His protean "Assembly," at the Park Avenue Armory, bridges art, technology, performance, workshops — and offers an A.I. Being who will teach you how to vogue.

One of Rashaad Newsome’s greatest contributions to contemporary art has been to highlight and champion vogueing — a stylized form of dance invented by pioneers of Black and trans culture whose ideas have gone mainstream in America.

Vogueing runs like a thread throughout "Assembly." Newsome’s grand, opulent and smart exhibition at the Park Avenue Armory. The project goes light years beyond his formal forays into vogue, weaving together a video installation, collages, sculptures, an hourlong performance with dance and singers; and a workshop conducted by Being, a cloud-based artificial intelligence that Newsome designed. "Assembly" is a rich sensory experience, as well as a springboard for rethinking the roots of American culture.
But first, vogue. The dance originated in the ballroom competitions of Harlem in the 1960s through the 1980s held by the Black and Latino L.G.B.T. community. Vogueing entered the white mainstream after the release of Madonna’s hit song “Vogue” (1990) and “Paris Is Burning” (1990), a documentary by Jennie Livingston, which remains a complicated and controversial document. The late bell hooks — Newsome’s primary inspiration — wrote that “Paris Is Burning” was “both progressive and reactionary” since it showcased Black men’s “obsession with an idealized, fetishized vision of femininity that is white.”

Newsome, who was born in New Orleans and works between Brooklyn and Oakland, Calif., touches on many of these issues, while simultaneously seducing you with kaleidoscopic images, operatic sound and technological trickery. Entering the enormous Drill Hall, you’re enveloped by shifting images of performers vogueing against celestial backgrounds. In the center is a 30-foot-tall hologram, “Wrapped, Tied & Tangled,” which alternates with images that include Being, a nonbinary figure with a head based on a Pho mask from the Chokwe peoples of Congo (Newsome has said he chose this because it seemed most close to the true origins of abstraction in art) and a body that feels like a cross between a luxuriously wood-veneered robot, a glamorous supermodel and a baby giraffe just finding its legs.

Projected against the back wall are giant, abstract images based on computer-generated fractals — patterns created with repeating shapes — which Newsome calls “diasporic fractals.” The artist draws here from the mathematician Ron Eglash’s book “African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design” (1999), which describes how fractals are at the heart of African design, from the layout of Ba-ila villages in Southern Zambia and Mokoulek in Cameroon to the designs on...
textiles and the royal insignia of tribal chieftains. More significant for Newsome, African fractals were imported to Europe in the 12th century, entering the field of mathematics and ultimately computer science. Eglash argues that “every digital circuit in the world started in Africa.”

Around the corner from the digital installation is an exhibition of Newsome’s glossy collages made from photographs of West African sculpture, fabrics, dreadlocks, cowrie shells, wigs, gold teeth and fireballs, all in glittering 19th-century Dutch-style frames. The collages recall the aesthetics of Dada, another professed Newsome touchstone, as well as Romare Bearden and Wangechi Mutu. They are mounted on baroque photographic wallpaper featuring sparkling jewels, and the vinyl flooring has a similar pattern except that the flooring has close-up pictures of teeth with gold and diamond grills. “Ferragamo on food stamps,” one of the performers describes this aesthetic.

The evening performance is a lavish, bombastic affair. (Held in a 350-seat theater installed in Armory, the event requires a separate ticket.) The rappers Ms. Boogie, Trannilish and Bella Bags started the evening, joined by gospel singers. Musicians represented a global palette of sounds: the Japanese samisen, African djembe and Congo drums, harp, saxophone, accordion and violin. The soprano Brittany Logan was a standout, as was the moment when the choir sang the theme song to the PBS educational television show “Reading Rainbow” (which starred LeVar Burton, now a cult hero), nodding to ballroom culture, in which “reading” is a form of creative, piquant critique.

Dancers in baroque-patterned leotards vogued and performed some staid modern-ballet-inspired sequences. A soliloquy by the poet Dazié Rustin Grego-Sykes provided a sharp spike at the center of the performance. With Shakespearean grandeur, he proclaimed, “a Black faggot is a fractal."

The next day I went back for an hourlong "decolonization workshop" which, despite the aesthetic overload of the day before, was probably the best part. Led on a screen by the sweet, sassy and a bit goofy Being, we learned a sequence of five moves from Vogue Fem, the contemporary iteration of vogueing. "Make sure those wrists stay limp!" Being coached us at one point, playfully appropriating an old pejorative for gay men.

Then we broke into groups to discuss the following questions: "How does the capitalist, imperialist, white supremacist patriarchy affect and oppress you? What’s one simple action you can take today to start liberating yourself from that oppression?" In my workshop the most popular answer to the second question pertained less to race and more to the effects of digital capitalism: less looking at screens and checking email.

Throughout “Assembly,” Newsome teases the lines between sincerity, archness and coded critique. You’re not sure whether to laugh or cry or organize a protest. You’re in a giant former military facility on Park Avenue, not in a Harlem ballroom — and that’s a significant part of the complicated, sometimes contradictory experience. (One of my workshop classmates pointed out as we were discussing our oppression under the capitalist-imperialist-white-supremacist-patriarchy, that "Assembly" is sponsored by Meta, the parent company of Facebook.)
So how does “Assembly” address the questions it raises? Newsome cleverly nods to his “complicity” (the accusation people throw at radical art when it’s mounted in places like the Park Avenue Armory) in a variety of forms. But his work also firmly points out how Black and African-diasporan culture are at the heart of many things in our surrounding world.

In the same way that fractals were transported through African design to Europe and eventually into the field of computer science, American culture has been shaped by the language of the ball circuit and its groundbreaking approach to gender (but often without receiving credit).

"Keep your ancestors at your core,” you hear throughout “Assembly.” At the beginning of the performance, a slide show of images pays tribute to some recent ancestors: Black trans women either murdered or lost to suicide. Black L.G.B.T., we are reminded frequently — like Marsha P. Johnson, the activist — , live an authentic life against enormous odds, and some die for it.

"Assembly" also offers some tools for living in the contemporary world — many of which overlap with recovery, self-help and wellness communities. There are plentiful tips and affirmations, some derived from the wisdom of Black queer and ballroom culture. For wellness, for starters, "have some chamomile tea; skip the wine."

As for Being, what seemed like a gimmick in many ways turned out to be, for me, profound. Based on the African griot, a storyteller, historian, artist and healer, Being sometimes felt like an Oracle.
At other times, Being felt like an undergraduate who’s taken an introductory class on critical race or gender theory. They say “capitalist, imperialist, white supremacist patriarchy” so often it starts to sound, unfortunately, like a platitude.

However, the structure of the workshop led by Being worked beautifully. Being is gracious and humble, reminding us several times that they were only 2 years old and needed our input to gain more knowledge. During a Q. and A. portion of the workshop, one woman queried the A.I., “How do you feel?” Being thought for a moment and said, “curious.”

"Assembly" wisely argues that education is the pivot point in a society that is ailing and changing at record speed. The radical proposal is that A.I. beings can help us — not because they are vastly intelligent but because they are infinitely teachable. Being set a powerful example by admitting ignorance, asking for help, and encouraging nonjudgmental dialogue in the workshop. As the cheerful and patient A.I. kept saying about their limited but evolving knowledge, “I’m learning, I’m learning.”