"What is it that a black object does?" asks curator Adrienne Edwards in the catalog for her exhibition *Blackness in Abstraction*, which investigated this question. At Pace Gallery, Edwards staged “black as a material, a method, a mode, and/or a way of being in the world” with installation, painting, photography, sculpture, and video, dating from the 1940s to the present. Since these predominately black works skirted overt messages and images, discerning how they act was an exercise in patience. To take a swift walk through would have been to miss the show. Instead, abstract expressionist Norman Lewis’s black paintings (1946–77), though not included, provide an enticing comparison. Jorge Daniel Veneciano has linked Lewis’s nonfigurative tableaux to the Greek myth of Orpheus. Orpheus descends into the underworld’s dark depths to rescue his bride Eurydice. The gods there permit Eurydice to follow him home, but caution Orpheus against glancing back at her before reaching the upper world. As the pair pass from the dimness of Hades into daylight, the hero hastily turns his head. In that instant, Eurydice, who was still in partial darkness, vanishes. Blackness reclaims her. The analogy connects aesthetic experience of the color black to an absent presence that is all-encompassing and, more specifically, to the experience of the ultimate abstraction: meaning. Meaning, like a shadow or a lost love, constantly follows us, engulfs us, but is never apprehended.

*Blackness in Abstraction* similarly reveled in art objects’ obscurity. Even so, the array of multimedia works on view offered glimpses of related references—for example, artistic genealogies, sociocultural and geopolitical critique, and lively inanimate substances, along with queries about identity—but such moments of recognition flared up and faded as one grouping after the next shifted course. Together the contributions, by an international group of twenty-nine artists, presented blackness as an expansive, abstract concept and accentuated the ways it sticks to, sometimes even saturates, the corporeal.

For instance, Jonathas de Andrade’s installation *Constructive Exercise for a Landless Guerrilla* (2016) contains photographs of black and other colored tarps, which the members of Brazil’s Rural Landless Workers’ Movement variously combined with branches and scraps to assemble shelters. Beside the photographs is a poem that describes how the structures were built. Resembling trash bags, the black coverings symbolize the dispossessed, disposable status of the shelters’ inhabitants. Pictured by de Andrade as protective sheaths, these tarps radically repurpose art history’s black monochrome, particularly that of Kazimir Malevich’s Black Square (1915), meant to epitomize painting in its purest, most transcendent form. Likewise, Turiya Magadlela taints and reinterprets this painting’s symbolism with her own black square of dark pantyhose. Stitched, ruffled, and ripped, the mesh pattern of Magadlela’s I never made Swan Lake 7 (2015) brings to mind not only a ravaged ballet tutu, but also the violence directed toward female and feminized bodies of color, especially in the artist’s country, South Africa. Such objects underscored artists’ formal experimentation with the myriad affects and associations of blackness, while prompting consideration for how differently situated people come to occupy and mobilize them. Yet, rather than reducing the art to a stable factor, the exhibition’s restrained color palette amplified the complexities of works and their shared reverberations.

Edwards’s sensuous and socially engaged approach to abstract art followed decades of critical thought on the politics of identity in this terrain. “Black is a Color,” Raymond Saunders famously proclaimed in 1967. His call to disentangle the naturalized bonds between a chromatic property, black artists’ use of it, and subject matter is echoed in Darby English’s influential 2007 challenge to the racialized readings imposed on African American artists’ output. In the 1990s, Ann Gibson also forcefully interrogated art establishments’ biases by exposing the ways mid-century New York City–based Abstract Expressionists’ culture, race, sex, and sexuality informed the production and reception of a modern art movement paradoxically touted for its universality and nonrepresentational qualities. Kobena Mercer’s 2006 anthology further moved to dislodge codified understandings of abstraction rooted in Western modern art, by mapping alternative models arising in cross-cultural, non-white, and non-Western practices. Edwards did not suppress the fraught historiography surrounding black abstraction. To the contrary, she created an arena for these messy subtexts by orchestrating tensions between objects. In isolation, Fred Sandback’s minimalist floor-to-ceiling installation of six black pieces of yarn, Untitled (Sculptural Study, Volumes in Dialogue/Opposition) (1982/2005), might lend itself to an exploration of black lines’ physicality, but alongside Carrie Mae Weems’s *String Theory* (2016), the bands connote body and value metrics as well. Weems’s archival print depicts a gallery scene, where black lines on walls generate the illusion of a surreal hanging with empty frames. Viewers familiar with Weems may construe these outlines as placeholders for her gray-scale photographs featuring individuals of darker complexions. By bracketing the artist’s signature implementation of black and invoking string theory, a physics theory that supposedly accounts for the structure of the universe, the print foregrounds institutional tendencies to evacuate blackness and the undervalued social attributes it signifies from our cultural spaces. As if responding to such institutional monopolies over cultural resources, the neighboring text accompanying de Andrade’s tarp exposition, which read “how to redistribute ownership through structures,” cast this problematic of reinventing societal frameworks as an overarching theme.
While *Blackness in Abstraction* built on art historical inquiries about the elusiveness, not to mention inequities, of identity and meaning in art, the show strikes me as a departure. Its emphasis on the hefty opacity of black objects inflects these prior debates with contemporary concerns pertaining to "new materialism." An amalgamation of analytic lenses that decenter the human subject, new materialism entails divergent positions. As demonstrated by the section highlighting stringy constructions, Edwards' project flirted with those philosophies confronting how humans are ensnared in or constituted through networks and "vital materialism," the vibrancy of nonhuman, material things. Objects that exuded such vitality presided in prominent places. In the center of the main gallery sat a corroded black steel cube. Layers of striated, coppery rust rendered Sui Jianguo's sculpture a consequence of thick accumulation. Dubbed *One Cubic Metre of Absolute Darkness* (2012), the object's luminous texture translates a so-called unit of absolute darkness into a throbbing, aging entity. Deconstructed oil paintings on canvas by Oscar Murillo hovered above like phantoms as they traversed the length of the first room. Their titles, such as *for the souls of the rotten mighty* from his series *one upon another and the other* (2016), drew attention to the droopy paintings' lyricism. With a sustained look, the suspended fabrics' multiple nocturnal hues and their industrial poetics came into view. Yet, without the Pace handout that designated the titles or other background information, Murillo's gesture could be perceived as a fetishization of the abject. Not coincidentally, a fetish effect—one that erases the histories, labor, and human perspectives undergirding material compositions—is an oft-cited liability of new materialism in general. Here, too, lies the general precariousness of the exhibition's strengths. In parts where the display's initial inscrutability made the aesthetic intelligence of artists' manipulated matter difficult to grasp, the work could have been hastily mistaken for dumb matter. That said, descriptions of each participant and their art's bearing on the show's "meta-themes" were readily available in Edwards's catalog. The rich entries there indicated that the pieces, which made an aloof first impression, would be invigorated by curatorial primers if a museum hosted the show.

Correspondingly, without wall text, the highly formal layout at Pace treaded a line between muffled intentions and quiet enchantment. Those in search of a narrative thread may have floundered while walking the aisle created by the two rows of standing walls spanning the first room. Floundering, as I did at the show's opening, was not without visual pleasures. Nevertheless, during a second visit, when I proceeded with care and eased into the space's choreography, its symmetrical arrangement no longer felt austere, but revealed the interior logic of a temple, introducing a kind of awe into my encounters with the artwork. Like an altar table, a wide shelf adorned the far end of the main gallery. The shelf contained not relics, but Sergio Camargo's *Untitled* sculptural series (1980–90). Each of his six sets embodies a geometric shape that incrementally changes scale and configuration. Made of Belgian black marble, the bold permutations appear as art organisms morphing before one's eyes. The progressions pulsed all the more with Glenn Ligon's video projection *The Death of Tom* (2008) flickering behind them. The flashes and twinkling piano music emanating from Ligon's installation tinged the white cube room with a sense of wonder.

At the same time, hints throughout—such as Ligon's allusion to the stereotype from Harriet Beecher Stowe's sentimental 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—cautioned against an uncritical or exclusively romantic, sensory disposition. From the outset, at the show's entrance, Adam Pendleton's *Untitled (code poem Los Angeles black)* (2016), signaled that however somatic the art here might have been, it was also matter to be deciphered. When seen from above, Pendleton's floor clusters of circular and rectangular black ceramics approximate a secret script, Morse code perhaps. Nearby, Ellen Gallagher's big mixed-media paintings elaborated on this leitmotif of cryptic abstraction. Her suite of four, Negroes...
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Battling in a Cave (2016), plays on an unfortunate inscription with those words found under the topcoat of Malevich’s Black Square. Carved into each of Gallagher’s densely collaged canvases were a couple of amorphous figures, facing one another as people might in a fight. These amoeba-looking creatures recalled how researchers discovered Malevich’s nasty joke when inspecting his painting via X-ray. In this regard, Gallagher’s suite blew up a racist microaggression to monumental portions, inviting visitors to reexamine the history of the black monochrome by searching for the enigmas buried in individual examples of this painting genre. With Gallagher’s provocation in mind, the exhibition’s numerous black monochromes, even those by canonical artists such as Sol LeWitt, Ad Reinhardt, and Louise Nevelson, could not be taken for granted.

Some of the most evocative works made black banal materials strange by eliciting the color’s cosmic aspects. Gallery-goers gravitated toward Wangeci Mutu’s soily splatter Throw (2016). This mural’s celestial design was the result of a private, live performance by Mutu. In it, she flung pungent fermented and dyed paper pulp at the wall. Knowledge of the artist’s assertive handling of this home-brewed goo redirected an appreciation of Throw as earthly, extraterrestrial sight back to a reflection on the artist’s hand and human will. Lorraine O’Grady also simulated the natural environment, by deploying her body. The black-and-white video projection Landscape (Western Hemisphere) (2010–11) provides close-ups of the artist’s locks wafting to ambient noises. Her ebony ringlets function as a synecdoche for the interracial mixing that underpins O’Grady’s biography, colonial history, and the Western hemisphere. With each new scene, the video presents the audience with a slightly different angle. The altering camera positions suggest an amalgam of abstract settings—from tall grass blowing in the wind, to the inside of a bird’s nest, to ocean waves. Landscape exceeds preoccupations with black identity on the planet, inspiring the mini-material organizations and vast ecosystems through which blackness emerges and interacts with our flesh. Such a compelling, if challenging, reorientation toward “black objects” is precisely what Edwards’s show fostered.

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NOTES

Joey Holder: Ophiux
WYSING ARTS CENTRE
CAMBRIDGE, UK
SEPTEMBER 25—NOVEMBER 20, 2016

Likened by the artist in an accompanying interview to a scientific lab/medical room, the installation of Joey Holder’s Ophiux at Wysing Arts Centre welcomed visitors into an uncanny futuristic world. The floor was bright white rubber, necessitating blue plastic shoe covers on entrance that muffled the sound of footsteps. Voices were muted, adding an air of hushed reverence to an environment that felt part spaceship, part surgical theater.

I felt as though I was being watched. From the ceiling, a cluster of blue heat lamps hung suspended, all eight lamps positioned to inspect each visitor entering the room. To my right, a larger-than-life C-arm X-ray machine leaned against the wall, next to a light box holding a series of slides. To my left, glass tanks containing the exoskeletal remains of dead crabs and strange, marine sponges sat beneath a video screen showing a reptilian eye opening and closing in repetitive slow motion. And facing me at the far end of the room was a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanner, the aperture of its central bore overlaid with a huge human iris, giving the apparatus the appearance of an unblinking eye.

The contemporary manifestation of the medical-industrial gaze is central to Holder’s interest in the ways in which our bodies are seen, mapped, and now digitized through technology. Developing ideas first explored during a residency at Wysing in 2015, Ophiux realizes collaborative encounters set up between Holder and scientists from Cambridge University. Building on the center’s mission to support experimentation, through interdisciplinary dialogue with computational biologist Dr. Marco Galardini (from the Wellcome Trust Genome Campus) and Dr. Katrin Linse (Senior Biodiversity Biologist at the British Antarctic Survey), the development of Ophiux was informed by current research into the sequencing of DNA. In particular, it explores the ways in which digital technology is enabling the extraction and processing of data—and that data’s potential for “mining” (and thus monetization) on an industrial scale.

Hence Ophiux: a fictional firm created by Holder as the vehicle for exploring her theme. Described as a speculative pharmaceutical com-