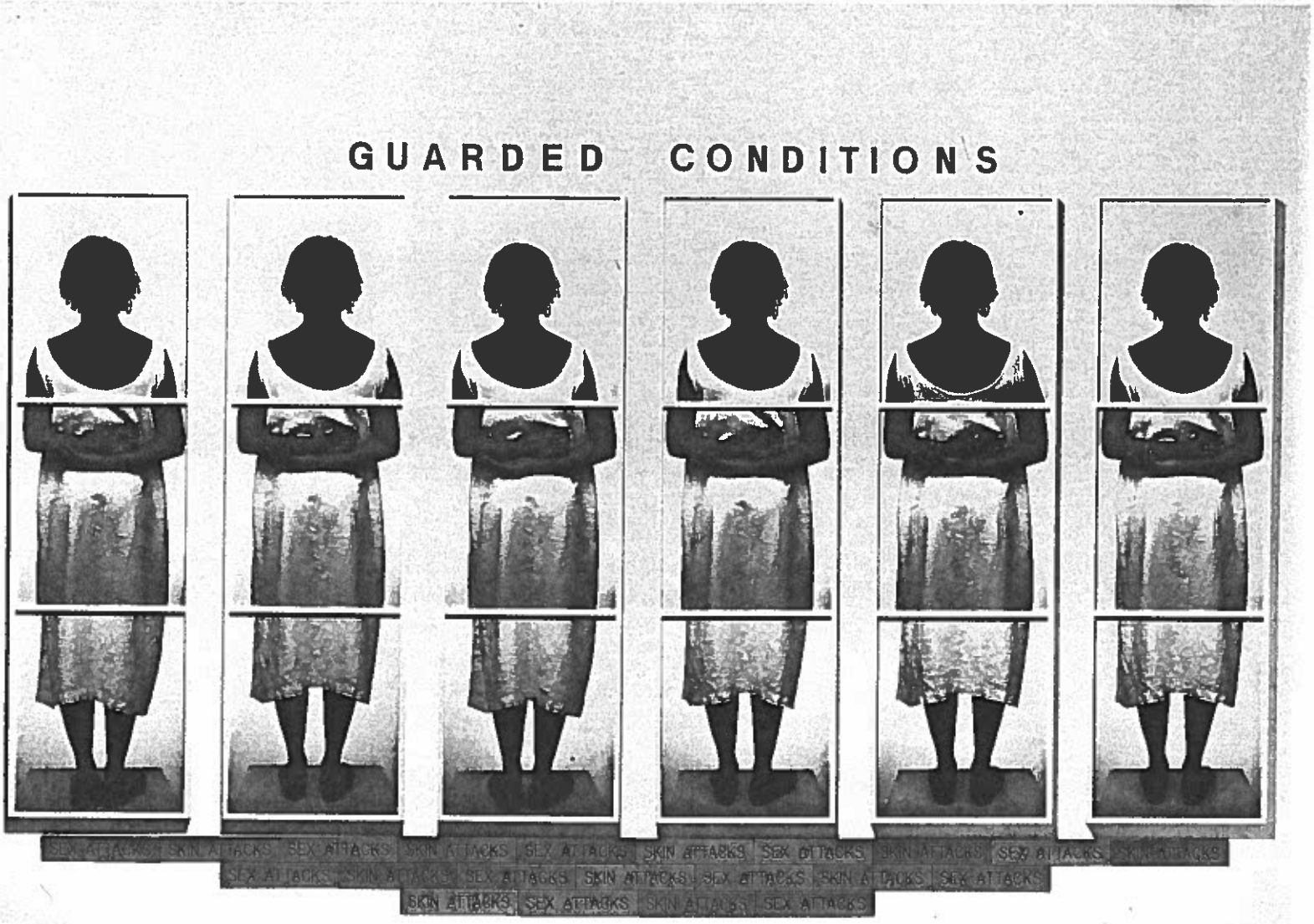
2

Lorna Simpson's Figurative Transitions

1.

Lorna Simpson's *Guarded Conditions* is an iconic if not canonical work of deceptively simple means (1989; fig. 2.1). On the most basic level, it repeatedly depicts a black woman who faces away from the viewer. The figure wears a simple shift and sensible shoes, her hair done up in equally sensible neck-skimming braids. The artist has rendered the woman's body larger than life-size and divided it into three subtly mismatched images whose serial iteration suggests an endless horizontal expansion. Yet among the six versions of Simpson's trademark antiportrait, differences do obtain between one seemingly identical set of Polaroids and the next, as if to register the model's shifting relationship to herself. Feet are shuffled about; hair gets ever-so-slightly rearranged; and in the middle row of photographs, the right hand alternately embraces then caresses the left arm, echoing the alternating rhythm of the words "sex attacks skin attacks," which are inscribed on the plaques running beneath the prints. The work presents "the black woman" as a vulnerable enigma, cut by the frame and framed by language yet still possessing an inscrutable sense of self.

But what of our own posture? What does it mean for us to stand before *Guarded Conditions?* To look at a row of women who will not look back? Does the fragmentation, enlargement, and turning away of the figure's body undo any sense of corporeal affinity we might feel, thereby foreclosing the possibility of identification? What are we to make of the interchange between image and text? How, finally, does the work aim to address and so position us as its imagined spectators? Surely the model's placement on a nondescript platform work is meant to summon and critique those phantasms associated with the historical staging of black female



2.1
Lorna Simpson, *Guarded Conditions*, 1989. Eighteen color Polaroid prints, twenty-one engraved plastic plaques, seventeen plastic letters. 231.1 x 332.7 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

subjects in the visual field from slavery to the present. The same imperative might be said to animate Simpson's practice as a whole, whether her early black-and-white documentary photographs of African American social gatherings, or her more recent efforts in film and video, such as the sprawling multi-channel installation *31* (2002), which purports to track the movements of a single black woman over the course of a month.

However, it was the artist's picturing of African diasporic womanhood in phototexts like *Guarded Conditions* that made her the locus of what is now a voluminous discourse, which productively models the promises and perils of a multicultural approach to art's histories. Getting a handle on Simpson's engagements with the "peculiar institution"—the aim of the present chapter—will not only require reckoning with these accounts, but will also mean revisiting her most detailed examination of the slave past, the rarely discussed *Five Rooms* (1991). Of all the site-specific installations considered in *Bound to Appear*, this project represents the greatest departure from an artist's tried-and-true habits of working. Yet ultimately, I want to argue, because of its "transitional" status within her oeuvre, *Five Rooms* allows us to grasp how representing the enslaved materially transformed Simpson's work, and provides a crucial lens for understanding the logic behind her varied means of figuring, siting, and historicizing the visual production of the black female body.

For the moment, I want to follow the trails offered by the literature. In examining Simpson's art, most critics tend to invoke slavery associatively rather than in the structural, affective, and historical terms that her art and the institution itself demand. The reception of *Guarded Conditions* provides a case in point. In the more than twenty years since its September debut at New York's Josh Baer Gallery, the work has been exhibited and reproduced ad nauseum, making it an emblem for black neoconceptualism, Simpson herself, and the contested cultural landscape in which her art was located. The piece put critic Robert Nickas in mind of an article he had recently read about "the brutal beating and rape of a black woman by two white men who, ironically, were working as security guards at the time.... The coincidence of the newspaper story and the piece in the gallery revealed how Simpson's work comments on the ugly facts of life without simply reporting them."[1] *Guarded Conditions* is introduced here as a studied refraction of the real; not dissimilarly, for curator Beryl J. Wright, it would become a double-sided metonym of racial sufferance. In her reading, the duplication of the turned-back figures "calls up images of those women who stand guard against the evils of the world on the steps of black fundamentalist churches on Sunday mornings," while the woman's isolated body locates her "in multiple situations of institutional repression and surveillance, such as slave auctions, hospital examination rooms, and criminal lineups."[2]

Although both interpretations privilege the off-frame scenarios that the artist assiduously refuses to picture rather than the internal logic of the work itself, taken together, these responses begin to suggest how *Guarded Conditions* sum-

mons up those corporeal depredations still central to narratives of black women's experience as well as their historical grounding within slavery's signal locales.[3] As Wright suggests, few sites resonate more evocatively with the work's unassuming white platform than the auction block as deployed in the antebellum United States. Varying in size, construction, and location—from a kitchen table repurposed for an urban private sale to a designated tree stump situated on the grounds of a plantation—auction blocks dramatized the precarious position of captive female subjects within slavery's economic and geographic scales. Forced to mount these structures at the master's command and to reveal their bodies for inspection by prospective buyers, enslaved women were removed from the circle of human suffering so that they might become circulating objects of sexual and pecuniary exchange.[4]

Simpson was not alone in directing viewers back to the auction block at just this historical moment. Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*, first staged in 1989, concluded with the sale, pitched to the audience, of the African American female performer cast in the role of the drama's eponymous slave protagonist; her name, Sally, refers to the playwright's own ancesstor and to Thomas Jefferson's enslaved "mistress."[5] To be sure, neither McCauley's play nor *Guarded Conditions* throws us back to a particular block, or to a verifiable subject. Rather, in both cases, the primal scene of slavery hurtles forward into the present, depicted with a resolute contemporaneity that does not so much conflate one moment with another as illuminated the structuring contours of black female oppression through a precise condensation of visual form. In Simpson's work various modes of figuration gesture toward what cultural theorist Hortense Spillers has identified as those economies of violence instantiated in slavery that continue to function in new and no less pernicious guises, still reducing subjects to things, even to flesh, though not always to chattel.[6]

I am not alone in making this observation. Art historian Kellie Jones argues that Simpson's phototexts reenact the historical production of black womanhood at the level of the image without, however, reperforming those processes on the figure itself, visually acknowledging the extent to which black folks have been produced as "human machines."[7] To make the case, Jones conjoins two intellectual positions: black cultural critic bell hooks's thinking about the transformation of African diasporic female subjects into parts of the laboring body; and art historian Rosalind Krauss's theorization of the part-object, a term that finds one of its most generative accountings in the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein.[8] The latter move is particularly productive. While psychoanalytic discourse has tended to be masculinist in outlook and Eurocentric in conception, it nonetheless provides a rich set of interpretive spurs and descriptive languages for thinking about the structural, affective, historical, and sexual dynamics of racialization, as well as Simpson's means for picturing them.[9] At key points in this chapter, I will look to this tradition not to offer a totalizing theory, but to ground Simpson's engagements with and critiques of hegemonic descriptive systems.

To take up where Jones leaves off, in Klein's framework, the infant construes itself and the world as incontrovertibly riven, a conglomeration of part-objects that satisfy and frustrate its needs. The mother herself is fragmented into a breast, becoming both the site of identification and the target of destructive feelings that fill the child with anxiety, afraid that the breast will lash out in retaliation. To shield itself from this venting of maternal rage, the infant splits itself and its object into good and bad portions, then projects all of its badness onto the outside world. In this position, which Klein calls the paranoid-schizoid, the hated breast becomes the hateful and hating breast. As the child comes to understand that each subject is a mixture of good and bad, it acquires a sense of conscience, guilty for the damage it has inflicted on the mother in fantasy, placing the child in the depressive position. The only way to overcome this psychic state is to repair the previous fantasized destruction of the breast, and to thereby internalize the image of the once-damaged, now-restored mother. This relay between positions develops early in the child's life and sets the pattern by which all further relationships necessarily function.[10]

Although Klein herself may not have entertained the thought, such dialogical movement can also be seen as structuring the political and psychic production of racial difference. Whether desired, envied, or feared, the black body is identified as the locus of those split internal objects that the white subject cannot successfully assimilate. And as Klein argues, when "these parts have been projected excessively onto another person, they can only be controlled by controlling the other person."[11] Trapped in the paranoid-schizoid position, the racist who lays eyes on a dark body cannot see a whole person with a mixture of good and bad aspects, but only a collection of malignant objects held together by a carapace of skin that is liable at any moment to fall apart, requiring the black subject's constant disciplining and justifying her instrumentalization for whatever ends.[12] Such impositions have had profound material and subjective implications for African Americans. Transmuted into objects by the transatlantic trade, black folks rarely had rights to their own bodies, their kin, or relation of any sort, since any bond might be torn asunder according to the master's whim, which carried all of the weight of the symbolic order.[13]

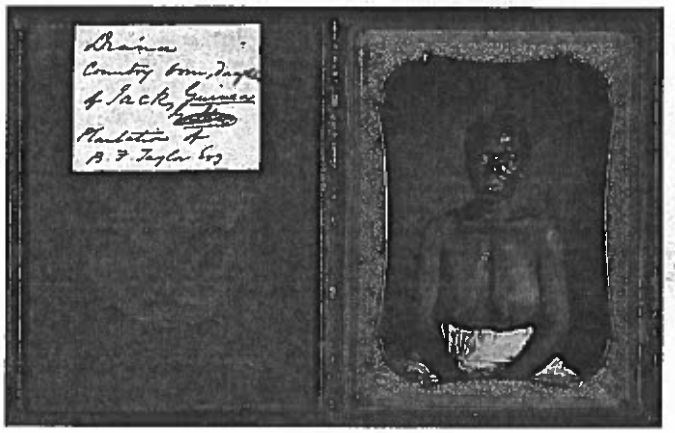
Simpson's phototexts take this order as determinative of their various mise-en-scènes, which at once evoke the distant past and describe conditions in the present. *You're Fine* offers a particularly germane example of the artist's method (1988; fig. 2.2). Here, she presents the figure as an odalisque stretched across four almost perfectly synchronized photographs. The woman's languid posture is belied by the texts accompanying the work, which neglect her beauty in favor of a checklist aimed at establishing a baseline of bodily health. "Physical exam, blood test, heart, reflexes": the plaques running along the left-hand side of the images further compartmentalize the model's already segmented body into so many part-objects that medical discourse would construe as libidinally neutral targets of examination. The implications of this procedure are clarified by the texts to the right of the

2.2
Lorna Simpson, *You're Fine*, 1988. Four color Polaroid prints, fifteen engraved plastic plaques, twenty-one ceramic letters. 101.6 x 261.6 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

photographs: one's fitness for a "position," "secretarial" or otherwise has little to do with individual wellbeing or the erotics of subjection. It is simply a matter of verifying that the corporeal apparatus can run smoothly enough.

The obtuseness and impersonality of such inquiry is precisely what the artist reveals, takes up, and reformulates. Because despite their bureaucratic, even scientific look, the text panels reveal little of descriptive value about their ostensible subject. Instead, they highlight the conventions of medicine itself, just as the photographic figures in Simpson's art reveal the contours of the cultural fiction known as "the black woman," who Spillers describes as the modern West's avatar of splitting and projection *par excellence*.[14] In *You're Fine* and *Guarded Conditions*, Simpson deconstructs those fictions as well as the attendant modes of picturing—criminal, typological, anthropometric, spectacularizing, and so on—used to produce the black subject as a transparent object. These modes depend on the almost absolute power of masters past and present and have come to structure the figuration of racial difference within the photographic field: the medium's capacity to isolate and magnify the visible world has time and again enabled materializations of the psychical drives that produced the slave as a species of part-object.

The historical record provides ample testament to these dynamics in the antebellum era and its aftermaths. Recall Richard Avedon's well-known photograph, *William Casby, Born a Slave, 24 March 1963*, an image celebrated and critiqued for the white liberal humanism of its visual and ideological framing.[15] Or better, think back, to J. T. Zealy's daguerreotype of Drana, one of the ruthlessly frontal portraits of captive subjects commissioned by Harvard natural scientist Louis Agassiz in 1850 (fig. 2.3).[16] Despite their photographers' radically divergent ambitions—to say nothing of viewers' myriad responses—in both images the black body and visage are staged as part-objects completely open to a visual inspection of dazzling exhaustiveness. Although William and Drana do look back, allowing a certain interiority to seep through, within a white supremacist hierarchy the "truth" of



2.3
J. T. Zealy, *Drana, country born, daughter of Jack, Guinea. Plantation of B. F. Taylor, Columbia, S.C.*, 1850. Daguerreotype. (Image no. 35-5-10/53041. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.)

these figures is always already known, and the image is merely another form of ratification that adamantly inscribes their difference.[17]

Like those of her cohorts Ligon, Green, and Wilson, Simpson's antiportraits simultaneously register and undo these procedures. Because her work deploys the photographic history of black femininity against itself, she has often been situated within a lineage of African American women's writing, performance, and visualization aimed at constructing counterhegemonic notions of the self in the face of slavery's persistent legacies. This resistive approach to cultural production arguably reached an apogee in the mid-1980s thanks to the work of a host of practitioners, including McCauley, playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, filmmaker Julie Dash, and the pioneering phototextual artist Carrie Mae Weems, with whom Simpson has often been compared. Empowered by black feminist activism and discourse, enabled by the emergent multiculturalism of mainstream institutions, and African American women artists were seen as taking the next steps toward what Lorraine O'Grady described as the reclamation of black female subjectivity in her 1991 essay "Olympia's Maid."[18]

In fact, *Guarded Conditions* was reproduced in O'Grady's text, whose call for new framings of African diasporic womanhood foreshadowed much of the discourse on Simpson that would follow. According to hooks, the artist recovers "subjugated knowledge"; Michael D. Harris claims that she visually undoes "the sexualized black woman," thereby making—in Deborah Willis and Carla Williams's account—"a public statement . . . that forces the audience to confront issues like sexual repression and racism."[19] However, more than one writer intrigued by Simpson's work saw her particular ways of engaging with the history of black female visibility as much more fraught with contradiction, offering important lessons for our understanding of her art, its discursive reach, and its imagining of the slave past.

2.

Relatively early in her career, Simpson was counted among the ranks of well-educated, postliberated African American practitioners whose bourgeois ties allowed them to navigate milieux of any and every composition: here was a generation of what novelist Trey Ellis, writing in 1989, called "cultural mulattoes,"[20] a cadre whose emergence critic Greg Tate had already proclaimed some three years earlier in the pages of the *Village Voice*:

> Though nobody's sent out any announcements yet, the '80s are witnessing the maturation of a postnationalist black arts movement, one more Afrocentric and cosmopolitan than anything that's come before. . . . These are artists for whom black consciousness and artistic freedom are not mutually exclusive but complementary, for whom "black culture" signifies a multicultural tradition of expressive practices; they feel secure enough about black culture to claim art produced by nonblacks as part of their inheritance. No anxiety of influence here—these folks believe the cultural gene pool is for skinny-dipping.[21]

Born to a middle-class family in Queens and educated at the School of the Visual Arts, Simpson sits neatly within Tate's framing, as did her fellow players in the black feminist performance troupe Rodeo Caldonia, such as Jones, actress Raye Dowell, and the artist's occasional collaborator, singer and composer Alva Rogers.[22] Like her model in *Guarded Conditions*, the artist was positioned as one of many figures working in and on what might be called—to borrow another term from Krauss—the "expanded field" of blackness: African American cultural practitioners were claiming space in both the short-lived black alternative arts weekly *B-Culture* and in mainstream daily newspapers.[23]

Paradoxically, most assessments of Simpson's art within white institutional discourse tended to halt at the presumed threshold of black female experience, conflating the sight of the figure with the sites that Simpson's practice aimed to conjure up and leaving out the question of the work's address to us as embodied viewers. Again relying on a chain of associations presumed endemic to black female experience, these accounts often singled Simpson out as the mascot for a specious brand of multiculturalism that prized difference for its own sake. This tendency is exemplified by the September 19, 1990, cover story that ran in *New York Newsday* (fig. 2.4). In the accompanying photograph, the artist is thirty years old, standing guardedly before *Untitled (Prefer, Refuse, Decide)*, a work completed that same year. Although we can make out the grain of this calculated image, the data offered up by it is almost as superfluous as that held out by Avedon's *Born a Slave*. It is the caption that tells us everything we need to know, that the artist figured here is at the center of things precisely because of her relegation to the margins.


'GoodFellas': The Wiseguy Life
A review of the film by Martin Scorsese. Page 2
Wednesday
Never Knowingly Understood
September 19, 1990
PART II
The Outsider Is In
It looks like the '90s art scene is going to be about artists who weren't male enough or white enough for the '80s — and Lorna Simpson fits the bill. Pages 6-9
Theater: Pact Puts 'Miss Saigon' Back on Schedule. Page 2
Part III / Food: Comfort Myth of Diner Survives Modern Times

2.4
Ari Mintz, *The Outsider Is In*, from *Newsday*, September 19, 1990, issue. (Newsday © 1990. All rights reserved. Used by permission and protected by the copyright laws of the United States. The printing, copying, redistribution, or retransmission of the material without express written permission is prohibited.)

> This year, outsiders are in. . . . And lots of museums, galleries, magazines and collectors are standing in line to seize the moment with artists whose skin colors, languages, national origins, sexual preferences or strident messages have kept them out of the mainstream. Say it's about time, blame it on guilt, call it a certificate of altruism for the living-room wall. Whatever, Lorna Simpson fits the bill.[24]

Indeed, she did. The article's author, Amei Wallach, goes on to note that Simpson was the first black woman ever to be chosen for the Venice Biennale and at the time she was one of only a handful of African American artists able to parlay exposure at nonprofit institutions like the Jamaica Center in Queens into inclusion at a mainstream gallery in Soho.[25]

And what of her art? According to Wallach's profile, it "is about what a tangled and terrifying thing it is to be a black woman. But her methods come straight out of the mainstream, museum-accredited white art world."[26] As these lines intimate, a large measure of the artist's success lies in the fact that her work appeared to bring issues of race in line with the postmodern and feminist critiques of representation that had began to crystallize in the 1970s and that came to constitute a *lingua franca* by the following decade. Simpson's work with image, text, and the

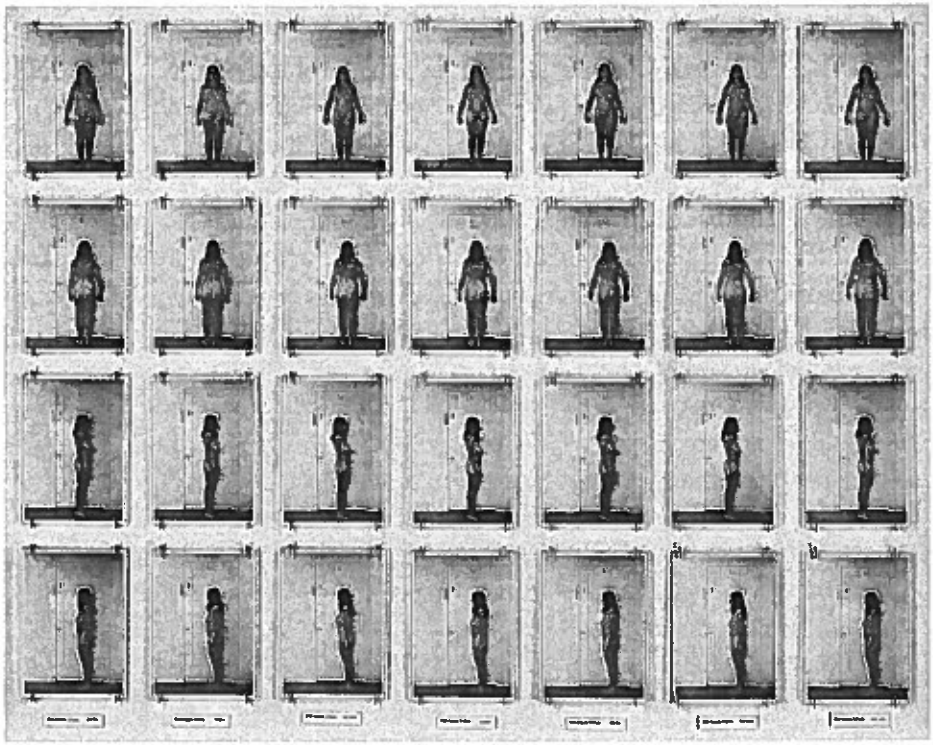
female body was imagined to successfully extend the political program of her white antecedents, from Carolee Schneeman to Cindy Sherman.[27] Even more tellingly, Wallach's pronouncement highlights the perceived tension in Simpson's work between form and content, lauding the artist's efforts as successful exercises in self-discipline—the screaming horror of her being reined in and made palatable by "white methods," whose instant legibility provided a wedge into the heretofore impenetrable terrain of "the black woman."

In the Simpson criticism, that figure is time and again imagined as a closed discursive site, in a repetition of the terms that the artist set out to critically revise. She would eventually vituperate against such limiting characterizations; she was well aware of how they were overdetermining her work's address:

> The thing I think I have the most difficulty with . . . is the thing about the black figure . . . how much "politicized" space this figure takes up. For instance, Kiki Smith does works about the body; she can do a sculpture out of resin or glass, it's kind of this pinkish Caucasian-ish tone, and her work is interpreted as speaking universally about the body. Now when I do it I am speaking about the black body. . . . But at the same time, this is a universal figure.[28]

"A universal figure." These words bear repeating, I think, because they clue us in to the world-historical ambitions of Simpson's practice. Although her art has preoccupied itself with the image of the black female body, as marked by the history of the Middle Passage, that figure is truly that: a *figure*, a character, a symbol, a rhetorical form. As such, it is an expansive site meant to refract and reframe the shared conditions of language and representation that differentially inform subjects' perception of what it means to be human in the modern era.

For Simpson, bringing those conditions into view meant coming to grips with the legacies of conceptual art. Like many of her pieces, the strategies she deploys in *Guarded Conditions* look back to the part-by-part serial construction of phototextual practices that emerged in the early 1970s.[29] Simpson was familiar with the art of Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula, and, like Weems, she studied with noted conceptualist Eleanor Antin at the University of California, San Diego, where she eventually abandoned her earlier documentary photography for a more critically inflected idiom.[30] As did her teacher, Simpson seized on conceptualism's signature tropes—the grid, seriality, repetition, and, above all, language—in order to examine how our knowledge of the world comes to be organized. Critic Eve Meltzer argues that the proliferation of these informational modes in visual art since the 1960s were part and parcel of a larger structuralist turn whose effects continue to resonate throughout the humanistic disciplines. By approaching all cultural phenomena as predicated on the same ironclad rules that govern the linguistic play of difference, artists, historians, anthropologists, and psychoanalysts aimed to chart the seemingly total epistemic systems that produce the modern world and its subjects.[31]

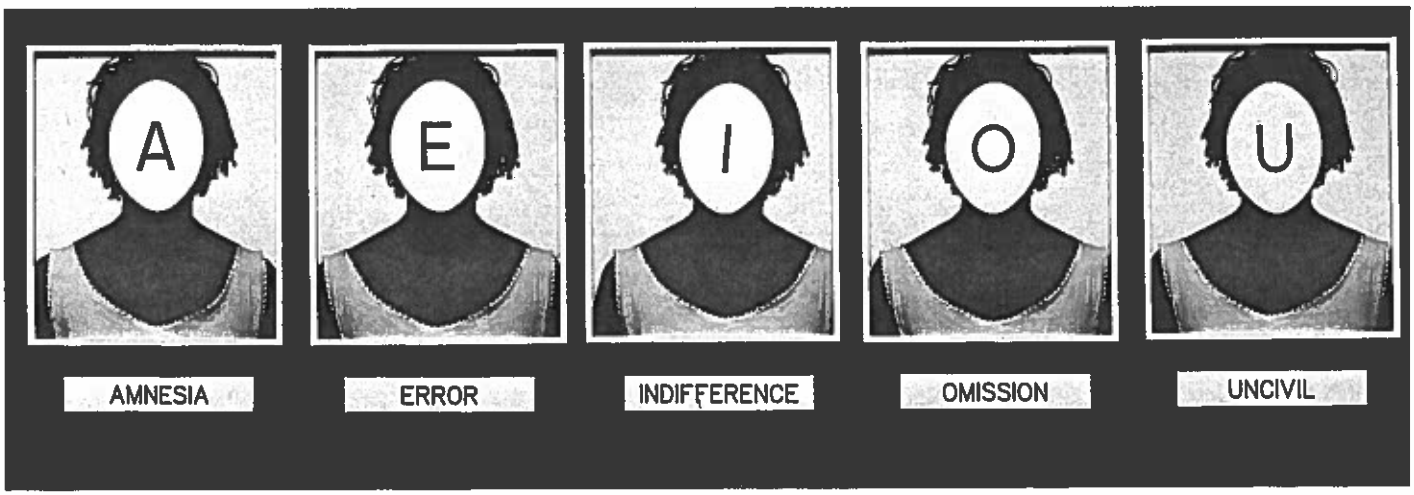


2.5
Eleanor Antin, *The Last Seven Days from Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, 1972/1999. Twenty-eight black-and-white photographs and date labels. (Photograph by Hermann Feldhaus. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.)

In Simpson's hands, however, deploying structuralist visual means required emphasizing the lapses and failures of any conceptual framework so as to account for the specific circumstances through which the black female subject comes into visibility. As Jones suggests, it is worth comparing *Guarded Conditions* to Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972; fig. 2.5). Over the course of thirty-six days, the older artist lost ten pounds through dieting and recorded her gradual transformation in a series of gridded photographs, four for each day, providing four views of her body.[32] The resulting work parodies even as it capitulates to notions of ideal female form: the artist has an exhibitionist streak that might easily be called narcissistic and the reduction she undertakes still maintains her corporeal integrity and arguably augments its appeal. No such assertion can be made about Simpson's work, which relies on repetition to make clear the difference that racialization makes.

To understand what that difference is, we might turn to *Easy For Who To Say* (1989; fig. 2.6). In this work, the artist has covered each iteration of the model's face with one of the vowels—A, E, I, O, or U. Now, the second edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary* defines a vowel as "a speech sound uttered with voice or whisper and characterized by the resonance form of the vocal cavities." Its enunciation requires a relaxation of the mouth and jaw, an opening of the body that

2.6
Lorna Simpson, *Easy For Who To Say*, 1989. Five color Polaroid prints, ten engraved plastic plaques. 78.7 x 292.1 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)



is countered, even blocked, in Simpson's work by its representative letter, which effects a figural closure. Though the letters concealing the model's face intimate a multiplicity of positions she might occupy and attitudes she might assume—adulterer, engineer, ingénue, optimist, unflinching—such musings are cut short by the matching red words marching beneath the pictures. "Amnesia, Error, Indifference, Omission, Uncivil": these terms would undermine not only the subjective position the figure would seek, but also her grasp on any recognizable position at all. Ironically, the "I" still claims pride of place here, bucking the chain of equivalences intrinsic to language in order to center the work and the viewer's attention on that most basic of self-assertions, now made by a "self" that is tenuously present at best.

In this phototext, the meaning of the letter, like the orientation of the subject, is understood as fundamentally unstable yet always susceptible to reifying impositions. *Easy for Who to Say* thus stages the difficulty of rendering the black female body—that site of invisibility and projection firmly fixed within the American cultural imaginary—while also maintaining the haunting sense of absence that is constitutive of identity however defined. As Judith Butler has argued, no particular identity can emerge without foreclosing others, thereby ensuring its partiality and underlining the inability of any specific content, whether race or gender, to fully constitute it. This "condition of necessary failure," the theorist maintains, "not only pertains universally, but *is* the 'empty and ineradicable place' of universality itself."[33] Viewed from this perspective, the words below Simpson's photographs suggest not only the ways in which black women have historically been denied access to the universal but also how they have been produced as the negative grounds—slaves, flesh, chattel—against which the modern subject has been constructed. Still, Simpson's effacement of the figure underscores that the identity of this black woman, however prescribed, can never be entirely accounted for given the structural incompletion she shares with all subjects. In making visible the vexed predication of African American womanhood, the artist performs what Butler would call an act of "cultural translation," critiquing the racism and sexism of previous universalisms by contaminating them with the very identity on whose abjection they were founded.[34]

What we witness in this work, as in *You're Fine* and in *Guarded Conditions*, is a method whereby the peculiarities of one black woman's body at once seems to guide and follow the pattern on which the work is modeled: the fall of her braids and the tilt of her head echo the shape of a vowel, the delicate wing of the collarbones draw us toward the neck. Visually marked by the historical regimes that would cast them as part-objects, in Simpson's art, African diasporic women are rendered as partial subjects necessarily caught within those totalizing schemas of race and sex that would curtail their subjective potentialities, not to mention the artist's. Each of these figures disjunctively resets the scale of the "human," her contours disrupted and her subjectivity translated in order to speak of histories that are and are not her own. In this way, the dialectic of figural fragmentation

operative in Simpson's work expands beyond the frame, gesturing backward temporally to the violence performed on the black female body and forward spatially into the spectatorial field.

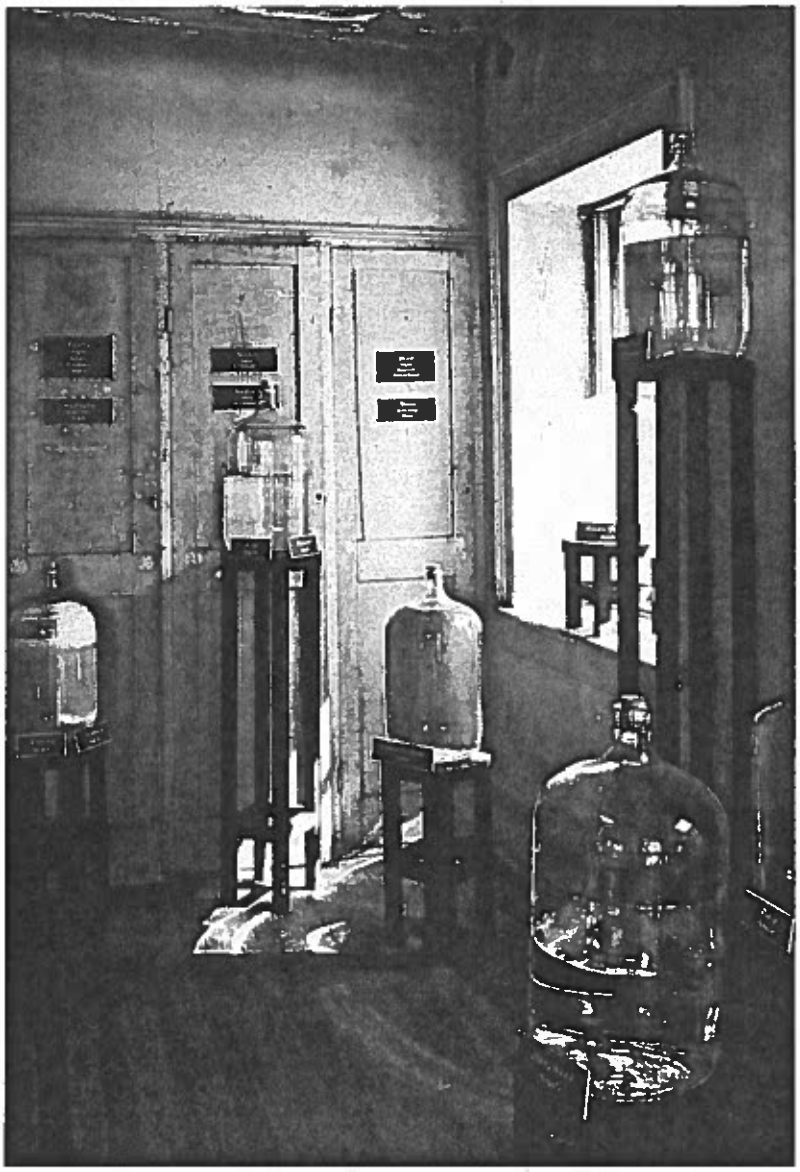
For even as a piece like *Guarded Conditions* laterally expands to include an army of identically clad subjects within its metonymic reach, it also aims to metaphorically pull us into its orbit, to implicate us in its categories, to establish the black female body as a site of identification and displacement in a visual rather than a psychic replay of the logic of the part-object. To encounter these images of the body in a posture perhaps analogous to our own and on a scale slightly greater, is to encounter a projected vision of ourselves on the block: it is as if our bodies' shadows have been thrown onto the wall and into the past by some unseen cone of light, a process of enlargement whose spatial logic is hinted at by the rows of text, which grow progressively longer as they near the photographs they caption in accordance with the logic of perspectival seeing.

Through such analogical solicitation, the work proposes that we test our bodies against its form; similarly, the model's placement before a white studio backdrop foregrounds our concurrent framing within the white cube of artistic consumption. Both aspects of the piece refer us to the black female body, a corporeal site everywhere riven by imperatives other than its own, reminding us of our own positions within a world run by biopower, which philosopher Michel Foucault defines as "the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life."[35] In the artist's photographs, the dynamics of subjection, which universally and unevenly pertain, are most visible at the site of the black female body.[36]

Reading Simpson's work correctly, then, means holding a whole set of contrasts in tension—metonymy and metaphor, body and image, structure and detail, part and whole, subject and object—in order to understand the coordinates of the present and the construction of the past that she brings into view. As viewers we are momentarily caught up in those fraught intersections; in *Guarded Conditions*, we are perhaps first and foremost grasped belatedly, while standing behind the figure of a black woman, in a relationship of historical posteriority. The target of skin and sex attacks, a cipher of negation twice over, the black woman depicted in Simpson's photographs undergoes ravages of modernity—the loss of a symbolic matrix, the alienating effects of capital, the shattering of the subject—that have only escalated in her wake. This figure's "guarded conditions" are very much our own and it is only a matter of time before we are each called on to assume her position.

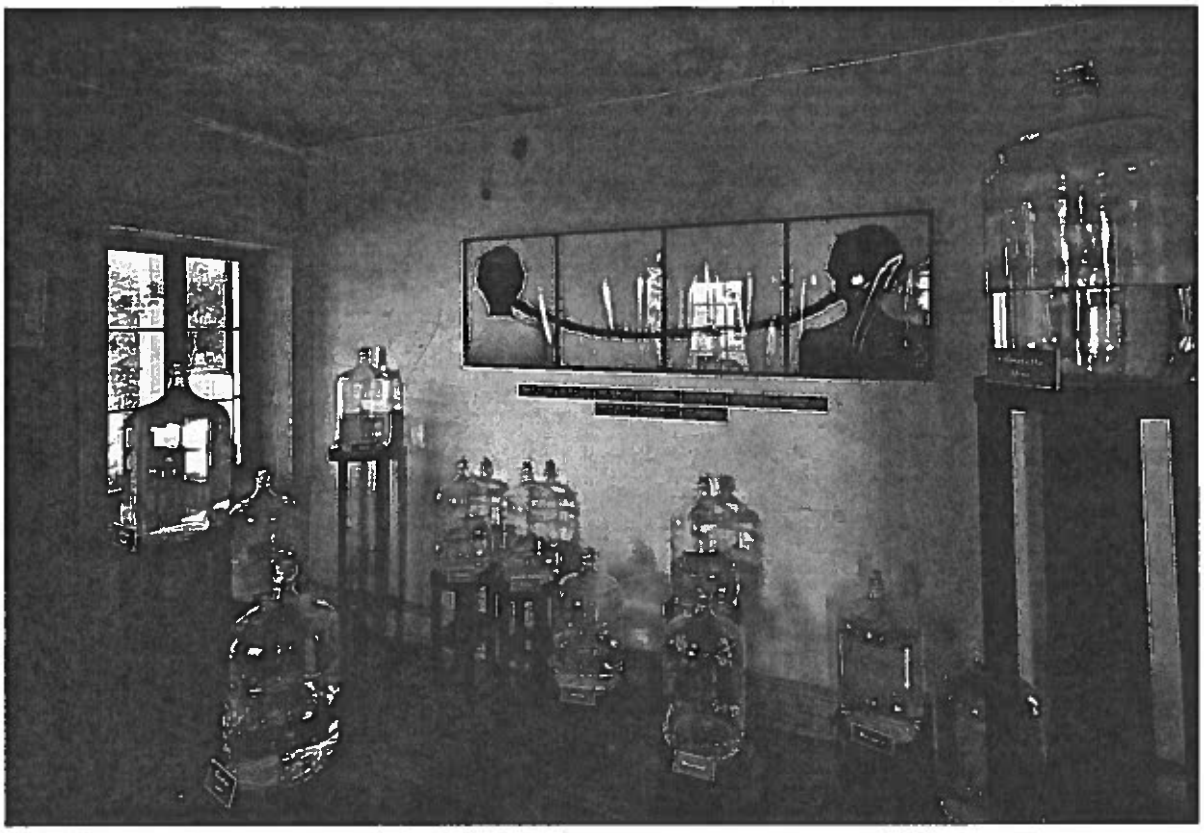
3.

Guarded Conditions and its sisters provide an oblique index of Simpson's attitude toward the slave past, which undergirds the conditions of black female visibility to which her work so rigorously attends. What I want to ask now is in what ways



2.7
Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991, detail (first room). Glass bottles, water, wooden stools, engraved plastic plaques, sound. Overall dimensions variable. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

did her practice shift when she engaged specific figures and sites associated with slavery on their own grounds? How did an encounter with the remnants of the institution modify her sense of what materials and objects might be mobilized in the staging of an aesthetic encounter? In other words, what changed and what persisted in Simpson's movement from the image of the black female body to the physical reality of the quarters? For answers, we must look to *Five Rooms*, one of many projects that together comprised *Places with a Past*, an exhibition organized by curator Mary Jane Jacob as part of the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, which ran from May 24 through August 4, 1991. Executed in collaboration with Rogers and sited in the dependency of a historic mansion for approximately

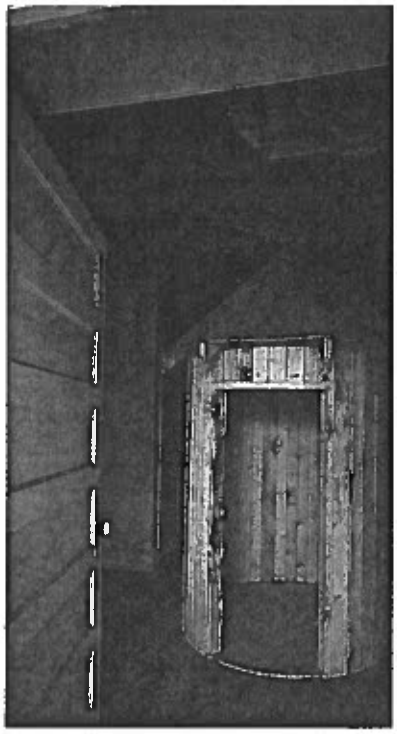


2.8
Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991, detail (first room). (Photograph by John McWilliams, courtesy of Spoleto Festival USA. © Lorna Simpson. Courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

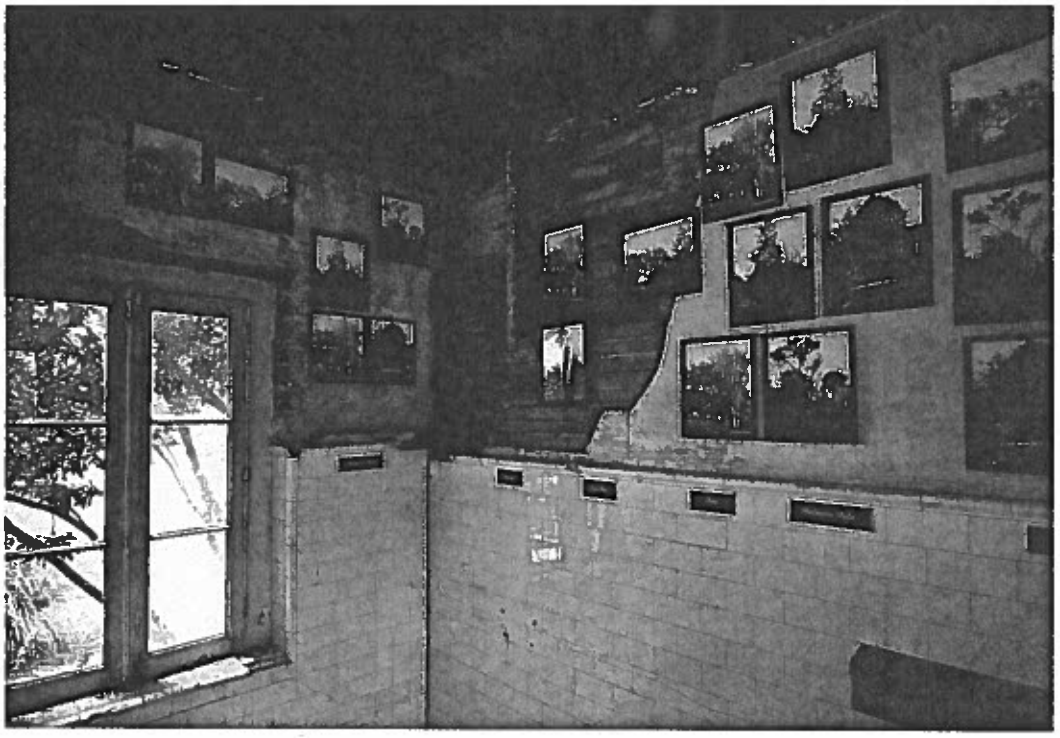
ten weeks, *Five Rooms* explicitly spelled out Simpson's approach to slavery for the first time (see figs. 2.8–12).

As even a quick glance at images of the work suggests, in executing *Five Rooms*, the artist continued to deny the sorts of visual transparency associated with the enslaved in favor of her own recalcitrant lexicon. Indeed, the walls of her chosen site teemed with those now-familiar panels of text, but this time they featured information about botany, geography, and the particulars of slave trading and resistance in the area (fig. 2.7). While the first and third of the rooms included sets of the artist's outsized turned-back women, these pairs were now tangibly connected by a long braid of artificial hair (fig. 2.8). However, the whole of the installation made clear that Simpson's tried-and-true phototextual strategies, even carefully retooled, were not enough to differently summon the slave past. In *Five Rooms*, she recruited an array of materials unprecedented in her mature work, relying on the readymade tradition set in motion by Marcel Duchamp and subsequently elaborated on by artists from minimal sculptor Carl Andre to *Places with a Past* participant Ann Hamilton.[37]

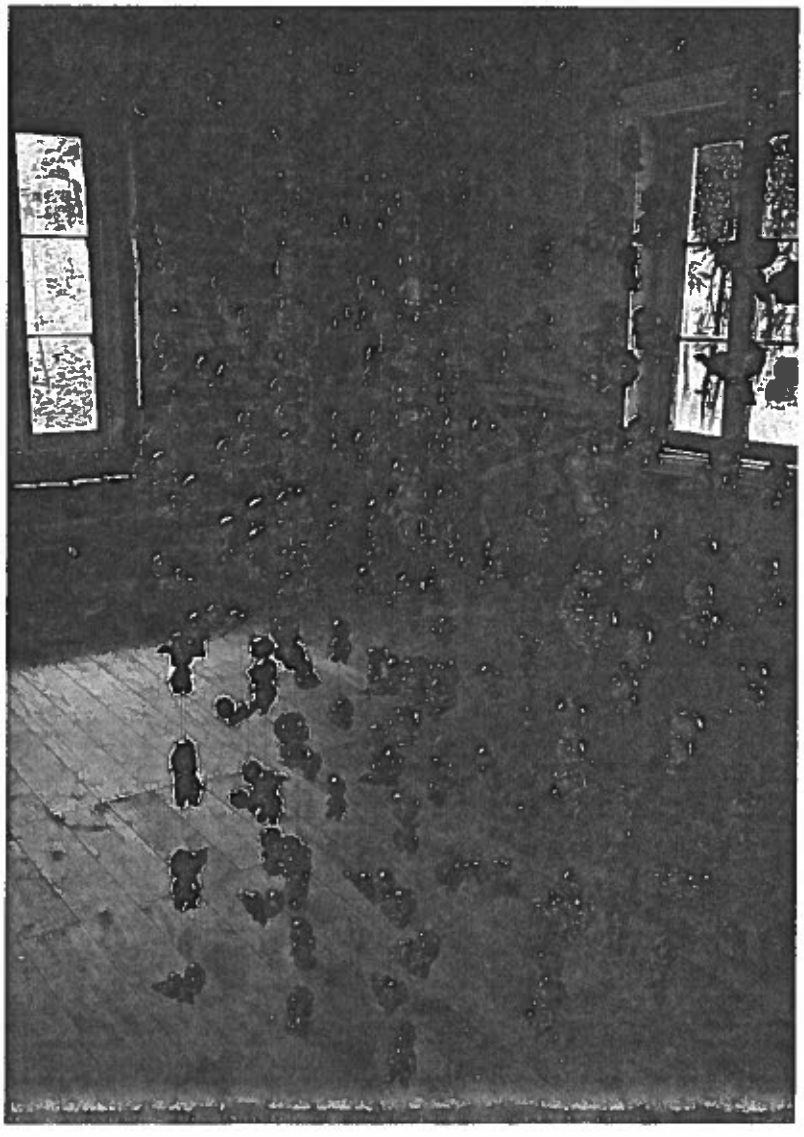
Simpson's objects make for a motley assembly: a makeshift wooden hut occupied the second room (fig. 2.9), images of local flora dominated the fourth (fig. 2.10), a ring of brown kewpie dolls hung in the last (fig. 2. 11), and jars of Carolina gold—the most valued rice variety of the region—sat squarely on stools in the



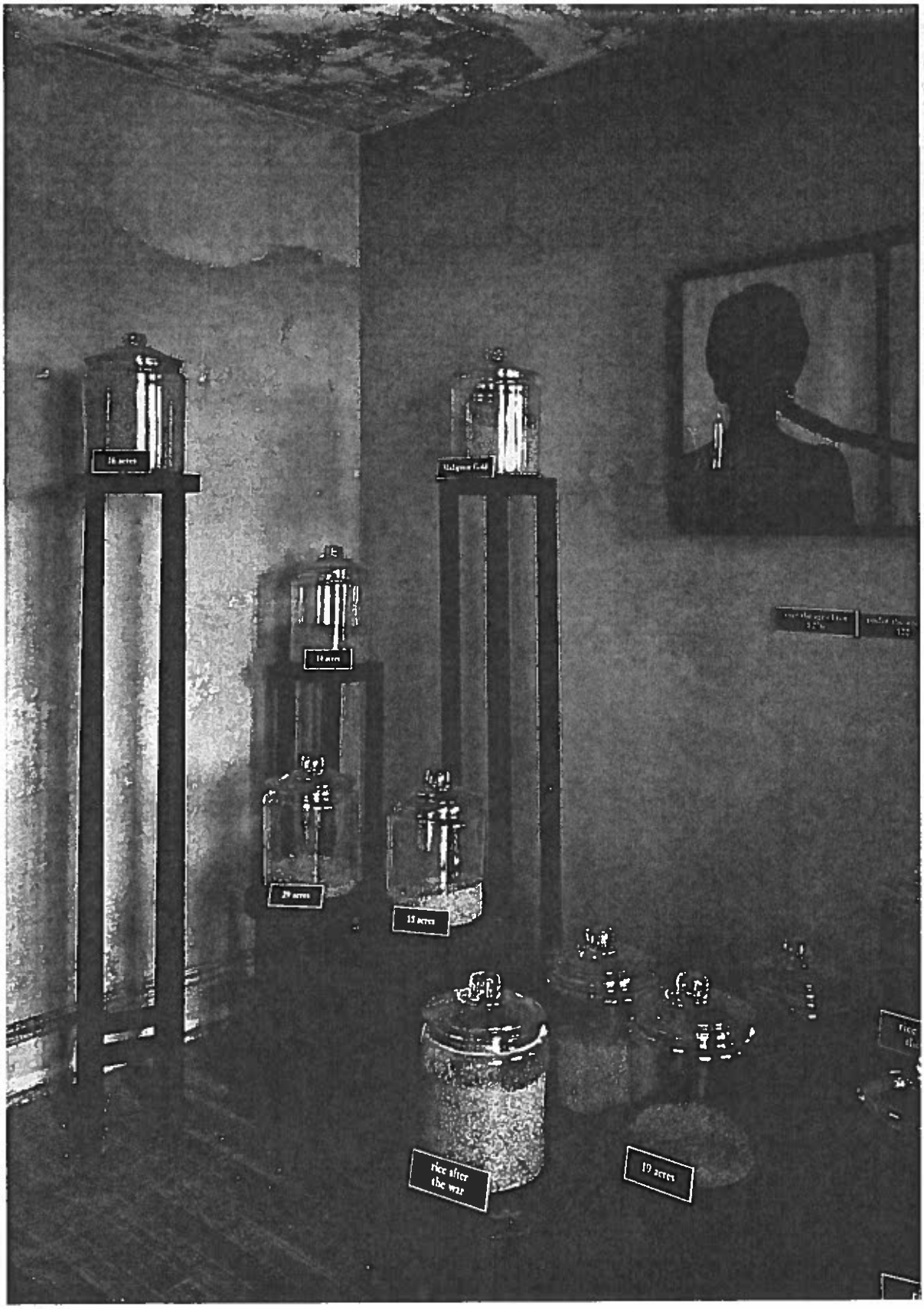
2.9
Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991, detail (second room). Wooden hut, engraved plastic plaques, sound. Overall dimensions variable. (© Lorna Simpson. Courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)



2.10
Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991, detail (fourth room). Gelatin silver prints, engraved plastic plaques, sound. Overall dimensions variable. (© Lorna Simpson. Courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)



2.11
Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991, detail (fifth room). Plastic dolls, string, engraved plastic plaques. Overall dimensions variable. (Photograph by John McWilliams. Courtesy of Spoleto Festival USA. © Lorna Simpson. Courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)



2.12
Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991, detail (third room). Glass bottles, rice, wooden stools, four Polaroid color prints, sound. Overall dimensions variable. (© Lorna Simpson. Courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

third (fig. 2.12).[38] All of this from an artist who would later admit, "I have a fear of objects because... including objects in the work, forces the work very strongly in a particular direction. I've always been kind of afraid of that—I kind of feel that I lose control in some way."[39] Music played its part as well. In each of the five spaces, the artist installed speakers that emitted one of four vocal tracks performed by Rogers, ranging from the singer's original composition "Islands" to the threnody of "Strange Fruit." In its use of sound, collaborative production, and emphatic materiality, *Five Rooms* demands that we again consider the orientation of Simpson's art. In many ways, the work condenses and expands her signature strategies by taking up the phenomenological space implied in her earlier work and literally embedding the viewer within it. Yet *Five Rooms* also coincides with the beginning of a phase in the artist's career that would witness a move away from her trademark figures and all of the references that went with them.[40]

In the process, Simpson conducted an investigation into how actual and imaged objects signify in the visual field opened up by site-specific art, a mode of aesthetic practice inaugurated in the '60s and '70s by the likes of Hans Haacke and Mierle Laderman Ukeles in order to engage the physical and structural constraints of a particular location.[41] As the artist's first significant entry in this artistic mode, *Five Rooms* occupies a liminal position within her trajectory, which in part accounts for its relative critical neglect. I would contend, however, that it is precisely this in-betweenness that makes the installation such an invaluable lens through which to approach a practice that consistently tarries in the gaps between categorical distinctions. In *Five Rooms*, Simpson negotiated the distance separating phantasms of African American femininity and the actuality of African diasporic women's lived experiences, a gap that has everywhere animated her art. The installation's emergence within the interstices of Simpson's oeuvre thus emblematizes and brings into focus her works' structural and relational functioning as "transitional objects and transitional phenomena."

I take these words from the title of a paper by psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, a trainee of Klein, for whom the phrase designates the infant's first truly "not-me" possessions—a doll, a rope, a tune hummed to itself—which, while symbolic of part-objects like the breast come to be valued for their actuality.[42] Simpson's choice of aesthetic resources in *Five Rooms* resonates uncannily well with Winnicott's descriptions, yet more important for my account of her work is the function that he ascribes to transitional objects and phenomena within childhood development. In his framework, these materials initially provide the infant with an intermediate space of illusion that seems to align subjective fantasy with objective reality. As such, they enable the child to test the limits of his creative projection against the actuality of the object world. Loved, abused, and eventually decathected through the withdrawal of libidinal energy, transitional objects and phenomena ultimately allow the infant to cope with disillusionment and to differentiate "between fantasy and fact, between inner objects and external objects, between primary creativity and perception."[43]

The same can be said of Simpson's '80s phototexts. Through their formal replaying of the black female body's production as a series of part-objects, these pieces conduct viewers out of the cultural imaginary and toward the realities of the symbolic. More than any other of Simpson's works, *Five Rooms* allows us to track how the artist negotiated those realities in material terms and how they eventually allowed her to incorporate a range of objects into her art—felt, shoes, and candles—that differently, though just as persistently, engaged the history of slavery. To flesh out this contention, in the pages that follow, I interleave interpretation with sustained description in an attempt to conjure the primary assumptions and corporeal experience that characterized the project's brief existence. Equally key to my account is the work's unfolding onto a range of contexts: narratives of slavery in South Carolina, site-specific art as modeled by *Places with a Past*, and black women's social positioning past and present. What remains paramount, however, is the ways that Simpson's art recast or ignored these specific histories in elucidating the structural conditions of enslavement and their ongoing legacies within the African diaspora.

Listen, for starters, to her reflections on *Five Rooms*, recorded for a public television special just a few weeks after she completed the installation: "What interested me was that this was kind of the giant slave port of the South, this was the center, and I felt very attracted to do a piece about that, not having done anything specific—in terms of specific information or subject matter—about slavery in my work before. Nevertheless, the work is about African Americans so of course there is a connection."[44] Simpson's own connection to the region was less personal than structural. A born-and-bred New Yorker of African American and West Indian descent, she had occasionally visited relatives in Atlanta during vacations but was more likely to spend her childhood summers with extended family in the Bahamas. In the course of the TV interview, she allows that to a certain extent, she held the familiar Northern view of the American South as benighted terrain, and in preparation for her sojourn, she consulted a range of primary and critical texts that begin to suggest the status of slave historiography circa 1991 and to illuminate the particular model of historical engagement that would subtend *Five Rooms*.[45]

While the work, like Simpson's oeuvre in general, makes no reference to specific individuals, the artist's readings included several firsthand accounts: the planter David Doar's volume *Rice and Rice Planting in the South Carolina Low Country*; Patricia Jones-Jackson's ethnography *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions in the Sea Islands*; and Harriet Jacobs's narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. Simpson complemented these perspectives with sweeping historical overviews, from George Brown Tindall's relatively focused *South Carolina Negroes, 1877–1900* to Richard Price's capacious anthology *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*. She also looked to efforts that trained their focus on the dynamics of gender in the context of the peculiar institution, such as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*.[46]

These texts offer a rich trove of materials from which to construct a composite portrait of enslaved South Carolina women in economic, cultural, and political terms on the macro- and micro-historical scales. Taken together, they illuminate both the modality of racial oppression inaugurated with the implementation of slave codes across the United States in the early eighteenth century, as well as the transformation of African folklore in the hands of the Gullah people of Georgia and South Carolina's Sea Islands, whose arts and language circa 1990 continue to reveal a sustained link to continental traditions.[47] However, in its blend of materials and its approach to a specific site, *Five Rooms* shared most with another volume in Simpson's library, Charles Joyner's structuralist history *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community*. Using slaveholders' tabulations, images of vernacular architecture, agricultural records, and accounts of spiritual and material practice, Joyner reconstructs the life world of the enslaved in the All Saints Parish of the South Carolina Low Country.[48] With such reading in hand, Simpson went to Charleston to investigate sites for her project, on the lookout for certain cultural formations and already cognizant of how the area was pervasively shadowed by the past of racial violence, though not necessarily in the forms one would presume and despite the shiny veneer promoted by the city itself.[49]

Like the white settlers of the region, many blacks came to Charleston from Barbados and other points in the Caribbean.[50] As the artist reminds us in her television interview, the city was a major port of entry, a sort of black Ellis Island, through which it is estimated more than a third of the enslaved Africans brought to America passed.[51] This circumstance accounts both for the city's historical black majority since the 1820s as well as its ability to accrue tremendous wealth in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[52] The destruction caused by the Civil War and a series of natural disasters resulted in large-scale economic devastation, and it was only in the 1920s and '30s that the city began to revive thanks to the efforts of the local "plantocracy." A small group of blue bloods, these descendants of the oldest white families in the area set out to preserve the city's architectural wonders and to cloak its past in tourist-friendly nostalgia.[53] Perhaps unavoidably, in constructing Charleston as an emblem of Southern gentility, the historical preservation movement aligned itself with patterns of segregation and selective amnesia, coercing black residents to relocate for the sake of local treasures, thereby securing the eventual "Disneyfication" of the area.[54]

Given such a history of exploitation and self-promotion, it makes sense that composer Gian Carlo Menotti was welcomed to the city in 1977 when he started a performing arts series modeled after his successful "Festival of Two Worlds" in Spoleto, Italy.[55] Nor is it surprising that when she was asked to introduce a visual component to the American festival, curator Mary Jane Jacob would eventually title her project *Places with a Past*. Conceptualized in the wake of the highly lauded 1987 *Skulptur Projekte* in Münster, Germany, and inspired by *Sculture nella Città*, held in Spoleto in 1962, Jacob's was the first major U.S. project to approach the whole of a city as a series of sites for sculptural intervention to widespread acclaim.[56] Promi-

nent sectors of the art press praised the exhibition for bringing diverse audiences into contact with that relatively new genre called site-specific art and for reflecting the multicultural ethos of the day without an appreciable loss of aesthetic quality.[57]

The roster for *Places with a Past* was a telling cross-section of contemporary practices that included artists of various races, genders, national origins, levels of recognition, and familiarity with installation-based work, from African American master David Hammons to the French duo Gwylene Gallimard and Jean-Marie Mauclet. Like that of Simpson and Rogers, several of the eighteen exhibitions examined some aspect of the slave past, and many more aimed to evoke absent figures through an accretion of historically resonant objects. To name just a few: Narelle Jubelin dotted the local Customs House with slave tags and antique coins; Joyce Scott bedecked a local square with beads and branches meant to venerate ancestors lost to lynching; and Elizabeth Newman filled a former schoolhouse with water, honey, dresses, photographs of black nursemaids, and audio recordings of lullabies sung by a local "dah," an African-derived term referring to a black female caregiver (fig. 2.13).[58]

2.13
Elizabeth Newman, *Honey in the Rock (Got to Feed God Children)*, detail, *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival*, 1991. (Photograph by John McWilliams. Courtesy of Spoleto Festival USA.)

2.14
Governor Thomas Bennett House Dependency. (Photograph by the author, 2010.)

In using an array of materials to activate the senses and recall the lives of black women, Newman's *Honey in the Rock (Got to Feed God Children)* was perhaps most similar to *Five Rooms* in strategy if not in tone or emphasis: rather than a site that foregrounded the ties of sentiment that linked subjects across racial lines, Simpson opted for the actuality of the slave quarters occupying the first floor of the dependency at the Governor Thomas Bennett House (fig. 2.14). The mansion itself, built around 1822 in the wake of a storm that caused considerable damage throughout the region, is an august building now often used for weddings;[59] the dependency presently houses the Medical Society of South Carolina. In 1991, this structure was in relative disrepair, having been damaged, like many parts of Charleston, by yet another hurricane in September 1989. When Simpson visited the building, there was no marker indicating its former purpose, as was not uncommon despite the preservation society's otherwise fanatical attention to historical detail.[60]

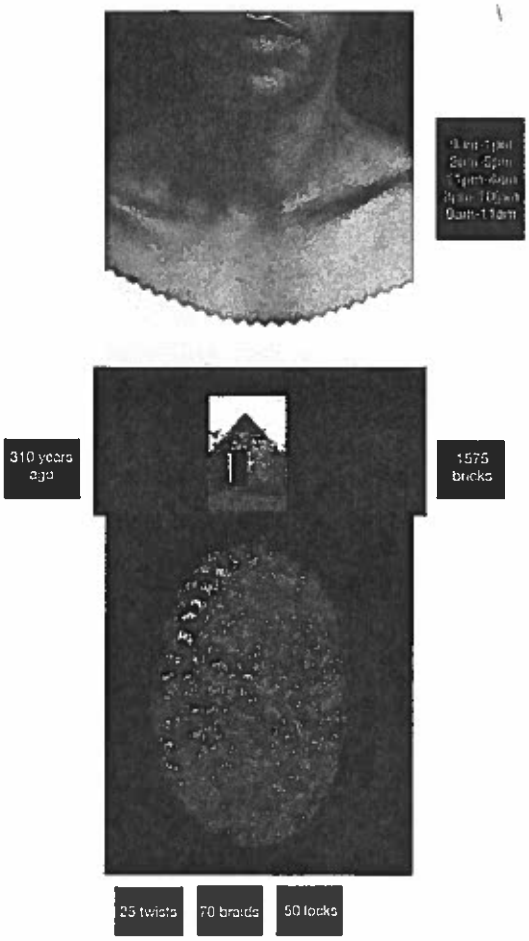
In eventually settling on this location for *Five Rooms*, the artist was able to evoke a whole set of issues related to Charleston's economic growth, to make clear what was forgotten in the celebration of the city's past, and to emphasize the proximity of master and slave in urban settings, as the dependency is located less than a stone's throw from the "big house." Servants directly engaged in the upkeep of the mansion—cooks, nannies, drivers, and butlers—would have occupied the Bennett quarters. While these slaves often enjoyed better material conditions than their counterparts on the plantation, they were under more continuous surveillance and expected to display greater compliance; the ruse of white domesticity offered the enslaved no safety from the demands of their masters.[61] For black women, who were often subject to sexual as well as physical abuse, life and labor within such spaces was doubly articulated.[62] Simpson's project takes account of this dichotomy,

yet in *Five Rooms*, the focus was not so much on the specific depredations experienced by the enslaved females who would have inhabited the quarters but on black women's contradictory status as agents of culture and objects of speculation within the economies of New World slavery.

Accordingly, the first room of the installation greeted viewers with simple black wooden stools supporting large bottles of water—modeled on those in use at area plantations—that in this context recalled the journey that brought enslaved women to South Carolina's shores. Simpson labeled the containers on the right with the names of slave ships, the countries from which their captives hailed, and in some cases the stops where cargo was deposited: Angola, Barbados, Providence, and Jamaica, for instance, were listed under the vessel Berkley (see fig. 2.7). She engraved the text panels leaning on the jars to the left with the names of local rivers that open onto the Atlantic and so eventually to Africa: Savannah, Amoretta, Winnemac (see fig. 2.8). On the wall was the expected set of photographs: two turned-back figures—one apparently nude, the other clothed—linked by two images of a cable of braided hair. The statistics running beneath these pictures documented the female contents of unidentified slave ships: "under the age of ten: 43," "over the age of ten: 789."

In their stacked arrangement, the plaques recall *Guarded Conditions*, as does the room's disposition of photographic figures, but the installation's emphasis on a physical encounter in real space makes the earlier work's implicit invitation to formal and bodily comparison an effective prerequisite. Let us, for a moment, imagine what it might have been like for an attuned viewer to perambulate this space and its objects, to lean toward images and away from stools, and to move back and forth between the texts and bottles that occupied the only available seats in the house. The spectator comes to pause before the clothed woman in the photograph on the far left. Standing there, she becomes aware of how the jar on the stool beside her metonymically completes the figure, stand-ins for legs and a torso that can only be imagined. This constellation prompts her consideration of the strange affinity suggested between the jar and herself, the photographic figure's "body" and her own, the "not-me" and the "me." In the process, the work solicits her to measure the metaphorical and physical distance separating her from those forms and to consider the violent conditions that would render her body and these objects frighteningly commensurate.

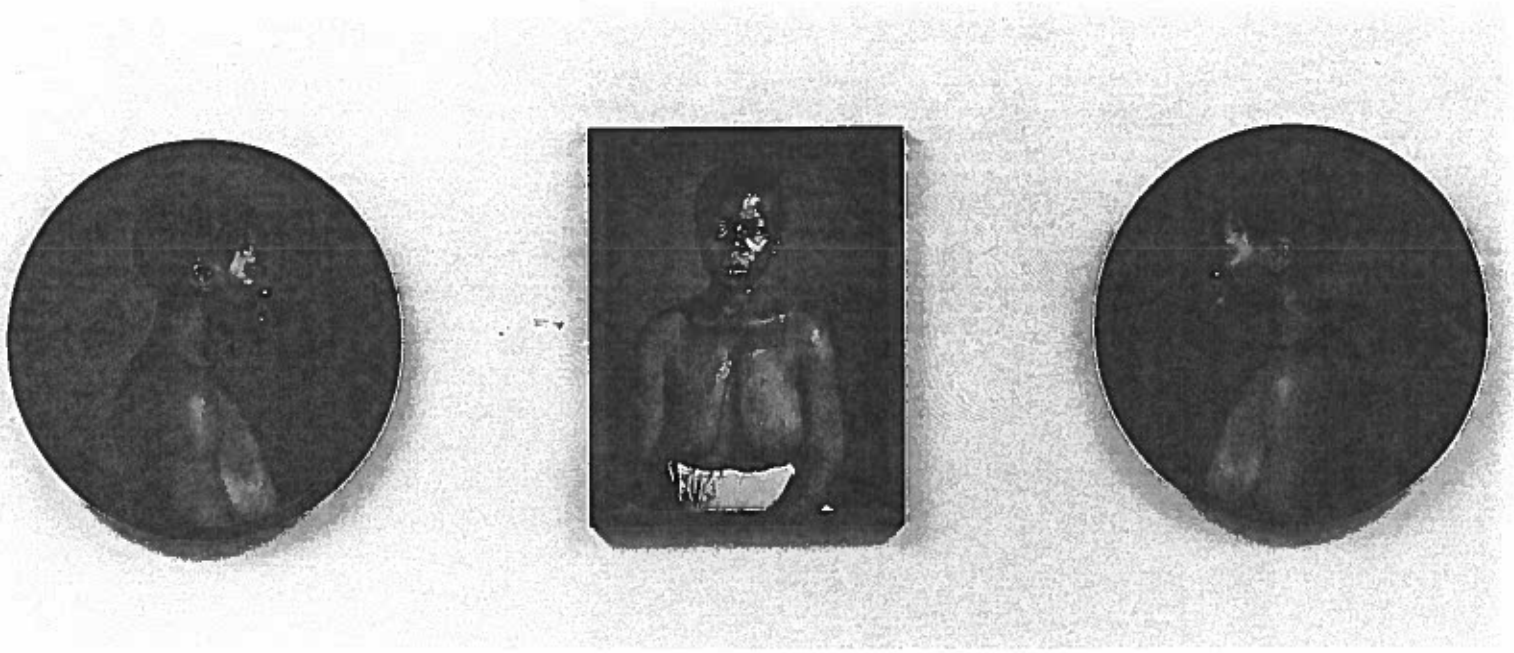
Simpson's move toward the thing as a figural marker of the body was not unforeseeable. By 1991, her strategy of visual fragmentation had already led her to a variety of new forms such as African masks, which are associated with blackness, to be sure, though not as immediately overdetermined by narratives of victimization as are images of black women. In *Counting* (1991; fig. 2.15), executed around the same time she was at work on *Five Rooms*, Simpson combined a trio of images, vertically stacking a woman's neckline on top of a brick smokehouse that surmounts a coil of false hair. She paired these photographs with texts that measure out intervals of time and tally up accumulations of matter. The placard



2.15
Lorna Simpson, *Counting*, 1991. Photogravure with silkscreen. 185.4 x 96.5 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

to the right of the first image reads "9am–1pm / 2am–6pm / 11pm–4am / 8pm–10pm / 9am–11am"; on either side of the second, "310 years ago" and "1575 bricks"; below the last, "25 twists / 70 braids / 50 locks." Rather than letting the caption do the work of describing a set of conditions that then allow the viewer to imagine a place as in *Guarded Conditions*, here, language communicates a series of moments and the images provide an actress, a locale, and a prop: it is our job to contemplate the scenario. In *Counting*, not only is our access to the sight of the black female body bracketed, but the image itself is also curtailed as a site of semantic proliferation. This work's tenuous leveling of person and thing underlines the artist's procedure of literalizing the discrepant equation of black female bodies and readymade forms that would serve as the material baseline for her intervention in *Five Rooms*.

Aware that this approach might risk a certain coldness, the artist decided early on to add vocals to the mix, since they could provide a highly affecting, "romantic" dimension to the work.[63] In so doing, Simpson mobilized the powers of what theorist Lindon Barrett has called the African American "singing voice." For Barrett,



2.16
Carrie Mae Weems, *Older Women Portraits*, from *The Sea Island Series*, 1992. Chromogenic color print. (Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.)

unlike the "signing voice" of speech and reason—exemplified by the plaints of grievance that issued from *Mining the Museum*—the black singing voice has long functioned as a site of positive valuation, rooted in the body, that is capable of undermining and critiquing the regnant logics of Western culture.[64] Alva Rogers, a classically trained singer, was the natural choice for this assignment. She, you'll remember, had worked with Wilson on *Spoils* and modeled for Simpson on several occasions, but Rogers is perhaps best known for her star turn in Julie Dash's luminous 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*, which focuses on a Gullah family at the turn of the twentieth century.[65] Having lived in the area for three months while filming, Rogers brought her own set of experiences and associations to *Five Rooms* that departed from Simpson's. Indeed, her approach rhymed more with contemporaneous efforts, such as Weems's *The Sea Island Series*, a set of quasi-ethnographic texts and lushly rendered photographs documenting ritual and folkloric practices, which were anchored by large-scale reprints of Zealy's photographs, now enlarged and tinted a rich indigo as if to make new demands on their viewers (1991–1992; fig. 2.16). In this body of work, Weems set out to understand how various sites and subjects in the region might represent unbroken links to African linguistic patterns, modes of belief, and conceptualizations of space.[66] While Simpson's choice of materials purposefully eschewed the forms of black cultural production invoked in Weems's pictures and for which South Carolina is best known—metalwork, carpentry, and basket-weaving—Rogers's songs deftly alluded to the material histories of the Sea Islands.[67]

According to the vocalist's script, upon walking into the first room, the viewer tripped off a motion sensor that played a continuous "loop of ocean sound effects." After four bars the first vocal track kicked in, Rogers singing the chorus to her original composition "Islands": "Islands / islands with brown faces / islands / way stations for slavery." After this song faded out, Rogers's voice could again be heard

"just above a whisper" chanting the children's song "Them Bones."[68] As with Simpson's objects, water, connection, and displacement were the key themes of Rogers's songs. And as in Simpson's work, where bottles of water suggested improbable bodies for photographic figures, in Rogers's composition, "brown faces" not only populated the islands but also defined them in a strongly, strangely anthropomorphic way: "Islands *with* brown faces." Such tactics bypassed the endless stream of clichés associated with slavery in favor of resonant formal linkages drawn between image and object, sight and sound, body and material that indexed the constrained position of the captive subject.

Fittingly, in the second room, Simpson installed the small wooden hut that filled the space from floor to ceiling (see fig. 2.9). Plaques naming various tactics of slave resistance—"arson," "conspiracy," "sabotage"—were laid around the baseboard of the structure. Although redolent of African architectures, Simpson patterned her building on the smokehouse at Boone Hall Plantation, a beautifully preserved estate not far from Charleston. Just large enough to stand in with arms outstretched, the circular hut and the texts at its base encouraged a looping navigation as viewers read about acts of defiance, which, for black subjects in America more often than not return to haunt their actors. Not only are blacks subjected to an insane violence, but black resistance feeds into the stereotype of savagery that justified such violence in the first place.[69] The wooden structure called attention to this transhistorical logic even as it referred back to a specific incarnation of it: plantation smokehouses—larded with stores of dried meat that were key to slave subsistence—were often both targets of black pilfering and preferred sites of black punishment.[70]

In metaphorically evoking such realities, the hut also quite specifically turned exhibitiongoers to the scene of South Carolina history. Most of Simpson's text panels in room two name acts rather than persons or events, but several repeat the phrase "Stono Rebellion of 1739," singling out the infamous uprising in which a band of slaves was said to have killed at least twenty whites before being hunted down and brutally murdered themselves.[71] This cue also speaks to the most famous episode of insurrection in Charleston. Denmark Vesey, a free African-born carpenter, orchestrated a revolt that was intended to end white rule in the city and that was slated to begin on Sunday, July 14, 1822, in honor of the French revolutionary storming of Bastille prison on the same day in 1789. According to some estimates, the uprising would have involved thousands of black coconspirators, many of them armed, but their plans were discovered in late May. Rolla and Ned Bennett, two slaves owned by Thomas Bennett, the governor of the state at the time and the builder of the mansion, were allegedly key players in Vesey's plot. The dependency was completed after the two men and Vesey were hanged, but through Simpson's chosen texts and Rogers's lamenting voice, they might be said to linger on.[72]

The soundtrack in this space was the first verse of "Islands"—"Brown faces / Came here / Against their will / In shackles and chains"—which played over a backdrop of talking drums from Chad.[73] When she activated the motion sensor

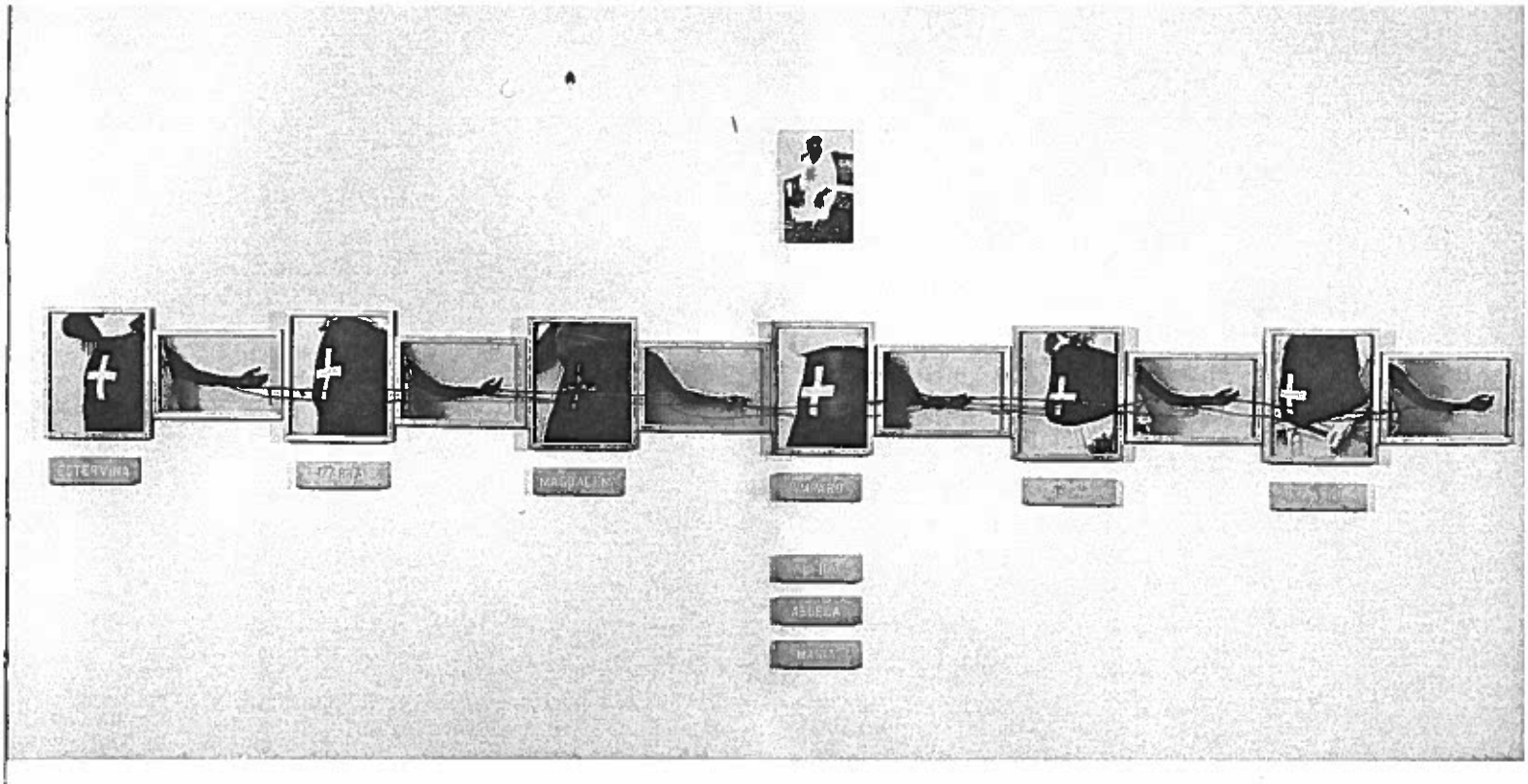
in this room, the viewer brought forth sounds that recalled the memory of absent African bodies even as the lyrics she heard recalled enslaved subjects whose very faces were liable to be shackled. Indeed, the visage was a site through which masters attempted to read both the temperament and ethnic origin of prospective purchases, ever in search of docile subjects hailing from regions noted for agricultural production in line with their own plantings.[74] Cast in this light, the turning back of Simpson's figures takes on another level of meaning, registering not only a refusal of the invasive gaze that would specify and dissect but also a small gesture of defiance against those globe-straddling regimes that would script the body in the language of pecuniary interest.[75]

Closer to home, the Bennett family earned much of its wealth through the cultivation of rice fields tilled by slaves. Thomas Bennett Jr. owned a mill still preserved in the city, and appropriately, rice was the dominant aspect of the next chamber (see fig. 2.12).[76] The third room was entered along the dependency's rear entryway, and the sonic accompaniment this time was Rogers using a Southern accent to read formulae for hoodoo rituals; her texts were adapted from the instructions on how "To Rent a House" and "Confounding an Enemy," published in Zora Neale Hurston's 1935 collection of black folklore, *Mules and Men*.[77] The images of turned-back women were again repeated, and the large jars of rice were alternately labeled with a temporal designation, the names of different species, or the amount of land that might be planted with the given quantity contained in its jar: "rice after the war," "Madagascar gold," "19 acres."

In this way, the process of substitution that made slaves into things was hammered home, pointing up the status of the enslaved woman as injured person and object of property, defined by her mobilization to supply the needs of the other but disallowed from asserting herself either on her own behalf or on that of her kin.[78] As theorist Frank B. Wilderson III might put it, in *Five Rooms*, "the Black has sentient capacity but no relational capacity. As an accumulated and fungible object, rather than an exploited and alienated subject, the Black is openly vulnerable to the whims of the world, and so is his or her cultural 'production.'"[79] In other words, everything can be taken away, leaving us with woman as rice: the enslaved female produced as nothing more than her productive capacity, frozen in the circuitry of exchange.[80] It is this figurative tactic that allowed Simpson to intimate the captive subject's position within the spatial, economic, and disciplinary matrices of the antebellum South in ways that were at once resolutely conceptual and affectively charged.

4.

Given her production of the black female body as a set of fragmented things and isolated figures, her apparent disinterest in producing an "accurate" historical narrative, and her bracketing out of South Carolinian material and discursive



2.17
Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Umbilical Cord*, 1991. Polaroid prints. (Image Courtesy of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists. Photograph by Hakim Raquib. Courtesy of the artist and Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, Miami, FL.)

tradition, how is it that Simpson imagines connection beyond the false identity that would equate one black woman with another? In answering this question, we ought look more closely at the photographs Simpson deployed in *Five Rooms*, in particular at the cable of synthetic hair that connects the three nude and one clothed figures. The braid's valence is multiple to say the least, prompting a consideration of the phantasmatic yet historically grounded relations that Simpson means to forge among subjects. Within the terms that *Five Rooms* holds out, that relation cannot be accounted for within progressive or naturalist paradigms. It is neither, in historian George Brown Tindall's words, a "bright thread of Negro Progress" in the "dark tapestry" of South Carolina history, nor is it an "umbilical cord" like the decorative wire that runs between generations of pregnant African diasporic women as in a 1991 phototext by Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons (fig. 2.17).[81]

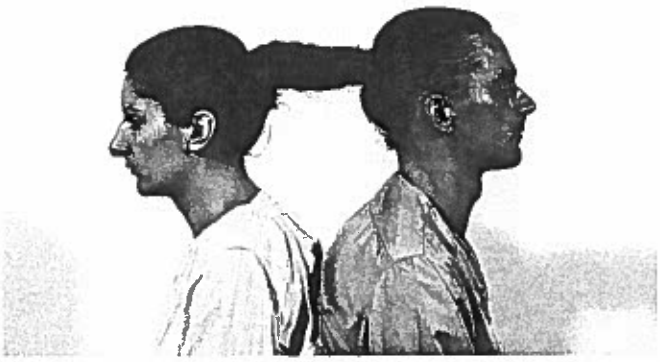
In contrast to such determinant connections, I would contend that Simpson's braid functions as a transitional object that reveals the logic not only of the installation but also of her practice as a whole, articulating a "separation that is not a separation but a form of union."[82] These lines derive from another text of Winnicott's on the significance of transitional objects and transitional phenomena. In his essay of that name, the psychoanalyst devotes several pages to the case of a young boy who seized on string as a way of negotiating the temporary loss of his mother.[83] As Winnicott argues there and elsewhere, the child's choice of transitional object makes every kind of sense: string connects, communicates, and denies separation. If the child develops according to the normative schema, the string becomes a thing in and of itself that "symbolizes the union of two now

separate things, baby and mother, *at the point in time and space of the initiation of their separateness.*"[84]

Less like the connections articulated by her African diasporic contemporary and more like the plait that connected artists Ulay and Marina Abramović for seventeen hours in a 1977 performance, the artificial braid in Simpson's oeuvre figures a contingent form of relation across space and time that must be fabricated, may eventually be undone, and that opens onto diverse artistic and discursive traditions (fig. 2.18).[85] Consider *Same*, whose sixteen pictures are based on the ones that appeared in the installation (1991; fig. 2.19). Here, Simpson creates a material connection that, due to its performative status, links two subjects together without presuming to transcend the radical incommensurability that pertains between them. Indeed, the texts in this work lay out the tenuous grounds upon which a contemporary relation between similarly raced and gendered subjects might be established: "they pronounced water the same way / were disliked for the same reasons / read w/ the same accent / were not related / worked for the same pay / read the news account and knew it could have easily been them / knew illness / didn't wear their hair the same way / were let go for the same reasons / had never met." What connects the women in these photographs is not simply the unchanging facts of black female oppression, but a willingness to be connected, to unconsciously mirror each other, even though such reflexiveness can never render them identical.

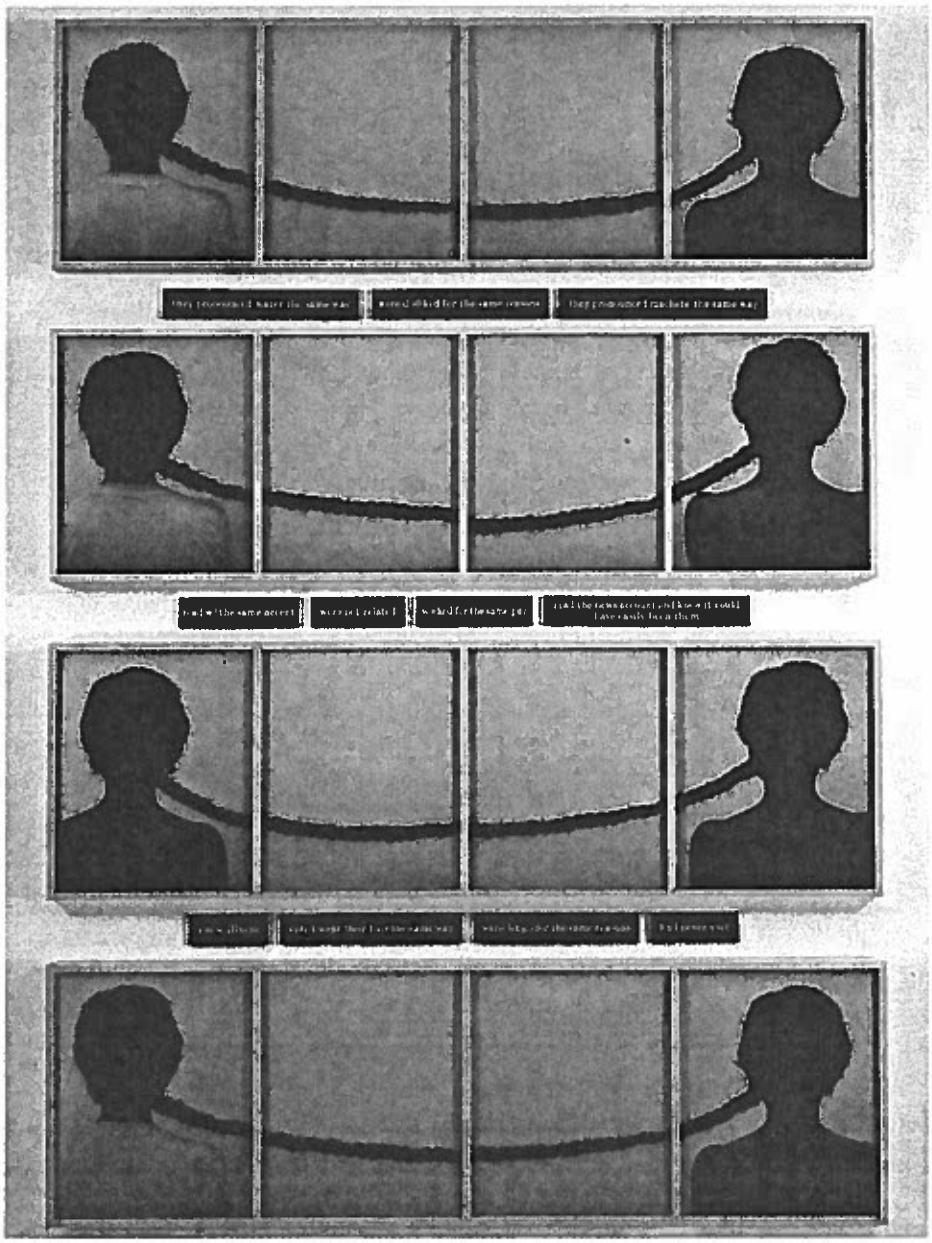
The pictures reveal Simpson's antiessentialist notion of belonging, which is brought to the fore in *Five Rooms*: having to spell out some connection to slavery in explicit terms required the artist to explicitly picture the connections that link black subjects to each other and to those on the other side of the color line.[86] Spillers reminds us that for the enslaved woman, filial ties, despite their liability to be fractured, constitute the "'threads cable-strong' of an incestuous, interracial genealogy."[87] Thus, the women's photographic contact in the first and third rooms serves as the background for water and rice, objects not only of consumption and production but also of a communion that unites them with a host of other figures both because of and despite the vicissitudes of slavery. Touching each other across space and time, Simpson's women establish links to the past that carry on unseen in the present. We are each solicited to join this corporeal circuitry, asked to perambulate these spaces, to explore their textures, and to wonder what braids might momentarily link us into the system of exchange.

In *Five Rooms* as elsewhere in her work, Simpson pictures what I would call a tending-toward-blackness—a leaning into and caring for—that implies an ethical concern marked by a reckoning with and acceptance of the social death that has historically bound black subjects to each other and to the substratum of Western culture.[88] As Jacob suggests, "Simpson sees her race eroded by poverty and a social structure that keeps it at a repressed, unhealthful level, the underclass of society from slavery days to now."[89] The statistics provide abundant support for this contention: in 1989, black median income was 83 percent that of whites; the poverty



2.18 (above)
Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Relation in Time*, October 1977. Performance, seventeen hours. Studio G7, Bologna. (© Marina Abramović. Courtesy of Marina Abramović Archives and Sean Kelly Gallery, NY.)

2.19 (below)
Lorna Simpson, *Same*, 1991. Sixteen color Polaroid prints, eleven engraved plastic plaques. 302.3 x 208.9 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)



rate among African Americans remained at nearly 30 percent, virtually unchanged since 1980; the infant mortality rate among blacks was more than twice as high as that among their white counterparts; and black women still tended to be heavily concentrated in low-level service jobs such as cleaning and caretaking.[90] In addition to highlighting such continuities, Simpson's photographs pose the question of disconnection, of how coalition might be imagined between African American women circa 1991 in light of growing disparities of class, privilege, politics, and culture. At the time critic Michele Wallace noted that, despite the emergence of powerful voices within the representational field, from talk-show host Oprah Winfrey to novelist Alice Walker to Simpson herself, the late 1980s and early 1990s were a moment of crisis for black women's organizing, which could rarely be unified around a singular front.[91]

In retrospect, Simpson's project constructed a basis for relationality in terms that underlined the common predicament of black women, emphasizing what it has meant to be a subject understood as an object and laying out the grounds of affinity based on the simple facts of material existence. The artist suggests as much in "Mannered Observation 2002," a text that resonates with the wonder and ambivalence of unexpected mirroring between individuals.

> There were two women. They sat across from me, at different points during my ride on the C train, leaving Brooklyn. The woman to my right had a scar on the left side of her face that was long and straight and extended from her eyebrow down around the outer portion of her cheek, ending at her jawline. She exited the train at Fulton Street. A few minutes later I noticed another woman to my left. She had a scar, slightly raised by keloiding, on the right side of her cheek. The scar was long and extended from her eyebrow and curved down around the outer portion of her cheek along her jawline. I shifted my attention to the dark reflection of myself in the window, so that I did not appear to be staring at her so intensely. My reflection, punctuated by streaming blue and white lights, reminded me that I have a small scar on the right side of my face that extends from just below the corner of my eye to the upper midpoint of my cheek.[92]

In creating this community of women based on their scars, Simpson carefully sidesteps a notion of bodily connection predicated on shared victimization in order to consider how diverse pasts, whether marked by violence or accident, manifest themselves formally. Through such implausible commonality, Simpson creates chains of signification, material and visual, linguistic and photographic, that might differently link subjects to each other.

I am not arguing, of course, that such linkage happens to the same degree between all subjects or that the artist's work opens itself to viewers indifferently: surely that access is conditioned by race, class, gender, and the systems of discrimination that guide the production of these categories. Rather, I want to claim that Simpson's practice reveals the assumptions upon which black female subjec-

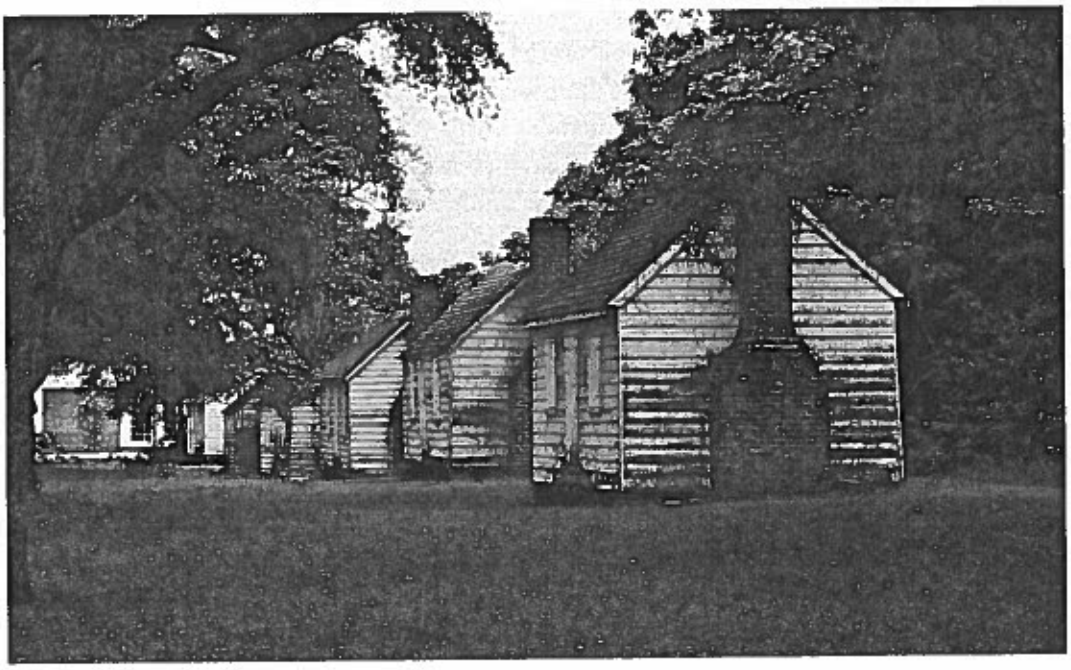
tivity are formulated and presents them as what Spillers calls the "zero degree" from which all subjects might take their bearing.[93] To argue otherwise would be to ignore the tremendous violence that Simpson's work brings into the frame, if not into view, particularly in the fourth room of her installation. There, gorgeous black-and-white photographs of the trees just outside the window, labeled simply with their species name, wended their way around a small space covered in ceramic tiles (see fig. 2.10).

The viewer's appreciation of these specimens was almost immediately colored with pathos. Speakers emitted Rogers's rendition of "Strange Fruit," a lyric made famous by Billie Holliday that describes lynched black bodies swinging from branches. This song was preceded by Rogers's reading of a passage from the Book of Psalms (135:17): "they have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not. They have ears, but they hear not; neither is there any breath in their mouths." The experience of these voicings was likely made even more chilling by both tracks' undercurrent of ambient noise, recorded in a cathedral, that further amplified the echoing effected by the room's ceramic tiles.[94]

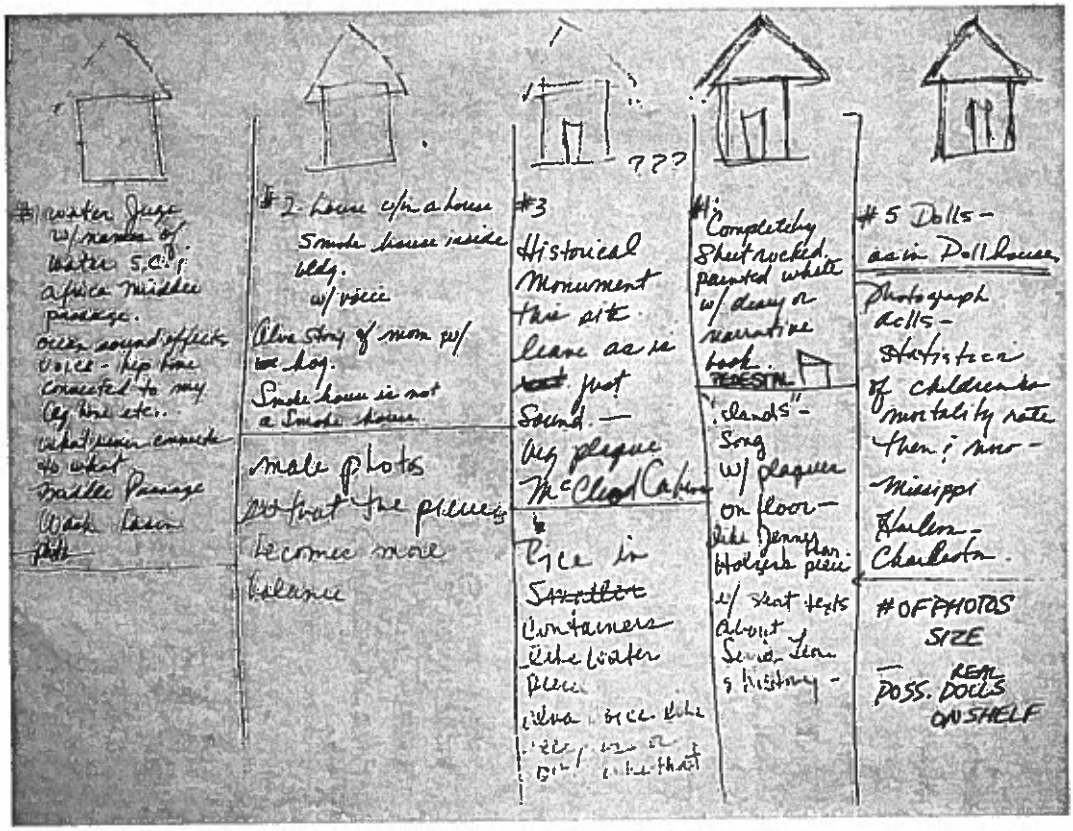
All of this combined to create a palpable sense of spaces haunted by quite specific histories germane to particular populations, an emphasis on the terror of the quotidian that might well have turned the informed viewer back onto the site—the area's local lynching tree was, after all, just two miles away.[95] As is so often the case in Simpson's work, the photographs in this room cast us to other sites and sights, yet our apprehension of them is qualified by her emphasis on a rigorous structural logic. The result is a set of keys for understanding the appearance of blackness and the construction of slavery as terms that are always already spectral, a fact that Roger's singing served to amplify in limning the presence of subjects long lost to sight, to history, and our understanding of it. If Simpson's object choices gave us the material coordinates of the enslaved, then Rogers's voice populated that network with "haints," figuring the ghosts left in the machinery of capital and refiguring our sense of how and where the slave past might manifest itself.[96]

Ironically, given her apparent attunement to the implications of her chosen location, it was not Simpson's initial choice. According to the itinerary of the artist's first trip to Charleston in December of 1990, she visited eight different former slave dependencies scattered throughout the Charleston area, from the American Sightseeing Building to the beautifully preserved Bocquet House.[97] Of these, her first pick was the last on the list, a group of six slave cabins on James Island located on a large tract of land once used to grow cotton by the McLeod family (fig. 2.20).[98] In addition to the slave quarters, the property included a big house, an avenue of live oaks, and a large field; it was, in other words, a classic plantation. Despite repeated appeals on Simpson's behalf, the staff of the Spoleto Festival was unable to secure the location for her use.[99] But a few months before the exhibition was scheduled to open, it appeared that the McLeod site might still be available and the installation was being planned accordingly.

A fax to Jacob dated March 6, 1991, shows sketches for each of the five ten-by-



2.20
McLeod Plantation slave cabins. (Photograph by the author, 2010.)



2.21
Preliminary drawing for *Five Rooms*, 1991. (Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, *Places with a Past* Archive, 57-012. Photograph by the author, 2005. © Lorna Simpson, Courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

fourteen-foot cabins that Simpson planned to use, along with descriptions of the contents to be placed in each (fig. 2.21). The elements depicted here are both familiar and different from those found in the final installation: the first space would have featured a wash basin, a soundtrack of water effects, and jugs of water labeled with the names of local rivers. The second would have contained a smokehouse and photographs of a male subject. The third cabin would either have been left as-is and labeled with a plaque reading " McLeod Cabins" or it would have featured water bottles filled with rice and Rogers reciting recipes. The fourth was to be covered with Sheetrock and painted white to resemble a contemporary gallery space with text panels placed on the floor commenting on the history of Sierra Leone and a diary placed on a pedestal where visitors could record their reactions. The fifth cabin was slated for dolls "as in Dollhouse," to be accompanied by statistics on contemporary child mortality rates.[100]

This document suggests that the major forms of the installation as well as Simpson's concerns in conceiving them, remained consistent. Here is how the artist explained her McLeod-oriented vision of *Five Rooms* in a proposal of January 4, 1991:

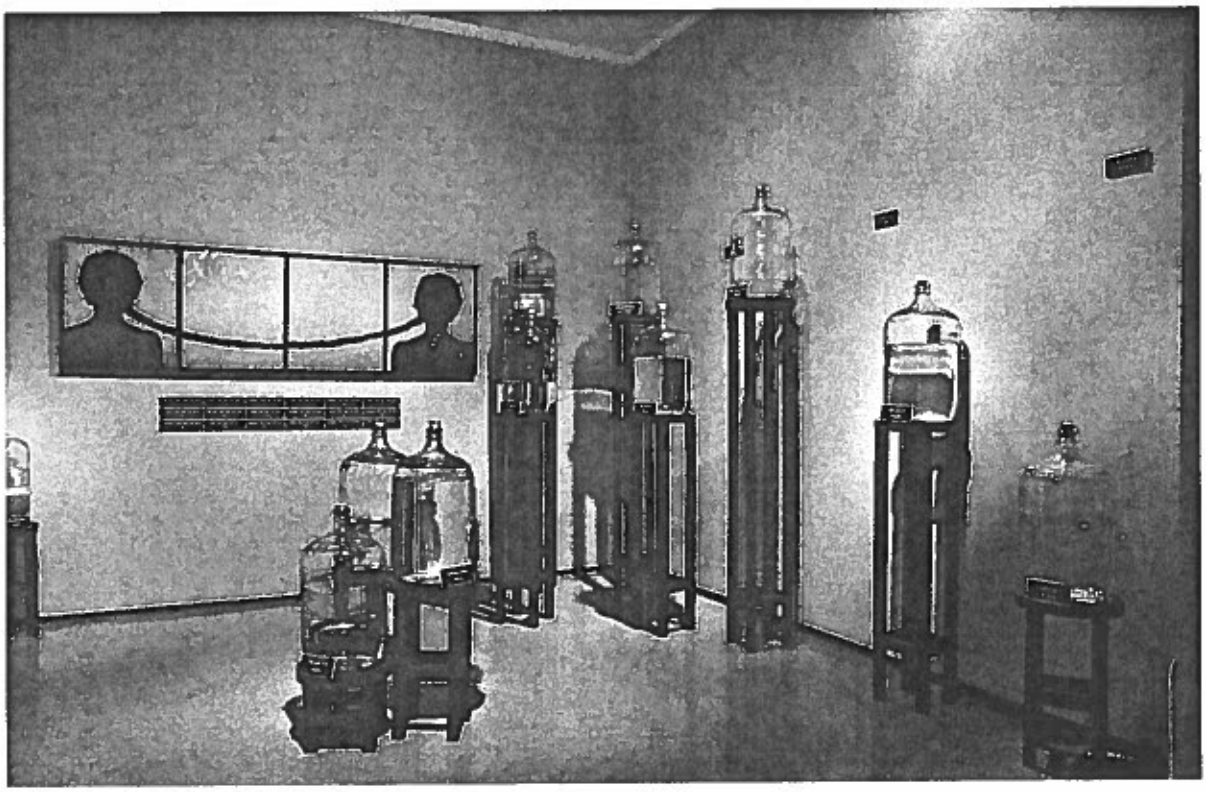
> This particular site, with its ordered rows of cabins, would allow me to create a series of five separate small works, each independent and self-contained in a cabin. The temporary installations would consist of framed photographs, objects arranged on shelves, and an audiotape that can only be heard within each cabin and activated when one enters. . . . The artwork will focus on the experience of Africans on James Island and Charleston, and link that to contemporary African-American experience. Issues of memory, identity, and race will be a part of this work, as with many of my past works.[101]

The artist's statement helps clarify that *Five Rooms* as it was eventually presented at the Bennett house was a work ghosted by the memory of what it might have been, structured by a site of which most viewers had no knowledge. And like the actual version, the would-be-*Five Rooms* accords neatly with Simpson's reigning interests in seriality, structure, and repetition. This fact, I think, underlines that it is not so much the specifics of literal sites of subjection but blackness and slavery as sites, as structures in and of themselves, that preoccupy the artist. Indeed, the haunting of the actual installation by its unrealized alternative productively highlights the relationship between various enslaved communities: whether sited in the urban center, on the plantation, or in maroon settlements, slaves maintained cultural and filial ties in the face of geographic separation.[102]

For her part, in moving from the McLeod cabins to the Bennett dependency and from visual constructions of the black woman to the material residues of slavery, Simpson remained true to her primary concerns, even if her means for making them visible shifted. Her work, it might be said, effectively challenged distinctions between "functional" and "literal" sites, as defined by the art historian James Meyer. In his groundbreaking account of the transformation of site-specific

practices from the 1970s to the mid-1990s, Meyer argues that more recent work such as Wilson's *Mining the Museum* is marked by its ideological interrogation of a given place, which is conceived as a functional site, an "informational" or "allegorical" "mapping of institutional and textual filiations and the bodies that move between them." Taken at face value, this definition also speaks well to Simpson's deployment of the black female figure in her phototextual constructions; likewise, Meyer's accounting of previous artists' concern with the physical and material determinants of a literal site—"an actual location, a singular place"—would seem to accord with Simpson's *Five Rooms*.[103]

I would argue, however, that in *Guarded Conditions* and its sisters, the artist spelled out the circumstances governing the functional site of African American femininity, while in *Five Rooms* she rendered a literal site resonantly functional. In Simpson's practice, the black female body as an avatar of subjection is understood to be a phantom, a universal figure that is both functional and literal at once, tethered to specific histories yet free-floating and always at hand. The specificity in her work never derives entirely from a singular location, but from the structures governing the appearance of blackness at any place or time. It makes sense then, that she went on to install the first of her five rooms at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago for her 1992 retrospective, suggesting that the legacy of slavery is always available for activation and it is the viewer's responsibility to establish a relation to it (fig. 2.22).



2.22
Lorna Simpson: For the Sake of the Viewer, installation view. MCA Chicago, November 21, 1992–March 14, 1993. (Photograph © Museum of Contemporay Art Chicago. © Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

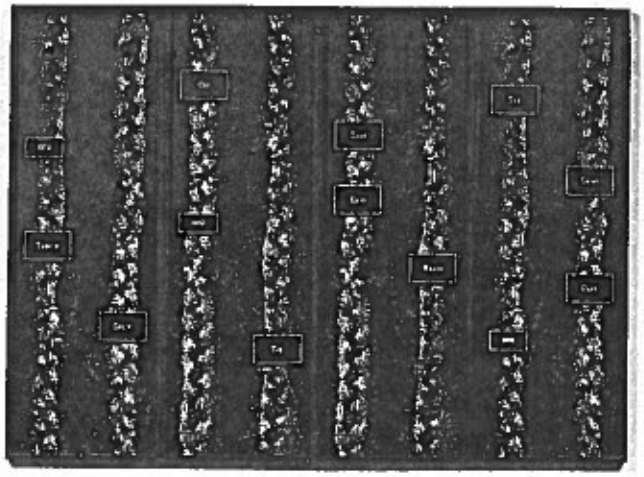
Just as her earlier work shows little interest in explaining to her viewers "how it really is" to be a black woman, *Five Rooms* was only partially about educating audiences didactically or creating a transparent narrative of black folks' sojourn in the U.S.[104] While its chambers might be thought to follow a sequential logic that provides a particularly American historical telos—from Middle Passage (room one), to resistance (two), to labor (three), to lynching and Reconstruction (four), to reproduction (five), the work can also be imagined to reveal the moods, attitudes, and postures of an absent African diasporic female subject as she is processed within an apparatus. Simpson's objects pose slavery not as a set of characters or episodes but as a set of structuring New World conditions that continue to be felt by embodied persons in her own time, even as Rogers's songs remind us of the narratives we do have by summoning up countless others that have been lost to history proper yet live on in the very structure of the material world.

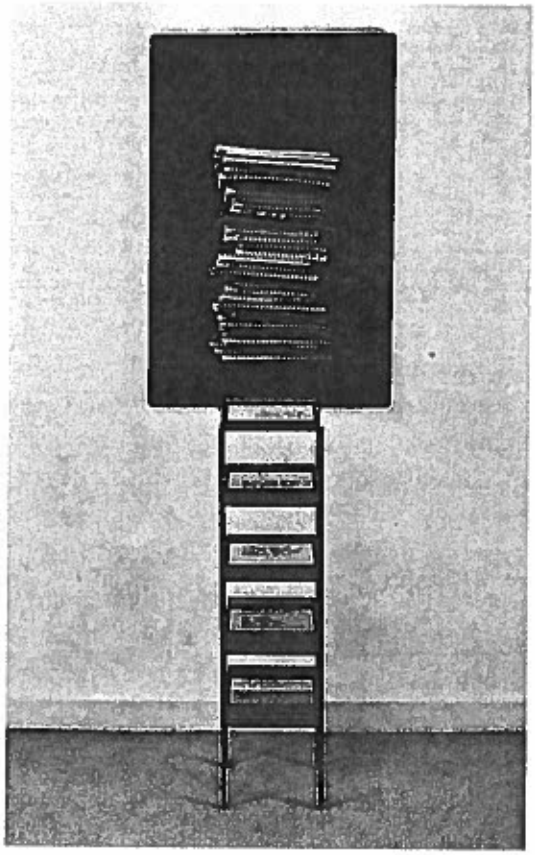
It is this dual vision that connects *Five Rooms* to *Down by the Riverside;* both projects bear the marks of their respective authors' investment in and critique of the structuralist imaginary. As Joyner notes in his introduction, his kaleidoscopic approach to the history of slavery in South Carolina was informed by the work of the *Annales* school in the 1930s and that of later historians who aimed to address the totality of the cultural, environmental, political, and economic structures in which quotidian subjects emerge.[105] Just as his text would recruit the voices of the formerly enslaved in order to qualify and recast the remains of the master's archive, so Simpson's installation productively deformed images of slavery by emphasizing the thingness of enslaved bodies and the counterhegemonic soundings that issued from them. In *Five Rooms,* blackness is "alreadymade," capable of being evoked with the lightest of touches.

As the final chamber of her installation demonstrates, Simpson had reconciled herself to these facts and set out to make use of them (see fig. 2.11). In the fifth room, viewers again heard the refrain from "Islands" and were confronted with prefabricated morsels: a circle of black kewpie dolls hung like a curtain from the ceiling, its dimensions precisely rhyming with those of the hut in room two. This element of the work reflects on the historical reproduction of oppression in both literal and figurative terms as indicated by the words "son" and "daughter" that marched along the walls. Here, black children are figured not through affecting images that might pull on the heartstrings but through hard plastic objects, commodities first and foremost. In this way, Simpson located the logic of the readymade in the crucible of slavery, which, according to Harriet Jacobs, produced its subjects as "God-breathing machines . . . no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend."[106] Although it is the closing note of *Five Rooms,* Simpson's ensemble of transitional objects suggests the new pathways to blackness and becoming that she would go on to explore. In concluding this chapter, it is to these pathways that I want briefly to turn in order to register their wide-ranging effects.

2.23 (below)
Lorna Simpson, *1978–1988*, 1990. Four gelatin silver prints, thirteen engraved plastic plaques. 124.5x177.8 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

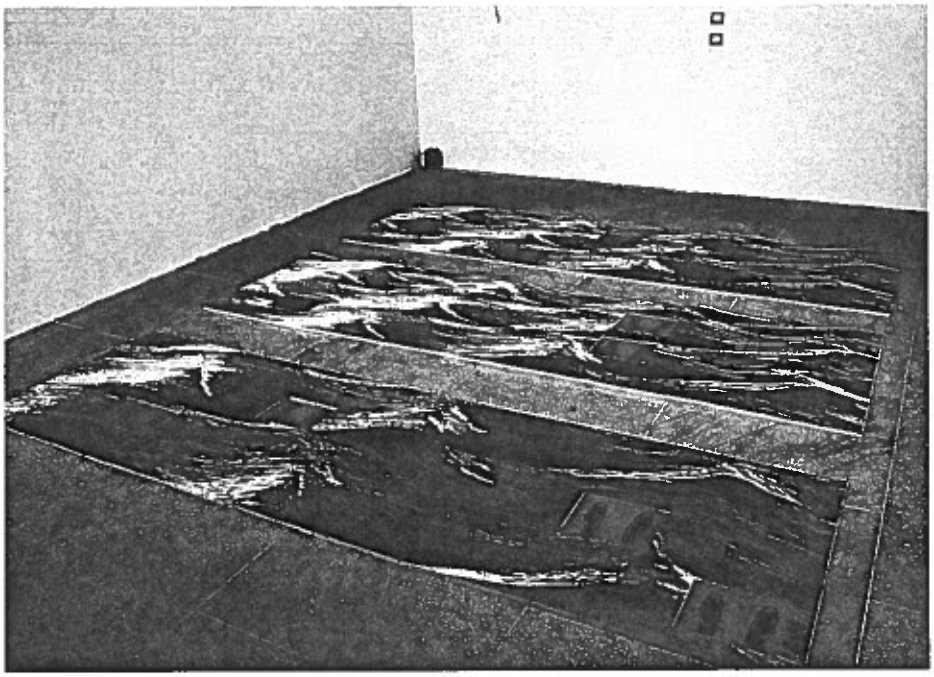
2.24 (right)
Lorna Simpson, *Stack of Diaries*, 1993. Photosensitive linen, steel, etched glass. 206x71x46 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)





5.

Around the end of 1992, so the story goes, the figure slowly began to disappear from Simpson's art.[107] Or at least its absence could no longer be critically explained as a logical extension of her established themes, as could earlier works like *1978–1988*, a phototext that mapped the passage of time through those now familiar braids and that was smoothly slotted into the discourse of what cultural theorist Kobena Mercer called "black hair/style politics" (1990; fig. 2.23).[108] Suddenly adrift without the exegetical anchor of the black female body and now confronted with all manner of increasingly sculptural synecdoches for its presence, several commentators explained Simpson's apparent about-face through a reversal of the terms previously applied to her practice. Consider critic David Pagel's reaction to an exhibition featuring Simpson's *Stack of Diaries*, a resolutely nonfigurative construction, nonetheless scaled to the body, that is composed of glass plates on a steel shelf and a photograph of the eponymous stack (1993; fig. 2.24). He opined that this work and its fellows were no longer about "specific politics," but "wide-ranging aesthetics," that "seduction" rather than "confrontation," was their mode, and that the artist herself was now "whisper[ing]" instead of "declaring." In the final analysis, Pagel found this new approach considerably less compelling, much "too bland and generic" when compared with the "biting energy of [her] earlier photographs."[109]



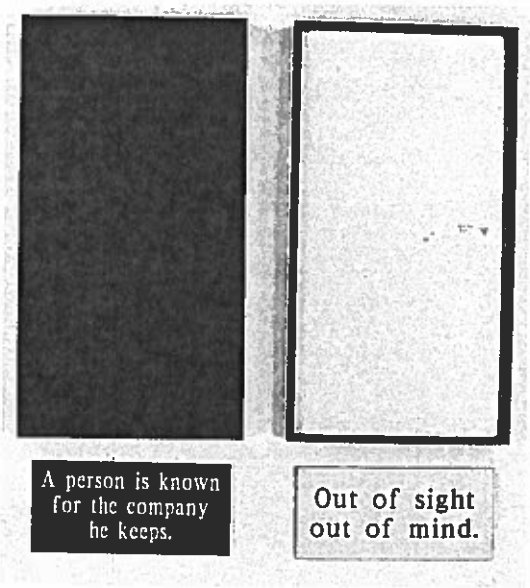
2.25
Lorna Simpson, *Standing in the Water*, 1994. Three serigraphs on felt panels, two video monitors, ten etched glass panels. Overall dimensions variable. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

This turn in the reception of Simpson's work was anticipated by Bradford R. Collins, who penned the only review of *Places with a Past* to dwell at length on *Five Rooms*. In his accounting, the artist's "estheticized attempts to enlist our sympathies on behalf of the historic victims of racism, though moving, seemed less effective than [her] conceptual photo works that implicate the viewer in present-day structures of racism."[110] Curator Thelma Golden was doubtless aware of how such myopic readings, hungry for allusions to contemporary black dereliction, could easily mutate into full-fledged backlash. She took the completion of *Standing in the Water*—a 1994 installation composed of etched glass plates, felt strips, video, and sound (fig. 2.25)—as the occasion to put the question on everyone's mind to the artist herself.

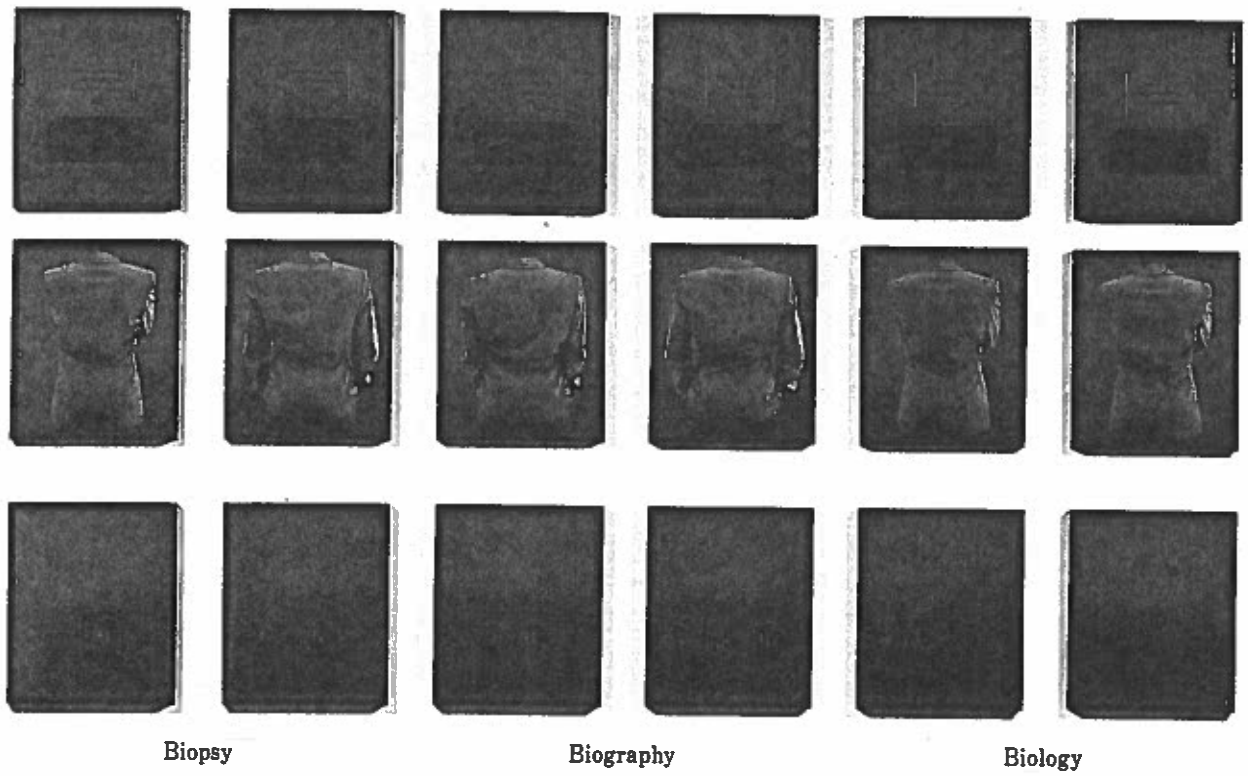
> The figure, your colored, gendered figure, seems to have moved out of the work. Our colleague Kellie Jones, our homegirl, art historian, and curator, and I have only half-jokingly referred to this shift by titling the new piece "Bye, Bye Black Girl". . . . But I think I understand this shift. . . . By denying viewers a figure are you disallowing them a place to "site" the issues so specifically, as you have similarly denied access to a face in the past?[111]

Simpson's reply? "Not really. . . . I am just trying to work through these issues without an image of a figure. My interest in the body remains."[112]

In *Standing in the Water*, that interest diversely manifested itself. Speakers placed on either side of the room emitted a soundtrack of aquatic effects. Among the concerns enumerated in the video were the plight of enslaved Africans who



2.26
Lorna Simpson, *Untitled*, 1989. Two gelatin silver prints, two engraved plastic plaques. 76×40.5 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)



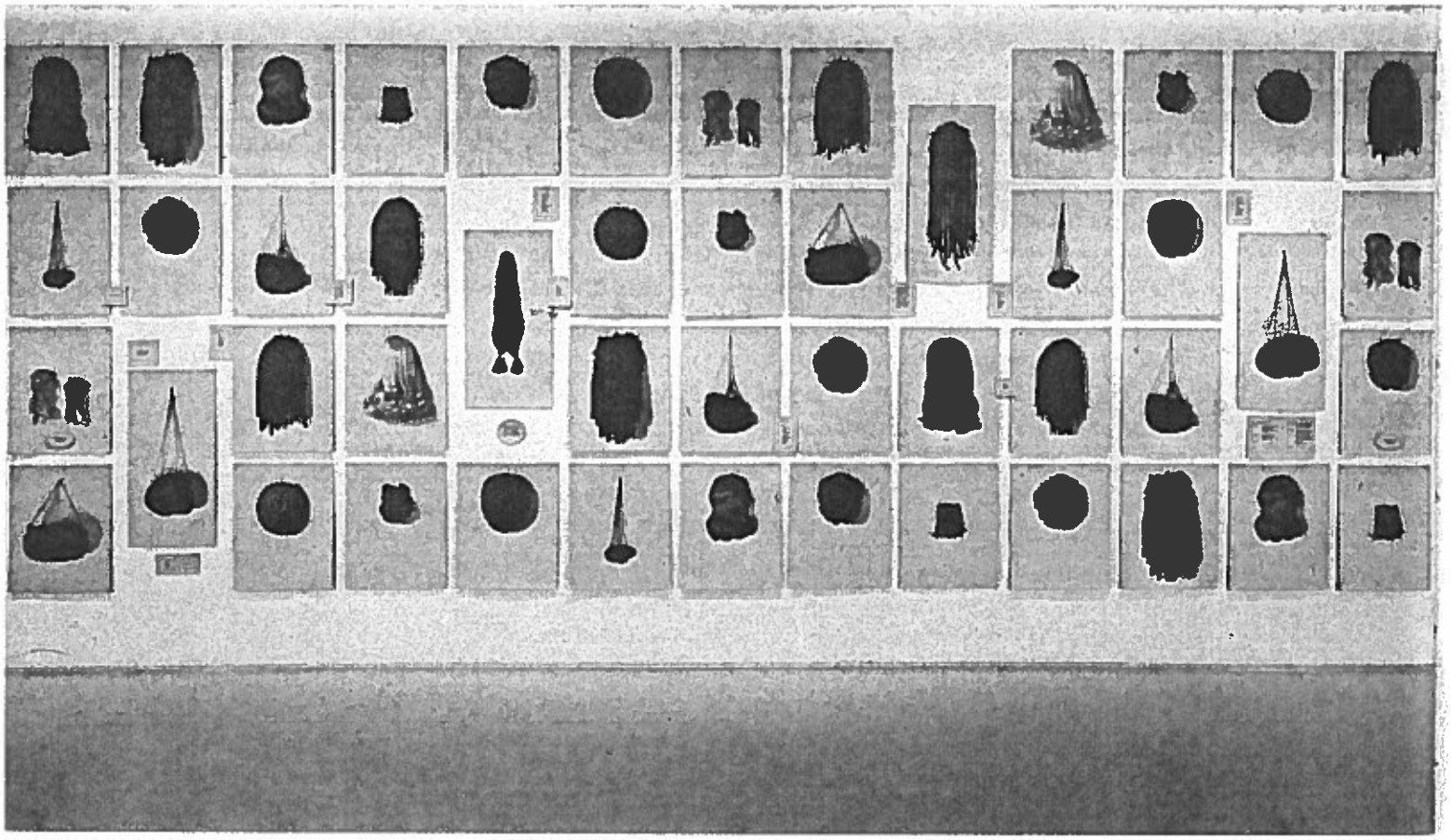
2.27
Lorna Simpson, *Bio*, 1992. Eighteen color Polaroid prints, six engraved Plexiglas plaques, three engraved plastic plaques. 248.9×411.5 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

jumped ship, the "promise of showers" held out to Jews on their way to the camps, and the memory of a "first time pissing in the ocean." These evocations, printed in white text, scrolled down the work's two small monitors—in the top unit over an image of a water pitcher, on the bottom over footage of rolling waves. Both televisions were embedded in the far wall of the gallery facing the entrance, which was separated from the exterior space by a cream-colored scrim. Moving inside, the viewer would have first encountered three five-by-twelve-foot lengths of felt printed with images of the sea, which became more legible as she approached the video monitors. Surmounting the felt panels were glass squares, each featuring the same photograph of a pair of shoes, yet differently tinted to suggest varying degrees of submersion.[113]

By January of '94, when *Standing in the Water* opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, these were the sole traces of the body that had guided Simpson's art and would continue to haunt it. In a 2002 interview, the artist connected the withdrawal of the figure at this moment to personal feelings of loss related to the death of her mother and of many friends from AIDS.[114] Such an assertion cannot be discounted, yet the transition that Simpson describes was in fact evidence of earlier processes of substitution and emptying out seen at work in, say, *Untitled* of 1989 (fig. 2.26). In this piece, two blank photographs are placed side by side—one black, the other white—and limned with texts that subtly evoke the dynamics of racial visibility through a refusal of rather than a reckoning with the object world. It was only in the wake of *Five Rooms* that Simpson began to produce head-on photographs of readymade goods with unprecedented frequency, means that allowed her to differentially bring blackness into play without necessarily bringing the black body or any other racialized referent into the frame.

The titles of these pieces—*Wishbones* (1993), *5 Candles* (1993), *9 Props* (1995)—begin to tell the tale; *Bio* definitively makes the case (1992; fig. 2.27). In this sprawling work, whose six tripartite antiportraits pointedly recall *Guarded Conditions*, the artist has replaced the feet and head of her figures with shoes and shoeboxes. As such, the piece visually and thematically recalls another feminist conceptual intervention, Mary Kelly's *Interim Part I: Corpus* (1984–1985), in which crisply rendered images of black handbags and other items of clothing stand in for the bodies of female subjects given voice in the work's alternating text panels.[115] Similarly, in *Bio*, photographic substitution arguably makes the work's textual commentary on the production of black women's lives within the long-standing regimes of Western biopower that much more poignant through its emphasis on bodily loss and subjective haunting. Ultimately, Simpson's encounter with slavery in Charleston not only allowed such part-objects to enter into her work, but to do so as signs for those bodily fragments and lost haints that have consistently shaped black women's horizons of subjective possibility.

To wit, in 1994 Simpson executed *Wigs (Portfolio)*, a wall installation featuring images of hairpieces bought at the local hair superstore printed on felt that was relatively disembodied, but that made slavery "material" through its use of



2.28
Lorna Simpson, *Wigs*, 1994. Fifty waterless lithographs on felt, 235 x 636 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

historical texts (fig. 2.28). Two captions are particularly germane. One recounts the experience of escaped slave and Underground Railroad conductor Sojourner Truth who "was asked that she display her breasts to confirm her sex during a meeting that she might have been a man masquerading as a woman." Another is lifted almost verbatim from *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom,* the extraordinary narrative of William and Ellen Craft, a married couple who escaped bondage in Georgia in 1848 through a brilliant disguise: knowing "that slaveholders have the privilege of taking their slaves to any part of the country they think proper, it occurred to me that as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be my master, while I could attend as his slave, and that in this manner we might effect our escape."[116]

Here, Simpson uncharacteristically relies on specific narrative episodes to do her work: a speaking subject is recruited that describes impersonation and concealment as historical exigencies. The corollary wig thus becomes a type of transitional object that lends itself to both the covering over and revelation of blackness. The other texts peppering the work—a psychoanalyst's interview with the mother of an avowed fetishist, for instance—make clear that black resistance is but one of many ways in which wigs allow for alternative constructions of identity without acceding to or refusing the gaze. Indeed, the work's gridded serigraphs seem to invite visual scrutiny as well as bodily contact, emphasizing divergent modes of perception and the need to think them together in imagining their absent locus.

Making sense of this shift in Simpson's work requires one final turn of the psychoanalytic screw. In her account of subject formation, theorist Kaja Silverman argues that each of us comes to apprehend ourselves as a self not only through the jubilant encounter with our reflected image famously described by Jacques Lacan in his essay "The Mirror Stage," but also, as the lesser-known psychoanalyst Henri Wallon maintains, through the sum of our physical contacts with the world, resulting in an apposite bodily identity that is keyed to tactile, cutaneous, and erotogenic sensation. Silverman terms these two schemas the visual imago and the sensational ego, respectively, and though they must be "laboriously stitch[ed] together" for a unified corporeal schema to be achieved, their disalignment "does not seem to produce pathological effects."[117] Psychoanalysis, despite its limitations, importantly teaches us that such troubled coexistence is always at issue in the construction of the self and its world, whether through the play of the image, the felt surface of the body, or the apprehension of transitional objects. Winnicott reminds us in "The Mirror-Role of the Mother and Family in Child Development," an essay inspired by Lacan's, that tacking between the imaginary and the actual is vital to the development of the subject's "psychosomatic interrelating and object-relating" capacities.[118] The same can be said of Simpson's art, in which divergent modes of perception continually haunt, undermine, and prey on each other.

Time and again her works underline the slipperiness of our grasp on the world by holding open the perceptual gap that some inevitably navigate with greater ease than others. For it is the plight of the black subject not only to recognize such disjunctures, but also to inhabit them in order to preserve the bodily ego from the objectifying images of blackness that litter the cultural landscape and doggedly cling to black skin.[119] Simpson's work tarries precisely in such interstices—between the particular and the universal, the functional and the literal, the visual and the sensate, the image and the thing, the structural and the historical, the phantasmatic and the factual—but above all, in the space between the subject and the object that has defined the bodily, psychic, and structural predicament of African diasporic peoples from slavery to the present. As befitting its status, the transitional *Five Rooms* ensconced viewers in the thick of these contradictions, requiring that both the artist and the viewer reckon with slavery and its objects, which continue to haunt the site of blackness, wherever it may be. It is precisely the question of the African diasporic subject's location—or lack thereof—that animates the next chapter's exploration of Glenn Ligon's fugitive tactics.