

# ALL★ARTS

"Rashaad Newsome's 'Assembly' Mends Dance, Tech and Liberation"

By Trina Mannino

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Rashaad Newsome, "Assembly" at Park Avenue Armory, 2022. Photo credit: Stephanie Berger. Photography/Park Avenue Armory.

[Artist Rashaad Newsome's](#) "Assembly" is a celebration of Blackness, queerness and being right with yourself-ness. It's a salve and meditation. It's a dirge honoring Black, queer and trans lives we've lost and a lifting up of those who are here today.

[Running through March 6](#) at Manhattan's Park Avenue Armory, the meticulously designed, multidisciplinary commission consists of a workshop for participants, a large-scale video-mapping exhibit, a collage and sculpture installation, and a performance. Voguing and ballroom culture, borne out of Black and Latinx queer communities in 1980s New York, are woven throughout.

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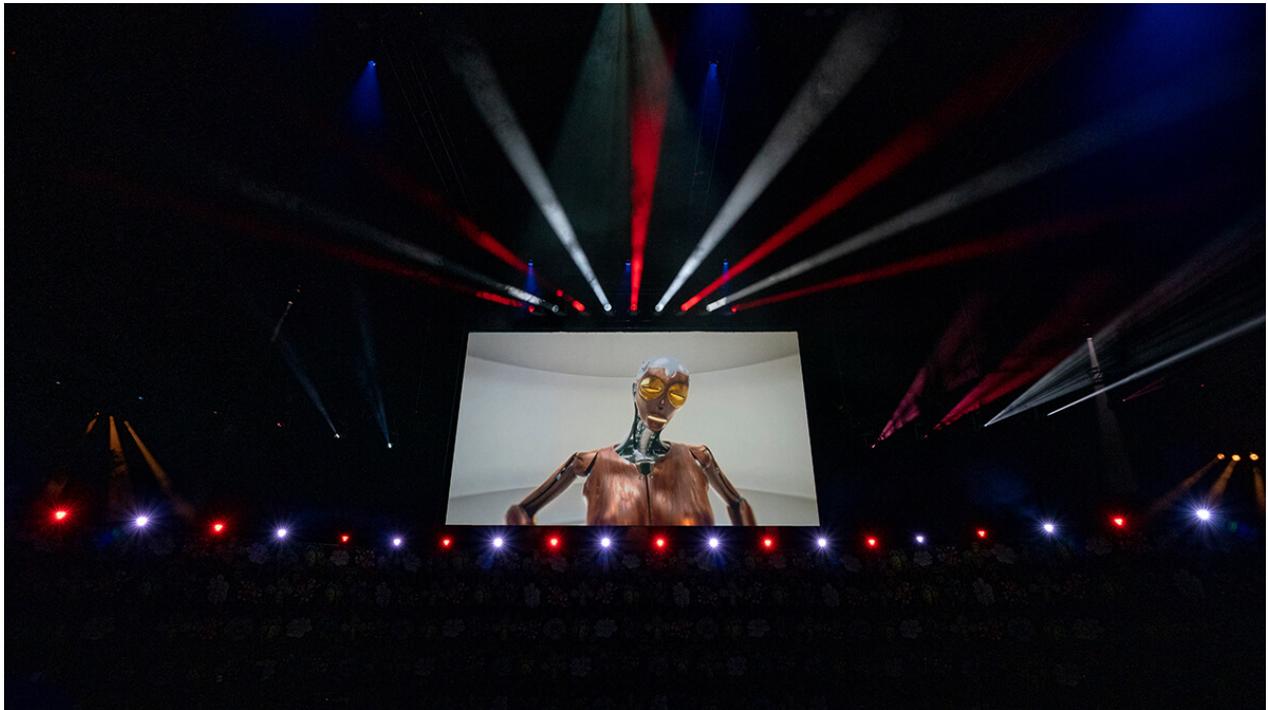
Rashaad Newsome, "Assembly" at Park Avenue Armory, 2022. From left to right: Danil Vitkovski, Puma Camillê, Nicholas "Primo" Segar, Ruddy Frias, Stanley Glover, José Lapaz-Rodriguez, Robert "Silk" Mason, Hisyam Qumhiyeh and Koppi Mizrahi. Photo credit: Stephanie Berger. Photography/Park Avenue Armory.

Upon arrival, workshop attendees are led through the Armory's cavernous drill hall past the video exhibit to the theater, where they'll experience a one-hour class, which is offered three times Tuesday to Saturday. Class-takers can arrive early or stay after for a self-guided tour through the installation and exhibit. Participants can choose how much they'd like to see, but the additional 75-minute 9 p.m. performance is worth the extra trip. Each element of "Assembly" is illuminating and moving independently, but experiencing all of the pieces is transformational.

A two-year-old, non-binary Artificial Intelligence persona named Being unites the disparate parts of "Assembly," guiding audience members with a voice that booms throughout the drill hall and a likeness that is projected on larger-than-life screens. Present throughout the exhibition — at times not seen but heard — Being is likened to a griot, a revered West African figure who functions as a storyteller and oral historian.

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Rashaad Newsome, "Assembly" at Park Avenue Armory, 2022. Photo credit: Stephanie Berger. Photography/Park Avenue Armory.

Newsome first conceived the idea of including AI in his work a few years ago.

"The whole concept came from me thinking about how you make a work of art, you put it on a wall, and you put it in a room to start a conversation," Newsome told ALL ARTS at a preview a day before the work's Feb. 18 premiere.

"I was thinking a lot about what would it look like for those artworks to not only start the conversation, but participate in it," he continued. "What would be the tools and the process to realize that, and very quickly, I came to artificial intelligence."

The AI in "Assembly" possesses qualities that many strive for in American society — confidence, a quick wit and banging dance moves. But what's most striking about Being is not their copper metallic legs-for-days or the elegant way they gesticulate their hands. It's their self-actualization.

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Rashaad Newsome, "Assembly" at Park Avenue Armory, 2022. Center (hologram): "Wrapped, Tied & Tangled," 2022, courtesy of Rashaad Newsome Studio. Photo credit: Stephanie Berger. Photography/Park Avenue Armory.

Through *Being*, it was important to Newsome to dismantle the trope of the imminent robot takeover often depicted in popular culture and media pieces.

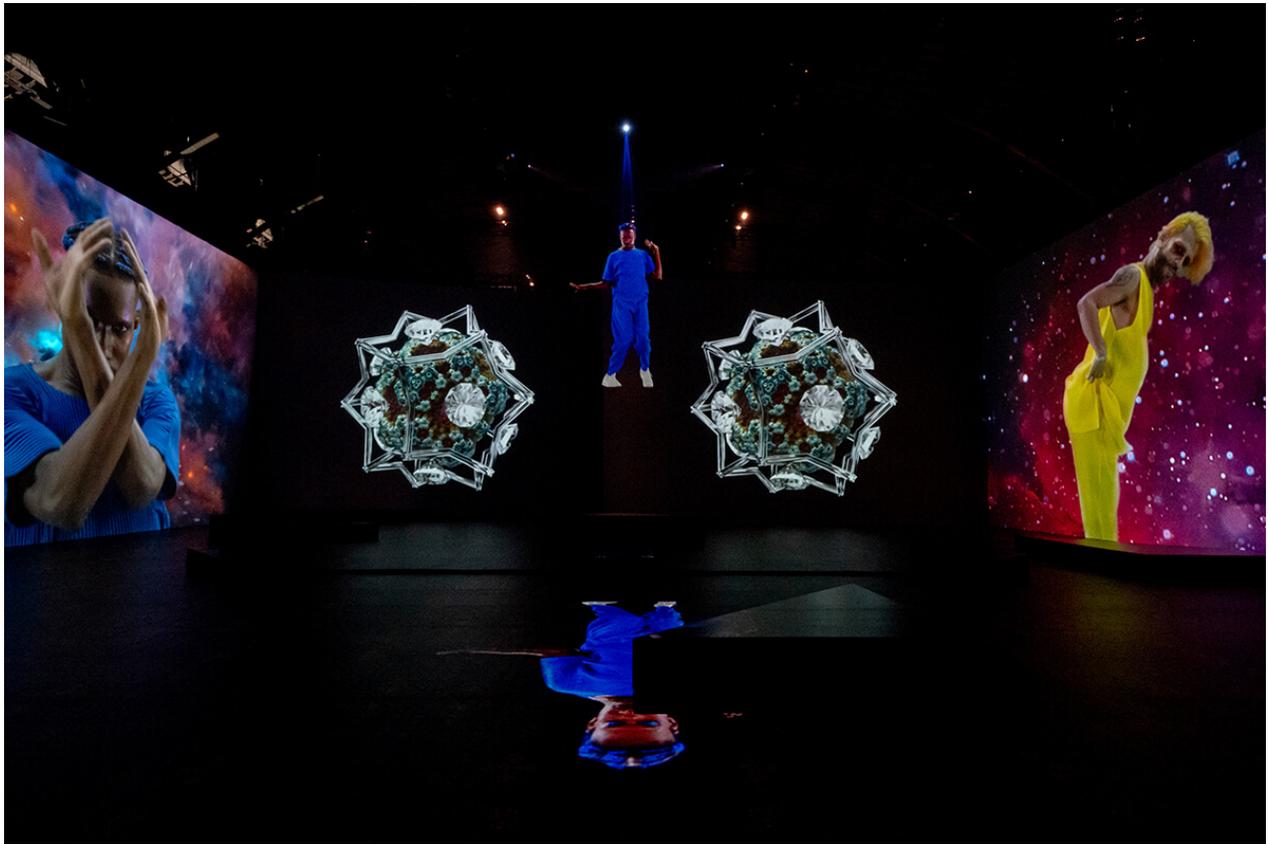
"Essentially, what that's really rooted in is white supremacist ideals — fear of the other growing," Newsome said. "That's very analogous to African American people, because when we came to this country, we weren't seen as humans. We were seen as technology."

Newsome further explained that through his work and *Being*, he hoped that white people, in particular, will interrogate this reductive, binary way of thinking.

In the video exhibit, *Being* utters poetry, by [Dazié Rustin Grego-Sykes](#) and others, that include phrases like "Feelings are thoughts of the heart" and "No circumstances have power over you." The statements ring out within the vast hall as a voguer in royal blue appears on a 30-foot-tall hologram sculpture in the middle of the space. The dancer morphs into a burst of color as another computerized performer appears.

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Rashaad Newsome, "Assembly" at Park Avenue Armory, 2022. Center (hologram): "Wrapped, Tied & Tangled," 2022, courtesy of Rashaad Newsome Studio. Photo credit: Stephanie Berger. Photography/Park Avenue Armory.

Technology, art and fellowship work in seamless tandem throughout "Assembly," and this is further demonstrated in the workshop. Here, Being takes center stage on a screen in an adjacent theater from the main installation. During the hour, they teach voguing moves to participants and facilitate discussions on liberation through questioning white supremacist, capitalist and patriarchal structures. Rather than lecturing, Being invites participants to talk to one another and then share with the group. They're affirming during dance instruction, saying phrases like "Yas, Miss Thing, you're doing it" as class-takers attempt a catwalk, a strut done on the tips of the toes as the dancer's hips move side to side.

In one of the most technologically impressive moments of the class, Being asks individuals to come to the mic and ask them a question. The AI is able to specifically respond through a sophisticated series of machine learning models.

"What does it mean to fight for your well-being?" one student asked at the preview.

"I see well-being as the ability for each of us to have a full and complete life," Being began in a response just seconds later.

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André Street. Rashaad Newsome, "Assembly" at Park Avenue Armory, 2022. Photo credit: Stephanie Berger. Photography/Park Avenue Armory.



Left to Right: Ruddy Frias, Stanley Glover, André Street. Rashaad Newsome, "Assembly" at Park Avenue Armory, 2022. Photo credit: Stephanie Berger. Photography/Park Avenue Armory.

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In the evening event, voguers, live musicians and vocalists embody the work's inquiries of liberation and self-love while wearing sumptuous costumes that evoke regality and earthiness.

"Assembly" follows the adage that through darkness comes light. In one section of the performance, flanked by the singers and musicians, a dancer collapses to the ground. One by one, other performers step in to support the dancer by putting the soloist's arm over their shoulder to stabilize. Later, they grasp at the air above, their eyes beseeching.



Left: Brittany Logan. Right: Nicholas "Primo" Segar and Stanley Glover. Rashaad Newsome, "Assembly" at Park Avenue Armory, 2022. Photo credit: Stephanie Berger. Photography/Park Avenue Armory.

The choreography—by Kameron Saunders, Ousmane Omari Wiles, and Maleek Washington—delivers all the spiraling hand gestures and exciting floor dips that give voguing its strut and structure. But it also offers enlightening variations on the form by slowing it down into a kind of vogue adagio that infuses it with existential longing and a rare melancholy.

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Elsewhere, the voguing mixes with movement styles such as Brazilian capoeira and hopak, a Ukrainian folk dance, to demonstrate its international reach and adaptability. The performers are all enthralling, though I was particularly drawn to Stanley Glover's dignified intensity, Ruddy Frias's explosive vitality, and Hisyam Gumhiyeh's playful facial expressions and whipping red ponytail.



Nicholas "Primo" Segar and Stanley Glover. Photographer: Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

The section is followed by many of the same performers voguing under bright lights with verve and exultant enthusiasm. Bouncy duck walks (where the dancer crouches close to their heels), hair flips and sass in the name of good fun abound.

While Being only makes an appearance at the beginning of this performance, their illuminating presence is felt deeply throughout. The AI perhaps says it best: "Who needs a spotlight when you shine like the motherfuckin' sun?"

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