

Art in Times of Uncertainty: <i>I am you, you are too</i>

Artworks have the power to bear witness to relationships between people and seize an image of a society at a moment in history. In pulling such stories from the past into the present, artworks command renewed relevance and timeliness in relation to current social, cultural, and political realities. [I am you, you are too](#) draws from the Walker Art Center's collection, foregrounding works that gather a pertinent resonance given our current time of immense social upheaval, division, and instability. Here, the exhibition's curators give a tour of key works.

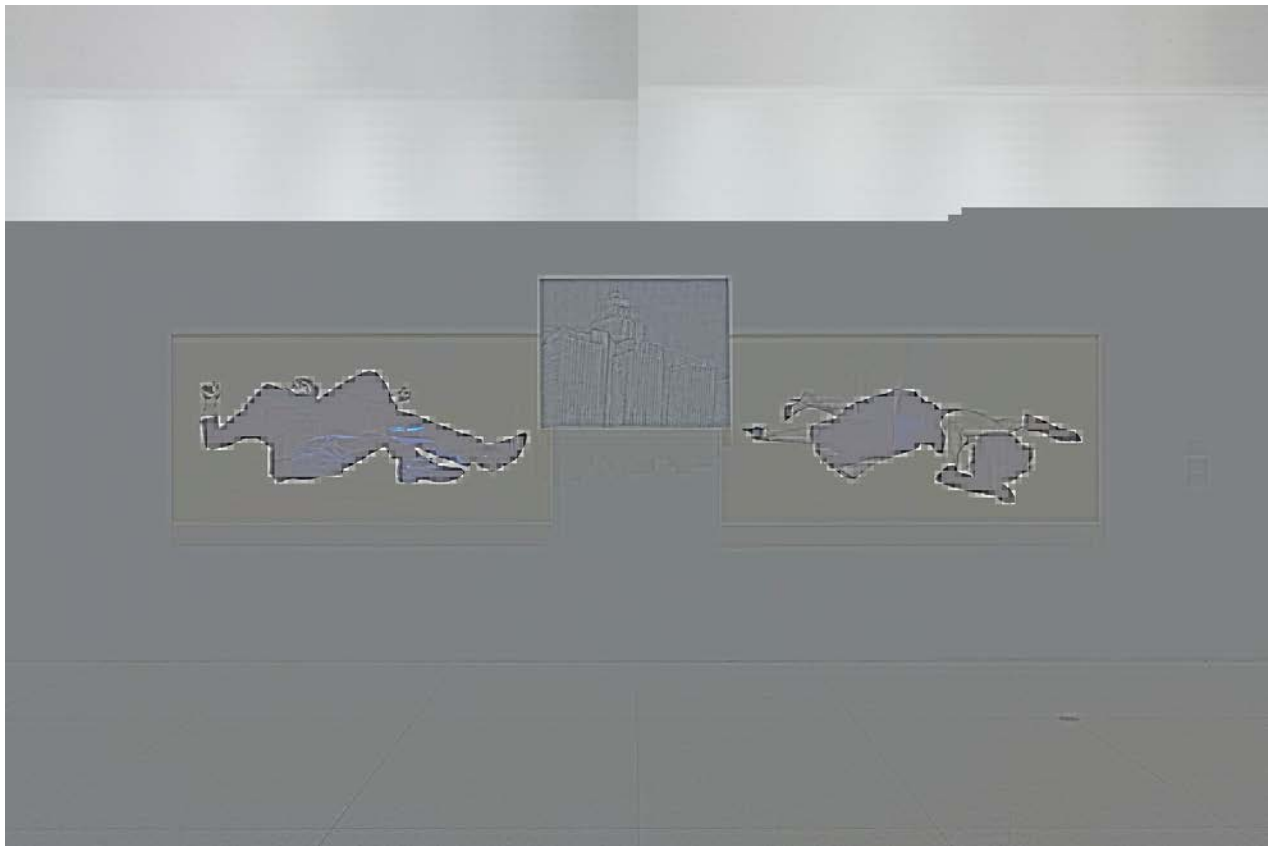
The opening work of *I am you, you are too*, [Nobuaki Kojima's Untitled \(Figure\)](#) (1976), forges an immediate dialogue between the individual and society. While inspired by a banner typically used in Japanese weddings, the sculpture's billowing fabric also brings to mind the flag of the United States of America. One of a series generally referred to as "Men with Flags," Kojima's sculpture was often interpreted by Japanese audiences as "a symbol for the oppressive post-war presence of the United States in their country."¹



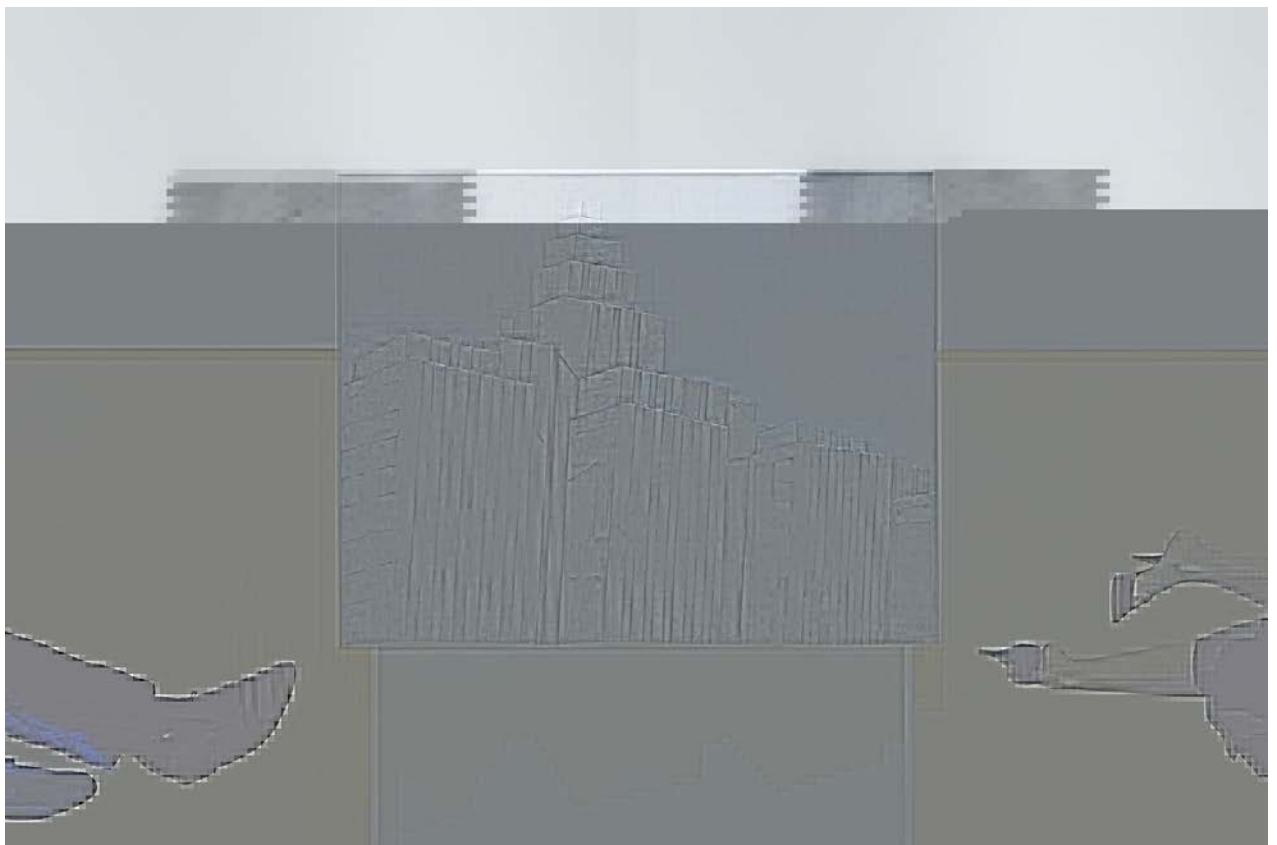
Nobuaki Kojima, *Untitled (Figure)* (1976). Photo: Gene Pittman

Made in 1976 following the end of the Vietnam War, the sculpture brings to mind US-Japanese relations of that time, especially president Gerald Ford's admission in that year of the wrongful imprisonment of Japanese-Americans in US internment camps during World War II. From today's vantage point, and when read outside of a US-Japanese context, *Untitled (Figure)* suggests the oppressive quashing of the individual by the American state—a suffocation felt today amidst pervasive anti-immigrant rhetoric and the sustained threat of immigration crackdowns.

•



Robert Longo's *National Trust* (1981), installed in gallery one of *I am you, you are too*.
Photo: Gene Pittman



Detail of Robert Longo's *National Trust* (1981).

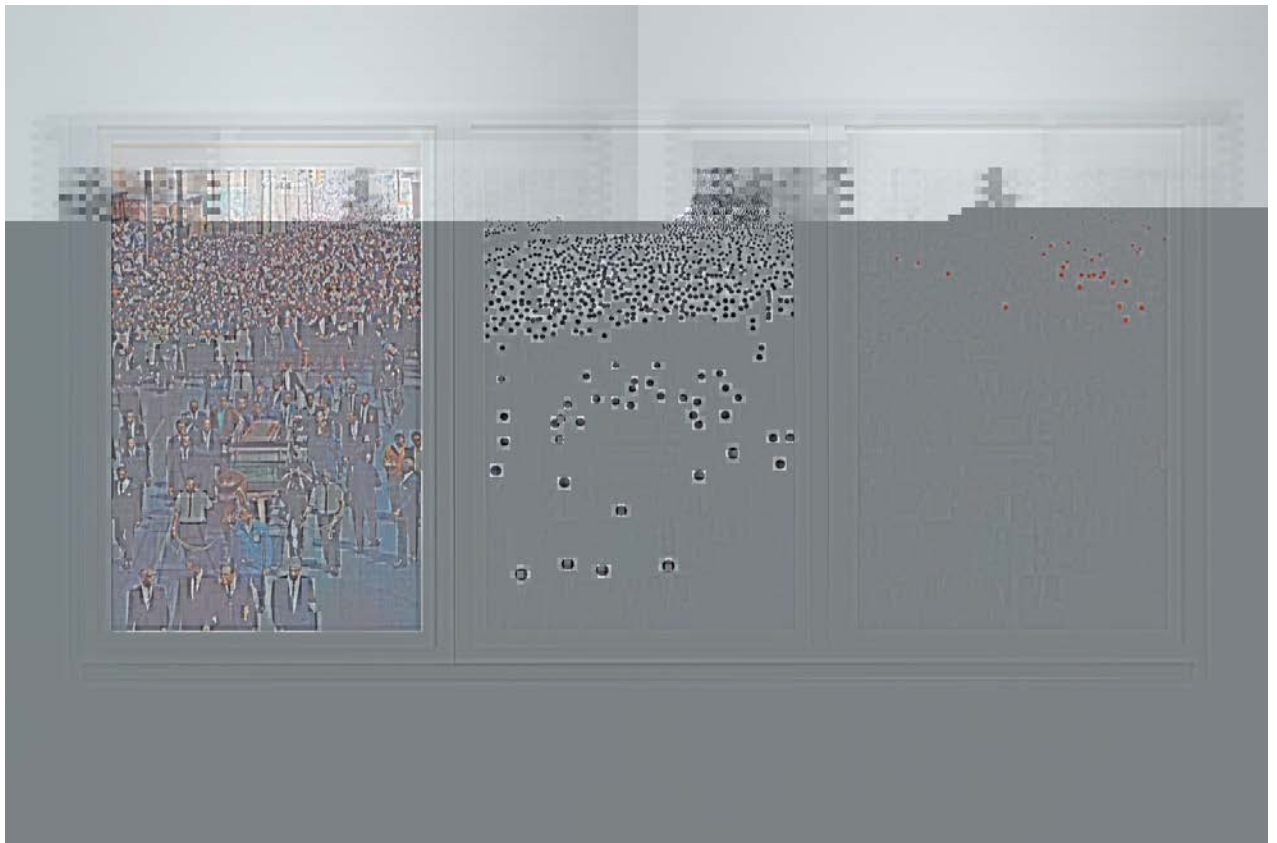
Photo: Gene Pittman

Towering over Gallery 1—a section titled *Meditating on Monuments*—is [Robert Longo's](#) *National Trust* (1981), a major work from the artist's *Men in the Cities* series (1978–1982). *National Trust* shows a smartly dressed dead couple, described by Longo as “doomed souls” and “fallen angels.”² Separating the pair is an aluminum relief showing The Tombs, otherwise known as the Manhattan Detention Complex, a New York municipal jail that was once a court of justice. The work's very title, *National Trust*, throws into sharp relief the trust placed in governmental bodies and the ways in which citizens are obliged to comply with rules and regulations. In Longo's hands, the social contract is rendered lifeless—the dead couple floats against a stark white background, a picture of separateness and despair. Longo sees his composition as resembling a falling upturned eagle³—a deeply symbolic suggestion of trust in government as a dead and irrelevant notion. Looking back at Longo's work, we are reminded of the divided New York of the early 1980s: a city experiencing the fast-paced corporate rise of Wall Street, yet also a steep increase in hard drug use and the HIV/AIDS crisis. Since September 2001, it's hard not to recognize shadows of 9/11 in the protagonists of *Men in the Cities*, their limp, contorted bodies sailing through the air. Seen today, *National Trust* strikes a particularly relevant tone, asking whether it is possible at all to place trust in an administration subject to almost daily accusations of collusion and conflicts of interest.

•



Installation view of *I am you, you are too* showing works by On Kawara and Alfredo Jaar. Photo: Gene Pittman



Alfredo Jaar, *Life Magazine, April 19, 1968, 1995*. Photo: Gene Pittman

Time and again, present day circumstances have compelled artists to surface works from their pasts that gather a new urgency given our times. This was the case with [Alfredo Jaar's *Life Magazine, April 19, 1968*](#), which, despite being made in 1995, had not been publicly seen until 2015. Rifling through copies of *Life* magazine, Jaar happened upon the iconic photograph showing the funeral procession of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dismayed by a lack of racial diversity among the attendees, Jaar created this work as a way to express his "[outrage to what these images reveal](#)," an outrage as relevant in 1995 as in 2015. Alongside an unaltered image of the funeral, Jaar reveals an astounding disparity in the number of black and white mourners—the many African Americans are represented with black dots, while the few white people are seen as red dots. Exhibited in the Twin Cities following the deaths of Jamar Clark and Philando Castile, *Life Magazine, April 19, 1968* garners a new present-day salience at a time of continued racial tension, the ongoing activism of the Black Lives Matter movement, and repeated police brutality against Black Americans and other people of color.

-



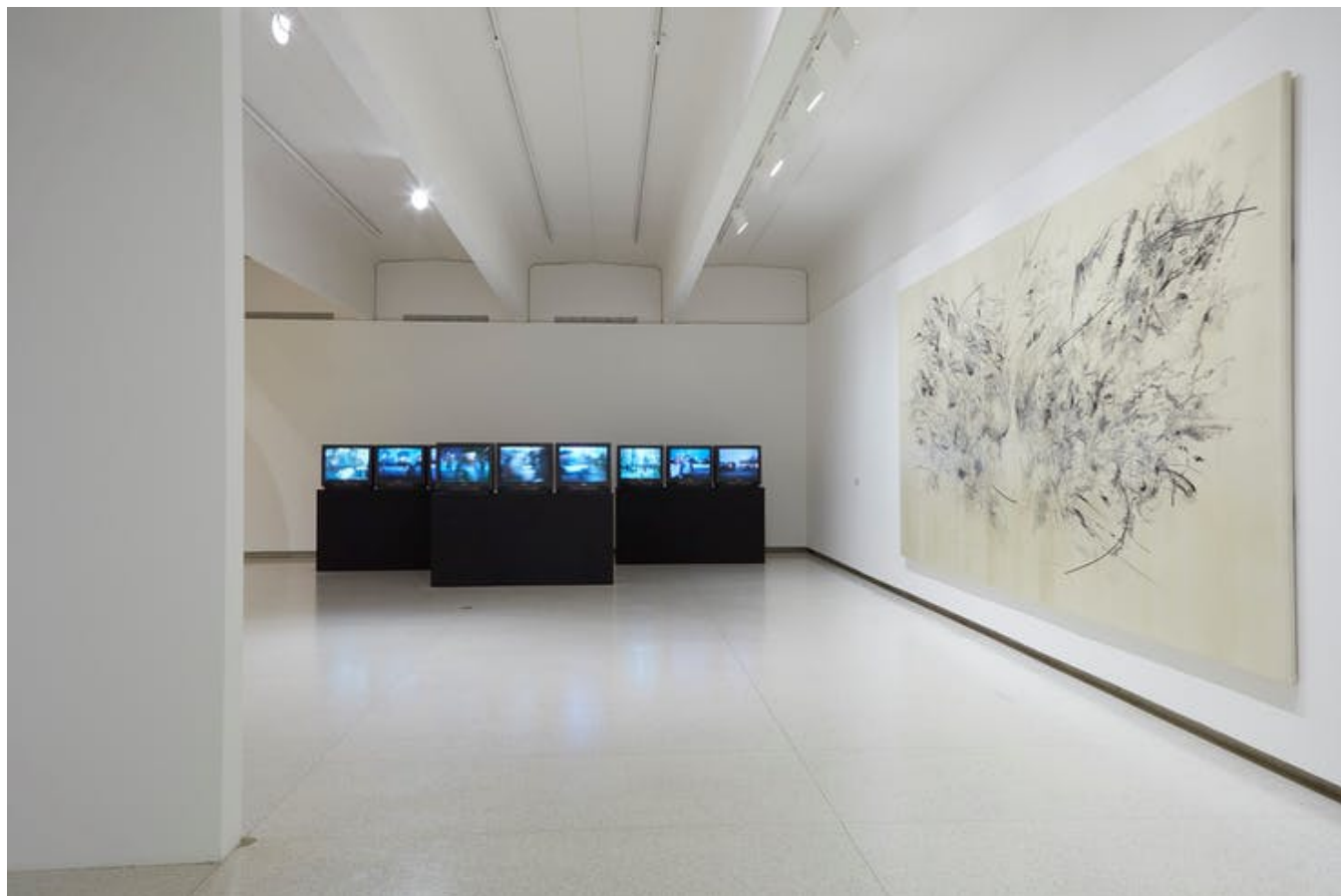
Installation view of *I am you, you are too* showing works by Kerry James Marshall and Wolfgang Tillmans. Photo: Gene Pittman



Detail of Wolfgang Tillmans's *Pro-EU anti-Brexit Poster Campaign* (vote remain 23 June), 2016. Photo:

Gene Pittman

In Gallery 2, a colorful grid combines posters designed by [Wolfgang Tillmans](#) to support the Remain campaign, which sought to prevent the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union in the lead-up to the June 2016 referendum. The posters present slogans at once universal (“no man is an island”) and specific (citing right-wing nationalist figures such as the British politician Nick Griffin and the recent French presidential hopeful Marine Le Pen), with some of the texts set against anonymous photographs of shorelines and skies taken by the artist as he travelled across EU borders. Tillmans created the series to encourage greater voter registration among the young and to counter the “[surge in nationalist fervor](#)”—in the United States, the slogan “Pittsburgh, not Paris” comes to mind. Exhibited for the first time in the US, the posters refer to a specifically British-European question, but they also speak broadly to a growing inclination towards international isolationism and rise of right-wing populism across the globe. One of the posters bluntly states, “cooperation, not confrontation,” a plea as relevant on this side of the Atlantic as the other.



Installation view of *I am you, you are too* showing works by Julie Mehretu and Chantal Akerman. Photo: Gene Pittman

While the anti-Brexit posters lament the dissolution of the European community, [Chantal Akerman](#)'s *D'Est* (1993/1995) focuses on its "coming together."⁴ Shot during the passage from summer to winter in Germany, Poland, and Russia, *D'Est* resists linear narrative in favor of lingering vignettes of anonymous tower blocks and train station waiting rooms. *D'Est* captures Eastern Europe in the throes of great societal change—the end of communism or, as the artist described the time period, "countries now embarking on different paths."⁵ Yet *D'Est* shows little of the jubilation or optimism one might associate with these times—there is no triumphant crowd celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall. Instead, Akerman seizes an image of inertia and stasis, symbolized by empty shop fronts and endless lines of people waiting. Though on the precipice of momentous change, Eastern Europeans are resolved to their impending and uncertain future. Permeating *D'Est* is a sense of fatigue felt in communism's wake. From this weary point, the European project began

anew and led to unification—only fifteen years later did Poland, along with several other Eastern European nations, join the EU. *D'Est* is a particularly bleak work to behold today, at a time when the EU is under threat by growing right-wing populism, as seen in the recent threats against judicial independence in Poland, or the growing anti-Semitism and xenophobia embodied by Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party in Hungary.



Two works by Postcommodity in *I am you, you are too*. Photo: Gene Pittman

Nearby floats [Postcommodity](#)'s 10-foot balloon, one of 26 once tethered across a two-mile stretch intersecting the US-Mexico border near Douglas, Arizona and Agua Prieta, Sonora. An ephemeral "temporary monument," the work was titled [Repellent Fence](#) (2015), and takes its design and color from the "repellent eye," a common and largely ineffective product designed to repel birds from gardens. This particular product design coincidentally employs indigenous medicine colors and iconography used by indigenous peoples from South America to Canada for thousands of years. Responding to the fraught landscape of the

border, *Repellent Fence* immediately registers as a protest against the fear-mongering rhetoric underscoring the presidential promise of a new US-Mexico border wall. Yet Postcommodity ([Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez, and Kade L. Twist](#)) view this transient landwork as much more —extending beyond the simplicity of bi-national politics and engaging with an underrepresented history of indigenous peoples, their languages, communication, and movement (for more on this topic, see [the collective's recent Artist Op-Ed](#)). In the artists' words, *Repellent Fence demonstrates* "the interconnectedness of the Western Hemisphere by recognizing the land, indigenous peoples, history, relationships, movement, and communication."



Danh Vo, *IM UUR 2* (detail), 2013. Photo: Gene Pittman



Danh Vo, *I M U U R 2*, 2013. Photo: Gene Pittman

At the core of Gallery 3, and giving the exhibition its title, is [Danh Vo's](#) *I M U U R 2* (2013). A room-sized installation, Vo's work gathers the personal belongings—thrift store bric-a-brac, keepsakes, and rare items such as scrolls—of the artist Martin Wong, who died of an HIV-related illness in 1999. *I M U U R 2* purposefully confuses the line dividing Vo and Wong's authorship, positioning them as kindred artistic spirits, a nod from Vo to Wong, one generation to the next. The installation is also an expanded portrait of Wong, encapsulating the ways in which he learned about the world and what objects can communicate about their owners. The title, *I M U U R 2*, stems from a catchphrase that would often appear on Wong's works and business cards, a slogan suggesting a blurring of the boundaries that separate one person from another, of the singular and the shared. In the context of the exhibition, and employed as its title, *I M U U R 2* reminds us that as individuals we are inextricably linked to one another, the relationships we forge extending far beyond our personal circumstances.



Installation view of *I am you, you are too*, showing works by Mark Bradford, Lara Favaretto, and Guillermo Kuitca. Photo: Gene Pittman

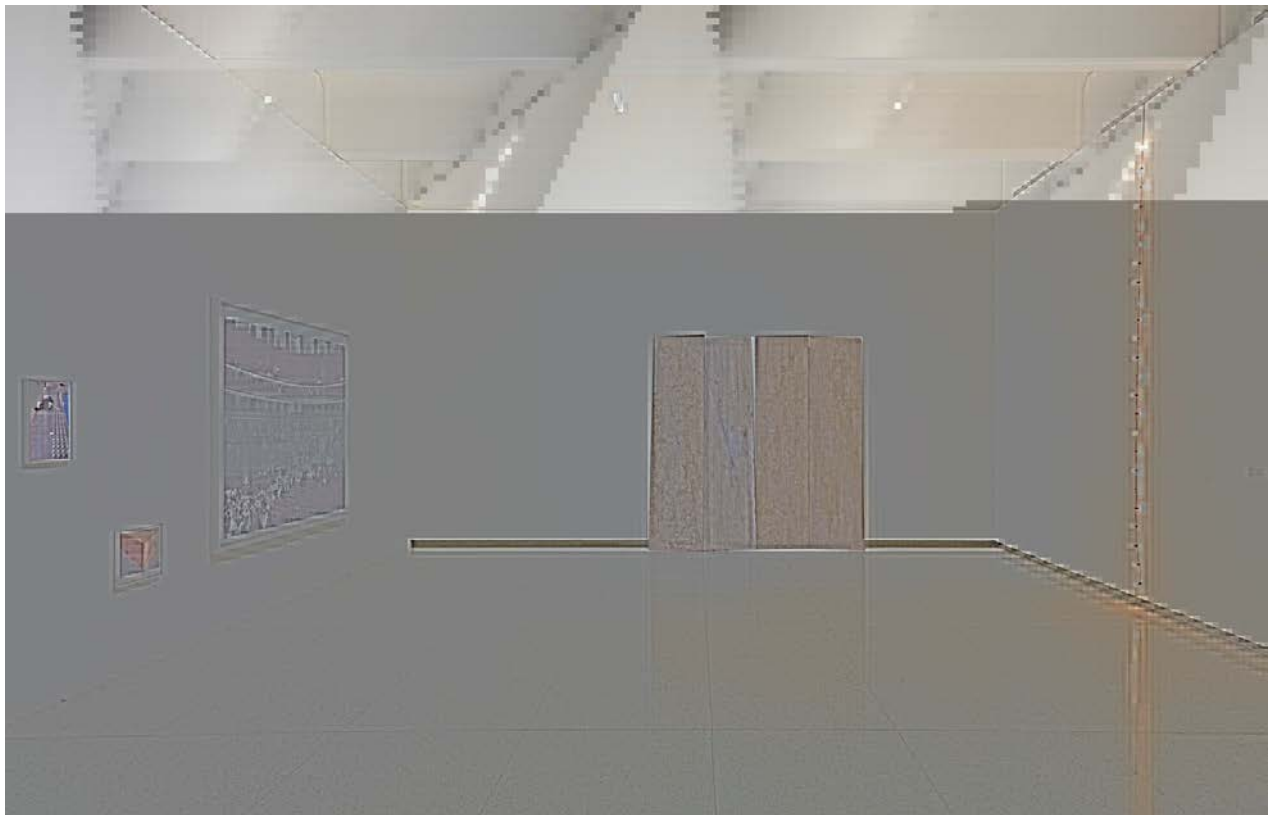
Danh Vo's installation is accompanied by artworks that eschew overt references to known narratives or peoples, instead exploring abstraction and the quotidian as a lens through which to explore themes of identity and

Felix Gonzalez-Torres famously claimed that "the most successful of all political moves are ones that don't appear to be 'political,'" which begs the question, for an artwork to tackle politics, does it need to be overtly explicit in its form, content, and address?

belonging. Felix Gonzalez-Torres famously claimed that "the most successful of all political moves are ones that don't appear to be 'political,'" ⁶ which begs the question, for an artwork to tackle politics, does it need to be overtly explicit in its form, content, and address? Can politics and questions of identity be engaged through the aesthetic vocabularies of abstraction, minimalism, and conceptualism that on the surface seem to resist such readings? How can abstraction and artworks

resulting from circumstances of personal reflection rather than shared sociability inform political dialogue?

-



Installation view of *I am you, you are too*, showing works by Wolfgang Tillmans, Michael Dean and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Photo: Gene Pittman

-



Installation view of *I am you, you are too*, showing works by Wolfgang Tillmans and Michael Dean. Photo: Gene Pittman

The human body—its scale and capacity to be felt or touched—is of fundamental importance to both Michael Dean and [Felix Gonzalez-Torres](#), who imbue industrial materials with personal meaning. Dean's *home (working title)* (2012–2016) finds its starting point in the typographical layout of the word "home." To create the work, Dean abstracted the word "home" beyond legibility, then translated the abstracted word into molds from which he cast the sculpture. Originally made for an exhibition titled [Government](#) (where other works were titled "yes," "no," "education," and "health"), *home* points to our domestic spaces, the first place through which we come to understand social experience. In confronting the personal with the political, Dean reminds us how governmental systems (housing, education, healthcare) hold influence over the quality of our everyday life. *Untitled (Last Light)* (1993) is one of a series of light strands that Gonzalez-Torres began making following the death of his partner, Ross Laycock, in 1991. While the sculpture might bring to mind joyous moments of celebration, the glowing lightbulbs also symbolize energy that will burn out, suggesting the fragility of life and the inevitability of death. The light string is made of 24 bulbs, or 12 pairs, that can be read as stand-ins for couples and relationships. With every bulb replaced when burnt out, *Untitled (Last Light)* evokes at once a melancholy and the possibility of perpetual renewal.



Installation view of *I am you, you are too*. Photo: Gene Pittman

I am you, you are too culminates in Perlman Gallery with *To come thickly*, a section that explores the depth of conceptual art in the Walker's collections and its resonance today. The title "To come thickly" refers to the Walker's dense holdings, which are in turn reflected in the gallery's floor-to-ceiling salon-style display. Yet the title also points to artists' interdisciplinary or process-driven approaches to artmaking, while considering the lasting influence of conceptual art pioneers on later generations. A selection of artworks here is placed on three different wallpapers by artists Yto Barrada, [Yoko Ono](#), and [Adam Pendleton](#). Each wallpaper is at once an artwork in its own right and a staging ground for distinct thematic arrangements of works by other artists, pointing to various features of conceptualism: seriality (of successive parts or numbers); everyday objects or actions; text and performance; and institutional, social, and political critique. Seen together, these pieces chart an evolution of conceptual art and explore ways that artists have challenged prevailing systems—including class, gender, race, and sexual

orientation—over the past 50 years.



Installation view of *I am you, you are too*. Photo: Gene Pittman

Pendleton's *Wallwork* (2017) abstracts Malcolm X's description of black Americans as "victims of American democracy." Excerpted from his 1964 speech "[The Ballot or the Bullet](#)," Malcolm X's words are rendered in spray-paint between legibility and illegibility, hovering between abstraction and representation. By referring to graffiti, Pendleton alludes to street and protests signs, especially the human rights movement galvanized around Black Lives Matter. Placed on top of Pendleton's *Wallwork* are three discrete groupings of works looking: at the series and the grid, institutional critique and how conceptual art can be harnessed as a means of political engagement. With its reference to racial division and social justice, Pendleton's *Wallwork* opens the political possibilities in works by artists such as Hanne Darboven, Steven Gwon and Sol LeWitt—each ostensibly concerned solely with formal questions.



Installation view of *I am you, you are too*. Photo: Gene Pittman

Barrada's *Palm Trees* (2010) wallpaper is composed of simple red geometric abstract forms—a line and a dot, representing the stem, leaves, and fruit of a palm tree. Barrada has repeatedly returned to this form in a series of free-standing, illuminated sculptures, as well as in the *Palm Project* (2009), which examines the symbolism of the palm tree as luxurious and "exotic." Reflecting on marketing campaigns designed to lure Western tourists to her native Morocco, Barrada has investigated how the palm tree form has been used to advertise luxury hotels, golf courses, and larger projects of urban gentrification and renewal. Two groupings of works—*Eccentric Abstraction* and *Critical Cartographies*—occupy Barrada's wallpaper. With a nod to Lucy Lippard's eponymous 1966 exhibition, *Eccentric Abstraction* brings together works by John Baldessari, Yayoi Kusama, Sherrie Levine, Howardena Pindell, and Walid Raad, which each offer a variance on the circle—playing with order and disorder, psychic landscapes, and biological and mathematical processes. *Critical Geographies* shows artists orienting themselves in the

world—via urban and rural landscapes, private and public spaces, mapping and borders. While Barrada turned her attention to the palm tree as a proxy for luxury, artists displayed here (such as Joseph Beuys, León Ferrari, and Dan Graham) harness a conceptual aesthetic to speak to themes of consumption, ownership, and global capital.

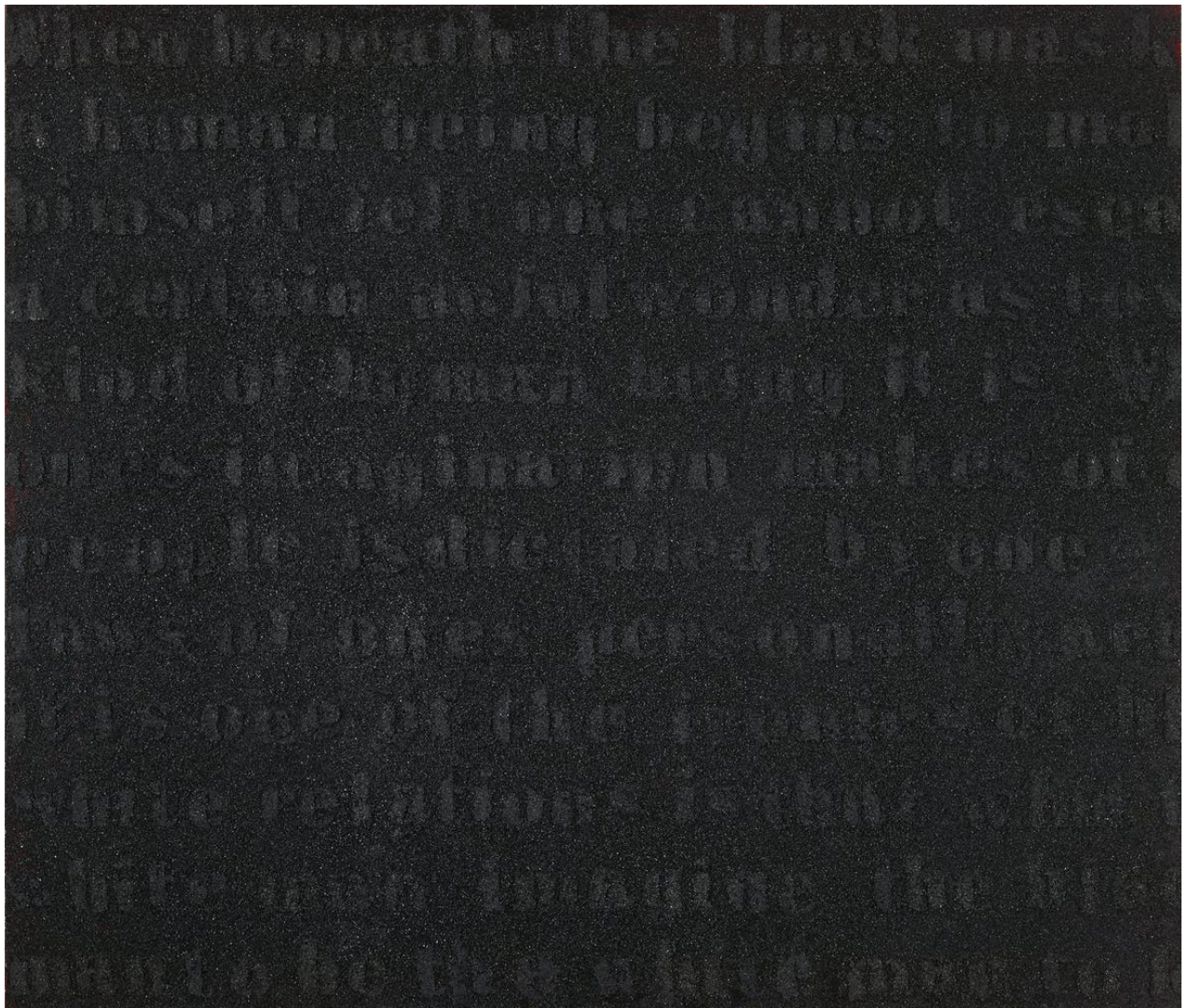


Installation view of *I am you, you are too*, with Yoko Ono's *Bottoms Wallpaper* (1968) on rear wall. Photo: Gene Pittman

An image of Yoko Ono's buttocks appears as a repeated pattern in her *Fluxus Wallpaper* (1968), made in collaboration with Fluxus founder [George Maciunas](#). The image is a still from Ono's *Film Number 4 (Bottoms)* (1967), which shows the various behinds of artists and friends from the London art scene whom Ono invited to model for her. Squarely capturing each person's body, Ono creates a formal geometry—a simple grid—that resonates with formal qualities of the many minimalist and conceptual works on view in *To come thickly*. Ono has described *Film Number 4 (Bottoms)* as an "aimless petition signed by people with their

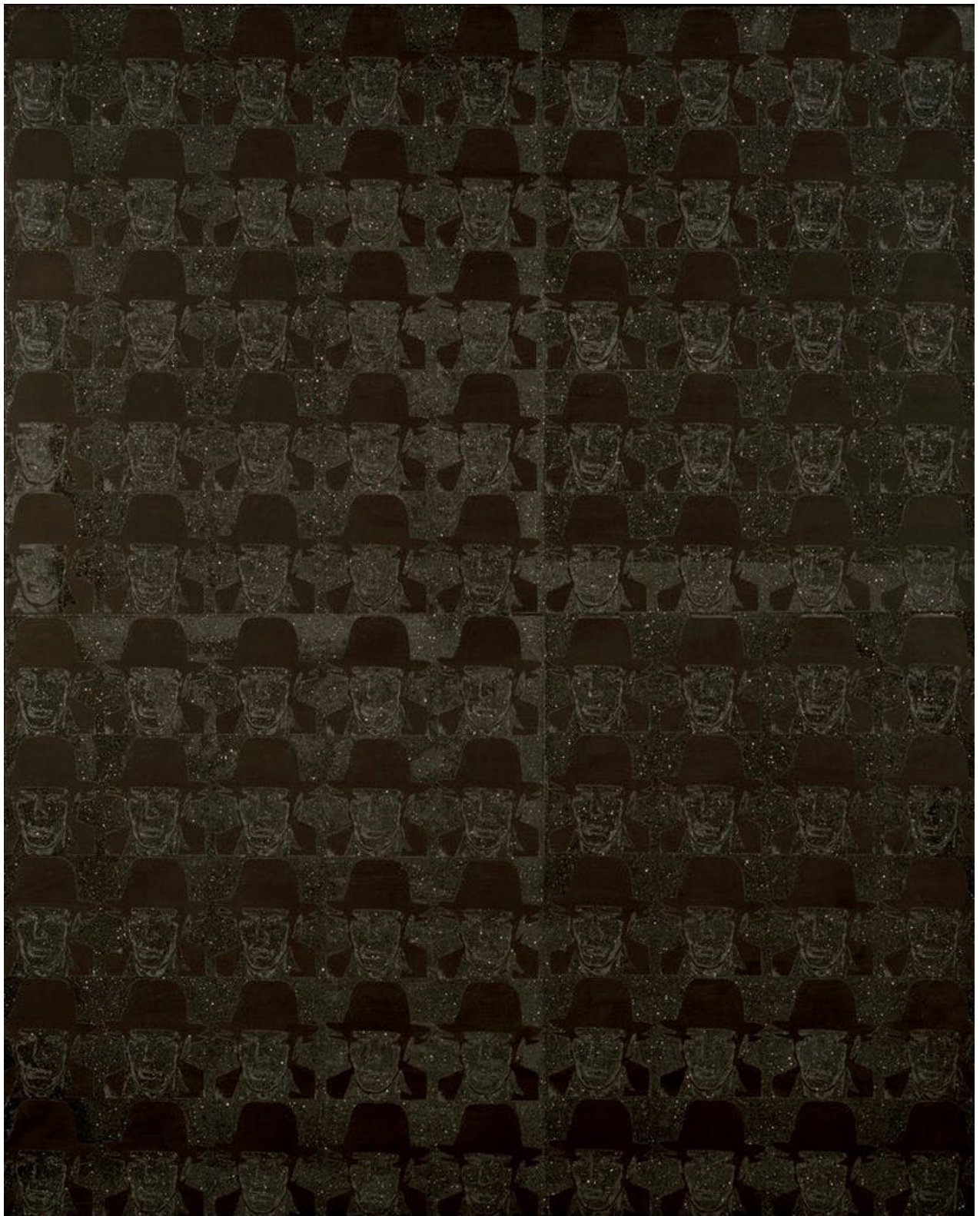
anuses"⁷, a slapstick send-up of structural film and the notion of "protest." Atop Ono's wallpaper are works by artists performing for the camera. Some use their bodies as material to test the boundaries of function and perception, resulting in iconic and sometime repetitive staged images. Other works highlight the importance of the mass-produced, everyday object or the prevalence in conceptual art of written text as artwork.

-



Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (Stranger in the Village #16)*, 2000

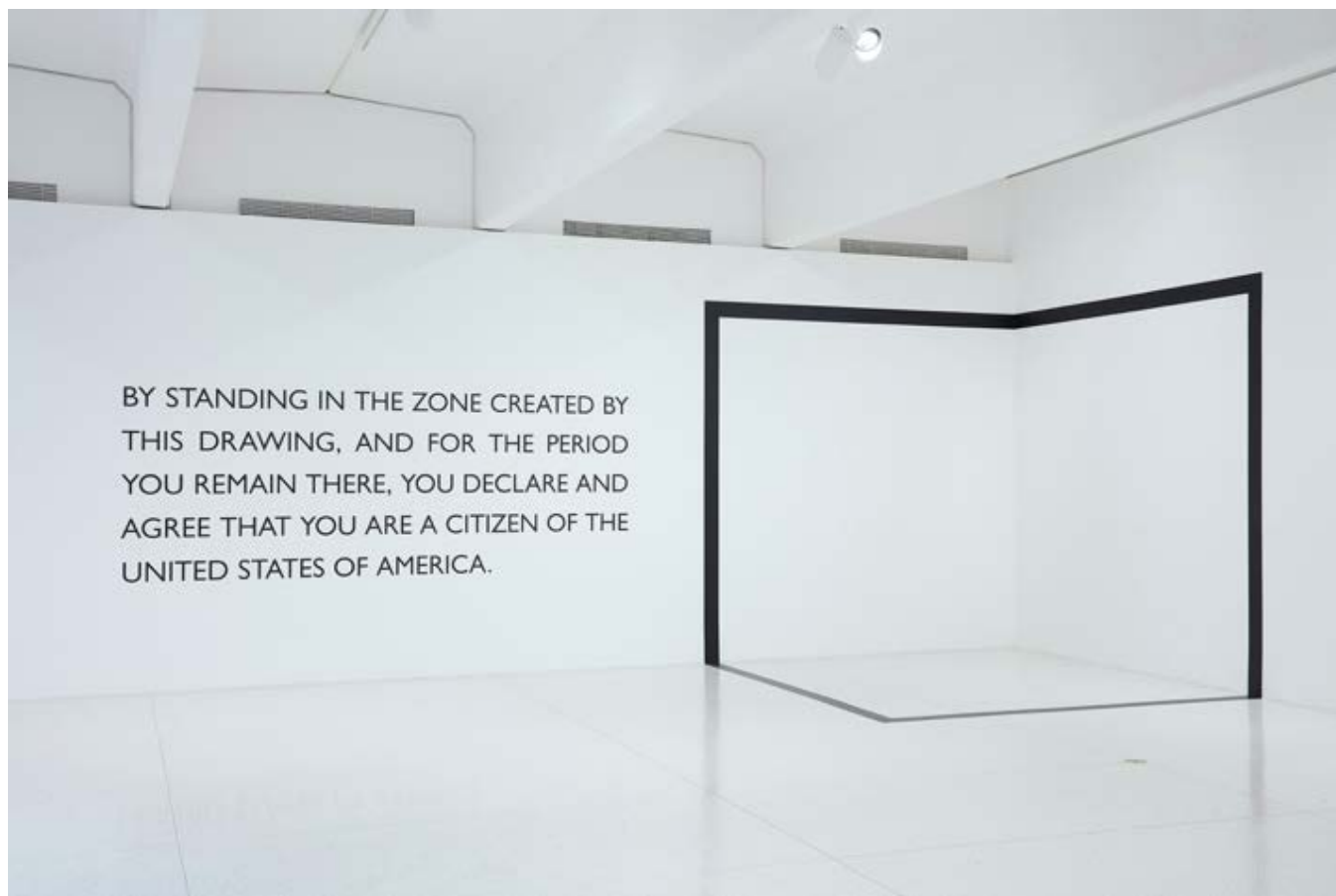
-



Andy Warhol, *Diamond Dust Joseph Beuys* (1980)

In its cross-historical sweep, *To come thickly* creates a genealogy of conceptual art's development, exposing how artists riff on each other's work, building dialogue across generations. Paintings by [Andy Warhol](#) and [Glenn Ligon](#) each have highly textured black surfaces. Warhol's

Diamond Dust Joseph Beuys (1980) is a prime example of the artist's "diamond dust" paintings, a series begun in 1980. Using pulverized reflective glass in the silkscreen printing process, Warhol captures Beuys as a glitzy and sparkling celebrity—a portrait antithetical to Beuys' critique of capitalism and his commitment to "social sculpture." Alongside is Ligon's *Untitled (Stranger in the Village #16)* (2000), from a series begun in the 1990s. Partly inspired by Warhol's "diamond dust paintings," Ligon began using a black oil stick to stencil texts onto canvas, the surface of which he would then layer with coal dust. The words seen on the painting's surface are excerpted from James Baldwin's *Stranger in the Village* (1953), a personal essay that considers African American identity via the lens of the author's recollections of a trip to a remote Swiss village. While formally similar, Ligon's work in no way suggests glamour, instead employing coal and Baldwin's text to speak of racial identity, the sense of being at once foreign and at home. Elsewhere, [David Hammons](#) wryly takes on the pervasive legacy of Marcel Duchamp in *The Holy Bible: The Old Testament* (2002)—whereby Duchamp's catalogue raisonné is bound in black leather so as to resemble a Holy Bible. In *Fuck Bruce Nauman*, [Ralph Lemon](#) displays ambivalence and antagonism towards Bruce Nauman's seminal recorded studio experiments, contemplating the ways race determines and shapes how he navigates the world and therefore his approaches to performance.



Carey Young's *Declared Void II* (2013) as installed in *I am you you are too*. Photo: Gene Pittman

As artworks are made and exhibited, their significance is dictated by their ability to offer compelling insight into the world as it is today or has been in the past. Yet, with hindsight, artworks also gather new meanings and resonate in often unintended and unforeseeable ways. It is possible to liken artworks to trees—whereby a tree ring corresponds to a meaning or reading of an artwork at a particular historical moment. As living things, artworks gather more and more rings, their history becoming increasingly complex and rich. *I am you, you are too* seeks to arrest this particular moment in time—asking how today's social, cultural and political reality accentuates and activates particular facets of works from the Walker's permanent collection. The exhibition locates the personal experience in the political and vice versa—our understanding of society, citizenship, and nationality are rooted not in abstract systems or ideas, but firmly in the everyday, the here and now, whereby we experience one another and the world.

Notes

¹ Hiroko Ikegami, "'Drink More?' 'No, Thanks!': The Spirit of Tokyo Pop," *International Pop* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2015).

² Howard N. Fox, *Robert Longo* (Los Angeles: Rizzoli/Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1990), 23.

³ See Robert Hobbs, *Robert Longo – Dis-illusions* (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1985).

⁴ Kathy Halbreich quoted in *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's D'Est* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1995), 8.

⁵ Ibid, 18.

⁶ Felix Gonzalez-Torres quoted in Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995), 13.

⁷ Ono quoted in Scott MacKenzie, *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 345.

Get *Walker Reader* in your inbox. Sign up to receive first word about our original videos, commissioned essays, curatorial perspectives, and artist interviews.