

This Longing Vessel

**E. Jane
Naudline Pierre
Elliot Reed**

Curatorial Essay by
Legacy Russell
Associate Curator, Exhibitions
The Studio Museum in Harlem

Longing (adjective)

Having or showing a yearning desire.

Vessel (noun)

1. A ship or large boat (synonyms: boat, ship, craft, barque)
2. A hollow container; especially one used to hold liquid, such as a bowl or a cask (synonyms: container, receptacle, repository, holder, carrier, basin)¹

Let's begin with a hole.

Holes, actually—many. Those holes that were drilled into the decks of transatlantic slave ships to allow those in the hold to breathe, the vessels that carried human cargo across the ocean toward the destination of a newly astonishing American capitalism.

To call philosopher Édouard Glissant into the room, let's "consent . . . not to be a single being,"² to together consider ourselves as the vessel, the vessel embodied.

I begin here because there's something about these holes that haunts me. Something really devastates in the noxious intersection of strategic structural engineering and what the holes quietly suggest: that those held below, *were indeed living beings*, alive and requiring air to survive. The holes in their very presence made a body of the ship, a vessel with a heart beating within, a collective breath and sigh. The presence of those holes clashes with a violent reality: slavery as a system that actively denied humanity toward the goal of maximizing profit. We can assume that those on this journey might have sometimes seen a blue sky through these holes, a constellation of perfect circles casting shadows as the deckhands and crew moved above, just out of reach of the souls below. These punctures in the deck's surface created an extraordinary creature with a hundred eyes, all blinking up at the gods' azure in unison.

These holes were a reminder of our world, and perhaps the last window to it for those who lost their lives along the way.

This was a longing vessel: rising and falling with the tides, suspended in passage toward a fractured unknowing, a future unbuilt and wild.

This Longing Vessel—these galleries, these doorways, these rooms—are each expectant portals in their waiting, watching, heart-beating, breathing. With *longing* comes an aching—that deep, tremorous desire that makes us hiss and wail. Writer Gary Fisher touches on the depths of this ache in his 1996 prose poem "Love in Prepositions,"³ sketching the queer contours of longing with acuity:

I want you *in* me; I want you *on* me; I want you *all around* me . . .; I want you *under* me . . . I want you *over, over top of* me, *on top of* me . . .; I want you between me (. . . *in me tearing me apart*); I want you *near* me; I want you *next* to me . . . that *near* won't be *near enough* . . . I want you and nobody else, *next* to me and nobody else. . . I want to remember you as you were in relation to me.

We are hollow yet hopeful containers when we long. Desire, "in relation," is decadent. Longing is also lonely. In longing, we dream deeply of being found, held, drenched, filled up, an ecstatic overflowing that runs like honey

1. Oxford Dictionary

2. Manthia Diawara and Édouard Glissant, "Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara," translated by Christopher Winks, *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 28 (2011): 5.

3. Gary Fisher, *Gary in Your Pocket: Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 26.

and makes the world we want sticky and complicated. In longing, we wish to be invisible just for an instant, to cease to exist so as to cease to ache. In longing, we wish for the boundary that separates one body from the next to collapse, just for a second, so that *just for a second* we can feel whole in sharing a wholeness with another being.

Thus, longing is a rococo gesture. In longing, we reach with a flourish. There is drama, remix, style, suspense. It is every “O” that traverses the lines of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*. It is Toni Braxton’s “Oo, I get so high / When I’m around you baby.”⁴ Longing is an *O* and *Oo*: it is known for the holes it makes in us, and famous for the things (within, without) it makes us see. Artists E. Jane, Naudline Pierre, and Elliot Reed in sharing this space, puncture it. Together, they flood the floors with stickiness, make walls and ceilings leak and glitter, slicing through art histories as if a cold ripe plum. Holes they make, and holes they fill with desire. These three artists ache with care, joy, sorrow, decadence, a longing for a future-perfect that prompts us to recognize what worlds we’ve wasted with all our wanting.

E. Jane reflects on how their interdisciplinary work is a vessel for their own wants: “. . . longing to be American, longing to be in my body, the longing I imagine Viola Davis felt when she quoted Harriet Tubman.”⁵ In their movement across this space they leave behind traces of their alter-ego MHYSA, an underground pop star for the cyber resistance that examines the Black diva—those who we have lost, and those who continue to march in the world—through a womanist tradition. Alice Walker’s 1983 definition of “womanist” comes in four parts:

1. . . . a black feminist or feminist of color. . . Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.
2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually . . .
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.⁶

Steeped in purples and lavenders here are found pieces of another self, left behind for us to wade through and work failingly to resolve. A mirrored room shows us a projection of the artist in the work “MHYSA - NEVAEH LIVE (Behind the scenes)” (2020), MHYSA a womanist *in workshop*, a pop star in-progress, a diva in proximity, but not in physicality, we can watch her as we watch ourselves, sharing the stage but divided in our positionality and relation to it. The presence of these traces of a performative other-self triggers tensions. On the one hand, the fetishized glamour of Black celebrity as it travels as both trap and artifact across geopolitical lines. On the other, the romantic siren-song of an alter-ego that earnestly promises to pay homage to the complex histories of Black performance and the presence of Black women as empowered agents therein. E. Jane in their notes considers these tensions and is active within them: “Our bodies are . . . still traveling to places where either slaves were traded or that have histories of colonial violence . . . for purchase, as entertainment experiences.” These different facets of E.’s practice underscores that Black womanhood is multidimensional, complex, and range-full, a right to claim that feels urgent in this moment in time.

In his poem “Visiting Hours” (1985), poet Essex Hemphill muses on his presence as a Black invigilator patrolling the galleries of a white institution: “I’m weighted down with keys, / flashlight, walkie-talkie, a gun. / I’m expected to die, if necessary, / protecting European artwork / that robbed color and movement / from my life.”⁷ In conversation with painter Naudline Pierre about her influences, she names painters El Greco, Caravaggio, William Blake—right alongside Bob Thompson. It’s an anxious relationship wrestling with these “masters,” she acknowledges, “But I *love* them.” What to do with a Western art history that has “robbed color and movement” from us? Pierre centers the Black body in her interrogation of, and love letter to, traditional religious paintings. “A Timely Rescue” (2020) requires the viewer to ask, “Who has been visible within the secular imagination of art-making, alongside the sacred—and why?” Pierre, holding the brush, brings a Black spirituality, gesture, fantasy and bodily presence into a canon that has long excluded blackness. “We Are Here” (2020) gives Black

4. Toni Braxton, “You’re Makin’ Me High,” track # 2 on *Secrets*, LaFace Records and Arista Records, 1996, compact disk.

5. At the Emmys in 2015 Davis quoted Tubman saying: “In my mind, I see a line. And over that line, I see green fields and lovely flowers and beautiful white women with their arms stretched out to me over that line, but I can’t seem to get there no-how. I can’t seem to get over that line.”

6. Alice Walker’s Definition of a “Womanist” from Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 1st ed., (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

7. Essex Hemphill, “Visiting Hours” in *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press, 2000), 20.

femمهood wings in a cosmic redefinition. Pierre expands the gilded frame, making space for new figures to stand within it, and to take up space newly. For the artist these figures are alter-egos and avatars in their own right, at times standing in Pierre's place as a shield, shroud, and embrace that offers the artist distance from the canonized crush of Western ways of seeing. *To not be crushed—to live!* Pierre allows her figures to take up residence, to take up room, to haunt and howl, carrying us through to the other side of a longing that has troubled art history since its dawning. The vulnerability of American-Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat's words guide us here: "My Madonna cried."⁸ The right to mourn and celebrate simultaneously, standing in that crossroads brings tears, a divine vessel in release.

To call on a term of Gordon Matta-Clark's, performance artist Elliot Reed makes and unmakes "anarchitecture,"⁹ calling attention to the edifice of the body as an unresolved material that requires constant redressing. The walls of this room are covered with "Hue" (2020), a digital color scan of the artist's right hand, a skin that, as we penetrate it, pass through it, consent to it enveloping us, underscores the consumption of Black and queer bodies as an erotic, the brutality of this eating, the way Black enfleshment in its un/gendered exposure has shaped a visual culture and its violent imagination. The underpinning of the body we stand within when wrapped within Reed's hand calls forth the ongoing case of white Democratic donor Ed Buck who, in 2019, was indicted in the deaths of two black men, Timothy Dean, fifty-five, and Gemmel Moore, twenty-six, and in January 2021 is set to stand trial for these murders. The case of Ed Buck manifests a hell on earth, what Reed calls a "real-life horror story." Horror and a necessary haunting can be housed in holes: we wander through cuts and tears across the wall of "Supernumerary" (2020), portals to peer through, windows of witness to a quartet score of Reed's own readymade composition. Here are the songs and whispers of all those that came before us bound up within us, our bodies careful containers to centuries of carrying. What Hortense Spillers describes as "the arrangements of captivity"¹⁰ is present: the contemporary circulation of Black bodies as an economy, the power dynamics that we confront as we negotiate who is held and who is doing the holding alongside how that holding might save or suffocate us. "the flesh... a prime commodity of exchange" that renders the body "a living laboratory."¹¹

In the same poem, Hemphill exclaims: "Fuck a Rembrandt!" Conjuring him here in these halls to protect Black artwork, to patrol and reach for us as brother, sister, mother, father, seeker, soothsayer. Here in these rooms is a searching. Together, longing in this vessel, we rock back and forth, holding one another on the dancefloor, heartbeats felt skin to skin, painted flesh on fire.

8. Edwidge Danticat, "Nineteen Thirty Seven" in *Krik? Krak!* (New York, NY: Soho Press, 2015), 33.

9. Term invited by artist Gordon Matta-Clark in the 1970s to describe his interventions made on physical buildings around New York City. In its most basic form, anarchitecture means "against architecture" and extended to other forms, such as poetry and music, as a means of refusing traditional or classisised standards.

10. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 12, no. 2, Culture and Contemporary: The "American" Connection, (Summer 1987): 75.

11. *Ibid.*, 68, 75, 78.