



**Title**

Bad Infinity: Selected Writings

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Cover image:

# Bad Infinity: Selected Writings

by Chris Hayes • 18.10.2023

The promise of a collection of essays is typically to record a particular strain of thought from a specific time period. Perhaps the reader might glean an insight into the mind of an insider, and recognise with hindsight the limits of a past orthodoxy, or they might be presented with the arguments of an outsider, proven correct after the fact. *Bad Infinity*, a collection of writings by the artist Aria Dean (b.1993), is a richly personal and provocative series of investigations into shifts in American art and life, articulating pivotal debates around the politics of technology and identity as they emerged from 2016 to 2023.

Ordered in reverse chronology, the ten texts move from the murky uses of technology and the justice system to conversations around identity and American art, Artificial Intelligence and more; they shift across tone and format, by turns urgent, despairing and vulnerable. A certain effortless humour runs throughout the book: in 'Black Bataille', for example, Dean opens with 'like most things I write or make, this idea [...] began as a private joke with myself' (p.61). Her writing is rooted in the moment, responding to real events across media, politics and culture as they are in motion, with her self-described 'unruly and impassioned' (p.11) thoughts taking conceptual risks through stretching connections between ideas and subjects.

One of Dean's most prescient critiques is the limits of a liberal framework of identity politics. Representation is not empowerment and despite the art world's radical posture, it is immersed in the power structures that it is supposedly at odds with. From here, Dean follows a rich and expansive line of critical thinking around Blackness, from Afro-pessimism to accelerationism and memes. This is perhaps most stridently articulated in an interview with Frank B. Wilderson III, a writer and academic who popularised the theory of Afro-pessimism. Wilderson argues that anti-Black violence is the core antagonism of history, eschewing the Marxist emphasis on class while also rejecting efforts to draw comparisons between other people of colour. Part of his argument concerns the limits of visibility and recent discourse, and moves towards a conclusion that puts Wilderson at odds with the emphasis placed on 'joy, love, togetherness, and community' (p.106) by other prominent Black thinkers and writers.

Maintaining a related scepticism about subjecthood, Dean intervenes in debates around accelerationism, the notion that

revolution might be achieved through intensifying dynamics of capitalism. She argues that the Left accelerationism, represented by the likes of Mark Fisher, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, is 'waterlogged by a duty to grapple with identity politics, labor, and practicality' (p.137). Instead, for Dean, a recognition of the construction of Blackness as a non-subject within racial capitalism offers a more productive critical direction. She quotes Kodwo Eshun, who once wrote, when listening to Black American music 'you get this sense that most African-Americans owe nothing to the status of the human' (p.147), drawing links between related discourses around a productive non-subjectivity. Dean sees the radicalness of what she terms Blaccelerationism as a 'fundamental and decisive feature', which philosophically represents 'part of Blackness's gift to the world' (p.148).



**Fig. 1** *Little Island / Gut Punch*, by Aria Dean. 2022. Hard foam coated and painted, 215.9 by 81.3 by 81.3 cm. (Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York and Château Shatto, Los Angeles; photograph Zeshan Ahmed).

**'Memes move like Blackness itself' (p.184) she wrote in 2016, reflecting a concern with digital culture that is primarily found among her earliest essays. Whereas a physical versus digital binary is now largely exhausted by the sheer volume of publications, Dean pulls on a more fruitful thread, focusing on the 'nature of the real within the mucky, mixed-up world we now inhabit' (p.125). Questions of violence, trauma and the ethics of spectatorship come to the fore in a critique of the fluid borders of the virtual, particularly within an American context. In 'Trauma and virtuality', first published in 2018, Dean writes that**

the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter became a meeting place for photos, videos and testimony of police brutality to circulate. Yet, quickly, people began to doubt the utility of such material 'towards justice', considering instead that it 'spectacularize[d] Black death in a country with an already voracious appetite for it' (p.129).

Large sections of the book are marked by astute critiques of technology, anti-Blackness within the United States justice system and thoughtful discussions of 'phenomenology of a spectacular social-media society' (p.128) – particularly in relation to the film *Cassowary: Mechanics of Empathy* (2016) by Arthur Jafa (b.1960), which compiles footage of gun violence and police brutality against Black people. Yet, it seems to this reviewer that the real heart of the book comes early on, in the second text, 'America's Bob Morris', an extended essay on the artist Robert Morris (1931–2018). In a discursive series of letters, performatively addressed to Morris, Dean almost approaches a kind of nostalgia for the porous, burdensome concepts of identity held by earlier generations. She casually refers to the artist as 'Bob' and describes him as the last of a generation for whom the concepts of 'America' or 'American Art' 'really hung together either as a project or a problem' (p.33).



**Fig. 2** *Little Island / Gut Punch*, by Aria Dean. 2022. Hard foam coated and painted, 215.9 by 81.3 by 81.3 cm. (Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York and Château Shatto, Los Angeles; photograph Zeshan Ahmed).

In this extended monologue, there is a hint that Dean is in fact writing about her own work and preoccupations, particularly

around abstraction and the limits of subjectivity. Dean is a defining figure in a contemporary generation of American artists who explore technology, and is particularly noted for her work as the Curator and Editor of *Rhizome* until 2021. Some of her earliest works explore Blackness and autobiography through discrete material means, whereas more recent work, such as *Little Island / Gut Punch* FIG.1 FIG.2, a greenscreen-green pedestal that looks as though it has been distorted with a 3D-modelling programme, straddles conversations around contemporary technology, histories of abstraction and the limits of representation.<sup>1</sup> Echoing this tendency within her wider practice, the curator Katherine C.M. Adams wrote about Dean's exhibition *Figuer Sucia* at Greene Naftali, New York (11th May–17th June 2023) FIG.3 FIG.4 FIG.5: 'Dean seems in part to be wryly testing what we as viewers will register as violent when the subject's form is on the edge of representation'.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Figuer Sucia* at Greene Naftali, New York, 2023. (Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York; photograph Zeshan Ahmed).

'It seems today,' Dean writes, that few artists think of themselves as American, instead 'aligning themselves more with identity markers or political orientations' (p.34). If they do, she laments, it is on America's terms, 'generally bound to playing with signifiers, and commenting on issues' (p.34). This is potentially a capitulation to neoliberalism, but also speaks to the shaky grounds of American identity itself. As Jean Baudrillard once wrote, 'For me, there is no truth of America' and for Dean, it is 'myths and illusions all the way down' (p.39).<sup>3</sup> Perhaps these are the stakes of American art, she ventures: to confront nothingness, to stare into the multitude of constructions and fabrications that underpin identity, to carry the performativity of the self and to resist pressures to provide an affirmative conclusion.

If *Bad Infinity* can be understood as a capsule of a critical perspective, then its strength – what makes it appear most alive – lies in its variety and breadth. Just as the moment in which these essays were written has evolved, progressed, collapsed and reformed itself, there is a palpable sense that the animating impulse of Dean’s inquiries – as the editors Isabelle Graw and Daniel Burmbaum suggest in their preface, ‘who are “we” today?’ (p.7) – has not yet run out of steam. This idea that there is still much more to say, and much to do, is encountered early on. ‘In another essay, in another few years, with a little more distance’, she writes towards the end of the most recent essay, ‘Channel zero’, ‘I’ll probably have the clarity to make an argument about the fact that much of the war that summer was waged on the battlefield of video’ (p.29).



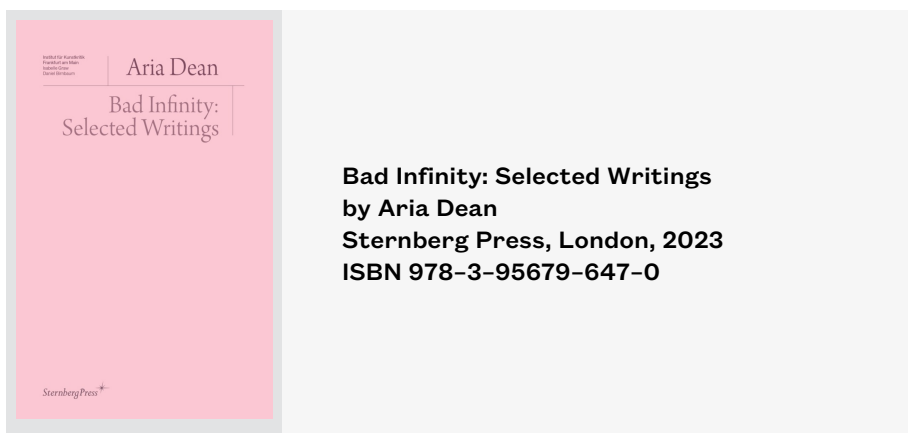
**Fig. 4** *FIGURE A, Friesian Mare*, by Aria Dean. 2023. Polyurethane foam, paint, wood, 99 by 102 by 122 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York; photograph Zeshan Ahmed).





**Fig. 5** *GROUND Duck Test*, by Aria Dean. 2023. Dye sublimation on aluminium and wooden cleats; three panels, each 244 by 108 by 5 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York; photograph Zeshan Ahmed).

## About this book



## Footnotes

- 1** James Hannaham described one of Dean's early exhibitions as 'incredibly neutral and manufactured', see J. Hannaham: 'Aria Dean: Blackness and blankness in the artist's first solo show', *4Columns* (10th November 2017), available at [4columns.org/hannaham-james/aria-dean?seo=/hannaham-james/aria-dean](https://4columns.org/hannaham-james/aria-dean?seo=/hannaham-james/aria-dean), accessed 16th October 2023.
- 2** See Katherine C.M. Adams: 'Aria Dean's "Figuer Sucia"', *e-flux Criticism* (23rd June 2023), available at [www.e-flux.com/criticism/547367/aria-dean-s-figuer-sucia](https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/547367/aria-dean-s-figuer-sucia), accessed 16th October 2023.

**3** J. Baudrillard: *America*, transl. C. Turner, London 1988, p.27.

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