

## Volumetric Space and Donald Locke: Artistic Attempts to Understand a Context

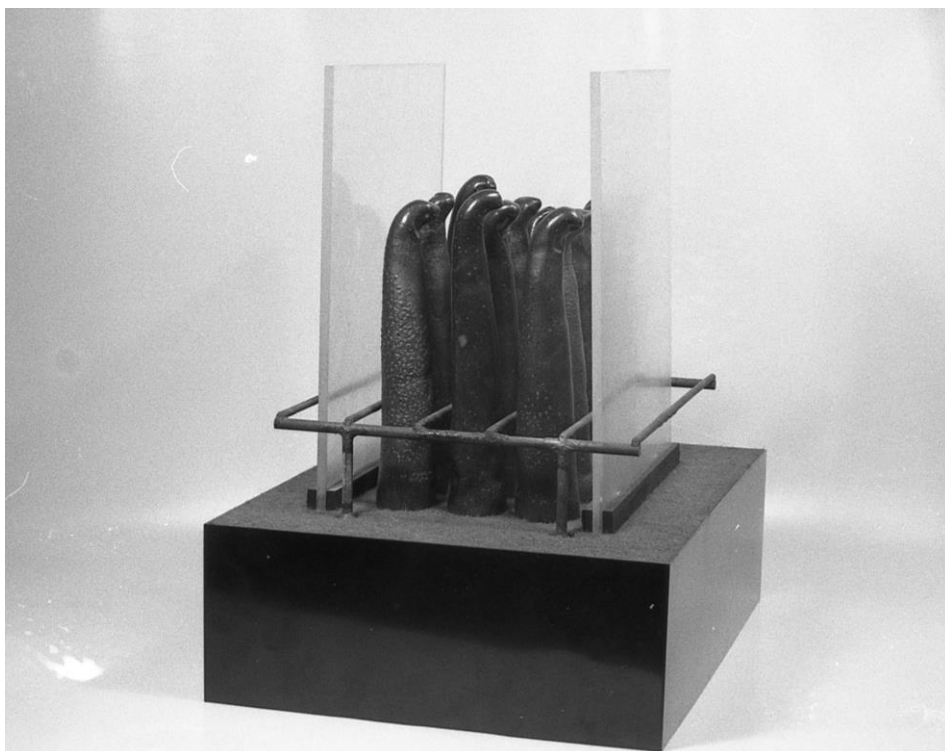
Dr Tiffany C Boyle, Presented as part of the Association for Art History's Annual Conference 2021[Unpublished]

As part of the panel 'The Plantation Complex' organized by Dr Anna Arabindan-Kesson and Dr Emilia Terracciano

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Drafted between 2004 and 2006, Guyanese-born artist Donald Locke in an extended artist statement reflected on his practice since his initial studies at Bath Academy of Art, in Corsham, in the 1950s, noted a prior concern that 'I seemed to have produced works that had no connection at all with one another, either in form and content.... Continuing, he says 'At this distance in time now, it appears that unconsciously, the total body of work has been trying to encompass and bend to the will of the imagination, every aspect of the life and experience of Black people in the New World – their political and sociological structures, the landscapes they inhabit, their physical uniqueness, the folk-lore and myths which crowd their imagination, and the socio-economic legacies they inherited from the past.'

Following this initial study at Corsham, Locke undertook a 5-year Masters programme akin to a present-day doctorate at the University of Edinburgh. He then returned to Guyana, before he came back to Edinburgh briefly through a British Council bursary, later moving to London, before leaving for Arizona on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1979. At the University of Edinburgh, Locke had been based in the studio ceramics department, but considered himself an artist, and concurrent to his studies curated exhibitions locally, bringing the work of peers such as Frank Bowling to Edinburgh for the first time. In the period following his graduation in 1964 until the early 1980s, radical shifts took place in Locke's practice – pivoting into installation work, gallery-based and outdoors; consequently moving towards painting and mixed-media canvases. Contrasting themes were explored: the open expanse of the desert, versus cage-like formations and regimented lines / the journeys of peoples and objects versus confinement / all explored in monotone as the artist came to terms with having left post-independence Guyana – and it is these binary oppositions, as they sit in relation to the plantation.



Donald Locke, From the 'Plantation Series,' 1972-3.

In the early 2000s, concurrent to the revised artist statement mentioned prior, Locke began to draft a history of contemporary Guyanese art, of which there exists an introduction and first chapter – it feels that in writing this and asking questions of the artistic practices of Locke’s peers and colleagues, that insights into his own preoccupations come to the fore. To quote this introduction at some length, Locke writes:

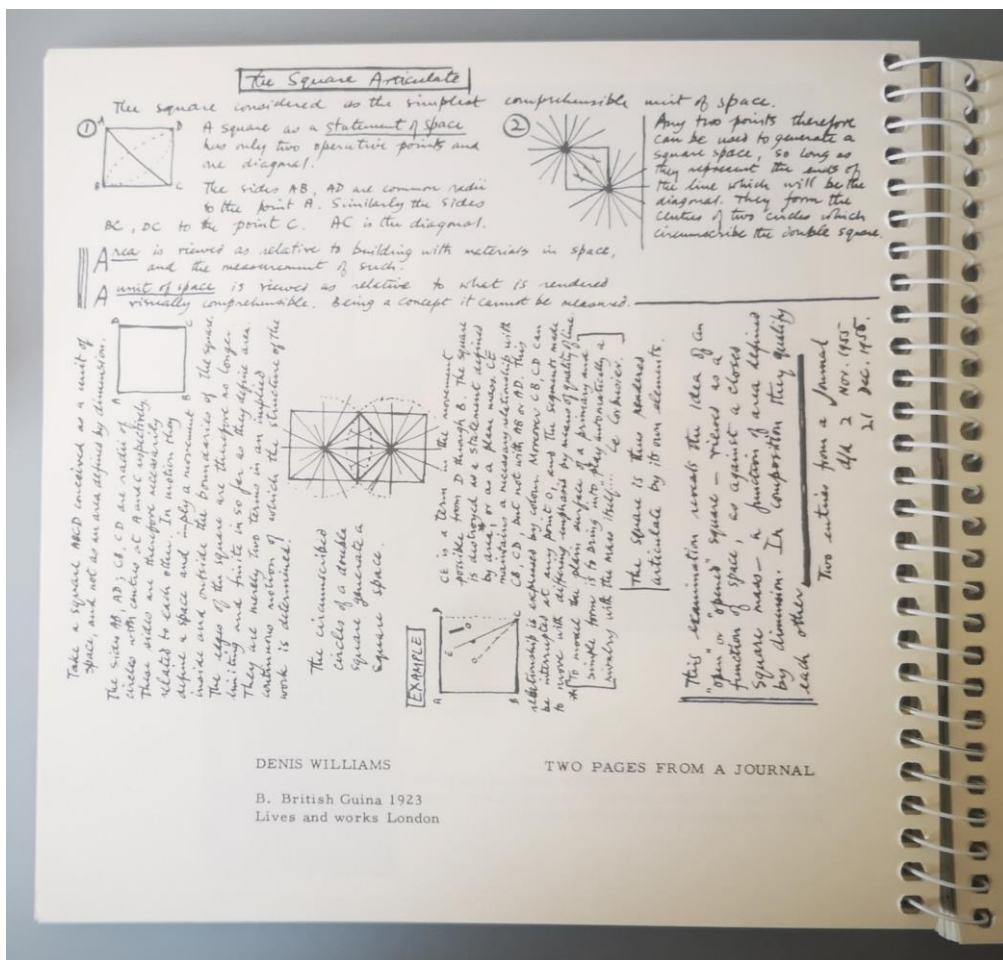
‘The Dutch were amongst the earliest settlers on the Guyana coast. They set up plantations, towns and villages designed on the grid system they transplanted from Holland; streets, walkways, drainage and transportation canals, as well as private and public property borders has a rigid, north-south orientation and met one another at strict right angles.... The influence this has had over the centuries on the psychological make-up of the people who live in Guyana – for them the effect has been enormous, compelling and well-recognised by most Guyanese of the pre-independence generations.’

The artist continues: ‘it’s influence on the visual arts has also been profound and dominating, in some cases amounting to an unwritten, psychological manifesto of irresistible force. This sense of being literally ‘boxed in’ was recognized by generations of Guyanese who, in the pre-independence days, endured this condition with a draining sense of powerlessness. It was quite common to hear the phrase the ‘outer world’ being used to describe advanced countries, literally the rest of the world which lay beyond the Atlantic horizon. It had an overwhelming influence of personal lifestyles and on the work of many of the most successful Guyanese artists as well. Combined with other factors, it created what I have called the ‘tendency towards squares and the box.’ Most of my generation, even after half a century away from home still remember vividly, daily experiences shaped and governed by this geometric eye so to speak, vision they were born with.’



Donald Locke, Twin Form Series, Guyana, 1966

Concurring with this notion of the outside vis-à-vis containment, in the second of three autobiographies written by Frederick Douglass, published in 1855, *My Bondage, My Freedom*, he describes the plantation as a nation within the nation – an enclosure in which the democratic rules of the nation at large were held to exception, deemed inapplicable.



‘Two Pages from a Journal,’ from the ‘This is Tomorrow’ 2011 re-issued catalogue, originally exhibited at The Whitechapel Gallery, 1956.

The archival research which has facilitated the writing of this text was undertaken in 2019, with the generous collaboration of the artists’ estate and the Stuart A. Rose Library at Emory. One of the real surprises was to discover Locke’s poetry, which especially through the 1970s exudes a pointedness in its wordsmithing that recalls Linton Kwesi Johnson. The opening line of this poem, titled *Plantation* from 1975, points to a real blurring between the artists’ visual and text-based practices: ‘The plantation is a black box.’ Locke’s artistic series of the same name spans from 1975-79. Locke’s Edinburgh work is referred to as based upon biomorphic forms - titled ‘twin’ and ‘standing forms’ – their surface and silhouettes reminiscent of the pelvis, busts, shoulders, necks, seed pods, and gourds, and other natural forms, recalling fertility and reproductive capabilities. The shift from these shapes to that of the square, in box and grid-form, is sharp.

In 1956, The Whitechapel Gallery in London staged the exhibition *This is Tomorrow*, since considered an iconic show, and its legacy re-evaluated in 2011 through an exhibition and the re-release of the catalogue. Architect and writer Theo Crosby’s initial idea was for an exhibition involving architects, artists, designers and theorists, in collaboration with members of the Independent Group. Thematically it interrogated ‘modern’ way of living, mass production and new technologies. The show required a collaborative model, dividing the 39 participants into 12 groups, who were to work

together to produce a single artwork. Guyanese artist Denis Williams was in 'Group 5' with artist John Ernest and painter Anthony Hill, and their combined contribution was to focus on the relationship between painting and architecture. Attending to the period 1913-23, to accompany their presentation, they lent two artworks, one from Piet Mondrian and a second from Naum Gabo. Denis Williams' contribution to *This is Tomorrow* was influential on Locke, who began to unpick the formulation behind the square, as the simplest compressive single unit of space, and quickly impacting Locke's plans for his own sculptural structures. Art historian Maryam Hamadani, speaking on Denis Williams' work in the context of *This is Tomorrow* and cultural programming in the same time period from the Commonwealth Arts Institute focused on abstract art, has discussed the mathematical here as a universalising pulse. In close reading Locke's work, I would like to consider the mathematical aspect as it relates to the square of the box and grid as a visual response to the ruthlessness of plantation-era economics, and the resulting topography of Guyana as previously mentioned – Locke's *Plantation* series precedes his *Black Box* works by two-three years, taking on a similar cube-like foundation for his sculptures, and thus reading his interest in the square in this way is not a large leap.



Donald Locke, Detail from: *The Room: An Environment with 15 Black Squares*, 1979-1981

Locke's shift towards the square, box, grid and the predominance of black run concurrent with one another, but as authors Claribel Cone & Barbara Cortright note in their piece for *Third Text* journal *Donald Locke: From Pottery to Postmodernism* ....'yet Locke's coat of black is as varied as the materials it covers. His cabinets are changing grounds for the placement of colored clay, bronze and wire.' In his cultural history of the colour, 'The Story of Black' art critic John Harvey outlines the sheer complexity of the many meanings of 'black' – describing it as at once the oldest colour, having a

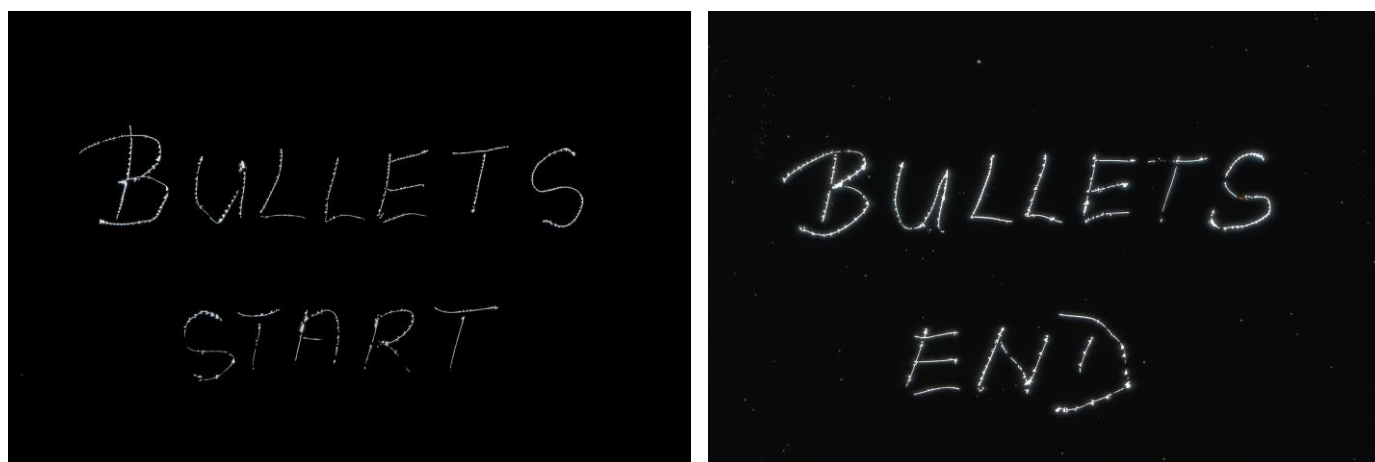
contested status as a colour at all, its luxurious connotations, with beauty, religion and superstitions, association with death and melancholy, and amongst many other readings – concluding that ‘no other colour has been so identified with extremes that are opposite and absolute.’ He further outlines the manner in which in Enlightenment Europe as the slave trade emerged begins to be equated, a new development, with servitude and slavery. In terms of colour theory, he states that ‘black is then at once a colour and not a colour, and both these things are often said’ before discussing its relation to white light. From these considerations, I would draw out two points: firstly that the interconnectedness of the colour black with its supposed inverse white harks back to the universalizing impulse described in terms of the mathematical emphasis, as noted by Maryam Hamadani, and that secondly, in the ambiguousness of black as a colour, that we start to see a means of refusal – it is neither formed by light, nor is true black really attainable.

The mathematical square and the matte black enveloping Locke’s work as refusals can be understood as the negation of i) visual pleasure, ii) of the labour to create since visual pleasure, and iii) of the exhibition circuit and art market. The total dominance of black in the artists’ palette at this time should also be understood as a mourning – for having left Guyana to pursue his artistic practice in the post-independence period of nation founding – but also as a gesture towards Black pride, and to the political advancements taking place in the transnational context of the time. When I say refusal, I am specifically thinking of it in terms of writer and academic Saidiya Hartman’s use of the phrase – she notes how in her 2019 book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* ‘one thing was absolutely clear: the practices of refusal—shirking, idleness, and strike—a critique of the state and what it could afford; and an understanding that the state is present primarily as a punishing force, a force for the brutal containment and violation and regulation and eradication of Black life.’



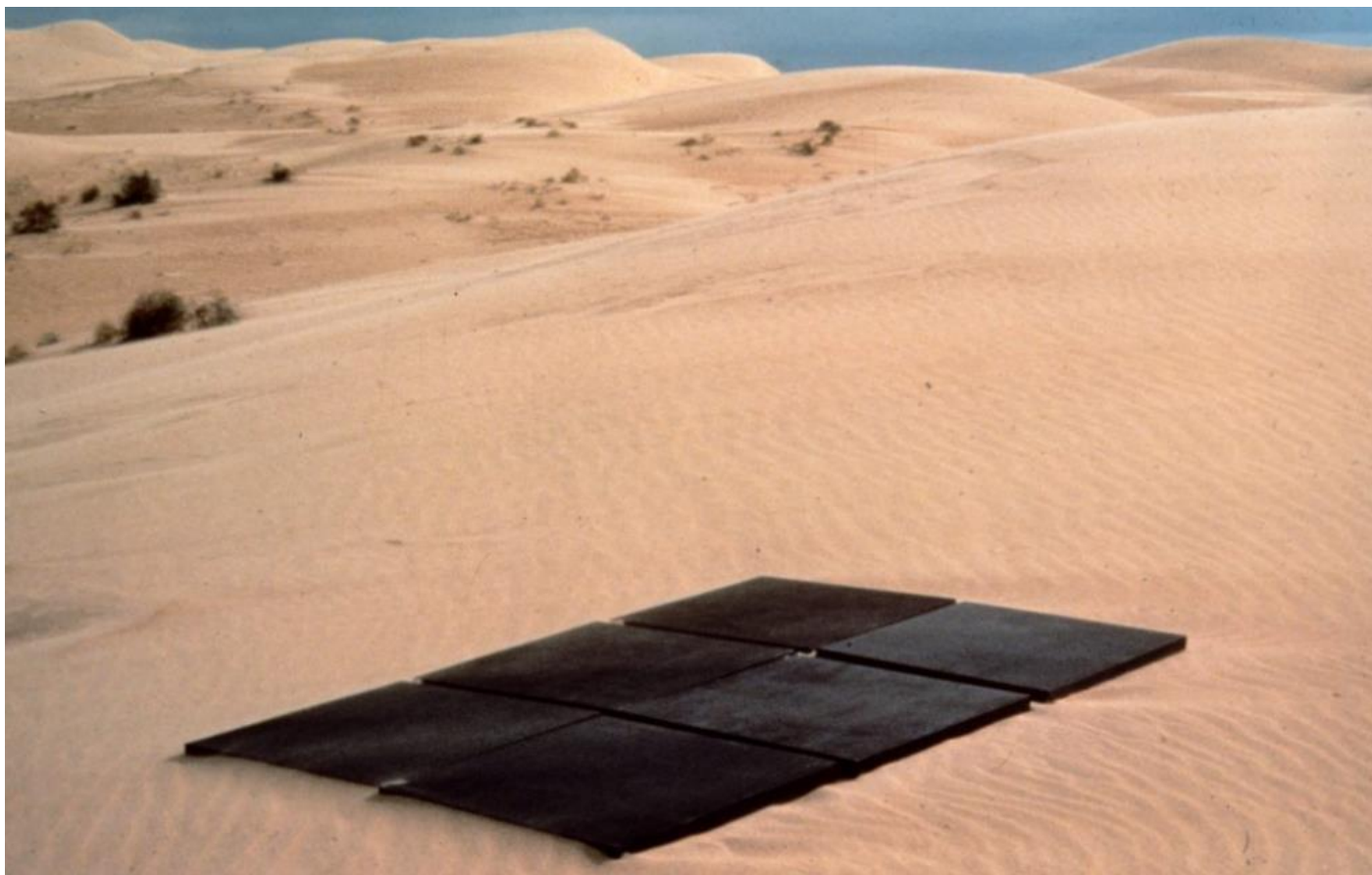
‘The Journey (3),’ 80 Digitised Slides, 1973-74. Taken in England, France and Spain.

In a conversation between Haartman and cultural theorist Fred Moten, he states that he is reminded of an 'essay by Foucault on (French philosopher) Maurice Blanchot called *The Thought of the Outside*. One way to think about it is the reason why we feel it necessary to constantly, I don't want to say go back to the hold, but the reason we feel it necessary to renew our consciousness of being in the hold, so to speak, is because maybe there's a way in which the thought of the outside can only occur from the inside. On one hand we speak in reverence of a tradition of the thought of the outside or the tradition of those able to be in two places at one time. I always thought that was the real importance and beauty of Harriet Ann Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave*, which is about constantly trying to figure out how to be in two places at the same time, under absolute duress, often in both places.' In the aforementioned artist statement drafted between 2004 and 2006, Locke wrote 'Perhaps unique in the history of mankind, the Black man in the New World has been coerced into a harrowing agenda, the crushing of thousands of miles of cultural time in the space of a few short generations' which speaks of the same experience as Moten simply in different words.



Donald Locke, 'The Journey ,' 80 Digitised Slides, 1973-74.

To begin to discuss this in relation to series of work from Locke – first *The Journey (1)* and secondly, *Arizona Squares*. 'The Journey' series is the first instance of Locke beginning to take his sculptural work outwith the studio, taking a cohort of black cylindrical forms on a series of long journeys through England, France and Spain, staging interventions with them into both rural and urban landscapes. Formed in rows, the linear path they forged together was of significance to the artist – in time, he began to incorporate into these the human body directly yet anonymously – the artists' wife Brenda recalls the precision by which she would placed within the line up by Locke. Of course, the artists' hand, the performative act of the placement of the work in the landscape, already obliquely implied a human presence and absence in itself – thus, the body's labour is both implied and withheld. 80 images exist from *The Journey* series, with the intention that these would be shown as a slide show, bookmarked with the two slides shown here. To my knowledge, this work was never shown in public as intended but a full set continues to exist in the artists' papers. The looped nature of such a presentation mode would have created a never-ending route and journey – a back and forth speaking for the artists own traversing between Europe and Guyana at that time, but also repeating his identification of the specific Black Diasporic experiences regarding time and travel outlined in the artist statement just a moment ago. Whilst these opening slides such that these should be read as bullets, punctures into the landscape, in the exhibition of Locke's work as part of the seminal exhibition *The Other Story* there was an extended dialogue between Locke and Araeen surrounding the phallic form of the objects, which initially Araeen found overtly sexual and in some tension to his curatorial premise. Equally similar forms as found elsewhere in Locke's work – huddled together, alongside trinkets, with a cowboy's spur attached – taken on different sentiments, but act as stand-ins for the individual body.



Donald Locke, *Arizona Squares: An Open Environment 2*, 1979-1980.

The artists' *Arizona Squares: An Open Environment* produced between 1979-1980 during his Guggenheim Fellowship is a further extension of *The Journey*. The artist worked with matte black canvasses, which were also being re-purposed in his indoor, studio-based work, titled *The Room: An Environment with 15 Black Squares*, 1979-1981. Working in a time-sensitive manner due to the heat of the desertscape with his wife Brenda and photographer Jim Cowlin laid out routes for these flat black squares, laid flat or horizontal to the ground, casting shadows – they act as markers of a route, perhaps a safety barrier, perhaps viewers of our trespass. The use of the desertscape seems to pre-date the manner in which Black-British filmmakers John Akomfrah and Issaac Julien – in their works *The Nine Musues* and *True North* respectively take on the snowscape, a different kind of desert – utilizing the landscape as a means by which to connote both the European imperial powers outlook on the so-called New World as a “blank canvas,” to do with as they please. The artist, with his uniformly blank/voided black canvasses moved at will, critiques through mimicry this historical theft of land and resources. This work was to only ever exist temporarily, documented only through photographs. Moreover, as was the case in Locke's practice throughout his life, he re-purposed these canvases entirely from his ‘room environments’ series, in which the black box was created within the indoor studio, containing both the artists' own sculptures, and at times his body. This the canvases and sculpture are forced by the artists to belong to two places, two bodies of work, simultaneously, their readings shift, and the artist demonstrably plays with their artistic value within the traditional codified art system, of which the artist was very aware.



Donald Locke, Human Prisoner Series: Loouey-Loouey, 1969, Documented outside in London.

As noted by artist historian Lucy Lippard in her seminal text *Six Years*, the dematerialisation of the art object can be defined as a 'process... or a de-emphasis on material aspects (uniqueness, permanence, decorative attractiveness),' to which Locke's use of everyday objects, own body, outdoor/hostile settings, and monotone black all speak towards. She notes that the idea was where the work took place, the output simply the outcome – and we can see that Locke applies this lack of preciousness to the non-final endpoint of his outdoor/indoor experiments. Lippard underscores that the era of Conceptual art was also the era of the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, the Women's Liberation Movement and counter-culture, however attention to the contribution of Black artists within Conceptual Art continues to be nascent, with important points of reference including Valerie Cassel Oliver's writing and recent exhibition projects for example that of the Hammer Museum.

### **Bibliography**

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