

REWRITING THE BODY: CARL AND KAREN POPE'S "PALIMPSEST"

By

Janet Dees

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History

Summer 2005

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By

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family, particularly my parents Lloyd and Dolores Dees, for providing me with a foundation that has helped to make all things possible. Their continuous support and encouragement is invaluable to me.

I would like to acknowledge my advisor, Dr. Ann Gibson for her insight, diligence and patience throughout this thesis writing process and her support and encouragement of me since the beginning of my graduate career here at the University of Delaware. Her high level of commitment to her graduate advisees should be commended and is greatly responsible for the effective and efficient completion of this thesis. Dr. Ikem Stanley Okoye provided crucial critical feedback. His insights continue to challenge me to refine my scholarship and to think in an expanded field.

Finally I would like to acknowledge Carl and Karen Pope, whose work *Palimpsest* is the subject of this thesis. I first viewed *Palimpsest* five years ago and it continues to engage me to this day. Thinking about this work has broadened my scope and refined my critical faculties.

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## ABSTRACT

In 1998 American artist Carl Pope was commissioned by the Wadsworth Atheneum to create *Palimpsest* a body art /video piece in collaboration with his twin sister, poet Karen Pope. *Palimpsest* was completed in 1999 and later exhibited in the 2000 Whitney Biennial. In this piece Pope conceives of his body as a palimpsest upon which a story has been written which is made up of projected stereotypes of who he is as an African –American. Through the enactment of three deliberate and permanent modifications to his body- the branding of the adinkra symbol *Aya* (I am not afraid of you), a small surgical incision and the tattooing of poetic text across the full length of the back of his body- Pope seeks to literally and symbolically rewrite this story and assert agency in the construction of his identity. This thesis discusses how Pope uses his body to evoke the specificity of his experience as an African-American, while at the same time using the body as a common denominator which, particularly through the experience of pain, links people across race. The work functions as a process of personal catharsis and self-actualization for the artist as well as an empathetic experience for the viewer and reinforces the idea of the body as a receptor and carrier of knowledge. This thesis also discusses the implications of the choice of body art/ video as the medium for *Palimpsest*

and situates the piece within the context of 1990's body art theory and practice and discourses of the 'black body'.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

“...and I realize with selfhood subtle and gross homeostasis equilibrium of my humanness that is oscillating consciousness beyond an ensnaring veil...”<sup>1</sup>

Of the works exhibited in the 2000 Whitney Biennial, Hans Haacke's *Sanitation*, which was a critique of New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani's perceived anti-art stance in relationship to the Brooklyn Museum exhibition *Sensation*, was probably the most frequently discussed. However, for me, the most memorable was a video/body work entitled *Palimpsest* conceived by the artist Carl Pope and executed in collaboration with his twin sister, poet Karen Pope. The piece consisted of a video projection recording three acts committed on the artist's body: the branding of the Adinkra<sup>2</sup> symbol *aya*, on the artist's back (fig. 1), a small surgical incision into the artist's arm, with the subsequent shining of a light through the thin lifted layer of skin, giving the skin a translucent quality (fig.2), and the tattooing of the words from the epilogue, excerpted from a poem written by Karen Pope along the entire length of the artist's back and leg (fig. 3). Interspersed

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<sup>1</sup> This is the portion of the poem written by Karen Pope for *Palimpsest* which is tattooed onto Carl Pope's body

<sup>2</sup> Adinkra symbols are used in Akan culture of West Africa. Literally adinkra means “to employ a message”, and these symbols represent self-contained proverbs. They are traditionally printed on cloth and used in the funerary context. W. Bruce Willis. *The*

with the edited footage of these actions were images of the Popes' faces reciting the entire poem from which the words of the tattoo were taken (fig.4). Their voices created the sonic backdrop for the images in the piece. On a nearby wall the poem was printed in its entirety. What was striking to me about the video at first was my inability to watch it. When Pope braced himself against the branding iron, I winced. When the scalpel cut into his skin revealing the pink flesh underneath, I shielded my eyes. It was as if I could feel the pain Carl Pope endured as he went through these procedures. My response to watching this video provoked me to ask what would make the artists endure in body what was difficult for me to endure in image? This question urged me to build the tolerance to watch the piece through several times, and contemplate the physical and metaphoric implication of the work and the acts committed on the artist's body. As I began to think about his body as a black body it occurred to me that these controlled acts were relatively tame in comparison to the real history of acts committed on and against the African-American body.

Produced in 1998-99 with the help of a commission from the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, *Palimpsest* is the realization of Carl Pope's desire to create a body centered work that engaged with issues of blackness. This desire was fueled partly in response to work by artists in the early 1990's that Pope saw as *representing* the black body, but not *engaging* with the black body. Trained as a photographer and working primarily in photography and installation, Pope's work to this point focused primarily on social issues particularly those affecting the African-American community including

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*Adinkra Dictionary: A Visual Primer on the Language of Adinkra.* (Washington, D.C.:

police brutality, alcoholism and youth violence. One of his best known works *From the Trophy Collection of the Indianapolis Police Department and the Marion County Sheriff's Office* (Fig. 5) is an installation consisting of a trophy case filled with mock trophies for actual police action killings of young black and Hispanic youth. This piece asserts that by not being prosecuted the officers are actually being rewarded for the taking of young lives. In a project entitled *The Black Community: An Ailing Body*, Pope investigated other arenas which he felt were plaguing the Black community. One part of the exhibition consisted of a map demonstrating and numbering the 500 liquor stores that are located within the African-American community of Indianapolis, showing the disproportionate accessibility of alcohol in African-American neighborhoods.

Pope levels his critiques against a number of forces which he sees as acting detrimentally on the African-American community, including forces within the community itself. In the installation piece *the Book of Numbers(Not the King James Version)* (Fig. 6) from 1991-92, Pope offers a critique of the Black Church which traditionally has been a supportive, political organizing engine within the black community. By conducting research into the finances of local churches, Pope exposed that some churches focused more attention on other efforts, such as building beautification projects, than on programs and actions that would benefit the wider community.

In 1996, Pope was commissioned by Real Art Ways in Hartford, Connecticut to create a piece to memorialize youth who were killed by drugs, AIDS and inner-city

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The Pyramid Complex, 1998), 26-29.

violence in that city. The resulting piece *Silent Wishes, Unconscious Dreams and Prayers...Fulfilled*, is an installation consisting of seventeen brownstone slabs engraved with the words and thoughts of eleven teenagers killed in Hartford. To create this piece, Pope interviewed the family and friends of the slain youths, gathering information about their hopes, expectations and dreams. Using these statements as a starting point, *Silent Wishes*, examines the assumptions these youths held about their lives, and the role that these assumptions played in their untimely deaths. The large engraved cracked stone tablets were placed in a field, recalling broken gravestones strewn about a cemetery. It was this project which prompted Pope to consider the psychological dimension of the manifestation of violence in the lives of these young people. Pope began to question how unconscious beliefs, particularly those related to racism might be manifesting themselves in his own life.<sup>3</sup> The body, as the site where the psychological meets the social, appeared to be the most appropriate medium to work through these complex issues, particularly with the role of the body as marked as “black” and “other” plays in the construction of identity in American society. By situating this exploration on his particular body, Pope emphasizes the 'personal' aspect of the political by looking at how racism works on the individual level. In this sense combating racism and its effects must be personal and internal as well as social and external. Through the medium of the body Pope is able to engage the particulars of his black body while appealing to the body as the ground of shared experience to communicate somatically to bodies that are different from his. This

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<sup>3</sup> Carl Pope telephone interview with author March 2004.

allows access through association, albeit not complete, to the specificity of history and reality of his body and of the African-American body.

The title of the piece is evocative. *Palimpsest* is a term originally denoting a parchment on which the original writing has been fully or partially eradicated by a process that could include washing, bleaching, abrasions, or a combination of methods, so that the parchment might be reused for another manuscript. In extended usage palimpsest can refer to any surface that has been prepared for reuse.<sup>4</sup> In the video/body artwork *Palimpsest*, Carl Pope's body is the palimpsest- the parchment upon which a story has been written; a story made up stereotypes of who he is an African –American and the collective trauma of the African-American body. In the process of this work Pope attempts to come to terms with this and re-write his own version of his story upon his body. The metaphoric implications of the title indicate that this is not a blank canvas but one on which work has to be done to erase the previous text before a new text can be written. It also leaves open the possibility that the previous text cannot be completely erased, that evidence of the attempts at erasure may be visible, and/or that the portions of the old text that cannot be erased are somehow incorporated into the new text.

*Palimpsest* is set at an important intersection of body art theory, postmodernist critique of subjectivity and theories about the black body. This work engages these multiple discourses, while it seeks to go beyond discourse to create an embodied experience of knowledge. *Palimpsest* is a work that is informed by these theories but in turn informs them and evinces new possibilities for the engagement with body-centered

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Mayer. *Art Terms and Techniques*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 294.

art strategies. The purpose of this current discussion is to unpack this poetically dense work in order to read it in relationship to other practices and theories about the body that relate to and inform it. The work contains the possibility of personal transformation for the artist and an empathetic experience for the viewer. Pope works against fragmentation to create an actualized self that has some sense of agency in the creation of a healed identity that incorporates the historical, social and personal.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE RETURN OF THE BODY

*Palimpsest* can be situated in the larger context of body centered art practices in the 1990's. In his 1993 article "What's With All This Body Art" *Flash Art* critic Jeff Rian observed a plethora of artists working with the body as a medium.<sup>5</sup> Art historians writing since then have noted a marked "return" to the body in the 1990's. This concept of a 'return' is predicated upon a paradigm which views the late 1960's and 1970's as the apex of body art practices, with a turning away from the body being a characteristic of art in the 1980's. From the mid-1990's to the present there has been an increase in the scholarship on body-centered art practices. This scholarship is not only concerned with the newly flourishing body art strategies of the 1990's and forward, but also with a revisiting of the body-centered work of the late 1960's and 1970's. Notable contributions include several articles by Amelia Jones, her book *Body Art/Performing the Subject* as well as the anthology she edited with Andrew Stephenson *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*. There is also the volume published by Phaidon and edited by Tracey Warr, *The Artist's Body*, two textual forums on the body in the *College Art*

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<sup>5</sup> Jeff Rian. "What's with All this Body Art." *Flash Art* (Jan/Feb 1993): 50-53. Artists mentioned by Rian cover a range of approaches of the body and included Lorna Simpson, Kiki Smith, Robert Gober, Byron Kim, Charles Ray.

Association's *Art Journal* organized by Amelia Jones and David Joselit respectively, Kathy O'Dell's *Contract with the Skin Masochism: Performance Art and the 1970's*, articles by Kate Ince, Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, among others, and works on individual artists too numerous to cite here. Many of the discussions cited above explored the physical mutability of the body and its relationship to identity.<sup>6</sup> A primary difference from earlier body art noted in the body centered work of the 1990's was its emphasis on the subjectivity, instability and expandability of identity.

Amelia Jones' work on 1990's art, for instance, explored the implications of body art practices in reference to new theoretical frames of viewing the self as specific, particularized, fragmented and dispersed. This articulation of the category of the individual allowed room for subjects not included in the 'modernist' notion of the individual to engage the body to investigate/explore these dispersed identities<sup>7</sup>. In *The Artist's Body*<sup>8</sup> she theorizes the body as the place where the "public domain meets the private" and where the "social is negotiated, produced and made sense of," claiming that it is also the medium through which "public and private powers are articulated," particularly in protest to "Modernism's repressive, exclusionary and colonizing logic."<sup>9</sup> The artists who employ body art strategies call attention to the particularity of their bodies that deviate from the assumed and unspoken normative body of Modernism - the

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<sup>6</sup> Amelia Jones, et.al " The Body and Technology" *Art Journal* (Spring 2001): 20-39.  
David Joselit et. al. "Biocollage" *Art Journal* ( Fall 2000):44-63.

<sup>7</sup> See particularly Amelia Jones. " Dispersed Subjects and the Demise of the 'Individual', 1990's Bodies In/As Art" *Body Art/Performing the Subject*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998)

<sup>8</sup> Tracey Warr, editor. *The Artist's Body*. (London: Phaidon Press, 2000). Survey essay by Amelia Jones.

white, male heterosexual. By making the body the focus of their practice, they call into question this 'normative body', protest against its primacy and force their own bodies to be recognized and validated. Jones argues that these practices often employ strategies and ways of engaging the body that fall out of the vocabulary of Modernist western practice. As a way for the artist to create new views of themselves, such strategies also fall outside of the ones ascribed to them by patriarchal structures which generate and support imperialism, racism, classism and sexism.<sup>10</sup>

A renewed interest in body art can also be seen outside of the realm of so called 'high-art' practices in the more popular or social arena of the expansion of body-work/body-modification. This category of 'body art' encompasses a diverse range of practices from tattoo, body piercing and more technologically advanced forms of body modification such as sub-dermal implants and the use of non-medically mandated prosthetics. These practices employ diverse aesthetic sensibilities from Modern-Primitivism to Cyber-Punk<sup>11</sup>. Despite the diversity of these practices and the specific philosophies behind them social anthropologist Susan Benson notes that in contrast to what art historians are observing about the work in their field, these works, rather than celebrating or exploring a dispersed identity, are preoccupied with "possession", "fixity" and the stabilization of the self through corporeal engagement. Benson observes that

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<sup>9</sup> Amelia Jones "Survey", *The Artist's Body*, 20,22.

<sup>10</sup> Amelia Jones "Survey" *The Artist's Body*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Victoria Pitts. *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003)

"Identities in the 1990's may be fluid but the too, too solid flesh of the 1990's is definitely *not* melting: indeed much work has gone into ensuring that it should not."<sup>12</sup>

This return to the body is evident not just in the fields of art and art history but is part of a broader attention fixed on the body across several fields including anthropology, philosophy and particularly sociology, which spawned a seemingly infinite series of terms to describe and relate to the body.<sup>13</sup> Of these, the inscribed body may be the most relevant for the current discussion. Indeed the title *Palimpsest* alludes to the body as a place of 'cultural inscription' which evokes writing as the controlling metaphor (if not the only one) through which the work can be understood.

In the midst of this larger emphasis on the body, artists and theorists of color in the 1990's were also revisiting the place of the 'black body'. Coco Fusco's 1996 essay "The Bodies That Were Not Ours" gives a usable accounting of the landscape of body focused strategies of artists of color in the 1990's. Reviewing the theories and practices of Hortense Spillers, Adrian Piper, Lyle Ashton Harris, whose work is discussed below and others, Fusco defines the black body as being in the center of the battle between the abject status of "blackness" in the mythology of American culture and the traumatic effect of this abject status on the group and its identity. Fusco notes that artists in the 1990's shift from "representing the race to representing what it means to be raced by

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Benson. "Inscriptions of the Self: Reflections on Tattooing and Piercing in Contemporary Euro-America." In *Writing on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. Ed. Jane Caplan. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 237.

<sup>13</sup> Andrea Howson. *The Body and Society*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2004)

offering their own bodies as subject and objects.”<sup>14</sup> Reflecting on the work of Hortense Spillers, Fusco notes a departure from the Freudian construct of identity that is organized around incestuous fantasies that operate in the mind as memories, to one that stresses the role of memories of collective black trauma associated with historical realities in the construction of black subjectivity.<sup>15</sup>

Concomitant with the development of body art was the use of photography, and later video, as a means to document and thus share with a larger audience the products of this often ephemeral medium. Video gradually replaced photography as the documentary medium of choice because of its ability to reproduce time. From the beginning, body artists played with the idea of the photograph and the video as “documents” by creating works that only existed as “documents.” The most notorious example of this is the photographs, films and videos that records the performances of the Vienna Actionists, who sometimes used red paint and animal blood to simulate bloodletting rituals, while leaving the artists’ bodies unharmed.<sup>16</sup> Early video artists such as Vito Acconci, self-consciously engaged the camera. Through the embrace of the video medium, Acconci performed private works with the video camera as the only immediate audience and

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<sup>14</sup> Coco Fusco. “The Bodies that Were Not Ours.” In *the Bodies that Were Not Our and Other Writings*. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 5. Fusco draws on Spillers’ influential essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 64-81.

<sup>15</sup> Coco Fusco. “The Bodies that Were Not Ours”, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Amelia Jones. “Survey” *The Artist’s Body*, 32; Amelia Jones. *Body Art Performing the Subject*, 34; Michael Rush. *Video Art* (New York, Thames and Hudson, 2003), 87-90.

manipulated video's capacity for immediate feedback to extend the experience of the self through time and space.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1990's with the rapid advancement of video technology, artists were able to manipulate images to an unprecedented degree, allowing for the presentation of simulated experiences that either have not or cannot be produced in 'real' space. Whereas in an earlier moment video art occupied a space bordering on documentary, communicating the immediacy of experience (whether the artist's or those whom the artist recorded), increasingly video art has embraced the codes of mainstream media, creating synthetic experiences.<sup>18</sup>

Artists such as Gary Hill and Mona Hatoum have used video technology to create works that engage their bodies in ways that would not have been possible without this technology. In Gary Hill's 1990 video installation *Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place* (fig. 7), different portions of the artist's body are presented as static images on separate monitors of varying sizes. The assemblage fails to create a complete body and the viewer is confronted with the disconcerting image of a body fragmented by technology.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> On Acconci see Rosalind Krauss. "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism." *October* 1 (1976):50-64; Amelia Jones. "The Body in Action: Vito Acconci and the 'Coherent' Male Subject." *Body Art Performing the Subject*; For an overview of the development of video art see Michael Rush, *Video Art*; John G. Hanhardt. "The Passion for Perceiving: Expanded Forms of Film and Video Art." *Art Journal* 45:3 (Autumn 1985): 213-216; John G. Hanhardt and Maria Christina Villaseñor "Video/Media Culture of the Late Twentieth Century." *Art Journal* 54:4 (Winter 1995): 20-25.

<sup>18</sup> Katherine Hall, Stewart Kendall and Kirsten Swanson. "Video Art in the '90's" *Art Criticism* 14:2 (1999): 74-93.

<sup>19</sup> Ewa Lajer-Burchath "Real Bodies: Video in the 1990's" *Art History* 20 (June 1997), 191-194.

Mona Hatoum's 1994 video installation *Corps étranger* (fig. 8), uses the medical video technology of the endoscopic camera to take herself and the viewer on a pulsating guided tour of her body's internal regions.<sup>20</sup> Consisting of a video projected onto the floor of an enclosed cylindrical space, *Corps étranger* creates an effect almost opposite of *Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place*. Instead of a separation from another's body the viewer is immersed within the body of "a stranger" and the artist fully explores her own body which may be "a stranger" to herself.

In contrast, Pope's *Palimpsest* does not participate in this self-conscious engagement with video as a medium. The power of work is based upon the viewer believing in the 'actuality' of the actions presented in the video, an expectation that has been dampened by recent trends in the medium. Employing the codes of fictive film making, increasingly embraced by artists (Matthew Barney for example) it is possible that a video such as *Palimpsest* could have been created without any lasting physical traces on the artist. The video's aesthetic works to persuade viewers of the truth and permanence of the actions presented and elicit a "documentary response."<sup>21</sup> The footage has a raw straightforward quality and employs basic editing techniques that signals to viewers increasingly conditioned by media bombardment to distinguish genre through

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<sup>20</sup> Ewa Lajer-Burchath "Real Bodies: Video in the 1990's" *Art History* 20 (June 1997): 195-202

<sup>21</sup> On the concept of documentary response see Dai Vaughan "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity" *For Documentary: Twelve Essays*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 58-59; The conception of documentary has changed where the acknowledgement of documentary not as "fact" but as polemic or personal viewpoint of the filmmaker has been self-consciously incorporated into the final film. See Dai Vaughan "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity." For an example of a film working in this manner see Raoul Peck's 1991 film *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*.

style, that *Palimpsest* is a product devoid of sophisticated manipulation. Even the interspersed images of Karen and Carl reciting the words of the poem resonates with the authoritative ‘talking heads’ of the documentary genre. As authors such as Dai Vaughn caution, documentary is also a construction, one that has often veiled the fact that it is presenting the author’s particular version of truth.<sup>22</sup> But in Pope’s case the intention of presenting a particular viewpoint is clear.

In the first action of *Palimpsest*, Pope is branded with the adinkra symbol “Aya” which means:” I am not afraid of you”. Taking its shape from the fern, a plant that can survive in rough terrain, Aya can also express endurance, independence and perseverance in the midst of difficulties.<sup>23</sup> The act of branding also has symbolic resonance as an action committed against the enslaved body, either as a mark of ownership or as a symbol marking one as one who has attempted to run away. With this act Pope simultaneously recalls, appropriates and inverts this association. Pope uses Aya to counteract this meaning of branding by casting it as a device with which he deflects racist assumptions about himself as an African–American male.<sup>24</sup> By having it branded into his skin, the symbol becomes activated and part of his new story about himself. Pope takes an act that was about the obliteration of the self and turns it into an act of self-actualization. An act that is associated with victimization becomes one of empowerment.<sup>25</sup> Pope’s

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<sup>22</sup> Dai Vaughn. “The Aesthetics of Ambiguity” in *For Documentary: Twelve Essays*.

<sup>23</sup> W. Bruce Willis. *The Adinkra Dictionary: A Visual Primer on the Language of Adinkra*, 82-83.

<sup>24</sup> Deirdre Bibby, Exhibition brochure. *Palimpsest*. Wadsworth Atheneum, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> In an interview on the film *Sankofa*, director Haile Gerima “ The branding [that Mona experiences] allows an exploration of the past. It unleashes collective memory of people who had certain identities and characters and beliefs...sometimes we are in crisis or a

appropriation of African adinkra symbols links his practice to that of other African American artists. In his interview with Christa Erickson he states that his use of the adinkra symbol was “ a conscious decision to use these symbols as a way of claiming a connection to Africa... this comes from a human need to recover the lost pieces of the past. African- Americans have done this for a long time... I think it speaks of what black people have done to make sense out of the unsolvable mysteries in our personal and collective histories.”<sup>26</sup> It is interesting to think of the use of the adinkra symbol here as an amalgamation of Pope's idea with a symbol taken from the Akan culture. While Pope is depending upon the meaning of the symbol, he is employing it in a way that it would not have been employed in its original cultural context.<sup>27</sup>

Looking specifically to Africa for inspiration is part of the art practices of contemporary artists from the various African diasporas. In his discussion of the presentation of the body in the work of African- American artists such as Renee Stout, E.H. Sorrells Adwale, Skunder Bogossian and Nelson Stevens who were working through the 1970's and 1980's, Michael Harris theorizes the symbolic use of the body as a site of ritual which links the artists to Africa. He argues that the presentation of the body in African-American art functions as an act of reclamation, self-definition and self –

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tragedy occurs, and we get awakened to a certain memory bin. It's [as if it's] the mind that is branded when Mona is branded.” Gerima, Haile. “ Filming Slavery: A Conversation with Haile Gerima” *Transition* 64(1994) p. 100

<sup>26</sup> Carl Pope in interview with Christ Erickson supplied by Pope to the author

<sup>27</sup> W. Bruce Willis, *The Adinkra Dictionary*, 26-29. Traditionally, adinkra symbols would have been printed on cloth, which was used in the funerary context. The symbol chosen would relate to a characteristic of the deceased.

assertion.<sup>28</sup> This relationship to Africa as a site of origin is made more complex by Stuart Hall. In his essay “Cultural Identity in Diaspora” Hall seeks to create a theoretical backdrop for the new Caribbean cinema of the 1990’s. In doing so Hall makes an observation that is applicable to other blacks in the American diaspora. Referencing the work of Edward Said, Hall identifies Africa as part of an “imaginative geography and history” for artists of the African diaspora. ‘...it can never be fulfilled nor required and hence it is the beginning of symbolic representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search and discovery.’<sup>29</sup> Pope engages Africa in this way in *Palimpsest* through the use of the adinkra symbol.

In an interview of March 2004, Pope named the 1993 film *Sankofa* by director Haile Gerima as an additional powerful influence on him, and the piece *Palimpsest*.<sup>30</sup> The term Sankofa is taken from another Akan adinkra symbol meaning to return to your roots, recovering /recuperating what has been lost (usually referring to history) in order to move forward. It is also interpreted as to know your past, in order to fortify yourself in the present, and build for the future.<sup>31</sup> The idea of Sankofa was in circulation in certain sectors of the African-American community and received increased cultural currency with the release of Gerima’s film and the discovery of what may have been a sankofa symbol constructed in nails on the remains of a coffin discovered in the New York

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<sup>28</sup> Michael D. Harris. “Ritual Bodies- Sexual Bodies: The Role of the Presentation of the Body in African-American Art.” *Third Text* 12 (Autumn 1990): 81-95.

<sup>29</sup> Stuart Hall. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” In “Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.) *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Blacks and Jews*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 32.

<sup>30</sup> Telephone interview with author, March, 2004; Gerima is Ethiopian born, UCLA educated and currently professor of film at Howard University.

<sup>31</sup> W. Bruce Willis. *The Adinkra Dictionary*, 188-189.

African Burial Ground also in the early 1990's.<sup>32</sup> The film's protagonist Mona, an African-American model on a photo shoot at Elmina's 'slave castle' in Ghana, is set up as the prototype of one who has lost touch with the past, particularly the history of slavery as part of her cultural heritage. Through the intervention of a griot character who is identified as the embodiment of Sankofa, Mona is forcibly transported back in time to recover and experience the atrocities, as well as the spirit of defiance and rebellion of slavery firsthand. Through *embodied recollection*, she undergoes a transformative process from compliance out of fear to resistance and finally to rebellion. Killed in the process of running away, her death returns her to the present, transformed with the knowledge of the past. She emerges with a new sense of self informed by and reconciled to history.<sup>33</sup> It is possible to say that *Palimpsest* has a sankofa sensibility. This recovering and transformation through embodied experience is echoed in *Palimpsest*.

Pope's looking to Africa also extended to finding a way to approach and come to terms with the body modification procedures that he undergoes in the process of creating *Palimpsest*. Pope was seeking a way to fight against the Western, particularly the American idea of the marked body as 'other', 'deviant' or 'transgressive'. While not

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<sup>32</sup> New York African Burial Ground Office of Public Education and Interpretation (OPEI) brochure. Viewable as a PDF file at [www.africanburialground.com/OPEI\\_Documents/OPEI\\_ABG\\_Brochure.pdf](http://www.africanburialground.com/OPEI_Documents/OPEI_ABG_Brochure.pdf) The sankofa symbol was adopted as a symbol for the project and used as a logo on the OPEI newsletter from the Fall 1994 issue to the present. As an educator for OPEI I witnessed first hand the impact this discovery exerted on certain sectors of the African American community particularly in New York, New Jersey and Washington D.C. OPEI newsletters, official materials and reports relating to the New York African Burial Ground can be accessed at [www.africanburialground.com](http://www.africanburialground.com).

referring to any particular tradition, Pope stated that he was influenced by some "African" models of the marked body as one that has entered into civilization and culture or as one that holds particular knowledge.<sup>34</sup> In this way marking his body was also about incorporating symbolically the knowledge of the collective history of the African-American experience, his acknowledgement and acceptance of that history and a willingness to make it a part of himself with all of its pain. This loose referencing of "African" attitudes toward the body, resonates with the idea of Africa as creative material and muse for African diaspora artists that Hall enunciates. The diversity and complexity of African approaches to the body rejects such simplifications but what may be inferred is what Joan Maw identifies as a sense of the body as the link from what is inside to what is outside, with nature and culture being part of the outside.<sup>35</sup>

The concept of looking to other cultural paradigms for alternative models of relating to the body, particularly looking to "non-western" cultures, has been a part of the history of body-centered art practices from at least the 1960's, although Pope, as an African-American artist, may see himself as having a special cultural claim on African cultural practices. As Tracey Warr notes, these practices often include "Ecstatic rites", "ritual initiations", "circumcision", "body painting", "scarification", "tattooing" and

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<sup>33</sup> For additional discussion of the symbolism in the film *Sankofa* see Sandra Grayson. *Symbolizing the Past: Reading Sankofa, Daughters of the Dust and Eve's Bayou as Histories*. (New York: University Press of America, 2000)

<sup>34</sup> Carl Pope. Telephone interview with the author, March 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Joan Maw. "Introduction" *Concepts of the Body/Self in Africa*. Joan Maw and John Picton.(eds.) (Wien: Institute fur Afrikanistik, 1992.)

"piercing" as ways to engage the body in other discourses that focus on the individual as "...the self as part of a continuum in time, a community, an environment, a cosmos."<sup>36</sup>

Amelia Jones focuses on body art's contribution to the discourse of what she sees as the "single most pressing philosophical question of our time," that is, the interrogation of the Cartesian subject. She critiques the turning away from the body by both feminist and non-feminist alike that she locates in the 1980's and its creation of a postmodernism concerned with "strategies of production" rather than "corporeal politics" which explore identity and subjectivity.<sup>37</sup> By a reinvestigation of the work of artists such as Hannah Wilke and Vito Acconci, Jones seeks to reinvigorate an embodied theory of art. In her chapter "Dispersed Subjects and the Demise of the 'Individual' 1990's Bodies In/As Art," Jones discusses the work of James Luna, Lyle Ashton Harris, Orlan, Gary Hill and Mona Hatoum among others, and lauds what she recognizes as the return to body centered practice in the 1990's. In her discussion of these works she takes the work of James Luna as a starting point to engage the embodied subject as "necessarily particularized and engaged in the social: as necessarily politicized..." Artists in the 1990's return to the body in such a way that they assist in the dislocation of the modernist, Cartesian subject or 'individual' being brought about by social, political, and technological changes.<sup>38</sup> I would say that the "return" to the body by artists in the 1990's is not really a return, but rather a continuation of work that was being made through the 1970's and 1980's of artists including Luna himself (see for example his *Artifact Piece* of

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<sup>36</sup> Tracey Warr. "Preface" *The Artist's Body*.

<sup>37</sup> Amelia Jones. *Body Art/ Performing the Subject*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 29.

1986(fig. 9)) who were part of what Jones terms as part of the ‘alternative discourse’ of artists engaged with the body in ways which particularly dealt with complicating the notion of racial and ethnic identity.<sup>39</sup>

Jones proposes that re-conceptualization of the body/self as “dispersed”, “multiple” and “particularized” has radical potential for women and other subjects historically excluded from the privileged category of “individual”.<sup>40</sup> While I agree that this concept allows a place for others in the deconstruction of the individual as white, male, heterosexual, etc. and that it allows space for those who are multiply identified, I would like to visit a particular aspect of the ‘alternative discourse’ to which she alludes, in order to complicate and nuance this notion. Out of Jones’ “women and others” I will focus on the discourse relating to the representation and theorization of the African-American/ black body. I do this to insert the particulars of the discourse on the black body into the discourse of body art theory in general, in an attempt to create a place which tempers both Cartesian individuality and the dispersal of the inter-subjective self put forth by Jones. Particularly relevant is Diana Fuss' observation that these subjects

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<sup>38</sup> Amelia Jones. *Body Art/ Performing the Subject*, 202-203

<sup>39</sup> Amelia Jones. *Body Art/ Performing the Subject*, 29. In her footnote, Jones’ qualifies this statement by stating that this was the trend in the dominant discourse, but notes that there were different elements at play in what she called an “alternative discourse” and cites Lucy Lippard’s *Mixed Blessings: New Art in Multicultural America*, as part of this alternative discourse. At a later point in the text Jones’ again footnotes this “alternative discourse” in citing but not discussing the different relationship Black women may have had to veiling or revealing their body as opposed to white women, directing the reader to Lorraine O’Grady’s “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity” in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, Arlene Raven, et. al., editors. (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 216-247, which I will discuss briefly, later in this paper

<sup>40</sup> Amelia Jones. *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 204

who have historically existed from a place of fragmentation and dispersal may not want to celebrate or explore this condition but may instead want to strive for cohesion.<sup>41</sup>

In her essay “Olympia Maid’s: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity” Lorraine O’Grady, in asserting her concerns as an African-American artist, states that “ It is cruelly ironic of course that just as the need to establish our subjectivity in preface to theorizing our view of the world becomes most dire , the idea of subjectivity itself has become ‘problematized.’”<sup>42</sup> She recognizes that the subjectivity that is called into question is the “transcendental voice of the Enlightenment” (Jones’ Cartesian subject) and bids “good riddance to him”, stating that “ we who are inching away from the margins to the center cannot afford to take his problem of his truths as our own.”<sup>43</sup> In this acknowledgement she embraces the benefit of the demise of this version of subjectivity, yet seeks to hold a less universalizing subjectivity for the neglected voices of Modernism, in order to diminish the importance of focusing on the definition of self only in relationship to others. Echoing Gayatri Spivak she states that “Critiquing *them* does not show who *you* are, it cannot turn you from an object into a subject of history”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Diana Fuss. " 'Race' Under Erasure: Post-Structualist African-American Literary Theory" in *Essentially Speaking: Feminism and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989.)

<sup>42</sup> Lorraine O’Grady. ” Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity” in *New Feminist Criticism: Art Identity Action*. Arlene Rave et.al. editors. (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 156

<sup>43</sup> Lorraine O’Grady. “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity” , 156.

CHAPTER THREE  
THE SCARRED BODY

In the second action of *Palimpsest* a small surgical incision is made in Carl Pope's arm. The skin is lifted and a light is shone through it, highlighting the transparency of this pigmented layer. With this action Pope seeks to attack the idea of perceived racial differences and the myth of the innate biological inferiority of blacks.<sup>45</sup> This act also relates to the problematizing of "blackness" as an identifying category, expressed for example in the work of Adrian Piper. Through works such as *Cornered* (fig. 10) she reveals that blackness is a social construction, not tied to any biological reality. *Cornered* consists of an installation where viewers are invited to sit in front of a video monitor, which is pinned in behind a table. Above the monitor on the wall are two framed birth certificates for Piper's grandfather. One of the birth certificates identifies his race as 'white' while, the other identifies his race as "black." The monitor plays a video of Piper in confrontational dialogue with her intended viewers. Piper begins the video by making the statement "I am black." (which from her complexion and features may not be obvious to viewers.) She then proceeds to recount the statistics of how many "African-Americans" have "white ancestry" and how many "White Americans" have "African-American" ancestry, dramatizing the fluidity and arbitrariness of racial categories and

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<sup>44</sup> Lorraine O'Grady. "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity", 157.

the negativity that has been inscribed onto blackness. In her writing Piper reveals that “What joins me to other blacks, then, and other blacks to one another is not a set of shared physical characteristics for there are none that all blacks share. Rather it is the shared experience of being visually or cognitively *identified* as black by a white racist society and the punitive and damaging effects of that identification.”<sup>46</sup>

I would add that this act also has an association with the idea of being “thin-skinned”, highlighting the idea that not just physical acts on the body, but intangible ideas can also affect a person and be absorbed into the body. This idea of the skin as a permeable layer which acts as the interface between our bodies and the rest of the world was theorized in particular by sociologists.<sup>47</sup> Through this gesture Pope concisely reveals through action what Stuart Hall has succinctly summarized in words “Race is not a genetic but a social category. Racism is not a biological but a discursive regime.”<sup>48</sup>

The return to the body in the 1990’s was investigated by many critics through a psychoanalytic framework. But if the body-centered strategies of the 1970’s were read through a Freudian lens, 1990’s critics’ analysis deemed psychologist Jacques Lacan’s construct of the split self defined through the other and always incomplete as the appropriate model for analyzing the body-centered work that was being created in the

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<sup>45</sup> Deirde Bibby, *Palimpsest* Exhibition Brochure. Wadsworth Atheneum, 1999.

<sup>46</sup> Adrian Piper. “Passing for White, Passing for Black” in Arlene Raven, Joanna Frueh and Cassandra Long (eds.) *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 246

<sup>47</sup> This is represented comprehensively in the volume *Thinking Through the Skin*, edited by Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey *Thinking Through The Skin*. (New York: Routledge, 2001.)

<sup>48</sup> Stuart Hall. “The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks?*” 21.

1990's . This paradigm is evident in the writing of Ewa Lajer-Burcharth for example, who uses this model in her investigation of the work of Gary Hill, Mona Hatoum and Maureen O'Connor.<sup>49</sup>

If the critical paradigm of investigating the artist's body/self moved from a Freudian to a Lacanian model, it seems logical that those critics interested in engaging with the work of African American and "post-colonial" artists would look to Frantz Fanon, and particularly his reading of Lacan through the historical specificities of the colonial situation. This idea was engaged most comprehensively in the 1995 exhibition by the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire* and its accompanying volume *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*. In the introductory essay to the latter volume, Stuart Hall offers an exploration of the question "Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black/Skin, White Masks?*" Hall discusses the relevance of Fanon's first and most psychoanalytically implicated work to artists, who put "their black bodies at the center of their explorations." Hall points to the importance of Fanon's concept of epidermalization literally "the inscription of race on the skin" as contingent upon the internalization of the view of self-as-other in colonized mind.<sup>50</sup> Hall argues that Fanon's text asserts that an "account of racism which has no purchase on the inner landscape and the unconscious mechanism of its effect is

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<sup>49</sup> Ewa Lajer-Burcharth. "Real Bodies: Video in the 1990's" *Art History* 20 (June 1997): 185-213, 345.

<sup>50</sup> Stuart Hall. "The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why Black Skin, White Masks?" in Alan Read (ed.) *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, London: Institute of Contemporary Art, Seattle: Bay Press, 1996, p. 16; *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire* London: Institute of Contemporary Art, Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995

only, at best, half the story.”<sup>51</sup> All of the actions of *Palimpsest* take the skin as the site from which to investigate the way race and racism are tied to the black body, and particularly ‘black’ skin. Pope takes up this challenge of probing the way race works not just as a social construct but as a part of the individual psychological landscape.

The work of Lyle Ashton Harris was among those included in the *Enigma* exhibition and his oeuvre has been discussed by several critics including Coco Fusco and Amelia Jones. As one of the more visible African-American artists working with their body as their material during this period, it may be instructive to read Harris’ work alongside *Palimpsest*. In his work, Harris explores the complexity and fluidity of identity. In his series *Constructs* (fig. 11) which consists of photographic representation of his body, Harris, through various accoutrements (wigs, etc... ) seeks to disrupt the idea of an identity that is fixed by race and gender. Harris’ works highlights the performative nature of race and gender as theorized by Judith Butler, by changing personas and disrupting the roles stereotypically assigned to the black male body.<sup>52</sup> While *Palimpsest* stands in contrast to Harris’ work in the relative permanency of the alteration of the physical body, both seek to acknowledge the ways in which identities tied to a stereotypical notion of blackness are artificial, and seek agency in the identities they wish to present.

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<sup>51</sup> Stuart Hall. “The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks*?” in Alan Read (ed.) *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), 17

<sup>52</sup> Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999.)

This second act of *Palimpsest* also evokes an association with the historical medical exploitation of the black body. In her landmark essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”, Hortense Spillers, quoting the work of 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist William Goodell, locates the beginning of the medical exploitation of the black body in slavery. Goodell states that “ An assortment of diseased, damaged, and disabled Negroes deemed incurable and otherwise worthless are bought up, it seems... by medical institutions, to be experimented and operated upon, for purposes of ‘medical education’ and the interest of medical science.” From the Charleston Mercury for October 12, 1838, Goodell notes this advertisement:

‘To planters and others.- Wanted fifty Negroes, any person, having sick Negroes, considered incurable by their respective physicians, and wishing to dispose of them, Dr. S. will pay cash for Negroes affected with scrofula, or King’s evil, confirmed hypochondriasm, apoplexy, disease of the liver, kidneys, spleen, stomach and intestines, bladder and its appendage, diarrhea, dysentery etc. The highest cash price will be paid, on application above at No. 100 church street, Charleston’,<sup>53</sup>

This example harkens back to slavery but is echoed in more contemporary practices such as the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment and, for Pope most urgently, surgery as a contemporary form of dehumanization of the black body.<sup>54</sup>

It is interesting to contrast this act of surgery with the kind of surgery enacted in the work of Orlan, one of the most examined artists in the 1990’s to use her body as

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<sup>53</sup> Hortense Spillers. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987), 68.

<sup>54</sup> Carl Pope. Telephone interview with the author, March 2004.

artistic material (fig. 12).<sup>55</sup> Orlan's project of remaking her face in the image of idealized female beauties found in the canon of Western art history is often read as a feminist critique of these ideals. Her practice of filming the operations and having them telecast live to various sites around the world may elicit an uneasiness from the viewer similar to that felt in response to watching Pope's surgical incision. Part of the operating logic of Orlan's work is an insistence upon a connection between the mutability of the flesh and the mutability of the self, one which she explores through extending her remaking through several operations. Pope's work implies a belief in such mutability by acting on his flesh to expose and change the writings connected to his flesh, and therefore his "self" by others. Whereas Orlan undergoes constant reformation, Pope's is a single instance in a career which has spanned more than 15 years. At its deepest level, Pope's work exhibits a desire to have his changes be significant and somewhat permanent. Kate Ince discusses Orlan's work in relationship to Bataille's theories of "base materialism" and "expenditure."<sup>56</sup> In her discussion of Orlan, Ince notes that "Orlan is not simply

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<sup>55</sup> See for example Kate Ince. Thinking Expenditure: Bataille and Body Art." *New Formations*; Amelia Jones. *Body Art/Performing the Subject*; David Moos. "Orlan's Theater of the Self." *Art + Text* 54 (1996): 65-72.

<sup>56</sup> See Georges Bataille "Materialism" and "Base Materialism and Gnosticism" *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*. Allan Stoekl (ed.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) Bataille conceived "base Materialism" as part of a critique of Materialism, which he regarded negatively as superimposing an idealist hierarchy on matter. The theory of "base materialism" seeks to do away with the distinction between the "ideal" and the "abject" and collapse all material experience; Georges Bataille. "Notions of Expenditure." In *Visions of Excess*. Bataille's theory of expenditure proposes that human beings have a primal desire to waste that is accommodated through social ritual strategies. In his formulation, those who have acquired the most within a society (elites) have an obligation to expend a portion of their excess, through activities that allow the larger community to benefit- religious sacrifices, public festivals, charities,

provisionally lending her body to art as occurs with mimetic representationalism, but is giving it over wholesale in a movement of Bataillian expenditure that reconnects art with its sacred origins.” This expenditure –“giving over of the body to art” can be read in relationship to Pope as well.<sup>57</sup>

The act of the incision in *Palimpsest* leaves a scar as a lasting trace of the act which has been committed against the body. While Pope’s scar specifically refers to this process, it is symbolic of other types of scars historically associated with the black body. This photograph of Gordon,( fig. 13) an enslaved African-American who escaped to the ranks of the Union Army was published in Harper’s Weekly on July 4, 1863. Photographed as part of his medical examination, his scars serve as visual and tangible testimony to the physical trauma he endured under slavery.

Carol Henderson’s delineation of the scarred black body as a trope in the literature of African -Americans speaks most directly to the issues Pope engages in *Palimpsest*. In her book *Scarring the Black Body Race and Representation in African American Literature*, Henderson sets out as her project the analysis of “literary materials that use the body and its inscriptions as an active metaphor for the reinvention of African

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etc. This also serves to maintain social order by placating those groups who are without “excess” and reaffirming the position of the elite who demonstrate their power by the amount of excess they expend. When this structure is not followed it causes societal disruption. For example, he criticizes the contemporary bourgeoisie(1930’s) who he thinks avoids this obligation by only expending for themselves. In this paradigm the few “ sacrifice” for the many, to maintain society, which is the aspect of this theory that Ince evokes in respect to Orlan. Those who are operating from a position of social disadvantage and sacrifice or those who sacrifice more than their “excess:, such as their bodies, are doing so not out of self-serving obligation, but from a stronger conviction that is linked to the sacred and the spiritual.

American subjectivity within certain cultural moments”. Her contention is that African American bodies are scarred in some way. However, the manner in which these marks are critically viewed and interpreted allows for “a reading that takes into consideration the dual functionality of scars as simultaneously signs of wounding and signs of healing.”<sup>58</sup> Her recognition and theorization of this theme, while recent, is seen as consistently appearing in various permutations in the broad range of work she discusses, from early slave narratives to the work of the more contemporary authors Ann Petry and Toni Morrison. Like the authors Henderson discusses, Carl Pope similarly constructs a visual vocabulary which activates the idea of the scarring or marking of the body to not only recall wounds but to also be sites of healing. The desired end of these meditations on the scars of black life (both physical and psychic) are an “evocation of [the black body’s] physical trauma, thus reclaiming the essence of a selfhood fragmented under the weight of a dominant culture’s gaze”<sup>59</sup>, which resonates strongly with Carl Pope’s project in *Palimpsest*.

In her essay “Can You be BLACK and look at this: Reading the Rodney King Video” In the catalogue for the *Black Male* exhibition, Elizabeth Alexander investigates the influence of what she terms a collective memory of trauma of the community witnessing of violence. The opening quote of her essay from a Duke University medical researcher “Memory resides nowhere and in every cell’ echoes the sentiment of Pope’s

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<sup>57</sup> Kate Ince.” Thinking Expenditure: Bataille and Body Art.” *New Formations* 46 (Spring 2002), 155.

<sup>58</sup> Carol Henderson. *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>59</sup> Carol Henderson. *Scarring the Black Body*, 7

*Palimpsest*. Alexander extends Spillers' theorizing of the memory of collective trauma of slavery and the accompanying violence into the 1990's. Alexander recalls the public display of brutality in the Emmett Till case of 1950's and links it to view the Rodney King incident as the latest in the series of witnessings of violence against black bodies in United States history. This analysis is brought to bear on several works in the exhibition including Danny Tisdale's Warholian *Rodney King Police Beating* from his series *Twentieth Century Black Men*, (1991) (fig. 14), Pat Ward Williams' 1986 piece *Accused / Blowtorched / Padlocked*, (fig. 15) and Carl Pope's own work in the exhibition *The Greatest Hits of the New York Police Department* (fig. 16) which is a variation of *From the Trophy Collection of the Indianapolis Police Department and the Marion County Sheriff's Office*.<sup>60</sup> Williams' photo-collage contains a found photograph of a lynched African-American man from an issue of Life magazine surrounded by hand written commentary by the artist ("*How can this photograph exist?*") which emphasizes the problematic implications of spectatorship in lynching photographs. The work asserts that

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<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Alexander. "Can you be BLACK and look at this: Reading the Rodney King Video(s)." in Thelma Golden(ed.) *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994) In his review of the Black Male exhibition, Okwui Enwezor singles out Pope's work as one of a few in the exhibition that is a successful confluence of polemicism and "powerful engaging art practice." He critiques the work as well as Gary Simmons' *Lineup*, however, as "operating too much through the language purloined from the discourse of the public rather than the private sphere. What would have added to the weight of those two moments is a view of how families in the privacy of their loss and pain, grieve and mourn for these lost bodies. The question really is how does the black world represent what Greg Tate so poignantly names as the 'deepest well of tragedy and spirituality on the planet?'" Okwui Enwezor. "The Body in Question : Whose Body? 'Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art'". *Third Text* 31 (Summer 1995):65-70. Its interesting to note that at the time of this critique, Pope was already in the process of developing a more personal visual language.

the photographer, by choosing to record rather than act is complicit with the violence and questions how this type of violence can be apart of our history. Tisdale's use of Warholian repetition speaks to the possibility of the desensitization we may feel in relationship to viewing the pain of others, particularly when the others are marked as different from ourselves through race, gender or both.

Where *Palimpsest* differs from Williams', Tisdale's, and even to a certain extent Pope's earlier piece in this exhibition is in the evocation of violence through symbolic gesture, rather than stark representation. The forms of violence being critiqued, namely police brutality and lynching, can easily be marked by a majority of art viewers as pain that belongs to others, particularly to African-Americans. As Elaine Scarry notes "To have great pain is to have certainty, to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt."<sup>61</sup> In Contrast, Pope's acts on the body do not at first viewing register as acts against the *black* body, in the same way as police brutality and lynching. This allows psychic room for the viewers to identify with the artist's body as a body on a somatic level. Once the associational aspects of the piece register through prolonged viewing and the words of voice tracks, the viewer may have a gauge for such pain, both physical and psychic which may have previously been unimaginable or inaccessible.

*Palimpsest* is an exploration and excavation of the effects of violence both psychic and physical against African-Americans; from the projection of and internalization of stereotypes to the historical abuses of slavery, to lynching, medical experiments and the contemporary threats of police brutality. But it is also--and I think

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most importantly--an act of self-reclamation, self-fortification and self-definition. All the actions in *Palimpsest* have multiple metaphoric meanings--as visualizations of psychic violence, symbolic evocations of historical and contemporary violence, and as acts within themselves of real and symbolic endurance.

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<sup>61</sup> Elaine Scarry. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 7

CHAPTER FOUR  
THE INSCRIBED BODY

The third action of tattooing a portion of the poem written by Pope's twin sister Karen, onto his body, makes concrete the association with language and is a literal rewriting of Pope's story unto his body. The portion of the poem that is tattooed on Pope's body "...and I realize with selfhood subtle and gross homeostasis equilibrium of my humanness that is oscillating consciousness beyond an ensnaring veil..." for Pope comments on his history and the realization of the pain that was in his life."<sup>62</sup> This portion of the poem evokes the stagnation of self that occurs when ideas of who one is are created outside of oneself and then internalized and work on the self unconsciously. Pope's is a process of clearing through this stagnation to a new consciousness of self.

In the edited version of these acts in the video, the words of the poem written by Pope's twin sister Karen and recited by both Carl and Karen Pope become the sonic backdrop through which the meaning of these actions are framed. The sound of their blended voices evoke sorrow and mourning. The sound functions like a chant for a spiritual ceremony--making the acts sacred.

As the collaboration of Pope and his twin sister Karen, *Palimpsest* extends itself to resonate with African-American experience both male and female. This idea is most

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<sup>62</sup> Carl Pope, email to the author.

effectively communicated through the joining of their voices. Pope insists on the vitality of this collaboration with his sister. He states “Since we are twins and the piece is a kind of self-portrait, I began to see the possibility of the project going beyond self-portraiture into a kind of double portrait of the black body. Karen’s inclusion in *Palimpsest* expands viewers’ notions beyond a consideration of my individual body or the black male body, and rather extends to the body of the African American community.”<sup>63</sup> Karen’s authorship of the poem and it being tattooed unto his body can also be read as attempt to include the female voice in this history and have it instrumental in this rewriting.

As stated earlier “writing” can be thought of the controlling metaphor of this work, and this third action makes this metaphor concrete. Writing here can be thought of in terms of the “American Grammar” theorized by Spillers. This refers to a symbolic systems of acts and attitudes toward the African-American body as well as traces of physical acts on the body, and written words in a traditional sense, which reinforce a particular interpretation of African-Americans and their history. *Palimpsest* engages in a re-writing in all of these senses. It is important to quote here in its entirety the poem that as heard in the video.

...this is the expression  
internal inertia that is sight and sound  
of which is rarely understood  
is often not acknowledged  
is mostly intellectualized

by those  
drawn  
to veer in my direction  
black

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<sup>63</sup> Carl Pope in interview with Christa Erickson.

striation and vocalization of a body of a self  
of a consciousness  
that dares to reverberate aloud  
without consent of those  
without participation of those  
fearful...but leering  
fearful...and defensive  
fearful...thus projecting  
flat imagery and ideology  
onto movement  
of my being  
and I am omitted...and I realize  
with selfhood  
subtle and gross homeostasis  
equilibrium  
of my humanness that is  
oscillating consciousness  
beyond an ensnaring veil...  
that would deny me clarity of self-awareness  
a conscious experience  
beyond  
peripheral illusion  
cast by those entrenched  
in deception and denial

The first several lines of the poem clearly express what the intention of this work is: an expression of blackness that is either not acknowledged to exist, misunderstood, or overly theorized so that it is detached from personal experience. As the poem continues a defiance against these modes of viewing blackness is expressed, and a commitment to expressing a blackness that is grounded in the self is affirmed. The use of the phrase “ensnaring veil” makes a direct reference to the “veil” as theorized by W.E.B. Dubois. Dubois theory posits the African-American as having a “double-consciousness”, a “sense of looking at oneself through the eyes of others.” Karen Pope describes this veil as ensnaring because it traps you in a place where no full self-consciousness can be expressed. Pope is seeking to rid himself (and by extension the larger African-American

psyche) of this double-consciousness to find a consciousness beyond this “ensnaring veil.”<sup>64</sup> The poem presents a juxtaposition of the static nature of internalized unconscious thoughts identified with false, socially constructed ideas about blackness, with the dynamism of the self that is achieved through self-conscious actualization of personhood.

Visual cues within the video, work with the text toward an explication of the subject matter. Particularly striking is the juxtaposition of black bodies and white bodies. This juxtaposition was fully intentional on the part of Pope. He emphasized the use of “white hands” on his “black body” in these operations to make the historical and contemporary connection to white on black oppression easily legible<sup>65</sup>

It is important to note that Pope stresses his agency in this process. White hands may be working on him but in a process which he directs to help fulfill his goal of self-determination. It is interesting to note that tattooed hands are creating his tattoo. Pope acknowledges using a man with “redneck” tattoos for this procedure. While this association may be made at first, however, the tattoo artist’s willingness to take a part in

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<sup>64</sup> Defining the “veil” W.E.B. Dubois wrote: “ After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman , the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of Seventh Son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American World, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself, through the revelation of the other world, It is peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking as ones self through the eyes of other, of measuring one; soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amuse contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness- an American a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it form being torn asunder.” W.E.B. Dubois *The Souls of Black Folk*. Ed. In *Three Negro Classics*. (New York: Avon Books. 1965), 214-215.

<sup>65</sup> Carl Pope in interview with Christa Erickson.

this process works against that reading. These tattooed hands can cue us to the diversity of tattoo practices and sub-cultures of the 1990's mentioned earlier. Pope's project of self-determination and freedom of personal expression has some resonance with the emphasis Benson discusses on "autonomy", "agency" and "control" in these other tattoo practices.<sup>66</sup>

One striking aspect of *Palimpsest* is the difference in the way Karen and Carl's bodies are treated. Carl's body is exposed, Karen's is not. Carl's body is acted upon, Karen's is not. This may be a function of their occupations, Carl being the visual artist, Karen a writer, and Carl's deeper investment in the production of the work. Consciously intended or not it alludes to the complex history of the presentation of the African-American female body in the visual arts. As Amelia Jones has noted, the 1980's feminist critique of body art as exposing the female body to the possibility of fetishization caused a turning away from the presentation of the body in some sectors.<sup>67</sup> This tendency to shield the female body from the gaze has associations specific to the African-American female body. Judith Wilson began to explore this in her discussion of the use of pornography by Romare Bearden and what she terms "the contested representation of the black female body", particularly the nude body as 'other' and 'sexually consumable' in the history of art. For two hundred years African-American artists responded to this with the avoidance of the female nude. This subject, according to Wilson, became permissible for African-American artists only after the 1960's and then

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<sup>66</sup> Susan Benson. "Inscriptions of the Self: Reflections on Tattooing and Piercing in Contemporary Euro-America." In *Writing on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 245,

“...all of these artist proclaim the beauty of the black nude. But none of them focus on the volatile conjunction of gender and race or the inflammatory myths of black sexuality that the black nude inscribes.”<sup>68</sup> While this may not be the intent, Carl’s physical articulation versus Karen’s articulation through language raises questions about the experience and representation of the body as both ‘gendered’ and ‘raced’ which have not been critically acknowledged within the construction of the work.

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<sup>67</sup> Amelia Jones. *Body Art /Performing the Subject*, 24.

<sup>68</sup> Judith Wilson.” Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden’s use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S Art.” In Gina Dent(ed.) *Black Popular Culture*.(Seattle: Bay Press,1992.)

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

Carl Pope's "giving over of his body to art" is rare amongst African-American artists. Sherman Fleming and William Pope L. are examples of artists who emphasize endurance through symbolic actions, referring through physical endurance to psychic endurance, but not to the same extent as Pope in *Palimpsest*. In his performances, Sherman Fleming enacts a symbolic language, performing the psychic effects of racism through symbolic physical acts. The piece which most influenced Pope, was *Pretending to be Rock* in which Fleming knelt on his hands and knees, beneath a chandelier made out of candles, which dripped hot wax onto his body.<sup>69</sup> This work metaphorically implicated that with repeated assault comes endurance but that endurance can only be found by a hardening of oneself. Another work by Fleming, *Something Akin to Living* (fig.15) of 1979, enacts a similar principle. In this piece Fleming stands naked between two columns while boards are thrust against his body at various angles. Fleming struggles to stand up and balance all of those boards until finally after 35 minutes, he can no longer hold them and lets them collapse.<sup>70</sup> William Pope L. has been working in performance since the early 1980's. He uses his street "crawl" performances to draw attention to problems that

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<sup>69</sup> Tracey Warr. *The Artist's Body*, 290. The piece was performed at SUNY New Paltz in 1997, but may have had an earlier incarnation.

need rectification. For example, his *Tompkins Square Crawl* ( fig. 16), of 1992 was intended to bring attention to the problem of homelessness in that New York City area.

By creating *Palimpsest*, Pope entered into a process of creating a new identity, through the permanent alteration of his body. For the last six years Pope has been interacting with the piece daily in the context of his personal life. In our recent interview Pope expressed that he felt that the reason why he hasn't made any new major work is because the work of *Palimpsest* is still in process, daily calling him to investigate beliefs that he holds about himself--recalling the marks on his body--forcing him into a process of constant self-examination on the way to becoming a stronger and consciously, fully self-actualized person. This work shows a profound commitment. By permanently altering his body, Pope has committed to not having a separation between art and life and allowing art to work on and in his life, which is how he hopes his art will act for others.

Pope has made a commitment to the full incorporation of the knowledge that *Palimpsest* manifests in his life. Any body art or performance art piece he may do in the future will have to take *Palimpsest* into account.<sup>71</sup> It is a process by which he has forever been changed. It demonstrates the principle that a practice conceived in the realm of art, can effect change--personal change. In its proactive and self-directedness, it reminds me of Adrian Piper's musing that "... no matter what I do or do not do about my racial identity, someone is bound to feel uncomfortable. But I have resolved that it is no longer

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<sup>70</sup> Tracey Warr, editor. *The Artist's Body* p.150.

<sup>71</sup> Thank you to Catherine Walsh for pointing this out

going to be me.”<sup>72</sup> It echoes a question Henderson explores “How does one regain agency in a system intent on destroying one’s motive will?”<sup>73</sup> *Palimpsest* seems to be part of the answer - by showing the possibility of creating identity in the space where past pains and social impositions onto the self can be recognized and reconciled, while at the same time asserting personal agency in the process of self-definition. In her discussion of the ways in which gender behaviors get inscribed Judith Butler notes the importance of repetition in inscribing a particular sense of what an identity is made up of and that identity is not fixed but performed and naturalized through repetition.<sup>74</sup> To combat the repetitious messages about African- American identity, Pope creates his own repetition. By these permanent inscriptions on his body, Pope’s self-actualized identity is constantly reinforced.

As a body *and* video work, *Palimpsest* was conceived as not just a personal transformation ritual for Pope, but as an act for other. If the time is taken to engage with it, *Palimpsest* calls viewers to confront racism, not as an abstract concept, but as the cause of physical and psychic pain to individual human beings. For African Americans in particular, it promotes the necessity of recognizing the effects of racism in the constitution of individual identity and of actively working to combat these negative effects. Combating racism requires as much internal personal work as collective social work and the role race plays in the construction of subjectivity differs from individual to

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<sup>72</sup> Adrian Piper. “ Passing for White, Passing for Black” in *New Feminist Criticism: Art Identity Action*. Arlene Raven, et, al. editors, (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 246

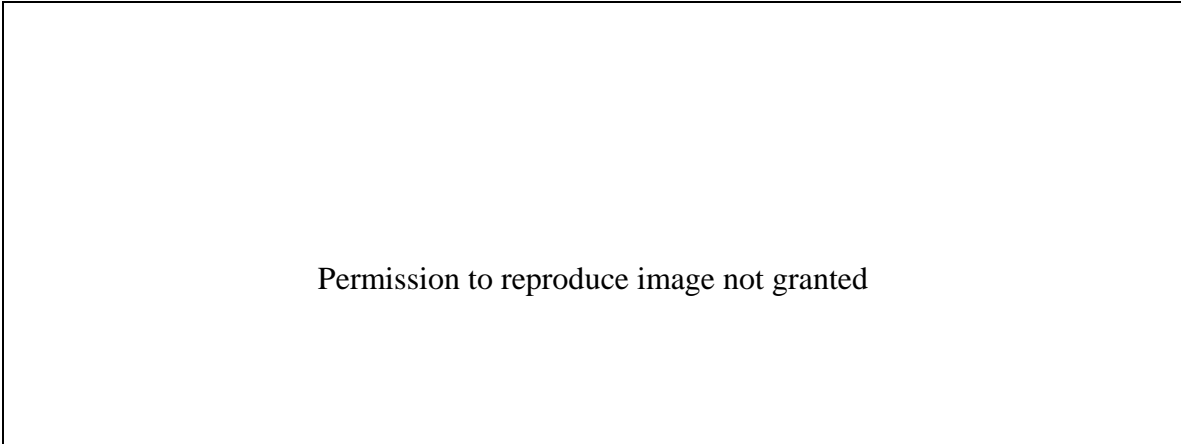
<sup>73</sup> Carol Henderson. *Scarring the Black Body*, 5

<sup>74</sup> Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999 ), 178.

individual. To heal, the relationship between the self and blackness “ as written on the skin” must be re-conceptualized. Through the use of his body to enact psychic change, Pope communicates the magnitude of what is at stake. By grounding his action in the body, Pope explores the possibility of the body as the residence of a common somatic language. At best, this represents the potential of the body as a vehicle for cross-cultural understanding. At the very least, it re-invigorates an exploration of the connection between physical, psychological and spiritual change.

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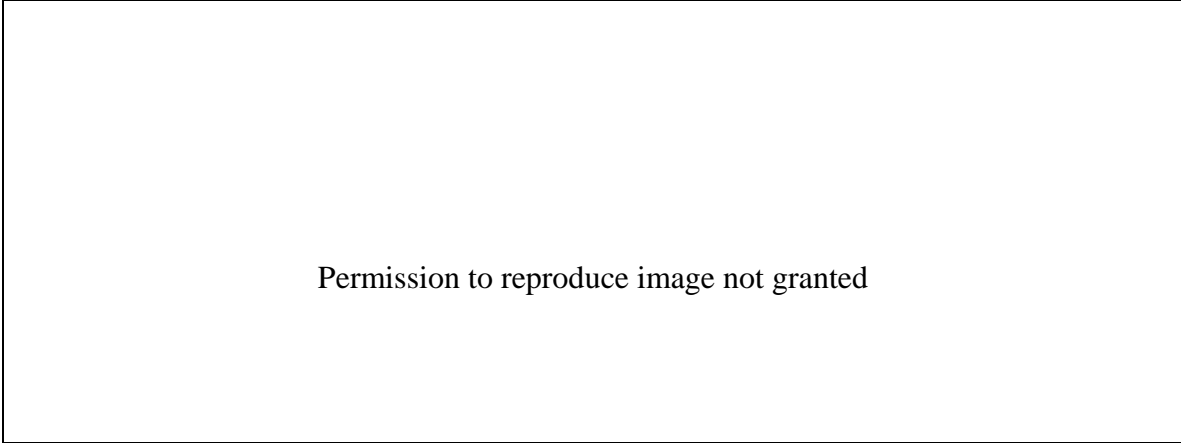
**Figure 1** Carl and Karen Pope *Palimpsest*, video still 1998-1999



**Figure 2** Carl and Karen Pope *Palimpsest*, video still, 1998-1999

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**Figure 3** Carl and Karen Pope *Palimpsest*, video still, 1998-1999



**Figure 4** Carl and Karen Pope *Palimpsest*, video still, 1998-1999

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**Figure 5**      **Carl Pope. *From the Trophy Collection of the Indianapolis Police Department and the Marion County Sheriff's Office* Installation. 1991-1992**

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**Figure 6** Carl Pope. *Book of Numbers(Not the King James Version)* Installation.  
1991- 1992

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**Figure 7** Gary Hill, *In as Much as it Has Already Taken Place* Video installation.  
1990

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**Figure 8**      **Mona Hatoum, *Corps étranger*, Video installation. Detail of video.1994**

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**Figure 9**     **James Luna. *Artifact Piece*, Performance/Installation. 1986**

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**Figure 10**    **Adrian Piper.** *Cornered*, Video/Installation. 1988

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**Figure 11** Lyle Ashton Harris. *Constructs# 10*, Gelatin Silver Print 1988

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**Figure 12** Orlan. *Omnipresence*, Performance. 1991

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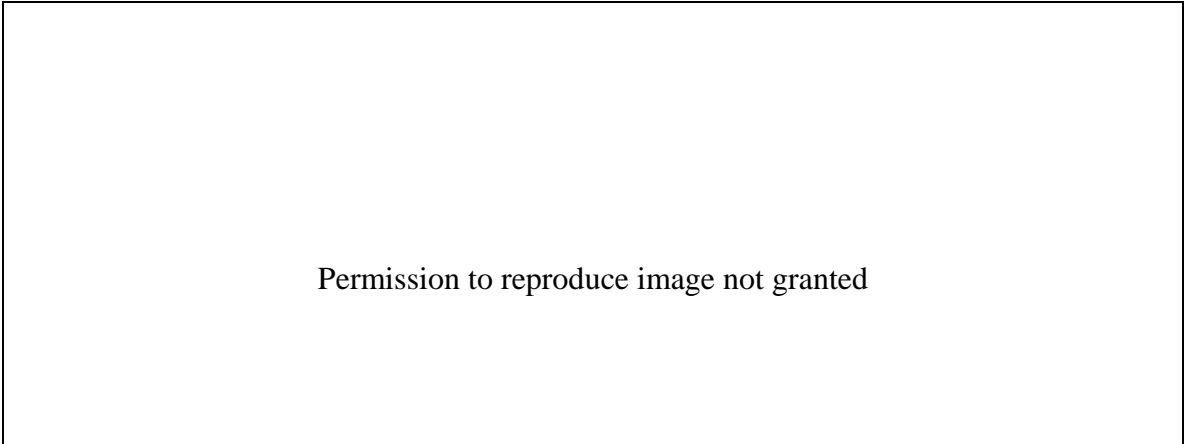
**Figure 13** *Gordon, Harper's Weekly July 4, 1863*

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**Figure 14**     **Danny Tisdale. *Rodney King Police Beating* from the series *Twentieth Century Black Men*, 1991.**

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**Figure 15** Pat Ward Williams *Accused / Blowtorched / Padlocked*, Photo-collage.  
1988



**Figure 16** Carl Pope. *The Greatest Hits of the New York Police Department*, Detail of installation

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**Figure 17** Sherman Fleming. *Something Akin to Living*, Performance. 1979

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**Figure 18** William Pope. *L. Tompkins Square Crawl*, Performance. 1992

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