

Dora Bond and Finn Constantine, "The Exchange with Arthur Jafa and Mark Leckey: 'I always say I'm an undertaker, I'm interested in where the bodies are buried'," *Plaster*, July 2, 2025

PLASTER

The Exchange with Arthur Jafa and Mark Leckey: "I always say I'm an undertaker, I'm interested in where the bodies are buried"

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Two era-defining works on show together for the first time in Croydon. For 'HARDCORE / LOVE' Arthur Jafa and Mark Leckey converge for a conversation that's been decades in the making



Mark Leckey and Arthur Jafa photographed by Finn Constantine

When two of the most influential video artists of the century descend on Croydon for a rare joint exhibition, it sparks a gravitational shift. 'HARDCORE / LOVE' is staged inside the Whitgift Shopping Centre at Conditions, the artist-led space reimagining what post-art school support could look like, and pushing back against "the cultural trainwreck that is arts funding in our neoliberal world", as art dealer and Croydon native Gavin Brown, who organised it, puts it. The show pairs Arthur Jafa's *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016) with Mark Leckey's *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* (1999); a double helix of rave, rupture, and resistance. Jafa's searing seven-minute reel reassembles the African American experience into a brutal and haunting loop – trauma and transcendence stitched together. Leckey's 15-minute VHS fever dream is a ghost story masquerading as a love letter, where ghostly clubbers blur into spectres.

To mark the occasion, the ICA hosted a talk between the two artists. Predictably, tickets evaporated fast. By the time the doors opened, the foyer was a crush of bodies hoping to get a spot by the front. It felt, unmistakably, like a moment. This was a conversation decades in the making. So, in case you missed it, we've pulled some excerpts from the talk, because this sort of exchange doesn't come around too often.



'HARDCORE / LOVE' is staged inside the Whitgift Shopping Centre at Conditions



The show is curated by art dealer Gavin Brown

Arthur Jafa: *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*. I mean, it's one of the greatest titles of all time. We were talking earlier today – I said I wasn't going to reference what we were talking about – but the word came up: 'spectral'. And so we were talking about how it's a little bit of a ghost dance.

When I saw *Fiorucci*, I had never really seen a film that got at or offered an explanation for one of the central preoccupations in my life. Which is that, as much as Black people are hated around the world 'The Wretched of the Earth', everybody loves the music. More than any other single film, that film gives you a vision of this music of the most despised people on the face of the earth, and how it just spread over the world like a virus. It's the question of, "Why does everybody like Black music?" Even the Nazis liked Black music! And the tension between it. The music is loved, and Black people are not always loved. So *Fiorucci*, to me, literally gets at that better than anything I've ever seen. Maybe better than anything I've ever read.

Mark Leckey: *Love is The Message, The Message is Death* – it's fucking amazing. You said it's only seven minutes, right? And that title just rings like a bell from the beginning to the end. I watched that video like I listen to music, you know. I'm not analysing it, I'm not looking for meaning. I'm looking for its effect. And I just remember the first time I watched it, just feeling the way it sort of roots itself in your brain, as music does and at the same time it opens something up.

ML: Both of us, we mostly align about music, right?

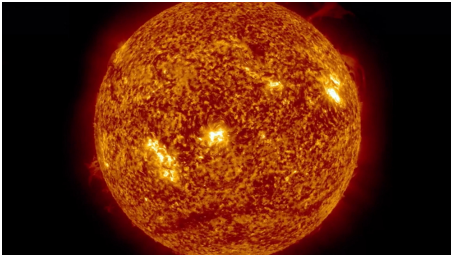
AJ: Yeah, definitely, even though you like a lot of beats per minute. I like the slower beats.

ML: We recognise that AJ is basically 60 BPM, and I'm about 148. Even though I don't sound like it now. Inside, I'm 140. I always look at music as a kind of condition, right? And it's a condition that informs, and when I look at TikTok, to me, people are editing using video in the same way as music, right? It's essentially the same kind of techniques and the same kind of energy in the same drives. I'm always invested in that. I'm always invested in the hope of those things. Music is a prophecy, right? The idea that music speaks to the future, or divines the future. And I'm still looking, and I think you [Arthur] are still looking for a kind of future, still looking for a kind of potential for things opening up creatively...



AJ: The future to me, is spatial, it's not just temporal. One of the things I've said about Black music is it's the canary in the mine shaft. The future is just down the tunnel. It's a little future shock, a little future fear. But one of the things about Black music, which is why I think everybody is interested, is because as a canary in the mine shaft, Black people have demonstrated that we are on the cutting edge of – the bleeding edge of – all the maladies of Western Civilisation. But nevertheless, we're not emblems of abjection. We're emblems of the possibility of surviving, levitating in the face of it. That's why I think everyone is into Black music, because it is a vision of the future that everyone is a part of...

ML: Me and AJ talked this morning, and I was saying that all popular culture is essentially paranormal, right? And then AJ started talking about Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*. I recognised something in *Scorpio Rising* that I wanted, and I didn't know what it was. And I guess up to now, I didn't really know what it was, but basically what I wanted was to understand that video or film has the capacity to be magical. It's to cast a spell that is both magic and manipulative. I think anger is very manipulative. And I think with *Fiorucci* there was a sort of spell cast when I made it that I wasn't aware of. I transferred something of my spirit at that time, the longing, the desire. I transferred that into the VHS, into the grain and the decay of the video. It inhabits it now. It's like an indwelling spirit, it's in that video. And I think that's what makes it ghostly, because it always was. But also, it was whatever, 25 years ago now. So it's literally a ghost film as well. The people you see dancing at the beginning are now probably dead. So you're watching something that occurred a long time ago in the past. Whenever I show it to students, to some 20 year olds, it feels so ancient.



AJ: The head I was in when I was making it [*Love is The Message, The Message is Death*] was, in a weird way, like I was unconscious. You're making it almost on automatic. I know I can never do that again. I've busied myself with other things. I still want that thing. But it's like, that mine, whatever that is, there's no more gold there. When I first put it together, I had a very intense experience. I literally cried when I looked at it straight through the first time... I just strung together like 90% of what it is now in like two hours, in a fever dream. I cried the first time I looked at it and have never shed another tear since.

One of my mantras is that so much of Black American art (I'm generalising that, but it's sort of true too) is made to uplift, because we need to be lifted up, because we're down pressed. Uplifting is very important, but it's just not what I do. I always say I'm an undertaker. I'm interested in where the bodies are buried. I'm interested in the dark shit. I've had to just accept that.

I have a very weird attraction to feeling unfilling. You know what I mean? Like a kind of unfilling. I have like 100 hours of Gaza footage, for example, that I've been assembling. I don't know what I'm gonna do with it. I don't know if I would ever show it, you just have to do what you gotta do...

To me, principles are really important. Seeing that the world is complex means shit is not going to come to you in black and white. Sometimes the bad guys have white hats and the good guys have black hats. If you can't make sense of that, we're fucked. We have to do so in our art. One of my metrics of art is complexity. 'A' is not [always] for apple. Sometimes 'A' could be for abjection, sometimes for zebra. That's just how the world is.

Information

This article features an extract from a conversation between Mark Leckey and Arthur Jafa, held at the ICA on 26th June.

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'HARDCORE / LOVE' is on view at Conditions, Croydon until 10th August