

An Artist Named Artist Finds Order in Digital Waste

American Artist examines blackness and detachment with broken shards of digital culture.



Louis Bury February 8, 2018



American Artist, "Mother of All Demos" (2018, all images courtesy American Artist and HOUSING)

Like getting a prominent tattoo at eighteen, legally changing your name to "American Artist" at the outset of your artistic career is a bold move. Whether or not you pull it off, the decision will define how others perceive you for the rest of your life. At first glance, the name might seem a grab for attention. But Artist's name, chosen because it grants a degree of anonymity online, is actually as humble and self-effacing as their art.

One of Artist's earliest works, "A Refusal" (2015-16), is an underappreciated achievement of **post-internet art**. For an entire year, they redacted everything they posted on social media: monochrome blue rectangles blocked every photograph; smaller black rectangles made text unreadable. The full posts could be seen only by arranging an in-person meeting with Artist. The performance swam against the digital current, suggesting that American Artist fits into a tradition of American nonconformist detachment, from Henry David Thoreau and Herman Melville's *Bartleby* to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Tehching Hsieh. Like Ellison's protagonist in *Invisible Man*, Artist has the underground ethos of an outsider.



Their first solo gallery exhibition, ***Black Goopy Universe*** at HOUSING in Brooklyn, extends these ethical and philosophical concerns into the material realm. The show's title plays with the phonetic pronunciation of GUIs — Graphic User Interfaces, or "gooeys" — and alludes to an essay by the same name that Artist recently published in the arts and politics journal *Unbag*. Drawing on the Afro-pessimist thought of Frank Wilderson and others, the essay chronicles a history of technological innovation, dating back to the Stanford Research Institute's 1968 demo of the GUI, to argue that whiteness and transparency are assumed to be innate properties of digital interfaces, when in fact they are the result of ideological design choices.

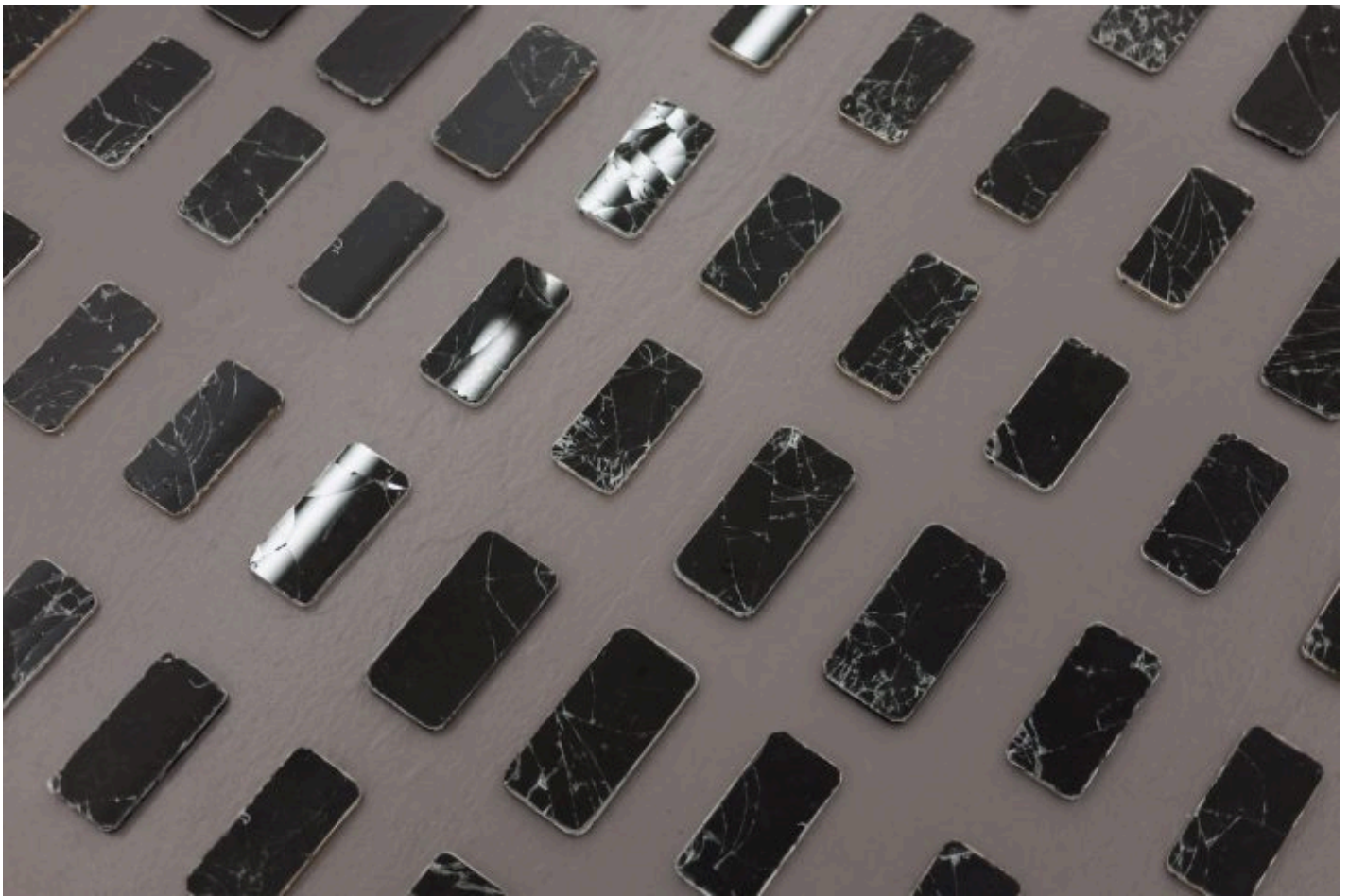
American Artist, "Mother of All Demos" (2018)

resists this assumption by portraying digital interfaces that are opaque, broken, and decrepit. "No State" (2018), a 12×12 grid of shattered cell phone cases installed on the gallery floor, draws the eyes downward and forces visitors to orient themselves around it in space. Fittingly, the grid is the approximate size and shape of a burial plot, and its somber rows of black casings evoke a cemetery seen from above.

The work in the exhibition — a mix of photography and sculptural installation —

This funereal mood pervades the rest of the exhibition. In the two other sculptural installations, "Untitled (Too Thick)" (2018) and "Mother of All Demos" (2018), black wads of bitumen glom onto digital devices, suggesting that those devices are physically and functionally stuck. In the seven-part series, "What is the Being of a Problem?" (2017), close-up and haphazardly composed

photographs of dingy computer monitors, televisions, and cell phone cases resemble images of garbage by photographers such as Chris Jordan and Tim Gaudreau.



American Artist, No State” (2018)

But whereas most trash art seeks to prick the viewer’s conscience with evidence of human wastefulness, Artist is more interested in digital waste’s own “being,” in a manner that calls to mind Object-Oriented Ontology, a recent strain of philosophy that rejects human-centric worldviews. The screens in the exhibitions — black, cracked, and mute — are treated as independent entities, rather than lenses or portals for viewing something else. GUIs are designed for ease of human use, but Artist imagines a universe in which digital interfaces have become recalcitrant and inaccessible.

Across all their work, Artist connects their stance of silent detachment to their African-American identity. For Artist, blackness is a category of identity that places harmful limits upon the individuals designated as such, but it also affords possibilities for insights that only an outsider might gain. Their underground sensibility resonates with scholar Kevin Quashie’s notion of “black quiet,” a form of modest or muted expression that runs counter to stereotypes of African-American culture. Like other contemporaries working in this vein, such as Steffani Jemison and Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Artist is notable because their work, despite its surface pessimism, seeks to create space for fugitive agency. I’d say that American Artist is an artist to watch, but their work calls into question the validity of that dead metaphor.



Black Goey Universe, installation view at HOUSING (2018)