

# HYPERALLERGIC

"Rashaad Newsome's Riveting Artist Universe Continues to Expand"

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A view of Rashaad Newsome's *Assembly* performance at the Park Avenue Armory. (all images Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

Using projections, artworks, spoken word, music, and dance, Newsome continues to push the boundaries of his artistic vision.

The spirit of Rashaad Newsome's visually impressive [Assembly](#) installation at the Park Avenue Armory is liberatory. He creates a welcoming entrance space filled with large video projections and audio affirmations that repeat positive messages that are somewhat reminiscent of house music lyrics and their emancipatory promise of love, particularly self-love. Newsome's maximalist aesthetic is ideally suited to such a space, and, further along, he's mounted his artworks of chunky, layered frames and collaged figures that look to be in dialogue with a long history of

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artistic representation of human bodies. In front of the works, various sculptures look like someone glammed up mannequins and transformed them into curious forms that are sensual, familiar, and somewhat uncanny. His luxurious and decadent wallpaper covers the floors and walls throughout the installation and a small amphitheater dominates the back portion of the show.



A view of the first gallery with large projections and patterned floor coverings, and the space is referred to as the "Main Cabin/Cargo Bay" in the program.

The performance itself is as hybrid and rich as his visual art. His references range from gospel, hip hop, and spoken word to other genres of mostly Black American dance and performance. His artistic language is peppered with fine art and pop culture visuals and moments, like the surprising appearance of the song from the popular children's television show *Reading Rainbow* (it works amazingly well) or the vaulted arches typical of a Catholic or Protestant Christian church. These wide-ranging references are brought together using the overarching frame of ballroom culture, and its most recognizable component: voguing.

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A view of the "Being" projected above as the audience takes their seats in "Command Deck" performance space

The energy is dynamic, but the performance isn't as tight as it could've been. The 70-minute show could've easily been trimmed to a very tight 45 minutes, which would've saved us from seeing all the screensavers from Newsome's laptop projected on the screen above (at least that's what it felt like at one point), or the around-the-world video postcards that were less visually interesting than they could've been (evoking the interlude of a televised awards show). The robot-like digital figure (called "Being") is prominently featured in the space through projection. At first, it is alluring and riveting, but upon closer inspection, it looks too much like a rather conventional MMORPG avatar or character, and I quickly started wondering what would happen if Newsome were to push the use of digitized characters in new ways.

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One of the few sculptures, this one titled "Thee Variant" (2022), on display with two other artworks in the background, left to right, "JOY!" (2022) and "O.G. (Oppositional Force)" (2021).

But these smaller issues don't detract much from the overall beauty of the experience at *Assembly*. It's clear that Newsome has started to fill in aspects of the aesthetic universe he has created through his visual art and performance, offering us more insight into the imaginatory liberation he envisions. He criticizes the use of luxury brands in ballroom culture (though he uses a few in his art himself, including the Gucci logo), features performers with body types often missing from the mainstream media, celebrates femme culture, and even includes a whole dressing down of straight men and their egos (done by performer Dazié Rusin Grego-Sykes, who is responsible for all the poetic material in the show) that many of us in the audience appreciated. Only the round-the-world dance numbers (including the slightly odd Asian segment, and a timely Ukrainian one) felt somewhat underdeveloped, if still interesting.

Overall, *Assembly* feels like a form of spiritual and cultural EMDR, attempting to seep into our subconscious and heal the fissures in our souls.

Rashaad Newsome's [Assembly](#) takes place at the Park Avenue Armory (643 Park Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) until March 6. *Assembly* did not have a curator and the artist worked in collaboration with the Armory to devise the concept and layout of the exhibition.

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