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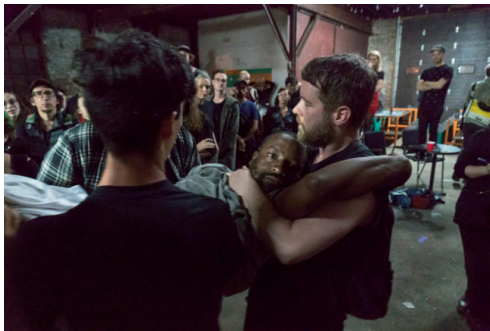
MAGAZINE Jan 1, 2018

First Look: keyon gaskin

NEW YORK

by Dana Kopel

keyon gaskin's performance, *this is for you. / you are a community. / this is my performance. / you are my material. / this is a prison. / leave when you want.*, at VIVA! Art Action, Montreal, 2017.



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Focusing on the institutional context of performance art, keyon gaskin critiques the racialized and gendered power structures that underpin the contemporary art system. In lieu of a bio, the young Portland-based artist provides a single sentence: "keyon gaskin prefers not to contextualize their art with their credentials." In *its not a thing*, which debuted in 2016 at American Realness, an annual festival of contemporary performance at the Abrons Arts Center in New York, the artist walked about the foyer and nearly disappeared within the darkened theater, then urged audience members to stand onstage. As is often the case with gaskin's work, the performance began informally and ended when the artist said so—no fanfare, no applause, art's sustained intensity diffused by nonchalance.

Presented in May 2017 at New York's Ludlow 38, *this is for you. / you are a community. / this is my performance. / you are my material. / this is a prison. / leave when you want.* began with an instructive prelude. The artist, dressed in black sweats and heels—a look combining nondescript streetwear with femme aesthetics—moved among viewers clustered against the small gallery's walls and rearranged them largely through gesture: a pointed finger suggested that someone take a seat on the floor; hands on the shoulders of another recommended a shift in placement. The point of this exercise, one gradually inferred, was to allow everyone to see the performance clearly. These spatial adjustments also drew attention, if only in a coded manner, to a range

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of identity markers: race, gender, social standing. Moreover, gaskin’s almost nurturing focus on the few black audience members emphasized the overwhelming whiteness of the crowd—and, by extension, of the art world.

In the latter half of *this is for you*, gaskin moved and danced through the space to the sound of pop and hip-hop tracks chosen through a mobile phone in real time. Toward the end, a handful of audience members—all young, white men—were recruited to carry gaskin around the gallery, as Lil Uzi Vert’s song “XO Tour Llif3” (“Push me to the edge / All my friends are dead”) played through speakers. The artist writhed in the men’s arms, struggling against their support, though remaining dependent on it, in order to underline a tension between violence and care that ran through the piece. At once generous and confrontational, *this is for you* generated a fraught intimacy between performer, participant, and spectator.

At this year’s American Realness, gaskin premieres [*a swatch of lavender*], which comprises solo performances and collaborations with artist Hayley Silverman and choreographer Will Rawls, among others. The work, which also includes a text composed with writer and artist sidony o’neal and writer Litia Perta, explores how identities accrue meaning through relationships and interactions.

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by Jeffrey Gibson

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