

# Bloomberg

Rashaad Newsome: "Assembly Is an Ambitious, Joyful Collage of Black Art and Voguing"

By Brian Schaefer

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André Street in *Assembly* by Rashaad Newsome at the Park Avenue Armory, New York.

*Photographer: Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory*

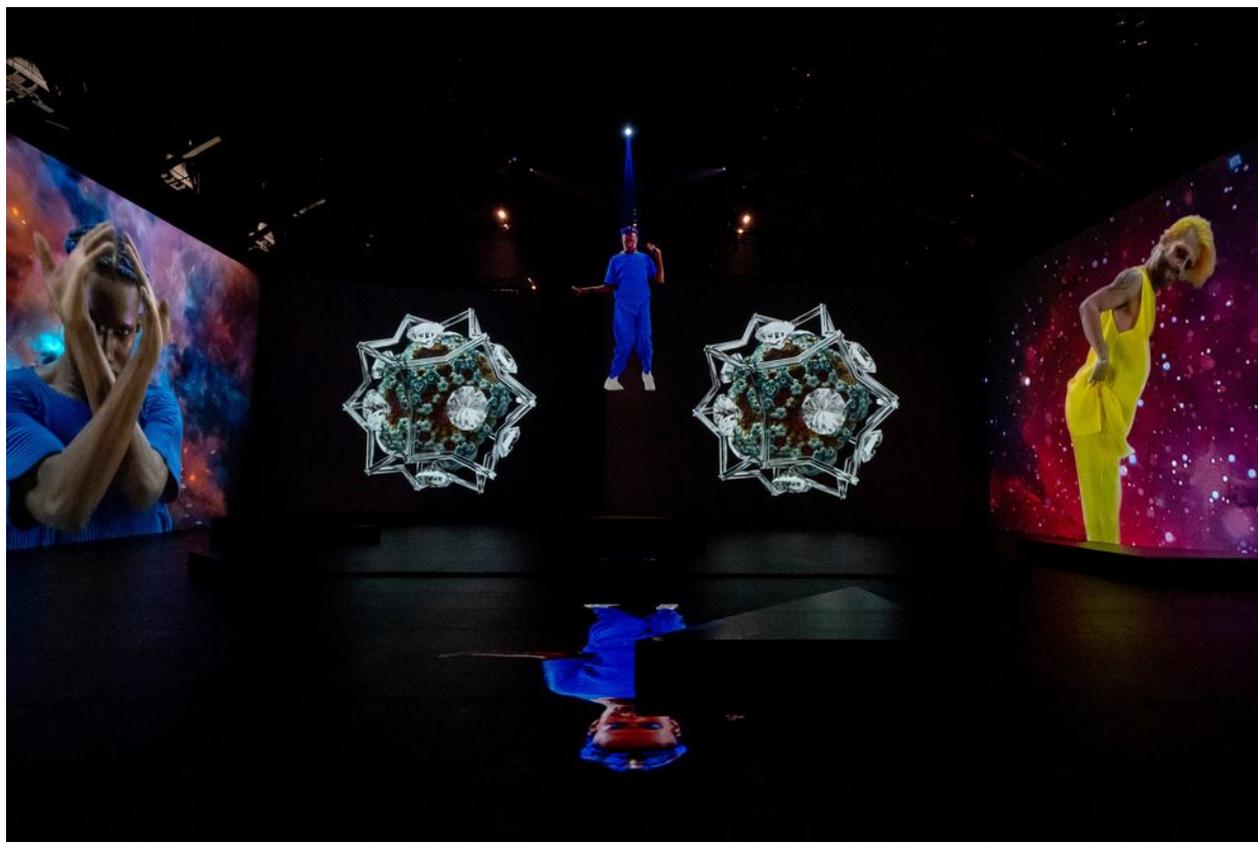
**Rashaad Newsome's multidisciplinary exhibition at the Park Avenue Armory goes deep on systems of oppression while also celebrating the glories of movement.**

The art of collage is the art of layering, of juxtaposition, of conversation between related and unrelated materials. It's making something greater than the sum of its parts. In *Assembly*, the immersive experience [now at the Park Avenue Armory](#) through March 6, [Rashaad Newsome](#) layers, juxtaposes, and creates conversation between multiple artistic and technological disciplines to explore the structures of oppression in search of Black liberation. As serious as that sounds, it also exudes joyfulness.

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Newsome is a multidisciplinary artist based in New York and Oakland, Calif., whose creative practices include photography and music as well as software engineering and community organizing, all of which he brings to Assembly, along with artificial intelligence, dance, sculpture, and a healthy dose of academic theory. The program itself is also something of a collage, comprising a large-scale exhibition in the Armory's gargantuan Wade Thompson Drill Hall; a pedagogic workshop that's part dance class, part lecture, part exercise in self-reflection; and a 75-minute performance that most successfully fuses and embodies Newsome's ideas. (The exhibition and daytime workshops require one ticket; evening performances require another.)



Video art and a hologram (center): *Wrapped, Tied & Tangled*, 2022, courtesy of Rashaad Newsome Studio.  
Photographer: Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

Newsome uses the Drill Hall to great effect, separating it into three distinct zones via large screens, which allows for a sense of discovery and intimacy that this vast space usually precludes. Viewers enter into a storm of color and movement pulsing from large video-mapped walls featuring the dancers Ousmane Omari Wiles and Justin Monster that surround a central 30-foot-tall hologram of solo vogue performers who hover above like fierce apparitions. The scale of the images underscores the significance Newsome places on the role of voguing in Black queer culture and its central role in this exhibition.

Migrate to the back half of the hall, and you'll encounter a 350-seat arena theater where the workshops and performances take place, behind which is a small gallery of Newsome's mixed-

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media collage and sculptural work that combine references to Black queer culture and West African design within thick, glittery 19th century Dutch-style frames. It's a powerful marriage of history, abstract art, and high fashion that proudly positions Black aesthetic traditions as equal to European ones.



A small gallery of Newsome's work is at the back of the hall.  
Photographer: Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

The works are hung on walls covered by the same breathtaking vinyl print that carpets the Drill Hall's floors, featuring jeweled flowers in geometric patterns that include intricate motifs of golden braids and chains, as well as rows of disembodied mouths flashing gold-capped teeth. This gemstone jungle print is both luxe and sly, a flamboyant assault of bling that nods to prints by luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton and Hermès while explicitly embracing Blackness. (And, like those brands, you can buy Newsome's pattern on silk scarves at the on-site pop-up boutique for \$140.)

While roaming the space and observing the art, you'll hear the constant recitation of mantras—"I am precious, worthy, and valuable"—in a voice that suggests Siri on a RuPaul setting. This is the sound of Being, a two-year-old artificial intelligence created by Newsome, who, we're told by press materials, is a nonbinary voguer and educator. I caught snippets of sassier sayings, including a reference to "the proverbial ballsack," that indicated a potential for irreverent wit.

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Being, the two-year-old artificial intelligence created by Newsome, leads the Dance and Decolonization workshop.  
Photographer: Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

Being appears to serve as Assembly's mascot and a manifestation of Newsome's thesis of reclaiming technology for Black empowerment, appearing like the wood-paneled supermodel cousin of C-3PO on a large screen over both the gallery and the theater arena. And it's from that perch, in the theater space, that Being leads the aforementioned Dance and Decolonization workshop, which is light on dance and heavy on lecture. (Imagine being read a Wikipedia entry by your RuPaul Siri.)

The drone of academic jargon becomes depleting, which is a shame because the idea of a participatory component is a smart one. Often the missing link between contemporary art and the complex theories it hopes to illuminate is the chance to collectively debrief them. I appreciated the opportunity to be in conversation with other attendees and acknowledge the dynamic of being a white writer responding to the work of a Black artist speaking largely to Black audiences, but Being didn't feel like the right facilitator for this exchange. Vulnerable statements and thoughtful questions from workshop participants deserve more than trite axioms ("You are a celestial spirit") and generic responses written by code.

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Dazié Rustin Grego-Sykes delivers a passionate spoken word in the evening performances.  
Photographer: Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

Newsome's ideas come alive in the evening performance, which is its own collage of music (band and gospel choir), dance, poetry, and dazzling graphics. It's more concert spectacle than cohesive theatrical event, but the various components—spoken word (a passionately delivered rant against straight men by Dazié Rustin Grego-Sykes), opera (gorgeously sung by Brittany Logan in a fabulous gold Elizabethan collar), or the fantastic voguing—each contains its own sense of drama and character.

Voguing, the competitive social dance form created by queer Black and Latinx members of the 1980s Harlem ballroom scene, has seen waves of mainstream visibility (think Paris Is Burning and Madonna in the late 1990s) and appears to be riding one now with the popularity of shows such as HBO Max's *Legendary*. For Newsome, voguing is a vehicle of self-love and resistance against society's structural oppression, and his troupe of dancers exuberantly conveys how it can be both an individual panacea for life's hardships as well as a communal protest.

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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. Photographer: Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory



Danil Vitkovski. Photographer: Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

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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.

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

These performers make the politics of vogue viscerally felt, rather than intellectually considered, as in the workshop. When layered and put into conversation with the stellar singers and musicians, Assembly accomplishes Newsome's aim of honoring Black struggle, ingenuity, and beauty, becoming a living tapestry as rich and magnificent as his bejeweled backdrop.

When it comes to being moved by ideas, nothing beats moving. And these moving beings are far more persuasive than any nonhuman Being.

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