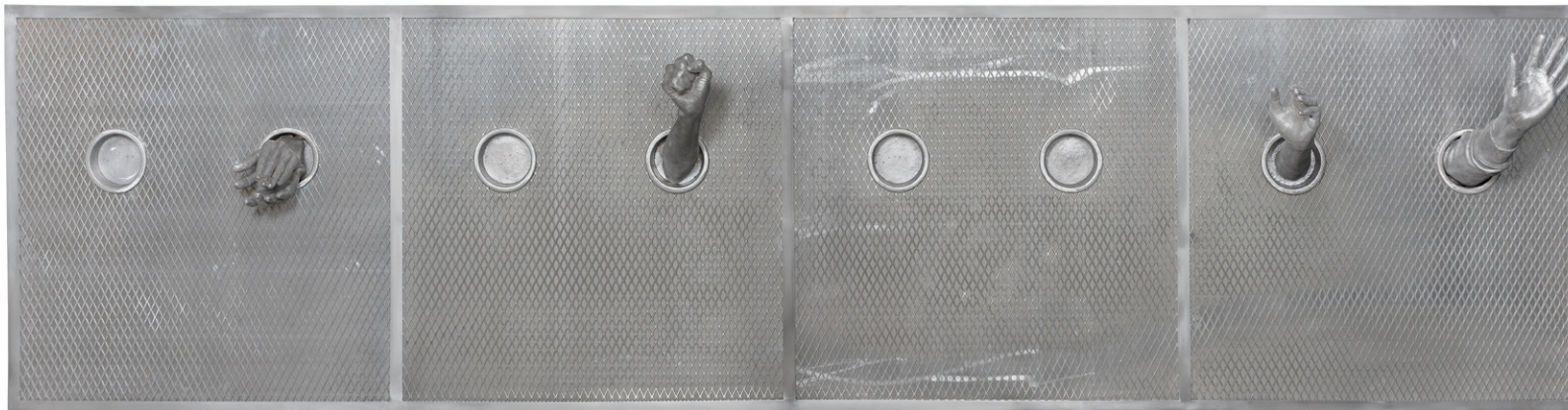


HANK WILLIS THOMAS

Primary Sources



DAVID WINTON BELL GALLERY, BROWN UNIVERSITY



A Luta Continua 2013
Aluminum, 31½ x 125½ x 19½ inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

HANK WILLIS THOMAS trained as a photographer, but he rarely takes his own pictures. Instead, he borrows from a wide range of sources that he transforms through physical and textual manipulations. His practice, which he describes as “photo-conceptual,” draws on the legacies of appropriation and pop art while exploring the physical and intellectual boundaries of the photographic medium. The works included in this exhibition upend the status of the photograph as something fixed; challenge the social function of the narrative image; and explore the phenomenological qualities of mimesis, while contending with what George Baker describes as the “spatial...expansion of the photograph” into real space.¹ Thomas’s experimental approach to image making reflects his broader investigation of the historical and cultural apparatuses surrounding issues of race, gender, and identity today. The artist frequently utilizes photographs that document civil rights struggles as the foundation of his work. He zeros in on the physical details of the individuals in these images, highlighting universally legible hand gestures or identifying other forms of non-verbal communication. While, as Mary Fulbrook notes,

focusing on bodily gestures may at first seem trivial in the context of a larger exploration of twentieth-century oppression, doing so helps “illuminate the ways in which dictatorships were enacted, experienced, or subverted in everyday life.”² In deconstructing the architecture of such primary sources, Thomas begins to decode their continued and contemporary meaning.

In his retroreflective screenprints Thomas dissects the contents of historical images into layers. The surface of each print is coated with a granular substance that causes light to reflect from the reproduced image. The result is a destabilizing fracture of the pictorial field where one section of the image is visible with light and another without. This strategy allows the artist to reveal a photograph in stages, undermining its temporal and spatial certainty. *Refusal*, is based on a 1936 photograph of German shipworker August Landmesser, who was a member of the Nazi party until he was expelled for marrying a Jewish woman. He was later imprisoned for “dishonoring the race.” At first we see a central figure standing firmly with his arms crossed on his chest, his brow pensively furrowed. When a spotlight shines on this surface, the glistening white background is

transformed into a crowd of men giving the Nazi salute. Landmesser’s seemingly disinterested stance becomes a powerful act of resistance against the gestural politics of the Third Reich. Thomas’s subtle reframing allows us to reconsider the quotidian ways in which gestures become a physical index of the political self.

While *Refusal* offers a compelling analysis of the cultural specificities of gestural politics, the *Punctum* sculptures function as a study in the universality of non-verbal communication. The *Punctum* series derives its name from Roland Barthes’s eponymous notion of the compelling detail that draws a viewer into a picture. For Thomas this is often a limb that seemingly reaches beyond the planar frame, demonstrating the embodied knowledge of protest and surrender. Thomas is particularly drawn to certain ubiquitous hand gestures, such as the raised clenched fist or open hands up, as can be seen in the four *Punctum* sculptures exhibited at the Bell Gallery: *Amandla*, *A Luta Continua*, *Raise Up* and *The Lives of Others* (all 2014).



Refusal 2014
White retroreflective material on aluminum, 27 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

The raised fist became an internationally recognized symbol of Black Power after African-American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos thrust their clenched hands into the air during their 1968 Olympic medal ceremony—in protest against discriminating federal policies in the United States. However, South Africans have favored the gesture ever since the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre. As Okwui Enwezor notes in the catalogue *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life*, the emergence of “this gesture signaled...that many members of the [anti-apartheid] movement had lost patience with negotiation and passive resistance,” after the horrors of seeing sixty-nine protesters gunned to death by the police.³ Raised fists feature prominently in photographs documenting the nearly fifty-year struggle against segregation in South Africa, and the *Punctum* series commemorates these hands by casting them as life-size sculptures.

Both *Amandla* and *A Luta Continua*, for example, depict jutting fists that are based on those captured in Catherine Ross’s “*Arrested demonstrators are driven away from the Supreme Court, Johannesburg*,” July 22, 1992. In this picture arms and fists reach out of the small windows of a paddy wagon, as police circle the vehicle. *Amandla* presents a single black fist punching through a solid yellow metal door. The hand is rendered hyper-realistically in silicone and embedded with tiny body-hairs. It is reminiscent of Robert Gober’s *Untitled Leg* (1989–1990), in which a single wax leg protrudes from the gallery wall as a visceral reminder of the body’s fragility. However, where Gober’s leg rests in quiet solitude, Thomas’s hand manages to shout through its silence. This is because, as Enwezor writes, “The image of the raised clenched fist, thrust upward in defiance, has been a ubiquitous one in the history of modern radical struggles. It is not only a symbol of power, it signifies self-affirmation, subjecthood and subjectivity.”⁴ *Amandla*, whose title refers to the Zulu word for “power” and was a popular anti-apartheid rallying cry



Catherine Ross, *Arrested demonstrators are driven away from the Supreme Court, Johannesburg, July 22, 1992*



During group medical examination the nude men are herded through a string of doctors’ offices. Courtesy of the Hasselblad Foundation. © The Ernest Cole Family Trust

**I’m fascinated with
how our history and our
understanding of the
world actually shifts,
so I think of history as a
moving target.**

— HANK WILLIS THOMAS

demonstrates the diachronic resilience of the raised fist: its ability to point at once to the origins of the gesture in the 1960s, to the historical specificities of Ross’s image, and to the continued struggle for racial equality around the world.

In *Raise Up* ten sets of arms extend above heads that are just protruding from the minimal white plinth they rest on. Cast in bronze—the medium of monuments large and small—these disembodied limbs seem to memorialize the universal sign of surrender: hands up. The sculpture is based on South African photographer Ernest Cole’s *During group medical examination, the nude men are herded through a string of doctor’s offices*, 1958–1966. In the original image ten nude black South African prisoners stand with their arms raised, facing a wall. They are waiting for an inevitably violating examination to begin. Upon seeing this photograph for the first time, Thomas explains that he kept staring at the naked bodies, each more muscularly defined than the next. This voyeuristic looking repeats the abuse already done to the men once by history. In isolating the hands and heads, Thomas frustrates the violence of looking by denying us visual access to their bare backs; reframing these figures outside the confines of the prison walls, he returns autonomy to each body.

Raise Up was fabricated in early 2014, just a few months before Michael Brown, the unarmed African-American teenager, was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, MI, and “hands up, don’t shoot” became a rallying cry for the Black Lives Matter movement.



Raise Up 2014
Bronze, 112¼ x 9¾ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Considered within this context, the sculpture serves as a prescient appropriation of a vulnerable gesture into one of powerful protest.

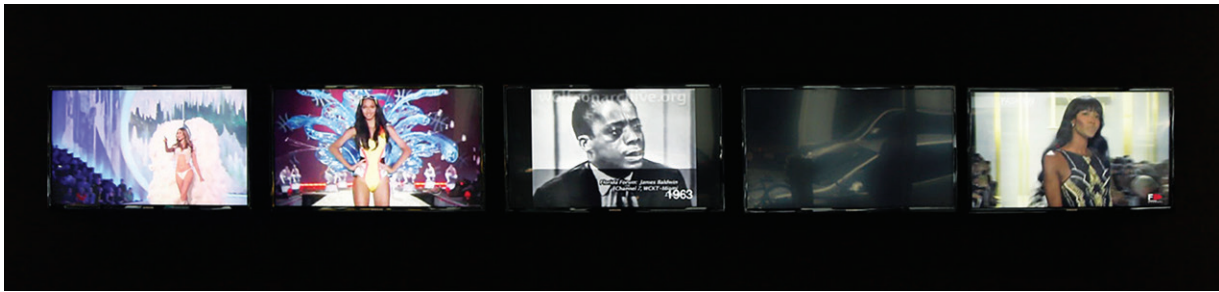
Thomas’s homage to James Baldwin, “*A person is more important than anything...*” (2014), addresses the current social climate in the United States more explicitly. In this five-channel video installation Thomas juxtaposes recent news events with vintage footage of Baldwin discussing the status of race and gender identity in this country throughout his life. Each screen is edited to shift and pulse in accordance with the cadences of Baldwin’s voice, visualizing the rhythm of his speech. Thomas pairs contemporary incidences of racial profiling, economic inequity, and discrimination based on sexual orientation together with Baldwin’s prophetic insights into the formation of identity.

In one particularly poignant passage, Thomas asks us to reckon with the persistent violence that black teenagers face daily by weaving together scenes of contemporary protests in honor of the recently deceased—Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, and Renisha McBride, among others, with Baldwin’s lamentation, “I know how you watch as you grow older, literally—and this is not a figure of speech—the corpses of your brothers and sisters pile up around you...not for anything they have done. They were too young to have done anything, in any case too helpless...”

The title of this five-channel installation is drawn from an interview with Baldwin, in which the author

deftly explains the need to examine whiteness with the same intensity that we look at blackness, if we are ever to live in a post racial world. Race, he argues, is a construct whose sole purpose is subjugation. The project, originally commissioned by New York Live Arts for their “Live Ideas, The Year of James Baldwin Festival,” reinforces the brilliance of Baldwin’s cultural analysis, as well as the pressing need to constantly reassess our own positions relative to issues of progress and privilege.

History classes teach us, from an early age, to use primary sources to build context for the complexities of the past. These documents and artifacts—letters, newspaper articles, and photographs—provide points of entry by offering intimate accounts of events as they unfolded. Today, they are the building blocks of writing history, which is precisely what makes Hank Willis Thomas’s recent work so compelling.



A person is more important than anything else... 2014
Five channel video installation, duration: 28 minutes 29 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



Amandla 2013
Silicone, fiberglass, and metal finish, 51⅞ x 29⅞ inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Hank Willis Thomas is a photo-conceptual artist working primarily with themes related to identity, history, and popular culture. He received a BFA in Photography and Africana Studies from New York University and his MFA/MA in Photography and Visual Criticism from the California College of Arts. He has exhibited throughout the U.S. and abroad, including at the International Center of Photography, Galerie Michel Rein in Paris, Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Baltimore Museum of Art, among others. Thomas's work is in numerous public collections including The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Whitney Museum of American Art, The High Museum of Art, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. His collaborative projects have been featured at the Sundance Film Festival and installed permanently in such places as the Oakland International Airport and the University of California, San Francisco. He is a recipient of the New Media grant from Tribeca Film Institute and New Media Infinity Award from the International Center of Photography for his transmedia project, *Question Bridge: Black Males*. He was recently appointed to the Public Design Commission for the city of New York.

LEFT

The Lives of Others 2014

Black urethane resin, 57 x 5 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

COVER

Raise Up (detail) 2014

Bronze, 112¼ x 9⅞ inches

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

With special thanks to Hank Willis Thomas, Michelle Woo and Will Sylvester at Hank Willis Thomas Studio, Joeonna Bellorado-Sameuls, Ruth Phaneuf, and Daniel Tsai at Jack Shainman Gallery, The Ernest Cole Family Trust, the Hasselblad Foundation, and Jo-Ann Conklin.

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