

The logo for the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) features the letters 'CAC' in a stylized, white, sans-serif font. The 'C' on the left is a solid red color, while the 'A' and 'C' on the right are white with a thin black outline. A red diagonal line crosses through the 'A'.

Contemporary
Arts Center

The artwork 'SAYA WOOLFALK' by S. Woolfalk features a central figure with a blue face and large, white, layered paper wings. The figure's eyes are wide and staring. Above the face is a circular, colorful mandala-like composition. This composition includes a central pink butterfly-like figure, a yellow and white striped pattern, and various other symbols like eyes and abstract shapes. The background is a light blue with faint, repeating patterns of the same central figure.

SAYA WOOLFALK
A CABINET OF ANTICIPATION



Essay #1

Bloodlines have not been linear for some time, if ever.

Nor, for that matter, are the histories and nations that have been built around enduring patrimonial customs – engineering a model where civilization and division are habitually intertwined, and the inclusion of a population necessitates the exclusion of an/other. Ethnicity, geography and culture have become the corresponding foundations of both congregation and segregation, providing the raw materials for the dual-edged construct of that which we call “identity.” The No Placeans and their descendants, the Empathics, are enchantingly transgressive in this paradigm because they embody ancestries we can no longer, nor often want, to see – animating the biological slurry of our modern world, and eviscerating the esatz integrity of essentialism. Their Creator/CEO Saya Woolfalk lives this combinative constitution, turning the “personal is political” into a universal proposal that translates her intermingled Asian, European and African-American heritage into the genetic blueprints of a transcendent clan. She has imagined an interspecies population of beings into quasi-existence, turning Renaissance humanist Thomas More’s elusive, if no less enticing dream of “utopia” [from the Greek for no (“ou”) place (“topos”)] into a reflexive mythology indicative of where we have been, who we are, and how far there is still to go. Science, spirituality and spectacle intersect in this pan-historical third space, where the pre-modern, yet eminently progressive Empathics become the agents to navigate through the thorny frontiers of race, gender, power, technology and nature.



For over a decade, with every succeeding exhibition advancing the narrative and expanding its implications, Woolfalk has authored a psychedelic amplification of our increasingly diasporic world – where rote adherence to ethnic authenticity is jettisoned in favor of an inclusive, deeply empathetic and environmentally-minded species. As each project builds upon the logic of the last in this cumulative creation story, Woolfalk parallels visionary artists like Trenton Doyle Hancock, Henry Darger, Firelei Baez and Frohawk Two Feathers in the orchestration of quasi-fictive ecosystems that weave singular components into all-encompassing tapestries. The architecture of this technicolor cosmology mirrors its mantra of cultural hybridity, as Woolfalk marries elements of science fiction, anthropology and speculative fiction into a pan-disciplinary constellation that collects paintings, sculpture, prints, craft objects, video and digital work under a singular museological lexicon. In so doing, employing the aura that antiquity and museum displays retain in the popular imagination, she thickens her fable with the anthropological weight/currency of artifacts. Bones, skulls, pelts, totems and textiles proliferate here under a glowing black light, coyly traversing First Nations, kitsch, archaeology and Afro-Futurism. The gravitas of these objects extends into the ultimate ethos of Woolfalk's Empathic enterprise, where post-racial humanism and idyllic communion confront the underlying reality that for thousands of people upon this planet—they have no rights, no refuge, no place. Where the absence of something sheds light upon its otherwise insufferable presence, Woolfalk's ambivalent Eden thereby interrogates the systems and pathologies – nation-states, racial hatred, environmental degradation, Darwinian individualism – that separate humanity from its ideals.

Recent revisions to North American economic policy grant corporations the same status and rights as people, even as they accumulate inordinate amounts of immunity and power that exceed physical bearing. If we read this rise as the apotheosis of corporations into world-spanning demigods, Woolfalk interrogates the late capital colonization of contact zones by way of a satirical self-help business. In the new-age boutique she brands

ChimaTEK, the Empathics literally sell pieces of themselves to “heal” their customers and advance interspecies hybridization on the gilded wings of consumerism. Speaking to goods that “allow a consumer to remix and manipulate their identity,” Woolfalk elaborates, “with ChimaTEK I wanted to explore what would happen when you simplify a long-term process of genetic and cultural transformation into a series of purchaseable lifestyle products.” The ensuing installations take on the guise of pop up shops that upscale the traditional museum presentation of artifacts as tantalizing vessels of re-invention. Such displays float somewhere between the synesthetic, drug-addled culture of the 1970s, which valorized hallucinogenic drugs as vehicles to expand one’s consciousness, and high end contemporary spas full of misty titillation and beguiling cure-alls. Seducing one to want more than their present state allows, this work speaks a language that is simultaneously a capitulation to, and hijacking of, the corporate manufacture of desire. In this context, Woolfalk’s work is a spiked elixir – irresistible in color, brightness and possibility – carrying a reckoning of the conditions that make such self-improvement alluring, and imperative.

Woolfalk employs what she calls “the utopian potentials of digital space” with equal dichotomy, extending the haptic underpinnings of her artifacts and agents into a virtual realm rife with both promise and peril. In many ways, the meteoric rise of online culture and communications anticipated the Empathics capacity to move fluidly between race, gender and appearance in an open-ended arena of socio-cultural experimentation. And yet, we know that the online revolution has also fed an equally dark passenger, fueling and fomenting an expansion of incendiary aggression, hate, and xenophobia. The apparatus is made in the image of its maker, and much like the infamous portrait of Dorian Gray, this initially utopian technology has also become a repository of human indulgence, hedonism, excess and violence. Never before have we been so connected and alienated at once, with social rituals in a state of entropic flux. And while one cannot put Pandora back in the box, by marrying



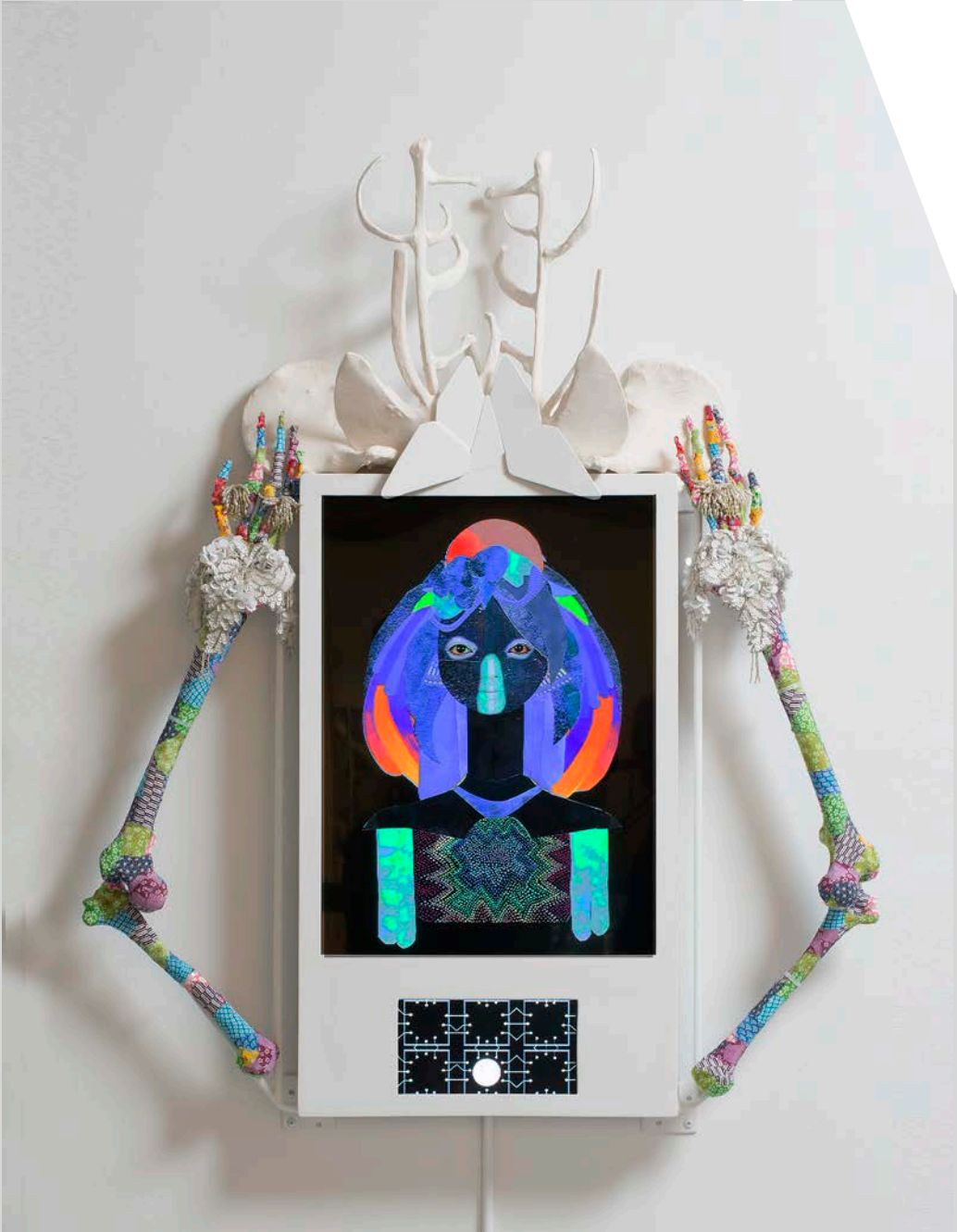
the flight of identity with a renaissance of empathy, Woolfalk's Avatar and Virtual Download Stations, along with a number of her video works and explorations into augmented reality, pursue humanity in the sprawling circuitry of post-humanism.

Seeking to restore the collectivity that is as obfuscated by social media as it is ethnocentrism, Woolfalk shares the evolution of the Empathics with the many, and atomizes her ego across a corps of avatars, agents, and collaborators. And while she remains the mastermind of this alternate universe, Woolfalk has consistently incorporated the voices, aspirations and expertise of those around her to animate its ambitions. From the formative *No Place* (2006-2008), which was scripted and conceived from exploratory interviews conducted by Woolfalk and her collaborator Rachel Lears, to a group of female dancers she enlisted to co-produce the first Ritual of the Empathics, to university-based biologists and neuroscientists that contributed to the Institute of Empathy, this world has never been the domain of a solitary Creator. Moreover, the continued expansion of this world via interactive installations, online platforms, public presentations (i.e. Times Square) and immersive performance incorporates the audience into a shared platform of meaning-making. In so doing, Woolfalk perforates the categories, gestalts and constructs that supposedly lifted us out of barbarism by way of autonomous enterprise. By turning up the volume of burgeoning pan-cultural, trans-gender, intersectional dimensions of contemporary society, Woolfalk cultivates a generative space of "discomfort and ambiguity," where, in her words, "participants can come to a more complex clarity about who we are and how we move in the world." The ingredients of tomorrow are nested in today, here, awakening, if only we can shed the comforts of selfhood for a kaleidoscopic contract of shared evolution.

Steven Matijcio

Jane Dale Owen Director and Chief Curator
Blaffer Museum





Essay #2

Two Third Other

This past April, Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz, the Director at the National Museum of Art in La Paz, Bolivia, was invited to speak with philosopher Achille Mbembe in a panel organized at MoMA. During an hour-long conversation, the two cultural theorists discussed the notion of borders, addressing processes of circulation and control, on a global scale. As they reflected on the concept of the “Other” and its institutionalization by state and border-control entities, Hinderer Cruz made a remark, which glaringly exposed a simple truth I had never apprehended in such clear terms. Despite a consistent claim that the “sacrifice of some lives for the betterment of others is the norm” and “deep-seated anxieties, including anxieties of racialized others taking over the planet,” each and every one of us is actually, constantly two thirds “other,” he stated. To function properly, our bodies need about 66% of water—not only for our well-being, but to ensure survival. Every day, 2.5 liters of “our” water is evacuated and reintegrates the greater water cycle, flowing through sewage, streams, oceans, mountains, clouds, raining over fields and rice paddies, and, eventually, maybe, recycled into consumable products. One could easily say that, having left the body, what was then “our” two thirds becomes two thirds “other.” *Isn't Otherness therefore intrinsically embedded in our human nature?*

¹ Achille Mbembe, 'The idea of a borderless world,' *ChimurengaChronicle*, accessed June 18, 2019: <https://africasacountry.com/2018/11/the-idea-of-a-borderless-world>.



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Saya Woolfalk's concept of "interspecies hybridization" exposes this through different avenues. Combining "culture and nature," the artist's multimedia pieces propose a future in which women are able to alter their genetic make-up to merge with plants. As two kingdoms collapse into each other, a No Placean—the term she chose for this new, hybrid being—becomes a N-other.

The tradition of envisioning a postmodern hybrid human is of course long-standing. Cyborg feminist theory overwhelmingly favors technological-human mash-ups over stable, physical identities. The specificity in Woolfalk's work, however, lies in the transitions she creates between the now and that envisioned future. Assuming continuums, the artist renders homogenous pieces constituted of both two- and three-dimensional elements and, rather than choosing one over the other, situates us, at the very same time, within the physical and technological realms. Her *ChimaCloud* amalgamates a DJ-godlike figure, with that of the artist him/her/themselves, and gives the programmer control over the underneath, subservient piece, *Venus*, a concatenation of video and sculpture. Similarly, in the Magrittean *Jillian*, photography appears last in a creative process, which involves weaving, performing and sculpting. In the mix, 2D and 3D become literally inseparable, the artist duping us by confusing the painted for the projected, and cleverly demonstrating how futuristic blending of cultures, races or kingdoms may take place as seamlessly as the association of techniques she herself combined.

Pondering on *A Cabinet of Curiosity*, I am reminded of that feeling I once had, leaving the movies after having watched *The Matrix*. Stepping out of the room and back into the light, I stood

still, befuddled, for a whole ten minutes, certain I was still in the movie. An immersive construct, the exhibition operates in similar ways, making one almost incapable of telling facts from fiction —*the ultimate blending*.

Saya Woolfalk's full body of work comprises a provisional quality: it calls for a future in which mutations will have attenuated our differences. Scientists recently discovered that mirror neurons are responsible for the pain we may experience when witnessing the suffering of friends. That exact ability to project ourselves into other's feelings and make ours the emotions they feel, sits at the very core of Saya Woolfalk's practice. An entry point into the concept of relational aesthetics, the characters she and her performing acolytes embody, bid us to emulate their behavior. Ultimately—and this may well be the exhibition's primal objective—they urge us to become more empathic ourselves.

Jettisoning colonial fantasies of the primitive, which cabinet of curiosities, a display common to natural history museums, could elicit, Woolfalk selects and meticulously edits each skull, femur and vertebrae. In so doing, the artist suggests evolution's next stage and allows for an improved version of us to commence. As skulls and dots motifs circulate from one medium to the next, Woolfalk pays tribute to our species' incessant mutability; each object a variant; a step forward in the long march of men, women and beings, towards a more fluid, empathetic version of humanity. To a large degree, this, to me, is what makes the Empathics so fascinatingly Other, and yet so compellingly contiguous to our Selves.

Valentine Umansky

Curator of Lens-Based Arts
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² Kate McQuaid, 'A Second Gallery A Colorful Combination of Culture and Nature,' in *Boston Globe*, 5 October 2006.

³ Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,' in Simians, Cyborgs and Women: *The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, 1991. Later nuanced by Paula Moya, who criticized Haraway's misappropriations in the relationships between cyborgs and women of color. See Moya, Paula M. L., and Michael R. Hames-Garcia (ed.), Introduction of 'Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism,' University of California Press, 2000.

⁴ Per Tate's glossary: term created by French curator Nicholas Bourriaud in the 1990s to describe the tendency to make art based on, or inspired by, human relations and their social context.



SAYA WOOLFALK

A Cabinet of Anticipation

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Curated by Steven Matijcio & Valentine Umansky

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