

SURFACE

Rashaad Newsome: "This Cloud-Based AI Robot Will Teach You How to Vogue"

By Ryan Waddoups

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"Assembly" by Rashaad Newsome at the Park Avenue Armory. Photography by Stephanie Berger, courtesy of Park Avenue Armory

Voguing is interwoven throughout Rashaad Newsome's ambitious new exhibition at the Park Avenue Armory, especially when instructed by an AI robot that encourages us to challenge cultures of dominance.

Even if you've never heard of "voguing" or find yourself stiff-limbed on the dance floor, there's a chance you'll feel much more confident after visiting ["Assembly"](#). Rashaad Newsome's sensorial new solo exhibition at Manhattan's Park Avenue Armory through March 6. Voguing informs nearly every aspect of the show, which puts Newsome's multidimensional practice on full display and beckons visitors to rethink the roots of American culture. Video-mapped walls pulsate with projected imagery of computer-generated patterns inspired by [African geometries](#). A 30-foot-tall hologram sculpture, meanwhile, morphs and mutates into various performers. In the evenings, a

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collective of dancers, musicians, and gospel singers stages a lavish performance in an immersive theater designed by local firm [New Affiliates](#).

So what exactly is voguing? The dance originated in Harlem's ballroom scene of the 1960s but reached a zenith two decades later, when members of the Black and Latino queer communities competed against one another by striking magazine-ready poses in dance-offs. The pageant-like drag performance brought together communities historically marginalized by gender, sexuality, or race. It permeated the mainstream through Jennie Livingston's award-winning—and [controversial](#)—documentary [Paris Is Burning](#) (1990) and Madonna's [equally dicey](#) hit song "Vogue" that same year.



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The breakout star of "Assembly" is Being, a virtual femme AI robot based on the African griot, a storyteller, artist, and healer. Designed by Newsome, the supermodel-like entity's head references [Pho masks](#) from Congo's Chokwe peoples, traditionally worn by male dancers in celebration of femininity. Being offers lessons that nurture visitors into embracing voguing's distinct movements. ("Left hand on right shoulder; left hand on left shoulder," Being [instructs](#). "Roll wrist forward; roll wrist back.") It also leads three workshops that inspire thought that challenges what it [deems](#) the "capitalist, imperialist, white supremacist patriarchy."

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"'Assembly' will offer audiences a new way of thinking about rights, liberty, and humanity, using the so-rarely-explored paradox of the Black experience and the advancement of technology as a jumping-off point," Newsome says. "Through explorations into the connections between quantum energy, Black sociality, and Black liberation movements, one thing becomes clear: the only way we'll get to the future is together. This type of beloved togetherness starts with a real reboot."

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