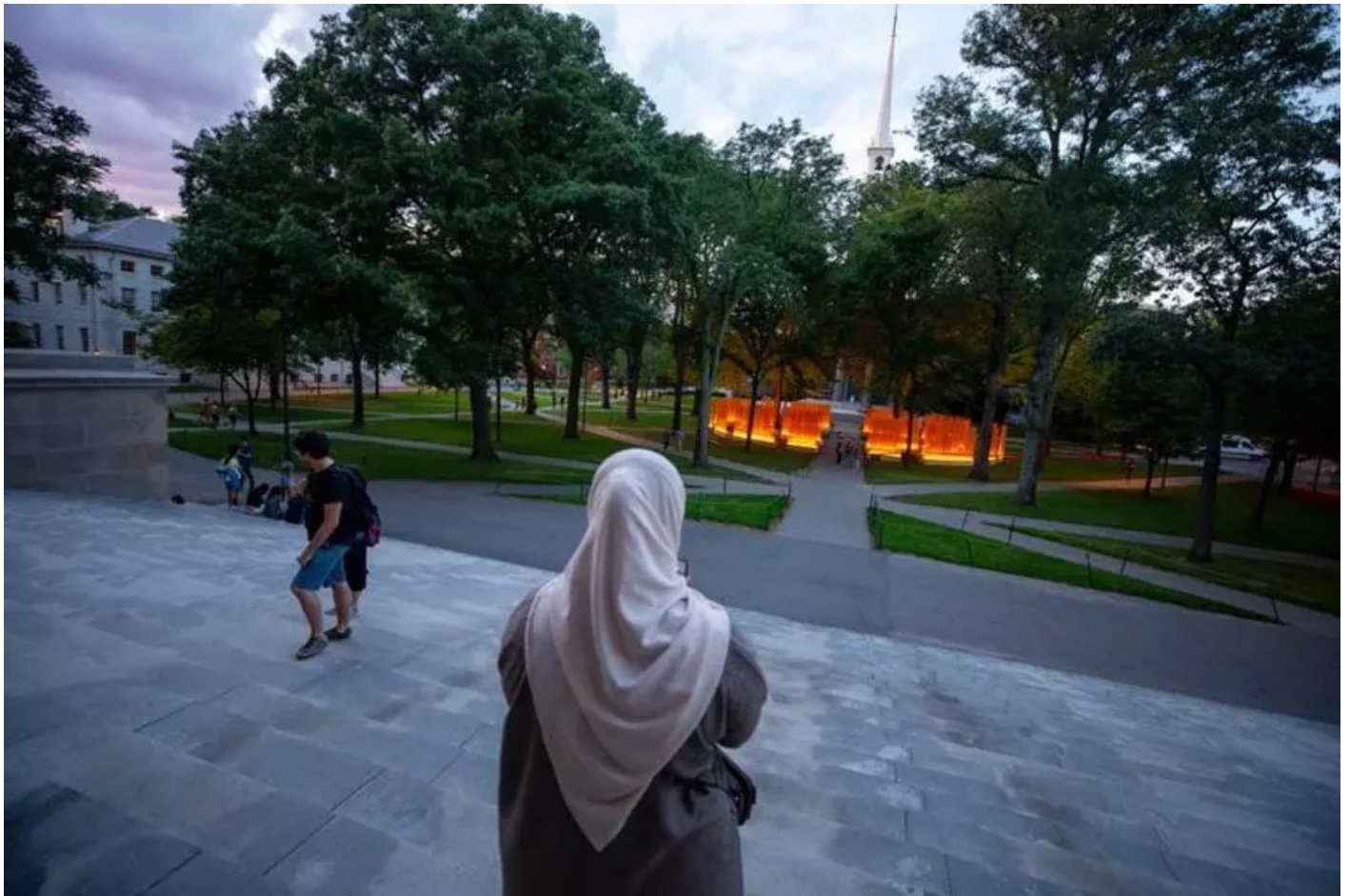


# The Boston Globe

## Harvard art exhibits remind us James Baldwin was right. The time for change is now



ROSE LINCOLN/HARVARD UNIVERSITY

**“Autumn (...Nothing Personal),” an installation by Teresita Fernandez inspired by James Baldwin’s 1964 collaboration with photographer Richard Avedon, is on display in Harvard Yard through Oct. 1.**

**By Jeneé Osterheldt**

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James Baldwin said light was in the eyes.

But we’re always rushing, phone in hand, too busy to see the humanity in strangers.

Sitting on a wooden bench in “[Autumn \(...Nothing Personal\)](#),” a public art installation by renowned artist Teresita Fernández and inspired by Baldwin’s words, there’s no escaping at the very least a glance at one another.

The benches form a circle and yellow, custom-made polycarbonate tubes extend from the back of the benches -- forming less of a wall and more of a golden compass of connection.

Almost every day this month there have been events to gather people for music, for speeches, for dancing, for readings of works by Baldwin, the renowned writer and cultural critic who died in 1987.

Though steadily studied in academic circles, Baldwin’s work has seen a resurgence over the last few years. His 1963 classic, “The Fire Next Time,” is the blueprint for 2015 National Book Award winner, “Between the World and Me” by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Last year’s Baldwin documentary, “I Am Not Your Negro,” was Oscar-nominated.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and the rise of a president who pushes supremacy, Baldwin’s reflections on oppression, racism, and social despair are relevant today.

“I think the reason why so many people are rediscovering and returning to Baldwin,” Fernández says, “is we are grappling with the place where we are socially in this country. As a person of color you feel like he’s writing for you. African-American history is the history for any American of color, Latinx, Asian-American, so far from the place where our families have arrived. But he’s also speaking to white people and the magic of his writing is he is doing it all at once.”

“[Nothing Personal](#)” was Baldwin’s 1964 collaboration with photographer Richard Avedon. Republished last year, it explores America’s lies, the ugly violence of the country, and the importance of light.

“The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out,” Baldwin wrote.

Fernández took that essay and made a physical manifestation that glows in Tercentenary Theatre in Harvard Yard. Between Widener Library and Memorial church, the yellow tubes seem to glitter, the open circle seems to call to passersby. They work there on their laptops, meet for coffee, cuddle over easy conversation. But wherever one might sit, there's likely a bench facing you.

“The piece forces an inward look,” says Fernández, the first Latina to serve on the US Commission of Fine Arts under President Barack Obama. “It turns away from the authority, the facade of all of these buildings. Everyone in the center and facing one another, looking at one another but also looking at self.”

The point is to be personal.

“Nothing personal” is what we say when we want to deny the humanity of a situation. Right now, our go-to for that is “Don't make it about race” and “It's not about gender.”

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Things happen very slowly. Baldwin talks a lot about those transitions being very intimate things but also being very palpable, powerful, and possible.’

We can get away with a great many crimes under the guise of not taking things personal. Sexism, racism, xenophobia. It's about an inability to see one another.

The installation was meant to be like the fall, a reflection of an “ephemeral sense of life.”

“There's a real confluence of the season and the somberness of autumn and the light changing and the leaves falling and this point of transition,” Fernández says. “Things happen very slowly. Baldwin talks a lot about those transitions being very intimate things but also being very palpable, powerful and possible.”

There will be a reading of James Baldwin at the installation on Saturday at 2 p.m.

The lesson from Baldwin that Fernández continues to share is one of finding a soulful equilibrium..

“This idea that Baldwin inspires in us and stayed with me throughout the development of this project,” Fernández tells me, “is we have to be both fierce and gentle, private and public, poetic and political. And keeping all of those things in balance is the kind of work I’m trying to create.”

We also have to bear witness. Baldwin often talked about witnessing. We cannot simply observe. We can’t see what we want to see. We have to bear witness to what is true.

And the time is now.

As “Autumn (...Nothing Personal)” prepares to close Oct. 1, Harvard’s Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts is just getting started with “[Time Is Now: Photography and Social Change in James Baldwin’s America](#),” open through Dec. 30.

The portraits, showcasing black Americans as they are and not as they’ve been portrayed to be, are an example of witnessing. It’s the brutality and beauty Baldwin’s writing on racism in America so often captured reflected in documentary photographs by Dawoud Bey, Marion Palfi, Steve Schapiro and others.

The connection between the photo exhibit and the public art installation is intentional, says Makeda Best, curator of photography at Harvard Art Museums.

“I have always been inspired by Baldwin’s writing and his interest in everyday people,” she says. “He always spoke to young people and I think it’s the everyday aspect — you don’t need the big moment. Your own everyday life can be revealing and provide insight into social change.”

The works she chose were shot by photographers when they were college age. Outside of portraits of Baldwin, the photographs focus on everyday black life.

The pieces not only symbolize Baldwin’s reflections, but many hold a mirror up to the madness we still face today.

In “Nothing Personal,” he writes of being arrested while standing with a friend.

“Not a soul seemed to notice; apparently it happened every day. I was pushed into the doorway of a drugstore, and frisked, made to empty my pockets, made to roll up my sleeves, asked what I was doing around here — “around here” being the city in which I was born. I am an old hand at this — policemen have always loved to pick me up and, sometimes, to beat me up.”

On display in “Time Is Now” is “Stop Police Killings, Selma” shot by Steve Schapiro in 1965. It’s impossible not to make the connection to the consistent criminalization of blackness.

“How does humanity look when it’s not someone you know,” says Best, who will host [a curator talk](#) at 6 p.m. Oct. 2. “How does it look when it’s not someone you recognize and how can that image be a sight of real revelation.”

Can you witness that familiarity of self in another when you don’t know them?

In 1984, in a New York Times Q&A, Baldwin was asked what he was a witness to.

“Witness to whence I came, where I am,” [he said](#). “Witness to what I’ve seen and the possibilities that I think I see.”

This quote is featured prominently in the “Time Is Now” exhibit.

“ ‘The time is always now’ is something he said,” Best says. “That urgency in the idea of witnessing is something that is appealing and has different meanings. It doesn’t always mean loud and shouty and on the front line. Activism is also witnessing.”

And that’s what Baldwin wanted. For us to understand life is short. We can’t afford to wait. We have to see the humanity in one another now.

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