

BLACK LIGHT - DAVID HAMMONS AND THE POETICS OF EMPTINESS

Glenn Ligon Interviews David Hammons

1. MY UNCLE TOSSY USED TO SAY THAT THERE are two kinds of Niggers in the world: Niggers and Crazy Niggers. Tossy was in the latter category. Handsome in a rough kind of way, he was highly opinionated, always funny, and frequently drunk. For Tossy, style was content, and he was stylish in a Pierre Cardin suit, Stacy Adams shoes, Kangol hat, Kojak sort of way—so fresh and so clean. Tossy (his real name was Elton, but nobody ever called him that) lived in my grandparents' basement, which was set up as a kind of mock bachelor pad with a sofa bed covered in gray-pink mohair, a teak coffee table with blue tile inlays, and a console radio/record player that miraculously picked up long-wave transmissions from Europe. It was on that machine that my older cousins introduced me to James Brown, Parliament/Funkadelic, and Richard Pryor, and it was in that basement that they introduced me to “practice” kissing. Tossy's favorite song was “Come Spy with Me” by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. He would sing it in a kind of slowed-down bass voice punctuated with staccato laughs and swigs of the whiskey du jour.

I was crazy about Tossy even though he was disdainful of my budding artistic talents: To the gift of a handmade Christmas card he muttered, “The boy needs to get outside more.” But even as a child I knew that Tossy's life was not a model of how to live my own. His indifference to the niceties of lower-middleclass black life scared me and challenged my other relatives' messages of uplift and racial pride. At heart, Tossy was a nomad, although he had lived in that basement for twenty years, worked at the Bureau of Printing and Engraving for even longer, and essentially had never left his parents' house. He fascinated me because he took what he had, which was almost nothing, and made something fabulous out of it, made it seem to encompass the whole world. When I first saw the work of David Hammons, with its attention to the poetics of emptiness, I saw in it echoes of my Uncle Tossy's life.

2. A PASSAGE FROM A 1991 INTERVIEW WITH David Hammons by Robert Storr, then curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of

Modern Art, New York:

Storr: How does the question of race affect the reading of your work and the scope of its development?

Hammons: I'm trying to get away with the redundancy of being an African-American or making African-American art. It's like a double negative, a double noun. So I'm trying to figure it out. Everyone knows that I am black, so my work doesn't have to shout it out anymore. . . . I am black. The work will automatically be thought of as a part of my African-American culture.

Being black, Hammons says, the work will automatically be thought of as coming from African-American culture. To be sure, Hammons uses materials that are culturally specific: fried chicken wings, cotton plants, gold chains, black hair, jazz, Night Train bottles, hoodies, and basketballs. And a Chinese gong. And spades. And snowballs, burning cigarettes, grease, cardboard boxes, blue cellophane, and “How you like me now?” But it’s more difficult than that. “African-American” or “African-American Art” has always been a complicated place to live. A noisy cul-de-sac at the end of a long and winding road that lots of folks are curious about but only want to visit during the summertime. I have always gotten stuck on Hammons’s “double negative.” I think I know what he means, but the words make me uneasy, with their echoes of DuBoisian double consciousness and “If you’re black, get back.” In the 1990 film *Paris Is Burning* Dorian Corey says, “When you’re all the same then you have to go to the fine point. In other words, if I’m a black queen, and you’re a black queen, we can’t call each other ‘black queens.’ . . . That’s not a read, that’s just a fact.” So really it is about how the terms “African-American” and “African-American Art” are used—and by whom. We need to go to the fine point. “African-American” or “African-American Art,” they’re part of the conversation, not the end of it.

3. ANOTHER QUOTATION BY HAMMONS—THIS time from a 1993 interview with Deborah Rothschild, curator at the Williams College Museum of Art. In reference to James Turrell, Hammons says:

Turrell, he's on a different wavelength. He's got a completely different vision. Different than mine, but it's beautiful to see people who have a vision that has nothing to do with presentation in a gallery. I wish I could make art like that, but we're too oppressed for me to be dabbling out there. . . . I would love to do that because that also could be very black. You know, as a black artist, dealing just with light. They would say, "How in the hell could he deal with that, coming from where he did?" I want to get to that, I'm trying to get to that, but I'm not free

enough yet. I still feel I have to get my message out.

Ten years after that interview Hammons indeed figured out how to make light “very black” for *Concerto in Black and Blue*, 2002, his exhibition at Ace Gallery in New York. At the entrance to the gallery visitors were given tiny pressure-activated LED flashlights no bigger than gumballs. When the flashlights were clicked on they gave off a blue light, which lasted until the pressure was released. Visitors were ushered through a door into the main gallery space, which comprised more than twenty thousand square feet spread over several rooms with twenty-five-foot ceilings. The gallery was completely dark. And what was in that twenty-thousand-square-foot space? Nothing. It was completely empty except for the blue light emitted from your flashlight and from those of other people walking around in the space with you.

When talking about Turrell, Hammons said, “We’re too oppressed for me to be dabbling out there,” and “I want to get to that, I’m trying to get to that, but I’m not free enough yet.” The movement to “get free,” to cross boundaries, is what’s interesting in Hammons’s recent work, in particular its radical dematerialization over the last several years. But let me reject a reading of Hammons’s project that sets up too strict an opposition between “free” and “not free,” “message” and “post-message,” objects and dematerialization, “white” work (Turrell) and “black” work (Hammons). For one, Hammons’s work has never been “on point” because it’s always too Fellini, too carnivalesque, too damn freaky-deke to be useful as a set of cheering fictions, an expression of an essential, unchanging blackness, or a standard-bearer for some multiculturalist agenda. What to make, for example, of a work like *Flying Carpet*, 1990, where fried chicken wings are attached with fish hooks to a Persian carpet hanging on the wall? Or *Traveling*, 2002, a drawing made by bouncing a basketball covered in Harlem dirt on a piece of paper with a suitcase stuck behind the frame pushing the drawing off the wall: playground virtuosity, nomadism, performance art, and Rauschenberg’s tire print, all elegantly rolled into one? Also, it would be a misreading of Hammons’s project to describe it as a linear movement toward dematerialization, for that doesn’t take into consideration earlier pieces like *Cold Shoulder*, 1990, giant blocks of ice with coats thrown over them, or *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 1983, where the artist sold snowballs on the streets of New York, or more recent pieces like *Global Fax Festival*, 2000, an empty exhibition hall with ceiling-mounted machines spewing faxes, or his *Flashlight Drawing*, 2000, which records the movement of a flashlight in a darkened room. Process, ephemerality, and transformation have always been part of Hammons’s work. In a word: Lightness.

4. OVERHEARD CONVERSATION AT AN EXHIBITION of Lorna Simpson's work:

Curator to Simpson: "What does your work have to do with black women and our lives?"

Simpson's reply: [*Silence.*]

The desires, possibilities, and deferred dreams of the black community as expressed through the work: the Message. But those desires, possibilities, and deferred dreams present a difficulty. Message, formulated in this way, equals a kind of restraint, a Bantustan policed from both sides of the fence. When thinking about working with light, Hammons anticipated one kind of response, wherein race delimits the scope of his artistic practice: "They would say, 'How in the hell could he deal with that, coming from where he did?'" Simpson's work generates another response: "What does this have to do with us?" Black bodies, yes, but apparently not "black" enough, because these bodies refuse to "represent." They remain mute, which is not even a representation of silencing but a theater of refusal, a thwarting of legibility. For example, in the two-channel video *Corridor*, 2003, we see the same actress moving through a modernist house and a seventeenth-century house. In each space she does household chores: washes up, gets dressed, sets the table. Husband and Master are out, and she is alone with her thoughts. And while colonial and mid-twentieth-century America were not the happiest of times for my people, one still had to eat and wash under one's arms. Simpson's video presents a decidedly nonmorbid depiction of black life, where black people are not "representing oppression" but are allowed to just be "people."

The impulse to resist overdetermined readings of the black body is also evident in Steve McQueen's video *Deadpan*, 1997, a complex restaging of a scene from the Buster Keaton movie *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* in which a house facade falls over a standing man. James Baldwin famously said that "the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations." What does it mean, then, to try not to move at all, not to speak, for a body to be unreadable? Stillness and interiority can function as a critical stance, a kind of resistance.

5. ANOTHER HAMMONS QUOTATION: "I'M NOT interested in who I am. I'm just a force on the planet who plays with these things and has no identity and no personality."

It's hard to leave your body behind, especially when your body is always being thrown up in your face. But being heavy is a motherfucker. The question is: How to remove weight, to move toward lightness, as Hammons has? How to do this while still acknowledging the particular history of a body that has been used, as Stuart Hall suggests, "as if it was, and often it was, the only cultural capital we had"? These questions now occupy several young artists who walk the threshold between a dematerialized and a historicized body.

In works such as *Dispersion*, 2002, and *Excerpt (riot)*, 2003, Julie Mehretu figures the body as a collection of networks. She creates canvases full of incident: records of memories, places, historical events, time, symbols, at once exploded and collapsed on themselves, dynamic, spiraling in and out of control, nonsensical, and coherent. They're a visual equivalent of Borges's "Library of Babel," except in this library the books are on tape and all talking to you at once. Mehretu's paintings are neural maps, flowcharts describing the processes by which what is exterior becomes interior (and vice versa). They're representations of the dizzying simultaneity and juxtaposition that characterizes this particular moment.

Camille Norment's installations are concerned with the moment the body becomes a stranger to itself. In pieces like *Dead Room*, 2000, and *Notes from the Undermind*, 2001, she creates architectural settings that distort your voice, project unheard frequencies through your body, create spatial disorientation, and generally mess with you. In *Driftglass*, 2004, the theme of the body's estrangement continues. The piece consists of a mirror distorted so that it reflects bodies only at oblique angles to its surface. Standing in front of the mirror, one sees other bodies, but one's own reflection is a blur. As the viewer moves toward the mirror, a motion detector triggers an audio component that intensifies as he or she approaches—sound standing in for the present but fugitive body.

Adam Pendleton's silk-screen paintings and wall-text/spoken-word installations also work with sound, placing our bodies in the space between text and voice. Texts by writers such as Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, June Jordan, John Rechy, and Toni Morrison are the raw material that he alters by adding his own text, creating Babel words, adding breaths and pauses, and constantly directing those texts toward questions of love. *TWOPEOPLETOGETHERISAMIRACLE* begins one piece, and the collapsing of identities that love enables is conflated with the collapsing of sexualities, of voice and object, of text and image. In Pendleton's work, as in the work of Mehretu and Norment, the dissolution of the body's

boundaries is seen as a productive moment, where the fusion of the body to history, to space, to sound, and to language points toward new possibilities.

6. THE ARTIST MARC ROBINSON STANDS IN A gallery in front of a portrait of Malcolm X with red lipstick and blue eye shadow. A woman sees the painting through the window and comes inside. “Are you the artist?” she says. He is not, but he nods yes anyway. Pointing at the work, she asks, “How can you do that?”

In Robinson’s video *I’m The Man You Think You Are*, 2002, a love poem to a bust the artist has sculpted of Malcolm X, this question is asked again. With Nina Simone songs playing in the background, Robinson caresses Malcolm’s face, adjusts his glasses, dresses him up in a suit and tie, and makes him slide and shake as if dancing at a house party. This is not Malcolm at the window with a rifle, a figure of hypermasculinity. This is Malcolm as an object of desire; partygoing Malcolm, good-time Malcolm, Malcolm from the block. Wayne Koestenbaum has noted that “iconicity is a form of makeover, a color scheme laid over a neutral surface.” Watching Robinson interact with the bust, we realize that there is no single Malcolm X, no solitary identity or even body, only approaches to Malcolm, only the Malcolm that we make and remake.

The problem with black families, they say, is absent fathers. Malcolm X is absent because he’s dead. What’s Bill Clinton’s excuse? Much was made of the former president’s decision to locate his office on 125th Street, a kind of performance piece called “I Like Harlem and Harlem Likes Me.” But Clinton’s actual presence in the hood has been scarce. In David McKenzie’s video *We Shall Overcome*, 2004, this absence is rectified. The artist is seen walking up and down 125th Street wearing a suit and tie and an oversize Bill Clinton mask. Set to a score of Louis Armstrong singing a civil rights anthem, we watch as people respond with curiosity, indifference, amusement, and outrage to McKenzie’s Clinton—equal parts Santa Claus and Jesus Christ. The impulse behind the video is a simple and generous one: Bring The Man to The People. But this is not Clinton. It is someone in a Clinton mask, and the lack the performance seeks to address ends up being amplified rather than filled. Ultimately, McKenzie is not interested in Clinton at all (trifling men are all alike!). He’s interested in the spooking. Clinton, like Malcolm X, is a void we inhabit, a repository for our desires, possibilities, and deferred dreams. McKenzie’s video positions icons as figures of intense identification that our bodies move into and out of and that speak to us in voices we happily misrecognize as our own.

7. ONE LAST DAVID HAMMONS QUOTE:

I like being from nowhere; it's a beautiful place. That means I can look at anyone who's from somewhere and see how really caught they are.

Sun Ra wasn't from here either—"here" meaning Earth. He also wasn't human. "I'm not real," he says in a 1974 film, to a group of black children. "I'm just like you. You don't exist, in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights." For Sun Ra—and for Hammons—not being from *here* is a movement toward placelessness, toward the utopic, the posthuman, *and* a deep critique of American society. Their genius was to employ a postmodern concern with the emptying out of the self as a critical strategy, one that might have particular resonance with a people historically positioned at the margin of what was considered human.

Hammons says light could be "very black," but how to reconcile the desire to be from nowhere, to have no identity and no personality, with the desire to make light "very black," when "black" is suggestive of a particular history, culture, and practices? What, for example, made *Concerto in Black and Blue* "very black" as opposed to merely "dark"? Well, nothing really, at first. But then I remembered a friend of mine's suggestion that Hammons could write a masterpiece with one-syllable words, and it pointed me toward the one-syllable words in the work's title: "black" and "blue." "What did I do to be so black and blue," or "the blues," or Amiri Baraka's "Blues People," or "Kind of Blue," or "Say it Loud . . .," or "Fugitive Blue," or "Blue on Blue," or "Black is the color of my true love's hair," or "I wear black on the outside, as black as I feel on the inside," and on and on and on. You went into the show looking for the art, but you came out having been the art. What's there is what we bring to the space. Blackness is a transient hotel, as a drawing by William Pope.L suggests. If blackness is a construct, then we are all construction workers, and what Hammons has done is to provide the space in which blackness can be constructed in light, like the famous photo of Picasso drawing a centaur in the air with a flashlight, except this time it's us with our little blue flashlights, signaling one another in the dark. What was black about *Concerto in Black and Blue* is whatever you think blackness is, whatever you brought to it, and what you did with what you brought when you got there.

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