

ON THE TOWN

A PERFORMA
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ROSELEE
GOLDBERG

Abstract/Black/Bodies: Kia LaBeija's (Untitled) The Black Act

A dance of rigorous geometries; primary shapes: circle, square, triangle; primary colors: red, yellow, blue. Dancers costumed as abstract forms. A dance of solos, duets, trios. Spirals, disks, grids. A total artwork of dance, music, scenography, lighting, costumes. We have seen this before, but never in this way. In *(Untitled) The Black Act*, Kia LaBeija reinvented and inverted Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet* (1922), the singular touchstone of early twentieth-century abstract dance, the banner achievement of Bauhaus performance, and enduring riddle of modern art. *(Untitled) The Black Act* is in a long line of *Triadic Ballet* reconstructions, reinterpreted, say, through the drag ballroom scene where LaBeija literally made her name—the former Mother of the Royal House of LaBeija entered the scene at the age of nineteen. *(Untitled) The Black Act* is not an interpretation of *Triadic Ballet* so much as its dialectical sublation: at once a preservation and a negation. Schlemmer aspired to abstraction; LaBeija foregrounded personal narrative. Schlemmer dematerialized bodies; LaBeija concretized them in specific identities, relations, and skins. Schlemmer's strict rules were countered by LaBeija's queer improvisations. And where Schlemmer marshalled technologized darkness to construct universal forms that abide by the laws of the abstract stage, LaBeija co-created a work through the relations between intimately linked Black, queer, female bodies and subjects.

Crucial to LaBeija's relation to space is an engagement with personal narratives: "Whenever I come into a space, I imagine what stories it has to tell. It's vital that the locations I choose for my portraits have a strong history."¹ *(Untitled) The Black Act* was co-commissioned by and first performed at Performance Space New York (formerly PS 122) in the East Village. In the past, LaBeija has situated and photographed herself in deeply personal locations, such as her bedroom on the twenty-fourth floor of Manhattan Plaza, the legendary artist housing complex where she grew up; her doctor's office, where she has her blood drawn regularly to manage her HIV symptoms, a condition with which she was born; the fashion photography set where she constructed eighties-inflected self-portraits for *W Magazine*;² or the entrance to the building where she visited her great-aunts, who sojourned north as part of the Great Migration. LaBeija had no previous personal connection to Performance Space New York, but, in any event, *(Untitled)* would have begun in the same space no matter where it would have been performed. It began in a pitch-black theater. It is this dark space whose history she mined and whose story she told with unrivaled urgency and beauty.

Her interlocutor is Oskar Schlemmer, the Bauhaus master most famous for his abstract dances and otherworldly costumes. LaBeija reinvented Schlemmer's

¹ LaBeija in Kia LaBeija and Fialho, "Kia LaBeija," *Artforum International* 56, no. 5 (2018).

² See Horacio Silva, "Kia LaBeija Is Remodeling One of Ballroom's Legendary Houses For the Future," *W Magazine* (2018). <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/hou-of-kia-labeija-ballroom-voguing>.

³ My discussion of Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet* draws on "Spaceless Play: Oskar Schlemmer's Dance against Enlightenment" in Noam M. Elcott, *Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 165–228. For further reflection on the intersections of contemporary art and artificial darkness, see "A Brief History of Artificial Darkness and Race Rethinking Darkness: Borderland Landscapes, Practices," ed. Ni Dunn and Tim Edensor (London: Routledge, 2021), 61–76.

⁴ Oskar Schlemmer, "Das Triadische Ballett," ed. Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde zu Donaueschingen (Donaueschingen 1926), no pagination. Translation mine.

Triadic Ballet, among the most sustained, rigorous, and inscrutable attempts at defining abstract space and dance in the early twentieth century. Performa 19 was organized around the centennial of the founding of the Bauhaus as the biennial's historical anchor; in the history of performance art, no Bauhaus work looms larger than *Triadic Ballet*. In order to grasp the magnitude of LaBeija's intervention into this legacy, we must venture a deep if brief dive into Schlemmer's magnum opus. Between their shared and divergent dances with darkness, *(Untitled) The Black Act* is a *pas de deux* with *Triadic Ballet* above all.

After several years of preparation, Schlemmer and several collaborators premiered *Triadic Ballet* on September 30, 1922, on the small stage of the Württemberg Landestheater in Stuttgart.³ For Schlemmer, *triadic* connoted a range of references: the musical triad; the threefold qualities of form, color, and space. Primary forms: circle, square, triangle; primary colors: red, blue, yellow; and primary spatial dimensions: height, depth, width. Additionally, there would be three when "the monomaniacal ego and the dualistic opposition are surmounted and the collective begins."⁴ For all the textual and visual documentation of *Triadic Ballet*, however, its choreography remains a mystery—the notation has been lost, save for the trio finale. The ballet languished for a generation after Schlemmer's death. LaBeija's primary access to the ballet was the 1968 film directed by Margarete Hasting, with artistic guidance by Bauhaus affiliates Ludwig Grote, Xanti Schawinsky, and Tut Schlemmer, Oskar's widow. In the most patently triadic invocation, Schlemmer divided the ballet into three movements, series, or acts,



each with its own color and atmosphere. As Schlemmer elaborated: "The first is a gay burlesque with lemon-yellow curtains. The second, ceremonious and solemn, is on a rose-colored stage. And the third is a mystical fantasy on a black stage."⁵ Soon after the premiere, Schlemmer reconstituted *Triadic Ballet* as an extended version of its third act; he abandoned the yellow and pink sets and embraced the black stage as the exclusive backdrop against which his costumes came to life. Even as the third, black act served as the basis for LaBeija's new work, in which she extended what Schlemmer called the "gay burlesque" of his original first act in ways he never could have envisioned.

With its black costumes and black sets, the third act, more than any other, realized Schlemmer's aspiration to "dematerialize the body."⁶ Following a long line of scientists, magicians, charlatans, photographers, cabaret performers, filmmakers, and directors of all stripes—most or all of whom were unknown to him—Schlemmer discovered that black costumes worn on a black stage could make the bodies of his dancers effectively disappear. Performers were given abstract names—*Spiral*, *Wire Costume*, *Disk Dancer*, *Abstract Dancer*—and were transformed into life-size marionettes controlled from inside the costumes. Other than the occasional unmasked face or naked hand, their bodies, enshrouded in black materials, were absorbed into the darkness of the black backdrops and yielded to their abstract costumes.

Schlemmer's choreography echoed or amplified the wardrobe, even as it obscured the bodies. At the premiere, *Spiral* traced a corkscrew path to a *toccata* by the eighteenth-century Italian composer Pietro Domenico Paradisi. But her body—clad in black leather over a black unitard—vanished, or "dematerialized," in favor of a blue, green, and silver overlay and a coiled spiral of transparent celluloid. Similarly, the duet for two *Disk Dancers* violently negated the bodies of its dancers. Costumed identically except for the colors of their disks, they wore black unitards and robotlike masks (later likened to the one worn by the robot in Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*) and were armed with lance tips for hands. Viewed frontally, they were reduced to vacant masks, weaponized fists, and invisible bodies bifurcated by metallic lines that ran from their pelvises up the center of their masks and extended well over their helmed heads. A swivel in either direction revealed the flamboyant disks and an absence where one might expect their bodies, which were occluded by the black-on-black effect. Over and over again, Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet* transformed the bodies of dancers—including his own, as Schlemmer always took on the all-important role of *Abstract Dancer*—into abstract shapes moving in geometric patterns amidst "the invisible linear network of planimetric and stereometric relationships" of the abstract stage.⁷

For Schlemmer, the battle came down to a fundamental opposition between humans and space:

The human organism stands in the cubical, abstract space of the stage. Human and Space. Each has different laws of order. Whose shall prevail? Either abstract space is adapted in deference to the natural human and transformed back into nature or the imitation of nature. This happens in the theater of illusionistic realism. Or the natural human, in deference to abstract space, is recast to fit its mold. This happens on the abstract stage.⁸

Oskar Schlemmer, overview of *Triadisches Ballett*, ca. 1924-1926.

Oskar Schlemmer, *Triadisches Ballett* costumes: spiral and disk, 1926.

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"Man and Art Figure," in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, eds. Oskar Schlemmer, László Moholy-Nagy, and Farkas Molnár (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 34.

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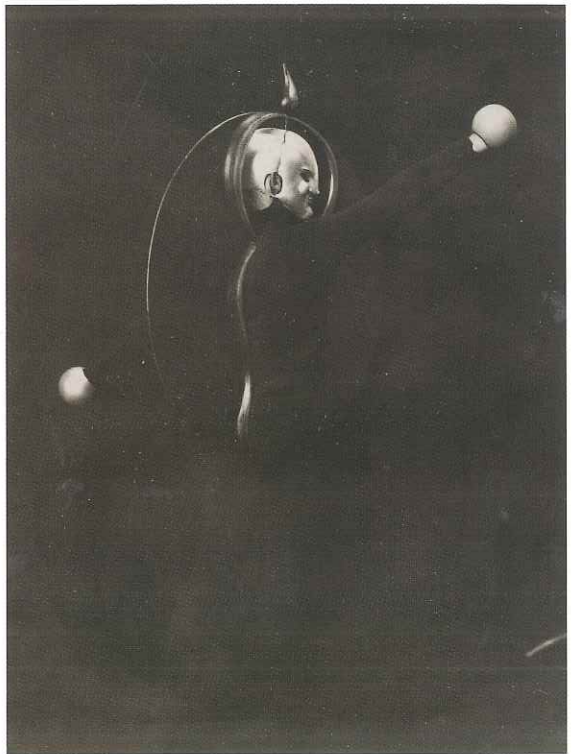
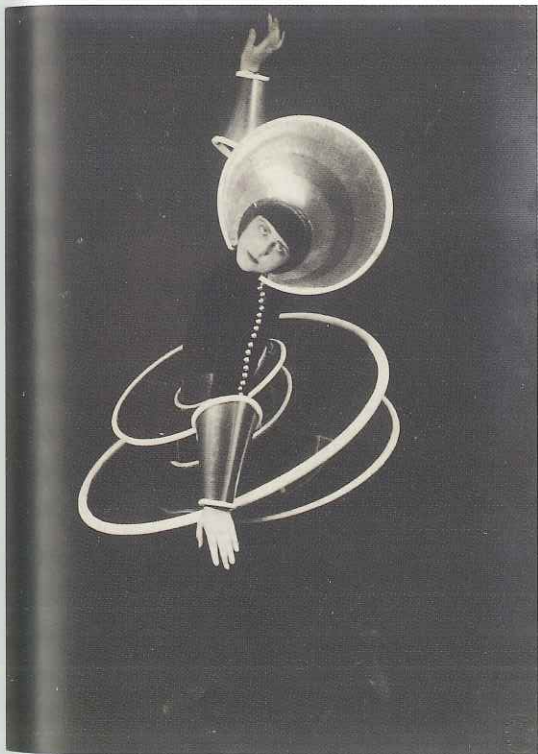
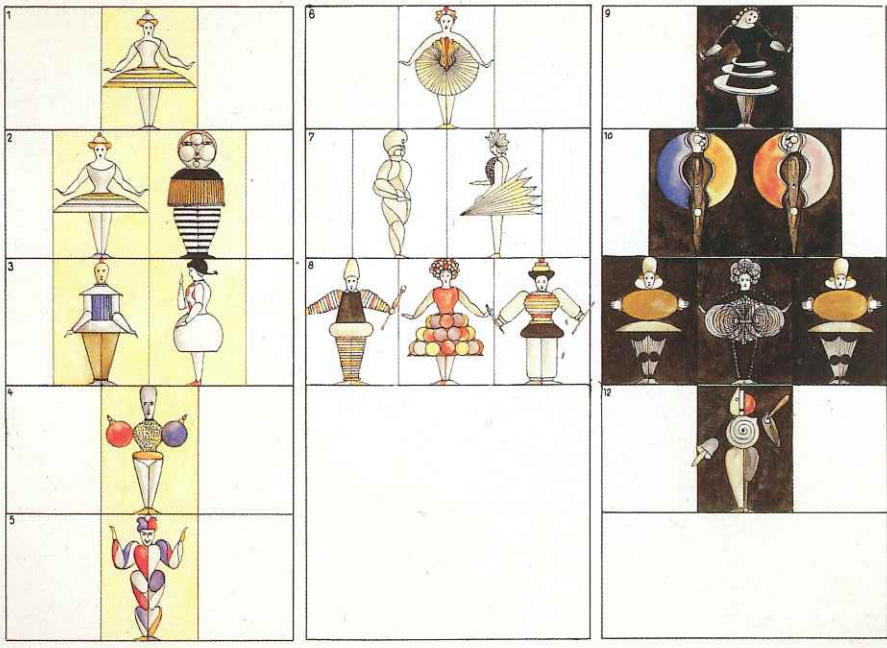
"Ballett?," in *Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar 1919-1923* (München: Kraus Reprint, 1923; reprint, 1980), no pagination. Schlemmer published these notes in the program for the 1922 premiere and republished them repeatedly throughout the decade.

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"Man and Art Figure," 23.

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Ibid., 22-23; Oskar Schlemmer, "Mensch und Kunstfigur," in *Die Bühne im Bauhaus*, eds. Oskar Schlemmer, László Moholy-Nagy, and Farkas Molnár (Berlin: Gebhardt Verlag, 1925; reprint, 2001), 13. Translation modified. The English translation, now patented, is patriarchal, erroneously translating "Der Organismus Mensch" as "Man, the human organism." For the sake of bibliographic usability, I left the English title of the essay uncorrected in the notes.







Schlemmer staged a choice between the human organism and abstract space—and recast the human accordingly. Yet even as he unequivocally prioritized abstract space, he endorsed universal biological laws, which “reside in the invisible functions of his inner self: heartbeat, circulation, respiration, the activities of the brain and nervous system.”⁹ What Schlemmer excluded absolutely was the personal and historical—as well as, to the degree possible, human attributes like sex/gender, race, or sexual orientation. Schlemmer’s were abstract bodies, freed from the vagaries of human difference.¹⁰

LaBeija’s (*Untitled*) *The Black Act* opened with a spiral: an undulating, costumed figure bathed in blue light, alone in the darkness. Slowly, white footlights augmented the blue overheads to reveal a dancer in a sheer pink sequined ballroom dress with matching flamboyant hat and opera gloves. LaBeija occupied Schlemmer’s original *Spiral* as “Camp.”¹¹ Just as the overhead lights slowly revealed a geometric maze on the floor, white footlights revealed the silhouette of LaBeija’s body within the glamorous spiral costume in a double striptease of abstract staging and individual body. LaBeija’s sinuous movements, however, contrasted starkly with the rigid geometry of the labyrinth from which she escaped. In forceful yet tender opposition to Schlemmer, LaBeija chose the human: not the human recast to fit the mold of abstract space, nor the human reduced to biological and universal laws, nor the dematerialized human whose body gives way to technologized darkness. Instead, LaBeija inhabited that very thing discounted in advance by Schlemmer’s abstract ballet: a queer, gendered, Black body.

Interviewer

Where do you move furthest away from Schlemmer?

LaBeija:

Life experience. We’ve both created works looking at the world we live in, but we have lived in different and separate worlds.¹²

Through program notes, interviews, and other avenues, LaBeija announced that the spiral is less a geometric form than a position with which she regularly identifies:

I have, at many times, been a spiral.

An abyss of obscurity, falling deeper into the same patterns; over and over. And somewhere amidst the twisting, turning, and reaching that happens when one falls, I find that I am breathing backward ...¹³

(*Untitled*) *The Black Act* is a deeply personal narrative for LaBeija and a personal journey for her and her collaborators. LaBeija performed the first and last of the four dances herself. Both her solos are performances of escape: In the first one, she spiraled out of a geometric labyrinth; in the final one, she pulled the gridded tape off of the floor and lay down a line of flight out of the dark space of the theater.

The second dance featured Daniella Agosto and Selena Ettienne, LaBeija’s “gay kids,” young adults she has nurtured as the mother of the Royal House of LaBeija, the birthplace of house culture within the ballroom scene and an

9
“Man and Art Figure,” 25.

10
Like most but not all of his Bauhaus associates, Schlemmer appears to have had no interest in engaging the “queer Bauhaus” recently excavated by art historian Elizabeth Otto. See Elizabeth Otto, *Haunted Bauhaus: Occult Spirituality, Gender Fluidity, Queer Identities, and Radical Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2019), 132–69.

11
Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” republished in *Against Interpretation* (New York: originally published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1966; Picador, 2001), 275–92. As Sontag writes: “Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility” (285). If (*Untitled*) *The Black Act* delivers Schlemmer’s *Triadic Ballet* over to Camp, then it does so precisely to enhance its moral relevance. LaBeija—along with artists such as Kehinde Wiley—may have reinvented Camp as political commitment. Committed Camp, as an alternative to Sontag’s still-brilliant exposition, could be a category for further inquiry.

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LaBeija in Emma McCormick-Goodhart, “Kia LaBeija: Attenuated Iconography,” *Flash Art* (2019). <https://flash-art.com/2019/11/kia-labeija-attenuated-iconographies/>.

13
LaBeija in the program notes for (*Untitled*) *The Black Act*, Performance Space, November 7, 2019.

14
LaBeija quoted in Maximiliano Durón, “For Performa Biennial, Kia LaBeija Reinvents a Bauhaus Classic—With a Ball Culture Twist,” *ARTnews* (November 7, 2019).

enduring alternate family structure for gay and gender-nonconforming youth. The dance of *Disk*—a highly abstract battle in Schlemmer's ballet—was, for LaBeija, a psychological and spiritual duel of the self, a struggle toward inner peace. The two performers mirrored each other's movements seamlessly, the result not of predetermined choreography but rather of intensive rehearsals spent in mutual recognition and anticipation. LaBeija instructed them: "If you keep your eyes together, you'll automatically know what the other is doing because you can feel it. It's not an easy thing to do, but if you can, you'll see things you could never see before."¹⁴ LaBeija rejected rigid choreography and instead jointly created, with her collaborators, the framework in which movement could unfold, which it did differently every night of the performance's run. Her performance practice aims equally at theatrical presentations and the real-world healing of an ever-widening circle of participants. Most immediately, Agosto and Ettienne were not on speaking terms when rehearsals began; LaBeija's collaborative, introspective performance practice restored their real-life relationship.

The third scene unfolded on a seven-by-seven-foot grid and featured Taína Larot, LaBeija's producing and life partner, as well as Khristina Cayetano and Terry Lovette, close friends and collaborators. Whereas the first two sequences reimagined specific moments from *Triadic Ballet*, this dance cast a far wider net of allusions. The choreography hinted at ballroom culture (specifically voguing) as well as classical ballet (particularly dancing *en pointe*), without adhering to either sets of conventions. The costumes intimated a range of sources and interlocutors: the first two acts of Schlemmer's ballet; the 1997 *Comme des Garçons* "Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body," or "lumps and bumps," collection

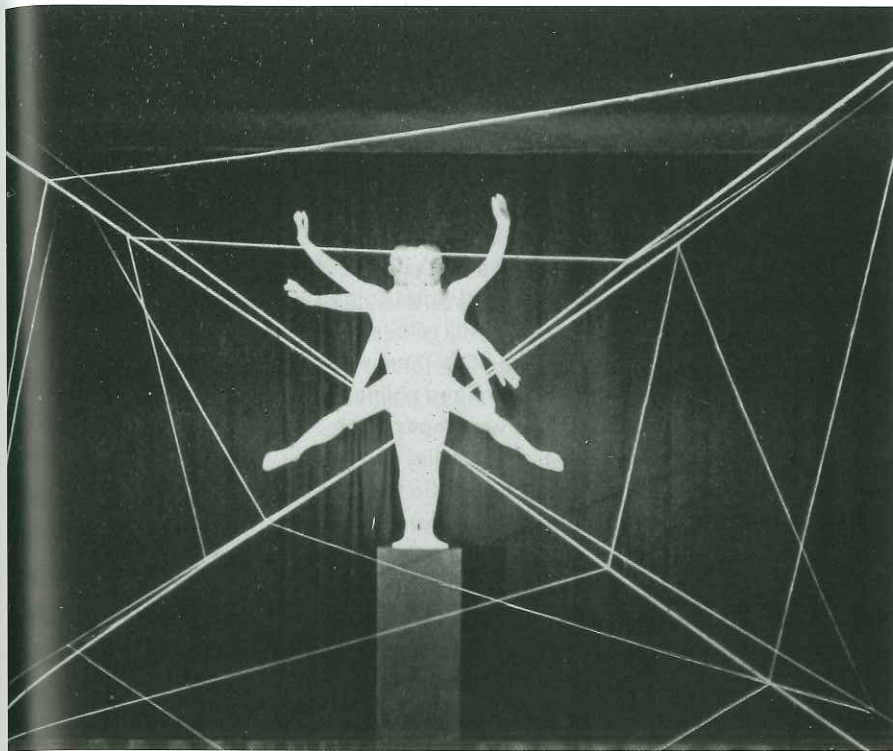




by Rei Kawakubo, fashion which was adapted for the performers in Merce Cunningham's *Scenario* later that year; fetish suits, replete with circular cutouts for breasts and thighs, as well as hooded sex masks; and elaborate African hair braiding styles. The choreography exemplified LaBeija's combination of strict parameters and individual freedom: One dancer walked *en pointe* along the edges and down the center of the grid, while the other two moved about the interior of the square; when they met, they formed their bodies into human sculptures. These were the rules. How, when, and where these movements and interactions unfolded was left to the dancers and to chance. No two performances were alike.

LaBeija entered the fray and began to clear the stage of the other dancers and of the tape that demarcated the grid (from this dance) and the geometric labyrinth (from the first dance). For LaBeija, the gridded tape echoed the lattice of Manhattan's streets, perhaps mediated by the tape Piet Mondrian employed to sketch his final paintings, not least (and still visible in) the unfinished versions of *New York City* (1941) and *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1944). The grid—delineated in white lines on a black stage—must also refer to the linear network of planimetric and stereometric relationships Schlemmer made visible in his Bauhaus books and demonstrations. The removal of this grid is the most explicit and violent rejection of Schlemmer's abstraction and the suppression of human difference it entailed. The grid and labyrinth signified psychological confinement, and the dancers returned—now in outfits that are not quite street attire, costumes, or stagehand clothing—and assisted LaBeija in removing them

Werner Siedhoff performing Oskar Schlemmer's Bauhaus demonstration "Raumlineatur mit Figur" ("Spatial delineation with figure"), 1927.



from the stage. The final dance was a solo but was executed in the company of her collaborators. When the old gridded and labyrinthine world had been crumpled up into a ball, LaBeija—once again a solitary figure in the dark—taped down a line of flight out of the theater. Her troupe followed. She closed the door. Empty darkness. The end.

Each of her five dancers represent a facet of LaBeija. The moves embody her struggles, passions, and aspirations in forms blatant and latent. For LaBeija, self-discovery is always an incomplete journey and never one ventured alone. Accompanied by the electronic music of her brother, Kenn Michael, and the percussions of her father, Warren Benbow, LaBeija constructed *(Untitled) The Black Act* as a family affair that adhered to an expanded definition of family. LaBeija is—and redefines what it means to be—daughter, sister, mother, partner. In *(Untitled) The Black Act*, the world is not limited to geometric relations.

The most vital arc of *(Untitled)* was traced by the potent and intricate presentation of bodies—bodies that were purposely obfuscated in Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*. Where Schlemmer's *Spiral* dematerialized the body into artificial darkness, LaBeija's *Spiral* brought her body into visibility—or at least hinted at it through silhouette and attire. With vacant, black holes where we would expect eyes and dark voids where we would anticipate torsos, the disks yielded their bodies to exuberantly abstract metal shapes. LaBeija's forms inverted these operations. Agosto and Ettienne were not transformed into disks; rather, they sported them as highly reflective ornaments: oversize earrings, forearm flares, and reflective surfaces woven onto balaclavas and along the arms,

legs, and waists. LaBeija's ensembles, designed by Kyle Luu, also revealed the wearers' midribs. LaBeija shared: "I wanted to show skin."¹⁵ Black bodies were not acknowledged in Schlemmer's black act; only white bodies were visible in the darkness. LaBeija's (*Untitled*) *The Black Act* insisted on shades of black that traversed theatrical darkness, costume materials, skin tones, and the complex histories—painful and jubilant—that imbricate and disaggregate through her lived experience.

In the third act, the figure was no longer presented as a physiological given. And it was there that LaBeija most directly took up Schlemmer's notion of abstracting bodies. In Luu's costumes, hips, shoulders, elbows, and wrists bulged to elephantine proportions. Breasts and legs were exposed, but still retained an otherworldly quality. Extended hair braids nearly brushed the floor. There was no recourse to a "natural" body before the impositions of culture and politics. "Schlemmer abstracted these bodies," LaBeija has said. "In a way, that's what we're doing now. We're getting so much work done to mimic the bodies of women of color—bodies that used to be shamed."¹⁶ Finally, there is Kia LaBeija's concluding solo. She first entered the stage alongside the trio of performers from the third dance, dressed in a silver, sequined corset over a bodysuit (adorned with rhinestones to "veil" her breasts and crotch) and a sequined fishnet head covering. Her hands and feet were bare. Dazzling costume, dark attire, and human flesh were no longer in strict opposition. After removing the gridded tape from the floor, the other dancers collapsed to the floor and effectively disappeared. LaBeija was alone, nearly without costume yet entirely covered. One astute reading of (*Untitled*) *The Black Act* sees in this final dance the revelation of the artist:

With no mediating costume, and with unrestrained movement, the figure of the performer emerges. This is not the abstract figure but the specific, individual figure of LaBeija herself. [...] The controlled abstract gestures of the Bauhaus are replaced with organic, improvised movements. The spring and the spiral are no longer studies of bodies in space, but represent the artist finding her path through life. The Bauhaus's study of impersonal unification is replaced by a preoccupation with the individual. This is in fact the 'pathos and heroism' Schlemmer once hoped to avoid. The finale is not the brink of abstraction but LaBeija herself, in glittering glory.¹⁷

This reading speaks the truth, even as it is incomplete. For as much as LaBeija was herself, she was not only herself. Many spectators immediately perceived an allusion to the Jazz Age icon Josephine Baker, a citation confirmed by LaBeija herself.¹⁸ Who is Josephine Baker to Kia LaBeija? The answer seems to align with Anne Anlin Cheng's perspicacious reading of the woman variously dubbed the "Black Venus," the "Bronze Venus," and the "Creole Goddess."

What is this thing called race? It is both more and less than biology or ideology. It wields its claim most forcefully and destructively in the realm of the visible, yet it designates and relies on the unseen. [Josephine] Baker, precisely as an apparent racial symbol, counterintuitively and significantly reveals the ellipses and the suspensions preconditioning the stability of that sign.¹⁹

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Interview with the author,
December 16, 2019.

16
LaBeija in Durón, "For Performa
Biennial, Kia LaBeija Reinvents
a Bauhaus Classic—With a Ball
Culture Twist."

17
George Kan, "Voguing Bauhaus,"
The Brooklyn Rail (2019–2020).

18
See, for example, Brian Seibert,
"Two Vogue Shows Strike Art-
World Poses," *The New York Times*,
November 12, 2019, C6. Confirmed
in conversation with the author,
December 16, 2019.

19
Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second
Skin: Josephine Baker & the
Modern Surface*. (Oxford, United
Kingdom: Oxford University Press,
2010), 13.

20
Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars:
Genealogies of Black Feminist Art
and Performance* (New York: New
York University Press, 2015), 7.

LaBeija was at once herself and—to borrow Uri McMillan’s potent concept—an avatar, a Black subject that has performed objecthood to become an art object: “Wielding their bodies as pliable matter, [...] Black women performers [...] repeatedly become objects, often in the form of simulated beings. [...] Put differently, performing objecthood becomes an adroit method of circumventing prescribed limitations on Black women in the public sphere while staging art and alterity in unforeseen places.”²⁰

Kia LaBeija’s (*Untitled*) *The Black Act* was nothing if not a staging of alterity. It began with the reality and visibility of Black bodies; then explored their abstraction through annexation, as bodies and braids once shamed become cosmetic ideals; and, finally, it revealed a Black, queer, female body at once wholly itself—wholly herself—and yet forever interlaced with the ellipses and suspensions of those seemingly stable categories. NOAM M. ELCOTT

