

John Akomfrah

PURPLE, 2017

SIX-CHANNEL VIDEO INSTALLATION, COLOR, 15.1 SURROUND SOUND

61 MIN.

Purple is a six-channel video installation by British filmmaker and artist John Akomfrah. Part of a filmic quartet focusing on the aesthetics and politics of matter and the follow-up to the multi-screen installation *Vertigo Sea* (2015), *Purple* presents a mesmerizing sound score set atop a collage of historical footage pulled from hundreds of hours of archival footage combined with newly shot segments. Thematically the film asks about the vitality and volatility of the current state of our planet, and demonstrates how climate change is affecting and has affected human communities, biodiversity, and the notion of wilderness. It is an immersive multiscreen meditation on the active powers of the “non-subject” and its impact on our biosphere.

This epic work is comprised of five distinct but interwoven movements presented in successive harmony. Syncopated as an orchestral call and response, its highs, middles, and lows create a powerfully robust and experientially immersive holistic audiovisual whole. The interconnectedness of the segments refers to an idea developed by philosopher Jane Bennett, which she calls vibrant matter: the way in which objects—organic and inorganic assemblages—relate to one another in the fragile “ecology of things” of contemporary life. Each of the movements focuses on distinct landscapes from around the globe that represent ecological environments that are in the process of disappearing and decomposing, from the volcanic grandeur of the Marquesas Islands in the South Pacific to the desolated landscapes of Greenland and from the melting Alaskan hinterlands to the rising coastlines of the Tahitian Peninsula. The footage of the Marquesas was shot during a research trip that Akomfrah conducted with the TBA21–Academy and the boat that is featured as a prominent figure in the film is in fact the M/Y Dardanella, TBA21–Academy’s research vessel. *Purple* gives viewers a glimpse into the vibrant interconnectedness of things and investigates the anthropogenic relationship between human and non-human life. With a poetic intensity and sobering content, *Purple* makes visible the magnitude of human-made degradation already charred into the earth’s surface. Akomfrah tolls a bell in warning of what is to come if we do not move from awareness into action.

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JOHN AKOMFRAH, **PURPLE**, 2017
INSTALLATION VIEW, MUSEO NACIONAL THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA, MADRID, 2018

It would be a mistake to think that the recent interest in nature expressed by artists and their works is the product of a passing fancy or an attempt to give conceptualism a second wind, situating “nature” in the place formerly occupied by “language.” It would be a mistake to think that when we say “ocean,” we are simply naming another theme in art, when in fact it is the whole. Saying “nature” or “ocean” is the same as saying “art.” In other words, saying “ocean” entails replacing the term “avant-garde”—a practice geared toward the radical transformation of inherited languages—with “nature,” an investigation into the substance of life, and identifying the latter as the mission of art. If this is true, then all artists with a vested interest in underwater life, in the sensory universe that welcomes a non-human perspective, clearly belong to this new nature/avant-garde. But this implies an even greater level of obligation and commitment for all those who are neither partial nor attracted to the idea that the intelligence of art is predicated on the assumption that, within every life-affecting process, there is an episteme, a knowledge, which is the wellspring of the future. In the past, visions of transformation meant transforming institutions, guaranteeing civil liberties and rewriting the social contract, but today that contract must necessarily include another vital party: planet Earth. In the same way, the historical notion of space as social space has opened up to include natural space through the agency of artists and many other thinkers. This new openness is marked by a sense of the particular, of the uncountable diversity that not only challenges how we think about the space of art, but also offers the great possibility of a new life for art outside of familiar social structures, museums, and the urban space. An interest in nature implies the immensity of a new habit: figuring out our place in the worlds we have created and in the larger world. Filmmaker John Akomfrah’s ambitious work *Purple* (2017) is revealed as a place where we can learn to perceive from within, where we can listen, describe, represent, and transform everything, in turn, into feeling, into a vision-altering movement in a sensory environment at once complex and fertile. The past and present images that comprise this six-channel film installation do not appeal to verification or the craft of theory when it comes to judging human behavior. Their harshness, and the judgment they exude, stem from the infinite dynamics of Akomfrah’s expert intuition as one intimately familiar with the semantic flow that allows images to open, unfold, and submit to our interpretation. The editing, the pace, the fully frontal presentation that nevertheless feels like a warm embrace in which Akomfrah situates us create a grand choreography of correlations that seem to align themselves in one direction: confronted with them, we can offer no rebuttals, only

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counter-proposals. *Purple*, a massive installation consisting of six screens, two photo triptychs and one sculpture, is an important visual reflection on humans’ tremendous destructive power over the rest of the world. Hearing the word “purple,” few people think of a strange pact rather than a color. But in this work, purple refers to the pact between a sea snail and the human race. The substance that animal secretes when it feels threatened is the color humans associate with power. What power? Ours: the simple power to destroy everything that surrounds us, to put ourselves on a higher level than all other life forms, to think that the world exists to serve us. Purple dye was actually discovered by another animal, a dog belonging to Hercules, who walked around with a purple mouth until Hercules discovered that the dog’s dyed snout was due to its playful munching on the murex snails that littered the beaches along the coast of the Mediterranean. A British writer, filmmaker, artist, and philosopher of Ghanaian descent, in 1982, Akomfrah founded the Black Audio Film Collective, a group comprising seven artists and film directors including himself: Reece Auguiste, Edward George, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, Claire Joseph, and Trevor Mathison. This collective is important because its members invented a visual language capable of addressing the links between the colonial past and the present of cultural production. What drives the tidal wave of images in *Purple*? What does it ask of us? While cultural criticism was motivated by the zeal for social justice, this new criticism, which contemplates the trial and judgement of our actions toward nature, should inspire us to honor a “debt of love” rather than merely do our duty. For example, how did we discover that our own bodies move and produce countless sounds? And what does all that activity beyond our consciousness tell us about our body’s condition? This piece and the way it is presented to us attempt to draw our attention to a problem that lies within rather than outside ourselves. The images suggest the possibility of attaining that state of being inside another body: the ocean, the environment. The memory of past events, current documentary images, and footage from fictional films intertwine with myriad new images. The editing of Akomfrah’s film not only underscores the coexistence of past and present but also emphasizes the rhythmic coexistence of different vital times in nature, from the lifespan of a cell to the geological memory of stone or of water. How often have you heard the phrase “listen to your body”? But what exactly are we listening to? How can that experience have any epistemological value if we cannot enter the ocean, the wind, to listen and to feel? Akomfrah shows us the breach of what should have been an iron-clad contract for peaceful coexistence. The destruction of the marine habitat forms a terrifyingly enormous front of images. The screens welcome and immerse viewers in a great experiment that reveals how we have eliminated the conditions necessary for a habitat’s survival and our indifference

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to the extinction of plants and animals. As the images show, coastal areas suffer disproportionately from this ailment due to their proximity to human population centers. Habitat deterioration has a dramatic effect on the biodiversity of the entire ocean. Estuaries, swamps, marshes, and other places vital to reproduction, the “nurseries” of practically every marine species, are at risk. And that great imbalance unleashes the fury of nature. Hurricanes, typhoons, storms, tsunamis, and other extreme weather phenomena further accentuate the massive upheavals in the life cycles of ocean plants and animals and, consequently, of humans. Swamps are dredged and used to build residential, industrial, and agricultural structures. Cities, factories, and farms generate waste, pollution, and chemical dumps that can wreak havoc on reefs, marine plants, birds, and fish. Dams reduce the natural flow of nutrients, interrupt the migration patterns of fish, and curb freshwater courses, increasing the salinity of coastal waters. Deforestation far from the coast produces erosion, and the resulting sediment is carried out to sea and deposited in shallow waters, where it can block the sunlight that coral reefs need to grow. Destructive fishing methods, such as bottom trawling and the use of dynamite and poison, obliterate coastal and deep-sea habitats. Thanks to tourism, millions of pleasure boaters and divers come into direct contact with fragile swamp and reef ecosystems. Oil tankers and container ships can damage habitats with their hulls and anchors. Spills of crude oil and other substances kill thousands of birds and fish, leaving a toxic trail that often takes years to disappear. The most devastating agent? Us. Influenced by the ideas of British philosopher Timothy Morton, Akomfrah uses images to tell us that “climate change” is a weak euphemism for this massive, revolutionary onslaught on life. It is not a change; it is trading the world we know for nothing, for total annihilation. This work is art, but what it addresses is all too real. Some might think these words are an exaggeration, and that can only mean one thing: we must, as Akomfrah does in his piece, make a heroic effort to radically alter our thinking, and that strong empathy with the non-human is the seed of a new brand of politics.

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