

Peace and Anwar Sadat
performance documentation,
1985. Black and white print.
8 × 10 inches. Courtesy of
the artist. Photo by BASIA.



Ulysses Jenkins by Jareh Das

Agency and immediacy are grounding principles that characterize Ulysses Jenkins's five-decade art practice. In his seminal, often collaborative performances and videos, Jenkins has employed archival film footage, still photography, processed imagery, and sound to probe what constitutes cultural production and iconography. An early adopter of video technology in visual arts, his works expose and actively reject the harmful and lasting stereotypes popular media—from Hollywood films to television to the contemporary art world—perpetuate in their representation of Black and Brown people. Jenkins has long led a rallying cry for Black artists to protect their subjecthoods by controlling the media that so often depicts them stereotypically.

Jenkins also adopts the figure of the griot—the community storyteller, singer, oral historian, and keeper of records in West African culture. His role as a griot is evident in one of his earliest films, *Two-Zone Transfer* (1979, originally conceived in 1972 at Otis Art Institute), in which Jenkins and collaborators Kerry James Marshall, Ronnie Nichols, and Greg Pitts stage a catatonic rendering of Black identity in America. A band of minstrels dressed in Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford face masks accompanies Jenkins as he embodies James Brown in a charged performance that re-enacts the charisma, virtuosity, and frenetic energy of the late Funk musician. *The Video Griots Trilogy*, which Jenkins produced between 1989 and 1991, is another griot project that brings together imagery and sound to chronicle the challenges faced by people of the global African diaspora.

Travel has always informed how Jenkins sees the world—from student trips in his youth observing punk and reggae countercultures, to his 2009 trip to Salvador Bahia with the dance company Viver Brazil. Those studies of the African diasporic spiritual tradition of Candomblé resulted in the ongoing documentary project *Videos Culturais da Bahia*. More recently, Jenkins began making music videos such as *Sobriety* and *Ethnic Cleansing* (both 2022), in which he acts as a commentator on the senselessness of atrocities like the Holocaust and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

A long overdue, expansive retrospective, *Ulysses Jenkins: Without Your Interpretation*, curated by Erin Christovale and Meg Onli (with Ikechukwu Onyewuenyi), opened at the ICA in Philadelphia in 2021. The exhibition subsequently travelled to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, Jenkins's hometown, and was on view until July 2023 at the Julia Stoschek Foundation in Berlin, Germany.

This past Spring, I spoke with the artist via Facetime about his formative years and how countercultures have inspired his enthusiasm for collaborating with other artists.



Ulysses Jenkins: Without Your Interpretation, 2021, installation view. Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania. Courtesy of the artist and Electronic Arts Intermix. Photos by Constance Mensh.



JAREH DAS: Your retrospective exhibition spans over fifty years of working across a range of different media, from videos to performances to paintings. In the 1970s, you were part of the avant-garde that embraced new media, such as video and digital tools. How has your relationship with technologies evolved over time?

ULYSSES JENKINS: Over the many years that I've been doing my work, technology has changed and that means we had to change with the technology. Those changes have in some ways predicted how I approached my art practice. I started working with the Sony Portapak back in the early '70s, after Nam June Paik made this device his tool for making videos.

I had a chance to meet him when I was in graduate school at the Otis Art Institute. He was a visiting lecturer at UCLA at the time, and my professor at Otis, Gary Lloyd, who was doing some of the earliest artwork with fax machines, introduced me to Paik. I had just finished making *Two-Zone Transfer* (1972) and had him look at the video. He gave me a response, saying that he thought it was good. This encounter helped me decide my direction, at a time when I was pondering whether to do painting or video and performance. So that's how everything got started for me—although I did make *Mass of Images* (1978) prior, which was the work that got me into graduate school.

JD: Your studies at Otis Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design) allowed for cross-collaborative hatches and involvement with the artist group Studio Z, alongside David Hammons, Senga Nengudi, and Maren Hassinger. You also had strong influences from teachers such as Chris Burden, Ilene Segalove, and Betye Saar who encouraged fearlessness and artists disrupting the status quo. I understand that your time at Otis also led you to seriously thinking about performance as a form you could adopt in your own art practice.

UJ: Yes. While I was in graduate school, I got a chance to see a performance by Laurie Anderson. Seeing her opened up the possibility and gave me confidence to bring together

performance and music as a visual artist. Ilene Segalove really helped me understand the functional aspects of narrative storytelling. But I also wanted to experiment with something other than traditional theater. So, I took it from there. I made *Inconsequential Doggerel* (1981) right after I graduated.

And of course, there were Charles (Charlie) White and David Hammons, both of whom I engaged with. Hammons, I'm sure you know, was influenced by White. Charlie gave me a worldview from a Black perspective. He did so many things that were unbelievably inspiring and on point for me to witness as a young Black artist who was trying to figure out how to get into the game.

JD: Can you speak about the ways you were exchanging with your peers and teachers during your time at Otis?

UJ: I did a summer session at Otis prior to my entering as a graduate student, and I took a class with Chris Burden. In that class, he told us not to try to copy his work, because if we did, we were going to fail. The thing that I got from him was this sense of not being shy, of being daring and taking your concepts forward as an artist. I encountered Barbara T. Smith when she gave a talk at Otis. At that point, I deeply began to think about doing performance art. She talked about how she left her family to become the artist she was. And I thought, My God! If she can do that much to do performance work, what's holding me back? Betye Saar on the other hand gave directions on her understandings of African rituals in the type of work she was making then and continues to make up to this day.

I remember an encounter in a class with the other grad students where we were showing our work for critique. I left my video on pause, and there was just my picture on screen, paused. As people walked in, they started laughing. I stood there trying to figure out what the laughing was about as I wasn't doing anything comedic to make you laugh at me. This experience also coincided with my studies on African American representations in Western art where, of course, all I could find, especially in historical paintings,

was Black people being depicted as servants. I asked myself, Why? And then, I see the same thing in film and television. The first Black person to get an Oscar was Hattie McDaniel, the sister from *Gone with the Wind*. She got an Oscar for being the servant. I began to realize that the portrayal of Black people is about servitude. You don't live in this country, but we've still got the same thing happening here in America, again and again with what the conservatives are trying to do.

JD: You have always been an avid collaborator. You've worked with Kerry James Marshall, Senga Nengudi, and members of the East Los Angeles art collective Asco. What was the drive behind these collaborations?

UJ: I'll start off with Kerry James Marshall who was at Otis with me, and I don't know if you've ever had a chance to have a conversation with him.

JD: I haven't had a conversation, but I met him very briefly in Venice and he was so lovely.

UJ: Okay, if you were to ever find yourself in a longer conversation with Kerry, he will take you to this whole other world with all the knowledge he has accumulated. Kerry had studied with Charlie White in high school prior to coming to Otis, and he knew what he wanted to do as an artist. He was a lot younger than me. When I put him in my performance, or rather, when he accepted to be in my performance, I found out that he could play piano. So, he's the guy playing piano in *Two-Zone Transfer*. Referring to the portrayal of Black characters in minstrel shows, I used masks of former presidents—Nixon and Gerald Ford—to make *us* the minstrels. Kerry is the one with the Nixon face mask. In my retrospective, I included the drawings of the exhibition space for *Two-Zone Transfer* that Kerry had done. Kerry's a great friend of mine and last time I was in Chicago, we got a chance to hang out by the lake and talk things over. He's doing fantastically well. You always feel good about that for your friends.

After I had graduated from Otis, I was in an exhibition in New York



Two Zone Transfer, 1979.
Still of video transferred to
DVD, color, sound. 23:52
min. Courtesy of the artist
and Electronic Arts Intermix.

Ulysses Jenkins, *Just
Another Rendering of the
Same Old Problem*, 1979,
original performance at Otis
College of Art and Design,
Los Angeles. Photo by
Nancy Buchanan. Courtesy
of the artist.



Still from *The Video Griots
Trilogy*, 1989–91, HD video,
12:29 minutes, color, sound.
Courtesy of the artist and
Electronic Arts Intermix.



Stills from *Dream City*, 1983, HD video, 5:23 minutes, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist and Electronic Arts Intermix.

opposite: Ulysses Jenkins, Centinela Valley Juvenile Diversion Mural Project documentation, 1976. Boulevard Market, Lennox, CA. Courtesy of the artist.

Stills from *Inconsequential Doggereal*, 1981, HD video, 15:13 minutes, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist and Electronic Arts Intermix.





where I showed *Remnants of the Watts Festival* (1972–73), and that’s where I met Maren Hassinger. We recognized each other from LA and decided to get together once back. When we met up, she had invited Senga Nengudi. I asked Senga to participate in a performance I wanted to do in my new studio, called *Adams Be Doggereal* (1981). That was our first, and from there on we did collaborative performances with each other and for each other’s work. The next work we did was *Dream City* (1981, filmed 1983) for the opening of a new performance location in LA, which at the time was at Rachel Rosenthal’s performance studio. I was really humbled by the fact that she asked me to open up her studio as a location for performance art.

JD: What were your engagements with Asco?

UJ: Well, I didn’t do any work specifically with Asco but with their members, Daniel Martinez and Patssi Valdez. Martinez shot the original documentary photos for the 1984 performance *Without Your Interpretation*, which was performed outdoors by Senga Nengudi, Maren Hassinger, May Sun, Todd Gray, and myself for the alternative art gallery Art Dock and also at the underground performance club The Lhasa Club. Valdez did the makeup—the performers were done up with outrageous face painting. I initially got familiar with the East Los Angeles art collective through their mural paintings. I knew Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, Willie Herrón, and Patssi. There was another group, called the LA Fine Art Squad, who also influenced me during my mural painting days. The Squad’s murals were so expansive that you felt like you could walk into them. When I started doing performance and video, I stopped painting, yet I tried to utilize video in a painterly way, for the different colorizations and other stuff.

JD: I can absolutely see how your painting background comes into your video and performance works.

UJ: Coming from painting, I got a lot of those notions from Nam June Paik and what he was doing with electronics and television. I also got introduced to the

virtual aspects in a class I took at Otis taught by Gene Youngblood. He had written a book called *Expanded Cinema* and had actually predicted all the stuff that we’re doing today with digital media. And this was in ’79! He said that the digital component would change video and television and communication. He already spoke of virtual distant communication where you could send pictures and text, which we now do without even thinking about it.

JD: How did you begin to use this embodiment of griot, which is of African origin?

UJ: I began taking on the persona of a griot when I was in grad school. Earlier, I mentioned this incident of being laughed at for being Black on screen. I was existing in an institutional space in the 1970s when white students were saying, “How are you, as a black artist, going to get any kind of influence in the arts community without following Eurocentrism?” And I said, you know, that’s an interesting question. It was a hard question at the time to even try to figure out. The griot was a way to counter this. The African griot is the person who tells the stories of the society, the family, the history, the culture. I wanted to adopt that role as my performative character. And it fit in with the ritual stuff I was learning from Betye Saar. Also, when I started working with Senga and Marin, they were of the same understanding and wanted to utilize that characterization. When we worked together, we were all griots. That also applies to David Hammons. We communicated through our work with rituals. You see the connection?

JD: Absolutely!

UJ: I think a lot of younger artists don’t understand how to connect to the griot tradition, or to what we were doing in communicating with our community and with the greater society. So, in that sense, when I was working with people of other cultural backgrounds, I ended up widening their perspectives.

I was brought up in the community of integration time. When I was in grammar school, my family moved from LA’s East side to the West side,

which was predominantly white at the time. The schools I went to all the way through high school were predominantly white. But for my undergraduate education, my mom wanted me to go to school in the South, to Southern University in Baton Rouge, where my family had gone to college. There, I got a whole different kind of cultural experience, particularly because they just passed the Civil Rights Bill, while we still had Jim Crow and Black people were being told to stay in place, as it were. And that is how many Black people in the South related to their personhood. I had experiences I’m not going to tell you about because then we’d be here all day, or all night where you are, in the UK.

JD: I’d love to hear about that another time though.

UJ: What I was trying to do in my work was to say that we all have to live together, and we need to stop placing each other in circumstances that don’t make sense to anybody except the people who are doing the discrimination. It seemed to be happening in the UK. When I got a chance to visit London as a student, I met all these people from the Caribbean who told me their stories, about how they got there and all that. Another time, in a pub, there was this white guy trying to get me to pay for some beers he had ordered for me and these Black women. When I realized that he was pimping these sisters, I questioned his intentions and he went back to the bar where he had a cloth bag with a hammer and came at me. He was intercepted by another white British guy who came to my rescue, and that guy took us all to The 100 Club. That’s the club where the Sex Pistols first played. There were all these folk with safety pins in their faces and all that spiked hair, yet lo and behold, there was a reggae band playing in the club. And I’m like, Wait a minute. How does this even work?

JD: Ska! The marriage of reggae and punk!

UJ: I saw all this in ’79 in London, but it had not come to America yet. The reggae guys were singing all this social,



Still from *Sobriety*, 2022, HD video, 5:41 minutes, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist and Electronic Arts Intermix.

Stills from *Ethnic Cleansing*, 2022, HD video, 6 minutes, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist and Electronic Arts Intermix.



political stuff which the punks were raving about. I said to myself, This will never happen in America. So, it was interesting for me to witness. We also went to Amsterdam, and that city blew my mind for sure. Some of my experiences in Europe were formative for me.

JD: It's nice to get a sort of varied perspective on how you came to making your work.

UJ: Well, the other thing is—I don't know if you've read my autobiography—before I went to graduate school, I moved to Kona, Hawaii. I wanted to get away from the Regan era of the awful police policies put upon young Black men because of the Black Panthers coming to the California state capital armed with weapons. So I left with my then-girlfriend and her daughter for Hawaii. Hawaii's multiculturalism really influenced me and seeing how the Hawaiian people were trying to live through the sort of neo-colonialism that was put upon them. As an outsider, I saw colonialism blatantly being played out. While living there, I worked in hotels and with the local people who conducted the entertainment in the tourist hotels, Hawaiians and Filipinos. I'm sure you see things differently in the UK than you would see them in Nigeria, although you guys had your own colonial past.

JD: Yes, and even though I was born in the UK, I grew up in Nigeria, so I feel sometimes that I have an outsider perspective on either side. I want to talk about music as a central component in your practice.

UJ: Music really is a major part in my work, especially related to the Griot thing. Combining music and speech into storytelling, that's what I was trying to do from the start, and I'm still doing it. There are these two songs that I had recorded with my band, the Othervisions Art Band, that feature in my latest videos, both made last year, *Ethnic Cleansing* and *Sobriety*. I actually made the songs when the war in Ukraine began, and I then made the video *Ethnic Cleansing* in connection to one of the songs. Later, after we started having problems here in the US with our so-called superstar Kanye

West, with his crazy verbiage against the Jews, I made the video *Sobriety*. People need to wake up about this. I see this as part of being a griot.

JD: You've worked in education all these years, so you're influencing a new generation of video artists. I'm particularly curious about the ways in which you're interacting with young Black artists. How do you advise them in navigating this present time where Black bodies are still being targeted and stereotyped?

UJ: Well, I was trying to dispel these stereotypes with my work. I try to teach my students that all minorities who come into Western cultures have to fight stereotypes. That's the way white people will allow them into their presence. I find this a lot with hip-hop and the way young rappers sell themselves and nobody is out there asking these mostly young guys, Why do you want to make a fool of yourself to get on top? Take someone like Ol' Dirty Bastard, you continue after being on top, but change "fortunately" to "unfortunately"....

When I was doing all this virtual communications work and telecommunications art, I was trying to say that Black people are going to be in the future. In 1984, when I collaborated with Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz for the Electronic Café network, I made a simulation of what video phone technology might look like in the future. At that time, the only Black person I knew of who was in a futuristic show was the woman in Star Trek, Ahura. She was a sister. Now there's recent talk about going back to the moon and sending new astronauts to try to make a settlement. They're going to send a sister. So, yay for Black women!