



FIGURE 1. Wall text by
David Hammons.
Photograph by author.

How to See Like Hammons

SAMPADA ARANKE

HAS ANYONE ELSE SEEN THESE.” Scribed on a wall in pencil, this fragment served as crude wall text for a vitrine in David Hammons’s 2019 exhibition at Hauser & Wirth in Los Angeles. The vitrine, filled with memorabilia, photocopies, and rare primary documents, was but one of many locations where Hammons displayed Hammons. This was not the first time Hammons wrote directly on the wall. In his 2016 Mnuchin career survey, he also employed this strategy. In that show, the wall texts also served as captions and commentary. This tactic within a broader strategy of exhibition-based intervention creates a space where the artist’s hand and the artist’s voice are not divorced from each other. Commentary accompanies objects and gives rise to a kind of analysis of the present—with each iteration of penciled wall text, we are brought into the present tense of the work, the place where historical relevance meets the artist’s opinion about its current iteration, a mobilization of graphite as an invocation of contingency, temporariness, the possibility of erasure . . .

While many have suggested that penciled wall text like this reflects art-world commentary by curators and collectors who attempt to ascertain the uniqueness or rarity of the work at hand,¹ I maintain that these written scripts are actually broader engagements with questions of what subjects and objects are even on display in the first place.² To ask, or to state, “Has anyone else seen these?” in the context of an exhibition is to slyly pose a question that already has an answer: yes, or maybe, or no. Any answer to that question proves Hammons’s point: that he himself is

both the seeing subject and object to see. To extend the stakes of this declarative call and its cheeky response, Hammons's question and answer is also, and actually, a question about history itself. To have seen, to have been seen, approximates a relationship to art history and its conceit—that to gain some kind of archival longevity, one must have their work seen and one must have been seen, a feat for an artist characterized as prickly and antisocial in his sociability.³ It must sound a bit curious to suggest that a Black artist methodologically pivots ocularcentrism even while engaging sight. By both leaning into and troubling vision as a sense, Hammons offers a critique of sight as it is otherwise operationalized in everyday life as a form of surveillance that is a part of a totalizing violence against Black life. Instead he moves that same concern around vision toward another kind of maneuver entirely. To be invited to see, and even more precisely to see like Hammons, is a methodology driven by a Black radical aesthetic critique and one I have provisionally named the Hammons effect.

Glamor and allure of mystery aside, Hammons's approach to his own persona as an artist has generated frenzied whisper networks around his infamous reputation, unabashed no bullshit lack of filter, and commitment to messing with the protocols of propriety perpetuated by and within the art world. In fact, my own Hammons obsession peaked in 2016 when I realized that every single time I mentioned wanting to write on him to artists, curators, or collectors, I was presented with immediate tales about the artist of repute. These interactions made it clear that I

needed to write not about Hammons himself, though that would be crucial to the project, but rather about the stories, rumors, and states of aesthetic influence presented by him. It's as if there's a whole world made by, about, and for Hammons, activated by the way he does art in the first place. The impact of the Hammons effect will be taken up in a research project in which I track how curators, collectors, and artists have been aesthetically, conceptually, and financially impacted by Hammons's artistic strategies.

This essay, however, focuses on the iterative gestures that give rise to a methodology that swerves, misuses, and deforms normative racial protocols of contemporary art.⁴ I will turn to modes through which Hammons approaches his work's exhibition, the artist's own interviews in which he comments upon his priorities and aesthetic strategies, and varieties of criticism and writing on Hammons by popular and art-world coverage. This methodological maneuver is part and parcel of Hammons's decades-long practice and serves to enact a Black aesthetic determination already sleeved in its own method. This essay works to unpack how Hammons throws into methodological disarray the question of art's histories with his relentless invocation of Black aesthetic practices that deform, if not refuse, their own making.

Straining Credibility

"Some of what he told us strained credibility," writes Calvin Tomkins in a 2019 *New Yorker* profile of Hammons.⁵ Having already described the artist as an elusive and private, stubborn yet charming, curious yet

assured figure, Tomkins ends his profile with a surprised realization that the artist “was still nourishing the Hammons myth—making himself appear more reclusive and otherworldly than he is.”⁶ In one fell swoop, Hammons is suddenly a generator of his storied reputation through white lies, fibs, exaggerations, withholdings, and any other kind of offerings that strain credibility. Tomkins is not exceptional in his presentation of Hammons. For decades critics, curators, and scholars have found him to be particularly slippery, obstinate, and downright mysterious.⁷ At stake in these presentations are not only racially charged subtexts on an artist’s reputation but also the question of how one imagines Hammons to bear the burden of authenticity, journalistic accuracy, and some kind of plausible refutation of how he has been figured throughout his career. This says nothing of how these demands are incongruent with how his art work is praised, specifically for its heightened referentiality to Black life through the imaginative gesture, willful refutation, and humorous critique. No demands for credibility are pressed upon the work, as the artist is given full license to run away from demands for factual accuracy.

What strikes me as an undercurrent in these depictions of Hammons is how they can’t even see how his embodiment of conceptualism is particularly *Black*, which is to say that his approach to the artistic genre is a misdirection and deformation of the notion of accuracy itself.⁸ As Hammons has noted, “I don’t trust the word. I trust the eye.”⁹ A general distrust in a discursive apparatus in many ways explains

Hammons’s misuse of discourse as material itself. Hammons often turns language on its head, bends the assumed normative principles of words and their meanings, and sometimes outright breaks the rules in order to create a dissonance between the object and its discursive association.¹⁰ I take up Houston Baker’s notion of deformation as part of a Black radical aesthetic. In Baker’s formulation Black American aesthetic practices are disinterested in achieving white canonical status by repeating formal traits within these works, and instead these practices turn to a deformation of mastery.¹¹ A deformation of mastery strives toward a wink at the canonical and yet ultimately bends or breaks such forms through an uptake that essentially accounts for how Blackness has always already transformed and impacted the form in the first instance. This concept is much akin to Greg Tate’s poetic insistence that “what has always struck Black observers of this phenomenon isn’t just the irony of white America fiending for Blackness when it once debated whether Africans even had souls. It’s also the way They have always tried to erase the Black presence from whatever Black thing They took a shine to.”¹² While Tate is speaking to the violent inclinations of white supremacist appropriation (cultural and otherwise), I find the attention to Black presence and an accompanying viewership that sees that presence to be particularly helpful when we think of the historical contingency of canons and their formations. As such, the forms that reach canonical significance also calcify into historical truths and become policed through the language of accuracy itself. By pointing to the insta-

bility of truths, Hammons instead redirects us toward the material conditions that open up new forms of looking—at both the artist and the object. Credibility is strained through the method of deformation and redirection, compelling us to look toward something else entirely.

Material Redirection

While the artist is highly aware of the centrality of sight in one's "making it" in art history, he has little to no use for the kinds of weighted associations a given artwork has to maintain in order to gain entry into disciplinary textbooks. Hammons cares little for questions of aura, originality, singularity, or even sustained market value driving his practice. Elena Filipovic has brilliantly accounted for this in her 2017 study of Hammons's *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, noting how "Hammons has regularly changed (sometimes several times) the composition, presentation, and constituent elements and title of any number of his pieces once they left his studio thus rejecting the fixity, stability, and finality of the conventional work of art, not to mention entirely challenging its role as a product to be easily consumed."¹³ Filipovic goes on to share how when asked by collectors to repair an element of a work that has broken, "Hammons has been known to further break or simply dispose of the original artwork, replacing it with a new version, so little is he preoccupied with the aura of originality and the value accrued by a piece in the process of its becoming 'historical.'"¹⁴ The artist even stopped making his famous body prints in part because they were doing so well in both exhi-

HAMMONS HIMSELF IS BOTH THE SEEING SUBJECT AND OBJECT TO SEE

bition and financial circuits.¹⁵ These detailed insights into Hammons's recurrent devaluation of the material and capital value imbued in the singular art object is also a recurrent apathy toward a general condition of art history. What might be seen as temperamental or impulsive acts are instead depicted as embodiments of refusal and ways the artist implements an emphasis on the processual qualities of his work. History, in these acts, is not evidenced by fixity but rather by the present-tense relevance of the work, deconstruction and reconstruction, and the multiplicity inherent in a given work's potential.

This activation of the present is seemingly incompatible with or at least in direct contradiction to Hammons's simultaneous deployment of aesthetic strategies to be considered within or intervene upon art history and its market imperative. Pushing against a notion of conceptualism grounded mostly in the discursive apparatus, Hammons's impact on this artistic approach lies in large part in the way he sees and composes material. Reflecting on his first meeting with Hammons, poet Ben Okri notes that "to walk with David is a lesson in seeing, and not just ordinary seeing. He's a supernatural noticer. He'd draw



FIGURE 2. Ruptured wooden shipping crate. Photograph by author.

my attention to people working and the materials they used, and to trash and discarded things, and the relationships between them. You realize how little you see.”¹⁶ This attention to materials and their uses allows Hammons to shift away from a question of the originality of a given mark or composition and instead opens up a means of material citation and construction. Objects are given license to use their weight—historical and material—in order to redetermine their conceptual associations.

Take, for example, Hammons’s large crate works, in which paintings peek out of their ruptured wooden shipping crates (fig. 2). When viewers look at these paintings, they are met with gestural brush marks in hues that span purples, blues, blacks, and whites. One is left to wonder about the nature of these works: Are they some of the wondrous Ed Clark paintings owned by Hammons?¹⁷ Are they Hammons’s early or recent experiments in abstraction? Is there even a painting in there? Can this whole object be called a painting? Here the crate, an object of protection for transport, a crude readymade container for precious commodities, and a ubiquitous and even damageable object itself, takes on an expanded set of associations. The displayed crate throws into crisis the question of what it means to see art works—what counts, what mediates, what filters, what obscures our experiences of loaded traditional mediums. Even further, we could also ascertain how the crate itself offers a hard sleeve of security, protecting the contents from damage, harm, or panoptic modes of surveil-

lance. The crate makes it hard to see, hard to access, hard to damage the art object, and forces the viewer to reflect upon the nature of seeing itself. Could the demand to see in entirety be a form of consumption harmful to the object that is seen? What of the protocols of sight that are aimed toward securing the seer’s cultural capital?¹⁸ Could we, instead, see another way?

In many ways the Hammons effect is an activation of a way of seeing as facilitated by the artist himself. Fully motivated by the principles of trust more than even the stability of the eye, Hammons has frequently activated his own line of sight as one that could contain the collective. Perhaps our greatest takeaway from a Hammons work is not to ask “Has anyone seen these?” but instead “How can we see like Hammons?” ■

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Notes

1 Griffin, "Is David Hammons Trolling"; Little, "David Hammons Returns to LA"; Taft, "Catherine Taft on David Hammons"; Tomkins, "David Hammons"; Wetzler, "David Hammons Taunts the Art World"; Zara, "Few Blocks from Skid Row."

2 As this essay transforms into a long-form project, I plan to spend a considerable amount of time on the relationship between objecthood, subjecthood, and presence in Hammons's work. Key elements of this project will require an attention to the ways that in the stories that surround Hammons's persona are effects of the artist's own prioritization of presentness throughout his practice. This will enable a consideration of Hammons's impact on processes of valuation, canonization, and institutionalization and how these processes are vexed in relation to Black artistic production. Ultimately I hope to demonstrate how Hammons creates avenues for art historical imaginations that prioritize Black radical presence.

3 This project is both indebted to and in conversation with key writings on and about Hammons, including Copeland, "Seat at the Table"; Filipovic, *David Hammons*; Finkelppearl, "Ideology of Dirt"; Jones, "Good Mirrors Ain't Cheap"; Jones, "In the Thick of It"; Jones, "Interview with David Hammons"; Schriber, "Those Who Know Don't Tell"; Thompson, "David Hammons"; Wofford, "Can You Dig It?"

4 While too much to go into in this essay, the normative racial protocols I refer to include a circumscription of whiteness as the default racial category of the presumed universal subject of contemporary art. This subjectivity is reinforced in terms of market-based, institutional, and even formal traits of valued works. It is not enough to say this as a totalizing fact, and there are of course moments of interruption in this default prioritization of whiteness. Much has been written about the whiteness of the contemporary art world. Select texts have been influential in my analysis: Berger, *White*; D'Souza, *Whitewalling*; Fernandez-Sacco, "Check Your Baggage"; Nochlin, *Women Artists*; Pinder, *Race-ing Art History*.

5 Tomkins, "David Hammons."

6 Tomkins, "David Hammons."

7 Copeland, "Seat at the Table"; Godfrey, *David Hammons*; Filipovic, *David Hammons*; Finkelppearl, "Ideology of Dirt"; Jones, "In the Thick of It"; Jones, "Interview with David Hammons"; Schriber, "Those Who Know Don't Tell"; Thompson, "David Hammons"; Wofford, "Can You Dig It?"

8 The Blackness of Hammons's conceptualism is a topic that will be explored with further consideration and detail in the book-length project.

9 Tomkins, "David Hammons."

10 I'm grateful to my peer reviewer for the insightful connection to Hammons's use of language as material. Scholarship on Hammons has attended to the artist's punning and wordplay as a deployment of his status as art-world trickster. Bey, "In the Spirit of *Minkisi*"; Hoover, "Stark-Strangled Banjos"; Wofford, "Can You Dig It?"

11 Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*.

12 Tate, "Introduction: Nigs R Us," 3.

13 Filipovic, *David Hammons*, 94.

14 Filipovic, *David Hammons*, 94.

15 Filipovic, *David Hammons*, 43.

16 Quoted in Tomkins, "David Hammons."

17 Boucher, "David Hammons Curates Edward Clark."

18 I by no means want to reinforce the very mythological and celebrity status of Hammons that the project aims to deconstruct. I specifically speak here of capital as a way to point to Hammons's place in the art world. As he is an artist who has accrued financial and cultural capital, his deformation of and maneuvers within the art world can be seen by some as acts that can only be done because of his prominence among a particular art world elite. This is, of course, true, and part of the Hammons effect includes maintaining a critical position toward the artist.

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