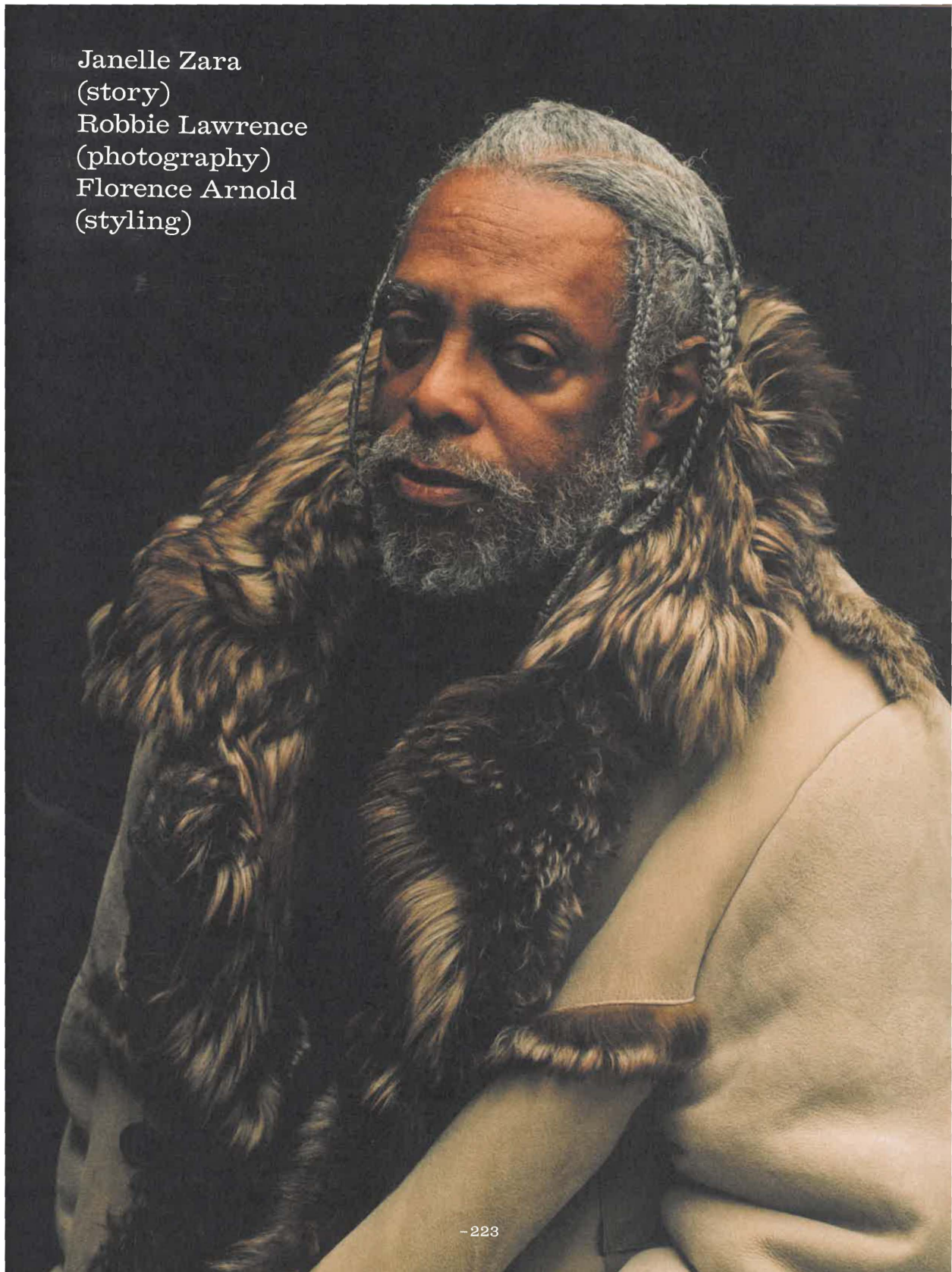


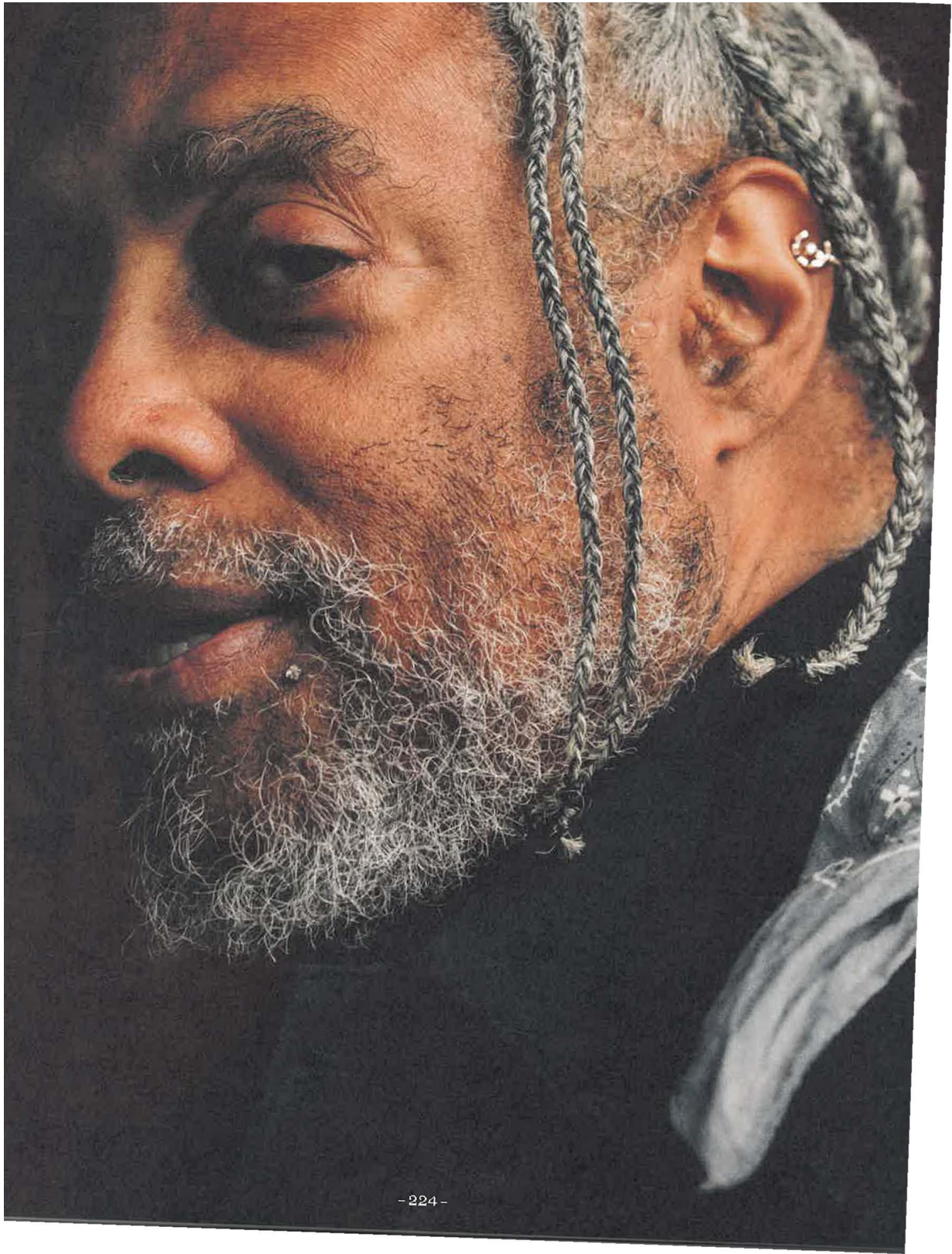
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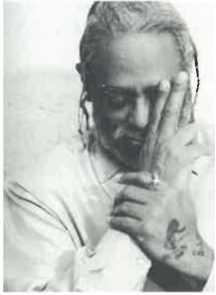
Janelle Zara, "The Arthur Jafa Manual," *Fantastic Man*, April 2026

The
ARTHUR
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Manual →

Janelle Zara
(story)
Robbie Lawrence
(photography)
Florence Arnold
(styling)







Arthur Jafa (65)

Because he spent the greater part of his career either working as an in-demand cinematographer or not working at all, Arthur Jafa sometimes struggles with calling himself an artist. But it's getting to the point where he can't really deny it. Since landing in the art world close to a decade ago as a relatively unheralded 56-year-old, Jafa now has about five exhibitions in major galleries and institutions each year and is regarded as one of the most significant artists of this century. His prolific and poignant work channels a lifelong obsession with images into visually rich assemblages of still imagery and video footage, drawing out affinities between

things that others simply don't see. He likes good shoes. He doesn't like coffee. He works in Los Angeles but can regularly be found abroad. Next up, a big show at the Fondazione Prada in Venice. These twelve pages are dedicated entirely to him.

I.

The general consensus within the art world is that ‘Love is the Message, The Message is Death’ (2016) was the breakout moment in Arthur Jafa’s artistic career. It’s a sequence of largely found videos that reach into both the soaring joys and the spectacular miseries in the broad spectrum of Black American life, rising and falling to the gospel sounds of Kanye West’s ‘Ultra-light Beam’. There are menacing scenes of policemen and Klansmen committing brutality and murder. Witness testimonies, both in Black churches and on the local news. Miles, Beyoncé, Serena and Malcolm, plus both Michaels: Jackson and Jordan. When played together, these visual notes strike something akin to a chord, sometimes in exquisite harmony, but often in haunting dissonance.

You can think of ‘Love is the Message’ as a theorist’s proposal for Black cinema, or as a film-maker’s ontological study of Black rhythm, intonation and being. Through cinema, video, sculpture and installation, the enduring question of Jafa’s four-decade career has been how “the power, beauty, and alienation of Black music” could be achieved in the visual arts. When the white art dealer Gavin Brown showed ‘Love is the Message’ in his Harlem gallery in 2016, lines formed around the block to see it, and members of the audience burst into tears. At 56 years old, Jafa was suddenly catapulted into artistic stardom, with an ongoing current of international museum exhibitions and magazine profiles. Up until that point, he had been struggling as a cinematographer, stifled by the limitations of the entertainment industry. The art world appeared, “in the beginning, like such a wide-open field to play in,” Jafa says. “Relative to the film thing, it just seemed so completely unconstrained.”

To pursue one’s interests as an artist is a rare privilege, he adds. Nevertheless, “It’s been a very interesting, somewhat rude awakening, coming to understand that you’re never free.”

→ EVENTS COMMONLY CITED IN ARTHUR JAJA PROFILES

His birth in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1960; seeing Stanley Kubrick’s ‘2001: A Space Odyssey’ at the age of ten; studying architecture and film at Howard University in the late 1970s; making ‘Daughters of the Dust’ with his then-wife, director Julie Dash, in 1991; winning Excellence in Cinematography at the Sundance Film Festival later that year; directing the cinematography

of Spike Lee’s ‘Crooklyn’ in 1994; falling into a profound state of disillusionment with the film industry immediately afterwards; intermittent bouts of professional uncertainty throughout; the birth of his daughter, N’Zinga, in 1984; the birth of his son, Ayler, in 2004; joining Gavin Brown’s roster in 2016, and moving with Brown to Gladstone Gallery in 2020; adding representation by Sprüth Magers in 2024, then Sadie Coles in 2025; winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 2019; holding exhibitions at three to five international museums per year for the last ten years.

II.

I ring the bell of an ordinary storefront on West Adams Boulevard, in a historically Black neighbourhood of Los Angeles, and the artist answers the door with a warm “Hello” and “I like your shoes.” He’s wearing a pair of Tom Sachs Nike trainers — beige with gold soles — and a plain white T-shirt, black cargo shorts and glasses with black rounded frames. He has a lip piercing, an eyebrow piercing, a silver beard and silver hair parted into large sections that flare into fine braids around his temples.

→ COMMON MISPRONUNCIATIONS OF THE ARTIST’S NAME

Jaf-fuh, Joffa and, in at least one instance, Yoffa. (The proper pronunciation is JAY-fuh, although the artist rarely corrects people and most often goes by AJ.)

The thing about Jafa’s public persona is that he seems almost unapproachably cool. Being both highly fashionable and close friends with such prominent thinkers as Fred Moten and the late Greg Tate, as well as having worked on music videos for Solange, Jay-Z and Kanye, he wields a certain level of celebrity that makes younger artists say, “There goes AJ” as he enters the room. But the mood inside his studio is completely relaxed and unassuming. Two assistants work at large desktop computers. A third arrives with a package from Jafa’s daughter. It’s a comically enormous mug — a call-back to an inside joke they made at a department store the other day.

Every surface of his studio brims with printouts, stacked on work tables and mounted on the walls or freestanding white boards. “I have this obsessive relationship to capturing images,” Jafa says, adding that it has only been intensified by the Internet: “If anybody

was ever built to be doomscrolling, it was me.” His image collection reflects his interest in Black aesthetics “predominantly, but not exclusively,” alongside an omnivorous range of “elective affinities, including Mickey Mouse, Norwegian black metal band Mayhem, The Hulk and Iggy Pop. We take a quick scroll of his Instagram feed, beginning with a reel by actor and friend Tessa Thompson, followed by college football highlights, a neuroscientific study on deep meditation, and more college football highlights. Perpetually haunted by memories of images unsaved, he’s streamlined a system of immediately forwarding “anything that I find magical, sometimes informational, or that just fills me with wonder” to an assistant to download. That’s not withstanding the images he still downloads himself. “I easily have 200,000 files on my phone,” he estimates. “Only question is, can I find them?”

A whiteboard mounted to the wall features a lengthy to-do list, with new work slated to debut with collector Julia Stoschek’s foundation in two weeks, then at Frieze LA in three. In May, Jafa has an exhibition at the Prada Foundation in Venice alongside 76-year-old conceptual artist Richard Prince, whose work similarly borrows from the imagery of pop culture. “A large part of what I do wouldn’t even be possible without the example his practice set,” Jafa says. “But by the same token, I don’t necessarily think my work is his work.”

JZ — I saw a quote in ‘Vanity Fair’ where you call him the Blackest white artist.

AJ — Well, the Blackest Black artist [laughing]. You know, he’s the master of appropriation. It’s just a joke on the idea of Black people not having any respect for proprietary stuff because we were owned.

The real critical task of the day is reformatting ‘Townshend’ (2025), a close-up portrait of Peter Townshend animated with AI and cut with concert footage of The Who. It debuted at Jafa’s first Sadie Coles exhibition in London late last year to positive critical and commercial reception. When one collector requested that it be reoriented from landscape to portrait, Jafa agreed, assuming the task would be “simple enough,” but then immediately ran into a major obstacle: “I sort of misplaced my project file.”

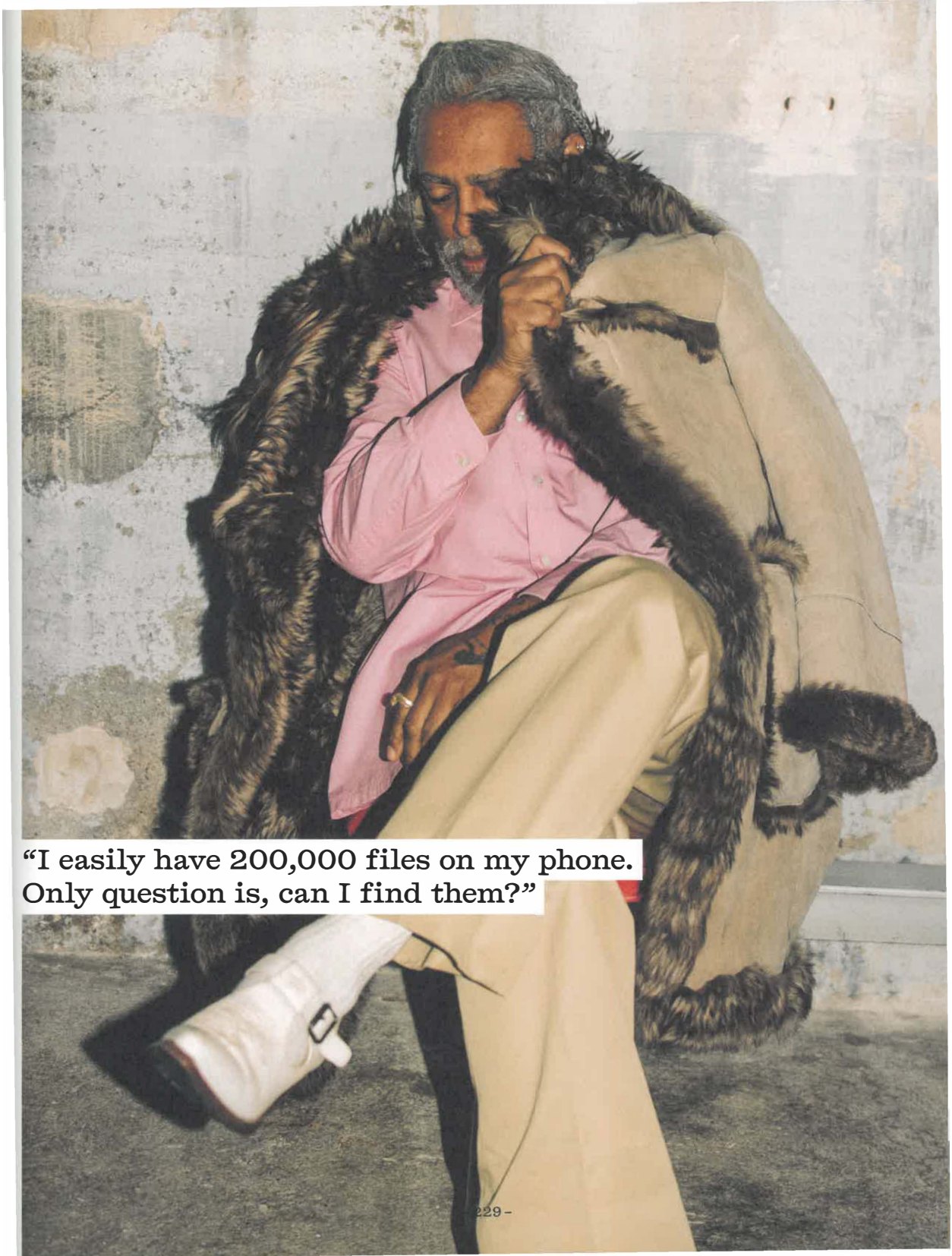
→ FURTHER CONTENTS OF THE ARTIST’S STUDIO

Three desks with three large computer monitors; a shelf of records including Jimi Hendrix, John

Arthur is wearing a pink cotton poplin Charvet shirt with his own large brown shearling coat and white leather buckled shoes, which are all by Prada. The beige chinos are also made by Prada. On the opening spread, and overleaf, Arthur wears the same look with the coat reversed. On the previous page he is in a navy cotton overcoat by Cos and his own bandana. All jewellery seen throughout is Arthur's.







**“I easily have 200,000 files on my phone.
Only question is, can I find them?”**

Coltrane, Barbra Streisand and Neil Diamond; a small selection of handmade Ethiopian shoe boxes, three made from wood, one from metal; a carved wooden neck rest from Kenya; multiple work tables with paper cutters, printed images, books and a pair of black Bottega Veneta boots (mid-calf, with a transparent lug sole). “I never wear these, actually. I just like the design of them,” he says, and reaches to the top of a shelf for “the ones I really love” — a pair of Rick Owens white pony-hair boots with a 10cm clear plastic heel and an automotive-inspired grill riveted to the toe. He removes a single boot from its plastic protective casing and sets it on the table. “I mean, it’s exquisite.”

III.

The artist grew up in the Mississippi Delta, a fertile plain deep in the American South, where the spectre of racial violence was an inescapable feature of his youth. This environment galvanised his appetite for darkness, another key feature of his practice. “Early on,” he says, “I rewired myself to push into things that disturb me, as opposed to recoiling from them.” His works are barbed with images like the lacerations on an enslaved man’s back, a recurring motif that might appear alongside the similarly raised textures of ritually scarified skin or the mountainous terrain on a map. Jafa also readily gravitates toward archetypes of the vilified: the undertaker, the alien (like the one in the movie ‘Alien’), or the fugitive (like Roy Batty from ‘Blade Runner’). He says that attraction to an object or an image is rarely due to its sheer magnificence, but more likely to the way it activates a latent impulse or appetite. Rather than second-guess their attractions, he advises young artists to investigate them: “You have to swallow them whole and spit them back out.”

JZ — I’ve never seen ‘Blade Runner’.

AJ — You’ve never seen ‘Blade Runner’?

JZ — I’m not really a movie person. I just saw ‘The Shining’ for the first time, like, two weeks ago.

AJ — That’s very weird. That’s like my friend telling me she’s never seen ‘Game of Thrones’.

JZ — You’re a fan? I love ‘Game of Thrones’.

AJ — Who’s not a fan? It’s not the greatest television I ever saw. But that’s like saying, “Are you a fan of football? Or ice cream?”

Despite its extremes of poverty and virulent racism, the supreme miracle of the Mississippi Delta was the invention of the blues, the precursor to rock ‘n’ roll and jazz, and therefore, as Jafa often says, “ground zero for American culture.” In his theory of music embodying Black American self-actualisation, the immateriality of music made it the ideal art form for the radically dispossessed, being easily stored within the nervous system as the body was forced inside the hull of a slave ship. The absence of resources meant an absence of conceptual limitations, where the melancholic intonations of the blues were developed by bending or worrying a note so that it fluctuates outside the lines of Western musical notation. With jazz, improvisation — the spontaneous and complex composition of music — introduced a new paradigm of self-determination, or in other words, freedom.

In a 2013 lecture at MIT, which you can watch on YouTube, Jafa says, “I like to say one reason Black cinema doesn’t exist in the way I would like it to exist... is that there’s no space to play.” He describes his stunning realisation that freedom has an inverse relationship to resources. In 1991, with a budget of \$880,000, he and his then-wife, director Julie Dash, were able to make ‘Daughters of the Dust’, a landmark in Black and feminist cinema lauded for its non-linear, unconventional, dream-like flow of lush imagery. “It was a pretty misleading experience,” Jafa says in relation to the project’s creative freedoms and positive reception. Then in 1994, Spike Lee hired Jafa to do the cinematography of ‘Crooklyn’, an experience that marked the erosion of the artist’s faith in the film industry. “If somebody gives you \$10 million, there’s very little space to play.” The budget for ‘Crooklyn’ was actually \$14 million, and it made Jafa feel like “a jazzman in a bar mitzvah band.” From 1995, Jafa hardly shot at all for the next seven years. “Being critical about the context that you worked in meant I more or less didn’t work.”

→ FAQs OF THE ARTIST

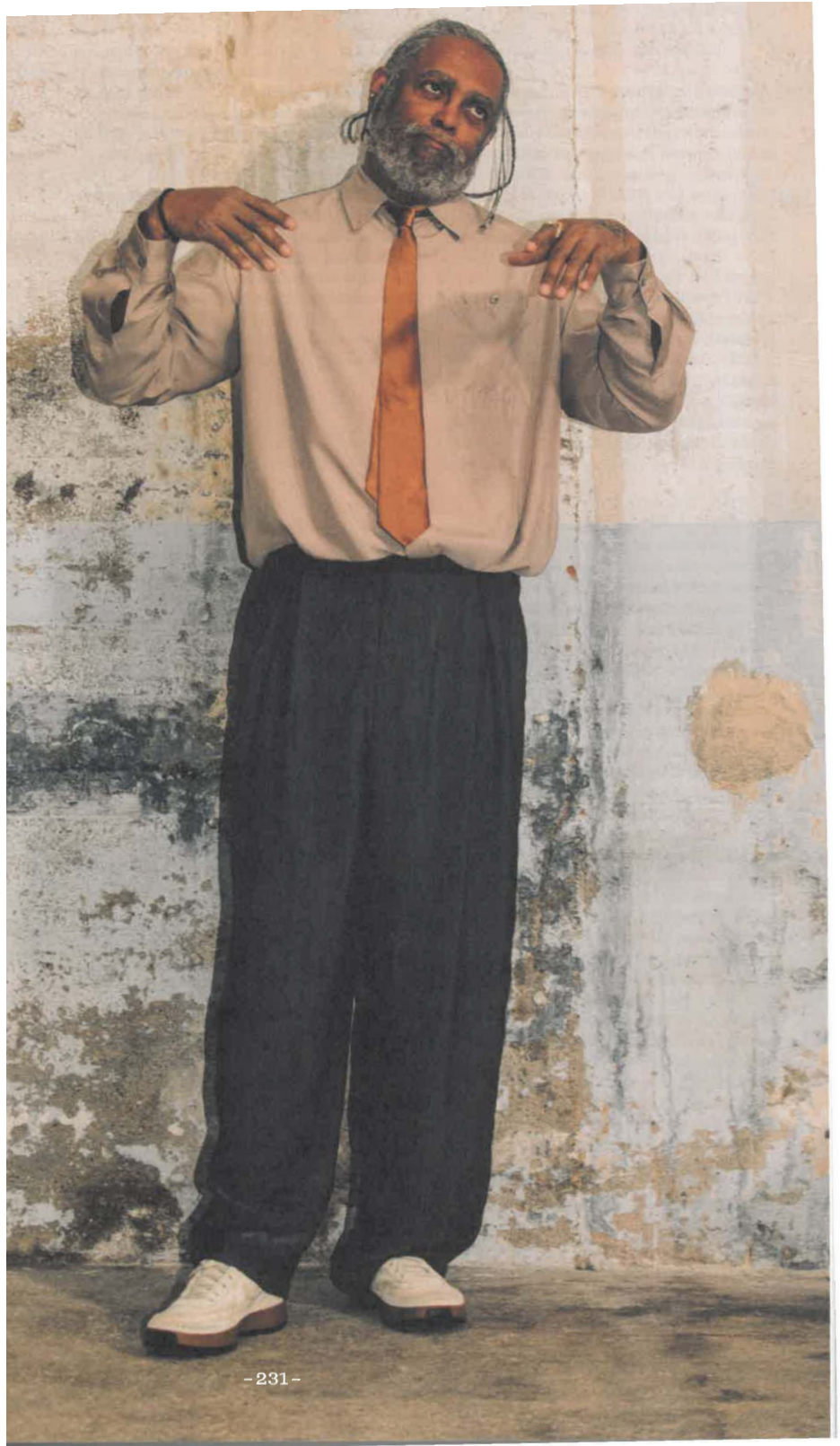
Who are your favourite directors?

(He’s spoken often of Stanley Kubrick, Andrei Tarkovsky, Robert Bresson, Yasujiro Ozu and Oscar Micheaux.) *Is it true you once said you don’t make work for white people?* (Not when you put it like that: “My work addresses Black people, everyone else gets to listen in.”) *What are you trying to say with your work?* (Nothing: “I’m not invested in wielding ideas to advance any particular theoretical or ideological position.”

→ Stills from Arthur’s extraordinary artwork ‘Love is the Message, The Message is Death’, which first burst into galleries in 2016.



Arthur appeared on Bella Freud's popular podcast 'Fashion Neurosis' in October 2025 talking at length about everything from his work to his wardrobe, and expressing a particular interest in appearing in *Fantastic Man*. Happy to oblige! He is wearing a beige silk shirt and orange silk tie, "both Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello, and grey wool trousers by Giorgio Armani, with his own Nike trainers.



He also says that this question is like asking Michael Jordan what he's trying to say on the court.)

IV.

'APEX' (2013), best viewed on a big screen with top-quality sound, pares the cinematic experience down to an eight-minute sprint through 841 still and moving images. Jafa's described it as the trailer to a film that, needing a \$100 million budget at minimum, "in all likelihood will never be made." It would be "a Black 21st-century 'Lord of the Rings'" at the end of the world, flush with "spooky entanglements" and "the abject sublime." In contrast to the soaring lyricism of 'Ultralight Beam', 'APEX' pulses along to 'Minus', a minimalist track by Detroit techno legend Robert Hood, in which different drumbeats continuously fade in and out, animating the still images with the urgency of a strobe light, an EKG monitor or a siren.

→ ONE LESSER-KNOWN FACT

To improve concentration, Jafa takes a selection of functional mushrooms and other herbal remedies, including a lion's mane tincture and shilajit resin, which he keeps next to his keyboard in lieu of coffee. "I've never been a stimulant person," he says. Although, "every four or five years I might try a cup."

To me, 'APEX' captures the essential features of Jafa's creative logic: the adaptation to economic constraint, the illumination of Black skin in cool blues, and an emphasis on "affective proximity" highlighting the peculiar and previously unseen similarities between one frame and the next — the spiritual likenesses between Mickey Mouse, African god Damballah and the orca whale or between bloody entrails and the volcanic surface of the sun. A decade later, Jafa followed 'APEX' with 'SloPEX' (2022): the same material stretched to 33 minutes and eight seconds, shifting it from the frenetic pace of an action movie to the slow burn of a prestige drama. I saw it last year at Sprüth Magers in Los Angeles, where two young people, confusing me and a friend for gallery employees, asked us what this work is about.

JZ—I told them that this is made by a person who collects images and puts them together according to the resonance between two disparate things.

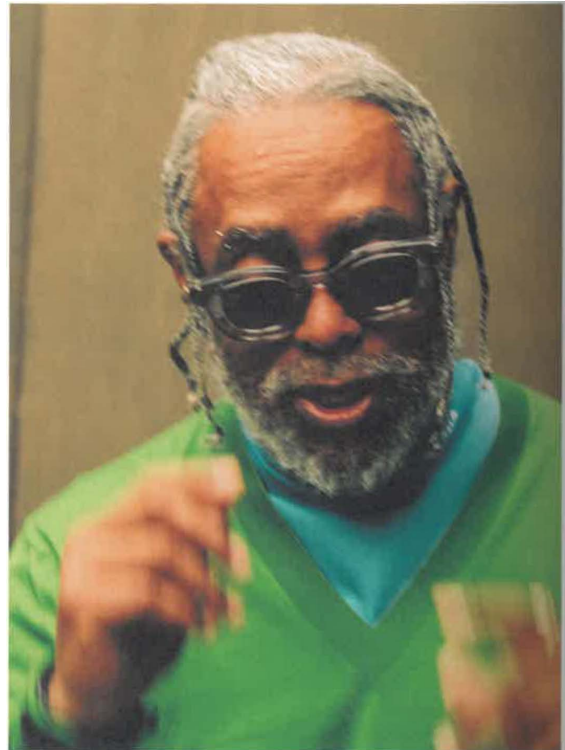
AJ—That certainly is as good a descriptor of what I do as anything, but at the same time, I'm very

resistant to my thing being named. I don't want to be boxed in, even if it's a box I built.

V.

"I like ideas," Jafa says, "because ideas are pure." Reality, by contrast, is riddled with compromise. "Generally, I'm pleased with what I'm doing," but "not enthralled," the artist adds. "I always have this very pronounced sense that I could do more."

Last year, at MoMA's invitation, Jafa took a stab at curating with 'Less is Morbid', an exhibition of more than 80 objects pulled from the museum's perma-



nent collection and shown in affective proximity. A Mark Rothko painting and a 1950 quilt by Lutisha Pettway of Gee's Bend, Alabama, are in a dialogue about patchworks, soft edges and ambiently fading colours, for example. Despite its favourable reception, there remains a hypothetical exhibition in the artist's mind of far greater turbulence, plus twice as many objects. "I've already been told that I should stop shitting on the show," he says. "I just think I could have pushed it a whole lot further."

From the beginning, he has been "interested in objects in space, and different ways of organising them." For his very first exhibition, at Artists Space

† Arthur is wearing a blue wool turtleneck and green wool V-neck sweater, both by Prada, and his own jewellery and sunglasses.

in New York in 1999, he assembled a drum kit that he played at the opening, arranging the disassembled pieces on the floor when the evening was over. But curating is a different thing, sometimes at odds with his ideals as an artist. "I'm super interested in discourse around art, but I'm very resistant to art being narrated. They want to tell you what it is you're looking at and what the relationship is between this and that. It doesn't allow people to have an experience."

Since the debut of 'Love is the Message', Jafa has had, on average, three or four major museum shows a year in cities from New York to Zurich to Melbourne to Biarritz to Paris. His expectations at the start of every exhibition are more or less the same: "You go in with a certain kind of martial stance," prepared to do battle with institutional protocols and bureaucracies or to have your ideas reshaped to fit pre-existing formulas and overdetermined categories. "It's a very frustrating experience. People are confusing the terrain and the map, as if the terrain is supposed to adhere to the map." He recalls one specific venue that produced "a very remedial presentation" of his work. "I thought it was great," he says, "but this other thing I wanted to do was better. It's interesting how you can make the work you want to make, and that work can still retroactively be constrained."

VI.

AJ—As a person whose career got traction pretty late in life, one of the things I prided myself on for years was my ability to not begrudge other people their successes. You know, not to become embittered, and to understand that another person's success is completely independent of what you do or you don't do so well.

JZ—You never had a rival?

[he smiles]

JZ—Oh yeah, everyone has a rival.

AJ—Everybody is going to certainly measure themselves against what has been accomplished. I just heard this Chinese saying, and I'd never heard it said like this. It goes: "Some people blow your candle out to make themselves seem brighter." And my thing is, like, I've never been a person to blow other people's candles out. I'm competitive. I'm, like, "If you have a candle, I want to start a fire," you know what I mean? But it's never about diminishing what they do. It's about, "How do you supersede?"

In 2020, with art dealer Gavin Brown, Swiss art collector Maja Hoffmann and

producer Melinda Nugent as partners, Jafa co-founded the film studio Sun-Haus, its name inspired by the late Delta blues singer Son House. Jafa reads me a rejected logline of 'Cudhial', a feature-length love story the studio is in the very early stages of creating: "A recovering sex addict, with his mother and daughter in tow, returned to his Deep South origins to unexpectedly reconnect with his first love." The "sex addict" descriptor isn't quite landing in the studio, but Jafa says it approaches the brokenness of the main character, who, like himself, is both wounded by and proud of the place where he grew up. Ryan Coogler's acclaimed film 'Sinners' actually takes place in Jafa's hometown and is set in the same period as a cherished film project that the artist hopes to one day realise.

JZ—Did you like 'Sinners'?

AJ—Did I like 'Sinners'? There are a lot of really incredible things to appreciate. I felt maybe a little threatened by it in certain respects, but ultimately, it just had very little to do with what I want to do. There's very little out here that is what I want to do.

VII.

As we approach the late afternoon, the daylight in the studio begins to fade. This entire time, the search for the missing project file has been gnawing at the back of the artist's mind. "I'm having a little crisis about this video," he says about a work that to some extent evokes his previous life working as a person for hire. He spent roughly his twenties into his fifties working on other people's films, where "90% of the shit I was doing I didn't really want to do." As someone with a pronounced ambivalence about finding success later in his career, he says, "Oftentimes I think, 'Wow, I wish I had gotten here a little earlier,'" and wonders what he might have accomplished if he had arrived at 40. The years leading up to his breakthrough were mired by bouts of suicidal ideation and career uncertainty, and he would occasionally choose to sleep in his car rather than bothering his daughter for a place to stay. But if there are infinite universes with infinite AJs, he considers himself one of the more fortunate. "I've had a wonderful life. I have wonderful friends. I love my kids," he says, and "I had really incredible experiences doing what I was doing." Various projects brought him into the company of Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde and allowed him to travel the world. He's seen visions

that remain permanently ingrained in his memory, sometimes tinged with regret, like an encounter he had at a petrol station in the early 2000s while shooting a documentary in Benin.

AJ—I felt her before I saw her, this woman. She must have weighed 300 pounds. She was riding a little bitty moped, a little scooter, and she was totally dolled up, swirled in fabric, like she had just come from a wedding. It was one of the most intense things I've ever seen in my life.

He had heard that the people of the area had the ability to read minds, and as he began to raise his camera, she turned around and looked directly into his eyes, and he put his camera back down. "Not every image is meant to be turned into a picture. I just had to accept that in my life," he says. However, "if there is an afterlife, the first thing I want to do is go back to that."

VIII.

"I don't have any real fear of death," the artist says. In Arthur Jafa's theory of reality, this thing we call life is like a game of chess, an essentialised, binary version of a much bigger existence, reduced to a limited series of moves across a board. "But when you're done with it, you go back to a life that is infinitely more complex, infinitely more nuanced, infinitely more specific," he says. "I think when our lives end, we're going to go to that bigger existence," a robust plane where souls are reunited with life's unsaved images and the friends no longer in the game. According to Jafa, "the game is the only way you can understand limit and constraint and resistance, so I think that's why we're here." He pulls out his phone to read aloud a note he wrote to a friend:

"It's all right to have to struggle to achieve one's vision. This struggle is not a sign of inability, but a sign that the real is resistant to conforming to what you've envisioned. Nothing truly great happens without blood sacrifice, blood sacrifice being the input of life force into one's endeavour. You just have to apply energy. One must feed the altar. Beethoven, typically thought of as an avatar of effortless genius, struggled greatly and inelegantly with shameless effort to achieve his compositions. And when his skills superseded any formal resistance to his visions, he went deaf, and so achievement, even in the end, was not without struggle."