

# Primitivist Accumulation and Other Inside Jobs

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Those in the know will tell you that the Black arts are saving art institutions and the art market. At least since the 2000s, and even more since the 2008 recession, Black art has been a motor of art's financialization, whereby, R.A. Judy argues, “ownership of Black expression provides collateral for raising capital.”<sup>1</sup>

I am interested in Black art and what happens to it—to its concept, its reception, its practice, and praxis—when it falls under what Marina Vishmidt describes as the speculative ontology shared by the arts and finance capital once they are brought under the same value-form: that of self-valorization. She describes it as a mode of primitive accumulation, which functions precisely by, “bringing objects and processes under a specific value-form.”<sup>2</sup>

Following Vishmidt, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, and R.A. Judy, among others, I am not solely interested in how Black art has become an object of speculation, or how Black art reflects on the relationship between Blackness and speculation (as Richard Powell does), but rather, “how art,” and particularly Black art, “speculates.”<sup>3</sup> And how the artist may or may not participate in this speculative project by performing the work of self-valorization.

In other words, the vexing question, “what is the subject and object of Black art?”<sup>4</sup> in Sampada Aranke's words, demands reposing in the context of art's speculative ontology and within the ecologies of art care that are sup-

ported by the very circularity of their assumptions: the idea that the modern art object, Fernando Dominguez Rubio writes, is *that which is already so*; it is the object whose value was always/will always be already there.<sup>5</sup> Or, in the terms of an equation Denise Ferreira DaSilva might approve: AESTHETICS = VALUE. This circularity, which undergirds the institutional structure of the modern art museum, deflects from the primitive accumulation that has already occurred.<sup>6</sup>

As Marx made clear, capital expands by chains of “alchemical” transformations, and I focus on “primitive accumulation” to slow down this relentless alchemy and think more clearly about moments of violent production, irruption or redistribution of value. And particularly, about the distinction between primitive and *primitivist* accumulation, where the latter, as I will explain, is particularly adept at concealing the traces of its own expropriative operations.

If, as Aranke proposes, Black aesthetic practices have troubled distinction between subject and object for a long time, and if Blackness appears in the West as already within that very distinction, which, however, it refuses to uphold, then Black aesthetics may always already be an “inside job.”<sup>7</sup>

## Exhibit A

*Inside* (Vasilis Katsoupis, 2023) was prompted by the filmmaker’s personal awakening about the “dark side of luxury,” while staying at a friend’s Lower Manhattan loft and his question about art’s capacity to sustain life itself. A heist film turned shipwreck, it features Nemo, played by Willem Dafoe, an art thief trapped in the high-tech loft of the art collector and star architect he is trying to rob, who is forced to create conditions of survival within an environment devoted to the care of the dealer’s collection. A Robinson Crusoe of sorts, Nemo’s expected practices of primitive accumulation turn instead into dispossession and steady decline.

While Nemo’s voice-over at the beginning and end of the film defends the enduring power of art—he explains that, as a child, he would have saved his sketchbook from a house fire, even before his AC/DC album or his cat Groucho, because, he says, “art is for keeps”—the film’s narrative is limited precisely by pitting human survival against art’s supposed intrinsic value, its value *as art*.<sup>8</sup>

To survive, Nemo aggressively misuses the loft’s artworks and décor, which includes a timer that waters the plants and a refrigerator that self-reports about dwindling supplies and volunteers energy-saving tips.

Although *Inside* timidly experiments with suggesting a flat ontology between subject and objects—we see Nemo forced to collect water destined to the indoor plants, eat raw fish from the decorative tank, or understand his own fate as associated to that of a pigeon that, like so many other birds in urban environments, most likely collided with the penthouse’s giant windows and eventually freezes to death on its terrace—the film still clings to the inalienable value of the stranded human, and, as mentioned, a vague sense of the eternal value of art.

In the meanwhile, as collection of art objects, the loft turns progressively into a “scene of unfolding disasters,”<sup>9</sup> precisely at the moment its “ecology of art care”—which Dominguez Rubio describes as a series of technologies of preservation and speculation on the aesthetic and financial value of a given work and the collection as a whole—enters in a state of fortuitous (or general) antagonism with Nemo’s survival.<sup>10</sup> So much so that, this ecology of art care becomes the very thing that Nemo has to escape.

## Exhibit B

In 1993-94, Sherrie Levine made 24 sculptures in white and black crystal and sandblasted glass cast “after” Constantin Brancusi’s *Le Nouveau Né* (1915-1920), which she titled (the gender-neutral) *Newborn*.

Authorized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which owns Brancusi’s 1915 original, Levine’s replicas, in Isabelle Loring Wallace’s words, “revisited the problematic analogy [...] between the work of art and the newborn child,” a move ironically commenting on Brancusi’s insistence, Leah Pires reminds us, that he never made reproductions.<sup>11</sup>

Levine’s was part of a wider critique of the masters of high modernism’s patrilinear claim to authorship, which she often signaled by using “after” in the title of her works (“After Walker Evans,” for example). Levine’s titular “after” functioned simultaneously as credit, a statement of authorship, an appropriation, and a reclaiming of the gendered labor of reproduction.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, as Rosalind Krauss argued, it was part of a broader rejection of the bachelor machine of high modernism, one that, I add, is marred by a racial and gendered confusion between production and reproduction.<sup>13</sup> With this gesture, Levine uncovers the reproductive impulse underneath the modernist masters’ claim to originality: they think of themselves as original producers but are actually reproductive. Thus, by inverting the relationship between original and copy, before and after, here and there, Sherry Levine’s *Newborns* activate not only the recursivity of the readymade, but further insinuate that

its fundamental gesture is driven by an aspiration to primitive accumulation: the value accrued to a mass-produced object once presented and received *as art*.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, for Thomas Folland, the readymade reacts to the stupor with which the modernist masters saw African art objects enter Western institutions of high art, so much so that, “Duchamp’s industrial objects allegorize the kinds of perceptual displacements necessary to perceive tribal artefacts as art.”<sup>15</sup> As Arthur Jafa further argues, building on Robert Farris Thompson’s idea of “African art in motion,” Duchamp’s was an act of radical alienation that mirrors the alienation of the African artifact from its natal context of use once it enters Western collections.<sup>16</sup> And because Duchamp’s readymade seized the alienation of the African art object, as well as the Black subject organically linked to it, it became the first full blown manifestation of modern art as derivative of Black aesthetics.<sup>17</sup> Which also means that Black aesthetics is already inside the logic of the readymade – and that’s what ultimately interests me the most.

### Exhibit C

In 2018, Carissa Rodriguez directed a twelve-minute video installation titled *The Maid*, commissioned by The Sculpture Center in New York. The video follows six of Levine’s pieces in their current settings in collectors’ homes in NYC and Los Angeles, museum storage rooms, and at Christie’s auction house.

*The Maid* unfolds from dawn to dusk, as a full day in the lives of the *Newborns*, as Rodriguez’s floating Steadicam shots, slow pans and tilts approach the *Newborns* in their own alienated environments as quasi-animate beings, quietly awaiting human care or perhaps questioning if it’ll ever come. Yet, no signs of a caregiver—except for the gloved hands of an art handler—is ever seen.<sup>18</sup> In the first part of the video, the set is eerily empty, and the lonely life of the *Newborns* is only witnessed by other artworks (Warhol, Lichtenstein, among many others), like the opening sequence of *Inside*, which begins as a “day in the life” of the art collection within the Manhattan loft.

Rodriguez shows the *Newborns* in their self-absorbed contentment and simultaneous radical alienation from any context of reproduction. In this way, she points to the invisibility of the labor of art care, while asserting the gendered nature of caregiving.

At the same time, she questions the duplicity of care by showing how the *Newborns* are cared for because they are part of that same ecology of art care



Figure 1.

that preserves the loft's artwork in *Inside*, whose malfunctioning ends up threatening Nemo's life. Ultimately, we discover, in both cases this is a care only contingently directed to the object themselves, because it is rather a care for the *systems* of care that can endlessly valorize the art objects in their care. Deployed in the service of value-production, care is now the value-form that art shares with speculative capital.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in the second part of *The Maid* the *Newborns* are brought to auction to be sold. The already alienated *Newborns* are unceremoniously alienated one more time.

#### Exhibit D

Rodriguez's *The Maid* was in turn inspired by Robert Walser's 1913 short story of the same title about a maid caring for the child of a rich woman—a child the story describes as “her charge.” The child suddenly goes missing and the maid travels the world for twenty years looking for her. When she finds her in Paris, the maid dies of happiness.

In Walser's one-paragraph story, the financial transaction by which the maid is put in charge of the child has already occurred and, just like her caregiving labor (or the mother's reproductive labor, for that matter), needs no further mentioning. Once the precious charge goes missing, however, the maid (presumptively) acts on her attachment to the child as well as an obligation—a charge—she seeks to pay back. All the while the story never mentions

the mother looking for the missing child.

While “by shifting emphasis from production to reproduction,” Leah Pires argues, “Levine’s work imagines alternative kinship structures for modernism,” that do not depend on the patrilinear claim to radical originality, Rodriguez extends this critique by recasting the original story’s hardline between reproduction (the mother) and caregiving (the maid) by focusing solely on the *Newborns*.<sup>20</sup>

These distinctions between reproduction and caregiving interest me because that’s where the labor of care—the perennial racial and gendered ghost in the machine—can only appear as already disappeared. That is, it never appears *as* labor, but only as a site of valorization.

### Exhibit E

With his fourth feature film, *Widows* (2018), Steve McQueen adapted the eponymous 1983 TV serial written by Lynda La Plante and recast the heist genre film’s reliance on primitive accumulation under the sign of racial and gendered dispossession: an interracial group of recently widowed women have to pull a job that will allow them to pay off the debt incurred by their husbands killed in a heist gone wrong. Yet, before the sum of money that Harry (Liam Neeson) has stolen and his wife Veronica (Viola Davis) has to pay back, there is the loss of their biracial son, killed by police during a traffic stop—his life foreclosed by the inherited debt of matrilinear blackness.<sup>21</sup> Although the film opens with a moment of intimacy between the interracial couple (figure 1), this plentifulness is immediately intercut with the deadly heist. After the getaway van explodes, a hard cut brings us back to Veronica in bed, directly confronting this same negative space no longer occupied by her husband (figures 2 and 3).

McQueen’s version places the gendered and racialized labor of maternal reproduction at its center: three of the six women who execute the heist have children—that is, “obstacles,” as McQueen puts it, that, let’s say, Daniel Ocean never had—and practice an intergenerational passing on of the charge from mother to mother, by watching each other’s children.<sup>22</sup> So much so that ultimately, one of the widows’ babysitters—Belle, played by Cynthia Erivo—ends up being the driver for the heist. In other words, caregiving is part of the infrastructure for the unlikely heist, which, in turn, is already a highly gendered undertaking, one that, as Veronica puts it, has a chance to succeed only because “nobody thinks we have the balls to pull this off.”



Figures 2-4.

We could say that Harry is still grieving the loss of their son—“I couldn’t save us,” he tells Veronica, as he reappears at the end of the film, when she has already returned to the hideout with the money from the heist—and that, perhaps, he used the heist, which seized a political candidate’s campaign money to benefit his opponent while faking his own death, as a ruse to get a purchase on a new life unburdened by this matrilinear loss. And yet, the film presents his drive toward primitive accumulation as powerfully aligned with the desire to become a bachelor’s machine: not caregiving, not producing, but reproductive only to himself (“I had to save me,” he cries).

### **Widows and Maids**

When I encountered Rodriguez’s *The Maid* at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, it literally stopped me in my tracks. When I saw Steve McQueen’s 2018 *Widows* the reasons and stakes came sharply in relief. Installed as a two-sided screen hanging from the ceiling, Rodriguez’s video placed the very imbrication of art care and expected valorization in a sublime *mise-en-abyme*. McQueen pushed this *mise-en-abyme* even further: a “charge,” or an unpayable debt is already the premise of the film. While *The Maid* critiques the way conditions of valorization for works of art are dubiously presented as mechanisms of an ecology of art care, it is exhibited within those very same conditions. On his part, by reversing the heist film’s premise on primitive accumulation, McQueen enters a productive conversation with Levine and Rodriguez and augments their intervention into the relationship between artmaking, reproductive labor, art’s speculative ontology and art’s care. He does so by approaching the heist film as a readymade. And if the readymade is an offspring of the bachelor machine, then he shows how patriarchy is a system of accumulation that is also death-driven and relies on gendered labor to pay back its charge.<sup>23</sup>

### **Inside**

In *Inside*, value is still relentlessly generated even when spectacularizing the art’s destruction or flaunting carelessness toward it, as Nemo deploys and destroys the loft’s art objects to fashion shelter and, eventually, an escape route through the skylight. Yet, interestingly for my purpose, there is an immanent critique of art’s own undeniable and unstoppable speculative mode of production that comes from its “inside”: the artworks’ collection itself, curated by Leonardo Bigazzi.



Bigazzi purposefully selected both “blue chip” artists (whose very label advertises the open secret of their imbrication with art’s speculative mode of production), such as Maurizio Cattelan or Francesco Clemente, alongside “socially engaged” ones, whose work at times pushes back against expectations of its own permanence or the tokenism of figuration as practiced by BIPOC artists, such as Maxwell Alexandre’s 2018 painting *If I Were you, I’d Look at Me Again*, on brown craft paper, which, ironically, is duplicated in a (more durable) large-scale photograph of the collector, his daughter and dog standing in front of it; works that deploy the language of social abstraction to reclaim its underlying collectivism, such as Amalia Pica’s *Memorial for Intersections #15* (2015), which takes exception with the Argentinian dictatorship’s banning of Venn diagrams because of their ability to map collective action. Works that address situations of political and existential limbo, such as Adrian Paci’s 2007 photograph of refugees in a state of “temporary permanence,” as they crowd on the boarding staircase of an aircraft that, however, is not there.

On the one hand, *Inside*’s art collection is tasked with telling us something about the collector’s personality while emphasizing plot points that can be best served by artworks that explore similar themes such as entrapment, suspension, or sheltering in place (like Joanna Piotrowska’s 2016–17 photographic series). On the other hand, perhaps Bigazzi has created a space for the collected artwork to perform its distance from the project of primitive accumulation that the collector has, however, already performed. At the same time, with the exception of a handful of recognizable works, this critique might remain obscure, unclear, or neglected when viewers do not know the artwork, its context, or its value. Still, they may wonder about the art-world value of any and all elements of the set design, at the same time that they might question their own investment in this value-seeking operation.

Hence the art collection’s immanent critique manifests as an undecidability about the processes of value creation that conflicts both with the film’s narrative of human survival as well as with the art world’s speculative processes.

### **Maids and Moths**

Cut off from the outside world, Nemo “befriends” a maid he watches through a close-circuit TV, and who hides in the building’s recesses to steal precious moments for herself. Yet while Rodriguez’s *The Maid* questions this ecology of (art) care, *Inside* takes place fully within it, even as it wrestles with some of its premises.

With old-school language we could say that the film's narrative attempts a troubling of the vexed relationship between *function* and *ornament*: what's hanging on the walls is no longer sacred, and even a Maurizio Cattelan piece such as *A Perfect Day* (1999), in which he taped his own curator to a gallery wall, has to be "set free," in a scene that came to Dafoe himself as he was working on set—although we might be left wondering whether it is the work or Cattelan's curator who should be metaphorically walking away.

Yet, as a whole, Bigazzi's curatorial choices push back against this facile distinction while keeping in play the relationship between ideas of *property* and *propriety* inherent in the very concept of filmic prop:<sup>24</sup> he selected only works that were part of private collections and had to negotiate separately with each artist the terms of their work's appearance, and the way in which it was going to be "misused" and possibly destroyed during the shoot.

Yet, art's speculative mode of production remains visible in the bachelor's reproduction of copies of, for example, *A Perfect Day*. And while duplication was circumstantially justified by the possible fate of the art objects on set, it takes on a difference valence here when the artist is already particularly adept at speculation and self-valorizing reproduction.<sup>25</sup>

In *Inside*, this immanence has also architectural implications. The loft itself includes a series of "crypts:" a video installation room in an unclear location, where Breda Beban's two-channel *I Can't Make You Love Me* (2003) plays continuously for no one to see—an expenditure of resources the refrigerator might object to—and an architectural "crevice" behind the collector's bedroom closet Nemo reluctantly passes through, only to find a rubber mummy of the collector, a book—William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—and the previously unlocatable Schiele self-portrait which was the main target of the heist—all objects that, more or less seriously, strive toward the eternal. There is also a basement of sorts Nemo visits in a dream by descending a replica of the boarding staircase featured in Paci's work, where the collector greets him warmly but also proffers a series of platitudes typical of an art opening, even though in this case it features the work of "socially conscious" artists (in this case, *Protocol 90/6* by MASBEDO, i.e., Nicolò Massazza and Iacopo Bedogni, 2018).

Ultimately, the film's immanent critique is also *cryptic*: it does not so much hinge on Nemo's quest for survival and eventual escape, but is rather embedded in the curated artworks themselves, making its place within them, like a moth, which Bigazzi describes as, "an animal that hides itself in the structure



Figure 5-6.

of the architecture of the house and through this attitude finds its own way of living”—an allegory made present in *Inside* through a moth costume by Kosovan installation artist Petrit Halilaj, which Nemo eventually wears to protect himself from the freezing temperature.

### Readymades

Yet, something happens in *Widows* which, to my eyes now trained on *Inside*'s immanent critique, establishes an even stronger family resemblance with Levine's *Newborns* and Rodriguez's *The Maid*, while positioning its critique *inside* its generic formula. It's the articulation of a more profound aesthetic "charge": the unpayable debt modernism has incurred with black aesthetics.<sup>26</sup>

As Folland observes, photography played a crucial role in establishing an aesthetic proximity between the readymade and primitivist art, a practice of which Alfred Stieglitz is the unlikely culprit, when he couldn't help but photograph Duchamp's *Fountain* as an art object.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in key moments in



Figure 7.

*Widows*, Sean Bobbit's cinematography frames Veronica the way Rodriguez approaches the *Newborn* and, by extension, the African artifact in the Western institutional context. Within the light-filled high-rise apartment overlooking Lake Michigan, a set décor following the visual vernacular of modernism, Viola Davis's face and hairdo are framed with abundant white negative space (figure 5) and thus progressively alienated, particularly when she is paid the unexpected visit by Jamal Manning—the candidate whose money Harry has stolen—who demands that she repays her husband's debt and reminds her of her radical dispossession: “You are nothing now. Welcome back,” he tells her (figure 6).<sup>28</sup>

While in keeping with the spirit of the Brancusi originals, the Levine's *Newborns* appear already fully figured and self-content, in Rodriguez's video they more scandalously and poignantly engender their own duplicates as reflections on shiny tabletops,<sup>29</sup> as if recapitulating the way Levine's recasting from the Brancusi original locates them within the very context of the industrially produced object they were hoping to stave off—for example when *Bird in Space* became entangled in a dispute over US Custom's classification of it as piece of polished bronze, rather than artwork, i.e., as a mass object—precisely by appealing to Black aesthetics as the opposite of industrial production.<sup>30</sup> Yet, in modern art the two are also co-implicated, as two polar opposites that, however, come to define each other.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, once alone, and coming face to face with her new loss, Veronica's face duplicates in windows (figure 7) and mirrors (figure 8), thus *imaging* not only creative production as, in reality, a reproduction, but also exposing the aesthetic debt that modernism owes to African art. In this way, *Widows* sets “Black art in motion,” as Jafa might say, by foregrounding the reproduction of



Figure 8.

the alienated Black object and subject through the mechanisms—here, specifically the “framing”—of high art.

This framing flaunts the seeming recursivity but, in reality, the primitive accumulation enacted by the readymade and mobilizes images of Veronica to approach the heist genre film as just that.<sup>32</sup>

But then, if the genre film is a readymade, and the readymade—from Duchamp onward—is already a reaction to the introduction of African art in Europe, and, more broadly, an art historical concept and practice always-already imbricated with both the primitive accumulation and the reproduction of Blackness, then the heist film becomes McQueen’s vehicle to reflect on the mandate placed on Black art and Black artists to constantly produce, reproduce, care, and, more importantly, self-valorize. A mandate built on an unacknowledged *primitivist* accumulation, where Blackness is already and fundamentally *inside*.

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## NOTES

1. See R.A. Judy, “The Unfungible Flow of Liquid Blackness,” *liquid blackness: journal of aesthetics and black studies* 5, no. 1 (2021): 27-36.

2. Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital* (Brill, 2018), 181.

3. As Richard Powell discusses in “The Price of Blackness,” a new section in the third edition of *Black Art: A Cultural History* (Thames & Hudson, 2021), beginning with the great recession of 2008 Black art has been approached as a sound and profitable investment. Further boosted by the 2020 summer of racial reckoning, Black art has become a feature of diversified investment portfolios. See also, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *All Incomplete* (Minor Compositions, 2021).

4. Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (University of Chicago Press, 2013); Sampada Aranke, “Blackout and other Visual Escapes,” *Art Journal* 79, no. 4 (2020): 62-75.

5. Fernando Dominguez Rubio, *Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum* (University of Chicago Press, 2020).

6. Finance capital is at home in the circularity of the racial dialectic, argues Denise Ferreira da Silva in *Unpayable Debt* (Sternberg Press, 2022), a circularity between cause and effect, the ethical and the juridical, the symbolic and “real.” I discuss some of the implications of this equation in “Condition Report,” *liquid blackness: journal of aesthetics and black studies* 8, no. 1 (2024): 2-23, in conversation with Ferreira da Silva “1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ - ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value,” *e-flux Journal* 79 (2017). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value/>

7. I develop these insights in my book in progress on “The Liquidity of the Black Arts: Black Study as Aesthetic Praxis.” Materials for this essay are also drawn from previously published essays: “Inside Job Meets Immanent Critique,” *Flash Art International*, March 14, 2023, <https://flash---art.com/2023/03/inside/> and “Of Widows and Maids: Production, Reproduction, Caregiving,” *In Media Res*, “Labor and the Moving Image,” curated by Jordan Chrietzberg and Navid Darvishzadeh, <https://mediacommons.org/imr/content/widows-and-maids-production-reproduction-caregiving>. I also think about this “insidedness” in the context of Fred Moten’s assessment of Blackness as invaginative to Kant’s aesthetic project, insofar as he deploys race “as the exemplary regulative and/or teleological principle.” Moten, *Stolen Life* (Duke University Press, 2018), 2. Since “[t]he scandal of the supersensible is that it manifests itself sensually,” “Black Kant” (pronounced “cant,” Moten insists), has accrued an unpayable debt toward blackness, which remains buried in the ground of critical thinking. (*Stolen Life*, 30-40). See also, my “A View of a Lanscape and Other Church Problems,” *liquid blackness: journal of aesthetics and black studies* 6, no. 1 (2022): 6-31.

8. This conclusion, however, relies on a fundamental confusion between creative work and art object, even though Nemo is trapped in the high-tech loft precisely because he knows the difference between art’s aesthetic and financial value.

9. That’s how Dominguez Rubio characterizes the reality of the modern art museum where art object’s constant deterioration reasserts their “thingness” in the face of what is considered their immortal aesthetic value. See Introduction to *Still Life*.

**10.** This “ecology” extends to include a whole cycle, a whole logistics of self-valorization, where logistics, as Harney and Moten identify it, is the fundamental self-valorizing mechanism of contemporary capital. Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*. Following Vishmidt’s insight, art care licenses processes of value-extraction whereby the art museum functions as an extractive zone.

**11.** Jsabelle Loring Wallace, “On Touch and Surrogacy: Carissa Rodriguez’s *The Maid*,” *Walkerart Magazine*, Jan 13, 2020, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/carissa-rodriguez-the-maid> and Leah Pires, “Alternate Conceptions,” in *The SculptureCenter, Carissa Rodriguez: The Maid* (SculptureCenter, 2018): 9.

**12.** This temporality confounds issues of filiation and derivation: “the original work appears as an original, as a before, only when it has been called on to defend itself from its double—only after Levine’s work has come after it.” Howard Singerman, “Sherrie Levine’s Art History,” *October* 101 (2002), 98.

**13.** Rosalind Krauss, “Bachelors,” *October* 52 (1990): 53-59.

**14.** Ruba Katrib writes: “Levine’s appropriation of the Brancusi was part of her ongoing artistic practice, the absorption of canonical artworks under her moniker, and in many ways an angling for shared parentage with selected patriarchs of twentieth-century art history.” Ruba Katrib, “Carissa Rodriguez: The Maid and Others,” in *The SculptureCenter, Carissa Rodriguez: The Maid* (2018), 2.

**15.** The question posed by the readymade, according to Folland, is “how does a thing become a work of art?” Thomas Folland, “Readymade Primitivism: Marcel Duchamp, Dada, and African Art,” *Art History*, 43, NO. 4 (2020): 812. See also Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” *October* 34 (1985): 45-70.

**16.** Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act* (University of California Press, 1979).

**17.** See Arthur Jafa, “My Black Death,” in *Everything but the Burden: What White people are Taking from Black culture*, edited by Greg Tate (Crown, 2003).

**18.** Loring Wallace, “On Touch and Surrogacy.” To be sure, she points out, the very last drone shot taken from outside the first collector’s apartment building in NYC, does include an easy-to-miss maid. But she is simply the caregiver, not the owner, she points insists.

**19.** On the challenges of care see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, “Give Your House Away, Constantly: Fred Moten and Stefano Harney Revisit The Undercommons in a Time of Pandemic and Rebellion (part 2),” Millennials are Killing Capitalism podcast. <https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/give-away-your-home-constantly-fred-moten-and-stefano-harney>

**20.** Pires, “Alternate Conceptions,” 9.

**21.** Although we find out later that this was just a ruse for seizing a political candidate’s campaign money to benefit his opponent,

**22.** The *New York Times*, “ScreenTimes: *Widows* with Steve McQueen.” YouTube video, 30:02. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWK6tNkIfO8>.

**23.** It’s not enough to say, as Daryl Lee does, that the heist film offers a way to reflect on the tension between capitalist production and aesthetic value, as if they were somewhat separable. What I am advocating here, instead, is that the heist film enters this tension in solidarity with the way it has been historically entered by the readymade. See

Daryl Lee, *The Heist Film: Stealing with Style* (Columbia University Press, 2014).

**24.** See the indispensable John David Rhodes, *Spectacle of Property: The House in American Film* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

**25.** In personal conversation, Bigazzi told me Cattelan made a big public deal about making a copy of *A Perfect Day* and placed it next to the original to make sure it was perfect, but I argue, also to create a spectacle of self-valorizing reproductions.

**26.** Consider, for example, Brancusi's *Mademoiselle Pogany*, 1912, and *White Negresse*, 1923. For Amelia Miholca, Brancusi becomes familiar with African art because of his involvement in the 1920s New York avant-garde scene (beginning with the 1913 Armory Show) at a time of critical, curatorial and collector's emerging distinction between artwork and artifact and, "he appropriated the sculptural abstraction of African objects to enhance the essence of form in his own sculpture." Miholca, "Brancusi's Involvement with African Art in New York," *Critical Interventions*, 9, no. 3 (2015), 179.

**27.** In "Readymade Primitivism," Folland argues that "like those tribal objects, the readymades were presented as full-fledged objects of aesthetic delectation, or at least asking that they should be so treated," 807.

**28.** As Grotkopp points out, "a whole article could also be dedicated to the interplay of colours and textures, the whites and blacks of dresses, dogs or the redness of Veronica's dress in the scene where she realises that Harry is still alive. These surface features are important both for the allegorisation of the heist with the craft of filmmaking but also with reference to a world in which appearances of race and gender are matters of life and death." Matthias Grotkopp, "Working for/working with/working against – *Widows* and the Politics and Poetics of Genre," in *ReFocus: The Films of Steve McQueen*, ed. Thomas Austin, (Edinburgh University Press, 2023) 103. While I don't agree with his conclusion, I do agree that color, textures and, more importantly, framing are essential to the way McQueen approaches the heist genre as a commercial product in need of a radical alienation from the inside.

**29.** To be sure, for the 2011 Whitney exhibition of Levine's *Newborn* series they were installed on top of shiny grand pianos, and thus cast their own reflection.

**30.** *United States vs. Brancusi, 1927-28*. As the Court reached its decision in favor of Brancusi, "it was operating at the outer limits of the artworld as it existed at the time." Derek Fincham, "How Law Defines Art," *The John Marshall Review of Intellectual Property Law*, 14 (2015): 316.

**31.** For Folland, readymades, "were a means by which a radical disjunction between industrialism and primitivism became synthesized as a way of invoking the modern in all of its inherent contradictions," 812.

**32.** I should add that, for me, genre films are always already building on processes of primitive accumulation in their very relationship (including deviations) to preexisting generic formulas. Yet here I am more interested in aesthetic (rather than narrative) debts, credits, and bachelor reproductions.