Smithsonian American Art Museum

musical thinking
NEW VIDEO ART & SONIC STRATEGIES

Video and music have been sister art forms since the 1960s, when musicians were among the first to take up video cameras and define a new creative field that also shapes experiences over time. Today, artists from all backgrounds use musical strategies to create powerful video artworks that address personal as well as shared aspects of contemporary life.

Music is central—not an afterthought—to the moving-image work of the twenty-first-century artists featured here. They bring *musical thinking* to their creative process—employing scores, thematic improvisation, and performer interpretation—and to their selection of songs, styles, and structures that embed meanings from musical traditions. Rich with cultural references, their works use music to call up memories, provoke insight, and invite embodied engagement. By weaving visual and sonic layers, the artists draw out connections between ideas, histories, and people. Featuring designed soundscapes that wrap around the space, their music-infused works transform individuals into communities that share a moment, move in sync, and feel their way into complex topics through senses that exceed words. In the galleries ahead, artists explore foundational ideas of the United States through rhythm and counterpoint. They cast the interrelation of past, present, and future as a form of remixing. Even contemporary understandings of identity are reflected through choral representations of personal experiences that multiply, dance, and narrate with many voices.

Musical Thinking celebrates recently acquired video works by Raven Chacon, Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, Martine Gutierrez, Arthur Jafa, Christine Sun Kim, Simone Leigh and Liz Magic Laser, and Cauleen Smith, plus existing holdings by ADÁL, which are paired with related prints, drawings, photographs, sculptures, and sound art by these artists. As you move through the artists' distinct spaces, we invite you to experience *musical thinking* across their many forms of creativity.

Musical Thinking: New Video Art and Sonic Strategies is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

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A Note on the Gallery Experience

Just as there are many ways music informs art-making, there are many ways music reaches into our lives. The Museum partnered with Motion Light Lab at Gallaudet University to create a layered experience of this exhibition available to all, including Deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences. Single benches or those to the right in each gallery, indicated with blue lights around the base, and the central dance floor conduct enhanced vibrations to allow physical appreciation of each video's unique soundtrack. Audio notes on the wall or open captions

below the projection are included for each installation. QR codes offer a choice of videos with ASL translation for the interpretive texts or written verbal descriptions of that section for those who use screen readers.

Please note: Artworks in the show include mature content and evoke a wide range of emotions. Interpretive texts have individual content alerts so audiences can determine their preferred path. The enclosed galleries may also have significant volume and light-level shifts; the dance floor pulses light.

Cauleen Smith
born 1967, Riverside, CA

Light up My Life (For Sandra Bland)
2020
neon, MDF, paint, faceted hematite, and aluminum
New Britain Museum of American Art, 2021.3, General Purchase Fund

The neon alternately highlights "I will light up your life," a play on the title refrain from a popular 1970s ballad, or "I will light you up," warning words from the Texas trooper who pulled Sandra Bland from her car during a traffic stop in 2015. When Bland, a Black woman who had been on her way to a new job the morning of her arrest, was found hanging in a jail cell days later, authorities ruled it a suicide. Depending on which phrase is most familiar, some audiences may first be charmed, others immediately disturbed. How does Smith play on our expectations and emotions by threading romantic lyrics and a violent threat?

ADÁL

Across decades of multimedia work, ADÁL foregrounded music as exemplary of a "Nuyorican" culture that keeps Puerto Rican roots alive in New York, while reinventing them to powerfully contribute to the fabled melting pot of America.

In *El Puerto Rican Passport,* ADÁL and collaborators emphasize imagination as key to overcoming the colonizing forces that have blocked self-determination for the island. The central manifesto points to forms of

creativity that transcend borders, especially music and dance, as evidence of the independence and resilience of an already existent "sovereign state of mind."

ADÁL's video sculpture responds to *West Side Story*, the 1961 film adaptation of the 1957 Broadway musical. The creative teams of both the show and film had no connection to Puerto Rican communities, yet their recognizable songs and choreography introduced stereotypical Puerto Rican characters, mostly performed by white actors, to U.S. audiences and stubbornly embedded them in pop culture. Manipulating *West Side Story* film footage as his title suggests, ADÁL adds the historical context Hollywood left out. Documentary clips show the economic and political conditions that pushed Puerto Ricans to migrate to the continental U.S. Performances by talented Nuyoricans are seen and heard, in particular jazz legend Tito Puente's propulsive percussion that fills the soundtrack. Police radio disrupts the music, underscoring the real dangers of fictional misrepresentation, and the well-worn suitcase suggests the personal costs of these movements of music and people.

Please note: The video-sculpture addresses police and gang violence.

Raven Chacon

Trained as a composer, Chacon (Diné) often starts from musically notated scores to create conceptually rich artworks across creative categories. Since scores are inherently fluid, even when they take fixed form in a video or print, the works based on them retain the possibility for further interpretation, collaboration, and reanimation in new contexts.

A performance of his 2001 composition of the same name, the 2015 video installation *Report* recasts guns as musical instruments, rather than solely as instruments of violence. Having no flexibility in tone, pitch, or volume, the firearms used in Chacon's score create a sonic complexity through the rhythmic staggering of different caliber shots. Location, casting, and framing for each performance, however, dramatically shape understandings of the shooters and their actions. In this video, percussionists of various backgrounds and genders resolutely fire across a New Mexican landscape, offering musical resistance to the myth of an uninhabited American West and a reminder that gunfire has long been the soundtrack of this land.

In his print portfolio series *For Zitkála-Šá,* Chacon recognizes Zitkála-Šá (Yankton-Dakota, 1876–1938), an Indigenous and women's rights advocate and the first Native composer to use Western musical notation. The series of score-portraits celebrates contemporary Native women musicians in his circle. Each striking graphic is accompanied by performance instructions, inviting all to imagine how they might activate this legacy.

Please note: The gallery to the right features the sights and sounds of extended gunfire.

Raven Chacon

born 1977, Fort Defiance, AZ

Report

2001/2015

single-channel video (color, sound); 3:48 min.

printed score shown on music stand

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2020.61A-C

Audio Note: Opens with sounds of wind and rustling paper followed by silence, a count off, and then a rhythmic staggering of pops, bangs, and wind noises in the pauses between volleys, which can be felt through the bench.

Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly

In their collaborative series, *Performed Places* (2006–ongoing), Ghani's filmmaking and Kelly's choreography excavate layers of memory and meaning enmeshed in historic sites. Through archival research and by responding to remnants of a given space's former life, they develop movement, narrative, and video choreography that reanimates the past.

When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved engages Pleasant Hill, Kentucky's Shaker Village, a nineteenth-century settlement where the preserved architecture and landscaping convey Shaker spirituality. Rooted in principles of simplicity, shared resources, and racial and gender equality, Shaker communities offer a utopian alternative to the primary settler-colonial values that shaped the United States at its founding.

Ghani and Kelly began with first-person accounts from the community's archives, assembling a textual score that guided a daylong performance. Through hymns that become rhythmic stomping and folk dances that become frenetic movements, the work traces the emotional and spiritual arc of weekly worship meetings in which spiritual gifts overtake believers' bodies. In the three-channel video, this performance is distilled from twelve hours into the choreographic journey shown on the central screen. On either side, mirrored shots of the serene environs emphasize the ordered design of Shaker life outside these chaotic convenings.

Projected life-size with surround sound, the video invites audiences to imaginatively step into this space and join this transformative gathering. The related photographs invite slower reflection on Shaker ways of being-in-common.

> On Mother Ann's birthday the whole Society met at the Meeting House to celebrate the day. Like all Sabbaths in Shaker villages, a beautiful stillness pervaded. After the body of worshipers gathered into order, we commenced the services by one bow and opened the meeting by singing a hymn. All that were able united into ranks to step for the first song, then formed two circles for the march. At this time in a meeting it was usual to step quick and lively for two songs, sing two songs for the slow march, then two for the round dance with the circle unbroken. On this occasion the house was too crowded to march with convenience, so the dancing commenced in a promiscuous manner by the middle and young classes, and was attended with great power. The seats had to be taken out of the room to give place for the spirits to sing and dance, and the gifts and blessings of heaven were poured forth by the heavenly Orders in great abundance. We received gifts of freedom and simplicity, life and zeal, balls of love and blessing, sparks of holy fire, palms of victory, staves of strength, crowns of love, mantles and robes of wisdom, chains of union, and numerous other gifts of a similar kind, calculated to strengthen our souls and fill us with life, which continued to flow almost incessantly throughout the meeting. Sometimes when an individual would receive a bush or other emblem filled with quickening power or holy fire, we would all unite and shake heartily. A great many were wrought upon by an irresistible power, which caused the assembly to shake and reel and toss like the trees of the forest when shaken with the wind. The involuntary exercise became so violent that we discontinued ranks and all united in the dance, and one was moved upon by the departed spirit of a female of some other Nation, and all her movements and motions seemed to prove she had lived to a very old age. There was some quiet sleepy kind of spirit took possession of Illinois Green, which caused her to sit about on the floor apparently asleep for some time, then all of a

sudden she sprang to her feet and whirled and jumped about the room as tho she was affrightened into a fit. About the middle of the meeting, Emma McCormack was possessed by a spirit and lay helpless for some time, continually hollowing, then suddenly sprang to her feet and danced round the room very swiftly for a short spell. After this Emma broke out in the most melodious strains that the human mind could conceive of, singing songs new to us, that appeared to be from the Spiritual world. Much praise was danced and sung that day, and towards the conclusion we received from Holy Mother Wisdom, each one a drop of her pure love … Some of those that were there say it was one of the liveliest meetings they were ever in.

Text adapted from:
A Brief account of the proceedings of the day, and the meeting of the Society at Pleasant Hill, Ky. December 25th, 1845. / Western Reserve Historical Society VIII A-49
June, 1847 / Spiritual journal, Pleasant Hill archives
Monday, March 8, 1852 / Spiritual journal, Pleasant Hill archives
Saturday, February 14, 1857, and March 1, Sabbath 1857 / Filson Historical Society, Bohon Shaker Collection, Volume 11 of 40, "Journal Kept by James Levi Balance, April 1, 1854–March 31, 1860"
THE LORD'S DAY, MAY 25TH/ JUNE 1st [1873] / "A Journey to Kentucky in the Year 1873," Elder Henry C. Blinn

Simone Leigh and Liz Magic Laser

Leigh, who is best known as a sculptor, and Laser, whose practice often turns public and political speech into performance scripts, decided to creatively collaborate when they discovered a shared interest in the depictions of "female hysteria" in popular media. For the initial score for *Breakdown,* they gathered scenes from soap operas, plays, movies, and reality television shows featuring characters expressing psychological crisis. The artists then worked with Alicia Hall Moran, the renowned mezzo-soprano, to interpret direct quotes and poses from this research material, which developed into the final libretto and choreography for the video.

In her tour-de-force performance, Moran's artistic range and improvisational ability transform the repetitive phrases and shrill cries of hysteria into musical layers that are associated with gravitas, heroism, and history. The overall operatic style aligns this Black woman's emotional release with a traditionally elitist European

high-art form, raising questions about which expressive displays are valued or criticized, and whose personal dramas are legitimized or dismissed. The performance also includes touches of the blues, jazz, and gospel hymns—African American musical forms that are themselves creatives balms for the psychological and spiritual impacts of racial inequity and violence.

Though alone in a balcony, Moran points through the screen to us, her imagined audience. What role does our witnessing play when personal pain is presented for public consumption?

Simone Leigh
born 1968, Chicago, IL

Liz Magic Laser
born 1981, New York City

Breakdown
2011
single-channel digital video (color, sound); 9 min.
in collaboration with Alicia Hall Moran
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Samuel and Blanche Koffler Acquisition Fund, 2019.33.2

Video produced with Polemic Media
Producer, David E. Guinan
Director of Photography, Collin Kornfeind
Production Assistant, Fontaine Capel
Special thanks to New Covenant Temple, New York, NY

Simone Leigh
born 1968, Chicago, IL

Cupboard VIII

2018

stoneware, steel, raffia, Albany slip

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Bridgitt and Bruce Evans

A brown-glazed stoneware torso sits atop a monumental raffia skirt or house-like structure. Combining body with object with architectural or found forms is a hallmark of Leigh's work, which centers an exploration of Black femme subjectivity.

Like much of Leigh's work, *Cupboard VIII* resonates with scholar Saidiya Hartman's idea of critical fabulation, through which imagined narratives can counter erasures in historical and archival records. Here, the figure's outstretched arms and the open jug mouth invite speculation on what sparked this expressive gesture and what remains unsaid.

Martine Gutierrez

In her own words, Gutierrez is "driven to question how identity is formed, expressed, valued, and weighed as a woman, as a transwoman, as a Latinx woman, as a woman of Indigenous descent, as a femme artist and maker." Through videos, photographs, performances, installations, and self-released albums and magazines, she incisively plays with stereotypes and their repeated commodification.

Clubbing explores the coding and performance of gender binaries in a scene of multiple selves sharing an otherworldly space that blends fantasy and reality. Gutierrez claims total control of every aspect of her projects, including *Clubbing,* taking on all the roles in front of and behind the camera. From the painted-on eyes to the sixties' mod costumes to the addictive groove that gets these bodies moving, it all comes back to Gutierrez, alone in her studio, aiming to create a welcoming world for all.

Though on first glance she appears to present heterosexual pairings, Gutierrez's layered drag performances open a kaleidoscope of queer possibility. Filmed through gauze, the hazy indefinability of the locale evokes the idea of queer nightclubs as utopian zones, havens from a dangerously divisive society, since utopia means "no place" in Greek. Celebrating the joys found there, *Clubbing* stands as an ode to the creativity and liberation of dance floors and their importance as places for self-discovery, interpersonal harmony, and nonconformist

community building.

Feel free to step up and dance along. The floor lights pulse with the music, while the black pathways transfer vibrations from the soundtrack to the soles of your feet.

Martine Gutierrez

born 1989, Berkeley, CA

Clubbing

2012

single-channel digital video (high-definition, color, sound); 3:06 min.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 2021.23.2

Audio Note: Electric fuzzy keyboard and clonking wooden beats start the instrumental song that continues throughout the video. A plucked bass and kick drum join as the *Clubbing* credit appears, after which a consistent groovy melody comes primarily through bass, keyboard, and electric guitar sounds. The chorus, when the dancers are in sync, has increased volume and percussion, which can be felt and seen on the nearby dance floor.

Christine Sun Kim

Through her art, Kim encourages audiences to attend to the links between music and meaning, sound and other and text, and performance and media installations to explore how she and the larger Deaf community establish their own relationships to the world of sound.

Kim wrote a text score for *One Week of Lullabies for Roux,* guiding seven friends (who are also parents) as they composed original soothing soundtracks for coaxing her own newborn, Roux, to sleep. Kim's instructions called for lullabies without lyrics that emphasized low frequencies, so she would be able to monitor and feel comfortable about the audio she was introducing into her baby's "sound diet." The artist-designed bench evokes a color-coded weekly pillbox, suggesting these songs are daily medicine.

For *Close Readings,* Kim edited together clips from five movies, removed the sound, and partially blurred the visuals. Then she invited four Deaf or hard-of-hearing collaborators to write unique captions, which she added

to each channel above the existing studio captions. The four screens play in sync, showing vastly different verbal interpretations of the same scene and soundtrack, and underscoring how different approaches to captioning significantly impact viewing experiences.

Please note: The video captions contain mature language.

Christine Sun Kim
born 1980, Orange County, CA

The Star-Spangled Banner (Third Verse)

America the Beautiful

2020
charcoal on paper
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase and purchase through the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center and through the Julia D. Strong Endowment, 2021.31.1-.2

In 2020, Kim was invited to be the American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter for that year's Super Bowl, performing these two patriotic songs alongside pop star Demi Lovato and gospel singer Yolanda Adams. Kim's monumental charcoal score drawings, made later that year, reflect her careful preparation. The graphic staff lines, clustered notes, and reordered, spatialized lyrics map her ASL translation, designed to match the singer's rhythmic and dynamic range with her own. The compositional arrangement and word choice also reveal Kim's continued engagement with this moment and material, conveying a perspective that is both critical and hopeful. This intentional historical positioning is further articulated in the artist statement at right, which she asks accompany this work whenever possible.

Kim felt conflicted around the Super Bowl invitation. Intended as a gesture of patriotic support for disability visibility and intersectional solidarity, her appearance also pointed to gaps between promised and actual equity. These subsequent drawings, scaled to the human body, ask us all to consider our relationship to these songs, their histories and their promises.

Christine Sun Kim Artist Statement

July 2020

This is a notation drawing of the American Sign Language (ASL) translation of "The Star-Spangled Banner," the national anthem of the United States, which I signed during Super Bowl LIV in February 2020 in front of millions of viewers. Accepting the invitation to give such a performance was not an easy decision; however, it was vital for creating visibility for the Deaf and disabled communities in America. While I initially dissected and rearranged the anthem in a way that suits ASL and my vantage point as a disabled performer, I have since learned that Francis Scott Key, the anthem's lyricist, actively defended the rights of slave owners, owned slaves himself, and cultivated an openly anti-Black and anti-Abolition attitude. With this information in mind, I wish for the work's potential visibility to now be extended by highlighting the fact that Black disabled people are disproportionately targeted by the police: Half of people killed by police have a disability (David M. Perry and Lawrence Carter-Long, 2016) and more than half of Black people with disabilities will have been arrested at least once by the time they reach their late 20s (Erin J. McCauley, 2017). Systemic racism permeates American culture so deeply that it becomes a norm and it goes unchallenged, and often unnoticed—much like the country's anthem. We must all support the movement by practicing both anti-racism and anti-ableism. Black Disabled Lives Matter.

September 2020

The full song of "The Star-Spangled Banner" consists of four stanzas; only the first one is used for the national anthem. The following is the third stanza:

> And **where is that band** who so vauntingly swore,
> That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion
> A home and a Country should leave us no more?
>
> Their blood has wash'd out their foul footstep's pollution.
> No refuge could save **the hireling and slave**
> From the terror of flight or **the gloom of the grave,**

And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Upon reading all four stanzas, I found them to be heavily tainted with racism and mockery. I selected three phrases (above in bold) and placed them under the beams of the stripe notes, as if they're part of the flag. Analyzing the text, a number of experts have suggested that "Where is that band" refers to the Colonial Marines, a group of enslaved Black Americans that fought for Britain in order to earn freedom. "The hireling and slave" is Francis Scott Key's way of mocking both British soldiers and the Colonial Marines. "The gloom of the grave" is perhaps his reaction to them as a slave owner, cursing both to the grave. I added this focus on the third verse in response to racial injustices that have been inflicted for centuries, and I support the growing call to replace "The Star-Spangled Banner" with "Lift Every Voice and Sing" of 1899 by J. Rosamond Johnson and James Weldon Johnson, which is considered the Black national anthem.

—Christine Sun Kim

Arthur Jafa

Jafa is an artist and filmmaker with a lifelong practice of compiling visual material he deems striking and relevant to understanding Black life in the United States. Long admired for his cinematography, Jafa is now equally known for videos, photographic works, and sculptural installations that feature in art spaces around the world.

Love is the Message, The Message is Death offers a swift-moving montage of the African American experience as captured in moving images, from nineteenth-century silent films to today's camera phone recordings of police killing unarmed civilians. Clips sourced from the internet are interwoven with Jafa's own home movies and past projects, and set to Kayne West's 2016 gospel/hip-hop anthem, "Ultralight Beam," itself a compendium of Black music history and voices. The selection whiplashes viewers between moments of celebration and mourning, humor and crisis, profound historical significance and everyday intimacy. Throughout, Jafa edits and adjusts playback speeds to mimic the exceptional tempo and tone control of Black musicians. This technique represents one way in which he pursues his long-stated goal of a "Black cinema with the power, beauty, and alienation of Black music."

In *APEX GRID*, the same approach of appropriating and remixing is applied to photographs. Scaled to fit like thumbnails into neat rows, hundreds of images reflect what Jafa sees as popular culture's managing of ideas and fears around Blackness.

Paradoxically, these works always feel timely because they point to patterns in Black life that repeat time after time. How might our experiences of Jafa's work change as today's news cycles make different elements suddenly—but repeatedly—feel relevant or raw?

Please note: These works include mature content, including images of violence and nudity.

Arthur Jafa
born 1960, Tupelo, MS

Love is the Message, The Message is Death
2016
single-channel digital video (high-definition, color, sound); 7:25 min.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Joint museum purchase with the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of Nion T. McEvoy, Chair of SAAM Commission (2016–2018), and McEvoy's fellow Commissioners in his honor; additional funding provided by Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest Fund, 2020.001, 2020.3

"Ultralight Beam" (2016), version from Kanye West album *The Life of Pablo,* performed by West, featuring Chance the Rapper, The-Dream, Kelly Price and Kirk Franklin and choir, with additional vocals by Natalie Green and Samoria Green.

Written by Kanye West, Mike Dean, Cydel Young, Kelly Price, Terius Nash, Nico "Donnie Trumpet" Segal, Kirk Franklin, Kasseem Dean, Chancelor Bennett, Noah Goldstein, Jerome Potter, Samuel Griesemer, Derek Watkins, Malik Yusef.

Produced by Kanye West, Swizz Beatz, Chance the Rapper, Mike Dean, Rick Rubin, Noah Goldstein, DJ Dodger Stadium, Plain Pat and Derek Watkins.

Arthur Jafa

born 1960, Tupelo, MS

APEX GRID

2018

Epson fine print face-mounted Diasec acrylic on aluminum panel

Private collection

At each end: *The work on this wall includes mature content, including images of violence and nudity. Enter this space to engage or chart an alternate path around the bench to the right.*

Cauleen Smith

Smith's art and filmmaking has always been driven by histories of Black brilliance that resonate across time. Listening closely to the spiritual and musical philosophies of composer, performer, and swamini Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda (1937–2007) has inspired Smith's recent works. Smith's cinematic collages connect Coltrane's transformative visions to others who create spaces for liberation from the nineteenth century to the present.

In *Pilgrim,* Coltrane's experimental jazz piano unfurls as Smith's camera moves solemnly through the white ashram buildings and hillside setting of the Hindu community Coltrane founded in California. These scenes soon merge with the gothic spirals of Watts Towers, mid-twentieth-century folk sculpture in southern Los Angeles, before fading into a Shaker cemetery in upstate New York, where a pre–Civil War religious group lived the values of racial and gender equality.

Sojourner expands this mapping of utopic possibility. While visuals touch down at significant sites across Philadelphia, Chicago, and California, voice-overs explicitly align Coltrane's mystical writings with those of Rebecca Cox Jackson, a Black Shaker eldress whom Smith found had described astral journeys a hundred years earlier, similar to Coltrane's. Their voices, and readings of the Combahee River Collective's 1977 manifesto, seem to be transmitted via old radios to a collective of futuristically fabulous young women of color. They carry bright banners with poetic phrases along a beach, behind a protest, and outside Watts Towers Arts Center, a

community hub founded by the late sculptor Noah Purifoy, whose Outdoor Desert Art Museum near Joshua Tree, California, serves as their concluding location. After gathering within and winding around Purifoy's large assemblages, their final pose is a feminist twist on a famed photo from 1966 of stylish young men gathered around Watts Towers.

Cauleen Smith
born 1967, Riverside, CA

Pilgrim
2017
single-channel digital video (color, sound); 7:41 min.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the SJ Weiler Fund, 2020.54.2

Audio Note: Set to a live album recording, the video begins with unseen audience applause and Alice Coltrane's voice introducing "One for the Father" as a song she composed and dedicates to John Coltrane. Passionate instrumental piano then rumbles and wavers for the next seven minutes. Heavy low chords and delicate trilling build into rolling, rapidly ascending and descending free jazz exploration of the full keyboard. As the song and video end, audience applause accompanies the closing credits.

Cauleen Smith
born 1967, Riverside, CA

Sunshine (for Brayla, Merci, Shakiie, Draya, Tatiana, and Bree, Riah, Dominique…)
2020
neon, MDF, paint, gold-pleated chain link
Courtesy of the artist and Morán Morán, Los Angeles

As neon words light from the bottom to the top, they build the choral repetitions of "my life" that kick off Roy Ayers's summer classic, "Everybody Loves the Sunshine" (1976). Smith's title offers a darker kind of repetition, recounting the names of eight trans women of color all killed within weeks of each other in 2020. Daring to live in the light as their true selves, these women's names are now shouted at protests affirming that

their lives matter even if their deaths go unsolved. Smith uses the song's familiarity as a hook for considering complicity—when do you notice the violence, and when do you just sing along?