



TEXT / A.M. WEAVER

BEYOND THE ABYSS: Neo-Hip-Hop Cultural Expression



The essence of hip-hop is a style, a lingo, and an attitude. Hip-hop punctuates the airwaves around the world. The throbbing staccato rhythms of a bass line and the languid flow or rapid fire of language tell a story. Music videos and films ranging from the experiential, pertaining to urban realities, to magical realism fall within an expanded notion of hip-hop. These films are as diverse as the genre itself.

Starting as a part of the urban graffiti movement in the 70s and stemming from the realm of battling, house parties, and the club, the gestalt of hip-hop has been the metropolis, the streets—whether those of New York or Los Angeles, or the cities between them. Now, more and more, hip-hop is used as a vehicle combined with filmmaking to tell urban tales of love, fear, and acceptance, whether in video shorts by artists such as Nadine Patterson or Bryan Green, the extended music videos of Allen Hughes, or the art films of Kanye West. The innovative power of the genre is its flexibility, and its tendency toward appropriation and remixing. This aesthetic combines elements, particularly allegory and bricolage, as tools to declare perceived truths by the artists.

Against the backdrop of North Central Philadelphia, Center City, and other Philadelphia neighborhoods, Green's film *Something in the Way of Things* (2007), featuring Amiri Baraka, and Patterson's *LoqueeshaAshleyFranklinJoséBrown* (2001), with poetry by Ursula Rucker, expose the inner-city grit of East Coast urban centers.

INSIDE FRONT COVER: **Jayson Musson**, *Need 3 Hands to Count it*, 2013, mercerized cotton stretched on linen, 74 × 96 inches [courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York] / TOP: **Nadine Patterson**, *LoqueeshaAshleyFranklinJoséBrown*, 2001, digital video, 6:00 minutes [courtesy of the artist; photo: Hannan Saleh]; BOTTOM: **Bryan Green**, stills from *Something in the Way of Things*, 2007, 9:31 minutes [courtesy of the artist] / OPPOSITE: **Kanye West**, stills from *Runaway*, 2010, film and video [courtesy of the artist]

Something in the Way of Things follows a couple's story through a questionable pregnancy, a choice between the loss of employment or a dead-end job that requires the sacrifice of dignity, and the disparity between youth and elders. Amiri Baraka's refrains are punctuated by the low pulsing instrumentals of the Roots, a Philly-based hip-hop neo-soul band. Earthy tones and a throbbing melody segue into electronic fusion-like rhythms. Baraka's edict "There is something in the shadow that courts your demise" echoes Langston Hughes' sentiment in the classic poem "A Dream Deferred." *Something in the Way of Things*, using music, poetry, and film, chronicles life for Black people in urban environs for whom the American dream is elusive.

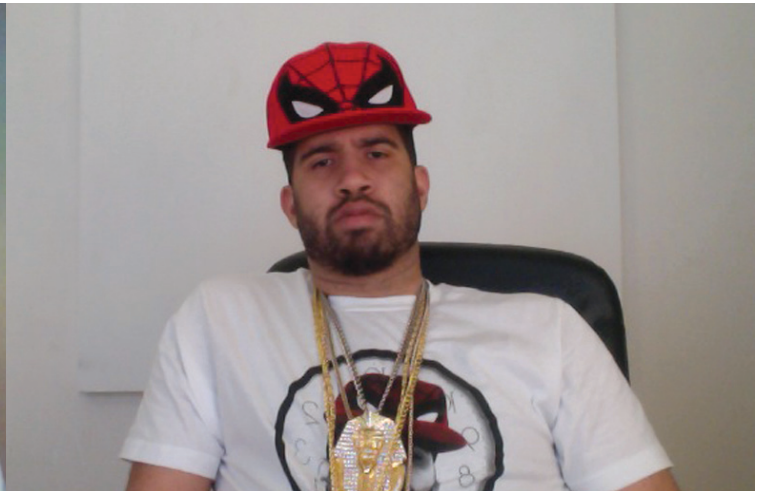
The founders of the Roots, Black Thought and Questlove, have made a career of collaborating with spoken word/rap artists. The group defies categorization, embracing jazz, fusion, and funk. Their work with filmmaker Bryan Green and poet Amiri Baraka is in continuum with their oeuvre.

In contrast to Green's film, *Loqueshia* focuses on children and gives voice to their dreams and aspirations. Ursula Rucker's nightingale-like crooning labels marginalized children—Asian, White, Latin, and Black—as ingénues and/or warriors who strive to dream. For them she proclaims, "I am ... I matter." This film, completed in three parts, reveals aspects of the dichotomy within inner-city neighborhoods, as sites of the familiar and comfort juxtaposed against threats of abuse, etc. At key intervals the film features a prepubescent Black girl—sometimes spinning, turning, and playing and sometimes in the classroom. This series ends with the girl looking through a crystal—portending multiple possibilities for the future? Scenes of various historical sites alternate in rapid succession with shots of Philly's archetypically narrow side streets. This much-heralded film marked Nadine Patterson's transition from documentaries to more lyrical, constructivist works. *Loqueshia* is a cautionary tale about youth, the pitfalls and challenges of growing up, in tandem with poetics that identify underlying mores and conditions that support growth and development within Black/Brown communities.

The poetics of both Amiri Baraka and Ursula Rucker could be labeled as "conscious poetry," a recent phenomenon in the spoken-word idiom. Baraka defies categorization in that his work transcends innumerable movements, from bebop to hip-hop, and rests firmly within the realm of the sociopolitical.

The above discussion focuses on the underground of the hip-hop genre—underground because of the glaringly apparent contrast in style and message between the work of these artists and that of stridently commercial ones such as Kanye West and Jay-Z. The collaborative piece *Runaway* by Kanye West and art director Vanessa Beecroft is a significant venture that attempts to transcend a mere vanity production, demanding consideration on its own as an art film. The cinematic flow of the piece shifts in innumerable directions; the story line consists of a simple narrative of boy-meets-girl/bird-like creature and follows their subsequent love affair that is ultimately doomed. The video then segues into Gil Scott Heron's metaphorical rant, alluding to political concerns: an awakening, which closes with, "Who will survive in America?"





Throughout the film, West vacillates from confessionals about his character flaws to philosophical moments and revelations and, not least, a love scene that pre-empt the departure/ascension of the nearly mute beloved. Beecroft's signature imagery complements West's opulent sensibilities. *Runaway* is evidence of an aesthetic in the making. West continues to court spectacle; his current tour, for instance, involves a monolithic structure with an elaborate light show and costumes.

The music in *Runaway* crosses genres from rhythm and blues to hip-hop to experimental with ease, but West's lyrics and overall rap are somewhat disjointed; the visuals, choreography, and costuming carry the production. The fusion of music video and film is a genre still coming of age. It takes more than spectacle to solidify a complex, ambitious cinematic endeavor. Nonetheless, West has the potential to become the great filmmaker and collaborator across genres that he envisions himself to be.

In the music video *I Need a Doctor*, filmmaker Allen Hughes contextualizes the return of Dr. Dre to a presumed position of fiefdom in the hip-hop world. The realm of sci-fi is elicited by the interjection of flashbacks and the appearance of Skylar Grey's holographic apparition/angel. Each principal character—angel, Dre, and his protégé Eminem—is well presented and the raps are phenomenal. Dre's expletives, directed toward his crew and those in the music industry who betrayed him, are offensive, but delivered with lucidity and fervor. Eminem, the industry's most celebrated White rapper, does not fail to deliver; his verbal execution and energy tell a story that is coherent and heartfelt. He is believable as the protégé pleading for his mentor's return to his position of leadership.

Both West and Hughes make use of magical realist devices; perhaps fantasy is a more apt description. Their videos/films are the stuff of layered imagination—something that America on some level feeds upon and culture cannibalizes. These apocalyptic films are at the crest of video/performance works that exist within the lexicon of a post-post-aesthetic associated with Afrofuturism.

Several young contemporary artists effectively use video as a vehicle for making statements about art and culture. Jayson Musson as Hennessy Youngman uses rap lingo and the language of the streets to critique the art establishment. *The Grand Manner*, a 2011 interactive project at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, showcased his sardonic humor and his analysis of what is often perceived as an elit-

ABOVE, LEFT + RIGHT: Jayson Musson, video stills from *Art Thoughtz with Hennessy Youngman* [courtesy of the artist] / BOTTOM: Jayson Musson, *A Zip and a Double Cup*, 2013, mercerized cotton stretched on linen, 84 x 60 inches [courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York]

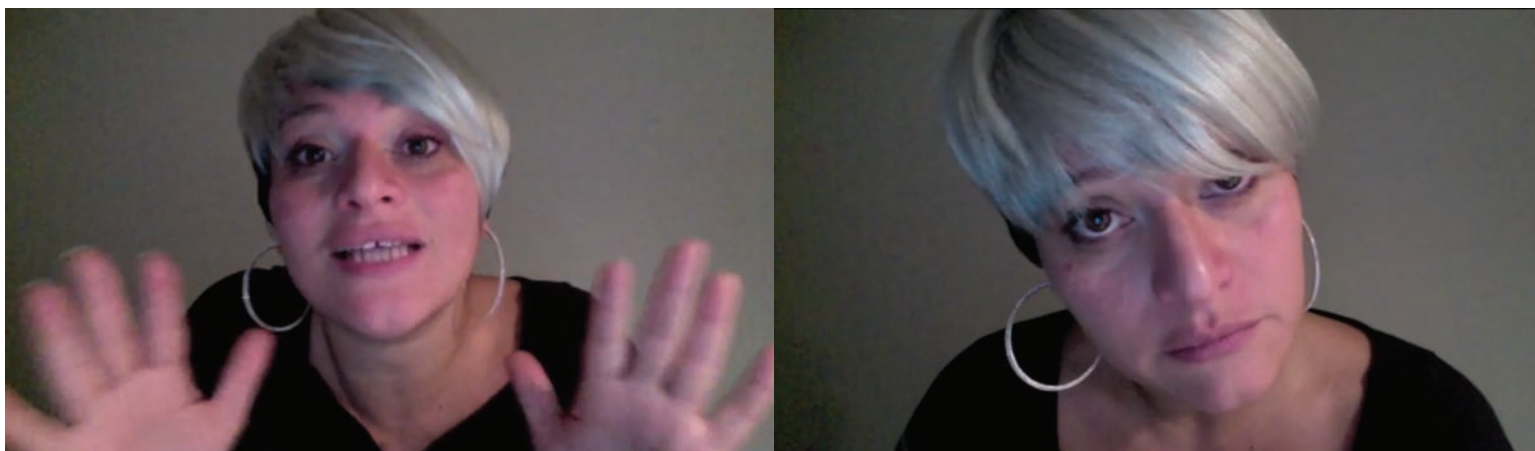
ist aesthetic. His comparative exposé of a King George III portrait and that of George Washington on an adjacent wall was nothing less than irreverent. Musson's antics have paid off; he has traded on his brand recognition and now makes marketable products: Coogi sweater paintings.

Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz actually preceded Hennessy with art info videos; she started her shorts in 2005. An alter ego, Mara Chuleta YoPrimer, provides humorous, thought-provoking discourse designed to educate Latin and urban audiences. One video discusses the concept of the white cube (just imagine explaining that to the uninitiated). According to Ortiz, the first Chuleta video was shot as a joke to entertain her 16-year-old niece and explain to the teenager exactly what Art Basel was all about. Her alter ego expounds on deconstruction, post-Blackness, and appropriation. She does all of this in pithy sound bites that leave the audience familiar with these art buzz phrases aghast and in hysterics. Chuleta dresses with large gold hoop earrings and sports a "doobie" replete with decorative hair clips. Ortiz feared being perceived as a minstrel, parodying personalities within the very community that reared her, however. She has since moved on to other performance-based projects.

From a comedic/satirical premise, Jayson Musson and Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz make videos pertaining to fine art culture, using vernacular speech, inflections, and mannerisms to "drop science" about their views and attitudes toward high and hip-hop culture. Invariably funny, these parodies and satirical works feature invented characters who demystify the language and concepts prevalent in the contemporary fine arts.

This diverse cross section of artists, most of them under 50, is in some way deeply ensconced in hip-hop culture. Beyond the bling and the quest for the good life, these artists aspire through collaboration and the use of video/film to communicate with broader audiences, and at the same time increase their reputations as artists of substance. Hip-hop's aesthetics and rap culture provide fodder for an examination of life informed by urbanity, fantasy, and the quest to unravel/reveal the complexities of Black/Brown existence.

A.M. Weaver is an independent curator and art journalist who frequently writes for *Art in America*, *frieze*, *Art Voices*, and *Art South Africa*. She currently lives in Philadelphia, PA.



ABOVE: Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz as Chuleta / BOTTOM LEFT + RIGHT: Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, stills from *Ask Chuleta #17: The Hustle*, 2012, video, 3:37 minutes [courtesy of the artist]