

The Offerings of EJ Hill

Home is where the heart is. There is a physicality to this turn of phrase—the sinewy organ circulating blood about the body, bleeding into the material, the built-space of an abode. At once, this imagery of a home translocating vis-à-vis the beatings of the heart complicates Cartesian dichotomies of mind/body, physical/material. By respecting the ability of idioms to flux between word and image, we begin to listen differently to bodies and buildings, attuning to their syncretic meanings, and recognizing the home and the heart are as structural as they are sentimental.

Such meditations are top-of-mind for EJ Hill, the Los Angeles artist who's back home, for now.¹ In a nostalgic missive, we learn that for Hill, the shifting realities of home—dependent on the ebbs and flows of the heart toward trauma or kinship—shape blood memories, which he attaches to streets, intersections, and built structures. In his words: “Manchester Ave. is my main vein; Vermont Ave. is my main artery. 76th and Western is my heart.”² Now working out of his mother's garage in South (formerly South-Central) Los Angeles, Hill shows upon his return an acute sensitivity to the spaces that subtend bodies and time. How these infrastructures, at varying scales, nourish Hill—both his body and practice—speaks to the multiplicity of home, itself a forum for imaging alternative relations between people and things.

But before all this, Hill spent considerable time in Boston and Chicago; returned to Los Angeles for his MFA; and then headed out of town again.³ A residency at The Studio Museum in Harlem and an installation at 57th Venice Biennale are his most recent pit stops. Some moves were premeditated, orchestrated for artistic ends; others seemed propelled by the itch to live life and locate love. Hill's return home was commemorated with *A Subsequent Offering*, a recent two-week show at L.A.'s Human Resources.

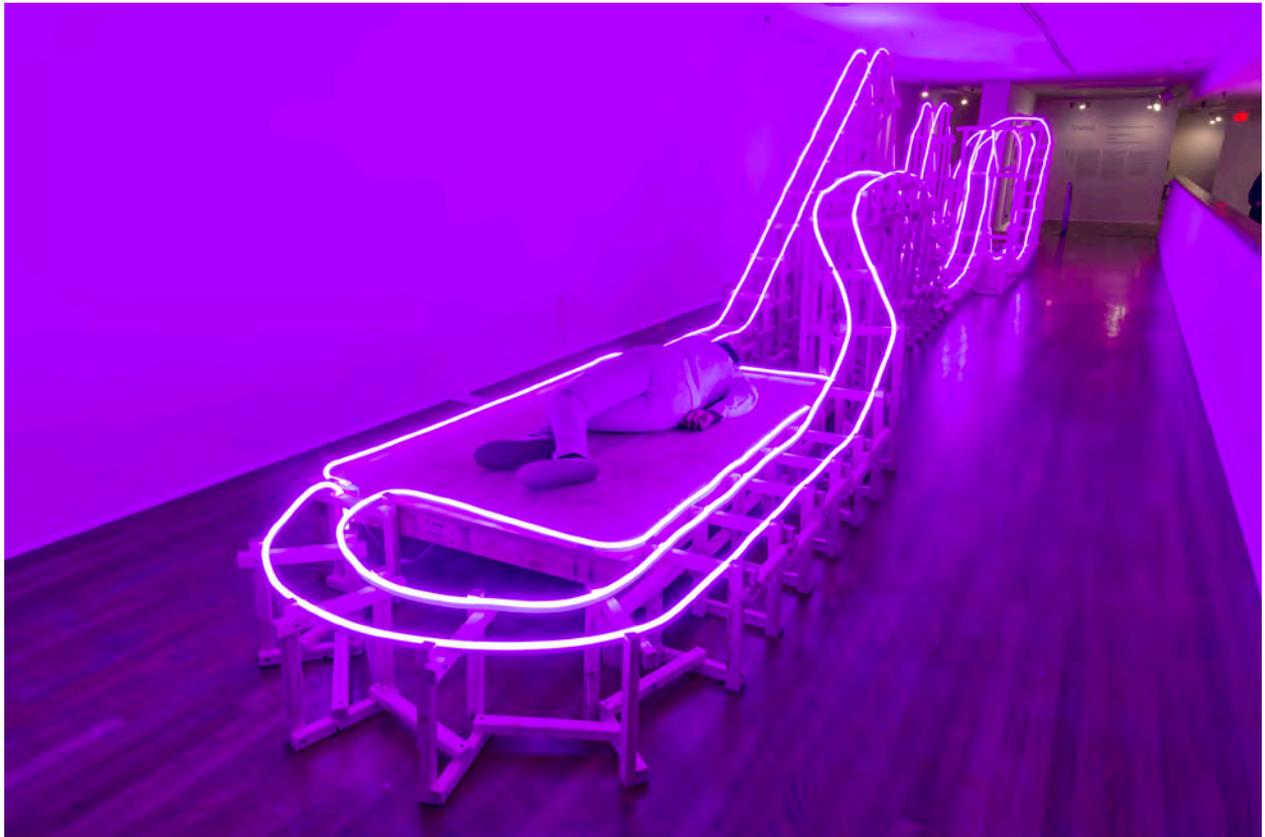
Although Hill has also shown elsewhere in L.A. since returning home, *A Subsequent Offering* admittedly took on a different cadence. On view was what some may call a shell of *A Monumental Offering of Potential Energy* (2016), the winding, 41-foot long wooden rollercoaster that premiered at The Studio Museum. In that iteration, Hill's body lay prostrate on a platform coupled to one end of the rollercoaster. The lurching tracks were replaced with neon, the vivid orchid glow giving Hill's inert figure a questionably ruddy cast. Lying somewhere between death and deliverance, Hill spent four months (from July 14 to October 20, 2016) flush to that 4 × 7 platform for up to nine hours a day. Hill's queer, black body became a site of performance, taking up a posture perpendicular to the lynched strange fruit of old or, sadly, resembling the gunned down black bodies strewn across asphalt roads.

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1
Fuck U Pay Us performing
on *A Subsequent Offering* (2017).
Image courtesy of Human
Resources. Photo:
Arlene Mejorado.

2
Fuck U Pay Us performing
on *A Subsequent Offering* (2017).
Image courtesy of Human
Resources. Photo:
Arlene Mejorado.



3
EJ Hill, *A Monumental Offering of Potential Energy* (2016).
Image courtesy of the artist and The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Photo: Adam Reich.

4
EJ Hill, *A Monumental Offering of Potential Energy* (2016).
Image courtesy of the artist and The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Photo: Adam Reich.

Notably missing in *A Subsequent Offering* was Hill, i.e., his prone body was nowhere near the rollercoaster platform that formerly held him for days on end. Not that I was expecting Hill to be there, again, for this shorter installation of the work, but having experienced the Harlem performance, there was a palpable emptiness to the rollercoaster as it hugged the back wall of Human Resources' sprawling space. An additional dais protruded out from the rollercoaster—a stage, as Hill put it, “for new performances and actions.”⁴ In a way, this bodily abyss orchestrated by Hill's evacuation of himself, magnified the rollercoaster's pared-down, neon aesthetics and the potential for other future bodies to inhabit, hold court, and re-embody *A Monumental Offering*.

Empty as it was, the installation—and Hill's human body—exuded what Arthur Jafa might consider a radical opening for cultures to “flow through figures,” with the human body “setting up...and then breaking down” the fixity of time and space.⁵ Across multiple nights, performers—comedians, poets, musicians, writers—did just that as they took center stage, upright, rising, and brimming with movement and motion. That isn't to say Hill didn't rise up and head home after performing day in, day out at The Studio Museum. But this felt different. In L.A., the acts—akin to Hill's in Harlem—were all still sensitive to the precarity of black life. Yet the lived-in platform and installation—bearing traces of Hill's body impressions—lifted some of the burden to represent pain in recumbent ways.

Hill often sat in the audience, gazing out at the panoply of performances. He clapped movingly after poet Sarah Gail gave a heart-stopping rendition of DeLois Barrett Campbell and The Barrett Sisters' gospel tune, “I Wanna Walk and Talk with Jesus”

(1995). He excitedly snapped pictures of the black, mostly queer female punk band, Fuck U Pay Us, as they thrashed and screamed about the stage. And he laughed and shared an aside with two childhood friends as Micah James' camp comedy routine poked at anti-black racism and his father's baffling gun-toting antics at a middle school basketball game. So while Hill was present, it was in a particular way that welcomed *home* the installation through a “multiplicity of articulations.”⁶ These voices came together on the blood, sweat, and tears of Hill's enduring body as it/ he “silently sobbed” back in Harlem.⁷ There, Hill dealt with the radical act of being “a strong and consistent visible presence” while lying—or appearing—abject.⁸

On this subject of asserting a presence despite the unending disappearance of blackness, cultural theorist Nana Adusei-Poku invokes Frantz Fanon's tears following stagnancy, which reminds us that Hill is not alone as he sobs. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon wept at his nothingness, his inability to “get up” as he lay there, this black colonial object, riddled with stasis.⁹ Yet Fanon was equally aware of the possibilities of his body or, more pointedly, how his “chest has the power to expand to infinity.”¹⁰ This corporeal crossroads between nothingness and infinity that Fanon speaks of is where we can situate Hill's offerings, from *A Monumental* to *A Subsequent*. For the latter, though, by receding into the crowd and somewhat emptying the installation of his body, Hill embraced a “nothingness [that] is not absence but foundation,” becoming this tireless “void that sustains.”¹¹ It is this radical type of offering from Hill that gave the poetry reading of Brandon Drew Holmes impetus, such that pieces like “Dead Body,” from Holmes'

1. EJ Hill, “A letter from home,” *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly*, June 17, 2017, <http://x-traonline.org/events/a-letter-from-home>.

2. Ibid.

chapbook *NEXTDOOREBONY* (2016), queered notions of loss as this striking underlife, boundless, without limits:

Sunrise
Sunset
Amazing grace, that sound
Ascend.¹²

When all's said and done, *A Subsequent Offering* played out like a nod to the collaborative, interdisciplinary ethos that has dominated Los Angeles performance from the late 1960s onward. The hybrid work of Asco, the Chicano activist art group out of East L.A., comes to mind, as does the short-lived collective Premature Ejaculation, and the feminist performance art group The Waitresses (who came out of the Feminist Studio Workshop or the Woman's Building). This lineage of performance permeated *A Subsequent Offering*. Even the installation itself—bare, empty of performers—equally evoked the California Minimalism of 1960s and '70s, where performance has resonance within immersive installations that experimented in the interplay of light and space.

A more telling parallel, however, is how the articulations on view at *A Subsequent Offering* joined with the agitations and aspirations of the black arts community in L.A. during the '70s and '80s. The focus then, as it is now for Hill and his colleagues, was on theatrical forms of activism and coalition building to radicalize space, all the while operating just outside the stability and structures of place.¹³ This unease toward place—which can be read as home—was there for black feminist artist Senga Nengudi who reminisces on how Los Angeles “never felt quite like home in the early days,” even with many feminist art movements and centers.¹⁴ The import of Nengudi's words aren't

3. From 2001 to 2009, Hill spent every summer in Stoneham, Maine, a town just outside of Boston, working with economically disadvantaged youth at Camp Susan Curtis. At the camp, Hill's bond with artist and educator Margaret Nomentana planted the seeds that set Chicago within his sights for art school. EJ Hill, email message to author, July 7, 2017.

an indictment of the home, but a call to fashion a mutable space for home that welcomes diverse ways of becoming and place-making. Nengudi eventually found home in Studio Z, a performance collective whose collaborative acts in non-places (e.g., freeway underpasses) took up “strategies of naming” elaborated upon through performance and installation.¹⁵

Hill and colleagues took up a similar approach in *A Subsequent Offering*: relocating the sculpture to a different space; changing the name of the installation; and embracing a repertoire of performance for other bodies—black, brown, beige, and white—to lament or let loose. Such gestures find Hill capturing the malleable marriage black collectivities evidence between space and naming. More importantly, though, from *A Monumental Offering* to *A Subsequent Offering*, Hill provides a glimpse into his heartfelt notions of home, and of identity as a kind of nomadic and often contextual life force, fluctuating with every heartbeat, circulating memories anew.

4. EJ Hill (@iheartbeuys), “Last summer...”, *Instagram*, June 17, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BVeKRoyITN7>.

5. Arthur Jafa and Tina Campt, “Love Is the Message, the Plan Is Death,” *e-flux journal* 81 (April 2017), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/126451/love-is-the-message-the-plan-is-death>.

6. Nana Adusei-Poku, “On Being Present Where You Wish to Disappear,” *e-flux journal* 80 (March 2017), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/101727/on-being-present-where-you-wish-to-disappear>.

7. EJ Hill (@iheartbeuys), *Instagram* post from June 17, 2017. “Last summer...”

8. *Ibid.*

9. Adusei-Poku, “On Being Present.”

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. Brandon Drew Holmes, “Dead Body,” in *NEXTDOOREBONY* (Los Angeles: n0 eg0 p0ems, 2016).

13. Amelia Jones, “Lost Bodies: Early 1970s Los Angeles performance art in art history,” in *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California, 1970-1983*, ed. Peggy Phelan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 156-158.

14. *Ibid.*, 126.

15. *Ibid.*, 155.