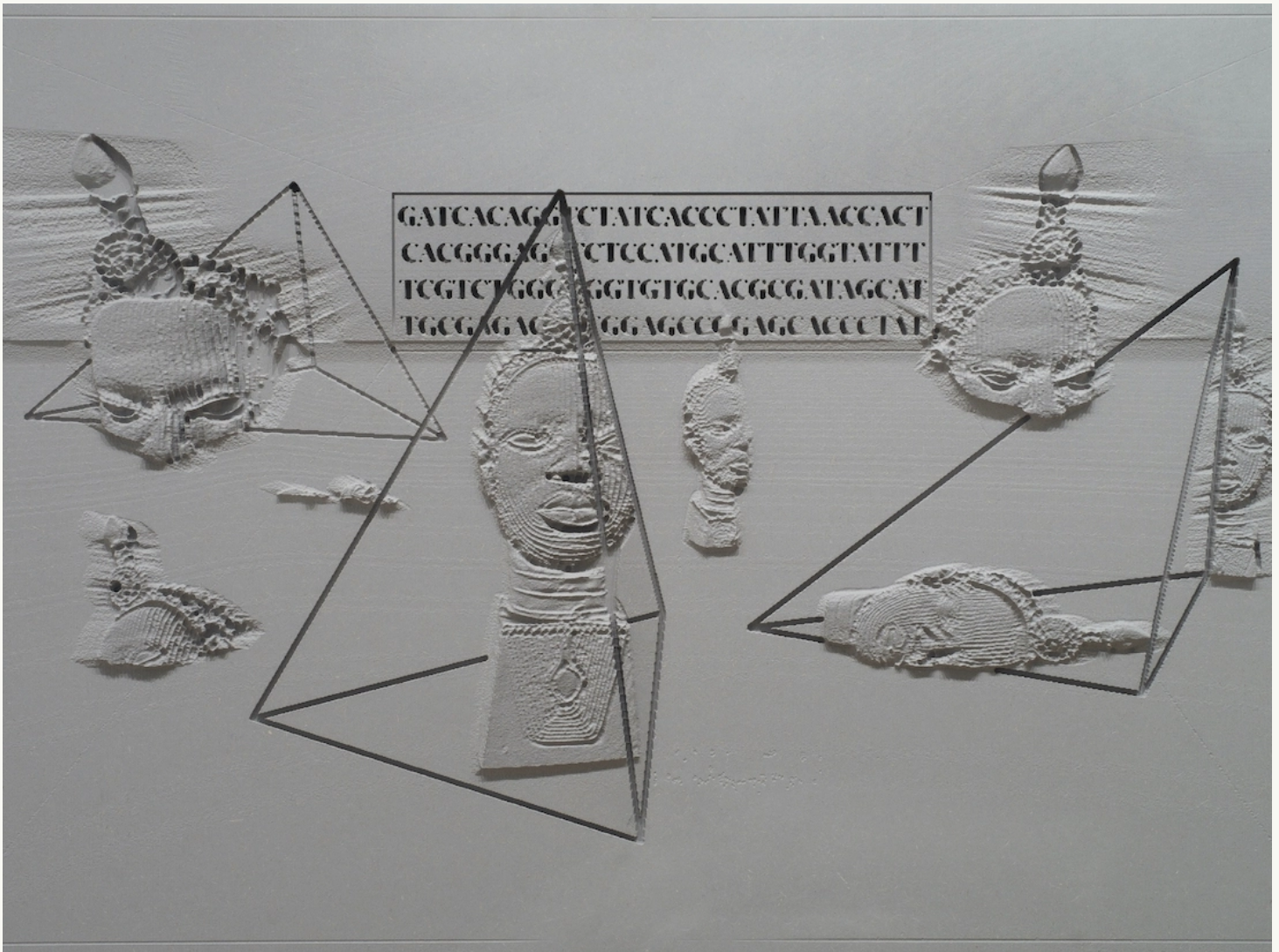


NOT YOUR GRANDFATHER'S AXE: COLEMAN COLLINS AT BRIEF HISTORIES

By May Makki

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Coleman Collins, *Sequential shift*, 2022, CNC-carved MDF, 39 by 26 inches.
COURTESY BRIEF HISTORIES

Lately, [Coleman Collins](#) has been cutting, marking, and converting his DNA sequence into videos, sculptures, and prints. Using iterative processes, he tests the limits of his materials, producing errors, variations, and gaps that probe the concept of inheritance.

These experiments are on view at the new location of the gallery [Brief Histories](#) as part of “Body Errata,” the artist’s first solo show in New York.

In some works, genetics are a starting point for considering what else might be inherited, from family narratives to generational trauma. In a series of works made of plywood panels finished to look like stone, Collins used a CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machine to cut out different compositions that incorporate the letters A, C, G, and T—the nucleotides that make up DNA. In *Tetrad* (all works 2022), these relatively abstracted letters label different planes of a geometric figure positioned above a more narrative text: *04-010/XMFM WAS BORN A SLAVE IN NORTH CAROLINA. HE NEVER LEARNED TO READ, BUT WAS EXTRAORDINARILY GOOD WITH ARITHMETIC AND GEOMETRY.* Different kinds of information meet and change form: while the text is inspired by Collins family lore, its subject is referenced by a genealogical numbering system. The geometric figure attempts to reconcile these two strands of information visually; however, the actual connections remain elusive. What kinds of information can DNA testing restore? How do they interact with our long-held beliefs and defining personal narratives?

In another piece in this series, *Sequential Shift*, the artist juxtaposes a section of his DNA sequence with partial renderings of an Ife head, an icon of West African culture and artistry. Some of the heads are set off in tetrahedrons, a shape Collins terms an ideal form. Here, the CNC machine interpreted the artist’s digital files with varying ease, and the results form a blended temporal register: while the tetrahedrons’ sharp lines are controlled and exact, repetitive speckles give the heads a pixelated look, and clusters of markings around several of the head fragments give the surface the appearance of having been worn down over time. In this collapsed plane, Collins seems to place himself within an artistic lineage.



Coleman Collins, *May be the last time, I don't know*, 2022, laser-engraved axe heads, steel, MDF, dimensions variable.

COURTESY BRIEF HISTORIES

In one corner of the gallery, an installation titled *May be the last time, I don't know* references the paradox of the “Grandfather’s Axe.” Is a family heirloom still “authentic” if all its parts have been replaced over time? This thought puzzle is typically used to contemplate the identity of a single entity. However, it can also be used to think through the relationship between a descendant and an ancestor and how much genetic material they actually share. At the gallery, six indistinguishable axe heads are each laser engraved with the phrase THIS MAY BE THE LAST TIME, suggesting an uncertain but ongoing duration. They are arranged on top of an MDF board on the floor; two flat squares of steel in opposite corners slightly elevate two pairs of the objects. The work plays with both physical and philosophical dimensions of the paradox: faced with identical objects, a viewer cannot distinguish an original from its copies. The axes’ placement in a mostly symmetrical pattern and in pairs suggests an effort to evaluate similarities and differences. Divorced from their handles, axe heads are less functional than symbolic, lending the work a cool and contemplative tone.

In another corner of the gallery, two stacked monitors display alternating video works. In *Dispersion*, the bottom monitor plays a short home movie of a boat trip Collins took in Nigeria in 2017: beginning outside the coastal town of Badagry, near the border with Benin, he traces a former slave route that leads to the “Door of No Return,” a port where many enslaved people last set foot in Africa. In the top monitor, the same video slowly degrades with each repetition, breaking down into pixels and primary colors, growing more abstract each time. Its disintegration (which Collins achieved by exporting the video again and again) both parallels the artist’s deteriorating memory of the trip and invokes the violent erasure of Black people’s origins through the transatlantic slave trade. While DNA testing might pinpoint information about one’s ancestry, this work, like *Tetrad*, insists that a return to one’s origins is always incomplete, and alludes to the diffuse effects of generational trauma.

In the center of the gallery, *Data self-portrait 2* ties together all of Collins’s iterative processes. A computer motherboard engraved with the artist’s gene sequence, the work is the most direct instantiation of his DNA (the exact code needed to produce another Coleman Collins), yet it is also the least guided by his interpretation. In its starkness, the work brings an existential dimension to the show: “What does it mean to have a body, and specifically this one?” the artist asked when speaking about the exhibition. “Body Errata” presents some hypotheses, finding new forms at the breaking points of data, narratives, and materials.

Reflections on Coleman Collins's 'Body Errata' at Brief Histories, New York

Coleman Collins in conversation with Erik DeLuca

89.5 MHz (FM) is the frequency for Bush Radio in Cape Town.¹ The station began in the late 1980s as an illegal pirate broadcast service to send sonic messages of apartheid resistance out to the surrounding townships. Voices of the struggle are transduced into electromagnetic energy that vibrates off a radio transmitter's antenna. In a fraction of a second – a short echo – these oppositional radio sounds are tapped by township listeners. Bush Radio re-uses colonial circuits to stay, endure,² persist and remain. This story is important to remember with the endless quantities of amplifying transistors produced from extracted sand. To preserve surveillance states, these transistors power supercomputers in Icelandic data farms. Bush Radio is important to remember within the electric linear actuators of 3D printers punching out DIY guns – endorsed by the National Rifle Association – that are showing up in US schools, within the binary code that represents digital sound and video that make deepfakes, and within the camera shutter's normalisation of dispossession.³ Transistors, radio sound, 3D printers, networks of surveillance, code, AI and the camera's shutter belong to the tangible realities of what Aimé Césaire calls the forgetting machine⁴ – a network of colonial and imperial technologies deliberate about erasing the past, erasing the environment, erasing languages, erasing unity, and erasing names. Bodies within bodies within bodies of errata. Like Bush Radio, how do I find ways to shapeshift colonial circuits to malfunction the forgetting machine? I was tripped by this question of thinking at my friend Coleman Collins's 2022 solo show 'Body Errata' at Brief Histories in Manhattan.⁵

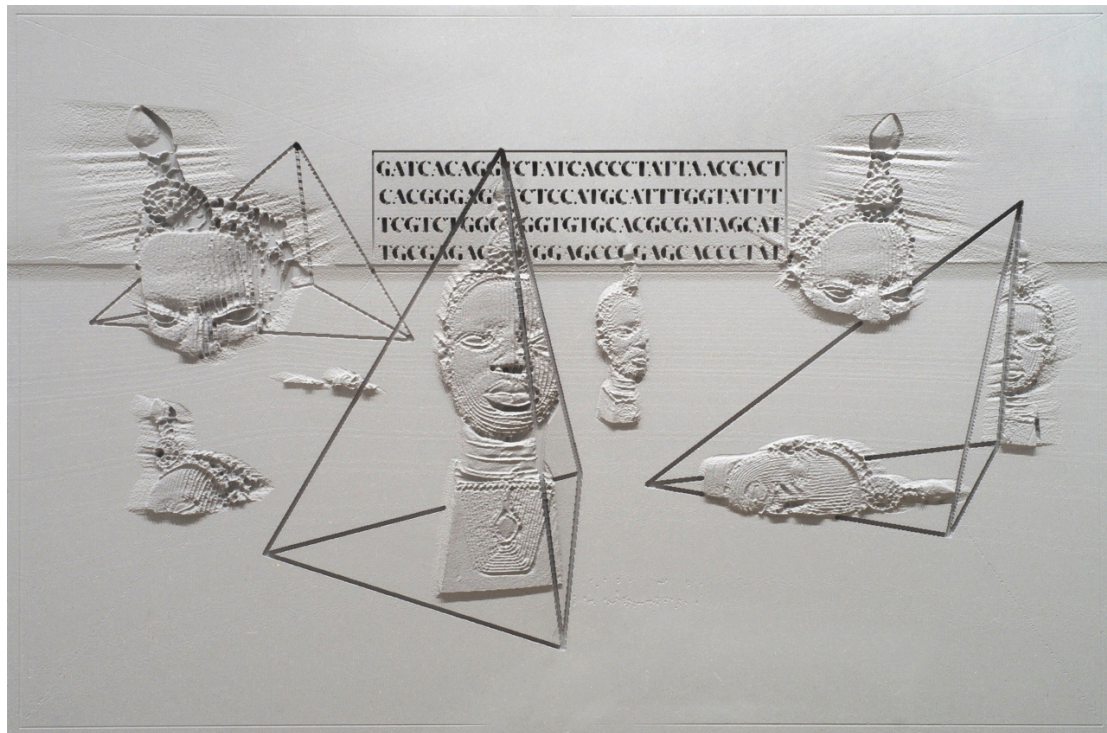
¹ See www.bushradio.wordpress.com/about/

² See Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London and New York, 2017

³ See 'Empire Records', Ian Wallace on Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, *Artforum*, 10 March 2020, www.artforum.com/books/ian-wallace-on-ariella-aisha-azoulay-potential-history-unlearning-imperialism-82405

⁴ See Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* [1955], Joan Pinkham, trans, Monthly Review Press, New York, 2001

⁵ Coleman Collins's 'Body Errata' was at Brief Histories, New York, April 1 – June 11, 2022



Coleman Collins, *Sequential Shift*, 2022, CNC-carved MDF, 66 x 99 cm, courtesy of the artist and Brief Histories

Erik: When I visited ‘Body Errata’ you told me about your DNA sequence. You called this sequence your score for the show. Can you tell me more about your process of ‘performing’ your DNA symbology and how it generated pieces like your CNC-carved drawing, *Sequential Shift*?

Coleman: When I started this project, I was primarily interested in location. I wanted to understand where exactly in West Africa my lineage came from. Generally, a genealogical research company will tell you that a certain percentage of your DNA comes from a certain region. But one of these services also gave me my DNA sequence, and I found having this abstracted view of myself really fascinating. And as you say, I began to see my sequence as a type of score. I had already been thinking about ties between my body and technology, and since the genome is a combination of four letters – A, C, G, T – I thought of it as akin to binary code with slightly more variables. Binary code communicates information, and my sequence consists of these four bases (adenine, cytosine, guanine and thymine) that are the elements of this information transfer. In the foreground of *Sequential Shift*, there are fragments of my cultural inheritance: sculptures from what is now Nigeria, but which had been the kingdom of Benin in west Africa. And that’s where, through this process, I traced a lot of my genetic material. Then what you see in the back of the image is a fragment of my gene sequence, which is seen elsewhere in the show. The sequence provides a background for this piece, and it also exists in the background of the collection of works in the show; it’s this constant drumbeat of information that is being passed down to me.

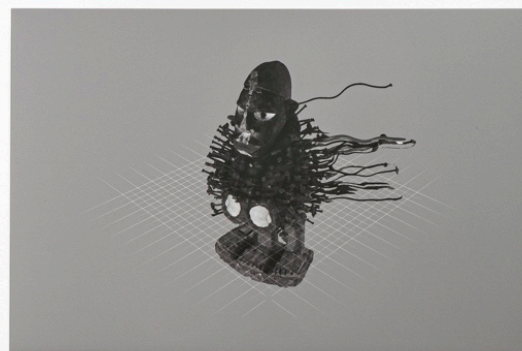
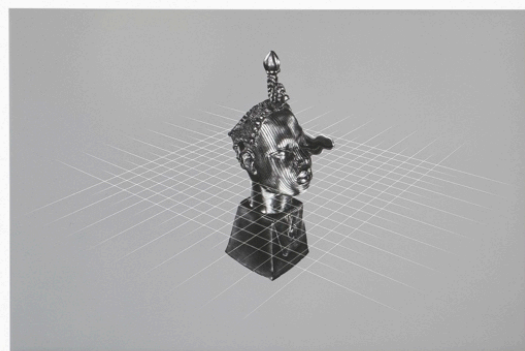


Installation view of Coleman Collins's 'Body Errata' exhibition at Brief Histories, New York, April 1 – June 11, 2022, image courtesy of the artist and Brief Histories

Erik: Dialogue with your ancestors is very present in 'Body Errata'. Maybe this is the performance of your DNA sequence; communicating with these people that hold your inheritance to make relational aesthetics. Circling back to Césaire's metaphor of the forgetting machine, in 'Body Errata' you seem to focus on errors, pixellation, erosion and brokenness related to erasure of bodies and identities. Can you tell me more about your UV prints *Error (Nkisi)* and *Error (Ifè)*?

Coleman: I took two sculptures that I have in my personal archive and 3D-scanned them, then manipulated them digitally to make these two prints. For me, this process is key – starting as material objects that become information that can be manipulated to make new material. These mutations take different forms. With the Ife head, which I purchased in Nigeria, I digitally stretched its eye out to one side. With the Nkisi figure, I added a third leg and duplicated the central, reflective piece. Actually, this is something that was a turning point for my conception of the show. Traditionally, a Nkisi has a reflective piece of metal or glass that is at the centre. It is the centre of the power figure where someone might store special substances. I saw the Nkisi in an antique shop in upstate New York, and I was fascinated by it – instead of using glass or metal, the sculptor who made it inserted a broken piece of a CD into it. And I thought, of course, that makes sense: it's a vernacular art where people are making things with what they have at hand. There's all this flotsam and jetsam in the world, like discarded CDs. I thought that the insertion of a previous generation of technology at the centre of this object dovetailed with my interest in inheritance and lineages.

And it also provided a tie to some other ideas I was working through about memory – how memories are stored and the way they are inevitably atomised and broken. I was incredibly taken with this object. For me, this work underlines how these forms mutate and change, and how technology is passed down and inserted into people’s everyday lives regardless of where they are.



Coleman Collins, *Error (Ife)* and *Error (Nkisi)*, 2022, UV prints on Dibond, 50 x 76 cm, courtesy of the artist and Brief Histories

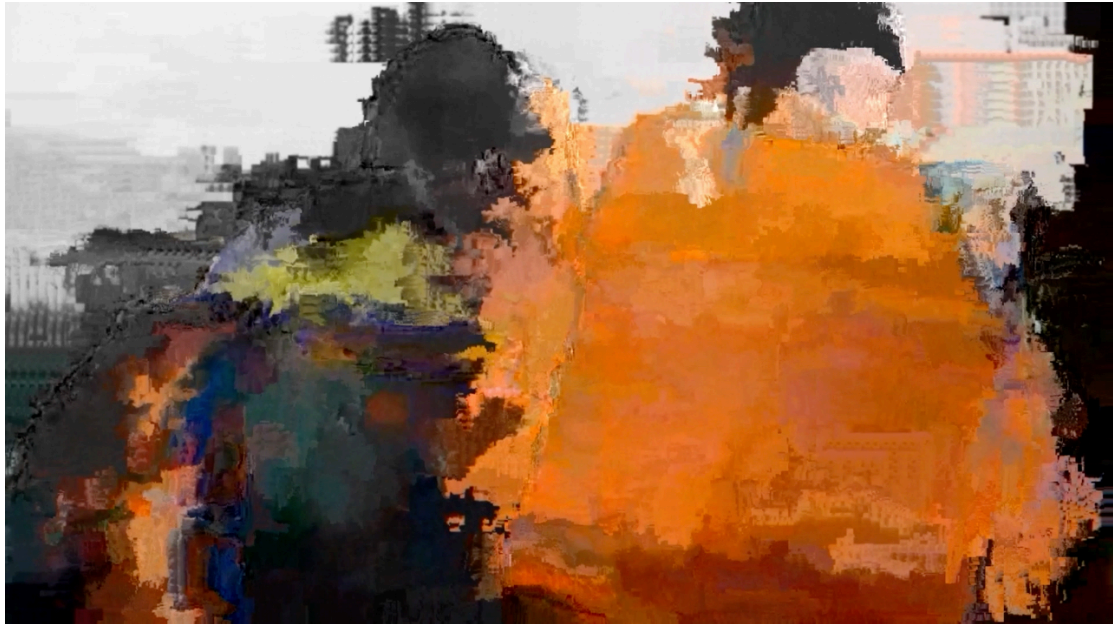
Erik: I went to a show recently at the Barnes in Philadelphia about Pueblo and Diné (Navajo) art.⁶ It focused on the change of materials, uses and processes of making over centuries of settler colonialism and cultural tourism.

Coleman: A lot of these West African sculptures are produced for a tourist market. Although they are related to ancestral ways of making, they can’t help but be affected by the current context. You can’t see it, because the image is grayscale, but the Ife head that I based the print on is extremely shiny. It’s a bit garish, unnatural – the original Benin Bronzes are not this colour. They are actually quite dull in colour because of the specific type of clay that was used in the process of fabrication; the shinier object’s authenticity is questionable. Again, I bought the Ife in Nigeria, which would seem to confirm its authenticity, right? But then, the fact of my coming to visit Nigeria and having a desire for this claim to authenticity informs the way that products like this are made. I have a complicated relationship with these objects: I act on them, and they act on me, and I act on them before they even come into my life because of my desire for these ties to Nigeria. And there is a way that the desire of the displaced is wrapped up with tourism. And that means that when you go to Ghana, when you go to Nigeria, you see all this slavery tourism that sprang up to cater to the desires of the diaspora from the West. I don’t know if you have heard about the Year of Return, but it is this big marketing push that Ghana did to get African-Americans to come back; it’s touristy, a bit kitschy.⁷ The CD in the Nkisi is not necessarily catering to the tourist – to me, it seems to be an assemblage strategy, working with what you have at hand. But in both these Nkisi and

⁶ ‘Water, Wind, Breath: Southwest Native Art in Community’, The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, 20 February – 15 May, 2020

⁷ See www.yearofreturn.com

If sculptures, the production of the object seems to occur in a context where there is a desire for a certain type of authenticity. This desire for authenticity is perhaps more legible as colonialist when the end purchaser is white, or identifiably Western. And I think that for the diasporic person, that desire is obviously different in terms of its origin, but nonetheless has the same material effects.



Coleman Collins, video still from *Dispersion*, 2022, 2-channel HD video, 5 mins, courtesy of the artist and Brief Histories

Erik: Speaking of material effects, I want to turn to your video, *Dispersion*. When I watched it, I immediately recalled the late sound artist Alvin Lucier's 1969 performance, *I Am Sitting in a Room*.⁸ In this piece, Lucier records himself reading a simple text that describes his process. He records this text to tape. He then plays the tape recording of his voice back into the room, re-recording it. The new recording is then played back and re-recorded. This process is repeated over and over again. The materials and contours of the room shapeshift with Lucier's voice to create a unique resonance in sound. Lucier said about the work: 'Every room has its own melody, hiding there until it is made audible.' I thought about this process when I was watching *Dispersion*. In your video, bodies move in a boat across water. The video of this action slowly shifts into pixelated abstraction. What hidden inconsistencies did you want to reveal in this video?

Coleman: It's less about hidden inconsistencies and more about gesturing to processes of dispersion. What I was most interested in was taking this image and then breaking it down to pixels of primary colours. There is a certain type of beauty that emerges as the form disintegrates. At the same time, the footage comes from a very personal memory of mine, a trip to a Nigerian slave port. So, the aesthetics of the work are in the service of the concept –

⁸ See www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAxHILK3Oyk

it utilises that visual dispersion as a metaphor for the physical dispersion that created the world that I exist in. The body I exist in.



Coleman Collins, video still from *Dispersion*, 2022, 2-channel HD video, 5 mins, courtesy of the artist and Brief Histories

Erik: Why does dispersion seem inevitable for you?

Coleman: This is where the specificity of language comes in. *Seemed* inevitable is quite different from *was* inevitable. That footage comes from the end of a trip in Badagry, Nigeria, where I found a much less developed slavery tourism industry. And in fact, the slave museums in this particular area were run by descendants of slave traders who seem to be unapologetic about having traded other Africans who were from different tribes; they felt they owed no duty of protection.⁹ I had an intense feeling when I was confronted with that crushing sense of inevitability: oh, well actually, there were many parties involved in this, right? But at the same time, this use of ‘seemed inevitable’ offers the possibility that this process wasn’t inevitable, and that perhaps there are other ways of being; that maybe it could have been different. I don’t want to foreclose the possibility of escape from this encirclement.

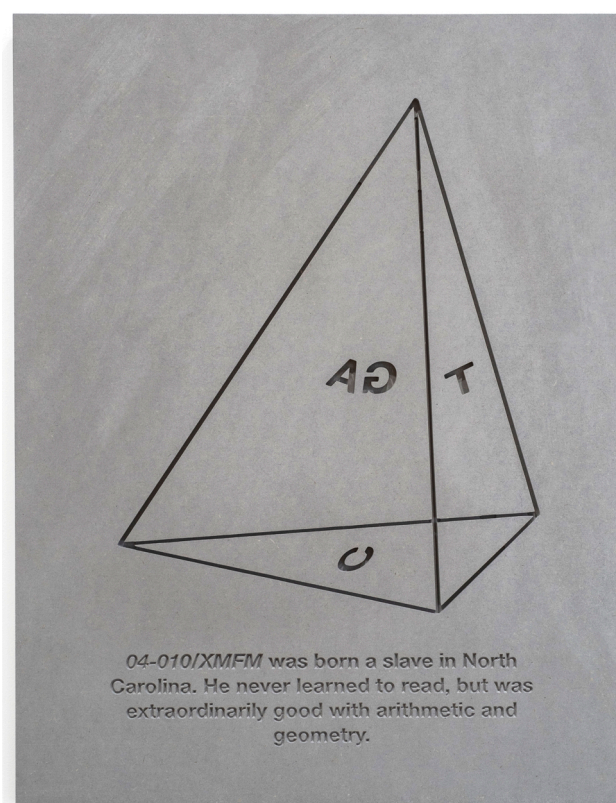
Erik: You talk about how our DNA code and inheritance trickles down through ‘generations of captivity, migration and traumatic events’. In my own work on inheritance I have turned to Sara Ahmed’s writing. In her book *What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use*, she writes:

What is behind you can be what enables you to enter the room, to occupy a space. We could think of this history as a history of wearing... An institution is easier to wear if you have the same shape as the shape of those who came before. A history of use can be

⁹ See Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, ‘My Great-grandfather, the Nigerian Slave-Trader’, *The New Yorker*, 15 July 2018

inherited as ease. As I noted in *Queer Phenomenology*, the word inheritance can mean to receive as well as to possess (2006, 125). An inheritance not only can be what you receive but can be a matter of how you are received. An inheritance can be an easing of being, an enabling – how spaces are shaped by those who came before.¹⁰

In your work, *Tetrad*, a tetrahedron is paired with the text: ‘04-010/XMFM was born a slave in North Carolina. He never learned to read, but was extraordinarily good with arithmetic and geometry.’ How are people like 04-010/XMFM behind you? And how have they enabled you?



Coleman Collins, *Tetrad*, 2022, CNC-carved MDF, 64.5 x 50 cm, courtesy of the artist and Brief Histories

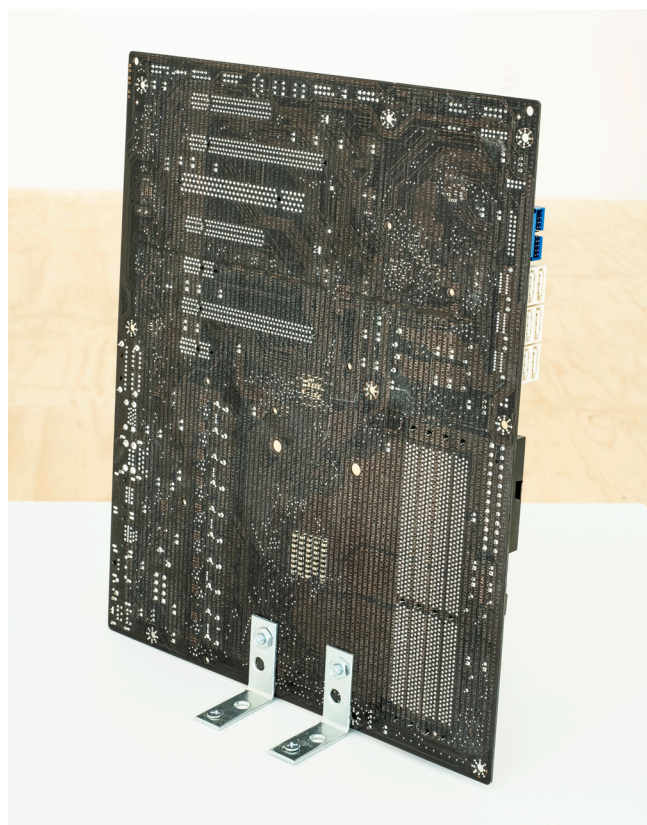
Coleman: 04-010/XMFM is my great grandfather. He was born in 1860 and had my grandmother when he was sixty years old in 1920, in North Carolina. My grandmother was very fundamental in my education and taught me a way of being in the world. She was also someone that I literally inherited money from. She bought a house and paid it off over forty years. Once she died, we sold it. I got a little bit of money that enabled me to do so many things. But there is also this immaterial ancestry, or immaterial legacy. I don't know what I've inherited; I can only speculate. But I feel connected to these people.

¹⁰ Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the uses of use*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2019, p 165

Erik: Yesterday I went to the controversial Philip Guston exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.¹¹ Because I have been focusing on your work, Guston’s subtractive processes were really present for me. In the mid-1960s Guston said, ‘I use white pigment and black pigment. The white pigment is used to erase the black... and so becomes gray. Working with these restricted means as I do now, other things open up which are unpredictable.’ As you subtract and erase material from the surfaces you work with – like aluminum, MDF, and human bodies – what are the most profound openings you have bumped into by chance?

Coleman: I’m looking for little moments to apply pressure to: the moment on the boat; the moment I see a broken CD embedded in a sculpture, the moment I see my gene sequence. I build upon these moments of encounter. I had a very different idea of how this work was going to play out and it ended up surprising me. But actually, something else happened after the show was up. I used that metaphor of grandfather’s axe; the axe that changes the heads many times over, over different generations. I thought it was a nice way of gesturing to the process of genetic inheritance, these changes that slowly happen. These slow mutations. Someone sent me a scientific article where the researchers used the idea of grandfather’s axe as a metaphor for the development of RNA.¹² And, for me, I was like, whoa, that was maybe the most satisfying thing that has happened for me in making this work – because, look, I’m not a scientist and I only have these suspicions that things are connected. And I think that there are ways of understanding these processes that I am trying to express in a material form. I’m not doing capital-R ‘research’. I really appreciated seeing this article because it makes me feel like there is something in these questions about identity theory and the nature of things. I am straining toward it, unsure about it. I don’t need proof, but it was validating to hear these ideas being expressed in a more formal and rigorous way.

Erik: In the centre of your show is a laser-engraved motherboard that you call *Data self-portrait 2*. When I look at this



Coleman Collins, *Data Self-portrait 2*, 2022, laser-engraved motherboard, 30.5 x 24.5 x 5 cm, courtesy of the artist and Brief Histories

¹¹ ‘Philip Guston Now’, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1 May – 11 September 2022

¹² Nicholas Hud et al, ‘The Origin of RNA and “My Grandfather’s Axe”’, *Chemistry and Biology*, Vol 20, Issue 14, 18 April 2013, pp 466–474, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1074552113001154

motherboard, I see thousands of transistors whose job is to produce a one or a zero; yes or no. If we think back to Césaire's metaphor of the forgetting machine, we can think about the transistor as a circuit component that literally enables fields of power that reproduce and maintain colonial relations and oppression. Why did you decide to make a self-portrait with these seemingly oppressive technological components?

Coleman: What's a technological component that isn't part of a system of oppression?

Erik: Right; I think Guston's work that incorporates the KKK hood deals with this kind of critical reflexivity. Guston said: 'I perceive myself as being behind a hood.' Similarly, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh said: 'Practise until you see yourself in the cruellest person on Earth, in the child starving, in the political prisoner. Continue until you recognise yourself in everyone in the supermarket, on the street corner, in a concentration camp, on a leaf, in a dewdrop.' Was making 'Body Errata' a way of seeing yourself in other bodies?

Coleman: That wasn't my aim, but I think I have arrived at something similar. My body is not separate from other bodies, despite the fact that they all have their own particular phenotypic, outward-facing characteristics. I know that the substances that make up my self are constitutive of every other body. And knowing that fact allows me to be in the world and commune with other bodies.

Coleman Collins is an interdisciplinary artist and writer who explores the ways that small, iterative processes can have outsized effects over time. He lives and works in New York. www.colemancollins.info

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