

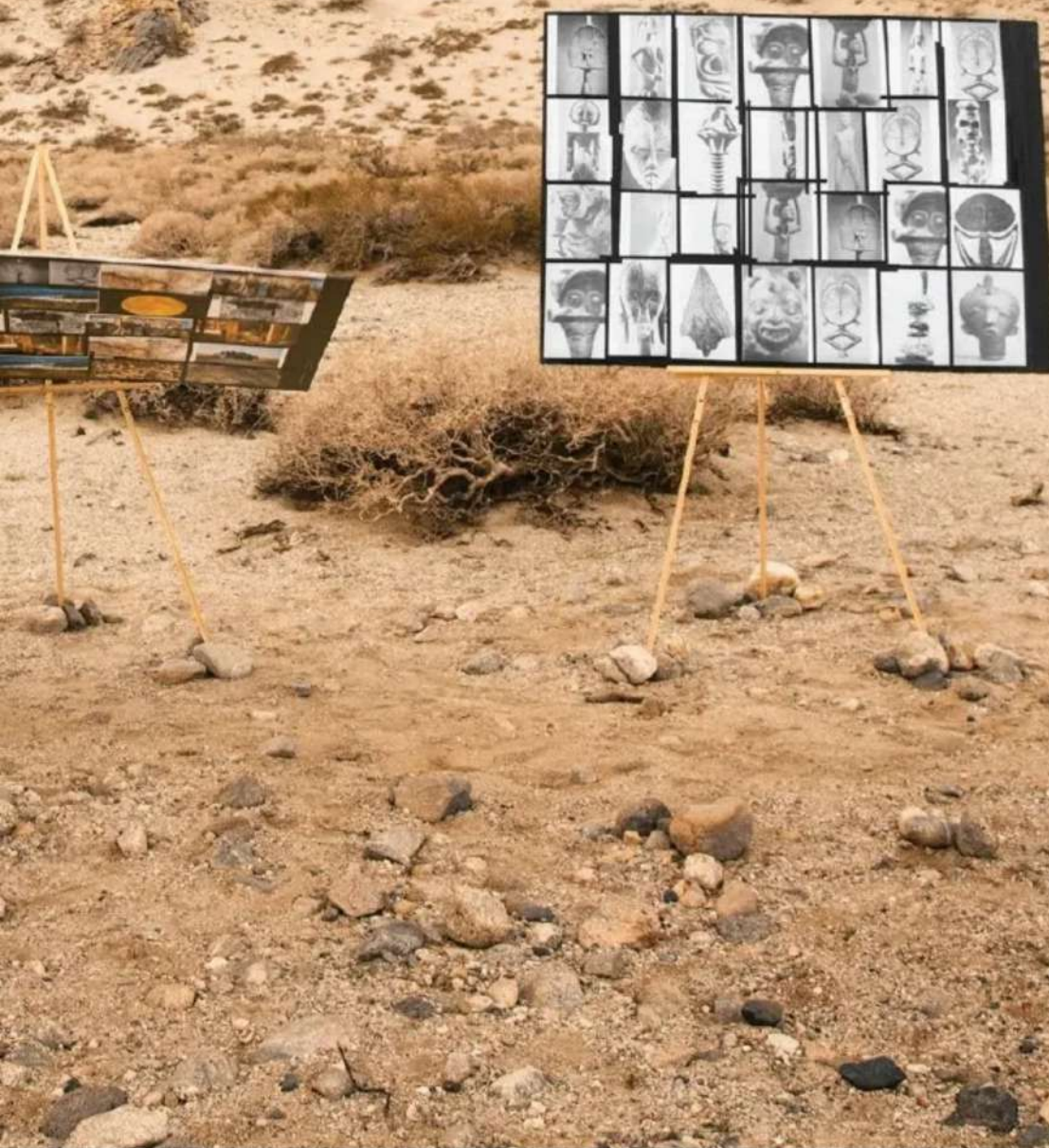
ABOUT THE GUEST EDITOR

Xaviera Simmons, *Red (Number Two)*, 2016



THE RADICAL UTILITY OF THE ARTIST

Xaviera Simmons' second sight
By Elleza Kelley



When Xaviera Simmons was 8 years old,

her father gave her a Polaroid camera with no film. Her mother could not afford the film, so she went without. That sense of longing, the potential that filled the space of the empty cartridge, was as integral to her upbringing as a sense of abundance. Her mother was a young creative writer and Buddhist who introduced Simmons to all the spaces of alternative living the city had to offer, taking her on frequent visits to women's pleasure houses. Often, she took Simmons on trips to Portland, Maine, where her friends were part of a thriving community of Black activists. Back home in Harlem, Simmons roamed the city, frequenting the Met, MoMa and The Studio Museum in Harlem. Her father was an artist, too, in his own way, taking photographs whenever they would meet and providing Simmons with her first cameras.

From ages 8 to 14, Simmons and her mother lived in Queens above her grandmother's best friend, whose Jamaican husband tended sunflowers, fruits, vegetables and berries for winemaking on a plot of urban farmland adjacent to the house. From Maine to Harlem to Queens, Simmons encountered the varied geographies and histories of Blackness in the Northeast. Beyond her own family's Southern roots, Simmons was also keenly aware of Harlem's inherent Southernness. The currents and paths of the diaspora indelibly shaped Simmons's concept of herself, of Blackness, of art, of politics and, significantly, of place and landscape, which she has explored at length in works which span mediums and form.

Eventually, she retraced some of those paths herself, quitting her job as a fashion photographer's assistant to walk with Japanese monks through parts of the United States, the Caribbean and Africa. They lived communally and walked these charged routes, contemplating the histories of the transatlantic slave trade that were embedded within the land, praying, meditating and talking as they walked. Simmons, who grew up both Buddhist and in the Black church, felt spiritually primed for such a journey. "I got to meet people all over the country and see what the country looked like on ground because we were walking eight hours a day," she says. "You don't walk this land and not understand it. I think of each inch of the land now, and I'm still learning about land."

This intimate experience with the land led to Simmons's first interventions within landscape photography. Trained in Bard's prestigious photography program, under the tutelage of Stephen Shore, Larry Fink, Luc Sante and An-My Lê, Simmons encountered the stunning and formidable Hudson River Valley through the conventions of large-format landscape photography. But there was a problem. These landscapes were empty—as if they had been purged of their histories of genocide, expropriation, settler colonialism, capitalist extraction and slavery. As one of the only Black students in the program, she encountered both landscape and art history, especially the history of photography, differently. On top of that, her time walking with the monks had completely transformed her relationship to land. So, she began to populate these landscapes, reanimating them with ►





Xaviera Simmons, *Because You Know Ultimately We Will Band a Militia*, 2021

ABOUT THE GUEST EDITOR



Xaviera Simmons, *Index Seven Composition Three*, 2015

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY

human forms. These Black subjects would frequently confront the viewer, obscuring their own faces with masks, photographic apparatuses and, often, framed photographs that seem plucked from another context entirely—a context that seems distant from the sweeping natural world, but that Simmons shows us is, in fact, intimately related.

After receiving her BFA in 2004, Simmons trained as an actor, not to act professionally, she explains, but “to understand how to work with emotions.” Simmons is not an artist in search of a medium but one who cycles through mediums and practices in order to communicate in increasingly precise ways. She does not see the hard edges between medium and genre, but has instead produced a porous, dynamic, wide-ranging practice that moves as she feels moved. It bends to meet the needs of her message. In her disregard for such traditional distinctions, she creates entirely new mediums and forms, modes of communication that simultaneously communicate practical political demands (abolition, reparations, land back) as they reach for imaginative ethical versions of the world.

In her series of photographs, ‘Index/Composition’ (2008-present), the human form is itself a landscape, its upper half sheathed in fabric, its lower half concealed by assemblages of objects that seem to sprout from the subjects’ waist. The scale and framing crop out identifying signs of a body or orientation and we are left only with the suggestion of a waist, the suggestion of kneecaps (or are those elbows?). What remains are sumptuous totemic forms—part photograph, part sculpture, part assemblage, part fiber art. Underneath their layers the bodies twist and sway ever so gently. In their contours one can trace a mountain range, a canyon. The sinister history of the Topsy-Turvy doll is flipped and reformulated—her black underside yields a place of worship.

Simmons’s Surrealist photographs reveal a citational impulse, impeccable technical skill and a deep sense of humor. Often, Simmons’s subjects hold apparatuses used for seeing—cameras, tripods, photographs, viewfinders.

She both leverages and sublimates the inherent violence of the camera with its imperatives to shoot and capture. Just as Simmons reminds us that photographic processes were slow and tactile for the majority of photography’s history, she also points out the violence of that touch: “There were a lot of white men running around, touching, feeling, tasting and enjoying,” she says. “This is why it’s so important for there to be many different types of photographers and many Black women who’ve made a pathway through it, because it was used as a weapon against us. It was used as a tool that we had to defend ourselves from. Because of the people who were behind the camera, who were touching us when we didn’t ask for that touch and who were photographing us when we were not able to even vocalize permission.”

Terror and beauty in equal measure. Bound together. Just as the viewer attempts to capture the subject of her photographic scenes, she slips away. Under costumes, into rock formations, behind a camera of their own. How do you reconcile love for a land you didn’t choose? For a land that holds beauty and terror in equal measure?

This exploration of touch and sensuality is also present in her sculptural work and interest in the material—both the conditions of everyday life and the physical substances and textures of the Earth. She is also drawn to objects, bowls and vessels in particular. Perhaps there is something about their longing shape, their potential to be filled. This shape dominates her installation. Even in the variations, the division of pleasures helps situate us to advocate, exhibited in 2021 at Pioneer Works in the show ‘Brand New Heavies,’ curated by Mickalene Thomas and Racquel Chevremont. Like most of her work, dating back to her early interventions with landscape photography, even in the variations it goes beyond multimedia—it creates its own medium by eroding the boundaries between the various aspects of Simmons’s practice. It is an installation, sculpture, architectural structure and video work all in one. Here she plays with contrast and layering: One side of the monitor shows bodies in erotic contact,

the other side shows text, an extension of the distinctive text paintings Simmons has been doing for over a decade. For Aruna D’Souza, this double-sided monitor suggests that “we continue to fight so we can continue to fuck. ... Those who protest are motivated by both anger at injustices and the pleasures that come from liberation.”

When Simmons began painting with text, in work such as *Harvest* (2010), she was committed to gesturing toward the typography of everyday life—the hand-painted wooden signs of working people selling their wares. She describes the earlier works as part of “a longing for constructing freedoms and different forms, for a liberatory poetics.” Though now Simmons sees the text work as having a much more straightforward and practical purpose—“to make movement work happen, to make organizing happen”—the beauty and the liberatory poetics are still there, sustaining the dream of freedom. Her texts, ligatured letters in thick white paint with minimal spacing, and which include passages like “dusk is the interval of a voluminous open,” form a kind of textile; they make pattern out of brushstrokes and negative space; they conjure something more powerful than sense and legibility. They compel an affective literacy, one that produces knowledge through feeling, form and recognition.

Recent text work such as the structure the labor the foundation the escape the pause (2020), which was erected in Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, pairs excerpts from the text of Special Field Order No. 15 with “a woven amalgamation of contemporary calls for reparations to the descendants of American slavery.” These texts, painted on wood and set in colossal black and white frames, vibrate against each other, forming a gulf of failed promises, landed fantasies, of repair and betrayal, of the cut lines and borders that give shape to the United States. These words cannot be understood without being felt.

Part of a show called ‘MONUMENTS NOW,’ the structure interrogates how, why and what communities choose to commemorate in their shared history. Similarly, Simmons produced a





Xaviera Simmons, *They're All Afraid, All of Them, That's It! They're All Southern! The Whole United States is Southern!*, 2019

Art|Basel Miami Beach

DECEMBER 2021

CHANGE EVERYTHING

GUEST EDITOR
XAVIERA SIMMONS
NAVIGATES THE
ENTIRE TERRAIN

GOING FORWARD

THE ADVISERS, ARTISTS,
CURATORS, COLLECTORS,
GALLERIES & MUSEUM
MAVERICKS LEADING
THE CHARGE

STATE OF THE ART

MUSEUM HYBRIDITY,
MARKET REPORT &
THE FUTURE OF FAIRS AS
THE WORLD REBOUNDS

SOURCE MATERIALS

SCULPTOR & TEXTILE ARTIST TAU LEWIS