



# Subject-Object Ambivalence: An Archival Institution

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**Subject-Object Ambivalence: An Archival Institution**

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Architecture  
Harvard University Graduate School of Design, by

**Jeremy Benson**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Architecture I

**December 2020**

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Jeremy Benson



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Sean Canty

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*Jeremy Benson*

Spring 2020

Credits and attributions are listed below for any work shown in the thesis project that is not exclusively my own.

### Images (from presentation, in order of appearance):

Still image from *Black Panther* (2018) dir. by Ryan Coogler

*Bench on 84s* (2017), Dozie Kanu

*Square Work: 4 decades of middle classness* (2015), Theaster Gates

*Kitchen Table Series* (1990), Carrie Mae Weems

*Perspective map of Montgomery, State capital of Alabama*, (1887), H. Wellge, Beck & Pauli, and Henry Wellge & Co

*Confederate State House Montgomery* (9 February 1861), Harper's Weekly (Author Unknown)

"Slavery in America: The Montgomery Slave Trade" (2018), Equal Justice Initiative

"Fountain at Court Square in Montgomery, Alabama (1886-1889), Alabama. Dept. of Archives and History

Rosa Parks Riding The Bus (21 December 1956), Bettmann/Getty Images

*Selma to Montgomery March 1965* (1965) dir. by Stefan Sharff.

Black Lives Matter painting around Court Square Fountain in Montgomery (19 June 2020), Mickey Welsh

The Winter Building from Court Square, Goat Hill History

The Winter Building in 1890, Alabama. Department of Archives and History

Room in Winter Building, image from "Souvenir History of Camp Sheridan" (1918)

*Veduta di Piazza di Spagna* (1750), Giovanni Battista Piranesi

Slave Cabin from Whitney Plantation, Elsa Hahne

Magnolia Plantation, Slave Quarters, LA Route 119, Natchitoches, Natchitoches Parish, LA., Library of Congress

Johnson Publishing Collection at the Stony Island Arts Bank, Chicago, Illinois (2015), Theaster Gates

"Museu Wormiani Historia," frontispiece from Museum Wormianum (1655)

**Footage (from short film, in order of appearance):**

“In Your Face: Interview - Arthur Jafa” (2017), SHOWstudio

*Selma to Montgomery March 1965* (1965) dir. by Stefan Sharff.

*Django Unchained* (2012) dir. by Quentin Tarantino

*Court Square Fountain - Brutal Slave History* (2018) dir. by Lucas Rackliffe

*Behind the Canvas: Kara Walker's A Subtlety* (2014) dir. by Tamika Cody

*SERENA* (2020) dir. by Tremaine Emory

“Kerry James Marshall: Being an Artist | Art21 "Extended Play”, Art21

“Artist Profile: Simone Leigh”, Guggenheim Museum

“KKK Cross Burnings”, King Rose Archives

“Confederate flag supporters rally in Montgomery”, CBS 42

**Music (from short film):**

BOA, by Sam Gendel and Sam Wilkes



# Subject-Object Ambivalence

An Archival Institution

Thesis by Jeremy Benson

Advised by Sean Canty  
Additional advisement by Michelle Wilkinson

Thesis Final Review 12/17/20

## Abstract

The project of Subject-Object Ambivalence is to design a cultural institution which privileges, and spatializes, Blackness. In this new vision of cultural space, individuals occupy both the subject and object positions. The simultaneous awareness of being seen by others as an object, while occupying a racialized subjectivity, is a dissonant reality of the Black experience in America. In his seminal 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois referred to this dissonant reality as “double-consciousness,” the “veil,” or, more simply, “two-ness.”

Occupying a place to both see and be seen, as Tony Bennett writes, collapses the disconnected experiences of either being a subject who sees or being an object that is seen. The resulting ambivalence — of being both a subject and object — is the exact experience of two-ness Du Bois speaks to and Black people experience. My project posits that providing a subject-object experience in an institutional context actively subverts and dismantles the traditional hierarchy, power, and distance imposed by institutions through time. What results is a framework for rethinking institutions and challenging the dominant paradigm of the production of knowledge and culture.



“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others. . . One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*



Arthur Jafa on subject and object positions.

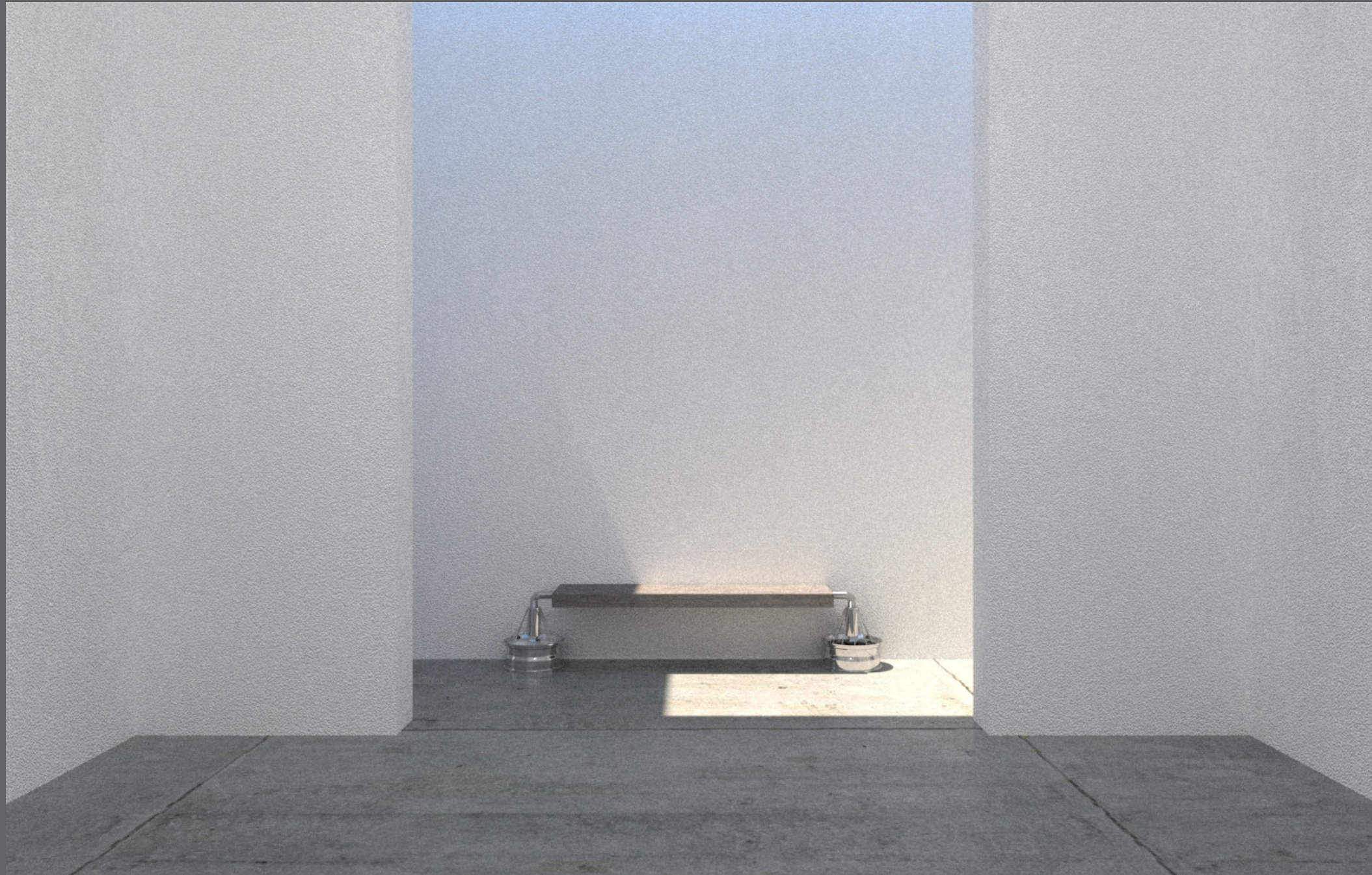






In Spring 2020, my independent research attempted to expand Arthur Jafa's Black Visual Intonation to the spatial dimension. The resulting "Black Spatial Intonation" might allude to a type of space-making within the context of cultural institutions that actively encourages and accommodates the identities of Black people and the influential culture they create.





Through representing and re-presenting subjects and objects — utilizing space as a mediator and facilitator — a new experience of institutions began to emerge. The research focused my thesis interest on institutional subversion and how to not only spatialize “twoness” but also disassemble the power and control built into the very foundation of institutions.



Dozie Kanu  
*Bench on 84's* (2017)





Exhibition spaces for the artifacts served as a spatial double and programmatic mirror to the activities the work suggested. In the case of Theaster Gates' work, I surrounded pieces that made use of *Jet* and *Ebony* magazine archive with another archive, the library.





Theaster Gates  
*Square Work: 4 decades of middle classness (2015)*





The simplified display room for Carrie Mae Weems' work recreates the room in which she is photographed. In this way, we create a spatial *mise en abyme*.



Carrie Mae Weems  
*Kitchen Table Series* (1990)



“A sight itself, it becomes the site for sight; a place both to see and be seen from, which allows the individual to circulate between the object and subject positions”

Tony Bennett, *The Exhibitionary Complex*

“Platforms . . . are alterations of the ground that can be read as tangible indexes of power relationships. . . . The platform therefore embodies the quintessential meaning of institutional power.”

Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara, *Platforms: Architecture and the Use of the Ground*

“The underpainting of high culture is expropriated labor, which in the American context means, above all else, slave labor.”

Hal Foster, *Underpainting, A Real Allegory*



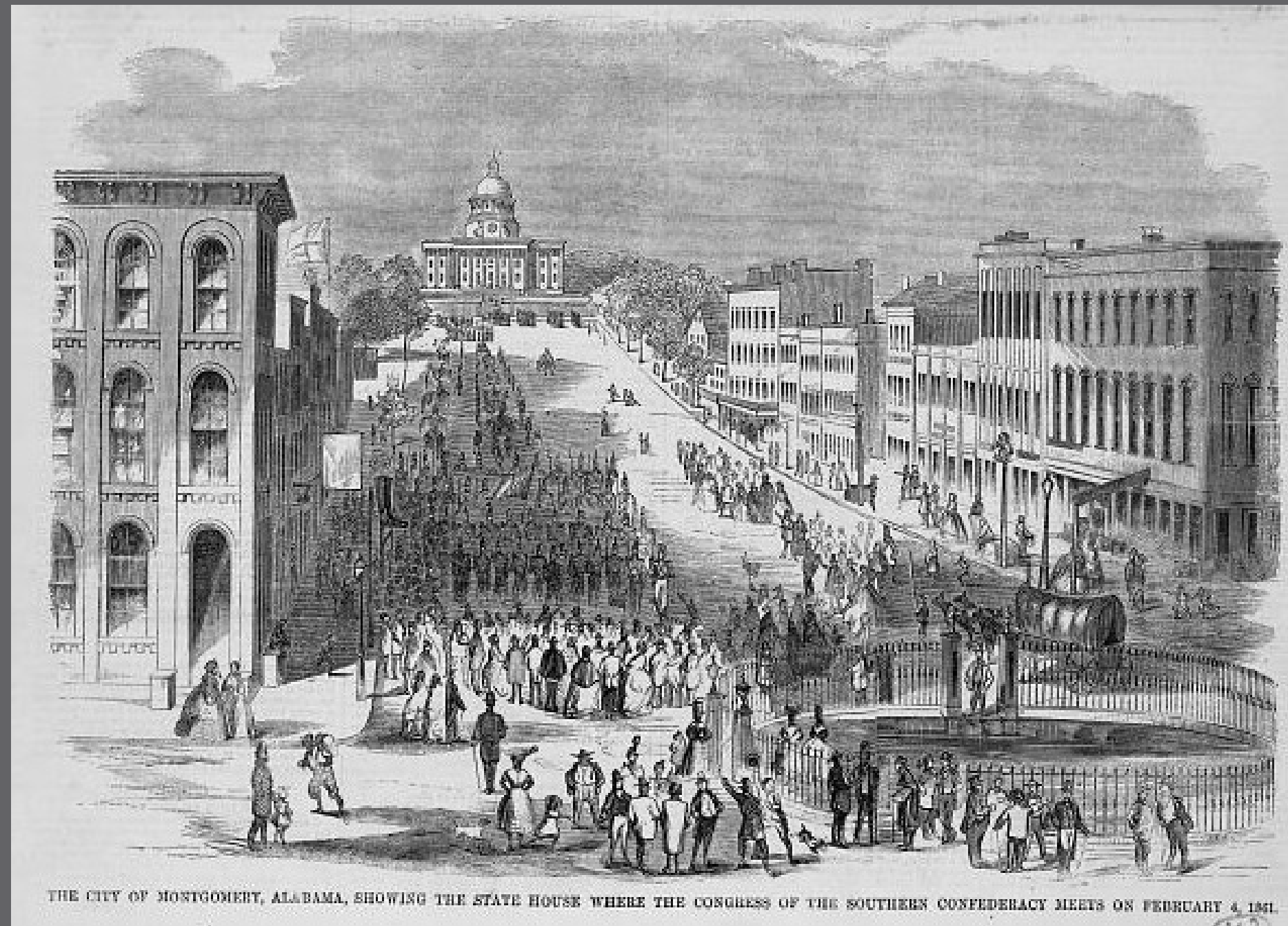






Montgomery is the capital of Alabama. It was established on the banks of the Alabama River, and incorporated as a city in 1819. Montgomery was one of the most “central and conspicuous” slave markets in the domestic slave trade. Enslaved individuals got off at the docks and were marched along Commerce St towards Court Square, where they were sold.





My site is Court Square, a plaza in Montgomery, Alabama at the intersection of Commerce Street (to the river) and Dexter Avenue (to the State Capital Building).

*Illustration: View of the State House from Court Square, 1861*



A map from Equal Justice Initiative's study on the Montgomery Slave Trade. There were a number of banks, insurance companies, and depots in the area surrounding Court Square that supported slavery and the Cotton Kingdom, at large.



Court Square in the late 1880s, showing the Fountain that was built on top of the artesian well, in 1885.



More recently, Court Square bus stop was where Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on December 1, 1955. This event would mark the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, a seminal moment in the larger Civil Rights Movement.



Almost ten years later, on March 7, 1965, the 54-mile protest march from Selma to Montgomery would commence. The path that the protestors took to the Alabama State Capital building led them directly through Court Square.





A present day photo of Court Square, showing the Fountain, the State Capital building, and the Winter Building at the corner of the Square.





A corner view of the Winter Building. The building was built in 1841 by banker and cotton broker John Gindrat, and served as the local branch of the Bank of St. Mary's.



Historic photo of Court Square, showing the Winter Building with covered wooden porches on the north and west facades.



In addition to supporting the cotton industry — and slavery by extension — the Winter Building held the offices of Southern Telegraph Company. Pictured above is the second-floor corner office. The telegram that authorized the Confederate firing on Fort Sumter was sent from this room, signaling the beginning of the Civil War.







Public Space Alterations: Carving

Create public-scale circulation by carving the ground plane of Court Square. A scar on the ground, this move reveals the “underpainting” of the site’s layered history: black bodies.





#### Material and Program Alterations: Gathering

Enslaved dwellings of 19th century southern plantations offer a way of thinking about materiality and program. Through alteration of their forced dwellings, enslaved peoples achieved agency and created a meaningful topology for gathering in exterior spaces.





#### Interior Alterations: Black Interiority

Providing a space that validates and centers the richness of the Black experience through displaying personal objects, effects, and ephemera. The walls of Rebuild Foundation's Stony Island Arts Bank sets up an intimate relationship between the books and the visitors.

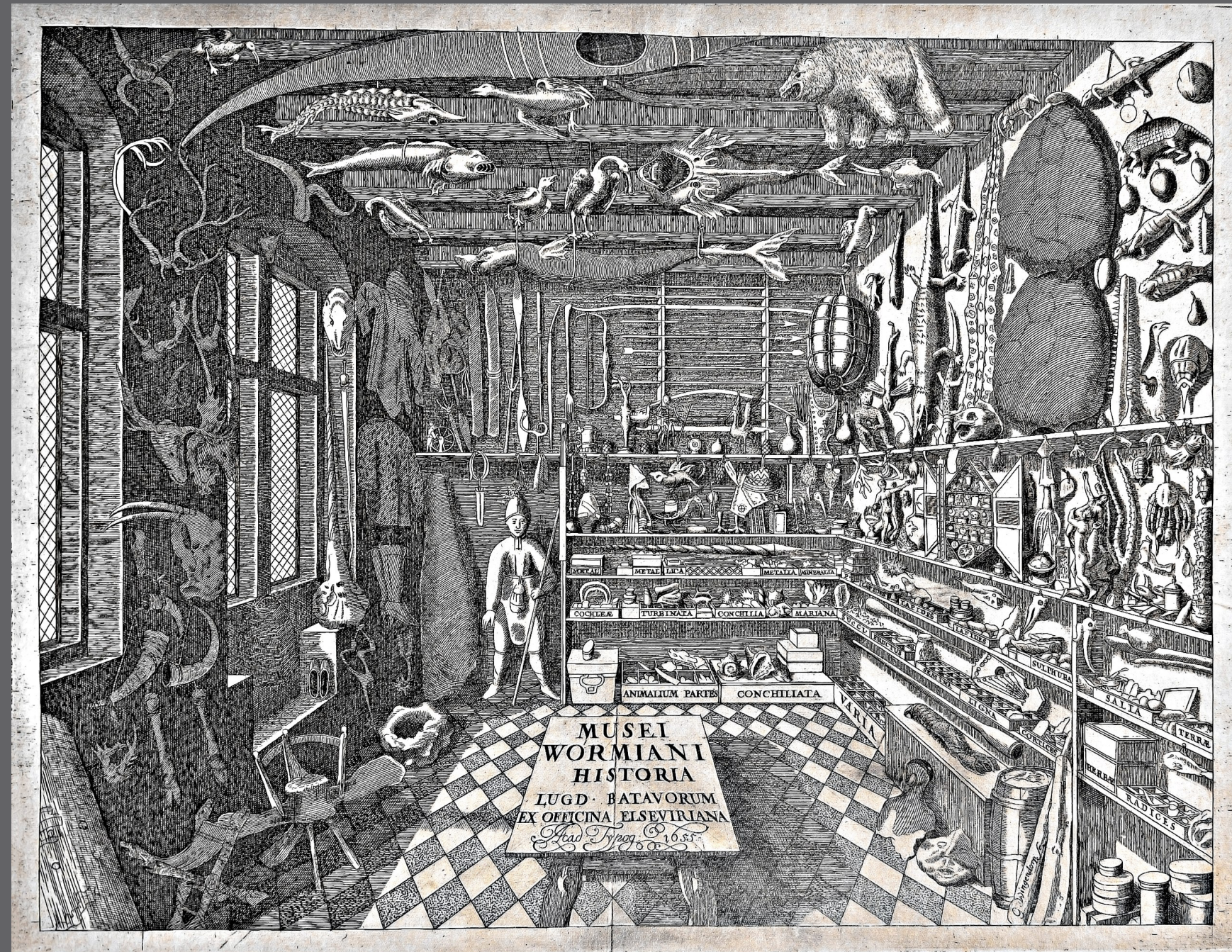




Interior Alterations: Accumulation as Archive as Texture

The walls of the archival library are textured with an expansive collection of books, including portions of the Johnson Publishing Company's archive of *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines.





Interior Alterations: Accumulation as Archive as Texture

Cabinets of curiosity, or *wunderkammer*, are the precursor to modern museums. Historically for the wealthy elite, they provided an opportunity for intimate engagement with the diverse objects on display.









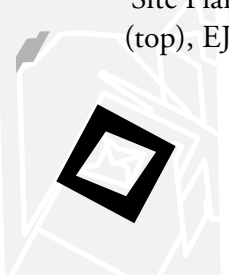
The Legacy Archive & Plaza will operate as an extension to EJI's Legacy Museum, one block north of Court Square. While the Museum focuses on the history of slavery and lynching, the Archive will collect cultural artifacts produced by Black people in America across time, including paintings, sculptures, photographs, documents, and other works.





Site Plan showing Court Square and Winter Building (middle), EJI's The Legacy Museum (top), EJI's National Memorial for Peace and Justice (bottom), and the State Capital (right)

Scale: 1:4800







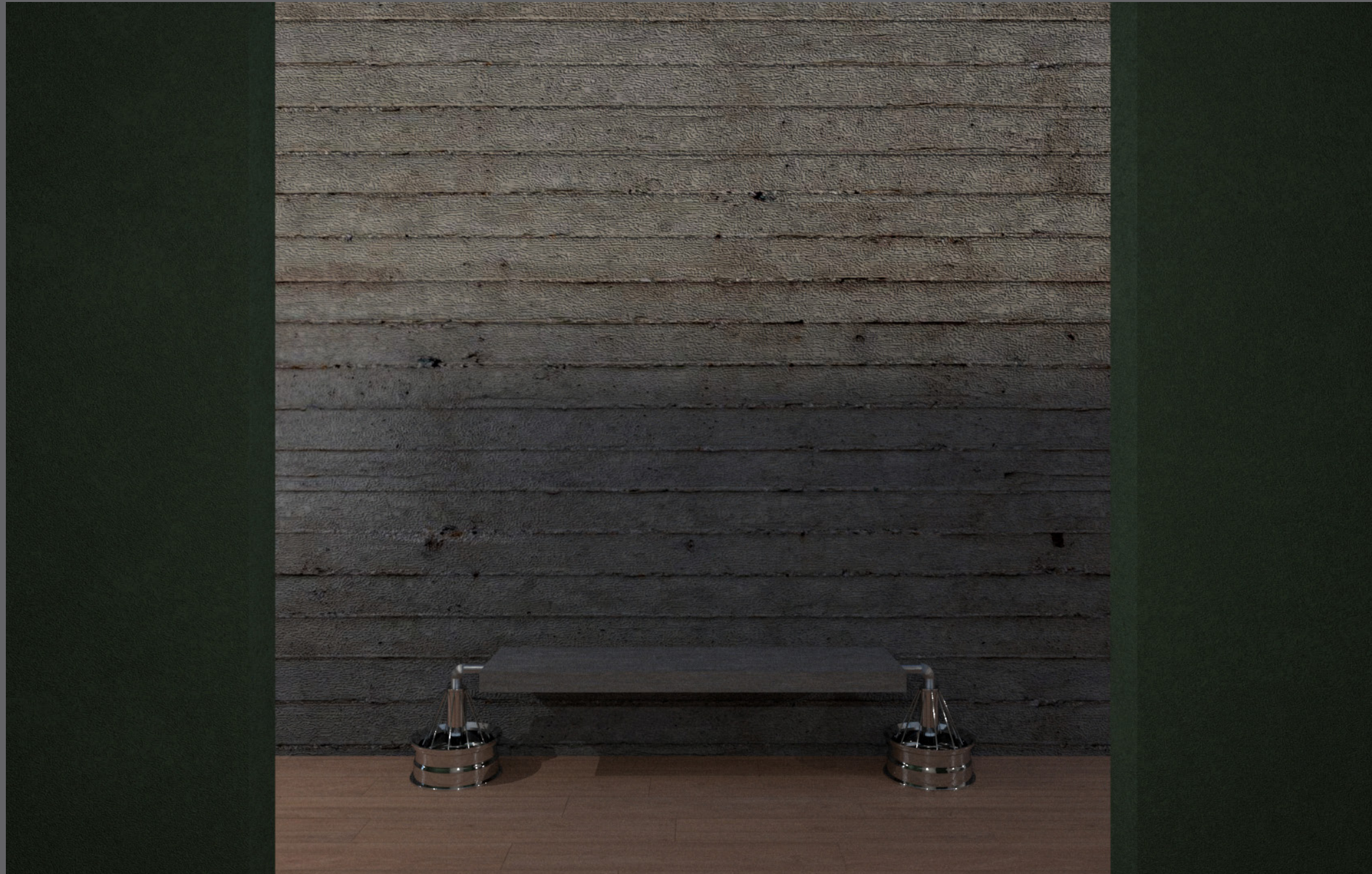
Birds-eye view of Legacy Archive, Plaza, and Promenade. The main plaza is situated between the Archive and the Promenade and is oriented toward the Winter Building. The Promenade, punctuated by viewing platforms, extends for one block towards the Alabama State Capitol.





View inside of library and document archive. A diversity of materials, including wood, brick, and concrete create an immediacy between the artifacts and the visitors. Within the Legacy Archive, spaces are scaled to feel more domestic and intimate.





View from looking room for Dozie Kanu's *Bench on 84's* (2017). As visitors walk down the hallway, passing the bench, they momentarily become another "object" within the frame of those in the looking room.





View of Legacy Plaza from the high-density mobile shelves in the document archive. Unique combinations of apertures out of (and into) the archive are created depending on which shelves are open.





The radial sculptural archive provides a space for exhibition, storing, and care for the objects.  
The horizontal surface operates as a display plinth and table for studying the artifacts.





Exterior view of plaza and stairs looking towards the Legacy Archive. The Winter Building is just out of frame to the right. We are denied a full view of the Court Square Fountain, which is shrouded by the walls of the Archive.



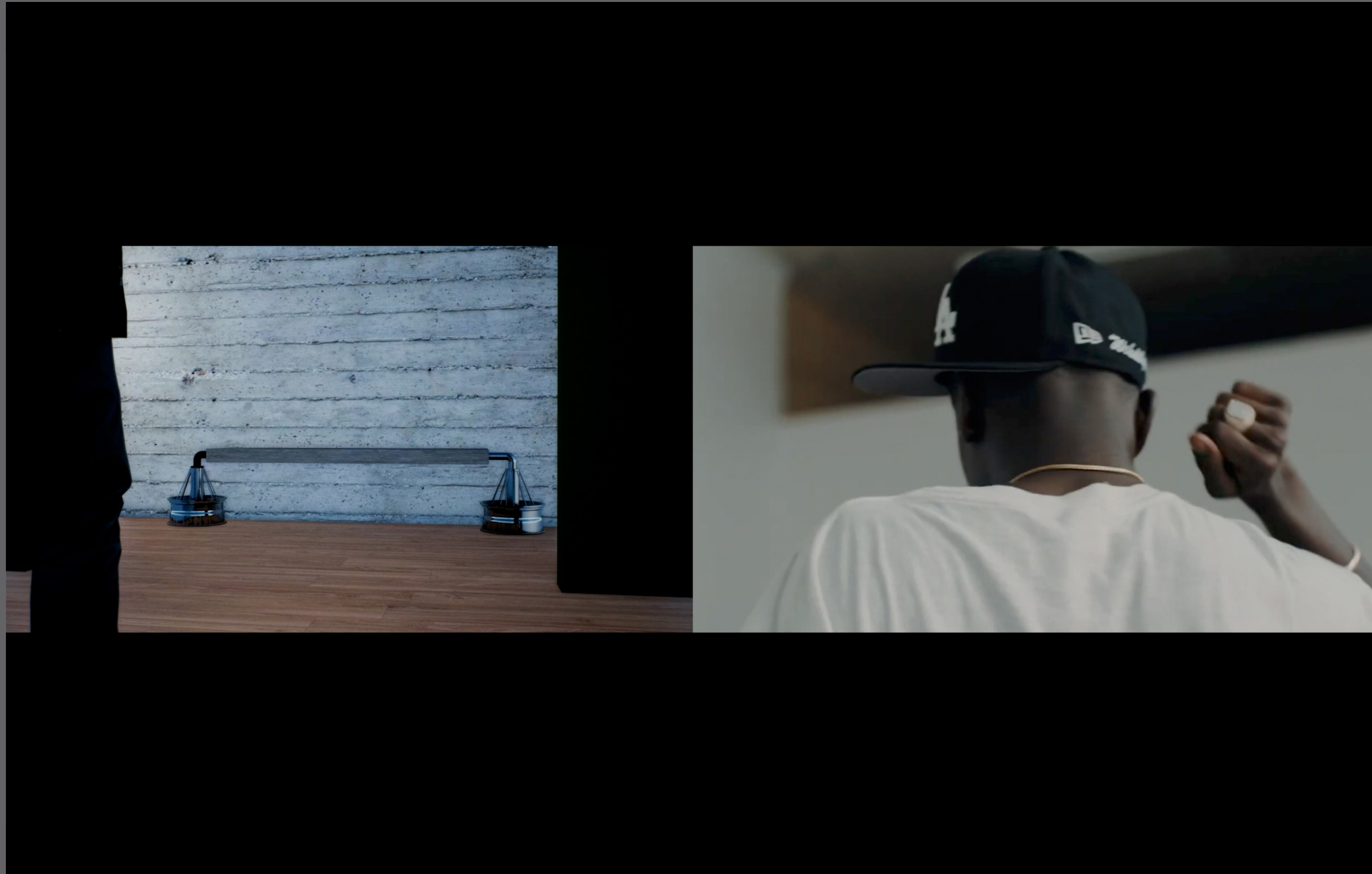


View from upper promenade showing Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* (2014) looking back at the Legacy Archive. A new subject-object relationship occurs between two non-living entities.

“For black people, moving through a given environment comes with questions of belonging and a self-determination of visibility and semi-autonomy. . . .Compositional movement (ways in which the body unifies, balances, and arranges itself to move through space) is a skill used in the service of self-emancipation within hostile geographies.”

Torkwase Dyson, *Black Interiority: Notes on Architecture, Infrastructure, Environmental Justice, and Abstract Drawing*





*Subject-Object Ambivalence: An Archival Institution* (2020)