

Essay: The Material of a Ghost

On the Function of Charged Matter as Artistic Material

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Abstract

This essay examines the ontology of a particular category of material used in contemporary artistic practice. It argues for an expanded understanding of artistic materials that accounts for the functional role of pre-existing cultural objects when they are employed as material. To this end, this essay introduces the concept of charged matter to describe compositional materials that carry cultural significance inseparable from their material use. The term is situated between the concepts of material and materiality, describing the convergence of these two notions – when cultural signs become artistic matter. Through

a series of case studies centred around Arthur Jafa's Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death (2016), this essay aims to demonstrate how charged matter continues to haunt the artworks it composes, shaping not only their form but also their meaning. In these instances, the cultural function of such materials supersedes their status as malleable base matter. In this essay, I therefore argue that to understand how this type of material functions in contemporary art, the cultural associations of these materials must be thought of as intrinsic to their role as compositional matter.

Introduction

A projector's light is formed into living images (Fig. 1-3). They shift and flicker between violence and joy, triumph and tragedy. We see a basketball arena; the stands filled with vibrant bodies moving in celebration. Then an image of the Civil Rights protests: black-and-white images of a child waving, surrounded by dancing women raising their picket signs in resistance. People dancing, a man pop-locking in a room surrounded by his cheering peers. The police shooting a bullet in the back of a Black man. An intoxicated lap dance, a woman bouncing against a man's crotch on the street. *The Birth of a Nation*. Barack Obama singing *Amazing Grace* at the eulogy of Clementa C. Pinckney, who was murdered in the terrorist attack in Charleston, 2015. *The Birth of a Nation*. A praying woman falling to the floor. A man in blue clothes falling to the ground at the hands of a man in red clothes. Floyd Mayweather lifting his arms, flexing his muscles before a fight. Armoured police rushing out of a van. The civil rights movement. A child striking his mom. Police brutality. Muhammad Ali. Ballroom culture, a Black body falling to the ground, voguing. *The Birth of a Nation*. Martin Luther King. A burning sun. Drake. A child with his arms raised high above his head, walking towards the police arresting his mother, crying out, 'What's going on?'. Aretha Franklin. A police officer slams a woman's head into the concrete. Slam dunk by LeBron James, flickering lights.

These images compose the artwork *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* (2016) by American artist Arthur Jafa (b. 1960). They occur and recur, with a pulsating and urgent



Fig. 1: Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* (2022). Installation view, The Douglas Hyde Gallery of Contemporary Art, Dublin.

impression. It's a cycle that you can't quite work out. Past, present, and future, shuffled together, forming a fragmented impression of the multifaceted visual impressions of Black culture in America. It's dizzying, in its shifts between violence and greatness. The images are often too fast to recognise, yet too impactful to forget. They're bodily felt, leaving a lasting impression on the spectator. The images are predominantly repurposed, pre-existing cultural fragments collected by Jafa; together, they show the mediatised representation of Black bodies in the United States, critically examining how such representations are reproduced and circulated in the collective archive of our visual culture.

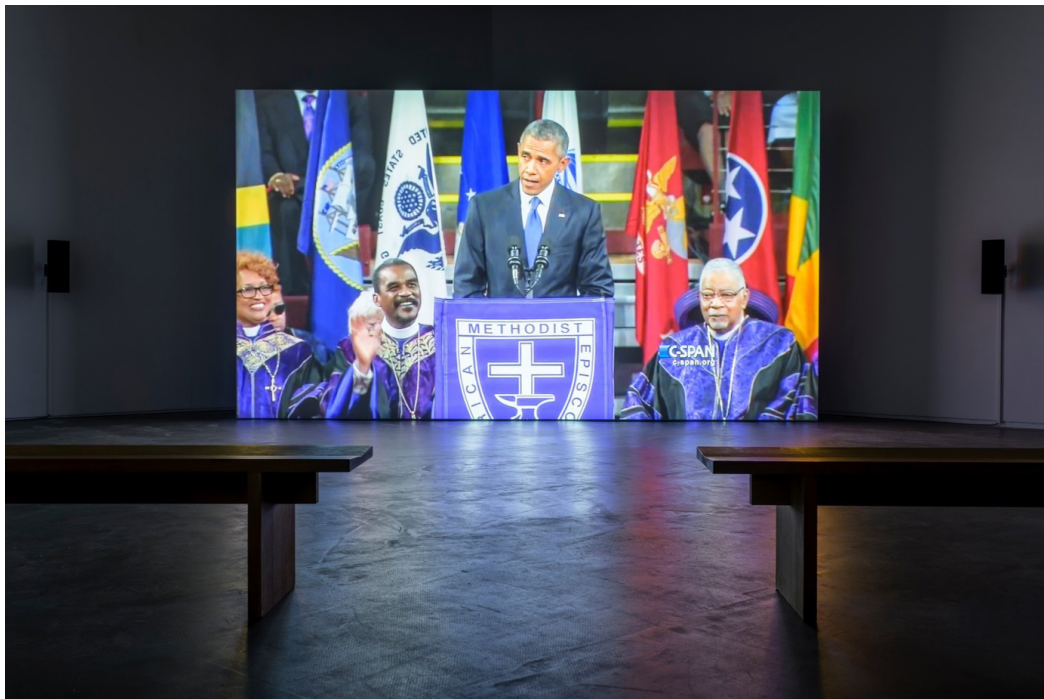


Fig. 2: Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* (2022). Installation view, *The Douglas Hyde Gallery of Contemporary Art*, Dublin.

There's much to consider with an artwork such as this. Its materials might not seem like the most relevant. However, after viewing it, this consideration never left me because what is the material of a work like this? It seems ghost-like; it carries with it a presence outside of its formal qualities. In this sense, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, represents a challenge to the ontology of materials within art history as it has traditionally been anchored in the tangible: pigment, marble, oil, and canvas (Ingold, 2007). As such, Jafa's work is an example of a broader turn within contemporary art, where artworks are no longer composed of these traditional materials but instead created by weaving together the intangible threads of culture. Where art is composed of materials chosen not in relation to its formal expression, but for their pre-existence. In this situation, the material becomes an active agent in the formation of the artwork's meaning, as opposed to traditional materials that were largely neutral building blocks before their transformation into art.



Fig. 3: Arthur Jafa, Love is the Message, The Message is Death (2022). Installation view, The Douglas Hyde Gallery of Contemporary Art, Dublin.

The purpose of this essay is therefore to examine this shift in material function and develop a vocabulary to describe works of art that employ a material that supersedes its base material function. This development is necessary because the application of cultural phenomena as compositional matter renders the existing categories of materials and materiality insufficient, as notions of material and materiality converge upon themselves. Materials, here understood as the *stuff* that another thing is composed of – the base material or brute form of an artwork – and materiality as the subject-object relations between this brute material and its spectator. This, however, cannot fully explain the function of matter in Jafa's work (Ingold, 2007; Tilley, 2007). Situated in the convergence of these two terms, where the cultural relation of an image becomes the base material of another is the concept of charged matter. This essay introduces the idea of *charged matter* as a concept signifying material function, in which the cultural significance of a compositional material precedes its formal qualities in its employment within a work of art. Charged matter exists in the convergence of materials and materiality as the materiality of one object/event/image is employed as the brute material of another. In this process, the materiality of the object – its subject-object relations – imbues the object's function as material and, in turn, the artwork.

Material, Materiality and Charged Matter

This leaves us with three distinct positions for analysing the material of an artwork: material, materiality and charged matter. Applying each of these to *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, illustrates the necessity of charged matter as a concept, as both material and materiality come up short in describing the material functions at play in Jafa's artwork.

So, first, we must identify what aspect of the work can be viewed as its base material. These must be the video clips. However, how can we describe what they are? Is their material the light from the projector? No, these protons of light are always different, existing in a somatic flux. Jafa's project isn't composing light – such as seen in the light and space artists: i.a. Robert Irwin, James Turrell and Mary Corse. Instead, the base material of *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* is the cultural event of the videos themselves – meaning, not the events or individuals in the videos, but the videos themselves. Jafa thus composes the artwork from prior medialised entities, as cultural signs that contribute with their cultural pre-existence to the artwork. As such, the materials are inseparable from their former materiality – the subject-object relation of their original and continual cultural impact. Jafa's work is not defined by physical qualities, but rather by its entanglements with cultural knowledge, history, and experiences: its matter is incorporeal but still strongly present. It's a material rooted outside of the somatic plane, residing within cultural memory and recollection. Like ghosts, these videos exist as spectral entities still tethered to the earthly plane. They're bearers of histories which spark recognition. Despite lacking a corporal body, they persist as phantoms, and as such, they are enacting their material function.

The concept of charged matter could be understood as a form of materiality; however, there's a clear distinction between the two. When first aired, the videos functioned within the framework they were made for, either online or in the news. However, now, as a material in an artwork, they appear once removed – repurposed as charged matter that not only depicts but also reflects on their own mediation and the societal actions inherent in these portrayals. Materiality becomes charged matter when it is recycled into the function of material, when the subject-object relation of an object is a central aspect in said object's use as a compositional material.

The material composing *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* is different from traditional materials of artistic creation, as they've existed as cultural entities before their use in the artwork. Throughout history, artworks have relied on the cultural understanding of the signs they represent. Yet, these signs have traditionally been mediated through *form*, not material. The following section explores this shift and places charged matter in a historical context of material understanding.

The Historic Role of Material

Examinations of material as signifiers of more than their physical qualities have previously been undertaken. However, significant differences separate these from the concept of charged matter

as presented in this essay. An example is found in the art of 14th-century Italy. In the works of this period – exclusively identified as theologically Christian – the material in depictions of divinity was not merely understood as representing the divine; it was seen as the actual body of the divine. These medieval objects of devotion:

should be understood as the immediate presence of the holy more than as indexes, icons, or symbols pointing to something else. They are [...] vibrantly active stuff, a locus of divine agency (Bynum, 2013, p. 12).

Therefore, in this context, the material of the artwork is acutely important. Nonetheless, this material function remains tied to the form in which it is composed. The materials used in depictions of divinity become divine in relation to their *form* as a religious image. Consequently, before the material is shaped into this form, it doesn't exist as divine but as a base material without cultural charge.

Similarly, the period's reverence of ultramarine pigment as a material is an example of matter being culturally tied to the divine, as it was praised as a colour both 'illustrious, beautiful, and the most perfect, beyond all other colours [and] more expensive than gold' (Bomford et al., 1989, p. 35). This value was established within a cultural frame, and as a result of the reverence of the material itself, it was used to signify something important within a painting; if a figure wore an ultramarine robe, they would be understood as important or divine – thus, the material added context to the form to which it was applied (Bomford et al., 1989, p. 36). Nevertheless, this cultural entanglement did not extend to the material itself. Again, the significance of the material was activated in its relation to form. As such, the material, ultramarine pigment, maintained the possibility of existing outside of the cultural entanglements of the image. A similar separation seems impossible when considering the material of works like *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, as these cannot be employed without their pre-existent cultural meaning. For example, if the images from *The Birth of a Nation* were used in something as plain as a collage picturing a flower, this work would still be understood in relation to the cultural significance of the movie. The flower would be imbued with meaning, and the artwork would be seen in relation to the history of racism.

The implications of charged matter resist erasure; they remain present, as spectral echoes of meaning, haunting the artwork with their presence. This resistance is evident in a work where such erasure is attempted. In German painter Gerhard Richter's (b. 1932) *Birkenau*-series, colourful and abstract forms are painted over black and white images from the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. While these images are visually erased, their cultural and historical presence persists in the work, becoming a part of its material existence. Whether one views this artistic obscuring of the horrifying images as an important or distasteful artistic gesture is not relevant to this argument – only that the charged matter in Richter's work indeed does impact the understanding of the finished work. The material presence of charged matter haunts

the work with its prior cultural and historical relations. Even when obscured, they shape the experience of the work. How this effect is utilised and fulfilled will, like all other materials, vary from artist to artist, from spectator to spectator.

An early example of charged matter within the art historical canon is found in the ready-mades of French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968). Duchamp exhibited pre-existing objects with minimal interventions, such as *Fountain* (1917), a porcelain urinal laid flat and signed 'R. Mutt' in black paint. At the time, the work was dismissed as non-art and excluded from an otherwise uncensored exhibition by the Society of Independent Artists in New York, 1917 (Tomkins, 1973). The form of the work caused a rupture in material understanding within artistic production. The scandal of the form was achieved through its charged matter. As previously illustrated, while the material of a traditional artwork has a symbolic function, it doesn't possess any cultural significance outside of its use in the work. The material composed into traditional painting or sculpture is a property to which form is applied; it's through this application of form, upon the passive matter, that the cultural significance appears (Lehmann, 2012, p. 10). This situation changes when an artwork is composed using charged matter. The material is apparent as itself, stripping away a layer of representation. The material appears as itself and is therefore less malleable than other materials; charged matter not only contributes formal qualities to an artwork but also social and cultural comprehension.

Charged matter cannot act neutral or passive; it can only be an active force in the formation of the artwork. While this situation is most apparent in violent or upsetting images – as is the case with *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* – this theory can be applied to all forms of creation using charged matter. This is the case with *Fountain*, as the work exists primarily as its pre-existent connotations. When Duchamp displays a urinal as an artwork, its original function and thereby cultural connotation remain visible in its new form as art. The urinal as a sign is tied to culturally taboo notions of bodily function. By using this "gross" object, Duchamp employs its cultural pre-existence, enabling its presence to function as a critique. The cultural charge of the urinal juxtaposed the established notions of fine art, causing two worlds to collide through the display of pure material. It was not the material of the urinal, its porcelain surface, that conjured this tension and censorship; rather, it was the urinal's cultural charge.

Through the Eyes of Others

This section of the essay explores how utilising charged matter can shape the finished artwork, underscoring the importance of material awareness in artistic production. This is achieved by discussing Jafa's work in relation to Danish artist Cathrine Raben Davidsen, who represents an artistic practice engaged with similar themes as Jafa, only she creates paintings from traditional materials absent of charge, illustrating the impact of charged matter on the finished artwork.

The charged matter composing *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, imbues the work with its cultural connections as a spectral presence. Jafa utilises pre-existing cultural "objects" as

charged matter to examine how Black Americans are depicted in media, and how their bodies are represented and made visible by an *other*. American sociologist and civil rights activist W.E.B. Dubois (1868–1963) reflects on this reality in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), explaining this feeling of otherness, which arises from perceiving oneself through the eyes of another:

A world which yields him [the racialised individual] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (2018, p. 3).

This image, 'amused contempt and pity', is quite striking, harrowingly poetic, and an accurate description of how the racialised individual is depicted in Jafa's images. Here, their existence becomes a form of entertainment. This critical perspective is realised through the utilisation of charged matter, whose properties give force to Jafa's artistic critique. As such, the ability to engage reliably with these themes can be contingent on the presence of charged matter. This becomes clear when works, absent of charged matter, are analysed alongside works wherein they are present. Perhaps the most notorious example of this is the American artist Dana Schutz and the scandal surrounding her painting *Open Casket* (2017), which depicts an abstract interpretation of the image of lynched American teenager Emmett Till's mutilated face at his open casket funeral. Schutz's abstract depiction of his face was criticised by American artist Hannah Black in an open letter. Here she stated that:

Although Schutz's intention may be to present white shame, this shame is not correctly represented as a painting of a dead Black boy by a white artist — those non-Black artists who sincerely wish to highlight the shameful nature of white violence should first of all stop treating Black pain as raw material. The subject matter is not Schutz's; white free speech and white creative freedom have been founded on the constraint of others, and are not natural rights. The painting must go (Black & Greenberger, 2017).

Black frames Schutz's painting as utilising 'Black pain as raw material,' her critique being that the painting engages with a charged subject in a neutral way, and that Schutz depicts it as if it were a traditional subject, which it is not.

Another example is found in the works of Danish artist Cathrine Raben Davidsen. In her retrospective *Let Everything Happen to You* at Copenhagen Contemporary (2024), she exhibited several paintings of disfigured victims of war – limp bodies, empty eyes and the aftermath of violence. One of these paintings, *Grace* (2016), is based on the image of a Syrian woman who survived an acid attack. However, the work does not tell her story; the source material is obscured by artistic style and interpretation. The wounds on her face are rendered in a soft



Fig. 4: Exhibition poster.

concerned with the real-life horror of the victim it depicts, but with the emotional response of the artist, using 'pain as raw material' as Black writes (2017). The discrepancy of importance between the artist's emotional reaction to suffering and the actual suffering is substantial; thus, the artworks appear cynical and distant, as erasures of pain.

It's important to note that the materials utilised by an artist are naturally not the sole determinant in this matter – identity and lived experiences are also significant. Jafa lives within the culture he depicts, as he is a part of the society producing these medialised objects. He is a Black American man, and he works with a material that is relevant to his own lived experiences. He emphasises this by including private footage in his artwork, such as a video from his daughter's wedding. In contrast, Davidsen, a Danish painter, experiences the war crimes in Syria through the media. Would there be a similar critique of Schultz or Davidsen if they used images as charged matter? They would still be outside of the events they portray, distant observers, *others* outside of the struggle they depict. However, they could not be accused of wrongly representing their subjects. I suspect that the reason why they didn't use the actual material is

magenta against her blue skin. The violence endured by this woman is transformed into a beautiful image. The link between image and lived trauma is severed. Instead of exposing oppression, the painting becomes a splendid abstraction detached from its context, which obscures the ties to the violence experienced by its subject.

As Black also notes, the intentions of Schutz and Davidsen could have been similar to Jafa's: to display horrors, form contemplation, and challenge the societal structures that enable such atrocities. However, this was not the function of the paintings themselves. In part, this is due to the lack of charged matter, as the subject becomes distilled through the artist's perspective and reflects the artist's inner life rather than the events it depicts. The work is therefore no longer primarily

that these would be too *real*, too affective, and the artists perhaps felt a need to dull the effects of the images before they could work with them. Conversely, this leads to the lack of a potent critique in their work.

This anaesthetisation of the subject is evident in the institutional use of Davidsen's work. The artist's mode of representation had rendered the image of the suffering woman consumable, enabling the exhibiting institution (Copenhagen Contemporary) to reproduce *Grace* as a poster (Fig. 4), feature the painting as the exhibition's web banner, and use it on the invitation to the opening party on Instagram (Fig. 5). Across the sorrowful eyes of the mutilated woman reads the enthusiastic invitation to Davidsen's exhibition opening, 'WE ARE SO EXCITED TO SEE YOU ALL NEXT THURSDAY FOR THE GRAND DOUBLE OPENING'. The work did not make visible the atrocities experienced by the civilian public in Syria: it obscured them. This exemplifies how an image unrooted in the events it depicts can be transformed into an enjoyable and usable form, altering the horrible image into a beautiful picture, leaving the suffering bodies behind. This case shows the importance of presence, of an artistic attention towards the subject matter and the method of representation in artistic depictions, and how charged matter can still haunt an artwork even in its absence.



Fig. 5: Personal screenshot of Instagram post from Copenhagen Contemporary.

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Fig. 1-3: Arthur Jafa, Love is the Message, The Message is Death (2022). Installation view, The Douglas Hyde Gallery of Contemporary Art, Dublin. © Arthur Jafa. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: Louis Haugh.

Fig. 4: Exhibition poster. Photo: A. Kierkegaard.

Fig. 5: Personal screenshot of Instagram post from Copenhagen Contemporary. Photo: A. Kierkegaard.