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**SHADOW BOXING: GOVERNMENTALITY, PERFORMATIVITY & CRITIQUE  
IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE**

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**PHD FINE ART**

## **ABSTRACT**

Via Foucault's notion of governmentality, the thesis examines the impact of privatisation on contemporary art practice and considers the implications for critique under such conditions.

I take up Brian Wallis' link between governmentality and the use of government subsidy and regulation as means of social control. I consider the effects of bureaucratisation on publicly funded art in America during the Reagan/Bush era, and the implications for 'alternative' practice as a mode of dissent.

Via Foucault's notion of critique as inherently paradoxical, dependent on power and reflexive, I examine Miwon Kwon's observation of the politically motivated artist's complicity within art world power relations. Using the 1993 Whitney Biennial as a case study, I discuss how the reformist strategies of alternative practice conflict with notions of autonomy, resistance and dissent.

In response to this situation, I discuss contemporary artist David Hammons; specifically, aspects of his practice that confuse the relation between the work, its documentation and dissemination. Hammons' practice relates to Hal Foster's proposal for reflexivity within critique, which I link to Judith Butler's notion of 'the performative'. Does Hammons' modus operandi circumvent the pitfalls that Kwon outlines?

In my art practice, I use photography, curating, publishing and writing as modes of production. A major concern has been the tenability of the artwork as a social document. I also explore the relation between high and low culture; as such, aspects of the 'everyday' often feature within my practice.

Current work examines the idea of urban municipal park as a type of utopia. To me, such parks are socially diverse – in terms of class, race, gender, age, physical ability, etc. Equally, the park is one of the few urban spaces where it is socially acceptable to stop, and do nothing. I propose the municipal park as an antidote to the frenetic, consumer-led city.

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# INTRODUCTION

## 1.0 CONTEXT

I will start by giving some background to the environment that I currently work in which may provide an insight into my choice of subject matter.

In Chin-tao Wu's *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s*, she charts the increasing influence of private and corporate sponsorship on the programming, funding and experiencing of the arts in Britain and America, since the era of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher respectively.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, she examines the public policy that facilitated the introduction of free market principles into important quangos like the Arts Council in Britain (ACE) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in America.<sup>2</sup> By free market, I mean the type of economic system intended to operate with minimal government intervention. Wu addresses the problematics of this phenomenon; particularly concerning the power that wealthy individuals and corporations now wield in dictating taste within the cultural sphere. Wu concentrates primarily on the impact of private and corporate investment on systemic and institutional levels. As a practising artist, I am concerned with how this phenomenon impacts on art practice, and whether it is something to which practitioners can negotiate a critical relation. As I will explain, the geographic focus of my investigation is primarily North America.

It would be unfair to suggest that the affects of 'the privatising of culture' have been entirely negative; in many ways, there have been clear benefits. Contemporary art in Britain, for example, enjoys greater visibility than ever before. With the aid of private and corporate sponsorship, there is greater awareness of contemporary art amongst the public. For example, I believe that Artangel, the publicly funded commissioning agency, has been instrumental in facilitating the popularisation of contemporary art in Britain over the past decade.<sup>3</sup> Consider, for instance,

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<sup>1</sup> Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980's*, London & New York: Verso, 2002

<sup>2</sup> The NEA is the primary government agency responsible for the implementation of funding and policy the arts in America. The Arts Council is its equivalent in Britain.

<sup>3</sup> Since 1985, Artangel has commissioned works from a variety of art forms including dance, visual art, performance and writing for non-conventional sites around the UK. The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Arts Council England support Artangel; also, The Company of Angels, its private donations wing. Artangel is a registered charity. It is worth noting that during the 1980s, Artangel



ambitious commissions such as sculptor Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1994), which involved her casting an entire Victorian house in concrete. Or, Michael Landy's *Breakdown* (2001), a process-based work that entailed cataloguing and destruction all of the artist's possessions. Or, Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), a re-enactment of the historical confrontation between police and miners during the miner's strike of 1984. Each of these public works received significant television coverage; whether it be the nationwide news reporting of the demolition of Whiteread's public sculpture; or, the screening of director Mike Figgis' film of Deller's re-enactment that appeared on Channel 4. Artangel has ensured high-profile coverage many of its projects, by co-commissioning works with powerful press and media companies. For instance, *The Times* newspaper and Channel 4 television co-commissioned Landy and Deller's projects respectively. So, the 'privatising of culture' has brought greater public awareness of the arts; more financially ambitious commissions; plus, increased willingness amongst business to associate with contemporary art. So, in theory, artists have greater funding options.

But, equally, the alliances between contemporary art, the media and the press have taken an unwelcome turn, particularly concerning the celebratisation of visual artists. The presence of contemporary artists within these contexts has become a familiar sight. At one point, there was even the reality TV show, *Date with an Artist*, where British artists such as Catherine Yass, Jessica Voorsanger, Chris Ofili and the Chapman brothers made a works of art "for a minor celebrity."<sup>4</sup> British artists such as Sam Taylor Wood and Tracey Emin continue to blur the boundaries between art and celebrity, regularly appearing in the society pages of magazines like *Vogue* and London's *ES*. One problem, resulting from this scenario, is that art becomes yet another a source of entertainment within a capitalist society, which potentially undermines a more serious engagement. This phenomenon of celebratisation has left many artists feeling disillusioned and alienated. My aim is not to set up a hierarchy between artists who engage with mass media and those who do not. However, I do distinguish between the current 'artist-as-celebrity' engaging with mass media and artists whose practices directly engage with television, radio or publishing for example. Consider, for example, Stan Douglas' *Television Spots* (1987-8), the film shorts shown on Canada's private television network; or, Andy Warhol's account of celebrity in his book, *The Andy Warhol*

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was responsible for bringing the work of American artists such as Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger and Les Levine to British audiences.

<sup>4</sup> *Date with an Artist* showed on BBC television in 1998. See, Concord Video & Film Council: <http://www.concordvideo.co.uk/ar2050m110.html>, 2005

Diaries (1989). I see the former 'artist-as-celebrity' model as largely self-serving; the latter, I regard as an attempt to examine the limits of contemporary art within the mass media.

There was proximity in Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's respective political agendas that brought about 'the privatising of culture' in Britain and America. It is perhaps unsurprising then that there are parallel narratives evident in both countries. Specifically, Wu outlines how in 1986, Margaret Thatcher launched the Per Cent Club, an initiative borrowed from Reagan's government, where she invited the chairmen of fifty-three of the top British companies to Downing Street with the aim of encouraging the practice of corporate giving.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in both Britain and America commercial art booms have emerged out of periods of recession. Consider how, since the 1990s', there has been a colonisation of London's Shoreditch area by established commercial galleries such as White Cube and Victoria Miro, as well as 'up and coming' dealers such as Kate MacGarry and Hales Gallery. Julie Ault gives a similar account of the colonisation of New York's Chelsea area. In both instances, cheap, light-industrial property became accommodation for commercial galleries and the creative industries as part of a larger process of gentrification.<sup>6</sup>

It can be argued that 'the privatisation of culture' in Britain and America has brought increased bureaucracy and accountability in public funding; more exclusive programming in public galleries and museums; fewer outlets for non-commercial forms of art practice. For example, now that many public galleries have to secure private and corporate sponsorship, curators have to ensure that their exhibitions appeal to such clients. This, ultimately, has an effect on programming in that to secure sponsorship, the show has to be marketable, preferably involving artists that the client will have heard of. So, increasingly, public museums and galleries show artists that already have a substantial commercial profile. The sponsorship issue may also affect content; work that might be hard to market, because it is theoretical or issue based, may often be excluded.

I will give two further British examples. In the past decade it has become much more difficult for unrepresented artists to show in important public galleries like the Ikon in Birmingham, the ICA in London or the Arnolfini in Bristol. In my view, curators in such galleries are increasingly nervous to take risks with younger or

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Wu, p.57

<sup>6</sup> Julie Ault, 'For the Record', in *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985*, New York: The Drawing Center & University of Minnesota Press, 2002, pp.6-8

unrepresented artists, beyond showcases like Bloomberg New Contemporaries,<sup>7</sup> which focuses on recent graduates; and, Beck's Futures, which claims to actively patronise "the emergence of new talent into the art world."<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, a fair proportion of Beck's Futures short listed artists could best be described as 'mid-career'; for example, John Russell, David Burrows, Roderick Buchanan, Carey Young, Nick Crowe, Rachel Lowe, Brian Griffiths and DJ Simpson.<sup>9</sup> It appears that unrepresented artists have to use such exhibitions to gain access to high profile public spaces and, ultimately, gallery representation. It is worth noting that in 1991, I took part in an exhibition entitled Four x 4, staged at the Arnolfini in Bristol [Fig. 1]. The exhibition was curated by Eddie Chambers, and featured four, young, recently graduated artists; namely, Perminder Kaur, Alistair Raphael, Vincent Stokes and me.<sup>10</sup> At the time, this was only my second show after graduating from Goldsmiths. Four x 4 was a major project, featuring newly commissioned work by each artist. My point is that, it is extremely unlikely that such a show would happen in the current climate. To reiterate, I think that the presence of mid-career artists in shows like Beck's Futures gives an indication of the problems facing non-represented artists gaining access to exhibitions in public galleries at this time.

A further outcome of the 'privatisation of culture' is that most of the new independent spaces opening in London take as their business model the dealer/commercial gallery model; spaces like Anthony Wilkinson and Modern Art Inc., for instance. There are less 'project' type spaces in London where the emphasis is non-commercial; examples of such artist led spaces include Cubitt and Whitechapel Project Space. Cubitt is a rare example of an art space that sets out amongst its objectives:

- *To profile emerging artists in a productive and critical context.*
- *To take risks and challenge public and professional perceptions of what constitutes contemporary visual culture.*
- *To provide career opportunities for artists.*

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<sup>7</sup> *New Contemporaries*, currently sponsored by Bloomberg, is an annual exhibition that tours nationally at public galleries such as Cornerhouse in Manchester, Camden Arts Centre in London and Arnolfini in Bristol.

<sup>8</sup> See, *Beck's Futures* at: [http://www.becksfutures.co.uk/2005\\_futures.html](http://www.becksfutures.co.uk/2005_futures.html), 2005

<sup>9</sup> *Beck's Futures*, sponsored by Beck's Bier, shows annually at the ICA in London.

<sup>10</sup> *Four x 4* was a series of four, four person exhibitions that took place across four galleries in Bristol, Leicester, Preston and Wolverhampton, during 1991.

- *To test models of curating and to expand the definition of exhibition practice.*<sup>11</sup>

My problem with the scenario I describe is the lack of variety it promotes within the British art scene. Of course, there are also clear distinctions in the way that the privatising of culture has affected Britain and America. For example, in Chapter 1, I discuss the defunding of the NEA and government attempts to control the content of contemporary art as aspects of Republican arts policy in the United States. However, in Britain it can be argued that the government's attitude towards the arts has not been so overtly hostile. If anything, in recent years at least, the British government has attempted to project a harmonious relationship between itself and the arts. In the nineties, Tony Blair used the creative industries as a means of marketing Britain internationally, under the rubric of 'Cool Britannia'.<sup>12</sup> This heading included music, fashion, design, architecture and art, and was aimed at selling a notion of British culture that was cosmopolitan, modern, innovative, sexy and, indeed, multicultural. In 1999, the Department for Culture Media and Sport stated that:

*"The creative industries contribute some £8 billion annually to the UK's export earnings; contribute over 4% to gross domestic product; employ around 1.4 million people directly and indirectly; and enjoy employment growth at about 5% per annum, twice the national average."*<sup>13</sup>

So, if anything, the current New Labour government regards contemporary art in terms of how it might serve the economy as a whole. As I note, in the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher invited the chairmen of Britain's leading industries to Downing Street as a means of alleviating government support of the arts. Conversely, in the 1990s, Tony Blair invited leading members of the arts communities to Downing Street – artists, designers, actors, musicians, etc., including Noel Gallagher of pop group Oasis – to promote the British cultural industries.

In recent years, influential department stores like Habitat and Selfridges have formed allegiances with contemporary artists, to the extent that art has arguably become synonymous with the marketing of "lifestyle." In the last five years, Selfridges has commissioned a series of high profile public works in and around its London store, by international artists including Samuel Fosso, Barbara Kruger,

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<sup>11</sup> See, Cubitt Gallery & Studios' Artistic Policy and Strategy at: <http://www.cubittartists.org.uk/cubitt.html>, 2005

<sup>12</sup> According to the Department of Trade and Industry, the creative industries include, "advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and computer games, television and radio." See, DTI, at: [http://www.culture.gov.uk/creative\\_industries/default.htm](http://www.culture.gov.uk/creative_industries/default.htm), 2005

<sup>13</sup> *Creative Industries: Exports: Our Hidden Potential*, London: Department for Culture Media and Sport, 1999, pp.9-10

David La Chappelle and Sam Taylor Wood. In a recent article on Blair's 'Cool Britannia' incentive and the use of art to sell consumer products, Zoe Williams makes the following criticism:

*"...to use art like this totally undermines its transformative and reflective power. If the purpose of art boils down to commerce, then it is entirely immersed in its society, it conforms willingly to the rules of that society. Art undertaken on this basis has no distance, and therefore no meditative properties. It is indistinguishable from craft. And without any kind of higher purpose, what we're talking about is not art so much as decoration."*<sup>14</sup>

Williams' comments are contentious. An alternative take on the past decade might conclude that marketing and sponsorship initiatives have democratised the relationship between the public and the cultural industries. Consider for example, how Nicholas Serota's corporate branding and expansion of the Tate galleries sites in London, Liverpool and St. Ives has created some of the most visited art venues in the country.<sup>15</sup> However, I do believe that Williams raises an important issue concerning the co-optation of art for political purposes. This runs close to my discussion of the Culture Wars in America using Foucault's notion of governmentality in Chapter 1.

I want to take this opportunity to address further implications of this commercialising trend for contemporary artists. Given my experience as an artist, research student and lecturer, I see that it affects a whole range of interconnected areas like funding, exhibiting and education.<sup>16</sup> I will briefly outline how I see this operating with regard to teaching and learning in higher education.

The first issue concerns teaching. Many artists (particularly those without gallery representation) have to find other ways of supporting their practice; traditionally, teaching has been a viable means of doing so. Art schools have long been recognised as havens for practitioners. Generally, they provide favourable conditions for the cross-fertilisation of ideas, access to practical and intellectual resources and potential project funding; plus, a regular, if modest, income. The affects of Wu's thesis on privatisation are evident within the academic sector in that universities are increasingly run on business models that require particular kinds of regulation. To explain, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is the main body for distributing public funds for teaching and

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<sup>14</sup> Zoe Williams, 'The Cool Con', *The Guardian*, October 25 2003, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/britain/article/0,,1070469,00.html>, 2005

<sup>15</sup> In 2003, Tate Modern, Tate Britain, Tate St. Ives and Tate Liverpool attracted a combined figure of 5.9 million visitors compared to the British Museum (4.6 million), the National Gallery (4.1 million), and the National Portrait Gallery (1.3 million). See, Tate, at: [http://www.tate.org.uk/faqs/research\\_q06.htm](http://www.tate.org.uk/faqs/research_q06.htm), 2005

<sup>16</sup> I currently work as a lecturer in the Visual Arts department of a university in the UK.

research to universities and colleges. HEFCE states that its goal is to promote and fund “*high-quality, cost-effective teaching and research, meeting the diverse needs of students, the economy and society.*”<sup>17</sup> HEFCE aims to play a key role in “*ensuring accountability and promoting good practice*” within higher education in England. These aims reaffirm the rhetoric of privatisation evident in Britain and America during the 1980s. For, example, in Chapter 1, I discuss how accountability, in the form of increased bureaucracy, was a key tool that the Republicans used to exercise governmental power over the American publicly funded arts sector.

In Britain, competition for funding amongst universities and colleges is harsh; they receive funds from organisations like HEFCE based on their research and teaching profiles. As a result, there is increasing pressure upon academic staff concerning the institutional documentation and assessment of their research activity. Of course, universities require this information to secure future funding that will ultimately benefit staff and students alike. However, for visual artists working in universities, specific issues emerge concerning the collation of this material.

In my opinion, these academic research audits often strain to accommodate the complexity of art practice; and, ultimately, may preclude certain sorts of work. For example, certain strategies that have been employed for decades may not qualify as citable research, e.g. self-published books; publications without an ISBN; self initiated projects; exhibitions that take place in non-conventional venues, etc. Importantly, these are specifically the types of strategies that artists engaged in ‘alternative’ types of practice might employ. This is not to suggest a conspiracy against such work; but, clearly, research that operates within known forms is surely easier to quantify.

By default then, the university endorses art practices that for certain artists may be neither desirable nor attainable. Equally, this system fails to distinguish between practices that have sufficient support (gallery representation, for example) to enable exhibiting in powerful, high profile institutions like Whitechapel Art Gallery or the Baltic, and those who do not. Further, the emphasis on the level of research output in any given year can be antithetical to the ways that some practitioners work. Some universities gather their research documentation on a quarterly cycle, which may add to a sense of pressure. Problematically, hierarchies can emerge in the work place when academic staff must classify themselves as either ‘research

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<sup>17</sup> The Higher Education Funding Council for England at: [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05\\_02/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05_02/), September 2005

active' or 'research non-active'.<sup>18</sup> My point is that within this highly competitive industry, a research profile may determine whether someone is employed or retains their job.

This leads me to the second aspect the privatisation of the academic sector I want to raise. Here I consider the relation between academic study and contemporary art practice – in the form of the PhD. Currently, HEFCE states that:

*“Our strategic aim is to develop and sustain a dynamic higher education research sector that holds a strong position among the world leaders, and makes a major contribution to economic prosperity, national wellbeing and the expansion and dissemination of knowledge.”<sup>19</sup>*

HEFCE is clear in asserting a relation between education and the market. As I will explain, key to achieving their aim is the provision of PhD and post-doctoral level programmes in English universities. According to Professor Toshio Watanabe of Chelsea College of Art, before the introduction of visual arts based PhDs, an MA was the highest level of qualification available in the field. He states that the mid-1980s saw a growth in MA courses, which in turn led to a decrease in their perceived value within the industry, making PhDs a more ambitious proposition.<sup>20</sup> Since a driving force behind HEFCE's ambitions for academic research is *“to sustain our research base against global competition,”* consequently, it identifies the need to *“recognise and support excellent research financially.”<sup>21</sup>* It is my understanding that the issue of international competition that HEFCE raises here predetermines national competition amongst universities for research funding. In order to sustain a strong national research base, you must attain the highest levels of research and universities must compete for the funds to achieve this. It is worth noting that there has been a substantial growth in art and design related PhDs in the past decade. For example, Watanabe gives the following account of the situation at Chelsea College of Art and Design, London. He notes that in 2003:

*“At Chelsea, for example, we had our first PhD registration in 1991, but this year we have 24 students with 19 pursuing practice-based PhDs. The number of PhDs is expected to rise to over 40 in 5 year's time.”<sup>22</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter 1, such practices are symptomatic of Foucault's description of the self-regulatory aspects of governmentality.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., HEFCE website

<sup>20</sup> Professor Toshio Watanabe, 'Practice-based PhD in Art and Design: Britain and Japan,' paper delivered at *Culture and Creativity: Education and Training in the Arts Seminar*, The Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation, London, May 14<sup>th</sup> 2003, p.2

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., HEFCE website

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Watanabe, p.3

For me, this issue of an increasingly privatised academic environment is double-edged. I certainly find the issue concerning the research outputs of academic staff in universities problematic for the reasons I outline above. However, I am less wary of the affects of PhD study on contemporary art practice. Because, in general, I believe that artists are pragmatic – they are ingenious in their methods of accessing funding, spaces and practical resources. In my view, undertaking a PhD can be one such means. I do not think that artists are necessarily cynical of the process; but in general, I think they find ways to make the system work for them.

One criticism of visual arts related PhDs is that they academicise art practice. I do not think the situation is as simple as this. In my view, the privatisation of British industries since the 1980s has had repercussions for all, including artists. Consider, for example, the demise of affordable housing.<sup>23</sup> Equally, the recent property boom in Britain has reduced the amount of cheap studio accommodation available. Under such circumstances, in order to continue practising as an artist, a career in the academic sector becomes a relatively attractive option. However, teaching is highly competitive, and in order to distinguish between candidates universities have to raise the bar ever higher. So, it is now expected that applicants will hold a BA, MA, Post Graduate Certificate in Education and a PhD before even considering a teaching post in higher education. Ultimately, I believe that the PhD must be discussed in the broader context of privatisation.

The scenario I outline here raises two important issues. Firstly, in linking education to the market, do we regard education as having any intrinsic value of its own? Secondly, Watanabe highlights that a plethora of MA courses in art and design eventually led to devaluing of that qualification within the industry. The question then is what happens when the provision of PhD programmes reach saturation point. What are the implications for artists?

On a more positive note, perhaps the visual arts based PhD will spawn a generation of artist-writers who will invigorate the relation between art practice and critical writing in Britain. I think that it is important for artists undertaking such a PhD to recognise its role in the commercialised academic arena regardless of whether their research engages with these issues. For me, it has been important to use this research as a means of interrogating the affects of privatisation on art practice in general, even if that research is symptomatic of the problem I describe.

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<sup>23</sup> Consider for example, the selling off of council housing by the Thatcher government under the Right to Buy scheme of 1980 that continues to today.



## 2.0 MY PRACTICE

For me, this thesis is a circuitous means of examining my own practice and motivations, and to test out their tenability. As a practitioner, my primary goal has been to find a way to operate as a presence and, as I optimistically describe, ‘on my own terms’. I have been consistently concerned with the notion of art as an issue of strategy. Yet, it is hard to think of my own practice in terms of a strategy, which would suggest some kind of game plan. I would say that my particular *modus operandi* has developed as much out of necessity as out of choice. What propels me is the need maintain a practice that is not overly determined by the demands of an art world that can be fickle and overly prescriptive about the type of art and artist it includes. Over the past 15 years, I have striven for a *modus operandi* that is flexible enough to encompass my various roles as a practitioner, and the various forms of practice that accompany them.

So, my practice involves photography, publishing, curating, writing and teaching. Via my art practice, I have exhibited nationally and internationally at venues including, British Council, Prague (1993); ICA, Boston (1996); Platform Gallery, London (2002); Threadwaxing Space, New York (2000); Waygood Gallery, Newcastle (2004). My most recent published writing includes, ‘Image of Pain: Physicality in the Art of Donald Rodney’, in *Doublethink: Donald Rodney*, Autograph ABP, 2003; ‘Concrete Poetry: David Hammons’, in *Antipodes*, White Cube Gallery, 2003; ‘Wanderlust’, co-written by Clare Cumberlandidge, in *Changing States: Contemporary Art and Ideas in an Era of Globalisation*, INIVA, 2004. Also, I have taught in a various of academic institutions including, Goldsmiths College, Camberwell College of Arts and the Royal College of Art, London; also, Jan van Eyck Akademie, Maastricht.

My ultimate aim has been to maintain a practice that is at once critical, as autonomous as I can make it, collaborative, and open to experimentation. Mine is a non-commercial practice.<sup>24</sup> Given these objectives and its non-commercial nature, I would describe my practice as sharing an affinity with certain ‘alternative’ practices operating in Britain and the United States from the 1960s onwards. But, I would say that graduating from Goldsmiths in 1989 as the Young British Art phenomenon was erupting has been equally significant. For example, 1990 alone saw a string of impressive, commercially oriented, self-initiated exhibitions in disused industrial spaces in South East London. For example, shows like *Gambler*

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<sup>24</sup> By non-commercial, I mean that I either self-fund or seek financial support from public sources such as Arts Council England or academic research funds. My work does not have a commercial profile.

and *Modern Medicine*, curated by Billee Sellman and Carl Freedman, and *East Country Yard* curated by Henry Bond and Sarah Lucas. Such shows provided a potent model for unrepresented artists of that generation. Taking part in the *East Country Yard Show* gave me a direct experience of this phenomenon.<sup>25</sup> The show was extremely ambitious, taking place in a disused fruit warehouse in London's docklands. The building housed eight, 20,000 square foot storerooms. *East Country Yard Show* attempted to distinguish itself from other such exhibitions in that it never tried to make the building look like a conventional gallery space. The brick walls went unwhitewashed, and each artist created a distinct installation in their allotted storeroom. For the show, I produced a series of untitled, large-scale colour photographic works; enlarged laser copies of found and donated personal snapshots that were bill-posted onto the loading doors around the space. The piece was the first of a body of works I was to make concerning personal history and the subjectivity of memory [Fig. 2].

Emerging from this culture of artist-led initiatives prevalent in Britain during the Recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s, I found myself exposed to a diverse, if not conflicting, range of artistic constituencies. Subsequently, my practice has oscillated between them. Importantly, I would say that, over the course of my career, I have been largely able to achieve many of the goals that I describe above. It has been most rewarding when my own strategies for art making have coincided with those of other practitioners. I believe that operating in this way has allowed me a certain amount of freedom to work across diverse subject areas and contexts. The downside is that for various reasons (including more bureaucracy and waning energy) it takes increasing amounts of time and effort to fundraise and administer these projects. I will now give some examples of photographic and curatorial projects I have completed over the years, to give a sense of my interests.

## 2.1 PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECTS: *MISE EN SCENE*

An ongoing concern has been the subjectivity of historical information; particularly regarding who writes abiding social narratives and the functions they serve. I have mainly examined this issue via photography. In early projects such as *Girl* (1994) [Fig. 3], and *Outing* (1994) [Fig. 4], I examined the relationship between personal and official accounts of history, using found and donated amateur photography.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *East Country Yard Show* featured work by Henry Bond, Anya Gallaccio, Gary Hume, Michael Landy & Peter Richardson, Sarah Lucas, Virginia Nimarkoh and Tom Trevor, all Goldsmiths graduates.

<sup>26</sup> Both these works formed part of *Mise en Scene*, which showed at the ICA London in 1994.

I was interested in the interface between the personal and the public arenas. In appropriating these domestic images, I wanted to push the potential for more than one narrative existing for the same image, and that one narrative would not necessarily supersede another. For instance, how might the generic rules of the snapshot – relating to thematics such as ‘the birthday’, ‘the holiday’, ‘the wedding’ etc., – start to speak of more specific narratives given a new location beyond the domestic environment? In this instance, the narratives I extracted from the photographs related to class and race; but also personal experiences that avoided such classification.

Attendant to this work is a concern with value. I wanted to explore how an item of supposed ‘low cultural’ value, like a snapshot, might impact upon the supposed ‘high cultural’ location of the gallery. I do not just mean that a snapshot is low value because it is from the domestic arena; but that many of the images that came into my possession were discarded, had previously fallen out of circulation. So, I am interested in the status we apportion to such images; sentimental value versus, possibly, market value, testing out their validity as art. Ongoing is a preoccupation with the theatricality of photographic images, in particular, the portrait; how we stage and perform for the camera.

## **2.2 PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECTS: NEVER KNEW IT FELT LIKE THIS**

Recent projects continue to address issues relating to photography, history, staging and value. However, where previous projects usually involved juxtaposing ‘low’ culture against ‘high’, here, I attempt to posit ‘high’ culture against itself. For example, *Never Knew it Felt Like This* (2002) consists of four photographs and each is the re-staging of an existing work of art.<sup>27</sup> The series sources works by contemporary artists such as Chris Burden, Valie Export, Agnes Martin and Gerhardt Richter, respectively.

I garner the images from published material, journals, invites, monographs, etc. The selection of images is quite disparate and varies from the well known to the obscure. The common denominator for selection is that the image depicts an ‘averted’ or ‘denied’ gaze. The project works with the idea of a portrait (or even self-portrait) that conceals as much as it reveals of its subject. For example, I had always been intrigued by Gerhardt Richter’s *Betty* (1991) [Fig. 5], which particularly embodies this contradiction. Within these photographs, I take on the

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<sup>27</sup> *Never Knew it Felt Like This*, showed at Platform Gallery, an independent space in London’s East End in June 2002.

role of the subject within the image. Equally, to make these photographs, I take on the roles of artist, artistic director and model simultaneously.

My role as the subject of the work shifts from model (Richter) [Fig. 6] to artist (Valie Export's *Body Configurations* (1988) [Fig. 7] and spectator (Chris Burden's *White /Light White Heat* (1976)). Importantly, this odd collection of images reveals some uncharacteristic moments in the chosen artists practices – like painter Agnes Martin's 16mm film *Gabriel* (1976) from which I have taken a still. So, the project attempts to contest identity on various levels – mine, as the figure whose gaze is averted, but also the identity of the appropriated artists. Ultimately, in putting together this unlikely selection of artists, my aim has been to stress certain hierarchies within the art world itself; how certain works of art are allowed to almost fall out of art historical circulation, whilst others are not.

### **2.3 CURATED PROJECTS: *INDENT***

I want to briefly outline two recent curatorial projects that I have devised. I see curating as a useful means of engaging with other practitioners. The two projects I have chosen to discuss here are book-related, which is just one area of my curatorial activity.

*Indent* was a series of talks and a related publication that I produced in 1999. The project set about examining self-publishing amongst British artists during that decade. I was particularly interested in the collaborative practices that self-publishing facilitates – between artist, designer, printer and editor, for example. I felt it was important to try and document that certain artists of my generation were working collaboratively and along very different lines to those that the media propagated at this time. The dominant image was of the individualistic, commercialised, Brit-Artist. *Indent* featured artist groups BANK, Inventory, *Mute* magazine, Emma Rushton and Derek Tyman, plus Grennan & Sperandio. Each of the groups invited maintained practices that were largely publicly funded.

I invited them to speak about issues such as patronage, mass-production, context and collaboration. As a means of consolidating the project, I produced *Indent*, a modest, black and white publication with the Camberwell Press. Camberwell Press was an independent publishing facility, then run by Susan Johanknecht at Camberwell College of Arts in London [Fig. 8].

Despite the common activity of self-publishing, this selection of artists covered a varied range of perspectives and practices. For instance, Pauline van Mourik

Broekman and Simon Worthington founded *Mute* magazine in 1994.<sup>28</sup> What interested me was how *Mute* had successfully shifted from a broadsheet newspaper format that was largely aimed at an art audience, to a glossy magazine that shared bookshop shelves with titles such as *Wired* [Fig. 9]. Initially, *Mute* discussed issues pertaining specifically to the relation between art and technology. It cites factors as motivating its creation as:

*“...the development of digital technologies and the World Wide Web; the gradual popularisation of a specifically British ‘avant-garde’ art in the mainstream media; and the explosion of DIY culture across the UK. These exerted mutual pressure, and forced many artists to reassess the place of art and artists – not just in relation to the market, new distribution platforms and the public sphere, but also to the politics of information, technology, and science.”*<sup>29</sup>

Recently, *Mute* has expanded its remit to discuss broader issues such as globalisation, culture and world politics. *Mute* is a quarterly magazine that has worldwide distribution, it also operates an online forum that is committed to “*a participative working model*” and the distribution of “*free software*.”<sup>30</sup> *Mute* was one of the first visual arts organisations in the UK to have both analogue and digital interfaces.

In contrast to the logistical sophistication of *Mute*, was the knowing amateurism of BANK. During the 1990s, BANK presented another facet of ‘Young British Art’. BANK’s founder members were, Simon Bedwell, David Burrows, John Russell, Milly Thompson and Andrew Williamson. BANK’s objectives were always ambiguous. On one hand, they made anti-establishment, anti-capital pronouncements, evident in their writing and association with left-wing art veterans Art & Language. On the other, they exhibited the kind of irreverence, self-publicity and ambition that was synonymous with YBA figures such as Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst. BANK’s affiliation with more typical aspects of YBA is further exemplified in them showing work by important YBA artists like Gavin Turk and Martin Creed.

BANK operated as both artists and curators in their projects. Their sensationally themed shows such as *Zombie Golf* (1994) and *Cocaine Orgasm* (1995) involved elaborate, low-fi sets, complete with plaster-cast figures, around which they installed artists’ work. Much of their output involved caustic and provocative ephemera – press releases, invites, posters, etc – as means of publicising and

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<sup>28</sup> *Mute*’s initial incarnation as a broadsheet was published between 1989 and 1992 from the Slade School of Art.

<sup>29</sup> See, *Mute* at: <http://www.metamute.com>, 2005

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, *Mute*

branding the group. Their 'tabloid' (usually A4, photocopied sheets), also entitled *BANK*, was a diatribe against art world hypocrisy and nepotism, in which they targeted powerful artists, curators and critics [Fig. 10]. Conversely, as Liz Ellis points out in her 1997 essay on ethics and aesthetics in contemporary art, "[BANK] attract considerable kudos for themselves from their shows, blurring the distinction between commentator and curator, artist and critic."<sup>31</sup>

## 2.4 CURATED PROJECTS: THE HOLY BIBLE

In 1995, I began work on a collaborative project involving curator Richard Hylton and artist David Hammons. By 2002, we had produced David Hammons' first artist's bookwork, *The Holy Bible: Old Testament* [Figs. 11-12].

Conceptually, the book is deceptively economical; Hammons appropriated two epic tomes – the Bible itself, and Arturo Schwarz's catalogue raisonné *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*.<sup>32</sup> The project involved rebinding Schwarz's book to resemble a bible, complete with gilt-edging, gold-tooled lettering, satin ribbon and black goatskin cover. Compared to my previous publications, David Hammons' 'bible' is a luxury item. In this work, Hammons subverts received value systems. *The Holy Bible: Old Testament* pays homage to Duchamp's readymade. At the same time, Hammons critiques the idea of art as a kind of religion, with Marcel Duchamp as the undoubted high priest of conceptual art. If Hammons succeeds in critiquing Duchamp, then he equally succeeds in critiquing himself as a latter-day devotee of the readymade. In his review, Stephen Bury suggests a heterogeneous notion of critique at work in Hammons' bible. He writes:

*"In Hammons' simple and playful gesture the work of art, art history, history and beliefs are undermined."*<sup>33</sup>

Also, in 2002, Hylton and I set up Hand Eye Projects, a not-for-profit organisation, in order to sell this book. We also had the goal of producing further artist's books and related events. Any profits from Hammons' book are to subsidise projects by less established artists. Doing this project was primarily a means of raising some of our own money, so that we would not be totally reliant on public funding.

As I note above, my own practice is non-commercial. Dealing with the commercial galleries, museums and private collectors has been a challenge in that I have had to

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<sup>31</sup> Liz Ellis, 'Do You Want to Be in My Gang: An Account of Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Practice,' Part 3, *n.paradoxa*, Issue 2, February 1997, at: <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/ellis3.htm>, 2005

<sup>32</sup>Published by Delano Greenidge Editions, New York, 2000

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Bury, 'Artists' Books: The Holy Bible,' *Art Monthly*, #264, March 2003 p.39

shift my perceptions of my own practice and consider the potential benefits of selling this bookwork. I would say that I have learnt a more complex notion of strategy than I had prior to this project with Hammons. I am amazed at how (with the aid of electronic mail and a website) we have been able to create the illusion of a well staffed, fully functioning arts organisation, complete with a suite of offices. In reality, we are two, unstaffed, just about functioning individuals, operating from the humble surrounds of a flat in South East London. Over the past three years, the company has managed to sustain itself, beyond our initial project funding, which for us, is an achievement.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

It is my view that, in various ways, we live with the legacies of the 1980s; the effects of privatisation on state run sectors like transport, education, health and, indeed, the arts and culture, for instance. As a visual arts practitioner, my specific concern is the arts. As I outline above, the ‘privatising of culture’ has had a profound impact on the ways in which we experience the visual arts today, not all of which are positive. My aim with this thesis is to look back over the past twenty-five years in order to make sense of the present and seek out a potential route forward.

The approach I take in writing this thesis could best be described as analytical and archival. As, I outline in my survey of my art practice, many of the projects involve interrogating historical information. This might involve the relationship between personal and official accounts of history evident in my re-use of amateur photography; or, equally, the recording of trends in self-publishing amongst visual arts practitioners. So, this archival aspect of the thesis is very much in keeping with my practice as a whole. In my art practice my aim is not simply to re-present historical information, but to contest its value, and sometimes to reconfigure its meaning. And so, in this thesis, my aim is not to write a purely historical account of the Culture Wars, for example. I want to subject this narrative to a critical analysis under Foucault and Butler, to see what we can garner about how power operates and how we, in turn, might respond to it.

I use Michel Foucault predominantly within this thesis. In my view, his ideas on governmentality and critique befit the complexities of the times in which we currently live. In my view, Foucault gives an account of power that is non-partisan. By this, I mean that within his notion of governmentality, Foucault outlines that all subjects and all organisational entities have power that they can exercise benignly or aggressively. In this model, Foucault does not favour one type of subject or

institution as powerful and another as powerless. This I consider as non-partisan. I have found Foucault extremely useful in assembling this particularly emotive narrative on how power operates in relation to contemporary art. I had previously used Marxist theory to examine this subject matter, which eventually proved too limiting. In her analysis of Foucault's *What is Critique?* Judith Butler asks the question, "And shall we assume that...[Foucault's] theory has no reassuring answers to give?"<sup>34</sup> For me, the answer is a resounding "No." But I think that this lack of resolution in Foucault surely encourages further questioning. Similarly, Judith Butler's ideas on heterogeneity within identity and, indeed, critique are crucial to this thesis; they acknowledge and challenge some of the ideological cul-de-sacs that operate within identity politics. As a Foucauldian, Butler recognises the importance of self-critique within any broader political goal.

David Hammons is a major case study within the thesis. In part, this is because of the longevity of his career as a significant international artist, but also because he continues to occupy a notably contrary position within the art world. Importantly, I think that Hammons' recognises the interplay between politics and aesthetics that is necessary to achieving his critical objectives. By this, I mean that he does not favour the signified over the signifier. The favouring of one over the other, Krauss and Kwon identify as a weakness in much politically motivated art. Hammons also acknowledges his own vested interests in the art world. It is my view that Hammons is non-partisan in his critique. To me, he sees any individual or institution, regardless of its political persuasion, as worthy of critique. His opportunistic modus operandi offers up a pragmatic notion of critique that accommodates the complexities of the market-oriented contemporary art world. I think that the relation between Hammons' vested interests and his non-partisan critique is contradictory, and provides a productive tension that he exploits.

Finally, my reasons for choosing an American rather than British case study are mixed. Primarily, most of the issues that propel this research, which I outline in this introduction, involve my practice directly. I would have found it difficult to provide a sufficiently impartial account that would also serve my theoretical objectives. Given the general proximity of the narratives surrounding the privatising of culture, I have often looked to America for clues as to how certain issues might resolve themselves here. So, in order to gain some perspective on the situation that I currently experience in Britain, I believe it would be useful to look beyond my immediate environment. Also, given that I am still a practitioner, I do

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<sup>34</sup> Judith Butler, 'What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue,' in Sara Salih ed. *The Judith Butler Reader*, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p.307



not want to historicise my practice at this point. I leave that for someone else to do.

## **4.0 OVERVIEW**

### **CHAPTER 1**

Chapter 1 discusses the effects of Reagan/Bush era on American contemporary art as an example of what Foucault terms 'governmentality'. Foucault describes governmentality as a system of social control that relies on the principle of self-regulation. A key aspect is that laws are used tactically as a means of exercising power. It is important to stress that, to Foucault, governmentality is a symptom of contemporary Western governance rather than specific to any particular political constituency. Chapter 1 gives an overview of Ronald Reagan's conservative politics in general and how they embody the basic principles of a governmental regime. For example, the Republicans' use of symbolic rhetoric (e.g. 'the family', 'decency', etc) as a means of garnering support amongst voters. Chapter 1 concerns how governmentality operates on a systemic level.

I look at Reagan's arts policy via his defunding and restructuring of the NEA; also, his attempts to privatise the publicly funded arts. Privatisation brought increased levels of bureaucracy that shifted the ways that artists and arts institutions validated their activities. To what degree do the effects of Republican arts policy reveal a problematic dependency on public funding within the alternative art community?

Under George Bush, pressure from the conservative right instigated the Culture Wars. Here, we see public funding explicitly used as a means of controlling the content of contemporary art. The Culture Wars compelled the alternative art community to be more accountable to the NEA. I discuss the Corcoran Gallery's pre-emptive cancellation of Mapplethorpe's *Perfect Moment* exhibition as an act of self-censorship. This incident raises the question of whether a governmental regime facilitates a subject's complicity in its own oppression.

### **CHAPTER 2**

Chapter 2 discusses the relationship between critique and governmentality at an institutional level. I outline Foucault's notion of critique, this links directly to his description of governmentality. I discuss three aspects of the critique that Foucault outlines – dependence on power, reflexivity and paradox. I examine these aspects in relation to the contrasting strategies of alternative art groups engaged in

institutional critique. I establish the Whitney Museum of American Art as a site of dissent. I then look at the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition's pickets over exclusion of minority artists during the late 60s; and, Group Material's subversive installation in the 1985 Whitney Biennial. Do these critical practices offer the potential to move beyond oppositional modes of critique?

I examine the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which has been described as the 'politically correct biennial' because of its inclusion of politically motivated work and minority artists. In the mostly negative critical responses to the biennial, writers made clear divisions between politics and aesthetics; also, between signifier and signified. Miwon Kwon and Rosalind Krauss argue that this separation is also evident in how artist produced their work. They claim that certain contemporary art practitioners have overlooked the signifier in favour of the signified – e.g. specific political issues, such as gender, race, etc. For Krauss, the emphasis on the signified shows a limited understanding of the political potential of the signifier. For Kwon, the emphasis on the signified is politically expedient.

I link this issue to Judith Butler's idea of the 'signifying economy' where she discusses the limitations of a binary model of critique, which ultimately reaffirms existing power relations. Butler suggests a heterogeneous model of critique. Which politically motivated practices already engage this model?

### **CHAPTER 3**

Chapter 3 addresses critique within a governmental system on the level of the individual. In this chapter, I give a general overview of the practice and modus operandi of David Hammons. I consider his status as one of the leading African American practitioners on the international art scene and how his career has been built on a modus operandi of limited presence. I propose that Hammons executes a critical art practice, which I examine in relation to Foucault's notion of critique.

My aim is to understand how Hammons avoids many of the pitfalls of politically motivated art practice that Krauss and Kwon identify. I discuss Hal Foster's proposal that art with critical intent should acknowledge "*its own siting within different discursive institutions.*" This reflexive aspect of Foster's proposal relates to Judith Butler's definition of performativity that involves the inhabiting of stereotype in order to subvert it. I propose that Hammons articulates a heterogeneous notion of critique. I explain how his work often confuses the relation between signifier and signified; and, equally, how the artist often inhabits

stereotypical roles within his practice and *modus operandi*, which he attempts to undermine.

To what degree is Butler's performativity a critical response to Foucault's governmentality? Butler's performativity acknowledges the complexity of power relations, which I discuss relative to the contemporary art world. She offers the potential for a critical *modus operandi* that is not necessarily oppositional. Butler also acknowledges the issue of vested interests, which I apply to artists' vested interests in the contemporary art world. Is David Hammons' practice an example of performativity?

#### **CHAPTER 4**

Having given a general overview of David Hammons' practice and *modus operandi*, I consider in detail the role of photography therein. I propose that Hammons uses photography critically as a means of disseminating his mythology, also of infiltrating the 'discursive institutions' that Foster describes. I want to consider to what degree photography lends itself to critique. This issue, I address via Roland Barthes' ideas on indexicality in photography. Via Jeff Wall, I contextualise Hammons' use of photography with an account of the critical objectives of photoconceptualism in the 1960s and 70s.

The areas I address are Hammons' staged-for-the-camera sculptural tableaux, also the photographic documentation of his performances. In particular, I discuss two works, *Pissed Off* (1981) and *Two Obvious* (1996). I describe how Hammons' use of photography confuses the relation between the work of art and its documentation; also, between product and process.

To conclude, via Barthes, I examine the relation between indexicality, signification and critique. I propose that photography inherently confuses the relation between signifier and signified. To what degree does Hammons' articulation of photography, subvert Judith Butler's notion of the 'signifying economy'? And, further, to what degree does this articulation of photography constitute a performative gesture?

INTRODUCTION: ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1: Virginia Nimarkoh, *Four x 4*, 1991 (Installation view)

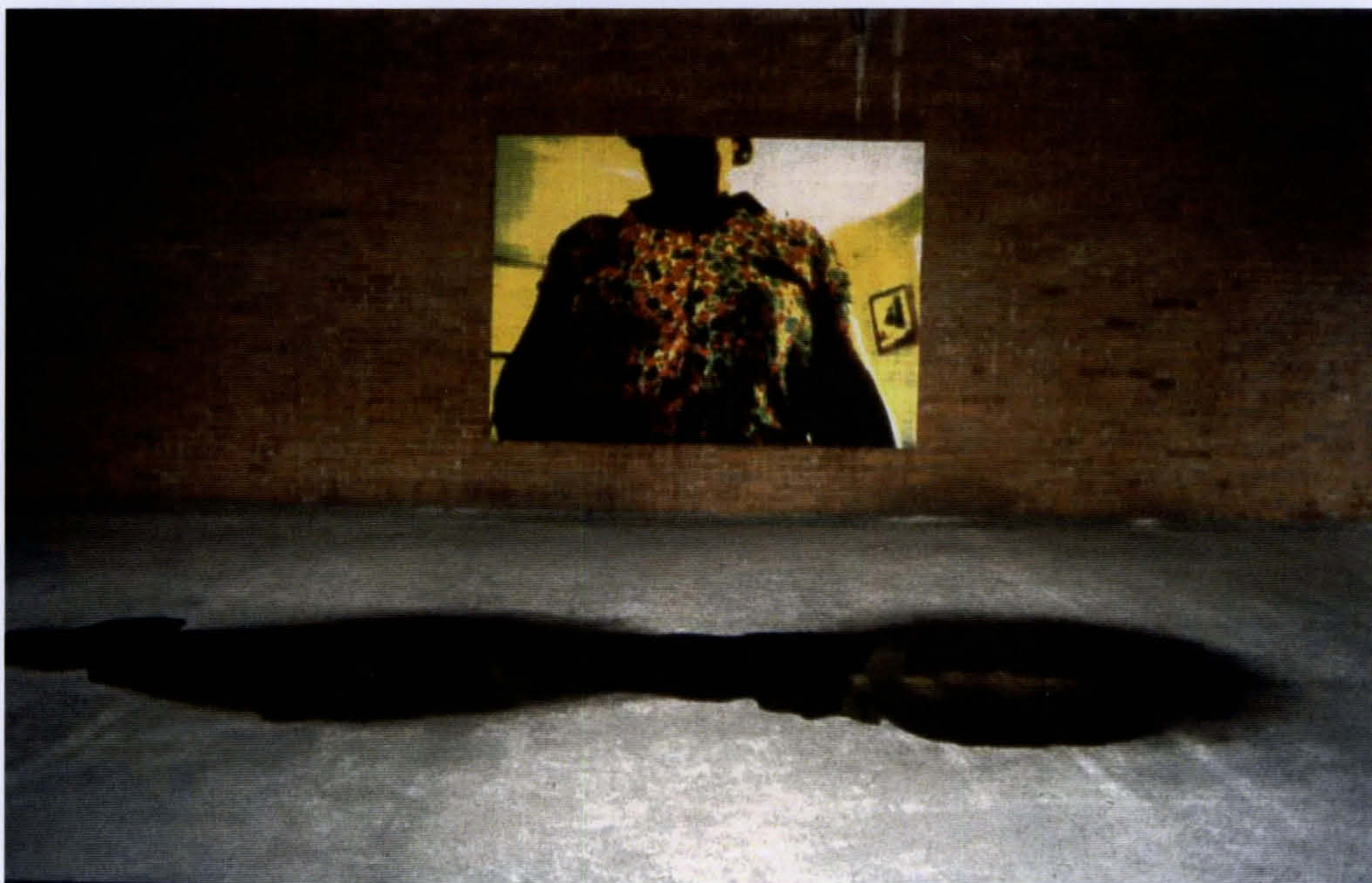


Fig. 2: Virginia Nimarkoh, *East Country Yard Show*, 1990 (Installation view)



Fig. 3: Virginia Nimarkoh, *Girl*, 1994



Fig. 4: Virginia Nimarkoh, *Outing*, 1994



Fig. 5: Gerhardt Richter, *Betty*, 1991

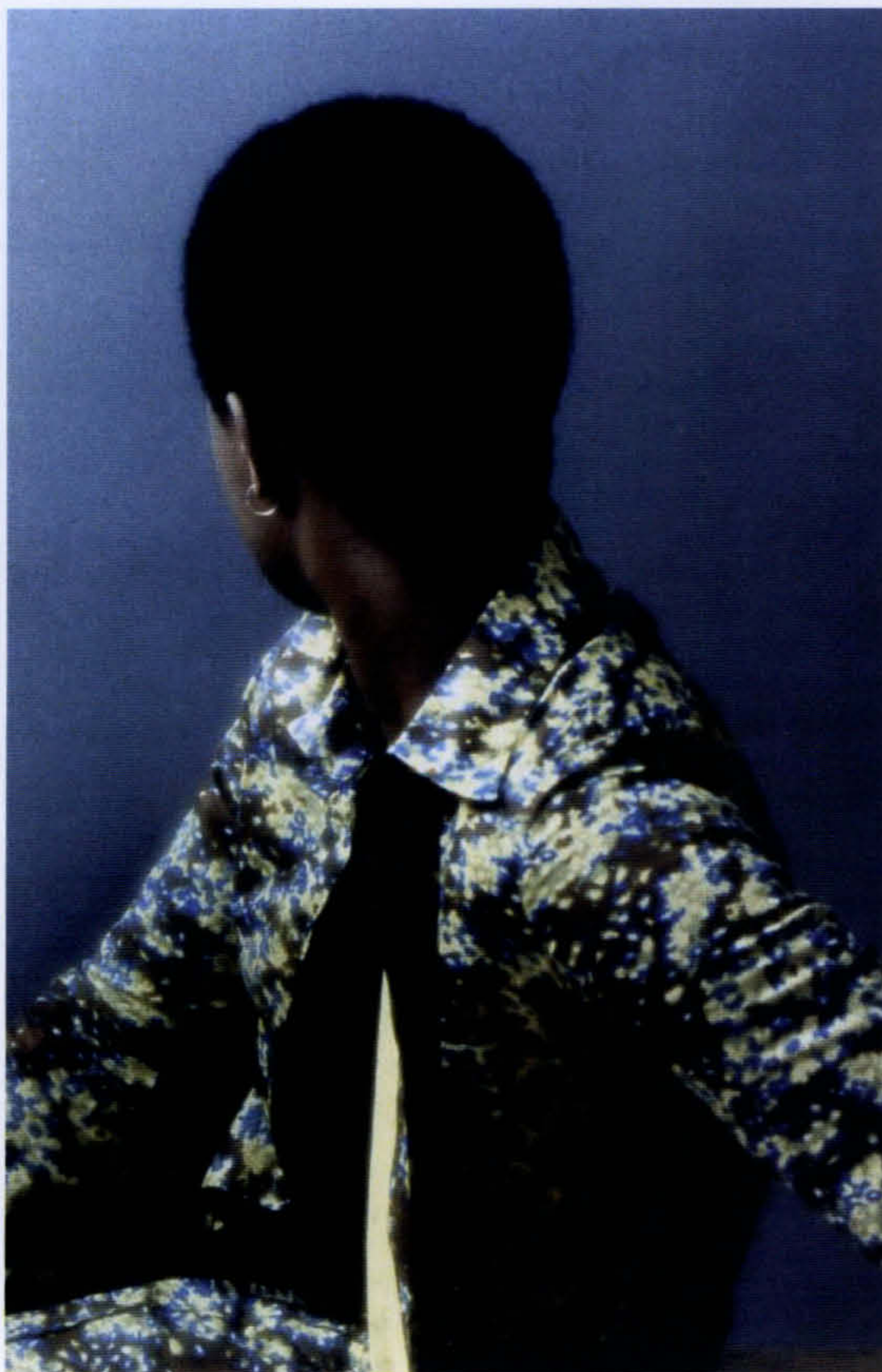


Fig. 6: Virginia Nimarkoh, *Untitled #1*, 2002 (After Gerhardt Richter, *Betty*, 1991)



Fig. 7: Virginia Nimarkoh, *Untitled #2*, 2002 (After Valie Export, *Body Configurations*, 1988)

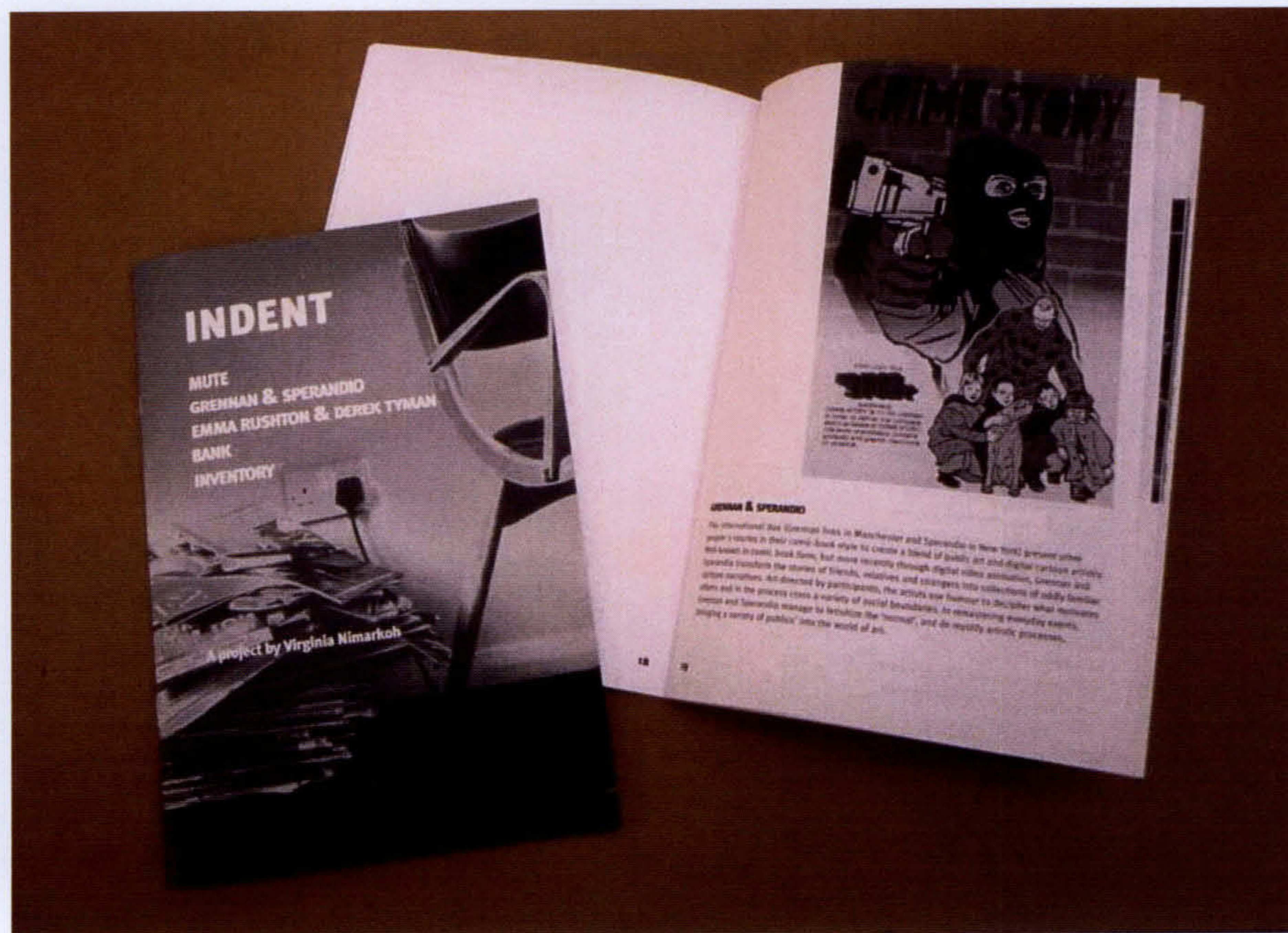


Fig. 8: Virginia Nimarkoh, *Indent*, 1999

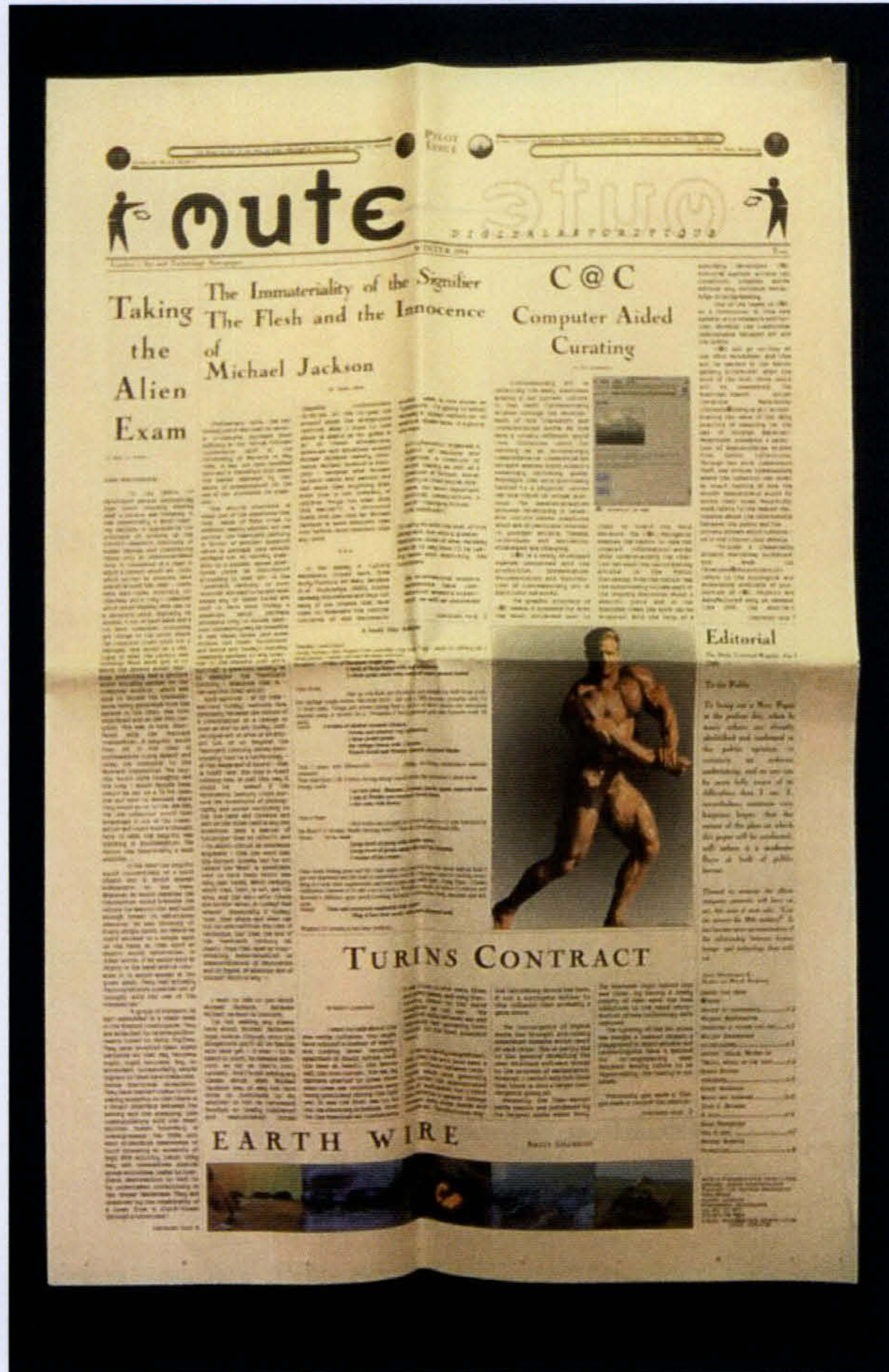


Fig. 9: *Mute*, pilot issue, 1989

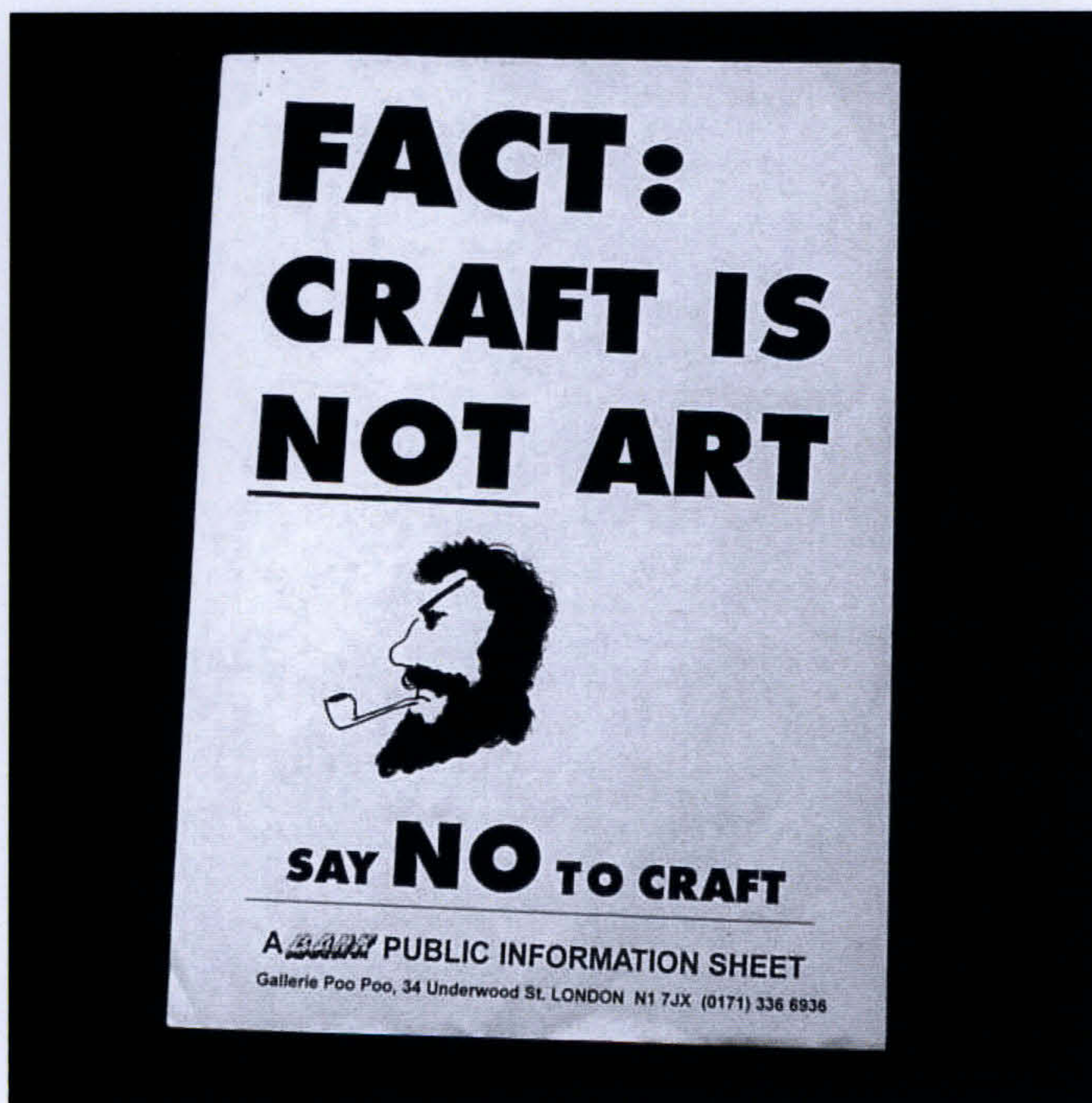


Fig. 10: BANK flyer, undated



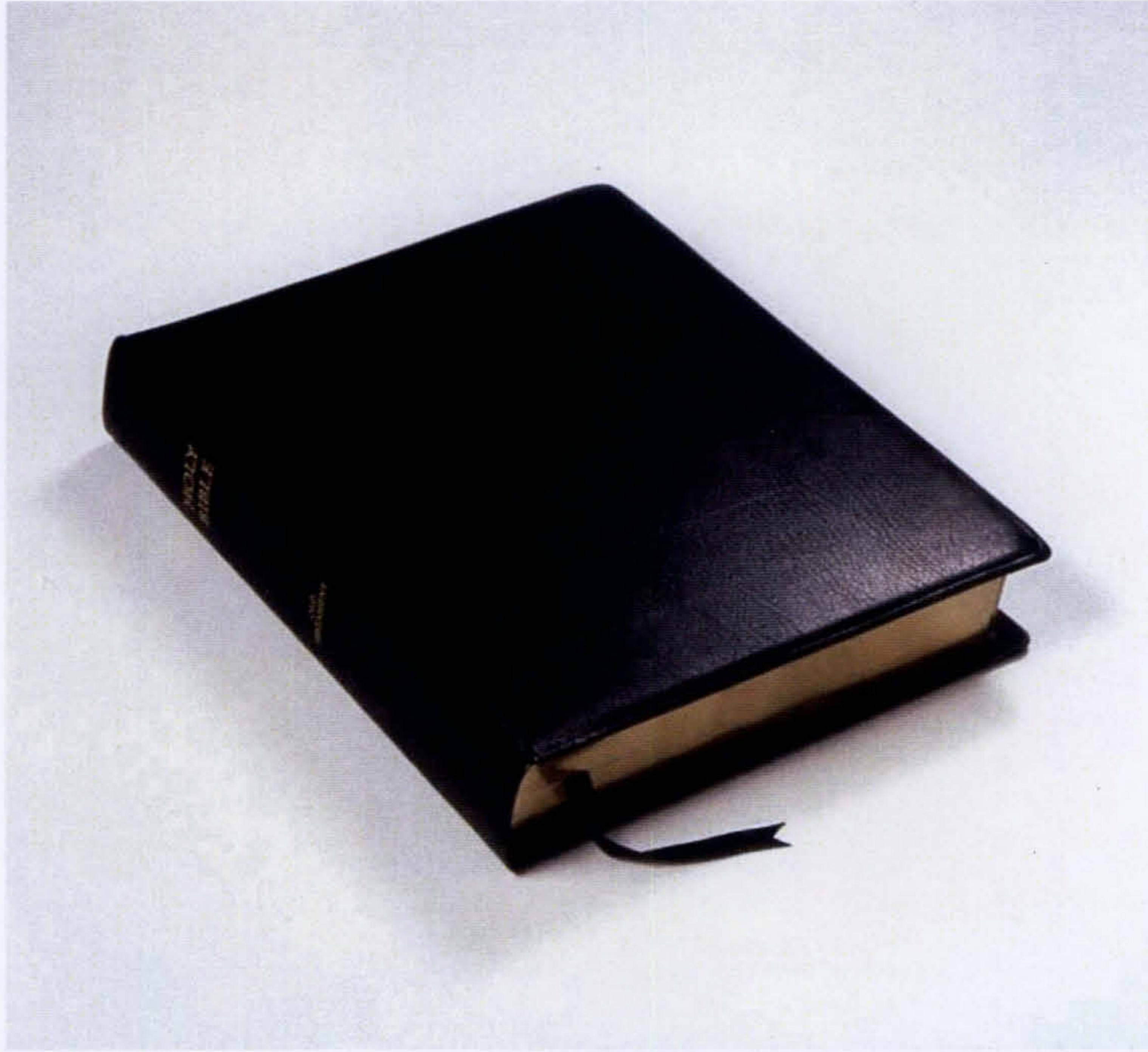


Fig. 11: David Hammons, *The Holy Bible: Old Testament*, 2002

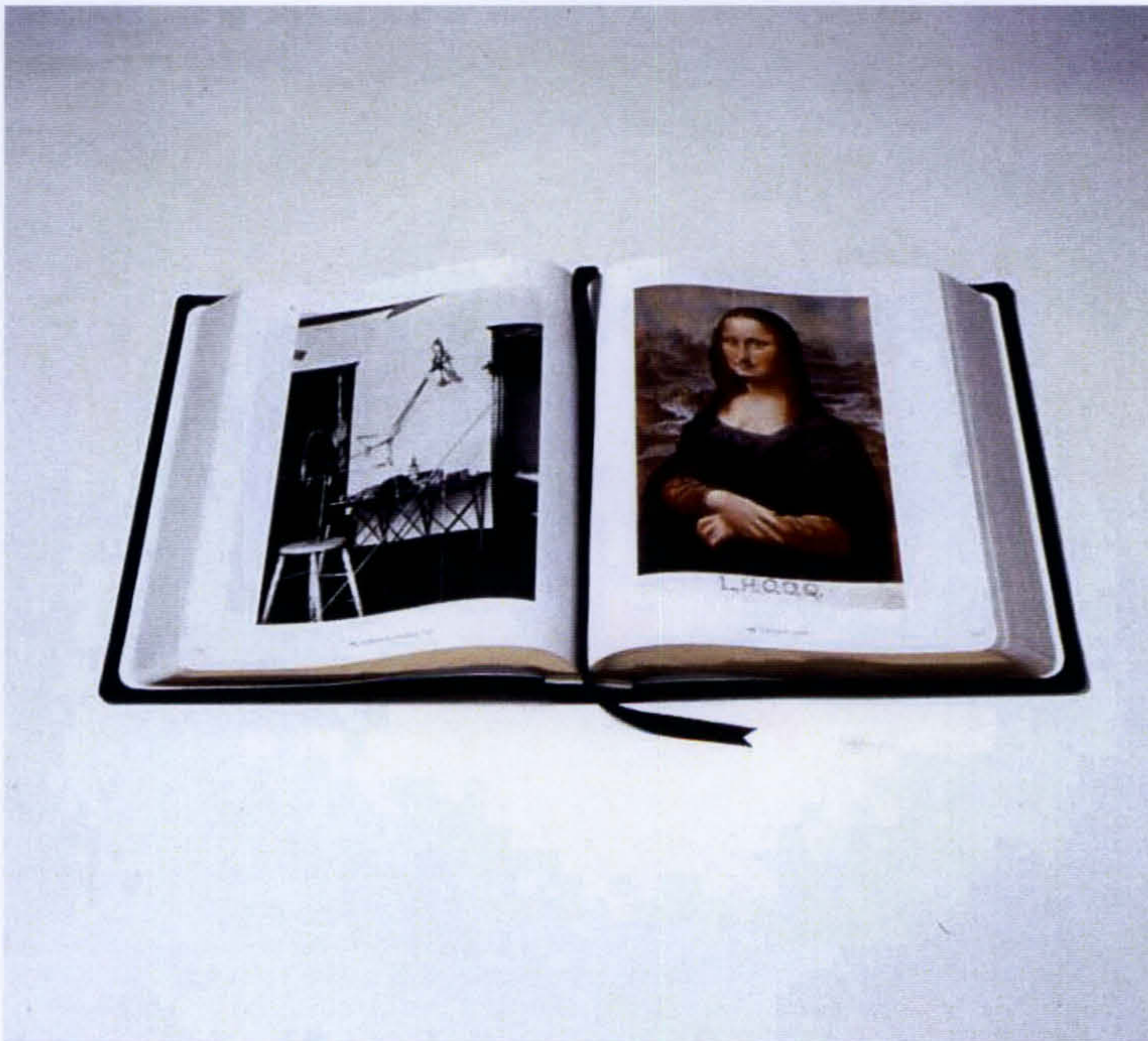


Fig. 12: David Hammons, *The Holy Bible: Old Testament*, 2002

# CHAPTER 1

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

As I outline in my introduction to this thesis, the backdrop to my investigation is the privatising of cultural institutions that took place from the 1980s onwards in Britain and America. My particular concern is how this issue affected contemporary art in America. As such, this chapter describes the early years in office of successive American presidents, Ronald Reagan and George Bush Snr, relative to their respective policies on the arts.

To recap: Chin-tao Wu refers to ‘privatising culture’ which involved the introduction of free-market principles into government agencies like the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In turn, NEA clients – artists, curators, critics, galleries, museums, etc – were expected to follow suit. Essentially, the Republicans regarded the arts as a luxury that the private sector should best fund. Initially, under Reagan, adopting ‘free market principles’ translated as the defunding and restructuring of the NEA; and, then, the privatisation of the publicly funded art sector in general. This meant that previously state funded clients were compelled to find increasing quantities of their funding from private and corporate sources, or perish.

Later, under the Bush Snr administration, the assaults escalated. At this time, the focus was on restricting the content of contemporary art, via the real and threatened withdrawal of federal funds. These events culminated in what came to be known as the ‘Culture Wars’ of the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> According to Richard Bolton, the Culture Wars refers to the 2-year period between 1989 and 1991. However, the key issue at the heart of the Culture Wars; what kind of art should be federally funded, were contested earlier and continue to surface sporadically to this day.<sup>2</sup> Bolton’s account focuses primarily on events stemming from the work of the artists Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano during this period, which I will discuss in detail in this chapter. However, it is worth noting that as early as 1981, the Reagan administration began serious measures to dismantle the NEA and limit publicly funded art. For example, it abolished the Art Critics Fellowships Program, a NEA funding

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<sup>1</sup> According to Richard Bolton, the ‘Culture Wars’ refers to the 2-year period between 1989 and 1991. For Bolton’s account, see ‘Introduction’ in Richard Bolton, ed., *Culture Wars: Documentation from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, New York: New Press, p.3-24

<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, New York Mayor Rudolf Giuliani’s call for a decency committee to oversee exhibitions receiving city money following protests by the Catholic League after Renee Cox’s *Yo Mama’s Last Supper*. The work, a photographic re-staging of da Vinci’s Last Supper depicting a naked, female Christ, showed at Brooklyn Museum in 2001.

initiative designed to support independent critics.<sup>3</sup> Artist Felix Gonzalez Torres highlights that the types of writing emerging at the time broke the tradition of discussing art in isolation of its historical, social and political context. He states that:

*“This new type of art criticism...broke the ideological mirror in which we reflected ourselves and the art object, devoid of any connection to history, to events, to issues and institutions that intercept and effect our thinking and our lives – even our most intimate moments.”<sup>4</sup>*

These critics were often writing about the issue-related art works emerging at this time, that the political right sought to suppress – for example, work concerning gender, race, sexuality, AIDS, etc. Surely, in suppressing the work of art critics, the Republicans equally intended to suppress the artists that such critics historicised, validated and promoted through their writing.

In discussing Republican arts policy during this period, my concern is to examine the power the state can exercise over contemporary artists; and, most importantly, how those artists respond in turn. Specifically, my aim is to examine the affects Republican arts policy on so-called ‘alternative’ organisations and the individual artists associated with them.<sup>5</sup> I will briefly outline the parameters of the alternative and not-for-profit sectors respectively. Emerging from the mid-1960s onwards, American alternative organisations form a diverse range of initiatives including galleries, bookshops, collectives, archives, etc. In her essay, *For the Record*, Julie Ault gives an overview of the New York alternative sector. She identifies a common goal amongst the alternatives as being “*commitment to cultural democracy.*”<sup>6</sup> I understand that this goal relates to the pursuit of unfettered access and resources by practitioners from all sections of the artistic community. Ault argues that by the 1970s and 1980s ‘artist-led’ enterprises emerged as a direct response to an exclusive and “*commerce-oriented*” art world.<sup>7</sup> As such, they provide an ‘alternative’ modus operandi for practitioners to the commercial art system. Equally, Ault notes that, during this period, cultural critics attempted to theorise the politics of representation within a context of multiculturalism.<sup>8</sup> Consider, for example, the writings of Douglas Crimp, bell hooks,

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<sup>3</sup> See, Carol S. Vance, ‘Reagan’s Revenge: Restructuring the NEA’, *Art in America*, v.78, #11, November 1990, p.51

<sup>4</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres originally delivered as a talk at *Sites of Criticism: A Symposium*, Panel Two, The Drawing Center, New York, March 10<sup>th</sup> 1992.

<sup>5</sup> For a survey of this alternative practice, see Julie Ault’s ‘A Chronology of Selected Alternative Structures, Spaces, Artists’ Groups, and Organizations in New York City, 1965-85’, in Julie Ault, ed., *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985*, New York: Drawing Center & University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p17-76

<sup>6</sup> Julie Ault, ‘For the Record’, in Julie Ault, ed., *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985*, New York: Drawing Center & University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p.4

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Ault, ‘For the Record’, p.3

<sup>8</sup> By ‘multiculturalism’, I refer to a school of thinking, whereby distinct cultures co-exist equitably – whilst preserving their cultural difference – within the same country. Broadly speaking, ‘the politics of representation’ refers to the power relations in action between any dominant culture and its minorities – specifically in relation to who is represented, by whom and for what reason. Within Western Culture,

Trin T. Minh-ha, Craig Owens and Gayatri Spivak, to name but a few. Consequently, within the field of contemporary art, many alternative spaces functioned as “*venues for self-representation and distribution*” to marginalised artists. By the early 1980s, the alternative art community had become associated with a particular notion of ‘the political’; also with dissent. Philip Yenawine argues that politically motivated work often emerged from alternative spaces.<sup>9</sup> For example, work that dealt with socio-political issues such as gender, race, sexuality, AIDS, housing, consumerism, etc. This put the alternative sector increasingly at odds with the three successive Republican administrations in power during this period.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the commonalities that Ault describes, she is wary of homogenising the complex, and often contradictory, concerns of this diverse sector under the rubric of ‘alternative’. She outlines “*the very different activities, ranging from ‘wanting a slice of the pie’ to ‘wanting nothing less than revolution’*” as equally representative of the cultural, political and artistic objectives of the alternative sector.<sup>11</sup> I will distinguish between alternative organisations and other not-for-profit organisations, like museums. It is my understanding that, because of their position within the art world hierarchy, and their traditionally exclusive practices, museums were generally institutions that the alternatives sought to challenge. I discuss the relation between the alternatives and the Whitney Museum of American Art in Chapter 2. However, other not-for-profit organisations like the private foundation Art Matters have played an instrumental role in assisting alternative practice. Art Matters set as its remit to support freedom of expression and less established forms of work, such as performance and video, via its grant giving and lobbying activities.

Republican arts policy of the 1980s and 1990s also brought increased levels of bureaucracy. In his essay, *The Privatization of Culture*, George Yudice asserts that this policy would compel “*new legitimation narratives*”<sup>12</sup> of the arts and culture, initially with regard to their relationship with the NEA. Yudice’s observation signals how such policy would impact on the ways in which publicly funded artists and organisations described and validated their activities, both within the art community and beyond. He makes the link between increased bureaucracy and increased accountability. In Brian Wallis’ essay, *Public Funding and Alternative Spaces*, he cites the bureaucratisation of

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those minorities could include – people ‘of colour’, people with disabilities, women, gays and lesbians, poor people, for example.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Yenawine, ‘But What Has Changed?’ in Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems and Philip Yenawine, eds, *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, New York: New York University Press, 1999, p.9-10

<sup>10</sup> These administrations consisted of two consecutive four-year terms in office served by Ronald Reagan (1981-89), followed by a single four-year term by George Bush Snr (1989-93).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Ault, ‘For the Record’, p.4

<sup>12</sup> George Yudice, ‘The Privatization of Culture (1997)’, in Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, Philip Yenawine, eds, *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, New York: New York University Press, 1999, p.287

publicly funded art as a prime example of what Michel Foucault has termed 'governmentality', or the implementation of 'self-regulation' as a means of social control.<sup>13</sup> Within a governmental system, rather than power being exercised by one ruler, it is devolved through a network of self-regulating organisational entities – for example, funders, artists, curators, galleries, etc.

The Republican measures to privatise culture had a devastating effect on the NEA, contemporary art practitioners and organisations. So, in this chapter, I will examine the significance of state regulation as instrumental in this process, which I address within a broader capitalist agenda. I pursue Wallis' link between Foucault's notion of governmentality and the regulation of contemporary art in the United States. In this chapter, I want to address how governmentality operates on a systematic level with regard to arts funding, policy, regulation and so on.

My aim, in focusing on this particular historical period, is not to exploit an obvious dichotomy between the leftist 'libertine' artist and the rightist 'conservative' politician. Of course, the use of government subsidy as a political tool (or, indeed, as a means of social control) is not limited to the Reagan/Bush administrations, or to the funding of the arts. Foucault contends that the practice of "*employing tactics rather than laws, and even using laws themselves as tactics*" is symptomatic of governmentality.<sup>14</sup> And governmentality, in turn, is a symptom of modern governance.<sup>15</sup> It is important, therefore, to attempt to put the Reagan/Bush era into some kind of historical context regarding the relation between policy, regulation and contemporary art in the USA.

George Yudice argues that there is an inherent political motive in any government's funding of public resources. He specifically outlines how the NEA was established in 1965 "*to strengthen the connection between the Administration and the intellectual community.*"<sup>16</sup> This aim was, in part, a means of diverting potential opposition during the Cold War; and, in part, a means of maintaining a sense of cultural superiority over Communist countries such as Czechoslovakia, which at the time, prohibited freedom of speech.<sup>17</sup> In the preamble to establishing the NEA, the Democrat President Kennedy stated that:

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., Wallis, 'Public Funding and Alternative Spaces', p.177

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault's lecture, 'Governmentality', was given at Collège de France, February 1978, in Graham Burchell, ed., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p.95

<sup>15</sup> Foucault examines the period from the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

<sup>16</sup>The historian Arthur Schlesinger Jnr., quoted in Milton C. Cummings Jnr., 'Government and the Arts: An Overview', in Stephen Benedict, ed., *Public Money and the Muse: Essays on Government Funding and the Arts*, New York: Norton, 1991, p.49

<sup>17</sup> Yudice goes further to consider how government subsidy was used during the 1960s to specifically alleviate dissent amongst marginalised ethnic groups during periods of civil unrest. He explains that such government subsidy was at the time regarded as a means of "channelling the expression of opposition." Ibid., Yudice, 'The Privatization of Culture', p.289

*“If we are to be among the leaders of the world in every sense of the word, this sector [the arts and culture] of our national life cannot be neglected or treated with indifference.”<sup>18</sup>*

Brian Wallis echoes this view of the relationship between federal arts policy and much broader political concerns, highlighting Republican President Richard Nixon’s recognition of the symbolic significance of cultural programmes within US Cold War propaganda. It is worth noting that during Nixon’s two administrations, the NEA received its biggest-ever financial boost with its budgets soaring from \$11 million in 1969 to \$114 million in 1977.<sup>19</sup> Yudice goes further to link the end of the Cold War with the reversal of federal support of the arts in America. He argues that once the threat formerly posed by Communism was no longer imminent, the USA no longer needed to distinguish itself culturally from Communist countries; and, thus the need for cultural supremacy ceased to be an imperative. So, the first-ever cuts to the NEA budget occurred under Ronald Reagan’s presidency, and continued under George Bush Snr, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. In fact, the NEA’s most drastic annual budgetary cut occurred under Clinton’s Democrat government in 1996, with a fall from \$160 million to \$99 million.<sup>20</sup> Yudice and Wallis describe quite distinct, inherently political motives connected to the giving of government subsidy. They also identify contrasting ways that contemporary government accommodates critique; whether in terms of harnessing its potential, as occurs under Nixon’s generous funding of the arts; or quashing its potential, as I will argue occurs under both Reagan and Bush’s defunding of the arts. Either way, both Yudice and Wallis describe the control of perceived critique using government subsidy. In my view, these contrasting strategies highlight the mutability of governmental power.

I now will outline Foucault’s 1978 lecture, *Governmentality*, which provides a means of examining the rationale behind the arts policies of Ronald Reagan and George Bush respectively. Foucault’s notion of governmentality is particularly pertinent here, because it proposes the potential for both the upward and downward exercising of power. So, for example, Foucault’s text can be read in relation to how American arts policy and regulation impacts on the art communities (downward); but also how, in turn, those communities regulate themselves and respond to the impact of such policy and regulation (upward). Foucault argues that within a governmental system, power relations are interdependent. As I note, certain sections of the alternative community made claims for their ‘anti-establishment’ critical stance. When read in relation to the

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<sup>18</sup> Philip Brookman and Debra Singer, ‘Chronology’, in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, New York: New Press, p.311

<sup>19</sup> These financial boosts occurred under Nancy Hanks leadership of the NEA between 1969 and 1977. Her tenure surpassed Nixon’s presidency by four years. *Ibid.*, Wallis, ‘Public Funding and Alternative Spaces’, p.171

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Wu, p.275

events surrounding the Culture Wars, Foucault's text surely complexifies what terms such as 'autonomy' and 'critique' might mean. Does Foucault offer a more pragmatic notion of these terms, based on the interdependence of power relations, than the notions of critique that rely on oppositional power relations?

## 2.0 FOUCAULT'S GOVERNMENTALITY

Foucault's *Governmentality* charts historical and philosophical shifts in Western society's understanding of what it means to govern, through an examination of Niccolò Machiavelli's 16<sup>th</sup> Century text, *The Prince*. Foucault's concern is the exercising of sovereign power, not only upon the state, but also upon the individual. As such, he outlines two key events occurring during the 16th Century. Firstly, with regard to the government of the state, Foucault identifies the historical moment where sovereignty superseded feudalism resulting in the emergence of "*great territorial, administrative and colonial states*." Here, I understand that Foucault is referring to the rise of the colonial empires of countries such as Britain, Spain and France respectively. Secondly, with regard to the government of the individual, Foucault considers religion; specifically the Reformation<sup>21</sup> as a pivotal moment, after which time there emerged the issue of how one should be spiritually governed in order to secure "*eternal salvation*".<sup>22</sup> According to Foucault, at the intersection of these two events lies the problematic of modern government – basically, "*how to be ruled, how strictly, by whom, to what end, by what methods etc.*"<sup>23</sup> Because of these changes in the state and the Church, Foucault observes "*a new pastoral form of power*"<sup>24</sup> evident from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century onwards.

I will briefly outline Foucault's reading of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, from which I can then distinguish his findings on government. Machiavelli presents a notion of government where the primary aim of the prince is to remain omnipotent within his principality, which he will have acquired either by "*inheritance or conquest*" rather than by election or other such method. Machiavelli refers to this process of acquiring dominions as, quite simply, the prince "*winning*" them, "*...either with the arms of others or with his own, either by fortune or by prowess.*"<sup>25</sup> Because of coming to power by either violent or non-elected means, the prince's link to his principality is inherently fragile. Consequently, he is always vulnerable to attack from both internal

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<sup>21</sup> The 16<sup>th</sup> Century movement whereby abuses of power in the Roman Church saw the establishment of the respective Reformed and Protestant churches.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Foucault, 'Governmentality', p.88

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Foucault, 'Governmentality', p.88

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., Wallis, 'Public Funding and Alternative Spaces', p.176

<sup>25</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, George Bull, trans., London: Penguin, 2003, p.7

(his subjects) and external (foreign enemies) sources. And so, the prince must, by force if necessary, keep control of his position.

Foucault observes that the role of those close to the prince is to draw a distinction between the prince's power and that of any other individual. Any display of power external to the prince is a potential threat that, ultimately, must be stifled. The aim, therefore, is to maintain the semblance of distance between the prince and his subjects. Machiavelli, for example, advises on maintaining a correct proximity between the prince, his advisors, enemies and flatterers, stressing that:

*“The only way to safeguard against yourself against flatterers is by letting people understand that you are not offended by the truth; but if everyone can speak the truth to you then you lose respect. So a shrewd prince should adopt a middle way, choosing wise men for his government and allowing only those the freedom to speak the truth to him, and then only concerning matters on which he asks their opinion, and nothing else.”<sup>26</sup>*

For Foucault, Machiavelli proposes a power structure with a particularly limited notion of government. It is primarily concerned with maintaining the prince's superiority over his subjects. Machiavelli's model only describes the *downward* exercising of power.

As an alternative, Foucault proposes 'the art of government' or 'governmentality' which applies equally to the governing of the self, the family and the state. Governmentality suggests a more wide-ranging notion of governance that accommodates the various power structures operating within a society at any one time. Power is devolved through a network of self-regulating organisational entities; this may include, for example, the teacher's relationship with his or her students, the superior's relationship with her nuns and, of course, the prince's relationship with his subjects. Within the governmental model, the presence of these distinct power structures is continuous with the government of the state, rather than a threat, as in the Machiavellian model.

To explain Foucault's notion of self-regulation: within this model, the head of state must learn how to govern him or herself, if he or she is to govern effectively. In this governmental model, the idea of self-regulation operates both *upwardly*, in terms of how the head of state governs him or herself, but also extends *downwardly* concerning how that head of state then governs his or her subjects. And how those subjects go on to govern their families, schools, villages and so on. The idea being that the well-run state will, in turn, engender well-run families and, ultimately, obedient individuals. It is important to stress the interdependency of each organisational entity – for example, the teacher's responsibility to his or her students, in relation to the head teacher's

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Machiavelli, p.76



responsibility to the school as a whole. In theory then, the principles of good self-government can be applied to the well-governed state and vice versa.

Of course, this model of a well-governed, self-regulating state is an ideal. Foucault goes on to outline a more realistic application, linking the downward trajectory of governmentality to forming the basis of what we now term 'policing.'<sup>27</sup> Under the rubric of governmentality, the state does not necessarily have to use violence in order to get its subjects to comply with its wishes – as would have occurred under Machiavelli's prince. A governmental regime, however, can use laws punitively.

With regard to the issues I outline here, I will examine the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George Bush with regard to the effects of their respective arts policies on American contemporary art, but also as examples of governmental regimes in operation.

### **3.0 THE BASICS OF RONALD REAGAN'S POLITICS**

Ronald Reagan's election in 1981 marked the beginning of a 12-year Republican administration. Arguably, for many artists, arts administrators and commentators, with the election of Reagan began one of the bleakest periods in the history of American contemporary art, in terms of contemporary art's funding, administration and public perception. The repercussions of his policies, it can be argued, are still felt today.

I will briefly outline the fundamental elements of Reagan's politics, which will provide some kind of context for considering the rationale behind his policies on American contemporary art. Throughout his career as a Republican politician, Reagan's political ethos can be best described as conservative, in that it taps into traditional Republican concerns such as; individualism, small government, free enterprise and low taxes, as well as; hard work, morality, patriotism and the family. Here, I will consider how these ideas get articulated through a use of symbolism that becomes a key tactic in Republican politics.

#### **3.1 REAGAN'S CONSERVATISM**

I want to draw out three important issues for consideration. Specifically, individualism, 'small government' and low taxes are intrinsic aspects of conservative Republican politics.

In this context, individualism is achieved through adopting a practice of self-reliance; that is, looking to ones own resources rather than those of the state, not only to

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., Foucault, 'Governmentality', p.92

maintain a living, but also to thrive economically and socially. Evidently, Reagan was a believer in the dignity that comes with hard work. He also believed that with self-reliance comes a sense of responsibility, not only for oneself, but also for one's family unit and society as a whole. Reagan was of the conviction that social responsibility brought with it an inherent reciprocity. This meant "*people pull themselves up by their bootstraps if they are poor and help the deserving if they are rich.*"<sup>28</sup> I think that implicit within Reagan's idea of individualism is the basis of a governmental system. His notion of self-reliance promotes the principle of self-regulation.

Related to this belief in individualism, was a suspicion of so-called 'big government', which was economically, socially and politically incompatible with Republican thinking at this time. Big government was regarded as symptomatic of the failings of the liberal left. Economically, big government meant bureaucracy, over-staffing, poor management and expense, whereas small government represented efficiency, streamlining, good management and cost effectiveness. Socially and politically, Reagan and his supporters felt that big government overly involved itself in the private affairs of American citizens, in terms of legislation and public services such as welfare. For example, once elected, Reagan distanced himself from the reinstatement of prayer in public schools, an issue popular amongst the conservative electorate. Reagan claimed that such legislation was an "*intrusion into the life of the family,*" and an area that "*government had no business dealing with.*"<sup>29</sup>

Equally, Reagan held big government responsible for encouraging dependency on state handouts amongst America's most economically and socially disadvantaged. Such dependency was surely the antithesis of the individualism the conservative right asserted. Welfare evidently robbed individuals of the incentive to become self-sufficient. For the Republicans, a significant and negative effect of big government was that it hindered individual freedom, responsibility and self-reliance in American citizens. In an attack against the left from 1980, Reagan declared:

*"I want to help get us back to those fiercely independent Americans, those people that can do great deeds, and I've seen them robbed of their independence, I've seen them become more and more dependent on government because of these great reforms."*<sup>30</sup>

In proposing budgetary cuts on particular government departments and public services, including welfare and education, Reagan sought to reverse a culture of dependency that had allegedly burgeoned under the Democrat Carter administration. Also, shrinking the size of the US government would effectively diminish its power over

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Dallek, quoting the *Los Angeles Times* in *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism*, Cambridge: Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1999, p.71

<sup>29</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, 4<sup>th</sup> August 1982, in *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism*, p.123

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Dallek, p.132

American citizens and, in turn, reduce the need for big government. Ultimately, according to Reagan, a relatively small government, that was streamlined and efficient, would lead to lower taxes and increased individualism.

### 3.2 SYMBOLISM IN REPUBLICAN POLITICS

Having established the nature of Ronald Reagan's conservatism, I want to consider how the Republicans articulated certain conservative themes through a use of symbolic rhetoric. I am particularly interested in how, by the late 80s, this use of reductive, symbolic rhetoric, would eventually impact negatively on the American contemporary art community. But first, to identify the key themes and determine the how they relate to Republican politics in general. In his study on the cause of Reagan's electoral victory, Joel Krieger identifies the core issues of the 1980 Republican election campaign as "*family, economy and empire*,"<sup>31</sup> which can be summarised as follows:

- Reagan was advocating a particularly conservative notion of 'family values', evident in his promotion of anti-abortion policy, heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family.<sup>32</sup>
- With inflation under the Carter administration rising to 16% and a national deficit in the region of \$75 billion, Reagan pledged to balance the economy through an extensive programme of spending reforms aimed at reducing public spending and taxes.<sup>33</sup> Crucial to the delivery of this pledge were budgetary cuts to public services including health, welfare, education, and, of course, the arts. Reagan planned to defederalise certain public resources via a programme of privatisation. George Yudice describes the complex nature of privatisation under the Republicans as, "*partnerships between government, the corporate sector, the non-profits, and civil society... The notion of partnerships blurs the boundaries between the private and the public.*"<sup>34</sup>
- As a means of re-establishing U.S. military dominance internationally, which was perceived domestically to be on the wane,<sup>35</sup> Reagan rejected détente to assume a more aggressively interventionist foreign policy, the likes of which his

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<sup>31</sup> Joel Krieger, '*The Roots of Reagan's Triumph*', in *Reagan, Thatcher and the Politics of Decline*, Polity Press, 1986, p.137

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., Krieger, p.137-9

<sup>33</sup> For overview of Carter's economy see, W. Carl Biven's, *Jimmy Carter's Economy: Policy in an Age of Limits*, University of North Carolina Press, 2002 Also, *Jimmy Carter*, Steve Schoeherr, Dept. of History, University of San Diego at: <http://history.sandiego.edu/gen/20th/car/carter01.html>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., Yudice, p.293

<sup>35</sup> U.S. hostage crisis in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were seen as humiliating defeats for America. Ibid., Krieger, p.129

Democrat predecessor, Jimmy Carter, had sought to avoid. This shift in policy would radically increase expenditure on the military.<sup>36</sup>

The three election issues of family, economy and empire came to form the basis of Reagan's political agenda throughout his time in office. It is specifically 'the family' that I want to address here, as an example of the use of potent symbols in Republican politics throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. But also, as Foucault identifies, 'the family' is one of the key self-regulating organisational entities necessary to a governmental regime.

### 3.3 FAMILY VALUES/FAMILY LIFE

Krieger identifies 'the family' as the axis around which all other issues are articulated in Republican politics of the time.<sup>37</sup> The Republicans promoted an idea of family life that centred on tradition – despite this being at odds with the way most Americans were living during the 1980s. Implicitly, the Republicans notion of 'the family' was based on a patriarchal, nuclear model, in which both parents were married and, preferably, religious; the father went out to work and the mother stayed at home to care for their children – although this model was rarely described explicitly within Republican politics.

Conversely, the Republican notion of 'the family' was very much in conflict with the nature of contemporary Western capitalism in which working mothers constitute an increasingly necessary component of any national workforce.<sup>38</sup> In his account of the events leading up to the Culture Wars, Douglas Davis confirms that during the 1980s, no more than 25% of American families corresponded to the traditional model Reagan promoted.<sup>39</sup> Such a narrow definition of 'the family' strained even to accommodate the reality of working mothers, let alone that of single, unmarried or gay parents. For many Americans, the use of such conformist language was surely alienating.

However, Reagan's promotion of 'family values' was extremely popular with what Dallek describes as, "*a certain group of middle-class, educated, suburban conservatives.*"<sup>40</sup> Importantly, Reagan had tapped into a growing grassroots movement amongst the highly conservative Christian right that was active nationally – in particular, organisations such as the National Federation for Decency, later to become

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<sup>36</sup> According to Robert Dallek, between 1981 and 1986, the annual US defence budget more than doubled rising from \$171 billion to \$367.5 billion. Ibid., Dallek, p.141

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., Krieger, p.145

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., Krieger, p.138

<sup>39</sup> Douglas Davis, 'Art & Contradiction: Helms, Censorship, and the Serpent', *Art in America* v.78 (May 1990) p.59

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., Dallek, p.132

the American Family Association.<sup>41</sup> Reagan was also responding to a perceived need amongst more moderate voters to provide a sense of security, which given America's struggling economy and diminished defence reputation, was evidently lacking. Rosalind Petchesky explains that Reagan's 'family values' were not simply "*manipulative rhetoric but the substantive core of a politics geared on a level that out distances any previous right-wing movements in this country, to mobilize a nationwide mass following.*"<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, Krieger argues that in placing a heavily coded and potent notion of 'the family' at the core of its politics, the Republicans were able to execute traditionally conservative ideas relating to social, economic and foreign policies – not so much by stealth, as by reasoning.<sup>43</sup> So that in effect, issues as seemingly unrelated as the proposed anti-abortion policy or the notorious Strategic Defense Initiative<sup>44</sup> could be articulated under the shared rubric of protecting 'family life'. Alan Crawford echoes this view. He states:

*"Sexual and family politics...beginning with abortion, become for the New Right intrinsic elements in a larger program that encompasses more traditional right-wing aims: anticommunism, antidétente, antitunism, racial segregation and antifederalism..."*<sup>45</sup>

This strategy, of using 'family values' to provide the political leverage ensuring they maintained the moral high ground in relation to their policies, became a Republican standard. Dennis R. Fox gives an important insight into the relation between Republican rhetoric of the family and a more extensive capitalist agenda. He observes that in using 'the family' as a political vehicle, the Republicans overlooked the concept of "*the family as an institution worth preserving on its own merits.*"<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Foucault makes a similar point regarding the role of 'the family' within a governmental regime. He contends that the family becomes a means by which to garner information on society in general concerning, for instance, "*sexual health, demography, consumption*" and so on. Foucault concludes that, "*the family becomes an instrument rather than a model: the privileged instrument for the government of the population.*"<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The American Family Association, through its leader Reverend Donald Wildmon, was to become one of the most vociferous opponents of the NEA during the Culture Wars.

<sup>42</sup> Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, 'Antiabortion, Antifeminism, and the Rise of the New Right', *Feminist Studies*, v.7 #2, Summer 1981, p.207

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., Krieger, p.145

<sup>44</sup> In 1983, Ronald Reagan announced his plans for the Strategic Defense Initiative or 'Star Wars' as the project came to be known. The anti-missile system was intended to intercept and destroy nuclear missiles from space before landing on U.S. soil.

<sup>45</sup> See, Alan Crawford, *Thunder on the Right: The "New Right" and the Politics of Resentment*, New York: Pantheon, 1980, p.176

<sup>46</sup> Dennis R. Fox, *The Reagan Administration's Policy on Using The Family to Advance Capitalism*, Delivered at convention of Law & Society Association, Colorado, 1988. See, <http://www.dennisfox.net/papers/reagan-family.html#Administration's>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., Foucault, 'Governmentality', p.100

'The family' provided the Republicans with a potent and adaptable symbol through which to reach its electorate. Yet, one might still ask why they chose a family-centred politics, as opposed to one centred around 'the nation' or 'the individual', for example, since patriotism and individualism are surely key aspects of Republican politics. Some clues are suggested in the following quotation from *The Family: Preserving America's Future*<sup>48</sup> (also known as the Bauer Report), a study commissioned by Reagan in 1986:

*"For most Americans, life is...a fabric of helping hands and good neighbours, bedtime stories and shared prayers, loving packed lunchboxes and household budget-balancing, tears wiped away, a precious heritage passed along. It is hard work and a little put away for the future."*<sup>49</sup>

This rather jarring juxtaposition of 'bedtime stories' and 'household budget-balancing' does suggest an ulterior political motive behind the Republicans family-centred rhetoric. Dennis R. Fox's critique of the Bauer Report extracts the explicit relationship between family and economy the Republicans intended. The report states that:

*"...democracy and capitalism are presented as an inseparable unit, both tied to the fate of the nuclear family. Such families not only save money, making possible economic expansion, but 'they teach children the values upon which savings are built - delaying gratification now for some future goal'".*<sup>50</sup>

The Bauer Report continues, perhaps most explicitly stating that, "*Attitudes toward work are formed in the family. Families which teach that effort results in gain, prepare skilled and energetic workers who are the engine for democratic capitalism.*"<sup>51</sup> It is worth noting that The Bauer Report was produced as a step towards developing a government policy on the family. Fox observes that the overt link between family and capitalism was omitted from the resulting policy, Executive Order 12606, signed by Reagan in September 1987. The link between family and capitalism was evidently not an issue that Reagan was prepared to confront the electorate with.

Importantly, the sentiments of the Bauer Report that link family to economy relate directly to Foucault's description of the fundamental principles of governmentality. He states that:

*"The art of government...is essentially concerned with answering the question of how to introduce economy - that is to say, the correct manner of managing individuals, goods and wealth within the family (which a good father is expected to do in relation to his wife, children and servants) and of making the family fortunes prosper - how to introduce this meticulous attention of the father towards his family into the management of the state"*<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The Working Group for the Family produced The Bauer Report directed by Under Secretary of Education Gary L. Bauer.

<sup>49</sup> *The Family: Preserving America's Future*, p.9

<sup>50</sup> *The Family: Preserving America's Future*, p.13

<sup>51</sup> *The Family: Preserving America's Future*, p.7

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Foucault, *Governmentality*, p.92

It becomes apparent that, under Republican rule, any social group or issue seen as antithetical to the potent symbol of ‘the family’ particularly one seen as secular, liberal or individualistic (in its broadest sense) – was ultimately regarded as anti-capitalist, or at least a threat to a capitalist regime. This issue is worth bearing in mind when considering how Republicans would go on to mobilise the sanctity of ‘the family’ in defence of its sustained attacks on the NEA during the Culture Wars. The motive behind the Culture Wars could, at least in part, be argued as an attempt by the conservative right to protect capitalist values rather than the sanctity of the family, per se.

Fox outlines how the language within Executive Order 12606 relating to ‘the family’ – despite its evocative symbolism – is both ambiguous and vague, specifically in terms of how a family policy might be managed. He observes that “*the order itself does not define explicitly the kind of family that is to be strengthened, and it gives no rationale for its provision.*”<sup>53</sup> Fox refers to the “*inherently subjective interpretation*” that would be necessary to implement that policy.

I want to briefly note these two characteristics: the Republicans use of emotive, yet vague symbolism that, in turn, allows for ‘subjective interpretation’. I do not regard this particular use of symbolic rhetoric as an example of weak or indecisive government on the part of the Republicans; it was, in fact, a highly effective tactic that they would go on to use offensively during the Culture Wars. I discuss this issue in Section 5 of this chapter.

#### **4.0 REAGAN & THE ARTS: THE AMERICAN FUNDING SYSTEM**

This section outlines the nature of Ronald Reagan’s arts funding reforms, paying particular attention to their severe impact on the American alternative art sector. I want to examine how these reforms problematise certain notions of autonomy and critique associated with that sector. But first, I will briefly outline some of the idiosyncrasies of the American funding system. Specifically, the intrinsic links between public and private funding, and the symbolic significance of NEA support:

The American funding system is based on a tradition of philanthropy. At the time of the NEA’s creation by U.S. Congress in 1965, only four states in America had their own arts funding agencies. Prior to this, most museums, galleries and artists received funds solely from private philanthropic individuals, trusts and foundations.<sup>54</sup> Such charitable gifts, in the form of grants, purchases, awards, etc were and still are, to varying degrees, tax deductible. With the NEA’s founding, U.S. Congress sought to

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., Fox

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Yudice, p.294

foster the relationship between public and private funding. Therefore, the NEA is restricted by its constitution to fund a maximum of 50% of any project's budget; recipients need to raise the remaining funds from other sources.<sup>55</sup> So, in effect, American publicly funded art museums, galleries and organisations can best be described as, what Chin-tao Wu calls, "*semi-public art institutions*"<sup>56</sup> or George Yudice, "*simultaneously public and private.*"<sup>57</sup>

In 2003, Dana Gioia, the Chair of the NEA summarised the complexity of an American funding system that "*combines federal, state, and local government support with private subvention from individuals, corporations, and foundations as well as [according to art form] box office receipts.*"<sup>58</sup>

The NEA does not cover an institution's operational costs, only project funding. Unlike in Britain, say, where despite a dramatic increase in corporate sponsorship and private donations during the 1990s, publicly funded art institutions still receive their core funding from sources like city councils or Arts Council England (ACE), with additional private or corporate support.<sup>59</sup> For example, in 2005, ACE only requires its clients to find 10% of project funding from additional sources.

As I note above, the American publicly funded art sector has its roots in philanthropic giving. NEA funding has played a crucial role in shifting the real and symbolic standing of that sector. So, for example, the Whitney Museum of American Art currently receives NEA funding. It was founded in 1930 around a core collection of American works donated by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, a wealthy sculptor and patron to the arts.<sup>60</sup> Historically, such private institutions have sought a degree of public funding; federal endorsement brings with it a level of cultural and political authority, without which these private institutions could be publicly regarded as mere vanity projects.<sup>61</sup> Federal funding effectively enables the symbolic transition from private collection to public institution.<sup>62</sup> Gioia reiterates this point, asserting that,

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<sup>55</sup> National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965, or Public Law 89-209. Quoted in, *Privatising Culture*, p.70

Given the extensive cuts in the NEA budgets since the Reagan era, this maximum figure of 50% is rarely met. To be clear, Reagan's first projected NEA budget stood at \$144 million in 1981; in 2003, that budget stood at \$116.5 million. See, speech by Dana Gioia, *Can the National endowment for the Arts Matter?* Washington DC, June 2003, <http://arts.endow.gov/endownews/news03/PressClubSpeech.html>. Also, Carole S. Vance, 'Reagan's Revenge: Restructuring the NEA', *Art in America*, v.78 #11, November 1990, p.51

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, Wu, p.18

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Yudice, p.293

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, Gioia

<sup>59</sup> For example, Wu cites a growth in Beck's beer sponsorship of British arts events from £20,000 in 1985 to £350,000 in 1994. *Ibid.*, Wu, p.133

<sup>60</sup> See, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney: A Biography*, B.H. Friedman, Doubleday & Company Inc., 1978. Also, The College of Staten Island of The City University of New York: [www.whitneygen.org/archives/biography/gertrude.html](http://www.whitneygen.org/archives/biography/gertrude.html)

<sup>61</sup> Despite its private origins, the Whitney belongs to the not-for-profit sector.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, Wu, p.18



“NEA funding has the power to legitimize a new organization and further validate an existing one.”<sup>63</sup>

With regard to its financial value, federal funding forms a minuscule part of American expenditure on the arts. For example, during the 1980s federal funding made up approximately 5% of total arts budgets;<sup>64</sup> by 2003, that figure had dropped to 2%.<sup>65</sup> Its symbolic value, however, is immeasurable. To explain, federal funding is used to generate further public and private income. Gioia estimates that in America every federal dollar attracts up to eight times that amount in matching grants and donations. In his survey of American public funding from 1992, Kenneth Baker recognises the “*multiplying effect*” of federal funding, stating that the NEA’s “*impact on American cultural life is far greater than is current annual dispensation of around \$170m would suggest.*”<sup>66</sup>

#### 4.1 REAGAN’S FIRST YEAR IN OFFICE

In the years between the Nixon and Reagan administrations, federal funding of the arts underwent an intensive period of growth largely via the NEA. The NEA saw its budgets rise from \$75 million when Nixon resigned in 1974 to \$159 million when Carter left office in 1981.<sup>67</sup> Those involved in the arts during the period directly preceding Reagan’s election arguably enjoyed something of an idyllic existence. According to Philip Yenawine, co-founder of New York’s Art Matters Foundation, the parameters of artistic production were expanding. Not only in terms of more locations provided by a growth in alternative organisations, but also in terms of art form – specifically, increased access to then ‘new media’ such as video and, of course, performance related works. Also emerging at this time was a new wave of art that sought to critique what Yenawine describes as a “*conservative but still dominant modernism.*”<sup>68</sup> As I have outlined, the artists associated with this work – many of whom were left-wing, feminist, gay, lesbian, ‘of colour’ or any combination of these factors – sought to challenge the status quo by producing work that addressed political issues such as sexuality, race, AIDS and so on. Importantly, Yenawine highlights the significance of government funding to this situation:

*“New or enriched sources of funding for art-making emerged, substantially encouraged by government entities, especially the National Endowment for*

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., Gioia

<sup>64</sup> Robert Brustein, ‘Don’t Punish the Arts’, *New York Times*, June 23, 1989, in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton, New York: New Press, 1992, p.42

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., Gioia

<sup>66</sup> Kenneth Baker, ‘Public Art Funding: the View from America’, *Art Monthly*, #159, September 1992, p.2

<sup>67</sup> ‘Chronology’, Philip Brookman and Debra Singer, in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton, New York: New Press, 1992, p.334

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., Yenawine, p.9

*the Arts, whose mandate included the fair representation of previously marginalized voices and visions.”<sup>69</sup>*

However, Yenawine’s reasons for celebrating the NEA’s support of so-called ‘marginalized voices’ relate directly to the reasons for the Republicans eventual reversal of this type of governmental support. To the political right, the “*inherently libertine*” values of contemporary art were regarded as increasingly incompatible with the conservative aspects of Reagan’s Republicanism.<sup>70</sup> For Ronald Reagan, public money had been politicised under the previous Democrat administration, which allegedly sought to develop the arts “*for social rather than artistic purposes.*”<sup>71</sup> Under Carter, the NEA had attempted to democratise the allocation of federal monies, encouraging programmes that sought to broaden arts audiences, for example, through the staging of projects in unconventional settings such as factories and prisons. To add to this, Carter had appointed minority and union representatives onto the NEA’s advisory board, The National Council on the Arts, as well as supporting politically motivated works of art. In Reagan’s view, such initiatives amounted to a ‘politicization’ of the NEA.<sup>72</sup>

In keeping with his election pledge, Reagan introduced a programme of spending reforms aimed at reducing public expenditure, that included cuts to the respective arts, education and welfare budgets. During his first year in office, Ronald Reagan proposed a 50% cut in the NEA budget. As I have already noted, in 1981 America had a national debt of some \$75 billion; Reagan’s first projected NEA budget was \$144 million.<sup>73</sup> It is hard to imagine, therefore, how the proposed cuts of 50% would have made any significant impact on the federal coffers. This assault on the NEA was surely significant in terms of what might be achieved symbolically.

One Republican aim was surely to demoralise the political left, which had done much to democratise and diversify the NEA in the preceding years. But, an aim must have also been to reverse the gains made in creating the type of culturally heterogeneous artistic landscape that Yenawine describes. Of course, any symbolic victory on the part of the government would, in actuality, devastate the art community given the great symbolic weight that federal funding carries in attracting money from other sources. Ultimately, the difference between receiving a small grant and no grant could mean the difference between the life and death of certain publicly funded arts organisations.

All sections of the art community came out in force to lobby against the proposed cuts, attending NEA subcommittee meetings and press conferences – from artists, critics and

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., Yenawine, p.9

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., Baker, p.2

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., Wu, p.49

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., Vance, ‘Reagan’s Revenge’, p.49

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., Brookman and Singer, p.335

directors of major arts institutions to celebrities, philanthropists and donors; and, of course, NEA sympathisers within U.S. Congress.<sup>74</sup> The sustained opposition by the art community was successful in that Reagan's proposal was eventually rejected. U.S. Congress conceded a 10% reduction in the NEA budget. Despite defeating Reagan on this instance, the 10% cut sent out a warning signal to the art community, since it represented the first-ever budgetary reduction in the NEA's history. This incident pessimistically set the tone for future governments (both Republican and Democrat) dealings with the arts.<sup>75</sup>

## 4.2 REAGAN'S ARTS FUNDING REFORMS

During the Reagan era, the Republicans argued that the art audience was at best specialised, and at worst, elitist; the arts were therefore an "expensive luxury" that did not comply with Reagan's proposed programme of public spending reforms.<sup>76</sup> Conversely, the Republicans also complained that the arts had become increasingly populist under the previous Democrat administration.<sup>77</sup> Either way, the intended outcome was the same, to defund and restructure the NEA. Ronald Reagan's strategy for reforming federal funding of the arts, basically operated on three fronts:

- Budgetary cuts to the NEA
- Restructuring the NEA
- Privatisation

I will address each of these issues in specific relation to their affect on alternative organisations and the individual artists associated with them. giving particular consideration to the issues of autonomy and critique.

## 4.3 BUDGETARY CUTS TO THE NEA

Whilst Reagan never achieved his proposed 50% cut to the NEA's budget outright, he did succeed in implementing an extensive series of budgetary cuts and restrictions. For the duration of his presidency, Ronald Reagan effectively froze the NEA's coffers at an average of \$159 million – reaching its lowest point in 1982 at \$143 million, and its highest at \$169 million in 1989.<sup>78</sup> Reagan's aim, therefore, was to offset cuts to the federal arts budget by increasing private and corporate involvement in the arts; an

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., Vance, 'Reagan's Revenge', p.49

<sup>75</sup> Catherine Lord gives a concise account of Reagan's first year in office with regard to the arts in 'Arts Funding Update', *Afterimage*, v.9 #3, October 1981, p.3.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., Vance, 'Reagan's Revenge', p.49

<sup>77</sup> Michael S. Joyce, *The National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts in Mandate for Leadership*, ed. Charles L. Heatherly, Washington D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 1981, p.1055–58. Ibid., Wallis, p.172

<sup>78</sup> For a history of NEA funding see, Philip Brookman and Debra Singer, 'Chronology', p.331-363

example of the Republicans aim to reduce government involvement in areas they believed the private sector should best support. The budgetary cuts to the NEA raise important issues regarding certain notions of critique and autonomy within the alternative community.

I outline above that the alternative community was associated with notions of dissent. A founding generation of alternative organisations had emerged during the 1960s and '70s, which comprised an extensive range of interests, organisational structures and practices. These included studio and exhibition spaces like PS1 and The Studio Museum in Harlem; collaborations and collectives such as Group Material, Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee and Guerrilla Art Action Group; plus resources like artist's book publisher and distributor Printed Matter, and the Franklin Furnace Archive. Many such groups emerged out of a period of intense political activism, opposing the Vietnam War; and contesting black civil rights and women's liberation, for example.<sup>79</sup> Despite the diversity of such organisations – for instance, Group Material had given up its permanent location and saw as one of its goals to critique the very notion of the alternative space; whilst The New Museum replicated a more conventional museum structure – what links them is their non-commercial status. This made alternative organisations particularly vulnerable to the proposed funding cuts. Despite the diversity of intent and strategy, these were specifically the kinds of organisations that the Republicans targeted. I explain above that much of the work coming out of the alternative community was antithetical to the conservative aims of the family-centred Republicans. Equally, the non-commercial organisational structure of alternative enterprises conflicted with the Republican capitalist agenda. So, alternative organisations and the artists associated with them were a challenge to Republican value systems, if not necessarily a direct critique of them.

Reagan's attempts to defund the NEA brought the issue of autonomy into sharp relief for the alternative community. I have outlined the broad range of opinion within this community; some had ambitions to eventually enter the market place, others resolved to remain outside of the commercial sector. Either way, given their non-commercial status, whether directly or indirectly funded by the NEA, the ramifications of the budgetary cuts were serious. It is my understanding that for sections of the alternative community, a critical *modus operandi* was contingent upon maintaining, at least, a semblance of autonomy.

I want to briefly consider the issue of autonomy in relation to Foucault's idea of governmentality. In its most basic sense, autonomy is surely compatible with governmentality since both stem from notions of self-government. However, within a

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<sup>79</sup> I discuss the links between the alternative sector and political activism in detail in Chapter 2

governmental system, autonomy is necessarily conditional. To explain: since governmentality proposes the upward and downward exercising of power, it inherently acknowledges that an individual or institution may be simultaneously reliant on, and responsible to, any number of other individuals and institutions. It is worth noting that Foucault does not describe any means of existing outside of this system, nor of excluding certain associations. I am proposing that a governmental system recognises the necessity for contradictory alliances within a society as a matter of course, but also as a means of attaining specific political goals. So for example, it is entirely in keeping with these principles of governmentality that until the 1980s, successive Republican and Democrat administrations had keenly supported the “libertine” arts, despite maintaining opposing political agendas. But, equally, that since the 1980s, neither party has seen it necessary to reinstate NEA funding.

My issue is that certain sections of the alternative community had adopted a necessarily oppositional notion of autonomy that was in keeping with the spirit of activism from which it emerged, but which failed to accommodate the complexities of operating within a governmental regime. The receipt of public funding surely compromises this oppositional stance. In her account of the alternative sector during the 1980s, Arlene Goldbard makes a related point regarding the political shortcomings of the sector, considering whether “*a more nuanced understanding of power (both “our” side’s and the other’s) might have yielded a more significant and lasting effect.*”<sup>80</sup>

I want to examine how these concerns get articulated in relation to Reagan’s funding reforms. During Nancy Hanks’ leadership of the NEA in the 1970s, the number of alternative organisations had burgeoned with federal support. For example, in 1971 five grants of \$22,600 in total were allocated under the Visual Arts Program to fund alternative organisations. By 1981, under the specific category of Artists’ Spaces, its budget had risen to \$919,550.<sup>81</sup> Like Philip Yenawine, Brian Wallis describes the positive relationship between the NEA, individual artists and alternative organisations during this time. He notes that:

*“...for the most part this collaboration between the NEA and alternative spaces was beneficial to avant-garde artists, who came to anticipate individual grants, support from alternative spaces, and relative autonomy.”*<sup>82</sup>

However, Wallis surely raises an ideological conflict of interest in the relationship between artists’ desire for artistic and political freedom and what had become an

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<sup>80</sup> Arlene Goldbard, ‘When (Art) Worlds Collide: Institutionalizing the Alternatives’, *Alternative Art New York 1965-85*, ed. Julie Ault, New York: The Drawing Centre, 2002, p.183

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, Wu, p.42

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, Wallis, p.176

expectation of federal funding.<sup>83</sup> Yenawine also describes, “*a certain degree of complacency and mistaken belief that American society at large had embraced its avant-garde viewpoints.*”<sup>84</sup> There was, perhaps, an idealistic assumption on the part of certain artists and organisations that they could directly critique the social, moral, political and economic values of the Republican government, and expect that same government to fund them indefinitely for the privilege.

Arguably, the two groups hit hardest by Reagan’s funding cuts were alternative organisations and individual artists. To the Republicans, these groups represented two of the most artistically and politically autonomous sections of the art community. To explain, unlike museum and large-scale galleries, which had powerful boards of trustees before whom they would have to report, individual artists and alternative organisations were relatively unaccountable for their creative activities. Furthermore, alternative organisations were specifically problematic to the Republicans given their ‘not-for-profit’ aims, often with informal, non-hierarchical organisational structures. The political right had little empathy with this business model, since it fell outside of the formal, bureaucratised organisational structures that the Republicans were endorsing at that time. Carole S. Vance explains that, with their not-for-profit status, these “*organizations had fewer obligations to be cautious; they had no need to mount traditional repertory, to please the subscribers or to expand already gigantic cultural edifices*”<sup>85</sup> So, in effect, alternative organisations represented the antithesis of Reagan’s vision for the arts.

Similar was true of individual artists, particularly those who chose to operate in the alternative sector. In New York alone, significant artists had emerged out of the alternative sector comprising a diverse range of practices and interests, including the work of John Ahearn, Karen Finley, David Hammons, Jenny Holzer, Faith Ringgold, Kiki Smith and David Wojnarowicz, amongst many others.<sup>86</sup> Artists involved within the sector were not necessarily commercially represented, and were, therefore, not contractually tied to any one institution. Vance continues:

*“... and as for individual artists, once they received their grants, there was no other force – museum, curator or state art agency – to monitor or moderate the content of their work.”*<sup>87</sup>

To a degree, the relative freedom from the financial pressures of the commercial sector did allow at least the semblance of autonomy for both alternative organisations and

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., Wallis, p.176

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., Yenawine, p.10

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., Vance, ‘Reagan’s Revenge’, p.53

<sup>86</sup> It is worth noting that for certain artists the alternative sector inevitably came to represent a ‘stepping stone’ an environment in which to establish their reputation in their progression towards commercial gallery representation.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., Vance, ‘Reagan’s Revenge’, p.53

individual artists. However, Reagan's funding cuts highlight the financial vulnerability of both these groups. Arguably, whilst at this point many artists and alternative organisations maintained relative creative and contractual autonomy, financially the same is not necessarily true.

#### 4.4 RESTRUCTURING THE NEA

Continuous with his funding cuts, the next step in Reagan's reforms was to restructure the NEA. Part of Reagan's strategy was to increase the numbers of conservative personnel into key positions within the agency, beginning with Frank Hodsoll as its Chair in 1981.<sup>88</sup> Hodsoll's appointment was notable largely because of his inexperience of arts administration. He came directly from the White House, where he was previously the Deputy White House Chief of Staff. As a keen supporter of Reagan's reforms, Hodsoll included amongst his priorities the encouragement of partnership between the arts and the private sector, through increased corporate sponsorship and private donations to the arts. Hodsoll was particularly candid about declaring a political affinity with Reagan stating, "*Needless to say, I would not be here if I did not fully sympathize with what the President is trying to do.*"<sup>89</sup> Hodsoll went on to make further personnel changes, surrounding himself with more supporters of Reagan's policies; including Ruth Berenson as his Associate Deputy Chairperson for Programs. Berenson had been an art critic for the right-wing journal *National Review*. She made clear her agenda from the outset, ominously stating that, "*the conservative part of our culture has not been represented at all.*"<sup>90</sup> After Berenson's appointment, Reagan himself made further conservative selections; for example, critic Samuel Lipman and painter Helen Frankenthaler – this time to the NEA's advisory body, the National Council on the Arts, which surveys NEA grants and policy.<sup>91</sup> This move, of effectively shifting the composition of the NEA from Democrat to Republican, liberal to conservative, was key to Reagan's planned restructuring.

One distinguishing factor of Hodsoll's time in office, was his particularly 'hands on' approach to his role as Chair, especially with regard to the allocation of grants. Historically, the NEA's Chair allowed the appropriate expert 'peer panels' and National Council the liberty of having the final decision on whether or not to award a grant. In an unprecedented move, Hodsoll revoked that decision-making power and

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<sup>88</sup> Hodsoll was Chair of the NEA between 1981 and 1989.

<sup>89</sup> Frank Hodsoll, at hearing held before the Committee on Labor and Human Resources United States Senate, 97<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, 6<sup>th</sup> November 1981, p.26. Ibid., Wu, p.72

<sup>90</sup> C.H.Simonds, 'Amounting to Something', *National Review*, August 20, 1981, pp.1025-26. Ibid., Vance, 'Reagan's Revenge', p.51

<sup>91</sup> Samuel Lipman was also publisher of the right-wing journal, the *New Criterion*. Frankenthaler was an opponent of the work of Mapplethorpe and Serrano, who argued that the NEA had 'lost art' "*in the guise of endorsing experimentation.*" See, Helen Frankenthaler's 'Did We Spawn a Monster?', *New York Times*, July 1989, published in *The Culture Wars*, p.64

exercised the right to veto decisions made by the peer panel or National Council.<sup>92</sup> Ruth Berenson played a key role in selecting potentially ‘problematic’ applications that might need the Chair’s attention. During his first year in office, Hodsoll queried 316 of 5727 grants that had already been approved by peer panels. Of the 316 grant applications, Hodsoll succeeded in getting 15 rejected by the National Council. In the case of a further 5, however, Hodsoll simply overruled the National Council’s support.<sup>93</sup>

What was notable in Hodsoll’s rejections was the level of distinguished and high profile practitioners included on his reject list. For example, an application for Jenny Holzer’s *Sign on a Truck* (1986),<sup>94</sup> a lightwork planned for Lafayette Park, Washington DC; also, one for an artists and critics forum including Hans Haacke, Lucy Lippard, Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler (1983).<sup>95</sup> Such prominent grant rejections were undoubtedly intended to send out a warning signal to the art community. However, these rejections were unpopular, resulting in bad press and opposition from those remaining Democrats on the National Council, as well as from the art community. In subsequent years, Hodsoll would relax his right to veto.

#### 4.5 PRIVATISATION

As I have explained, the American arts funding system in America has its roots in philanthropic giving. So, with regard to the privatisation of the arts, ‘the private’ is already implicit to the existence of that system. However, despite the NEA’s governing rules restricting its contribution to a maximum of 50% of any projects overall budget, the Republicans regarded this figure as too high, and a disincentive to potential private giving and corporate sponsorship.

As a result, Reagan sought to increase financial involvement in the publicly funded art sector from both private (trusts, foundations and individuals) and corporate (business) sources – or ‘partnerships’ as they have euphemistically come to be known. George Yudice has observed, this particular notion of partnership “*blurs the boundary between public and private*” rather than doing away with state support entirely.<sup>96</sup> This blurring of boundaries has had a profound effect on the delivery of art within the public sector. The issue of privatisation does not limit itself to the funding of an organisation. There is a distinct possibility that the public organisation may be encouraged to also adopt a commercial business model and, ultimately, the associated

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<sup>92</sup> For an in depth account of Hodsoll’s time in office see, *The National Endowment for the Arts Under Frank Hodsoll*, *ibid.*, Wu, p.70-78.

<sup>93</sup> Catherine Lord, President’s ‘Man: The Arts Endowment Under Hodsoll’, *Afterimage*, v.11 #7, February 1983, p.3-4

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, Lord, p.3

<sup>95</sup> ‘Editorial’, *New Art Examiner*, January 1987, p.5

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, Yudice, p. 293



concerns – such as profitability, expansion, merchandising, etc. In some instances, this certainly benefits the organisation. Consider, for example, how certain public galleries and museums embraced corporatisation at this time. During the 1980s, under the directorship of Tom Armstrong, the Whitney Museum of American Art opened four branches in the headquarters of multinationals (including tobacco conglomerate Phillip Morris Companies). An increase in corporate funding helped the museum stage exhibitions that were more ambitious. This, in turn, raised the Whitney's profile, significantly increasing museum audience figures from 231,654 (1974-5) to 532,333 (1983-4).<sup>97</sup> However, in certain instances the merging of public and private creates an ideological conflict. One such instance occurs in the Republicans dealings with the alternative organisation sector.

One of Frank Hodsoll's schemes was to encourage alternative spaces, in particular, to earn income through the sale of artists' work. The federal support of these non-profit making, politically motivated organisations represented an area of key interest for Reagan. So, with the assistance of Benny Andrews, a respected artist and Hodsoll appointed director of the NEA Visual Arts Program, efforts were taken to make alternative spaces more financially viable.<sup>98</sup> Importantly, Andrews exposed a potential fault line in the relationship between artists and the alternative spaces, asserting that:

*"The people who set up the alternative spaces, they kept a certain attitude, an anti-commercial attitude. It's built in—they don't want to sell work. But most artists don't see anything wrong with selling."*<sup>99</sup>

This point is supported by the fact that sections of the alternative community had, in fact, become a conduit for certain artists to enter the commercial sector. Conversely, many alternative organisations were largely run 'by artists for artists' as a means of exercising some control over the presentation, contextualisation and dissemination of their work; and, apparently, a means of bypassing the commercial system. For such enterprises, with their not-for-profit status, any move to make a profit through sales was inherently antithetical to their ideology. Despite the worthy objectives from the alternatives, Andrews' comments do highlight that certain sections of the alternative community were not entirely in-step with the needs of individual artists.

Reagan's efforts to privatise alternative organisations failed. After much protest and little financial success, the Republicans eventually dropped the project to privatise alternative spaces.<sup>100</sup> Equally, Reagan's budgetary cuts and Hodsoll's grant rejections

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., Wu, p.136

<sup>98</sup> Interestingly, from the late 1960s, Andrews had been a key member of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, an alternative organisation that had protested vehemently against for the inclusion of black artists and curators in major museums such as the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in Gerald Mazarati, 'The Arts Endowments in Transition', *Art in America*, v.71 #3, March 1983, p.13

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., Wallis, p.172-3

were the least successful aspects of the political right's attempts to reform the NEA. The Republicans had failed to win public support since the arts budget constituted a minuscule part of the overall federal budget. Equally, the Republicans simultaneous calls of elitism and populism within contemporary art sent out a mixed message to the public.

However, despite the limited success of Reagan's reforms, they did impact greatly on the culture of the publicly funded arts in America. They engendered a more formal, bureaucratised funding system in which both artists and organisations were under greater scrutiny. Ultimately, they were more accountable to the NEA – at least for the quality, content and marketing of their projects – via certain conditions of their funding. Goldbard reiterates this point in her account of the process of bureaucratisation and increased accountability in the alternative sector, noting that:

*“Artist’s organizations were pushed to conform to corporate models of accountability and corporate styles of doing business. Thus, within groups of previously controlled by artist doing for themselves, an internal class system was created, stocked with administrators, development, and so on.”*<sup>101</sup>

It is worth considering that for many in the alternative community federal funding had represented a means of attaining *“freedom from the commodification of art.”*<sup>102</sup> I would argue that such funding certainly provided a ‘buffer zone’ between the needs of the alternative community and the demands of the commercial sector, if not total separation. However, what cannot be contested is that if the government responsible for administering state subsidy *“institutionalizes commercial values”*<sup>103</sup> within the public sector, the ideological standing of that funding surely alters for all involved. My concern is that the alternative sector (particularly those for whom the market was not an objective) may not have adequately recognised this shift; nor adapted their activities accordingly.

The increased accountability that came with privatisation, which Goldbard describes, continued into the Bush era. Via George Bush's arts policy and its destructive outcome on the alternative sector, I want to now consider accountability as an example of self-regulation and a key aspect of governmentality. And, to specifically consider how, given the appropriate conditions, self-regulation can escalate into self-censorship.

## **5.0 BUSH & THE ARTS**

George Bush's election in 1989 saw an escalation in the opposition to federal funding of the arts that marked the beginning of the so-called ‘Culture Wars’. It was during this

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., Goldbard, p.194

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., Goldbard, p.184

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., Goldbard, p.184

period that the political right began to exercise an overt use of moralistic rhetoric in its opposition to the NEA. So, where previously issues such as abortion or AIDS education had been labelled as ‘anti-Christian’, ‘anti-family’ and ultimately, ‘anti-American’, it was contemporary art that became the target of such emotive language.<sup>104</sup> Significantly, a highly effective, if opportunistic, coalition of activist groups and individuals drawn from the political and Christian right – including Morality in the Media, the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family and the American Family Association – began to mobilise against the federal funding of contemporary art. The most disturbing aspect of this offensive was that in controlling what the NEA funded, the conservative right effectively sought to control the content of contemporary art in America.

Early on in his presidency, George Bush had taken a relatively moderate, non-interventionist stance on the arts, eager not to replicate the unpopular attempts by Reagan to defund and restructure the NEA. When questioned as to his views on federal funding of so-called ‘obscene’ art,<sup>105</sup> Bush stated that he would rather the NEA’s Chair handle the issue than “*risk...getting the Federal Government into telling every artist what he or she can paint or how he or she might express themselves.*”<sup>106</sup>

So, at this time, the arts were not a presidential priority. Whilst never going as far as reversing Reagan’s budgetary restrictions, Bush made the symbolic gesture of increasing the NEA budget of \$170 million allocated under Reagan by an additional \$4 million.<sup>107</sup> However, given that the agency had effectively undergone a budgetary ‘freeze’ during the Reagan administration, this figure fell far short of the total budget of \$223.9 million that arts advocates recommended would be necessary to restore the NEA to its 1981 spending levels.<sup>108</sup> It was at this time that NEA Chair Frank Hodsoll resigned to be replaced by John E. Frohnmyer, a lawyer and member of the Oregon State Arts Commission. Whilst largely unknown to the arts community, Frohnmyer was an ambitious Bush supporter who had been notably active in the 1988 presidential campaign.

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<sup>104</sup> Patrick Buchanan, ‘How Can We Clean Up Our Art Act?’, *Washington Post*, June 1989, *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, p. 226

<sup>105</sup> Carole S. Vance, ‘Misunderstanding Obscenity’, *Art in America*, v.78 May 90, p.49-50. In this instance, the reference to ‘obscene’ art could be described broadly as any work depicting the naked body, or that is of a sexual nature; including homoerotic or sadomasochistic acts. However, the legal definition of obscenity in America is very specific and is based on what is known as the Miller ruling. At this time, there was no common definition in use regarding what constituted obscene art, despite this legal definition. I will to this issue in my discussion of the Corcoran Gallery.

<sup>106</sup> George Bush press conference March 23, 1990, quoted in Brian Wallis, ‘Bush’s Compromise: A Newer Form of Censorship?’, *Art in America*, v. 78, November 1990, p.59

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, Brookman and Singer, p.361

<sup>108</sup> Walter Robinson, ‘Election ‘88 and the Arts’, *Art in America*, v. 76 #11, November 1988, p.216

## 5.1 THE CULTURE WARS

Foucault has observed that within a governmental regime, the downward, trajectory of power forms the basis of what we call ‘policing’. However, as I will explain over this survey of the George Bush’s implementation of arts policy, the *upward* trajectory of power that concerns regulation of the self equally infers a notion of policing, as may occur in instances of self-censorship, for example.

Now, there was an eight-month interval between Frank Hodsoll’s departure and John Frohnmayr’s appointment. During this period, conservative Republicans seized the opportunity to mount an onslaught of unprecedented severity upon the NEA that was to launch to the Culture Wars. In early 1989, a conflict erupted between conservative politicians and activists against liberal politicians and the art community over the federal budget and reauthorization of the NEA.<sup>109</sup> The conflict centred on two separate art exhibitions, one featuring the work of Andres Serrano, the other, that of Robert Mapplethorpe. The exhibitions were the recipients of federal funds amounting to \$45,000 in total. Conservatives inside and outside of Congress had branded both artists’ work ‘obscene’.

The two basic positions emerging from this conflict can be summarised as follows. The liberal left argued that NEA restrictions on the content of artworks, on whatever grounds, amounted to an infringement of the 1st Amendment right to freedom of expression. The conservative right contested that it was the duty of Congress to spend taxpayers’ money responsibly. They also regarded the funding of provocative art – essentially, work that was often politically motivated; particularly if it dealt with sexuality, gender or AIDS, for example – as a misuse of federal money. To reiterate, such work, through its insistence on heterogeneity, was unacceptable to the conservative right since it challenged the fundamental values of Republicanism, which sought to conflate the specificities of identity under the rubric of ‘the family’.<sup>110</sup> In fact, even potential conflict within the family structure – between individual family members – is homogenised under this rubric. For instance, the distinction between the needs of the mother compared with those of the child. Or as Carole Vance highlights in American anti-abortion rhetoric, the symbol of the foetus takes precedence over that of the woman.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Every five years the NEA has to be reauthorized by Congress in order to continue to function as a government agency. If the NEA is not operating in accordance with the objectives of Congress, then Congress ultimately has the power to withhold reauthorization effectively abolishing the NEA.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., Fox

<sup>111</sup> Carole S. Vance, ‘The War on Culture’, *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Change America*, eds. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, Philip Yenawine, New York University Press, 1999, p.230

In May of 1989, the Republican Senator Alfonse D'Amato brought a reproduction of Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) – a 60x40", colour photograph of a crucifix made from plastic and wood that is submerged in the artist's urine – to the attention of Senate. Rev. Donald Wildmon of the Christian, right wing, American Family Association had, in turn, brought the work of art to his attention [Fig. 13].

It is worth noting that Serrano had produced *Piss Christ* unsubsidized. In 1988, the South Eastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA), which administered Awards in the Visual Arts (AVA), gave Serrano an award of \$15,000. SECCA then toured an exhibition of ten AVA recipient artists chosen in that year. This exhibition received negative attention whilst on tour in Virginia during 1989. The exhibition, at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, included a print of *Piss Christ*; Serrano also gave an artist's talk. It was in this context that Serrano and his work came to the attention of Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association.<sup>112</sup> Wildmon had campaigned against this work since its exhibition earlier that year.<sup>113</sup> D'Amato denounced Serrano's work as "*a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity.*"<sup>114</sup> Senators' subsequently applied pressure to Hugh Southern, acting Chair of the NEA, to account for the grant allocation procedure that funded an artist's work that was allegedly "*undeserving of any recognition whatsoever.*"<sup>115</sup> Of course, the Republicans were not simply out to banish provocative contemporary art, per se. They just did not want it receiving federal funding, as these comments by Republican Representative Dick Armey highlight:

*"I clearly know offensive art when I see it...there ought to be a way for the endowment to establish procedures where they can clearly deny funding for art like that. The arts do serve a role of probing the frontiers, but I would say let that be funded from the private sector."*<sup>116</sup>

For Armey, the issue was one of relieving the American taxpayer of funding provocative art. However, as I have noted, it was the alternative sector rather than the commercial that was primarily nurturing the type of provocative artwork that was causing the furore. Armey remains oblivious to the fact that much of the work funded by the NEA, via artists' fellowships and grants to alternative organisations etc, was neither necessarily commercially viable nor necessarily appealing to the commercial sector. Ironically, Laura Trippi, then curator at New York's New Museum, points out

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<sup>112</sup> Virginia Nimarkoh, *Correspondence with Julie Ault*, June 2005

<sup>113</sup> The American Family Association states as its aim to represent and stand for "*traditional family values, focusing primarily on the influence of television and other media – including pornography – on our society.*" See, <http://www.afa.net/about.asp>

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., Vance, 'War on Culture', p.222

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., Vance, 'War on Culture', p.222

<sup>116</sup> Armey, quoted in 'Art on the Firing Line', Grace Glueck, *New York Times*, July 9 1989. Ibid., *Culture Wars*, p.59

that the negative publicity surrounding contemporary art was, in fact, damaging its relationship with corporate and private funders. She states that:

*“...even with funders still committed to the project, we’re finding a lot of caution and concern. We’ve had to give a lot more detailed information about any political or sexual content. Everything’s been scrutinized to an extent that’s unprecedented.”*<sup>117</sup>

So, the issue of increased accountability now extended across both public and private funders. By summer of 1989, the situation had significantly worsened. By now, conservative members of Congress had singled out Robert Mapplethorpe, as well as Serrano as unworthy of federal support. Right-wing opponents of the NEA, such as TV evangelist Pat Robertson of the Christian Coalition, were joining forces with politicians to discredit the government agency. The increasingly aggressive attacks on contemporary art were spreading to the mainstream press, which this editorial from the *Washington Times* exemplifies, stating that, “America’s freeloading artistic establishment are furious because taxpayers are getting bored with picking up the check.”<sup>118</sup> Patrick Buchanan, ex-communications director under Reagan, was quick to use his columns in the nationally syndicated *New Criterion* and *New York Post* to lambaste federal funding of contemporary art, at one point writing:

*“What is to be done? We can defund the poisoners of cultures, the polluters of art; we can sweep up the debris that passes for modern art outside so many public buildings; we can discredit self-anointed critics who have forfeited our trust.”*<sup>119</sup>

Amid this climate of hyperbolic rhetoric and surging hostility towards contemporary art, a retrospective of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe was due to be shown at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC. The exhibition was particularly resonant since the artist had died in March of the same year. However, the gallery’s director, Christina Orr-Hall pre-emptively cancelled the exhibition. *Perfect Moment* featured a range from Mapplethorpe’s oeuvre including formal portraits and floral arrangements [Fig. 14]. However, the inclusion of sexually provocative photographs of children, plus homoerotic and sado-masochistic imagery from his *X Portfolio* particularly caused offence. In the days running up to show’s cancellation, Representative Richard Armey had raised the photographs as an issue in Congress, criticising NEA support of the work and, subsequently, lobbying over 100 members of Congress to sign a letter of complaint to the NEA.<sup>120</sup> The reasons behind the Corcoran’s cancellation were ambiguous – some argued that the gallery was evidently fearful that the exhibition

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<sup>117</sup> Quoted by C. Carr, ‘War on Art’, *Village Voice*, June 5<sup>th</sup> 1990. Ibid., *Culture Wars*, p.231

<sup>118</sup> Editorial, ‘Urine the Money’, *Washington Times*, September 14 1989. Ibid., *Culture Wars*, p.103

<sup>119</sup> Patrick Buchanan, ‘Jesse Helms’ Valiant War Against Filth in the Arts’, *New York Post*, August 2 1989, p.23

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., Brookman and Singer, p344

would further denigrate the NEA in the eyes of its congressional opponents.<sup>121</sup> Others suggested that the gallery feared unfavourable media and political attention – despite the same work having successfully and uneventfully shown at venues in Philadelphia and Chicago respectively.<sup>122</sup> The Corcoran was one of eight galleries scheduled to show the touring exhibition, and the only one to cancel.

Rather than quell media and political interest, the Corcoran's action fuelled debate and criticism from within the art community, spawning numerous articles in both the art and mainstream press. The Corcoran's decision to cancel the Mapplethorpe exhibition is particularly troubling since it was not the initiating venue for the exhibition, nor had it raised NEA funds for the work, nor had the Corcoran itself come under any direct criticism up until this point. The Corcoran's actions had serious ramifications; sending out a message to the conservative right that art organisations would capitulate to indirect political pressure. It also set a precedent in terms of cancelling projects because of their content. The Corcoran incident raises the issue of self-censorship, which I will return to in my conclusion of this chapter.

The political furore continued into autumn, with Republican Senator for North Carolina Jesse Helms entering the fray. Helms, a sympathiser of the American Family Association, made a proposal to Congress to cut the NEA's visual arts budget by \$400,000. Also that it cease to fund the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art and the Philadelphia ICA, the organisations responsible for Mapplethorpe and Serrano exhibitions respectively. Most significantly, Helms proposed that the NEA should have the power to refuse funding to future projects they might be consider "*indecent or obscene*."<sup>123</sup> This proposal came to be known as the Helms Amendment and would be extremely influential to the outcome of these events.

To recap, in 1989 the NEA's five-yearly reauthorization was up for consideration by Congress. Both President Bush and NEA Chair John Frohnmayr had initially supported a reauthorization with no congressional restrictions. But given the political and media furore surrounding so-called obscene art, the Helms Amendment; not to mention the approaching mid-term elections, Bush was under pressure from moderates in Congress, such as Republican Representative Paul Henry, to find some kind of compromise position that would satisfy both liberals and conservatives. Since the federal budget made up a minuscule amount of overall federal expenditure and had not previously been a priority as far as Bush was concerned, the various arts scandals were

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., Baker, p.2

<sup>122</sup> Joshua P. Smith, 'Why the Corcoran Made a Big Mistake', *Washington Post*, June 18 1989, in *Culture Wars*, p.37

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., Vance, 'Misunderstanding Obscenity', p.49

attracting disproportionately high, public attention.<sup>124</sup> Any compromise measures were therefore an issue of political damage limitation for Bush. By October 1989, Congress granted the NEA its reauthorization with the following restrictions. (It is worth noting the proximity of these measures to those outlined above in the Helms Amendment):

- A reduction of the 1990 NEA budgets by \$45,000; the exact amount awarded to the Serrano and Mapplethorpe exhibitions.
- A withdrawal of NEA funding from the South Eastern Center for Contemporary Art, which had awarded Serrano. A cut in NEA funding to the Philadelphia ICA of \$25,000 the organisers of the Mapplethorpe show. Both organisations were placed under a year's probation.
- The forbidding of the NEA to fund 'obscene' art using the criteria of the 1973 Supreme Court case Miller versus California. Plus, a ruling that any grant recipient convicted of obscenity or child pornography would be expected to repay their award.
- Increased accountability to Congress on the part of the NEA's expert peer panels and National Council.

Works by Serrano and Mapplethorpe had provoked intense political and media interest; and, certain conservative Republicans, such as Representative Dana Rohrabacher, were lobbying for the total abolition of the NEA. Consequently, the restrictions government finally implemented seemed relatively lenient.<sup>125</sup> Yet, this was the first time that Congress had made content restrictions on what the NEA could fund.<sup>126</sup> Also, via its National Council and expert peer panels, the NEA would be more accountable to Congress than ever before. The persistent onslaught on the NEA administration and budget that began with Reagan continued under Bush. The aim was surely to diminish the political power of this government agency after years of both Republican and Democrat support. Consequently, George Yudice argues there has been a "*change in the communicative or symbolic function*" of the NEA.<sup>127</sup> I think that Yudice is referring to a shift in public perception of the NEA's role, from one of 'nurturing' the arts during the 1970s, to one of 'policing' the arts by the end of the 1980s. And, as the 1989 reauthorization restrictions make clear; if the NEA was to police the art community, then Congress was, in turn, to police the NEA.

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<sup>124</sup> For example, in the summer of 1989, NEA Chair John Frohnmayer vetoed grants by four performance artists, because of the 'political' content of their work. The artists, Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, John Fleck and Tim Miller, came to be known to as the 'NEA 4'. The NEA refused the artists the right to appeal the decision not to fund them. Subsequently, the artists sued the NEA citing a breach of the First Amendment. In 1991, the artists won their case on the grounds that the NEA decision was unconstitutional.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., Wallis, p.59

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., Brookman and Singer, p.348

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., Yudice, p.288



Yudice highlights the bureaucratisation of publicly funded art evident in increased accountability to the NEA through its grant application and monitoring procedures. This, he contends, relates directly to the commercial business structures and objectives which alternative organisations were encouraged to adopt under Frank Hodson in the early 1980s. It is possible to see a continuation of this process of increased accountability in the events surrounding the Culture Wars, where publicly funded art became even more accountable – with regard to its content – not only to the NEA, but also to the mainstream press and media.

My concern here is how three successive Republican administrations also impacted on the ‘communicative or symbolic function’ of the artist and, indeed, the gallery. To my mind, during this period, there is a symbolic shift from that of the artist or gallery as ‘creator’ to one of the artist or gallery as ‘advocate’. In conclusion, and with regard to the idea of the ‘advocate’, I want to further consider the implications of the relationship between governmentality, self-censorship and accountability.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Foucault points out that a key aspect of governmentality is the use of “*laws themselves as tactics – to arrange things in such a way that, through a certain number of means, such and such ends may be achieved.*”<sup>128</sup> During the Culture Wars the conservative right’s moralistic use of symbolic rhetoric as a means of assaulting the NEA – and in turn, contemporary art – came to the fore. I want to consider how a particularly non-specific idea of ‘obscenity’ was used to effectively control the creative output of the Corcoran Gallery. As I have already outlined, the use of symbolism – such as ‘the family’, ‘the decent tax payer’, etc – became something of a standard amongst the Republicans from the early 1980s onwards. The conservative right could articulate this symbolism both offensively and defensively. We see an offensive articulation in, say, the promotion of so-called ‘family values’ as a social objective, something to which all members of society should apparently aspire. A defensive use of the same symbolism occurs, for example, in the conservative right’s negative stance on both abortion and AIDS education or its criticism of contemporary art during the Culture Wars – in each instance the sanctity of ‘the family’ is evidently threatened by the existence of such issues. Carole Vance describes the process:

*“In moral campaigns, fundamentalists select a negative symbol which is highly arousing to their own constituency, and which is difficult or problematic for their opponents to defend. The symbol, often taken out of*

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., Foucault, p.95

*context, and always denying the possibility of irony or multiple interpretations, is waved like a red flag before their constituents.*"<sup>129</sup>

So for instance, in the case of the Mapplethorpe work – specifically the homoerotic and sexually explicit *X Portfolio* – the symbol propagated by the conservative right was one of the ‘homosexual-artist-as-sexual-deviant’ – an interpretation that was clearly at odds with the Republicans notion of ‘family’. Reproductions of Mapplethorpe’s photographs were passed around by hand in Congress – certainly out of the context in which they were meant to be shown. And, finally, accompanied by literal and reductive descriptions of the images such as, “*One man urinating in the mouth of another*” by Pat Robertson of the Christian Coalition.<sup>130</sup> Or “*a photograph of a man crouched over, his penis on a block, named ‘Mr 10 1/2’*” quoted within an American Family Association press release [Fig. 15].<sup>131</sup>

The Corcoran’s self-regulating response to this manifestation of governmentality was not to defend the work, but to cancel the Mapplethorpe exhibition. As a ‘tactic’, Carole Vance argues that the conservative right intentionally used a term such as ‘obscenity’ in its broadest possible sense rather than employing its legal definition. This allowed the opponents of contemporary art the opportunity to pick on any work of art they wanted that might depict, say, nudity and call it obscene. This use of vague, yet emotive language can be traced back to the Reagan era. Consider for example, how Dennis Fox criticised the Reagan administration’s failure to delimit a key term such as ‘the family’, even within its proposed family policy. This, according to Fox, left potent symbols such as the ‘family’ open to ‘inherently subjective interpretations’.

Had the Republicans’ employed the legal definition of obscenity, it would have been virtually impossible to define any federally funded or publicly exhibited work of art as obscene. This is because within American law, under the Miller ruling,<sup>132</sup> a work must fulfil *all three* of the following criteria to qualify legally as obscene:

1. *The average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find the work, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interest.* [This means that the work is sexually arousing]
2. *The work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specified by the statute, and*
3. *The work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.*<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., Vance, ‘War on Culture’, p.224

<sup>130</sup> Christian Coalition advertisement, Washington Post, June 20 1990, *Culture Wars*, p.316

<sup>131</sup> American Family Association press release, published 25 July 1989, *Culture Wars*, p.71

<sup>132</sup> This ruling stems from the Supreme Court case, Miller vs. California, 1973.

<sup>133</sup> 413 US 15 at 24 (1973), quoted in Vance, ‘Misunderstanding Obscenity’, p.55

As Vance points out, by dint of the fact that the work Mapplethorpe and, indeed, Serrano had received federal funding implicitly confirms their 'serious artistic value'. The works then fail to meet all three criteria, which means that they cannot be considered obscene. The validation of a work of art by receipt of funding or even its selection for exhibition in a bona fide exhibition space would make it near impossible to argue obscenity, even if the work could be proven sexually arousing and offensive. Vance observes that if a standard (legal or otherwise) is not set, then limits of obscenity cannot surely be defined. In keeping the parameters of obscenity necessarily indeterminate, the conservative right were able to exercise greater control over the art community, engendering a climate of fear, self-doubt and eventually self-censorship. Vance notes of the Corcoran incident:

*"From the censor's viewpoint, self-censorship is an ideologue's dream, since it is cheap, self-policing and doesn't require large bureaucracy to administer. It is more effective than legal regulation, since fearful individuals, trying to stay out of trouble, anxiously elaborate the category of what its likely to be prohibited."*<sup>134</sup>

So, I am arguing that given the appropriate conditions, self-regulation can mutate into self-censorship. Foucault's governmentality surely suggests a mode of governance in which the citizens become complicit in their own social control, if not oppression. And it is here that the extreme implications of self-regulation become most explicit. The alternative sector optimistically proposed autonomy as a means of self-determination and, ultimately, empowerment. The Corcoran Gallery incident makes apparent that the governmental regime, with its emphasis on self-regulation, has the potential to subvert the empowering aspects of self-rule; eliciting a type of fearful self-scrutiny that insidiously disempowers.

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., Vance, 'Misunderstanding Obscenity', p.53

CHAPTER 1: ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 13: Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*, 1987



Fig. 14: Robert Mapplethorpe, *Patti Smith*, 1986



Fig. 15: Robert Mapplethorpe, *Mr 10½*, 1976

## CHAPTER 2

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 of this thesis examined the systemic implications of Foucault's governmentality, the organisational system that has its basis in the principle of self-regulation. Brian Wallis has made the link between publicly funded art in America, the use of government subsidy as a political tool and Foucault's idea of governmentality. The thesis extends this connection, with Chapter 1 specifically surveying the arts policies of Ronald Reagan and George Bush respectively. Chapter 1 considered the effects of these policies on the NEA; and in turn, sections of the American contemporary art community.

Foucault suggests both benign and aggressive applications to governmentality. The former applies to a well-run utopian society where each subject is accountable to its superiors and responsible for its subordinates respectively. From the latter, we derive the term 'to police'. It is my view that the Culture Wars embodied the harsher aspects of a governmental regime. As I maintain, self-regulation was instrumental in isolating and disempowering certain members of the artistic community. For example, Chapter 1 chronicled the Corcoran Gallery's pre-emptive cancellation of its Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition; and described how a governmental regime can in fact provide the conditions necessary for self-censorship. My concern here is whether under a governmental system, certain individuals and organisations can become complicit in their own oppression. My question then is, given governmentality's basis in interdependent power relations, whether complicity is inevitable for those subjugated by such regimes. And, if so, what are the implications for critique?

In this chapter, I consider how certain types of critique function within a governmental regime. I start by establishing Foucault's notion of critique, which he develops in relation to his concept of governmentality. Via his lecture, *What is Critique?* Foucault gives a complex and contradictory definition that at once encompasses and challenges oppositional ideas of critique.<sup>1</sup> There are three interrelated areas that I will address here. Specifically, Foucault describes critique as simultaneously dependent on power, paradoxical and reflexive. Firstly, with regard to critique's dependence on power, Foucault argues that critique emerges out of power, a response to dissatisfactions with prevalent power relations and, therefore, only exists because of that power. Secondly,

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What is Critique?' in, *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt, University of California Press, 1996, pp.382-398

concerning critique's inherent paradox, he describes critique as at once a "*partner and adversary*" of power.<sup>2</sup> According to Foucault, this is precisely because critique emerges from power in order to challenge it. Thirdly, Foucault outlines critique's reflexivity, which he locates in the "*Christian Pastoral*" tradition. This tradition, he argues, has its roots in self-reflective activities such as prayer and confession. For Foucault, this reflexivity promotes an intimate knowledge or engagement with the power relation being challenged. For example, Foucault locates the emergence of a critical impulse within the Church's interrogation of Scripture. Conversely, Foucault argues that the Christian Pastoral tradition also forms the basis of governmental self-regulation. So, how might such a contradictory notion of critique function in relation to contemporary art practice?

This chapter addresses the implications of Foucault's notion of governmentality and critique on an institutional level. I propose the idea of the Whitney Museum of American Art as a site of dissent, examining its complex relationship with the alternative community from the 1960s onwards. As I will outline, since the late '60s there have been varied and sustained attempts – from curators, critics and artists – to challenge the museum's traditionalist programming and acquisitions record. The Whitney annual and biennial exhibitions had acquired a reputation for favouring sellable kinds of painting and sculpture to the detriment of less sellable mediums such as photography, video and performance.<sup>3</sup> Equally, the museum had been criticised within the art press for its repeated selection of white, male artists to the exclusion of women artist and artists 'of colour.'<sup>4</sup> Arguably, the alternative community's sustained critique of the museum directly influenced the programming of the 1993 Whitney Biennial. This exhibition was something of an anomaly in the museum's conservative programming. It has been described as the "*politically correct Biennial*" due to the high proportion of artists from the alternative community; including many women artists, artists 'of colour', gay and lesbian artists; and an unprecedented proportion of politically motivated art.<sup>5</sup> Equally, the 1993 Whitney Biennial favoured previously underrepresented mediums such as performance, photography and video. I will return to discuss the relation between identity and artistic medium shortly.

There are two key issues I want to raise via this examination of the Whitney. The first concerns certain reformist strategies within the alternative sector, which initially sought to increase the quantity of so-called 'minority' artists and art forms, presented in public

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p.384

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Also, Jeff Rian, 'The 1993 Whitney Biennial: Everyone Loves a Fire', *Flash Art*, #170 May/June 1993 p.78-9

<sup>4</sup> Also, Maurice Berger, 'Are Art Museums Racist?', *Art in America*, v.78, September 1990, p.68-75. I will refer to each of these texts in detail later in this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Thelma Golden, 'What's White?', *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, New York: Harry N Abrams, 1993, p.35

galleries and museums. Eventually they challenged the terms on which underrepresented artists and art forms were exhibited. The second issue concerns the relation between artistic medium and identity, and the problematics of considering the relationship between art and politics in terms of a binary.

In Chapter 1, I examined the process of formalising and bureaucratising artistic practice that has occurred since the 1960s in America. Sandy Nairne has described this process as “*the institutionalizing of dissent.*”<sup>6</sup> Nairne’s concern is with the artists’ role in facilitating this process by creating their own ‘alternative’ spaces. Nairne charts the rise of alternative spaces during the 1960s with regard to their positive contribution to the art system in both the USA and Europe respectively. He notes how such spaces have altered and enriched the cultural terrain with their innovative practices; not only in terms of the range of work they presented, but also in how they selected works and engaged with their audiences. For example, in 1970, Jeffrey Lew set up an alternative space at 112 Greene Street in New York that provided an important outlet for conceptual, sculptural and performance related works. Practitioners who presented their work there include conceptual artist Vito Acconci, choreographer Trisha Brown and sculptor Gordon Matta-Clark. Lew’s space was known for its ad-hoc managerial approach; it, evidently, barely operated a curatorial programme. Artists could physically alter the fabric of the building; they dug up floors and took down walls as necessary. As Mary Delahoyd notes in her essay, *Seven Alternative Spaces*, Lew “*provided the site and generated the attitude for things to happen.*”<sup>7</sup> Delahoyd echoes Nairne in her praise of the alternatives contribution to contemporary art in America. Of 112 Greene Street, in particular, she states that:

“...virtually every major sculptor of the ‘70s encountered 112. Indeed its physical character may have impelled the sculpture of that decade on its free-wheeling experimental course.”<sup>8</sup>

For Nairne, the ‘institutionalizing of dissent’ refers to a “*cycle of frustration, energetic independence and, over a number of years, eventual institutionalization.*”<sup>9</sup> Nairne’s “cycle” describes how prevalent power relations caused the frustration that provoked alternative spaces into being. In turn, the same power relations facilitated the institutionalisation that caused the demise of many such spaces – under Reagan’s bureaucratising policies, for example.

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<sup>6</sup> Sandy Nairne, ‘The Institutionalization of Dissent,’ *Thinking About Exhibitions*, eds, Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, Routledge, 1996, p.387-410

<sup>7</sup> Mary Delahoyd, ‘Seven Alternative Spaces: A Chronicle,’ 1969-75, *Alternatives in Retrospect*, New York: The New Museum. Ibid., Nairne, p.397

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Delahoyd, ‘Seven Alternative Spaces,’ quoted in, *Alternative Art New York: 1965-85*, p.30

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Nairne, p. 388



In contrast to Nairne, Julie Ault offers a less deterministic view of the history of alternative practice. In her essay, *The Double Edge of History*, in which she reflects on Group Material's activities during the 1980s, she asserts:

*“Although some organizations that wanted to were unable to survive, many that are now gone were strategic and time-based by purpose (i.e. protest strategies are usually one step in processes advocating social change). Other endeavours have become institutionalized, incorporated into larger entities, reconfigured, and so on. But facts always have multiple meanings. For a less bleak panorama one should register the fact that critical alternative activities have altered accepted notions of possible functions and definitions of art.”<sup>10</sup>*

I think that both these positions are worthy of consideration here; whether, it is Nairne's view of inevitable institutionalisation or Ault's view of institutionalisation as potentially strategic. Where both agree is that the alternative sector's influence on the contemporary art system in general cannot be underestimated.

The scenario I outline here, regarding the demands the alternatives made on behalf of underrepresented artists and artistic mediums, brings me to my second issue for consideration. This pertains to a tendency within both art criticism and art practice of this period, to consider the relation between artistic medium and identity in terms of a binary. As I will outline, via a survey of critical responses to the 1993 Whitney Biennial, this binary generally manifests itself as a conflict between aesthetics and politics; form and content; or signifier and signified. It is my concern that such thinking negatively delimits not only how we understand identity to occur; but also, how we understand meaning to occur. To illustrate this point, I will return to Sandy Nairne's account of early years of the alternative community where he notes that:

*“The pioneers of alternate spaces usually had an immediate binding purpose that held them together over and above the desire to exhibit their art. This is most clear in spaces led by political interest, in the feminist or Black arts movement, or in spaces devoted to a single medium such as photography or video.”<sup>11</sup>*

Of course, there is truth in Nairne's distinction between “political interest” and artistic medium as defining factors for certain creative alliances that occurred within the alternative sector. However, my concern is that maintaining such divisions surely ignores the complex relation between these two factors. Consider, for example, the significance of time-based mediums such as performance art, video and photography, in challenging the notion of the artwork as commodity between during this period. It is clear that there can be specific motivations in using a particular medium that unite artists of distinct political, artistic or theoretical affiliations. Conversely, Philip Yenawine has contended that such mediums were increasing popular amongst artists

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<sup>10</sup> Julie Ault, 'The Double Edge of History', originally printed in *Springerin*, Bd.III, Heft 3, Fall 1997

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Nairne, p.390

making politically motivated work at this time.<sup>12</sup> Basically, I am calling for a more complex understanding of the relation between aesthetics and politics; form and content; signifier and signified.

These issues are discussed at length in *The Politics of the Signifier* where Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss and Miwon Kwon critique the 1993 Whitney Biennial.<sup>13</sup> They highlight a tendency in contemporary art practice whereby certain practitioners have compromised the signifier (basically, 'the work') in favour of the signified – (in this case, specific political issues). Foster, Krauss and Kwon observe that this tendency is problematic for contemporary art practice. For example, Krauss specifically focuses on the work of art. She identifies an impatience, or a “*rush to the signified*” amongst certain artists’ works within the exhibition.<sup>14</sup> Krauss argues that by concentrating primarily on the political content of a work of art, both artists and critics give insufficient attention to political potential of the signifier. For Krauss, limiting the potential readings of a work of art in this way is “*profoundly unpolitical.*”<sup>15</sup>

Miwon Kwon considers the implications of this scenario concerning the artist’s relation to the institution. She extends Krauss’ point, observing that certain artists neglect the signifier “*in order to consolidate politically.*” This, Kwon argues, is a means of presenting a coherent political position that will be attractive to curators and critics. Given that much of the work that Kwon discusses addresses identity politics, she argues that the idea of ‘consolidating politically’ means that artists’ inevitably compromise the possibility of complex readings of identity. Ultimately, Kwon contends that a conflation occurs between the artist’s so-called ‘difference’ – race, gender, sexuality, etc – and a notion of the political. The issues that both Krauss and Kwon raise surely have serious implications for the efficacy of the kinds of politically motivated art I have described so far. But, equally, it is my view that the distinctions that both make between signifier and signified surely reiterate a binary notion of this relation.

The issues raised here bring me to consider Judith Butler’s notion of the “*signifying economy.*” In *Gender Trouble*, Butler examines the relation between gender and sexuality.<sup>16</sup> Specifically, her aim is to challenge a particular presumption evident within feminist theory of a heterosexual reading of gender.<sup>17</sup> Butler argues that this

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Yenawine, p.9

<sup>13</sup> ‘The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial,’ Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Silvia Kolbowski, Rosalind Krauss, Miwon Kwon, *October*, #66, 1993, p.3-27

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., ‘The Politics of the Signified,’ p.7

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., ‘The Politics of the Signified,’ p.6

<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York & London: Routledge, 1990

<sup>17</sup> Butler’s critique includes the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray. Ibid., Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Preface (1999), p.vii.

presumption limits the reading of gender to a binary that operates between “*received notions of masculinity and femininity*.”<sup>18</sup> According to Butler, the creation of a binary that comprises ‘masculinity versus femininity’ excludes the possibility of indeterminacy and ambiguity within gender; and potentially stigmatises minority experiences such as transsexuality and lesbianism. Butler identifies this binary as a “*signifying economy in which the masculine constitutes the closed circuit of signifier and signified*.”<sup>19</sup> For Butler, accepting this ‘economy’, even as the basis of critique, means accepting received notions of gender. She contends that this ultimately reiterates prevalent power relations. Butler warns that, “*feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion*.”<sup>20</sup>

My aim in using Butler here is not to privilege gender over identity per se, but to acknowledge that within certain critical practices which operate on a binary notion of power relations, there exists the potential to replicate the very power relations that were originally to be challenged. Butler identifies this tendency within feminist theory; Nairne makes a similar point concerning the “*phenomenon*” of the alternative community, of which he states that:

*“Whatever it’s pioneering and combatative origins this ‘phenomenon’ eventually reproduced many of the same relations of power and control as the museum and gallery system.”*<sup>21</sup>

Via my survey of Foucault’s notion of critique, it is evident that there is a paradoxical aspect to critique; that may indeed undermine the very attempts of challenging prevalent power relations. Within this paradoxical notion of critique, does Foucault also provide the model for a critical *modus operandi* that also allows for indeterminacy and ambiguity within identity?

## **2.0 SUMMARY OF FOUCAULT’S NOTION OF GOVERNMENTALITY**

I want start by briefly re-establishing the basic principles of Foucault’s governmentality, from which I can then outline his definition of critique. So, to summarise:

1. Foucault describes ‘the question of government’ as emerging out of shifts in Western society during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. He argues that the questions raised during this period concern “*how to be ruled, how strictly, by whom, to what end, by what methods, etc.*”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.vii

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.15

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Butler, *Gender Trouble* p.viii

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., Nairne, p.406

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Foucault, ‘Governmentality,’ p.88

2. Foucault's notes the general evolution of the 'question of government' involved a simultaneous drive within diverse disciplines concerning, for example: "...*how to govern the poor...how to govern a family... how to govern armies...cities, states, how to govern one's own body, how to govern one's own mind.*"<sup>23</sup>
3. Foucault states that before the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, power relations between the governed and those who govern were distinct and discontinuous. He states that the aim of governmentality is to establish continuity in the power relations of these two groups.<sup>24</sup> Governmentalisation led to the dismantling of feudal structures where power relations were relatively static. With governmentalisation emerges the potential for flexibility in these power relations – specifically, the upward and downward exercising of power.
4. One important distinction that Foucault identifies between feudal and governmental rule is the use of force. A feudal system could regularly employ force or impose laws as a direct means of social control. A governmental system, he claims, however, would more likely employ "*tactics rather than laws... even using laws themselves as tactics...*" to achieve a certain goal.<sup>25</sup>
5. Key to Foucault's governmentality, is the principle of self-regulation, which he links to "the Christian pastoral" tradition. This mode of 'governing souls' with its emphasis on self-reflection (evident in prayer and confession, for example) forms the basis of self-regulation.<sup>26</sup> Within a self-regulatory system, to govern others well, the individual must first learn how to govern him or herself.

## 2.1 FOUCAULT'S NOTION OF CRITIQUE

I will now outline Foucault's definition of critique, after which I will discuss aspects of Foucault's account of the evolution and characteristics of critique in relation to American alternative art practice.

In his 1978 lecture, *What is Critique?* Michel Foucault puts forward a historical and analytical account of the origins of critique; also, a provisional description of what it means in relation to governmental power relations.<sup>27</sup> With regard to providing a historical origin, Foucault explicitly links a notion of critique to the evolution of

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Foucault, 'What is Critique?,' p.384

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., Foucault, 'Governmentality,' p.91

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Foucault, 'Governmentality,' p.95

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Foucault, 'What is Critique?,' p.383

<sup>27</sup> Foucault's lecture was held at the Sorbonne, Paris, on 27th May 1978.

governmentalisation in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Foucault is not suggesting that all critique started in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, but that with the advent of governmentalisation there simultaneously occurred a particular “*critical attitude*” that sought to challenge it.<sup>28</sup> According to Foucault, the emergence of the question, ‘How to govern?’ “*cannot be dissociated from the question ‘How not to be governed?’*”<sup>29</sup> And this second question evidently relates to critique. It is important to stress that these two factors – governmentality and critique – have an intrinsic link, and evolve concurrently. I will return to this point shortly.

Analytically, these two questions initially appear to be the antithesis of each other. The relationship that Foucault proposes between the ‘How to govern?’ of governmentality, and the corresponding ‘How not to be governed?’ of critique, initially suggests an oppositional basis to this particular notion of critique. But, Foucault notes that the question, “How not to be governed?” is not concerned with totally rejecting power relations. The prospect of not being governed at all is never an option. As I have established, the governmental system is articulated via a network of interdependent power relations that incorporates every organisational entity including, the individual, the family, the school, the church, business and so on. Therefore, it is not possible to operate entirely outside of this network. In fact, if we take Foucault’s thesis to its logical conclusion, there is no ‘outside’ within which to operate. Foucault argues that the question “How not to be governed?” is more concerned with the *degree* of governing. He states that this question, in fact, concerns *interrogating* power relations rather than rejecting them. Foucault stresses that the question ‘How not to be governed?’ is preoccupied with:

*“How not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of these principles, in view of such objectives and by the of means such methods, not and like that, not by them?”*<sup>30</sup>

According to Foucault, it is the nature of this interrogation therefore, that forms the basis of modern Western notions of critique. Here, Foucault arrives at his preliminary definition of critique, what he refers to as: “*the art of not being governed so much.*”<sup>31</sup> He describes critique as an ‘art’ which surely suggests a potential use of tactics as a means of achieving a particular end, as in the ‘art of government.’ Beyond this initial and provisional definition, Foucault goes further to develop a notion of critique that is both complex and contradictory. There are three particular aspects I want to consider here.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, p.384

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, p.384

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, p.384

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, p.384

The first concerns the relation between critique and power. I have noted that historically Foucault has established a notion of critique emerging concurrent to governmentalisation. Accepting this account surely raises certain questions regarding the nature of critique's relation to power. For instance, if governmentality and critique emerge concurrently, do they operate on equal terms? Despite this simultaneous emergence, is critique a response to power? Is one contingent upon the other? Foucault describes the role of critique as necessarily subordinate to that of power. He argues that critique is an inherently supplementary activity; it is necessarily dependent on that which it criticises.<sup>32</sup> According to Foucault, critique "*appears destined, by nature, by function...to dispersion, to dependence, to pure heteronomy.*"<sup>33</sup> Whilst one can argue whether it would be feasible for power relations to exist without critique, the reverse is certainly not so. Foucault reiterates this point, stating "*critique only exists in relation with something other than itself.*"<sup>34</sup>

Secondly, Foucault proposes a paradoxical aspect to critique. With regard to its relation to power, Foucault describes critique as "*A counterpoint, ... at once partner and adversary to the arts of government.*"<sup>35</sup> Foucault does not elucidate much further what he means here. However, the idea of critique occupying simultaneously conflicting positions in relation to power is certainly a pertinent one. Foucault surely challenges the idea that critique is inherently oppositional or polemical, as his initial description suggests; and he surely presents a more complex relationship between critique and power. Foucault's statement regarding the partnership between governmentality and critique may also refer to their synchronous genealogy; that both questions emerge from the same critical impulse. It could be said, for instance, that the question 'How not to be governed?' is simply an extension of the initial question 'How to govern?' Or, even that the initial posing of the question 'How to govern?' is in itself a critique of the very idea of government. If critique is a partner of governmentality, does that mean that it somehow facilitates the exercising of power? Foucault's description of critique suggests that critique inadvertently reaffirms certain power relations through the act of criticising them; also, that such power relations are ubiquitous and contested at all times.

Thirdly, I am considering the notion of critique as a reflexive activity. Foucault links the history of European governmentalisation from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century onward with what he calls "*the Christian pastoral*" tradition.<sup>36</sup> He contends that before

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p.383

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p.383

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p.383

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p.384

<sup>36</sup> Foucault is at pains to note that this is but one theory of the origins of governmentality. Ibid., Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p.383

governmentalisation, subjects were ruled as an “*essentially religious practice linked to the authority of the church.*”<sup>37</sup> Within this model of governance, Scripture is an irrefutable truth. Foucault argues that via the doctrines of the Church the subject understands its role in society and its relation to power. He explains that the Christian pastoral promotes an organisation system whereby:

“...every individual whatever his age or status, from the beginning to the end of his life and down to the very details of his action, ought to be governed and ought to let himself be governed...be directed towards his salvation, by someone to whom he is bound in a total...relation of obedience.”<sup>38</sup>

As I have noted, fundamental to the Christian pastoral tradition is what Foucault refers to as the “*reflective technique*” (prayer, confession, etc) that is concerned with the “*direction of conscience.*”<sup>39</sup> And this reflective technique, with its focus on the individual comes to form the basis of self-regulation, a central principle of governmentality.

It is worth looking at how the issue of ‘reflection’ forms a fundamental aspect of Foucault’s notion of critique. To reiterate, the question of ‘How not to be governed?’ as it pertains to the Church concerns the veracity of Scripture. As with Foucault’s general model of critique, there is an interrogation of the meaning of Scripture at this time. According to Foucault, the Church’s critique of Christian pastoral governance concerned “*a question of what is authentic in Scripture, of what was actually written in Scripture, it was a question concerning the kind of truth Scripture tells.*”<sup>40</sup> And fundamental to this interrogation is “*a return to Scripture,*” to the actual text, in order to interrogate its parameters. This idea of a ‘return’ is certainly important because it locates a reflective or, perhaps, reflexive aspect at the heart of critique.<sup>41</sup> The critique is reflexive because it involves a dynamic between the Church and its rules. This issue of reflexivity surely suggests an intimate knowledge, or engagement, with that which is to be challenged as a necessary condition of critique. So, to recap: this reflective aspect of Christian pastoral governance with its emphasis on the ‘direction of conscience’ evidently forms the basis of governmentality; but equally, provides a fundamental aspect of critique.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, p.385

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, p.385

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, p.383

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, p.385

<sup>41</sup> I do not think that critique is automatically reflexive, as it may seem that I am arguing. But I do think, in this instance, that it is a more appropriate term than ‘reflective,’ which implies simply an inward looking. ‘Reflexive’ implies a consideration of the relation between the subject and the thing being challenged.

I want to briefly consider these three aspects of Foucault's definition of critique that I have outlined above as a means of contextualising the types of 'alternative' practice I discuss in Chapter 1. The aspects relate to:

- Critique's dependence on power
- Critique's reflexivity
- Critique's paradox

## 2.2 CRITIQUE'S DEPENDENCE ON POWER

Foucault describes the critique of prevalent power relations within contemporary Western society in terms of various oppositions. He lists the "*opposition to the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill...of administration over the ways people live*" and so on.<sup>42</sup> I am proposing that implicit within Foucault's list is an idea that critique is reactive, a response to historical power relations. The notion of critique as reactive is in keeping with Foucault's definition of critique as supplementary to power; and, ultimately, dependent. I want to consider the emergence of the alternative community in America relative to this idea of critique's dependence on power; but, also, to establish the parameters of their activities.

As I mention in Chapter 1, the alternative community emerged out of a culture of political activism in the 1960s and '70s. At this time, the socio-political climate in North America provided the catalyst for various sections of society to challenge the status quo. Such activism sought to contest a diverse range of issues including, the Vietnam War, women's liberation, black civil rights and so on. Consequently, certain formal and informal political coalitions emerged corresponding to issues such as feminism, race, sexuality, anti-capitalism, etc. As I will discuss in more detail, sections of the alternative community actively contested these same issues. In her essay, *Biting the Hand*, Lucy Lippard surveys the relationship between politically motivated artists and museums in New York from the 1960s onwards.<sup>43</sup> She highlights that museums became a target for political activism because as public institutions, they were generally perceived as more accountable than commercial galleries. And, therefore, according to Lippard, at least potentially "*likely to listen to the art community on ethical and political issues.*"<sup>44</sup> So, the museum became a site for various debates and demonstrations directly concerning a broad range of issues such as the War in Vietnam, and the political implications of certain forms of corporate financing. For

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<sup>42</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power,' *Power: The Essential Works of Foucault: 1954 - 1984*, v.3, ed. James D. Faubion, Penguin, 2000, p.329

<sup>43</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Biting the Hand: Artist and Museums in New York since 1969,' in *Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985*, ed. Julie Ault, New York: The Drawing Centre, 1997, pp.79-120

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., Lippard, 'Biting the Hand,' p.79



example, in 1970, via an open letter to the *New York Times*, the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC)<sup>45</sup> asked whether supporters of the Museum of Modern Art:

“...ever question the propriety of an esthetic [sic] institution which considers negligible the fact that much of its money comes from the profits of the Vietnam War, of South African Apartheid, of Latin American colonization.”<sup>46</sup>

Of course, the alternative community was not solely concerned with an activism that addressed world politics. There were issues that related specifically to artistic production that they also sought to challenge. One such challenge was an institutional orthodoxy relating to a particular notion of modernism, as espoused by Clement Greenberg, for example; and the associated values such as, technical expertise, authenticity, permanence and uniqueness within artistic production.<sup>47</sup> Artists responded to these aesthetic values by promoting practices that emphasised anti-elitism, ephemerality, reproduction and collaboration, for instance.<sup>48</sup> So, what Julie Ault calls the “*alternative structure*” – of spaces, funding, labour, etc – also provided the framework for the production and dissemination of art from a variety of different aesthetic and conceptual positions that were, in various ways, contesting the formal and conceptual demands of Greenberg’s modernism.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, Lucy Lippard recalls the diversity of early AWC meetings that included “*a number of minimal, conceptual, and Fluxus-related artists, along with politicized local mavericks.*”<sup>50</sup>

My aim here is not to establish a binary between aesthetic and political concerns. However, I want to argue that an insistent strain of modernism reified the formal abstraction of the signifier; and in the process, privileged form over content. My point is that the aesthetic values that this strain of modernism asserted surely have socio-political implications. To me, such formal constraints maintain a hierarchy of form over content, and over certain perspectives in art that do not subscribe to these constraints. Lucy Lippard reiterates this point in her essay, *Escape Attempts*, in which she chronicles her involvement in Conceptual Art practices during the 1960s and ‘70s, and specifically addresses the commodification of certain types of Conceptual Art. She observes that:

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<sup>45</sup> Art Workers' Coalition (active 1969-71) was a group of artists, filmmakers, writers, critics and museum workers who campaigned to make New York's museums more accountable both to artists and to society in general.

<sup>46</sup> 'Why MoMA is their Target,' *New York Times*, January 18<sup>th</sup> 1970, D24. Quoted in David Deitcher's 'Polarity Rules: Looking at Whitney Biennials, 1968-2000,' in *Alternative Art New York 1965-85*, p.203

<sup>47</sup> I am using the term modernism in relation to that described by Clement Greenberg in this essay, 'Modernist Painting.' Here Greenberg defines modernism essentially as “*the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself – not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.*” See, *Art in Theory 1900 -1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Blackwood Publishers Ltd, 1992, pp 755-760

<sup>48</sup> It is worth noting that, the alternatives critique of modernism has its antecedents in modernist practices such as Dada and Surrealism, for instance.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, Ault, p.14

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, Lippard, 'Biting the Hand,' p.84

“...art that is too specific, that names names, about politics, or place or anything, is not marketable until it is abstracted, generalized, defused.”<sup>51</sup>

The result is that certain artists remain the most collected, exhibited and written about, whilst others are ignored. Consequently, groups such as the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC)<sup>52</sup> and Women Artists in Revolution (WAR)<sup>53</sup> formed; and adopted activist strategies such as sit-ins, petitions, public meetings and boycotts, to raise awareness of exclusive museum programming practices. Over the course of this chapter, I want to consider the ramifications of such coalition building. Does it impact on how we read identity, for example?

Here, I have outlined a section of the alternative community's critique of the mainstream art world, and its relation to political activism in general. My aim has been to establish that the alternative community's critique incorporated social, political and aesthetic concerns, which arguably distinguished their activities from other forms of political activism. My point is that whether contesting social, political or aesthetic ground, sections of the alternative community were responding to abiding power relations.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, my understanding is that their actions were in keeping with Foucault's idea that critique is dependent on that which it criticises.

### 2.3 CRITIQUE'S REFLEXIVITY

Foucault describes critique as an interrogation of power relations that has its basis in the 'reflective techniques' of the Church. It is clear that the alternative community critiqued the art world of which they were part, but what I want to consider here is its capacity for self-critique.

In 1980, the art journal *Studio International* posed the following question to various artists, curators, writers, etc: “*Is the alternative space a true alternative?*” Ingrid Sischy, then editor of *Artforum*, made an important contribution with her initial response: “*Alternatives [sic] to what? to whom? and for whom?*”<sup>55</sup> Sischy's answer is pertinent because it destabilises the idea of the alternative sector as representing one half of a binary relation with the mainstream. She establishes a notion of heterogeneity, recognising the alternative sector as a plurality of diverse strategies, rather than a

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<sup>51</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Escape Attempts,' *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California Press, 1973, p. xxi

<sup>52</sup> Established in 1969, the BECC organised to improve the programming possibilities for the work of black artists and curators at museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney in New York.

<sup>53</sup> Established in 1969, WAR was an offshoot of the Art Workers' Coalition and aimed to improve inclusion for women artists.

<sup>54</sup> When I use the term 'mainstream' here, I am referring to the majority of American galleries, museums and other arts organisations – that are privately funded, profit making or that run along traditional hierarchical organisational structures.

<sup>55</sup> Ingrid Sischy, 'Is the Alternative Space a True Alternative?,' *Studio International*, v.196, #990, pp. 69-74, 1980

singular entity. Sischy continues with a barrage of questions, which highlight that the parameters of 'the alternative' are surely relative. She asks:

*"Is the New Museum an alternative to the Whitney? The Whitney to the Modern? The Modern to the Met? New York to Paris? ...Tribeca to Soho? The NEA to the Guggenheim Foundation? Would the Whitney be an alternative in Mississippi? In Glasgow?"*<sup>56</sup>

Sischy's provocative questions interrogate the symbolic significance of certain institutions, sources of funding, and geographic locations that are pertinent to the alternative and mainstream art world alike. Taken as a whole, her questions place each of these factors in a non-binary relation to each other. But Sischy's questions do not cease there. She goes further to query various criteria that exist under the rubric of 'alternative' that pertain to the market; the exhibiting of work; success, and so on. Again, she asks:

*"Are the criteria based on the content of the work? That it's sold or not sold or even unsaleable? Are the criteria based on what already existed? Is lateral or linear audience a concern? Are there still stars?"*<sup>57</sup>

Sischy is surely asking what it is that fundamentally distinguishes alternative practice from the mainstream. Implicit is a question concerning what criteria are used to judge artistic production, whether they are market led, or assessed on some other basis. Her insistent questions highlight a concern from within the sector over what constitutes 'the alternative' at this time. The fact that *Studio International* posed the initial question concerning the tenability of the alternative space reiterates this point. It is worth noting that Sischy's questions remained largely unresolved in 1980, despite the alternative sector having emerged during the late 1960s, which I would conclude, suggests that 'the alternative' as a nebulous and constantly evolving entity.

As I mention, Sischy's interrogation effectively destabilises distinct categories such as 'alternative' and 'mainstream'. And, if Sischy's line of inquiry suggests a nebulous quality to the alternative, then can the same be said of the mainstream? Does Sischy point to a more pragmatic assessment of the relation between the alternative and mainstream, that is less distinct than that professed by some within the alternative sector? If so, what are the implications for critique, given the certain oppositional claims of challenging the power relations between the alternative sector and the mainstream? This leads me to my next point regarding critique's inherent paradox.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., Sischy, 'Is the Alternative Space a True Alternative?', p.72

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., Sischy, 'Is the Alternative Space a True Alternative?', p.72

## 2.4 CRITIQUE'S PARADOX

Foucault has described critique as a “*partner and adversary*” of power; and, as such, has an inherently paradoxical nature. I want to consider this proposition regarding one particular aspect of the relationship between the alternative and the commercial sectors. In Chapter 1, I establish the ongoing problem for the alternative sector, of commercial galleries pilfering its artists and curators; and, in turn, individual artists and curators using the alternative sector as a means of entering the mainstream. As contributors to the *Studio International* survey of practitioners' views of alternative practice, artists Dottie Attie and Howardina Pindell, plus curator Jean E. Feinberg, discuss the problematics of this situation.

Arguably, a major challenge to the activities of the alternatives must be one of economics. Dottie Attie highlights the dilemma for artists working within the alternative sector. She notes that:

*The biggest advantage to an artist-run gallery...is that it allows the artist to show his/her work on her [sic] own terms – one has total control over what is shown and how. However, very little work is sold, so the artist is still economically dependent on outside sources.<sup>58</sup>*

Attie articulates that the issue for many artists (assuming, of course, that the opportunity presents itself) was whether to sacrifice the creative freedom that the alternative sector provided, for the potential economic stability of the commercial sector. However, the repercussions of this scenario have wider implications than the careers of individual artists. Even on the most pragmatic level, it is clear that an association with a commercially successful artist is a useful asset for any gallery or arts organisation. If an artist operating in the alternative sector were to become financially successful, and then leave to enter the commercial sector, the alternative spaces does not necessarily benefit from their investment in that artist regarding future income from funding, for example. So, whilst the individual artist and the commercial gallery might benefit from this situation, the alternative sector might well not.<sup>59</sup>

For some practitioners, the implications of the commercial sector's parasitic relationship with the alternatives threatened the very notion of alternative practice. Jean E. Feinberg argues that the survival of the alternative space primarily relies on the attitudes of its participating artists and curators. Feinberg contends that:

*“If the members of either group see the ‘alternative’ space as providing them with an ‘alternative’ route for success within the art establishment,*

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., Attie, ‘Is the Alternative Space a True Alternative?’, p.69

<sup>59</sup> Of course, some spaces operated specifically as venues for ‘up coming’ artists.

*which is often the case, then obviously the situation is not one of true alternative.*<sup>60</sup>

But is alternative practice simply an issue of attitude, of making an effort not to be co-opted? Feinberg's observations surely fail to take into account the complexity of the relationship between the alternatives and the mainstream. With regard to this, Howardina Pindell makes an important point concerning the emergence of the alternatives in relation to the commercial that corresponds to Foucault's description of the emergence of critique. She states that:

*"Alternate [sic] spaces have become, ironically, by default, an extension of the commercial system, partly because they developed due to the system's not absorbing everyone. The alternate structure grew in opposition to these omissions. And it is presumed that a truly alternative space must not be co-opted by the commercial system."*<sup>61</sup>

Pindell makes clear her position on the issue of co-optation. However, in stressing that the alternative sector evolved, in part, as a necessary response to prevalent art world power relations, she also establishes an intrinsic link between the alternative and the mainstream. As both Pindell and Feinberg make clear, within this notion of alternative exists two conflicting impulses; one that aims to challenge the elitist value systems of the mainstream, the other, that seeks to enter its ranks. It can be argued then, that the alternative sector is at once, 'partner and adversary' of the mainstream.

### **3.0 THE WHITNEY & DISSENT**

With regard to these issues, I want to examine the relationship between the alternative sector and the Whitney Museum of American Art in the years preceding the 1993 Whitney Biennial. In this section, I address the museum's problematic standing within certain sections of the art community; also, how the museum became a site for dissent. I specifically discuss the activities of two distinct artists groups, the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) and Group Material respectively. As I will describe, these two groups represent certain shifts in the strategies of institutional critique between the 1960s and the 1990s. Via the work of the BECC and Group Material I want to establish the presence of particular coalitions that were formed to facilitate political action during this period – some, which centred around 'single issues' such as gender or race; others, which were not specifically defined around aspects of identity. How do such coalitions impact on a notion of critical art practice? How do these coalitions impact on our understanding of identity and meaning, for example? These issues will provide a context for discussing the 1993 Whitney Biennial later in this chapter.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., Feinberg, 'Is the Alternative Space a True Alternative?', p.70

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., Pindell, 'Is the Alternative Space a True Alternative?', p.71

I want to start by briefly establishing the Whitney's reputation amongst sections of the alternative community and sections of the art press. The Whitney Biennial is arguably one of the most prestigious exhibitions show-casing the work of American contemporary artists. However, for some artists, it came to embody some of the most exclusive and conservative aspects of the mainstream art world. Despite claims of representing American art, the Whitney had acquired a reputation for favouritism in its repeated selection of certain artists for the Biennial; and its persistent choice of predominantly white, male artists. Equally, the Whitney was seen to privilege the most marketable examples of painting and sculpture to the detriment of less marketable mediums such as video, photography and performance.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, from the 1960s onwards, the Whitney, and its related annual and biennial exhibitions, received harsh criticism from a diverse range of voices within the art world at large. For example, in 1987, the feminist art activists the Guerrilla Girls revealed that, "*the museum already owns work by 12 of the 43 artists in this years show*" and that, "*no black woman has been chosen for a Whitney Biennial since 1973.*"<sup>63</sup> Later, in an essay questioning the paucity of African American artists showing in major art American museums, Maurice Berger echoed such sentiments, targeting the Whitney Biennial for having "*consistently had notoriously poor representation of artists of color [sic].*"<sup>64</sup> And, Jeff Rian's critique of the 1993 Whitney Biennial acknowledged the exhibition's historical preference for "*mostly male artists and market orientation.*"<sup>65</sup>

Between the late 1960s and mid '70s, Whitney Museum of American Art became the target of sustained art activism. As I note, Lucy Lippard claims that many museums dealing with contemporary art became the focus of such activism at this time. In part, she argues, because the museum remains a primary means by which artists (particularly those making object-based work) can enter art history; that is, via museum collections, catalogues and institutional validation.<sup>66</sup> Exclusive practices, therefore, deny certain artists their place within that history. Of course, all selection processes are 'exclusive' by definition. However, in my view, it is the grounds on which particular practitioners and practices are included or excluded, that are contested here. Ultimately, a key aim of art activists was to redress the balance.

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<sup>62</sup> I am not suggesting that all time-based work is non-commodifiable, just that the Whitney favoured mediums that were highly marketable; in other institutions, this was not necessarily the case. Lucy Lippard has established that much Conceptual Art made in the late 1960s and early 1970s was conceived of as uncommodifiable; in part, because of its ephemeral nature. However, according to Lippard, by the early 1970s certain conceptual artists were selling for vast sums internationally and showing in prestigious galleries. In 1969, she had predicted, "*the art world is probably going to be able to absorb conceptual art as another 'movement.'*" Ibid., Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, p.xxi

<sup>63</sup> These statistics formed part of the exhibition; *Guerrilla Girls Review the Whitney* took place at The Clocktower, a not-for-profit gallery in New York, 16<sup>th</sup> April – 17<sup>th</sup> May 1987. See, *The Guerrilla Girls, Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls*, Pandora, 1995, p.46-48

<sup>64</sup> Maurice Berger, 'Are Art Museums Racist?', *Art in America*, v.78, September 1990, p.68-75

<sup>65</sup> Jeff Rian, 'The 1993 Whitney Biennial: Everyone Loves a Fire,' *Flash Art*, #170 May June 1993 p.78-9

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., Lippard, 'Biting the Hand,' p. 80

In, *Biting the Hand*, Lucy Lippard's critique of the relation between the alternatives and New York's museums, she considers certain shifts in how artists chose to challenge the museum between the 1960s and '70s, compared to the 1980s and '90s respectively. She contends that during the 1960s and '70s artists generally chose to challenge the museum from 'outside' the institution, their protests taking the form of pickets, petitions and other such oppositional strategies. By the 1980s and '90s, Lippard notes that many dissenting artists were choosing to challenge the museum from 'within'.<sup>67</sup> Many of these artists attempted to appropriate the institutional apparatus (the museum's collection, display methods, its education programme, interpretation materials, etc) as a means of producing critique. Artists such as Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson are prime exponents of this *modus operandi*.<sup>68</sup>

With specific regard to the Whitney Biennials, I want to consider the implications of this strategic shift in critical activity from 'outside' the institution to 'within'. To illustrate this shift, I will address the quite distinct practices of the BECC and Group Material respectively; with the former representing an example of critique from the 'outside'; and the latter representing critique from 'within'. To what extent is, the act of challenging the Whitney's programming and acquisitions record on the grounds of improving the selection of excluded practitioners and practices (whether from 'outside' or 'within') symptomatic of Nairne's "*institutionalizing of dissent*"? Or, is it primarily a means by which artists sought to gain access to public institutions to which they felt they had a right?

### 3.1 THE BLACK EMERGENCY CULTURAL COALITION

As an example of dissenting artists operating from 'outside' of the institution, I want to address the activities of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition. I will start by outlining the BECC's emergence, activities and achievements; I will then proceed to discuss the possible limitations of this kind of coalition politics [Fig. 16].

In the late 1960s, two separate exhibitions staged at museums in New York, provided the catalyst for the BECC's founding – the Whitney Museum of American Art's *The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America* (1968) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Harlem on My Mind* (1969). The Whitney's historical survey exhibition of the 1930s had neglected to include any black artists, which effectively wrote off the art historical significance of the entire Harlem Renaissance. As a result, a group picketed

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., Lippard, 'Biting the Hand,' p.80

<sup>68</sup> For example, in Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992) the artist critiqued the collection of the Maryland Historical Society by re-presenting artefacts from that collection. Wilson was able to reveal a historical African-American presence within the collection that had formerly been submerged, purely by reconfiguring artefacts "found" within the museum's own collection. The work consequently challenged the notion of the museum as the historical repository for all. See, exhibition catalogue, Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, Museum of Contemporary Art (Baltimore), 1992

the museum that included writer Henri Ghent; painters Faith Ringgold, Romare Bearden and Benny Andrews; plus sculptor and filmmaker Camille Billops.<sup>69</sup> Subsequently, the group went on to stage their own “*counterexhibition*” entitled, *Invisible Artists: 1930* (1968) at the Studio Museum in Harlem.<sup>70</sup> Further, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *Harlem on My Mind* was allegedly a survey of African American creativity within the eponymous New York district. The exhibition relied heavily on historical photographic documentation and, therefore, came under heavy criticism for failing to engage directly with the work of contemporary black artists. As such, the Harlem Cultural Council publicly withdrew its support for the show, claiming a “*lack of Negro scholarly participation and the projected use of photographs in place of original art*” on the part of the museum.<sup>71</sup> Thus, as the BECC stated in their flyers, they formed as “*an action-oriented, watchdog organization to implement the rights and aspiration of individual artists and the total art community.*” The organisation was specifically “*dedicated to seeing to it that the cultural contributions of Afro-Americans get their fair and due recognition in America.*”<sup>72</sup>

A major sticking point for the BECC was the notable absence of black curatorial staff in key posts within both the Whitney Museum of American Art and Metropolitan Museum of Art. Members of the black artistic community were offended that white curators were presenting exhibitions like *Harlem on My Mind*, and felt it unnecessary to liaise with the black artistic community over possible approaches or content. In his essay, *Polarity Rules: Looking at Whitney Annuals and Biennials 1968-2000*, David Deitcher surveys the ongoing battle between the alternatives and the Whitney Museum of American Art. He chronicles the BECC’s targeting of the Whitney regarding these issues of black involvement and employment in the museum. Between 1969 and 1971 the BECC were engaged in a series of meetings with the Whitney administration, their demands included:

“...a major group exhibition of African American Art, ‘with a Black guest curator’; ...more African Americans to participate in the Whitney Annuals; hiring ‘Black curatorial staff to co-ordinate these endeavours’; and staging ‘five or more solo exhibitions for Black artists during the year.’”<sup>73</sup>

As a result of this dialogue, the Whitney agreed to purchase more African American art for its collection; also, to stage ‘five or more’ solo exhibitions of African American

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<sup>69</sup> What links this diverse group of practitioners is a commitment to politically motivated art practices and activism; for example, Faith Ringgold’s paintings focused on the social injustices suffered by both women and black people in America. She was also a strident member of various art activist groups such as Student and Artists for Black Art Liberation (1970), and Action against Racism in the Arts (1979). Camille Billops, whose films and sculpture also discussed issues of race and of gender, co-founded the Hatch-Billops Archives of Black American Cultural History, New York in 1971.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., Ault, p.19

<sup>71</sup> ‘Benny Andrews Journal: A Black Artist’s View of Artistic and Political Activism 1963-73.’ Ibid., Deitcher ‘Polarity Rules,’ p.208

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., Ault, p.20

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., Deitcher, ‘Polarity Rules,’ p.209



artists in its first floor lobby gallery; and take advice from “*Black experts*” when staging such shows.<sup>74</sup> With the Whitney implementing these measures, the BECC appeared to have made significant headway in its negotiations with the museum. However, the museum did not go as far as to employ any African American curatorial staff. Consequently, in 1971, Robert Doty, a white curator at the Whitney, organised *Contemporary Black Artists in America*. The BECC subsequently responded with a boycott of the exhibition; a demonstration outside the museum; and, again, a counterexhibition entitled, *Black Artists in Rebuttal*, held at Acts of Art Gallery, New York. It is worth noting that groups such as Women Artists in Revolution, Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee, and the Women Students & Artists for Black Art Liberation made similar actions over the representation of women’s art in museums. Despite operating from the precarious position of the ‘outside’, the achievements of such groups were significant. For example, the combined efforts of the BECC, the Art Workers Coalition and the aforementioned women’s’ groups ensured that the sculptors Betye Saar and Barbara Chase-Riboud appeared in the 1970 Whitney annual; they were evidently the first black women to show at the museum.<sup>75</sup>

The BECC’s achievements cannot be underestimated. However, their demands for increasing a black presence within the Whitney raise an important issue regarding the problematics of coalition politics in general. As I have noted, the BECC made clear that one of their key aims was to ensure that “*the cultural contributions of Afro-Americans [received] their fair and due recognition*” and, as such, race was a primary concern. Of course, it would have been impossible for the BECC to attempt to dictate which ‘Black guest curator’ or ‘Black curatorial staff’ or ‘Black artists’ the Whitney might employ. However, in leaving the matter entirely open, there is a tacit suggestion that *any* black artist or curator would have been better than none. Perhaps, given the Whitney’s poor track record over such issues, this may well have been the case as far as the BECC were concerned. But it appears that the BECC were primarily concerned with the symbolic significance of having a black presence at the Whitney; the intention behind the proposed appointments may well have been to send out a message of change to other museums and galleries in New York, and America in general.

But, surely, the issue of inclusion is more complex than quantity? For example, would it have mattered to the BECC if the appointed black guest curator or curatorial staff also upheld the Whitney’s conservative programming? How does the demand of a ‘Black guest curator’ account for the differences – style, taste, historical interest, theoretical interest, experience, etc – that may distinguish one curatorial practice from another? Surely individual members of the BECC would have preferred particular

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., Deitcher, ‘Polarity Rules,’ p.209

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., Lippard, ‘Biting the Hand,’ p.89

artistic or curatorial practices to others amongst available black practitioners. To me, this is one way that the goal of inclusion conflicts with the efficacy of the critique. The critique from ‘outside’ model is flawed precisely because those opposing are external to the institution. So, the BECC can only ever make quite general and limited demands of the Whitney because it does not have the power and position to do otherwise.

The issue that emerges here concerns consensus. Implicit within the BECC’s staffing demands is a presumed unity of intent amongst BECC members; and by association, the black art community in general. Arguably, in seeking a political outcome that benefits the black art community as a whole, it may be necessary to discount more marginal views. Furthermore, I am contending that in privileging race above all else, the BECC was in danger of misrepresenting the diversity of opinion, not only within its own organisation, but also within the black art community at large.

It is my view that the issues raised here are symptomatic of certain problems inherent within coalitional politics in general. In, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler’s critique of feminist theory, she affirms the “*democratizing impulse*” that drives political coalition building. However, she also contends that such coalitions can prove unintentionally counterproductive. As I note, Butler claims that much of feminist theory operates along a heterosexual drive that does not accommodate the complexities of gender – such as transsexuality, for instance. She observes a type of hierarchy that can emerge in the process of trying to politically consolidate various diverse opinions or identities. Butler states that:

*“...the coalitional theorist can inadvertently reinsert herself as sovereign of the process by trying to assert an ideal form for coalitional structures in advance, one that will effectively guarantee unity as an outcome.”<sup>76</sup>*

For Butler, the implications of this situation are untenable. In her account of this tendency within gender related coalition politics, Butler is describing an aspect of critique that simultaneously subjugates. In order for feminist theory to begin to be more inclusive, Butler calls for an initial interrogation of the power relations that condition critique in this particular way. Butler argues that without such an interrogation, critique is in jeopardy of operating a false consensus; and, as she notes,

*“...relapsing into a liberal model that assumes that speaking agents occupy equal positions and speak with the same presupposition about what constitutes “agreement,” and “unity” and, indeed, that those are the goals to be sought.”<sup>77</sup>*

To illustrate that these points are symptomatic of coalition politics in general, rather than feminist politics specifically, I want to briefly outline certain internal conflicts that

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.20

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.20

emerged within the black art movement during the 1970s. In Crystal A. Britton's *African American Art: The Long Struggle*, she gives an account of the emergence of Spiral, a black activist group, which painters Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis established in 1971.<sup>78</sup> Britton observes a male dominance within the group; of its fourteen original members, only one, painter Emma Amos, was female.<sup>79</sup> At this time, Faith Ringgold attempted unsuccessfully to join Spiral. Britton also notes that Ringgold was also denied exhibitions at the Studio Museum in Harlem – a space specifically set up to support the work of black artists – because Ringgold claims, “*there were all these Black male artist who would have to get their chance first.*”<sup>80</sup> Because of perceived sexism in the black art movement, Ringgold co-founded, Where We at Black Women, an art activist group that sought equal access for black women artists.<sup>81</sup> In line with Butler's account of certain hierarchies within feminism, Britton describes a situation whereby the ‘single-issue’ coalition (in this instance race) cannot accommodate difference within its ranks (in this instance gender).

So, with these issues in mind, I want to return to the issue of the BECC. To what degree, do the BECC's staffing demands inadvertently undermine the possibility of a heterogeneous assertion of black political opinion; and, in turn, black identity? It is my view that a conflation of politics and identity emerges here. What might be the repercussions of this situation in terms of how such groups are perceived within the mainstream? If coalitions are based on certain aspects of identity (gender, race, sexuality etc), does an assertion of ‘difference’ within those criteria necessarily undermine the political intent of the coalition as a whole? Do other forms of coalition exist that allow for creative, political and cultural diversity? I will return to further discuss this relation between identity and politics in Section 4 of this chapter.

### **3.2 GROUP MATERIAL**

I want to now take a general look at Group Material's practice; and then to specifically discuss their installation *Americana* (1985) as an example of how certain dissenting artists worked ‘within’ the institution during the 1980s and ‘90s. In initially addressing the emergence, activities and achievements of Group Material, I will consider how their practice differed from that of the BECC. Also, I want to think about whether the practice of critiquing from ‘within’ has its own inherent imitations.

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<sup>78</sup> Crystal A. Britton, *African American Art: The Long Struggle*, New York: Todtri Productions, 1996, p.67

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., Britton, p.67

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., Britton, p.71

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., Britton, p.71

Established in 1979, Group Material's founding members included, Julie Ault, Patrick Brennan, Marybeth Nelson and Tim Rollins.<sup>82</sup> Over their seventeen-year history, the group's membership expanded and contracted to include artists such as, Doug Ashford, Felix Gonzalez Torres and Karen Ramspacher. Early Group Material activities centred on a self-funded shop-front exhibition space in New York. Later the group gave up its space to concentrate on showing at existing venues and to create public art works.<sup>83</sup>

Group Material was established around a notion of political, artistic and cultural diversity. To explain, they described their influences as extending beyond the art environment to include a variety of other disciplines. For example, Julie Ault has recalled the significance of her exposure to Punk music and, later, Rap in mid-1970s New York. She notes that, "*the music scene downtown really transformed art culture, and the DIY atmosphere across a number of fields encouraged many of us to create rather than consume culture.*"<sup>84</sup> Equally, the group cited the politically motivated practices of artists Conrad Atkinson and Hans Haacke; plus writer Lucy Lippard, as significant role models. Rollins notes the relevance of Colab, the artists group established in late 1970s, which worked using a vast range of mediums, including publications and public access cable television; plus, funding and organising innovative projects in and around New York.<sup>85</sup> Importantly, Group Material acknowledged the activities of art activist groups like Artists Meeting for Cultural Change and Guerrilla Art Action Group. According to Ault, Group Material's membership incorporated a range of political and cultural interests within its ranks that ranged "*from feminist and Marxist theory to design and popular culture.*"<sup>86</sup> As such, these diverse interests engendered their particular approach to art making and dissemination.

Group Material evidently exercised a heterogeneous notion of critique that simultaneously operated on a number of fronts. As Julie Ault claims, the group sought

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<sup>82</sup> The catalyst for Group Material's formation was notably similar to that of the BECC. Tim Rollins has noted Group Material's emergence out of Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (AMCC), an art activist group that included painters Leon Golub and Nancy Spero, conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, as well as writer Lucy Lippard. The AMCC formed during the mid-70s to protest the Whitney's planned exhibition celebrating the American bicentennial with work from the John D. Rockefeller III collection. Many amongst the alternatives felt that the Rockefeller family's immense wealth and political sway wielded undue influence over major cultural institutions like MoMA and the Whitney. Also, in the early 1970s, Republican governor for New York, Nelson Rockefeller was criticised for his role in quashing the Attica prison revolt; and, for remaining silent over the Vietnam War. In keeping with the Whitney's perceived insensitivity, the exhibition was to include no work by artists 'of colour' and only one work by a woman artist. It is worth noting that the BECC and the AMCC protested together against the staging of this exhibition. See, Lippard, *Biting the Hand*.

<sup>83</sup> It is worth mentioning that Group Material was one of a number of collaboratives operating in innovative ways at this time. Others include Colab (est. 1977) and Fashion Moda (est. 1978).

<sup>84</sup> Dan Cameron, 'Group Material talks to Dan Cameron,' *Artforum*, v.41, April 2003, p.198

<sup>85</sup> David Deitcher, 'Tim Rollins talks to David Deitcher,' *Artforum*, v.41, April 2003, p.78

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, Cameron, 'Group Material talks to Dan Cameron,' p.198

a “*collaborative practice in which they could fuse their interests in art and politics*”<sup>87</sup> As such, they worked collaboratively producing densely layered thematic installations. They juxtaposed various art mediums (painting, text, video and sculpture, etc) with documentary material (TV news footage, etc) and mass-produced consumer products (washing machines, t-shirts, foodstuffs, etc). They also collaborated with other social groups such as local residents, school students and political activists. For example, for the exhibition *The People’s Choice (Arroz con Mango)* in 1981, the group invited local residents to contribute an item of special significance to the show. For Group Material, such projects were an attempt to democratise the art making and dissemination process. To them, their collaborative practices represented a model for democracy. They envisaged that this model could potentially extend to broader contexts – for instance, the museum and, indeed, society in general.<sup>88</sup>

It is my view that Group Material intended to challenge the parameters of art practice via its insistence on collaboration and its plethora of artistic mediums. Similarly, one could argue that Group Material wanted to challenge the idea of what a political art practice might entail, given its diverse interests and working practices. So, their practice simultaneously critiqued art world traditions such as Greenberg’s notion of modernism; but also the conventions of political activism. I want to now consider Group Material’s installation, *Americana*, as an example of institutional critique from ‘within’.

In 1985, Group Material took part in the Whitney Biennial. According to David Deitcher, this particular Whitney Biennial differed from its predecessors in the increased inclusion of installation art. However, the exhibition’s demographic make up was still notably limited. As I have outlined in this chapter, the museum had acquired a reputation for failing to acknowledge particular mediums and artistic practices. With regard to this, I want to examine how Group Material’s installation entitled, *Americana*, managed to critique the Whitney on a number of levels that included the aesthetic and the political [Fig. 17]

For the 1985 Whitney Biennial, Group Material staged its own ‘biennial within a biennial,’ using its allocated exhibition space to invite artists who they felt should have been included in the overall exhibition, but had not been. Their installation included a selection works including, Faith Ringgold’s painted quilt works, paintings by Nancy Spero, sculpture by John Ahearn and text-based signs by Edgar Heap of Birds. What linked this diverse collection of artists was their commitment to socially motivated art practice. For example, Faith Ringgold’s work drew on the traditions of painting, quilt

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., Ault, p.58

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., Cameron, ‘Group Material talks to Dan Cameron,’ p.198

making and story telling, to provide a personalised Afrocentric take on American historical narratives. Also, Edgar Heap of Birds' text-based signs incorporated wordplay to critique the history of European subjugation of Native Americans. It is worth mentioning that certain artists in *Americana* were already part of much longer dialogue with the Whitney over issues of inclusion and exclusion. For example, Ringgold had been a member of the BECC, and Spero a member of AMCC, respectively.

In keeping with their trademark multimedia, multi-layered installational approach, Group Material juxtaposed the aforementioned artists' works with various emblems of American consumer culture such as televisions, washing machines; and branded products such as 'Wonder' bread, 'New Freedom Maxipad' sanitary towels and 'Almost Home' cookies.<sup>89</sup> According to Deitcher, within this formal arrangement, *Americana* challenged the institution by subverting "*the architectural protocols of high art display*".<sup>90</sup> Further, Group Material's installation was located in the first floor lobby gallery. This was the same space where the Whitney located its 'five or more' solo exhibitions of African American art as promised to the BECC in 1971. In Lawrence Alloway's essay, *The Great Curatorial Dim-Out*, he analyses a perceived crisis in American curating, giving an account of the lowly status of the lobby gallery within the Whitney.<sup>91</sup> According to Alloway, the lobby gallery was architecturally humble; the space was fundamentally a thoroughfare located between "*the sales desk and the elevators*." But, also, curatorially, the exhibitions tended to be small-scale, brief affairs. This lobby gallery had become the only space within the museum to regularly show work by black artists. And, as such, was eventually referred to as the "*Nigger Room*" by artists in the black art community. My point here concerns the relation between marginalisation and homogenisation at the Whitney. The lobby gallery was meant to address the marginalisation of black artists within museum's programming. However, the complacent culture within the Whitney ensured that it effectively became a marginal space.

I think that Group Material's staging of *Americana* was effectively an attempt to subvert the reading of the Whitney's first floor lobby gallery – a space historically known for its racial designation.<sup>92</sup> In literally filling the space with work that was socially motivated, by women artists, artists 'of colour' and so on, Group Material overloaded the meaning of this space as 'other'. In my view, Group Material operated an extremely complex critical practice compared to coalitions such as the BECC whose

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., Deitcher, 'Polarity Rules,' pp.222-3

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., Deitcher, 'Polarity Rules,' p.223

<sup>91</sup> Lawrence Alloway, 'The Great Curatorial Dim-Out', *Artforum*, #8, May 1975, reprinted in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg at al, New York: Routledge, p.222

<sup>92</sup> The lobby gallery was operational between 1969 and 1975.

activities were largely oppositional. But was Group Material's practice of critiquing from 'within' any less problematic than that the BECC's critiquing from 'outside'?

Group Material's *Americana* was a critique of exclusive practices at the Whitney, and within the art world at large. As such, its primary audience was arguably members of the art community. This is not to say that politically motivated artists should seek the lowest common denominator by making their work accessible to the widest possible audience. But, in aiming their gaze specifically at the art world, Group Material may have been vulnerable to exercising its own kind of exclusivity. In Hal Foster's essay, *The Artist as Ethnographer*, he traces the art historical legacy of Walter Benjamin's 1934 lecture, *The Author as Producer*, in which Benjamin lays down a treatise for socially engaged artistic practices. Foster examines the implications of Benjamin's text for contemporary art practice and specifically addresses art that critiques from 'within' the institution. Foster is particularly critical of work that plays with the museum's institutional apparatus (signage, display methods, cataloguing, etc) using an ethnographic framework. Foster cites the work of artists' Fred Wilson and Renee Green as particular examples [Fig. 18]. Foster contends that such work can be duplicitous, in that it may reiterate the same hierarchical practices it seeks to undermine. He states that,

*"...the deconstructive-ethnographic approach can become a gambit, an insider game that renders the institution not more open and public but more hermetic and narcissistic, a place for initiates where a contemptuous criticality is rehearsed."*<sup>93</sup>

Group Material's *Americana* was not ethnographic in its subject matter, although it did intentionally address ethnicity via its selection of artists. Indeed, the selection of marginalised artists would have had a particular resonance to members of the art community. Also, the installation did attempt to subvert certain museum display conventions such as, white walls, and particular hanging methods.<sup>94</sup> Deitcher describes how Group Material's *Americana* "*replicated the entire apparatus of its museological object, tweaking the latter to expose conventions and to underscore exclusionary cultural effects.*"<sup>95</sup> Foster's point is reiterated in a direct criticism of *Americana* that suggests that group material had scored an 'own goal' in its attempt to critique the Whitney. Kim Levin wrote in a *Village Voice* review of the Biennial that:

*"It's nice that Group Material tried to outwit the Whitney curators with its laundry room, even if it ended up doing the dirty work for them."*<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, MIT Press, 1997, p.196

<sup>94</sup> For instance, Group Material covered the walls of the installation with domestic wallpaper; they also hung much of the wall-based work in the style of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century art salon.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., Deitcher, *Polarity Rules*, p.222

<sup>96</sup> Kim Levin, 'The Whitney Laundry,' *Village Voice*, April 9, 1985

Levin suggests that in producing its multicultural, politically motivated installation, Group Material saved the Whitney the effort of having to directly engage with such issues. Levin's comments further suggest the potential for paradox within critique. To its credit, *Americana* was open to a number of readings. David Deitcher also notes that, "on its face, *Americana* was a playful, simultaneously ironic and sincere sampler of the American way of life four years into the Reagan-Bush era."<sup>97</sup> My point here is simply to highlight that aspects of Group Material's critique from 'within' practice were as potentially counterproductive as the BECC's critique from 'outside' practice.

The aim of this section has been to establish a notion of the Whitney Museum of American Art as a site for dissent. The respective activities of the BECC and Group Material that I outline here exemplify some of the shifts in how the alternatives engaged in an institutional critique of the museum between the 1960s and 1990s. My intention has not been to privilege one *modus operandi* over another, but to establish the strengths and weaknesses attendant to both.

Both the BECC and Group Material shared the goal of wanting to change how the mainstream art world functioned. Both groups emerged to contend art world inequities concerning access to opportunity. As I have chronicled, the way in which these two groups went about achieving this goal was radically different. The BECC described itself as an "action-oriented, watchdog organization to implement the legitimate rights and aspiration of individual artists and the total art community"; as such, I am arguing that it represented an oppositional notion of critique. Conversely, as Julie Ault describes, "Group Material viewed public institutions as platforms and places that we wanted to affect through participation."<sup>98</sup> This attitude was surely in keeping with their collaborative art practice in general; and distinguishes their activities from groups like the BECC. Consequently, it is my view that Group Material represents a multifarious model of critique. Where the BECC comprised of individual artists whose art practices were not directly involved in the group's activism, Group Material's collaborative art practice formed the basis of their activism.

A further distinction concerns the problematics of coalition building that I highlight in Section 3.1 via Butler. I am contending that because Group Material formed on a principle of heterogeneity that encompassed identity, culture, politics and aesthetics, the group was more able to accommodate difference within its ranks than certain 'single issue' identity based groups. For example, the themes that Group Material chose to work with were diverse and not exclusive to any one social group. As Rollins notes, their exhibitions "addressed social themes and subjects like alienation,

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., Deitcher, 'Polarity Rules,' p.222

<sup>98</sup> Julie Ault, 'Three Snapshots from the Eighties: Julie Ault on Group Material,' excerpted from Julie Ault, 'Exhibition: Entertainment, Practice, Platform,' ed. Christian Kravagna, *Agenda*, Vienna: Folio, 2000



*consumerism fashion, music, and gender.*”<sup>99</sup> Could Group Material’s multifarious practice offer a model of a critical *modus operandi* that allows for indeterminacy and ambiguity within identity? I will now discuss the 1993 Whitney Biennial.

#### 4.0 THE 1993 WHITNEY BIENNIAL

Keeping in mind the notion of the Whitney Museum of American Art as a site for dissent, I want to discuss the 1993 Whitney Biennial specifically. My aim in this section is to examine certain tendencies within art practice and art criticism that polarise the relation between signifier and signified, aesthetics and politics, form and content; to consider the implications for politically motivated art practices, and critique in general. But first, I will outline events immediately preceding the 1993 Whitney Biennial.

As I establish in Section 3.0, from the 1960s onwards, the Whitney had gained a reputation amongst artists and critics alike, for exercising exclusive acquisitions, programming, and employment practices. The Whitney evidently favoured the most marketable mediums. Also, as I describe, the museum historically favoured the work of white male artists over the work of artists ‘of colour’ and women artists. And, as the BECC made apparent, the Whitney had failed to employ any black curatorial staff. The Whitney Biennials were particularly important because they were the only regularly occurring national survey of contemporary American art practice.<sup>100</sup> As such, the criticism the museum received was largely justified.

David Deitcher, in his analysis of more than thirty years of Whitney annual and biennial exhibitions, observes that the 1993 Whitney Biennial heralded a shift in position from the institution. The Whitney had recently appointed David Ross, whose outlook on the relation between art and politics was decidedly different from the museum’s usual stance. For example, in an interview for the *New York Times*, Ross declared, “*I do see art in a social context, to some extent, but I find myself on the line between those who believe in the transcendent power of art and those who question it.*”<sup>101</sup> This apparent openness to a coexistent relation between art and politics is further demonstrated in Ross’ appointment of Elisabeth Sussman as head curator of the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Sussman had come from the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, a public gallery known for its progressive programming.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., Deitcher, *Tim Rollins talks to David Deitcher*, p. 78

<sup>100</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, ‘Crisis in Curation: Elisabeth Sussman in conversation with Ine Gevers,’ *Conversation Pieces*, Jan van Eyck Akademie, 1997, p.3

<sup>101</sup> David Ross, quoted in Grace Glueck, ‘New Director at Whitney Looks Ahead,’ *New York Times*, January 12<sup>th</sup> 1991, A14

The 1993 Whitney Biennial aimed to make significant structural changes with regard to the demographic selection of artists and curatorial team; the range of artistic mediums and subject matter; and the exhibition's theoretical core. The curators of the 1993 exhibition sought to challenge expectations of what might constitute a Whitney Biennial, but had ambitions extending beyond the exhibition itself; part of a much larger call for change. Sussman's biennial was based on a precept of heterogeneity. She proposed that a necessary criterion for viewing the 1993 Whitney Biennial be:

*"...a willingness to redefine the art world in more realistic terms – not as a seamless, homogenous entity but as a collectivity of cultures involved in a process of exchange and difference."*<sup>102</sup>

In practice, Sussman's call for a redefining of the art world, at least as far as it pertained to the 1993 Whitney Biennial, took the form of quantitative shifts in the demographic, aesthetic and theoretical make up of the exhibition.<sup>103</sup> This basically meant – more artists 'of colour,' more women, more gays and lesbians, more time-based work, more politically orientated work, and more theory (I will return to discuss the implications of this list shortly). As such, the aims of Sussman and her team could represent a further example of a 'critique-from-within' strategy.<sup>104</sup> Consequently, as Deitcher notes,

*"...the 1993 Biennial marked the climax in the exhibition's protracted and often painful history of attempting to go beyond the exclusionary cultural standards it traditionally represented and reinforced."*<sup>105</sup>

I want to outline, in slightly more detail, how the 1993 Whitney Biennial distinguished itself from previous biennials in terms of the issues listed above.

Firstly, concerning gender balance alone, the 1993 Biennial featured approximately thirty-four works by women artists and fifty-one by men, whereas the 1991 Whitney Biennial had featured some thirty-two works by women artists and seventy by men. This philosophy of inclusion also extended to the composition of the curatorial team. The 1991 Whitney Biennial team had comprised of three white men and one white woman. The 1993 team, headed by Elisabeth Sussman and assisted by Associate

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<sup>102</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, 'Coming Together in Parts: Positive Power in the Art of the Nineties,' *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art & Harry N. Abrams, 1993, p12-25.

<sup>103</sup> It is worth contextualising the 1993 Whitney Biennial in relation to two significant exhibitions in the preceding years: *Magiciens de la Terre* (Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, 1989); also, *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (Studio Museum in Harlem, New Museum of Contemporary Art & the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, 1990). Whilst the curatorial concept behind each project was quite distinct, common to both projects was the prominent curating of women artists and artists 'of colour'. Both exhibitions sought in quite particular ways to 'redress the balance' in challenging what might be considered mainstream within the art world. As Michael Brenson observed in his survey of recent trends in contemporary art practice, "*Magiciens of the Earth and The Decade Show...seek to do justice to artists outside the Western mainstream.*" (Michael Brenson, 'Is 'Quality' an Idea Whose Time Has Gone?', *The New York Times*, July 22, 1990)

<sup>104</sup> Similarly, between 1969 and 1976 Marcia Tucker, another progressive curator, programmed at the Whitney. For an account of Tucker's time at the Whitney, see David Deitcher, 'Polarity Rules,' p.205

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, Deitcher, 'Polarity Rules,' p.238

Curators Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt and Lisa Philips, comprised of two white women, one black woman and one white man. The relevance of these figures might seem spurious, were it not for a return to its all white, three-male-one-female format in the subsequent 1995 Whitney Biennial. My point here is not that gender is a criterion for judging art. However, within the conservative environment of the Whitney, that was largely male dominated, the issue of gender is surely contestable. A similar point can be made regarding race. Most notably, twenty-two years after the BECC made its original demand for 'Black curatorial staff' at the Whitney, the museum employed Thelma Golden, its first black curator.<sup>106</sup>

Secondly, with regard to the artistic mediums on show, I have already noted that Whitney Biennials had traditionally favoured painting and sculpture. The 1993 Whitney Biennial saw a sizeable increase in 'newer' mediums such as video, photography and performance. So, for example, of the eighty-seven odd individual artists, collaborations and groups on show, only eight involved painting; compared to twenty-eight out of seventy-two individual artists in the 1991 Biennial. This shift in the position of time-based mediums within the Biennial did not solely operate on the level of quantity. In previous years, the Whitney Biennial had been criticised for the adjunct relationship that these mediums had to the main body of the exhibition. Within the 1993 Biennial performance and video, in particular, evidently took a more integrated position within the exhibition as a whole.

My third point concerns a shift in content. In her catalogue essay, *What's White?* Thelma Golden labelled the exhibition the "*politically correct*" biennial because it privileged work motivated by social and political issues such as sexism, homophobia, racism, AIDS etc.<sup>107</sup> So, for example, Lorna Simpson's installation, *Hypothetical?* (1991) directly referenced the Rodney King beating and the subsequent LA riots; Robert Gober's sculpture, *Newspaper: The Serious Bride* (1992) traced homophobic narratives within the mainstream press; and Nancy Spero's collage, *Marsha Bruskina* (1989) addressed Nazi war crimes. This shift in content was surely facilitated by the fact that many of the artists were selected from the alternative sector or commercial galleries that supported politically motivated work.

In my view, there is an intrinsic link between the three points I outline here. As I highlight in my introduction to this chapter via Philip Yenawine, certain artistic mediums such as performance and video became increasingly popular amongst politically motivated artists during the 1980s and 1990s. These were the same mediums that the Whitney had neglected to show. In turn, such politically motivated,

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<sup>106</sup> Thelma Golden, email correspondence 09.05.03

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., Golden, 'What's White?', p.35

time-based work was often made by artists belonging to minority groups – women, artists ‘of colour’, gays, lesbians, etc. I am arguing that excluding a particular medium – for example, performance-related work – automatically meant excluding certain minority groups and contents.

Finally, compared to previous Whitney Biennials, the 1993 exhibition generated an unprecedented amount of supporting material. This material included artists’ statements, interpretation panels, guided tours, a reading room, and so on.<sup>108</sup> Unusually, the Biennial exhibition catalogue featured substantial essays from each of the curators, plus further texts from Whitney director David Ross and important social critics including, Homi Bhabha and Coco Fusco. In his *Flash Art* review of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Jeff Rian observed that, “*Texts are everywhere: artist’s statements, text-laden works, audio tapes, signage, you name it.*”<sup>109</sup> Such commentaries generated even more debate; in fact, the 1993 Whitney Biennial even spawned reviews of reviews.<sup>110</sup> The Whitney’s reliance on theoretical and explanatory texts for this exhibition was unusual. What impulse compelled the museum to explain this particular exhibition to its various audiences? Does this self-perpetuating need to explain represent a further manifestation of self-regulation? What might be the implications for contemporary artists? I want to take a more detailed look at the press coverage of the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Initially, my aim is to examine the reception of the curators pioneering structural changes; but, also to highlight a tendency that within art criticism concerning the relation between the signifier and the signified.

#### 4.1 CRITICAL RESPONSES

So now, to give an overview of the largely hostile art press response to the 1993 Whitney Biennial; from which I will discuss one analysis, *The Politics of the Signifier*, in detail.<sup>111</sup> I specifically want to address a tendency within art criticism that polarises the relation between aesthetics and politics, form and content, the signifier and the signified. My concern here is how this tendency impacts on the way in which we understand meaning to occur within a work of art. But, also, I want to consider the implications for critical art practices.

David Deitcher has noted that traditionally the Whitney Biennials provided a forum for an ongoing debate between two distinct views of art’s social function. The first

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<sup>108</sup> It is worth considering that such devices have now become commonplace for even the most humble of exhibitions, but at the time, the plethora of supporting material was extraordinary.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., Rian, p.78

<sup>110</sup> For example, the editorial piece ‘The Air Up There’ (*Afterimage*, v.21, Feb ’94, p.2) was a critique of ‘The Politics of the Signifier,’ which appeared in *October* journal.

<sup>111</sup> ‘The Politics of the Signifier’ was the first of a series of roundtable discussions by the *October* journal exploring the problematics surrounding art, theory and politics relative to then recent “*political events, socio-economic developments, and institutional changes.*”

view subscribes to the idea that art is a “*transcendent repository for human values*” such as “*harmony and coherence, frivolity and agency, freedom and emotional presence.*” And, the second “*frankly political view*” involves art “*as embedded – and therefore implicated – in the social relations of everyday life.*”<sup>112</sup> Despite its evident structural changes, the 1993 Whitney Biennial continued this debate.

Interestingly, although the art press make quite diverse criticisms of the exhibition, much of it continues to operate around this axis of aesthetics versus politics. For example, Jeff Rian’s review, *Everybody Loves a Fire*, explicitly targets the Whitney’s curators for privileging politics over aesthetics. Whilst championing the exhibition’s overall aims, Rian argues that much of the work on view displays deference to mass media, namely – television, magazines, film and advertising. As such, the curators’ curious inclusion of George Holliday’s eyewitness video documentation of the Rodney King beating (listed as a work of art) gets particularly negative attention. Rian contends,

“...by favoring [sic] politics, the curators and most of the artists show an indifference to such modernist prerequisites as significant form, inner necessity, and originality.”<sup>113</sup>

Eleanor Heartney’s, *Identity Politics at the Whitney*, also makes link between the politics versus aesthetics dichotomy. Unlike Rian, she does not consider the aesthetic to be at the service of the political in this instance. However, Heartney notes a stridence in the programming concerning the function of art, which she recognises as more common amongst conservatives. She argues:

“In a curious way this tendency to privilege social message over esthetic [sic] considerations parallels the attitudes of the religious right in its demand that art be morally uplifting.”<sup>114</sup>

In this review, *Whitney Biennial: Apocalypse Now?*, Steven Henry Madoff makes a similar point in highlighting the exhibitions failures. According to Madoff, the Whitney’s curators fell into a trap of their own making. He argues that in their attempt to prove that marginalised art could hold its own within the rarefied museum the curators opted for high production values in their presentation of the exhibition. In doing so, Madoff argues that the elegance of the biennial’s installation inevitably undermined the political efficacy of the work on show. Madoff states that:

“For all the coherence of the theme, the liveliness of the displays, and the highly thoughtful placement of pieces, the package smacked of precisely the

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., Deitcher, ‘Polarity Rules,’ p.201

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., Rian, p.78

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., Heartney, ‘Identity Politics at the Whitney,’ *Art In America*, v.31, May 1993, p.47

*kind of slick expertise, that many of these artists would argue, has built this white world of domination.*"<sup>115</sup>

Whilst it cannot be denied that the exhibition was a highly produced affair, perhaps overly so; Madoff's view infers a very limited notion of what political art might look like. He also neglects to consider that the political is surely dependent on its context. So, the strategies that may work within the alternative space (e.g. low production values) may not necessarily transfer to the museum.

And, finally, Dan Cameron's review entitled, *Backlash*, is perhaps most scathing in his criticism of the Biennial's curators. He blames Sussman and Golden, in particular, for sharing "*a personal hatred of anything that might provoke an outbreak of guilt-free pleasure.*"<sup>116</sup> For Cameron, the exhibition wrongly asserts that a concern for aesthetics, somehow, "*represents an evasion of the artists social contract.*"<sup>117</sup> He contends that, ultimately, the politics-versus-aesthetics dichotomy is a false art world construction that the curators unquestioningly propagate. Cameron reproaches the Whitney's break with tradition, mocking the curators' belief that, "*substituting feel-good liberalism for big-gallery clout is going to satisfy anyone's craving for cultural diversity.*"<sup>118</sup>

Ironically, the overwhelming criticism of the 1993 Whitney Biennial is that it had created its own hierarchical and exclusive practices; despite an evidently genuine attempt to challenge the museum's status quo. Again, there are echoes of the paradoxical aspects of critique that Foucault describes. The critics seemed to have a problem with the tightly focused programming of Sussman and her team. But, because it favours politically motivated art, is the 1993 Whitney Biennial any more discriminating than the previous Whitney biennial exhibitions that regularly excluded such work? The conflict between politics and aesthetics vis-à-vis the 1993 Whitney Biennial continues in the discussion, *The Politics of the Signifier*, where cultural critics including, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss and Miwon Kwon critique the exhibition.<sup>119</sup>

## 4.2 THE POLITICS OF THE SIGNIFIER

*The Politics of the Signifier* differs from the criticism of the 1993 Whitney Biennial that I outline above. The discussion examines a problematic tendency within contemporary art criticism to polarise the relation between signifier and signified, rather than simply articulating that tendency. However, I want to consider whether it in any way

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., Madoff, p.129

<sup>116</sup> Dan Cameron, 'Backlash,' *Artforum International*, v.31, May 1993, p.12

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., Cameron, 'Backlash,' p.12

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., Cameron, 'Backlash,' p.12

<sup>119</sup> This text is important because it gives an in depth analysis of the exhibition, and raises broader issues relating to the production and dissemination of contemporary art at this time.

reiterates that tendency. In order to do so, I will end this chapter by discussing the issues raised here in relation to Judith Butler's notion of the 'signifying economy'.

In introducing the discussion, Hal Foster identifies a tendency present in both contemporary art practice and criticism, which he describes as "*a turn away from questions of representation to iconographies of content; a certain turn from a politics of the signifier to a politics of the signified.*"<sup>120</sup> Foster refers to a situation in which a particular theoretical or political position gets privileged as "*the message*" of the work over and above the work itself; the signifier. According to Foster, 'the message' usually relates to specific aspects of identity such as race, gender, sexuality, or a broader reflection on world politics. Foster argues that in doing so, inadequate care is given to the importance of the signifier, the physical manifestation of the idea, the materiality and form of the work or art. His concern is not, apparently, for the sake of formalism, but for the sake of signification – *how* materials signify meaning in relation to their historical and institutional contexts.<sup>121</sup> According to Foster, the outcome of this tendency is twofold.

Firstly, he contends that if a theoretical concept is privileged, then the artist may deal with that concept as "*content to be illustrated.*"<sup>122</sup> Theory is, therefore, applied to art as a kind of appendage. The result is that two formally identical works could contain diametrically opposed theoretical frameworks.<sup>123</sup> Foster's argues that privileging theory ignores the theoretical capacity of the signifier. This ultimately disables any theoretical reading of the work itself, whilst it is assumed that the theoretical aspect of the work resides in the content.

Secondly, Foster identifies the problem of *where* the perceived politics in art is located, and *how* it might be constructed. To Foster, within certain contemporary artworks, the political is assumed to be located elsewhere, within some notion of 'the real.'<sup>124</sup> Foster asserts that, "*once located outside art, however, it can only be brought back within it as content, and usually through an autobiographical mode.*"<sup>125</sup> In this scenario, rather than instigating a new intimacy within artistic and political engagement, Foster perceives a distancing that, again, may disable a political reading. So, he maintains, if the artist disavows the political potential of the signifier, there may be little alternative

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., Foster, 'The Politics of the Signifier,' p.3

<sup>121</sup> It is my understanding Foster is referring to art related institutions such as museums, funders, journals and so on.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., Foster, 'The Politics of the Signifier,' p.3

<sup>123</sup> The examples Foster gives include Neo-Geo art from 1980s versus art illustrating concepts from gender and/or postcolonial studies in 1990s.

<sup>124</sup> It is my understanding that the 'real' relates to issues such as race, gender, sexuality, disability and so on.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., Foster, 'The Politics of the Signifier,' p.3

than to rely on the autobiographical in its various manifestations; these include the work itself, the artist's statement and the curator's essay.

Foster's observations are certainly evident when considering the work on show in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, where artists' work tended to articulate quite limited aspects of their own identity. So that, in general, artists of colour made work about race, women artists focused on gender issues, gay and lesbian artists works centred on sexuality, and so on. For example, African American artist Gary Simmons' work addressed "*racism in the criminal justice system*,"<sup>126</sup> lesbian artists' Sadie Benning and Cheryl Dunye "*each made tapes about lesbian relationships*"<sup>127</sup> and Sue Williams critiqued "*women's unequal place in society*."<sup>128</sup> Indeed, even African American curator Thelma Golden's catalogue essay took race as its central theme.

It is my view that such practices echo the 'single-issue' coalitional strategies of the BECC, or Women Artists in Revolution, for example; whereby one aspect of identity takes precedence over all else. As I argued via Butler's critique of feminist theory, the emphasis on one aspect of identity can be counterproductive. Whilst these debates respond to the need to articulate difference in society in general, they can stifle how difference is articulated within the debate itself. What are the ramifications of this tendency for politically motivated art practice? How does it effect how we understand identity to occur?

Rosalind Krauss describes a trend similar to that of Foster's, whereby art criticism declines from examining the work itself and instead simply *names* "*a set of ideas that the art might invoke*."<sup>129</sup> According to Krauss, this process deflects attention away from the signifier, reducing meaning to a 'name' that is then transferred from the work to, what she terms, "*a register of 'important ideas*."<sup>130</sup> Krauss does not elucidate what this register might comprise of, but given the context of the debate, I surmise that she is referring to themes such as race, gender, sexuality or, indeed, broader issues of world politics. She contends that displacing attention from the work itself makes a heterogeneous reading of it impossible. This is because the "*important ideas*" take precedence over the various levels of signification – the interplay between materiality, form, concept, context, etc. So again, the signified takes precedence over the signifier. And, for Krauss, the outcome is a delimited and predetermined engagement between audience and work. To illustrate her point, Krauss focuses on two manifestations of this process; firstly, as it pertains to the artist, in the case of Lorna Simpson's installation *Hypothetical?* (1992) [Figs. 19-20]. And, secondly, as it pertains to the

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., Heartney, 'Identity Politics at the Whitney,' p.45

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., Rian, p.79

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., Heartney, p.45

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., Krauss, 'The Politics of the Signifier,' p.4

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., Krauss, 'The Politics of the Signifier,' p.4



curator, Thelma Golden within her catalogue essay, *What's White?* Krauss describes a highly formal work by Simpson, which incorporated an array of some 200-odd mouthpieces taken from brass wind instruments and arranged in a grid on the gallery wall. Contrasting this sculptural element, was a closely cropped photographic image of a black person's lips on the opposite wall. The connecting wall displayed a 36-word press cutting from the *Los Angeles Times*, relating to the verdict of the first Rodney King trial.<sup>131</sup> The piece also featured a soundtrack of human breath [Figs. 20-21].

Krauss reads the piece in terms of a set of taxonomic registers – one that operates relative to the collection of mouthpieces, the other, to a notion of (absent) body parts from which Simpson's photograph of lips has been sourced. Krauss links these two taxonomies to a stereotype of the black body in its relationship to a notional Jazz musician. She locates the political significance of the piece within the formal interplay between photography and sculpture; and as such, reads the inclusion of the Rodney King press cutting as irrelevant to the work. It is curious that Krauss effectively disregards one quarter of Simpson's installation in this manner. I will return to discuss this issue in more detail shortly.

Krauss then turns her attention to Golden's catalogue essay that evidently makes a claim for the work being about "black rage."<sup>132</sup> The 'rage' issue manifests itself most explicitly in Simpson's use of the *Los Angeles Times* press cutting. Here, black mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley, was asked at the time of the first Rodney King verdict whether, as a black man, he would be afraid. Bradley's response was "*No, I wouldn't be afraid, I'd be angry.*" As Krauss observes, majority of Golden's essay centres on the meaning of the press cutting; and the issues contained within it, rather than Simpson's work as a whole. Golden makes scant reference to the significance of the mouthpieces, the photograph or soundtrack. In fact, Golden goes as far as to describe these elements as "*flanking [the] text.*"<sup>133</sup> Indeed, her description of the soundtrack as "*the sound before the fury*" takes the reader back to the press cutting.<sup>134</sup> Golden argues that:

*"...this text embodies a multitude of readings which Simpson encourages the viewer to interrogate... the media assumption about response (that post-Rodney King black men should be afraid) in confrontation with the reality of the situation (that post-Rodney King black men are very angry)."*<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Following the Rodney King beating by Los Angeles Police Department officers in March 1991, the officers were sent for trial, and notoriously acquitted. Public response to the verdict resulted in the Los Angeles riots of 1992. The officers were sent for re-trial in spring 1993, the verdict being that two were again acquitted and two sentenced to 30 months in a low security prison. No rioting followed the second verdict. For a synopsis of the case, see: [www.crimsonbird.com/history/rodneyking.htm](http://www.crimsonbird.com/history/rodneyking.htm)

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., Krauss, 'The Politics of the Signifier,' p.6.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., Golden, 'What's White?,' p.31

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., Golden, 'What's White?,' p.31

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., Golden, 'What's White?,' p. 31

For Krauss, this is an unacceptable reduction of the work to one 'important idea'. Whilst 'black rage' features in the work to an extent; for Krauss, both Simpson's placing of the provocative Rodney King cutting and Golden's insistence on the 'black rage' reading amounts to the same thing; a deflection of attention away from the signifier. Krauss insists that "*work on the material level of the piece is what constitutes the signifier,*" rather than the evidently appended 'important ideas'.<sup>136</sup> Krauss goes further to state that the limitations this process places on Simpson's work is counterproductive to the apparent political motivations driving both the work and its inclusion in the exhibition. In my view, Krauss is suggesting that this emphasis on black rage and the LA riots forestalls a heterogeneous reading of Simpson's work; and doing so, runs counter to Head Curator Elisabeth Sussman's original call for redefining the art world in more diverse terms.

Krauss' locating of political signification in Simpson's work seems diametrically opposed to that of Golden's. Where Krauss diminishes the significance of the press cutting, Golden amplifies it. Golden's insistence on the layers of meaning within the King press cutting, mirrors Krauss' insistence on the equivalent within the sculptural and photographic elements of Simpson's installation. Golden calls upon the viewer to interrogate the *Los Angeles Times* cutting in a manner similar to which Krauss demands of the work as a whole.

Conversely, both Golden and Krauss, from their respective positions, see heterogeneity as a goal. In Golden's essay, she quotes Cornell West's proposition of a "*new cultural politics of difference*" where the aim is to "*trash the monolithic and homogenous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general and universal in the light of the concrete, specific and particular.*"<sup>137</sup> And it is through this prism that Golden apparently reads Simpson's work. What is problematic in their respective positions is that, despite claims for heterogeneity, both Golden and Krauss effectively describe Simpson's work in binary terms. Where Krauss privileges the signifier; Golden privileges the signified. Neither seems prepared to consider a reading of Simpson's work that accommodates both views.

For example, one could reasonably argue that Simpson's work challenges supposedly 'benign' forms of stereotyping (that equate black people with particular types of music, for instance); which she then juxtaposes against more pernicious manifestations; like those expressed within the Rodney King incident. I think that Golden and Krauss

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., Krauss, 'The Politics of the Signifier,' p.6.

<sup>137</sup> Cornell West, 'The New Cultural Politic of Difference' in, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds, Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West, New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990, p.19

represent opposing views within a binary debate. I will return to consider the implications of this in the conclusion to this chapter.

Miwon Kwon's criticism of the 1993 Whitney Biennial specifically concerns the relation between the artist and the institution. Kwon discusses the trend within contemporary art and criticism that seeks to critique the institution from within. As I have already outlined in my analysis of *Group Material*, in the critique from within strategy, artists would often rework the institution's apparatus of signification; that is, its collections, display methods, interpretation materials, and so on. However, Kwon's critique specifically concerns art that attempts to critique the notional anthropological or ethnographic collection.

Kwon gives the example of artists such as Fred Wilson, Renée Green and Jimmie Durham whose work engaged, to varying degrees, in such critique. All three artists exhibited in the 1993 Whitney Biennial. In relation to such practices, Kwon makes a link between Foster's notion of the 'autobiographical mode' and the critique from within strategy. To recap: according to Foster, this mode is a means by which content is appended to the work of art, when the political is assumed to exist beyond the signifier itself. So, within the autobiographical mode, artists tend to focus on one dominant aspect of their identity for discussion – e.g. race, gender, sexuality, etc. Kwon argues that very few artists are able to “*problematize the possibility of an autobiographical mode*” in relation to the institution.

As an example of an artist who succeeds in doing so, she cites Jimmie Durham, whose work evidently acknowledges the iconographies of both political art and Native American art. According to Kwon, in order to avoid the reductive effects of the autobiographical mode, Durham has little choice than to attempt to subvert both.<sup>138</sup> In my view, Durham's awareness and critique of the autobiographical mode is evident even in the title of his installation for the 1993 Whitney Biennial; *I forgot what I was going to say* (1992) [Fig. 21]. The installation featured Durham's trademark mix of faux Native American ethnographic artefacts that combine readymade objects with his own sculptural interventions, written messages and quotations. Such work, Laura Mulvey has described as highlighting “*the misunderstandings and literal displacements in American colonial exchange.*”<sup>139</sup>

With the exception of artists like Durham, Kwon notes that many artists have instead turned to a “*pragmatic or illustrative mode*” of critique.<sup>140</sup> For Kwon, the 'pragmatic mode' involves the artist taking shortcuts in terms of how they make the work; and

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., Kwon, 'The Politics of the Signifier,' p.15

<sup>139</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Survey,' *Jimmie Durham*, London: Phaidon, 1995, p. p.70

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., Kwon, 'The Politics of the Signifier,' p.10

relinquishing certain responsibilities regarding the works reading, in order to “*consolidate politically.*” She argues that the artist’s complacency regarding the signifier’s political potential, which effectively curtails broader readings, is essentially strategic.<sup>141</sup> And, for Kwon, in presenting prematurely consolidated works of art, the artist is responding to some form of institutional expectation. So, paradoxically, Kwon links this form of institutional critique to a notion of complicity. Foster echoes this view in his text, *The Artist as Ethnographer*, where he states that:

*“...the ambiguity of deconstructive positioning, at once inside and outside the institution, can lapse into the duplicity of cynical reason in which artist and institution have it both ways, the one a complement or compensation for the other.”*<sup>142</sup>

So, Kwon is arguing that when the critique from within strategy is combined with an identity-based agenda, it can raise specific problems. Her argument is not with the entire notion of institutional critique. However, Kwon challenges the genre of critical art practice that mimics, for example, the display and cataloguing mechanisms of the ethnographic institution.<sup>143</sup> Within the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Fred Wilson’s installation *Re: Claiming Egypt* (1993) presented mass-produced Egyptian memorabilia in the manner of an ethnographic display to comment on the commodification of black history. I would argue that although Wilson uses similar methods to Durham, such as appropriation and juxtaposition, his installation fails to subvert iconographies of both political art and black art. Even in terms of the works title, in my view, there is a literalness to Wilson’s presentation.

It is clear via this discussion of the work of Durham and Wilson respectively, that an aspect of the artist’s identity (in this instance, race) cannot predetermine the political efficacy of the work of art. However, for Kwon, there is an assumption that a particular artist’s work might be read as political purely on the basis of their ‘difference’ – race, sexuality, gender and so on – in relation to the dominant culture. Kwon notes that this conflation of politics and difference may even influence an artist’s selection for curated projects. She observes that artists compliance with such curatorial agendas at least guarantees visibility. Kwon’s sentiments are echoed in Liz Kotz’s criticism of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, where she observes that:

*Critical work of the past decade has endlessly interrogated the commodification of identity politics, in which producers whether black, Chicano, Asian or gay, are expected to offer up their identity, their “difference,” for the consumption of the mainstream institution and its viewing publics.”*<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., Kwon, ‘The Politics of the Signifier,’ p.10

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer,’ p.196

<sup>143</sup> Renee Green’s *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992/1993) also employed such devices.

<sup>144</sup> Liz Kotz, ‘Video Drone: Whitney Biennial 1993,’ *Artforum International*, v.31, May 1993, p.16

Both Kwon and Kotz describe a type of co-optation that is, ironically, based in a notion of dissent. In this instance, the artist surely becomes captive to his or her identity, and the institution determines the parameters of critique. To conclude this chapter, I want to consider some of the issues raised here in relation to Judith Butler's idea of the 'signifying economy'.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have attempted to address certain issues concerning how critique occurs within a governmental regime. I have argued that historically, a notion of critique fuelled the long term attempts of alternative groups, like Group Material and the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, to challenge the exclusive practices of mainstream art institutions like the Whitney Museum of American Art.

In this examination of critique there emerges a conflict between art and politics, form and content, signifier and signified, within both contemporary art practice and criticism. This tendency is particularly evident within the critical responses to the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Foster, Krauss and Kwon identify a dichotomy that privileges the signified over the signifier. Evidently, this dichotomy has wide ranging and negative implications for contemporary art practice, concerning the artist and the artwork (Foster); the artwork and the audience (Krauss); and, indeed, the artist and the institution (Kwon). *The Politics of the Signifier* specifically reveals issues of complicity and co-optation in the relationship between the politically motivated artist and the institution. However, the co-optation described here differs from that identified by artist Howardina Pindell. For Pindell, the artist eschews his or her politics in order to enter the mainstream. Whereas in Kwon's interpretation of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, politics becomes a commodity and a selling point – indeed, a means to enter the mainstream.

It is my view that the issues emerging here comply with Foucault's notion of critique. For instance, Sussman and her team's groundbreaking exhibition attempted to challenge the very notion of what traditionally constituted a Whitney Biennial. This challenge from within the institution is representative of critique's reflexivity. Equally, the exhibition's unusually inclusive selection and structure were in response to the Whitney's history of exclusive practices; I believe that this highlights critique's dependence on prevalent power relations. Also, the negative critical responses to the 1993 Whitney Biennial emphasised certain counter-productive aspects of the exhibition. I am arguing that Sussman's call for heterogeneity inadvertently created overly prescriptive curatorial strategies. This was surely apparent in the exhibition's reliance on explanatory texts in general – interpretation panels, artist's statements, curators' essays and theoretical texts; and, in Thelma Golden's text specifically. These strategies effectively predetermined the parameters of identity, also of critique. This conflict is in keeping with Foucault's notion of critique's paradox.

I want to conclude by relating the issues I have outlined here to Judith Butler's notion of the 'signifying economy'. To recap, in *Gender Trouble*, Butler challenges a particular tendency within feminist theory that privileges a heterosexual reading of gender. Butler refers to this

binary as a “*signifying economy in which the masculine constitutes the closed circuit of signifier and signified.*”<sup>145</sup> Butler argues that accepting this ‘economy’, whether for critical purposes or otherwise, is to accept received notions of gender. This, she contends, inevitably reinscribes existent power relations.

So how does this idea of the ‘signifying economy’ impact on the issues raised in the *Politics of the Signifier*? According to Butler, this ‘economy’ has broader ramifications that incorporate other types of subordination such as, “*racial, class and heterosexist, to name but a few.*”<sup>146</sup> For Butler, the creation of a binary notion of power relations is problematic, since it fails to recognise the complexity of these relations; that they are interdependent, for example, as Foucault has outlined. For instance, Thelma Golden’s analysis of Lorna Simpson’s work operates along a binary of racial subjugation; basically, ‘black versus white’ that effectively precludes any further interrogation of the work. Equally, Rosalind Krauss insists on a formal reading of Simpson’s installation that works within a ‘signifier versus signified’ dichotomy; that wilfully ignores aspects of signification which the artist intended.

It is my view that the opinions expressed within *the Politics of the Signifier* are, to an extent, vulnerable to the negatively delimiting factors of the ‘signifying economy’. However, I want to consider whether there are any alternatives to this economy. Butler argues that in order to challenge the delimiting aspects of the signifying economy, feminist theory should remain vigilant to its own delimiting tendencies. She states that:

*“...the effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms.”*<sup>147</sup>

I do believe that Kwon offers up a ‘different set of terms’ within her discussion of Jimmie Durham’s installation. Durham’s attempts to simultaneously subvert both the iconographies of both Native American art and political art surely run close to what Butler is suggesting – since he demonstrates an awareness of the negatively delimiting potential of both. In my view Durham via his Whitney Biennial presentation from 1993 installation, offers up a heterogeneous notion of critique that operates on various formal, cultural and political levels. Could such a modus operandi provide a tenable means of sustaining a critical art practice? Is it a way of negotiating Nairne’s seemingly inevitable “*cycle of frustration, energetic independence and... eventual institutionalization*”?

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.15

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 19

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 19

## CHAPTER 2: ILLUSTRATIONS

### THE BLACK EMERGENCY CULTURAL COALITION

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During the spring and summer of 1969, six months of negotiations between the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition and the Whitney Museum of America Art, resulted in an agreement between the two organizations which was to have a profound effect upon the Art Community in general, and upon Black Artists in particular. The agreement, which reflected one of several demands put forth by The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, was that the Whitney Museum would stage a major exhibit of the works of Black Artists, National in scope. It was further agreed that the museum would schedule the exhibit to take place during the art season's "prime time," beginning late 1970 and extending to 1971.

The exhibit, in the words of the museum's director, John H. Baur, would be, "designed to assess the contributions that the best black artists are making the creative life of America today." Speaking for the Whitney Museum, Mr. Baur further stated, "We've taking these steps because we feel that Black Artists have suffered more handicaps than other artists, particularly in bringing their work to the attention of collectors and dealers. But our final judgement of what we buy and show, will rest on quality."

Ignoring an earlier agreement that the work for the exhibit would be selected by a two-man committee consisting of one of the museum's curators and a qualified Black art expert acceptable to both parties, the museum declared that its own curators would choose the show, utilizing the advice of Black Art experts "wherever feasible." We are dealing here with evidence that neither the museum's stated commitment to stage a black Art show during the art seasons prime time 1970-1971, nor its grudging promise to draw upon the advice of Black Art experts have been honored.

Because of the Whitney Museum's discourteous handling of the matter, The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, with whom the agreement to stage a Black show was reached, had to learn through other reliable sources of the museum's rescheduling of the exhibit date to April 1971; a period that could hardly be considered "prime time." As to the selections for the show, our fellow artists across the nation have reported being subjected to such humiliating experiences as having Mr. Robert Doty, apparently the museum's lone selector, enter their studios and demand to see only this or that piece of which he had heard or with which he was previously familiar, at the exclusion of all others. Many Black Artists of outstanding ability have reported being by passed altogether, and no Black curatorial assistance has to our knowledge been drawn upon to date. An overall air of confusion and mistrust has resulted from the lack of information regarding the Whitney's preparation for the show.

With exceptionally competent Black curators such as Edmund B. Gaither, at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts; Dorchester, Mass. and such capable Black Art specialists as Randall J. Craig, of Philadelphia, Evangeline Montgomery, of the Oakland Museum, Dr. Sanelia Lewis, of the Los Angeles County Museum, Floyd Coleman, of the Atlanta University center and Prof. Riddleys of Fisk University, and with forward-looking, sensitive art institutions such as the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Civic Center Museum at Philadelphia; both with successful Black shows behind them, we must seriously question our need to tolerate the callousness of such as the Whitney.

Fig. 16: BECC flyer (detail, undated)



Fig. 17: Group Material, *Americana*, 1985

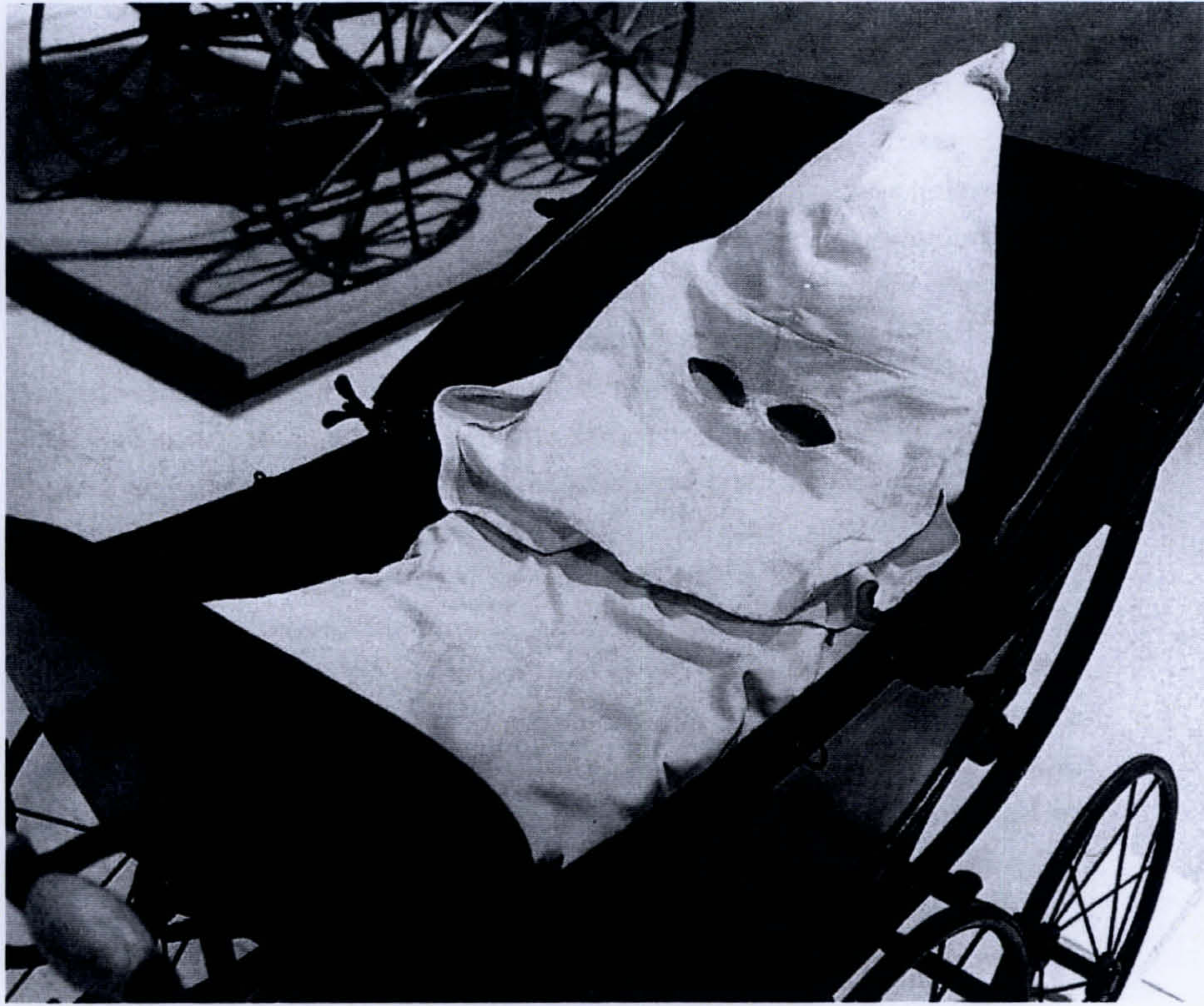


Fig. 18: Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1992 (detail)



Fig. 19: Lorna Simpson, *Hypothetical?*, 1992 (detail)



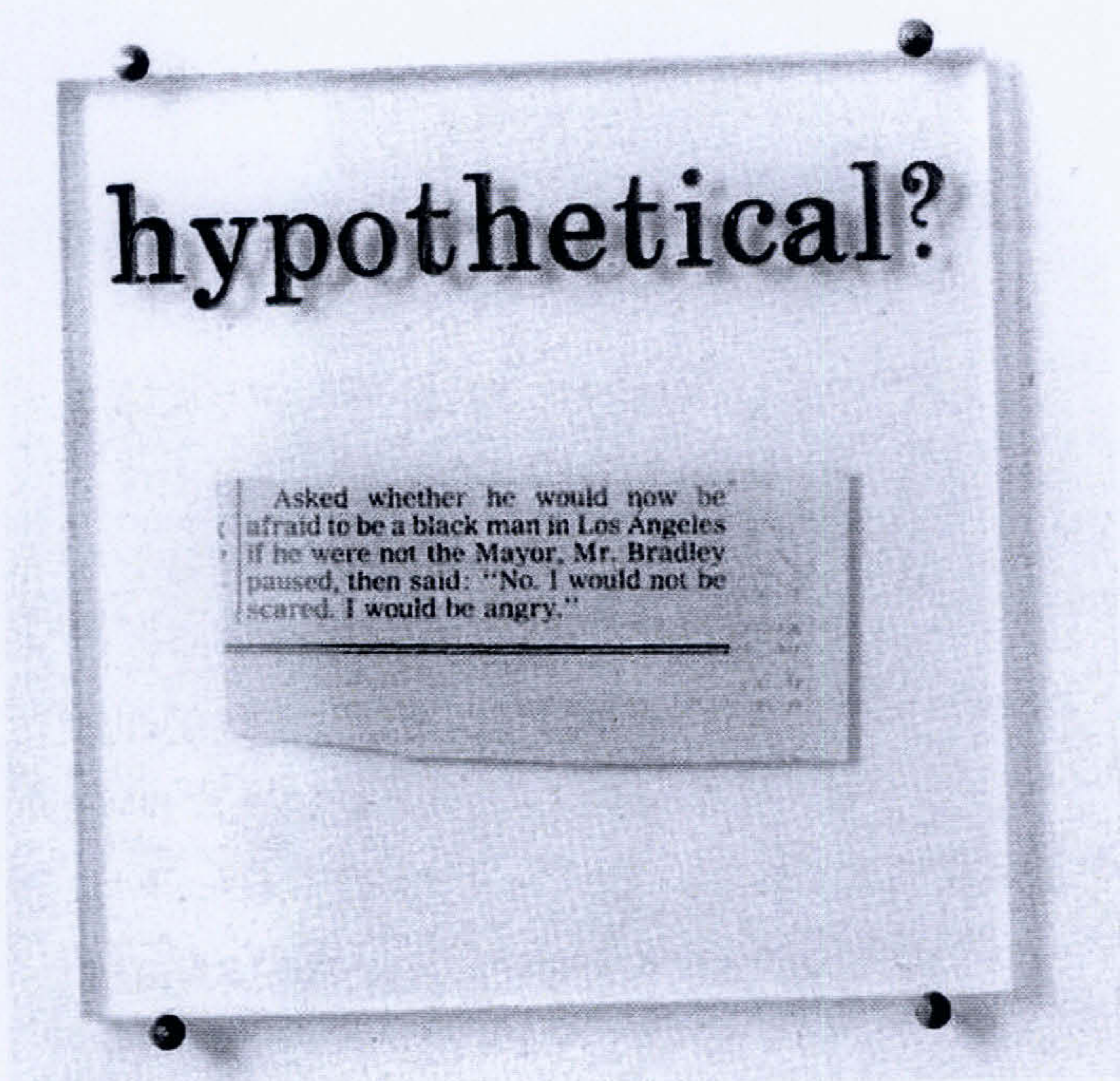


Fig. 20: Lorna Simpson, *Hypothetical?* 1992 (detail)

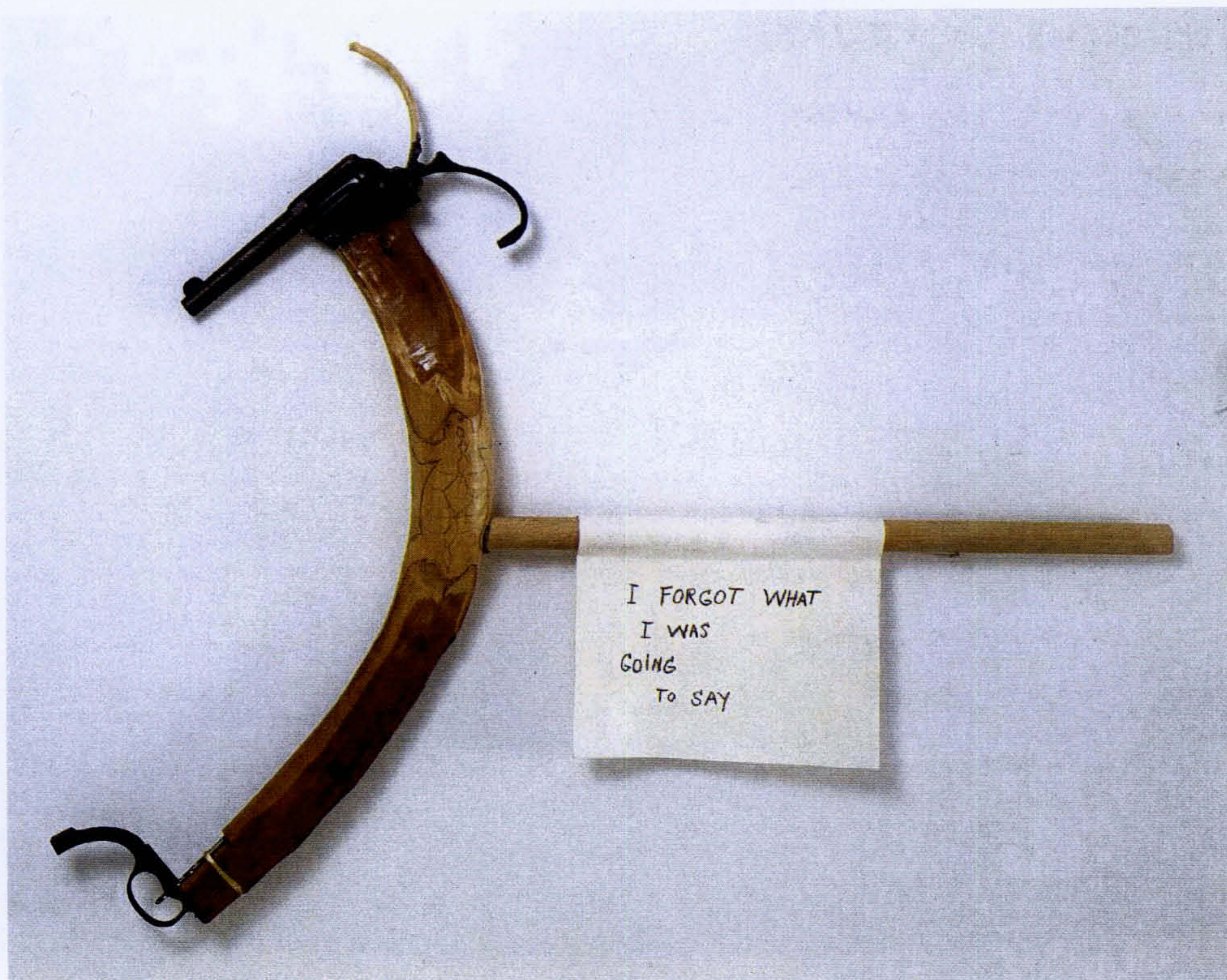


Fig. 21: Jimmie Durham, *I Forgot What I was Going to Say*, 1992 (detail)

## CHAPTER 3

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The overriding concern of this thesis is to consider the possibilities of critique for a contemporary artist as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In order to investigate the issue of critique now, it has been necessary to look back to artistic practices that have, in various ways, attempted to challenge the status quo. The focus for the research has been the contemporary art communities operating in North America since the 1980s; addressing the complex relationship between so-called ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream’ art practices. My aim has been to consider the implications for critique that operates within a Western governmental regime.

Chapters 1 to 3 explore how governmentality operates on systemic, institutional and individual levels, respectively. As I have discussed, Foucault’s notion of governmentality refers to the organisational system that has its basis in the principle of self-regulation, which means that the individual must first learn to govern him or herself in order to govern others. In turn, Foucault describes governmentality as a network of interdependent power relations. Therefore, every organisational entity comprised of individuals – family, school, church, museum, etc – operates within this network. Within this model, Foucault proposes that power is exercised ‘upwardly’ and ‘downwardly’. He also proposes both benign and aggressive applications of this idea.

Chapter 1 addressed how governmentality can work on a systemic level. The chapter builds on Brian Wallis’ connection between a negative political use of public funding for the arts during the Reagan/Bush era and Foucault’s notion of governmentality. As I have outlined, Foucault proposes the use of ‘laws as tactics’ as a key characteristic of a governmental regime. In this particular case study, the use of laws as tactics was evident in the Republicans’ manipulation of the obscenity regulations as a means of controlling the content of certain politically motivated art during the 1980s and 1990s. Via a discussion of self-censorship amongst the alternative sector during the Culture Wars, Chapter 1 recognised a retroactive potential within critique that can reinscribe the very power relations it seeks to challenge. The issue here concerned whether governmentality’s basis in self-regulation and interdependent power relations inevitably compromises critique.

Chapter 2 addressed Foucault’s corresponding idea of how critique operates within a governmental regime. For Foucault, critique is simultaneously, dependent on power,

reflexive and paradoxical. As I have noted, Foucault's notion of governmentality allows us the potential to imagine that prevalent power relations operate at all levels – from individual to institution to state and so on; and these power relations are fluid rather than fixed. It is my view that his equally complex and contradictory notion of critique allows us the potential to consider challenging power relations in a non-binary manner.

In relation to this, Chapter 2 discussed the implications of governmentality on an institutional level. My case study investigated the ongoing relationship between New York's alternative art sector and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The chapter looked at the sector's diverse attempts to challenge the perceived exclusive practices of the museum. Sandy Nairne refers to a "*cycle of frustration, energetic independence and, over a number of years, eventual institutionalization*" that he observes within alternative practice at this time. Nairne's notion provides an example of the interdependent power relations that provide the conditions necessary for the existence of alternative practice in this instance. For example, Nairne acknowledges the prevalent power relations that caused the frustration, provoking alternative spaces into action. Equally, these same power relations aided the institutionalisation that ultimately led to the demise of many such spaces. For instance, George Bush's restrictions on NEA funding meant that alternative practices that depended on federal funding became exceedingly vulnerable. A primary issue raised in Chapter 2 concerns the possibility of inclusion without co-optation. Equally, Nairne's "cycle" begs the question of whether alternative art practice can accommodate longevity. Or, is it necessarily temporary?

Chapter 3 will investigate the relationship between critique and governmentality on the level of the individual. The chapter specifically examines the critical art practice of contemporary American artist David Hammons.

David Hammons is renowned for his contrary *modus operandi* and critical art practice, which I will attempt to describe over the course of this chapter. However, I want to start by considering Hammons' achievements on a purely factual level. I have chosen Hammons as the subject of this chapter, in part, because of the longevity of his career as a significant international artist, which spans over thirty odd years. Importantly, David Hammons commands great respect from artists, curators and critics alike. Consequently, he has exhibited at some of the most renowned galleries and museums internationally; and received accolades including at least one honorary

doctorate, plus prestigious cash awards including the Prix de Rome and MacArthur Foundation award respectively.<sup>1</sup>

Hammons' influence on artists across the generations is certainly worth mentioning. For example, the young British artist Chris Ofili's use of Afrocentric iconography arguably owes much to the influence of David Hammons. It is my view that Ofili's now trademark use of decorated elephant dung within his paintings, pays homage to David Hammons' series of elephant dung sculptures produced in 1978.<sup>2</sup> In these works, Hammons ornately decorated the dung-balls with foil and beaded dressmakers' pins; he then incorporated elements such as, a toy cart, toy elephants, peanuts, etc, to produce sculptural tableaux. Hammons also commands respect amongst his peers. For example, in a 1995 interview with Dirk Snauwaert, the artist Jimmie Durham praises the tangential means by which Hammons articulates critique within his work. Durham observes that:

*"David Hammons doesn't talk about the Black situation, except that that's what he always does. From way over in the left field, from a different place, from a place that turns out to be strangely within the art discourse – the discourse we wanted all along."*<sup>3</sup>

David Hammons' success is notable by any terms. But it is my view that as a black practitioner, Hammons' longevity as an important artist, and his art world status are particularly noteworthy. My concern is how Hammons has managed to maintain this status, particularly in the light of the exclusive practices prevalent within the contemporary art world that I have highlighted over the previous two chapters. Has David Hammons avoided Nairne's "*cycle of frustration, energetic independence and eventual institutionalization*"?

Now, my interest in Hammons is not solely down to his commercial and critical success. Despite this success (or perhaps due to it), Hammons occupies a notably contrary position within the art world. As I will describe, David Hammons operates a modus operandi that is based on unlimited presence, in which he is often at odds with the conventions of the art world. As a result, curators and critics have also dubbed him "*elusive and evanescent*,"<sup>4</sup> "*acerbic*" and "*infamous*,"<sup>5</sup> also "*arrogant and overrated*."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hammons received an honorary doctorate from the Pratt Institute, New York in 1992, and a MacArthur Foundation Award of \$290,000 in 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Critics including Olu Oguibe and Dan Glaister respectively have also noted this connection between Hammons and Ofili. See, Oguibe at the House of World Cultures Forum 1 Archive, at: <http://www.hkw.de/forum/forum1/doc/sep-dec99/1102-2220-Oguibe.txt>. Also, Dan Glaister's review of Chris Ofili in *The Guardian*, Wednesday December 2 1998, at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/turnerpeoplespoll/story/0,13945,1058541,00.html>

<sup>3</sup> 'Interview with Dirk Snauwaert,' *Jimmie Durham*, Phaidon, 1995, p.29

<sup>4</sup> See, press release for Hammons' solo exhibition at White Cube gallery London, 27 September – 2 November 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Coco Fusco, 'Wreaking Havoc on the Signified: The Art of David Hammons,' *Frieze* #22, May 1995, p.36

<sup>6</sup> Manthia Diawara, 'Make it Funky,' *Artforum International*, May 1998, p.120

Initially, in this chapter, I will examine the contradiction of Hammons' practice – in particular, his work and *modus operandi* – in relation to Foucault's notion of critique. I will look at examples of Hammons work spanning the past thirty years; also, his relationship with the various apparatuses of the contemporary art world – the art press and auction houses, for example.

In *The Politics of the Signifier*, Hal Foster proposes an alternative tactic for critical art practices that aim to avoid the kind of negatively delimiting effects of the institution that I outlined in my discussion of Lorna Simpson's work for the 1993 Whitney Biennial.<sup>7</sup> To recap: via Foster, Krauss and Kwon respectively, I argue that both art practice and criticism that exercise a binary notion of power relations are liable to reinscribe the very hierarchical power relations they seek to defeat. The area I discuss particularly concerns the insistence on a binary relation between signifier and signified; that relates to Judith Butler's description of 'the signifying economy.' Because of this limited notion of critique, Foster observes that certain artists in the 1993 Whitney Biennial failed to address the context within which they presented their work; and, they failed to consider the potential for the institutional apparatus to affect the overall reading of their work. This, he regards as a weakness in the critical efficacy of the work since, according to Foster, it neglects "*its own siting within different discursive institutions.*"<sup>8</sup> I do not think that Foster necessarily means that the work should have been literally 'about' the institution. However, Foster appears to be arguing that, in the case of the Whitney Biennial, a tactical shift may have been necessary on the part of the artist to avoid negative delimitation. I would argue that Group Material's contribution to the 1985 Whitney Biennial, *Americana*, is an example of the type of reflexivity that Foster describes. Their installation of work by a diverse range of artists acknowledged the museum's exclusive history, and addressed this issue by subverting that history but also spoke of broader issues concerning perceived American values.

It is my view that Foster is calling for reflexivity within art practice that operates beyond the 'autobiographical mode' which he evidently finds so problematic. Critical practices that simultaneously operate on different levels are surely one example of the heterogeneity that Butler calls for in challenging the negative effects of a 'signifying economy'.

I want to consider whether David Hammons' *modus operandi* is a tenable element of a critical art practice within Foster's terms. Is Hammons' *modus operandi* a means for him to acknowledge and challenge his own 'siting within different discursive

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<sup>7</sup> By negatively delimiting, I am referring to the situation that Kwon describes where the institution defines the artist in terms of their difference, and that difference then determines the artist's engagement with the institution.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Foster, 'The Politics of the Signifier,' p.9

institutions'? In order to discuss Hammons' modus operandi, I must first establish the parameters of his practice, addressing the various aspects of his work, which I will also discuss in relation to Foucault's notion of critique. Does Hammons offer a model for heterogeneity within his practice?

## 2.0 DAVID HAMMONS' PRACTICE: INTRODUCTION

In this section, I will give a brief overview of David Hammons' practice to date to establish the parameters of his work and modus operandi. My aim in doing so, is to raise the issue of critique within his practice. And, specifically, to provide a basis from which to consider how Hammons' work and modus operandi relate to the three aspects of critique that Foucault has identified; that is, concerning critique's reflexivity, paradox and dependence on power. In Chapter 4, I will look specifically at one aspect of Hammons' practice, photography, in detail, which I will discuss in relation to Judith Butler's idea of the performative.

So, first to outline some basic aspects of Hammons' career so far. Born in Springfield, Illinois in 1943, David Hammons has been exhibiting his art since 1970.<sup>9</sup> There are contrary accounts of Hammons' art education. For example, Kay Larson, states that "*Hammons briefly attended Chouinard and Otis art institutes in Los Angeles near the end of the '60s.*"<sup>10</sup> Other accounts<sup>11</sup> state that Hammons had significant formal training in Fine Art, having studied at the Chouinard Art Institute (1966-68), and the Otis Art Institute of the Parson's School of Design (1968-72).<sup>12</sup> Hammons' distinct art practice includes performance, assemblage-based sculpture, public art, photography<sup>13</sup> and printmaking; in recent years, he has also made a foray into working with artists' books. His work may also take the form of seemingly impromptu interventions on New York's streets that may be performance-related or sculptural. Also, as I will discuss, he has often collaborated with practitioners from other disciplines. The overriding question I want to consider in this section concerns to what degree is this diverse practice provides a means for Hammons to avoid negative delimitation.

David Hammons' practice is decidedly itinerant in nature; the artist literally garners his materials from the streets, thrift shops and flea markets of his adopted city of New York. He also adapts this process to incorporate the local vernacular when he shows

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<sup>9</sup> See, Robert Sill, *David Hammons in the Hood*, Illinois State Museum, 1993, p.61

<sup>10</sup> Kay Larson, 'David Hammons,' *Galleries Magazine*, Feb/Mar 1991, p. 102

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Sill, p.60

<sup>12</sup> I note this because, conversely, Hammons has acquired a reputation for producing a transient, ephemeral brand of art that incorporates the urban vernacular traditions of New York and that almost borders on Outsider Art. This reputation is arguably something that the artist has cultivated. See, for example, 'No Wonder: David Hammons and Louise Neri,' *Parkett*, #31, 1992, p.50

<sup>13</sup> Hammons does not generally take photographs himself, but has worked with a photographer to produce some 'staged-for-the-camera' sculptural works that I will discuss in Chapter 4.

his work internationally.<sup>14</sup> I would describe Hammons' practice as steeped in the vernacular traditions of New York's various communities from which he takes his inspiration. So, for example, in Peter Schjeldahl's article, *The Walker: Rediscovering New York with David Hammons*, he gives an account of some of the sights experienced during an evenings promenading with the artist. He recalls:

*"During our stroll, Hammons paused to behold casual marvels: a peculiar arrangement of potted plants braving the chill air outside a Japanese barbershop...or a swath of gleaming aluminium foil under an unused door of a restaurant, held down by bricks to block drafts."*<sup>15</sup>

Such sights undoubtedly inform the language of Hammons' art and his particularly distinctive use of the readymade. Consequently, Hammons' trademark is his use of the detritus of everyday urban living – the discarded beer bottle tops, cigarette butts, fried chicken bones and wine bottles, dirt, grease and hair – that he has made synonymous with a certain idea of black culture. Related to this is Hammons' overriding concern with symbolic orders that he seeks in all aspects of American culture. This concern extends, for example, from the spiritual significance of hair in contemporary shamanistic ritual to the cultural relevance of the latest Nike Air Max™ running shoes, within American society. As, Joshua Dexter reiterates in a review of Hammons' 1989 exhibition at Exit Art in New York, "*As a bricoleur Hammons show flashes of inspiration in his ability to transform found objects or 'poor' materials into constellations of symbolic meaning.*"<sup>16</sup>

In recent years, David Hammons' work has extended beyond the playful and sardonic observations on African American culture, for which he is most famous, to more abstract works that incorporate his fascination with the symbolic within both art and life. In Section 2.1, I will go on to discuss Hammons' use of both abstraction as well as figuration relative to Foucault's notion of critique.

Much of David Hammons' known activity extends beyond what might strictly be termed 'the work' – that is, the sculpture, the performance, the printmaking, etc, for which he is famous. In fact, I will argue that Hammons' reputation is equally for his *modus operandi* – that is, the way that he operates within the art world; how he deals with galleries, curators, the art press, other artists, auction houses, and so on. Hammons' *modus operandi* is distinct, in that, he oscillates between near non-engagement with the art world, and selling to the highest bidder. Consequently, Hammons has gained (if not cultivated) a mythology based on a degree of notoriety, in

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<sup>14</sup> In his 1998 project at Yamaguchi ICA in Japan, Hammons combined materials such as tatamis (Japanese floor cushions) ripped to look like grass; and pop-corn attached to branches to reference Japanese cherry blossom to reference this particular cultural context.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, *The Walker: Rediscovering New York with David Hammons*, *The New Yorker*, 23-30<sup>th</sup> December, 2002, at <http://www.newyorker.com/critics/art/>

<sup>16</sup> Joshua Dexter, 'New York in Review,' *Arts Magazine*, October 1989, v.64, p.99

which he is often at odds with the conventions of the art world – or, indeed, any other perceived status quo. For example, Eugene Pattron gives an account of a particularly contentious work by Hammons. In Washington during 1989, Hammons showed *How Ya Like Me Know* (1989); a public art work in the form of a large scale painted billboard, depicting the African American politician Jesse Jackson, sporting white skin, blue eyes and blond hair [Fig. 22]. Hammons intended the piece to comment on the unlikelihood of Jackson becoming president given his race. Members of the local black community, unfamiliar with Hammons' practice, took offence at the work and unceremoniously battered it using sledgehammers. In *How Ya Like Me Know*, Hammons was at odds, not only with the status quo that forestalled Jackson's political career, but also with a conservatism within the black community that prevented certain members from seeing the irony in his work.<sup>17</sup> Pertinently, when asked of his view of the work's vandalism, Jesse Jackson responded that, "*reaction is an extension of the art. You drop a big rock in the water – the issue is not just the rock. It's also the ripples. This is a big rock.*"<sup>18</sup> I think that this comment is important since Jackson recognises the symbiosis between David Hammons' work and his modus operandi. Jackson's analogy of the 'rock in water' also raises the issue that it is near impossible to separate Hammons' modus operandi from his work, so it will be necessary to discuss both in tandem to some degree.

Over the course of his career, David Hammons has worked within broad range of environments that encompass alternative spaces, non-gallery spaces like 'the street' and 'the beach'; plus, museums and commercial galleries. His work has appeared both in organised exhibitions and impromptu interventions. So, for example, in 1971, Hammons had his first solo exhibition at the commercial space Brockman Gallery in Los Angeles. Arguably, his most famous performance-based intervention, *Biz-aard Ball Sale* (1983), took place on the street at Cooper Square in New York.<sup>19</sup> In 1997, Hammons showed his installation, *Blues and the Abstract Truth*, at the Kunsthalle Bern. And, in 2002, Hammons participated in the final exhibition at Exit Art, the alternative space in New York where he had previously shown in 1989.<sup>20</sup> In Section 2.2, I will discuss to what degree this diversity of context informs Hammons' modus operandi and indeed constitutes a critical aspect of the artist's overall practice. But

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<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that when the same damaged work showed at Jack Tilton Gallery in 1991, Hammons surrounded it with a cordon of sledgehammers.

<sup>18</sup> Eugene Pattron, 'Painting of White Jesse Jackson Attacked in D.C.,' *New Art Examiner*, v.17, February 1990, p.11

<sup>19</sup> This performance consisted of the artist selling snowballs to the public during winter of 1983. Photographs from the intervention have been widely distributed; one particular image made the front cover of *Art in America* (February 1992) and *Galleries Magazine* (February/March 1991) respectively.

<sup>20</sup> *The End: An Independent Vision of Contemporary Culture 1982-2000*, Exit Art, New York, January - April 2000



first, I will start this examination of David Hammons' practice by discussing his work in relation to Foucault's notion of critique.

## 2.1 DAVID HAMMONS' WORK & FOUCAULT'S NOTION OF CRITIQUE: REFLEXIVITY

In this section, I will discuss works from three different decades of David Hammons' career. So, I will start by briefly addressing Hammons' work from the 1970s in relation to Foucault's notion of critique's reflexivity.

David Hammons' early work, which consisted largely of body prints, received both commercial and critical success during the early 1970s.<sup>21</sup> These works, he made by pressing his grease-covered clothes, skin and hair onto board, and then dusting the greasy imprint with chalk or pigment. Within his body prints, Hammons directly addressed overtly political issues such as black civil rights. For example, *Injustice Case* (1973) referenced the enforced restraint of the Black Panther activist, Bobby Seale, during the Chicago Eight trial [Fig. 23].<sup>22</sup> The image, made entirely using Hammons' body print technique, depicts a black male bound to a chair and gagged. The American flag frames the work. This image was very much in keeping with the political tenor of the times, when, as I outline, American artists and activists alike, actively contested political issues.

In later body prints, Hammons began to abstract his depiction of the black body. So, in works such as *Spade* (1974), he juxtaposed the playing card symbol of 'the spade', with an imprint of his own face, skin and hair [Fig. 24]. The allusion to the racial stereotype was unequivocal in this work. In an interview with Kellie Jones in 1986, Hammons outlined his motivation for using the spade as a motif. He explained:

*"I was trying to figure out why Black people were called spades, as opposed to clubs. Because I remember being called a spade once, and I didn't know what it meant; nigger I knew but spade I still don't."*<sup>23</sup>

In his body prints, Hammons conflates the relationship between signifier and signified. For example, in *Spade*, specifically, Hammons overloads the meaning of the term by simultaneously presenting its conflicting meanings – as word within the work's title, as a playing card symbol, a racial slur, and a manual tool – within one work of art. It is

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<sup>21</sup> By 1973, Hammons had also begun to work with sculptural assemblages and performance.

<sup>22</sup> The Chicago Eight trial refers to the indictment of Rennie Davis, David Dellinger, John Froines, Tom Haiden, Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin and Bobby Seale for 'crossing state lines with the intent to incite violence'. The men had taken part in the 1968 Democratic National Convention to protest the war in Vietnam and racism America. On 29<sup>th</sup> October 1969, Seale was bound and gagged for using abusive language towards the judge. He received five years in prison for contempt of court. See, <http://www.law.umckc.edu/faculty/projects/trials/Chicago7/SealeB.htm>

<sup>23</sup> 'Interview with Kellie Jones,' printed in, *Discourses: conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, eds, Russell Ferguson, William Olander, Marcia Tucker and Karen Fuss, Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990, p.210

also worth noting that critics have described these overtly political works in terms of their aesthetic complexity. In 1970, J.E. Young mentioned how Hammons' body prints seemed to defy definition in terms of their medium. He noted that:

*"These pictures which look as though they were photographically derived, but in fact are not, seem midway between printing and painting."*<sup>24</sup>

I would argue that these works, apparently concerned with stereotype, attempt to subvert linguistic and aesthetic delimitation. Hammons achieves this through an overloading of meaning and an innovative use of technique. Arguably, Hammons employs a similar overload of meaning to that employed in Group Material's *Americana*. This brings me to the final aspect of David Hammons' body prints that I want to discuss in relation to Foucault's notion of critique's reflexivity.

In the indexical nature of Hammons' body prints, the artist literally has to enact the role of 'the spade', which ensures that he remains inseparable from the stereotype to which he refers. I would argue that the works are performative in that they run very close to Butler's idea of how drag subverts gender norms. Hammons inhabits a particular subject position – in this case, the racial stereotype – precisely in order to subvert it. This leads me to consider David Joselit's reading of Hammons' body prints. Joselit, in his essay *Towards a Genealogy of Flatness*, considers the legacies of Greenberg's notion of flatness as a characteristic of modernist painting. He cites Hammons' body prints as an example of a post-modern notion of flatness that deflates both optical and psychological depth in favour of a visuality in which "*identity manifests itself as a culturally conditioned play of stereotype.*"<sup>25</sup> For Joselit, post-modern flatness represents:

*"...a powerful metaphor for the price we pay in transforming ourselves into images – a compulsory self spectacularization which is the necessary condition of entering the public sphere in the world of late capitalism."*<sup>26</sup>

Joselit's point concerning the repercussions of 'in transforming ourselves into images' is an important one. It is worth noting that by the mid 1970s, Hammons moved away from making body prints, ambivalent at the commercial success the work was having given its political subject matter.<sup>27</sup> Joselit describes Hammons' wilful conflation of subject and object in works such as *Spade* or *Injustice Case*, as the artist's literal "*occupation of a stereotype.*"<sup>28</sup> It is my view that this 'occupation' that occurs in Hammons' use of indexicality, where he assumes the role of activist Bobby Seale or the eponymous 'spade', fulfils at least one criterion of Foucault's notion of critique. Here, I

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<sup>24</sup> J.E. Young, 'Two Generations of Black Artists: Brockman Gallery,' *Art International*, v. 14, October 1970, p.74

<sup>25</sup> David Joselit, 'Towards a Genealogy of Flatness,' *Art History*, March 2000, p.20

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Joselit, p.20

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 'Interview with Kellie Jones,' p.210

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., Joselit, p.27

am arguing that such works are reflexive with regard to the artist's identification with the subject as means of critiquing racism.

## 2.2 DAVID HAMMONS' WORK & FOUCAULT'S NOTION OF CRITIQUE: PARADOX

The second work of Hammons that I want to address here comes from the 1980s, which I will discuss in relation to Foucault's notion of critique's paradox.

It is my view that whilst David Hammons' concern for identity politics has not waned over his career, he has moved towards less overt depictions of race. So, for example, in 1985 Hammons produced *Delta Spirit*, a beach hut designed by the architect Jerry Barr,<sup>29</sup> in New York's Battery Park.<sup>30</sup> Hammons constructed the thirty-six foot hexagonal wooden hut (complete with porch, pitched roof, washing line and picket fence) out of found lumber gathered from Harlem's streets [Fig. 25]. For Hammons, the work was a celebration of Afrocentric vernacular architecture, or as he put it in his 1986 interview with Kellie Jones, "...that Negritude architecture. Nothing fits, but everything works...everything is a thirty-second of an inch off."<sup>31</sup> Adorned with Hammons' trademark bottle-tops, the ad hoc structure made direct reference to a specifically working class African American experience. According to Hammons, such architecture is distinctly Pan-American in that it unites the houses of the southern states with, for example, Harlem's magazine vendors' stands.

I want to briefly draw attention to the relevance of the collaborative aspect of this project. Jerry Barr oversaw the building of the structure; and as a finale to the project, the experimental Jazz musician, Sun Ra performed in front of the work. In David Hammons' interview with Kellie Jones, when asked about his role in this collaborative project, Hammons playfully cast doubt over his role as its author, declaring that:

*"No, that was all Jerry's [idea]. I don't know how to stack wood, to keep wood from falling down...He knew how to get the best out of a piece of wood. I was just going to build a lean-to, a little shed, and take all the money and go home."*<sup>32</sup>

Collaborations such as these recur through out Hammons' career.<sup>33</sup> They are significant in that they blur (sometimes problematically) the boundaries of authorship

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<sup>29</sup> Tom Finkelpearl also mentions artist Angela Valeria as a further collaborator on this project. See, 'On the Ideology of Dirt' in, *Rousing the Rubble*, P.S.1 Museum and MIT Press, 1991, p.81

<sup>30</sup> Creative Time, an alternative organisation that promoted visual and performative art in disused spaces, commissioned *Art on the Beach* (at Battery Park landfill site) of which Hammons' installation was part. The project took place annually between 1978 and 1988. Ibid., Ault, p.39

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 'Interview with Kellie Jones,' p.216

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 'Interview with Kellie Jones,' p.216

<sup>33</sup> For example, in 2000, Butch Morris conducted *Conduction # 113: Interflight* as part of Hammons' *Global Fax Festival* in Madrid and performed by Graham Haynes, Joan Saura, Agusti Fernandez and J.A. Deane. Morris is a composer whose practice incorporates aspects of new music, Jazz, and improvisation using electronic and mechanical instrumentation.

and ownership in regard to the work of art. For example, Hammons has been involved in disputes over copyright with collaborators such as photographers Bruce Talamon and Alex Harsley respectively. In 1997, Hammons collaborated with Harsley to produce *Phat Free* a video work featuring Hammons kicking a bucket along a New York street at night. This piece featured in the 1997 Whitney Biennial. In a recent correspondence with photographer Dawoud Bey, he gives this insight into the problematics of David Hammons' collaborative practice. Bey notes:

*"This video ... was a collaboration between Hammons and Harsley, though Harsley's name has seldom appeared in the screening. There is currently a dispute going on around the lack of credit given to Harsley for this piece, since he was entirely responsible for the video's production, shooting and editing the finished piece and sound. My point here is that all of Hammons' video and photo-based work as such has been extremely collaborative in nature."*<sup>34</sup>

One can argue that Hammons intentionally problematises the idea of artistic expertise by playing off his own practice against those of architect Jerry Barr, and musician Sun Ra, both experts within their respective fields. However, when working with artists of lesser stature than himself, Hammons' relationship with his collaborators could arguably be seen as exploitative.

So, to return to consider the relation between David Hammons' *Delta Spirit* and Foucault's notion of critique. It is my view that *Delta Spirit* complies with Foucault's notion of critique's paradox on two counts. Firstly, in his use of African American vernacular architecture, Hammons paradoxically invokes the presence of the black, working class subject via its absence. It could be argued that this paradox provides a means for Hammons to challenge the commodification of the black body via its visual representation within politically motivated contemporary art. In *Make it Funky*, Manthia Diawara's analysis of David Hammons' oeuvre, he supports this assessment. In fact, Diawara takes this idea one step further, suggesting that the absence of the black body creates an opportunity. He contends that Hammons' evacuation of the black body from his work "*leaves a vacuum to be filled by identities, images and stereotypes*" and as such, he "*provides us with new ways of seeing the world that we consume and that consumes us as images and stereotypes.*"<sup>35</sup> Secondly, Hammons problematises his role as the author of the project by working collaboratively with practitioners of arguably equal stature. And, in suggesting his own role in the project was subservient to that of Jerry Barr, particularly given that the work is accredited to Hammons. In my view, Hammons' collaborations are part of a critical approach to art making similar to that of Group Material, which challenges still prevalent modernist values such as originality and expertise. The paradox is that Hammons is still surely

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<sup>34</sup> Dawoud Bey, email correspondence, 4<sup>th</sup> March 2003

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Diawara, p.125

the orchestrator of the project, despite his protestations. Equally, his attempt critique such values can unintentionally prove to be exploitative.

### 2.3 DAVID HAMMONS' WORK & FOUCAULT'S NOTION OF CRITIQUE: DEPENDENCE ON POWER

My third example of David Hammons' work that I want to discuss comes from the year 2000; here I will consider how Hammons' work relates to Foucault's idea of critique's dependence on existent power relations.

As I have mentioned, certain areas of Hammons' work are decidedly more abstract than those I have addressed so far. For example, in his installation *Global Fax Festival* (2000), Hammons suspended nine fax machines up in the rafters of the Palacio Cristal, a historic glass pavilion located in Madrid [Fig. 26]. Throughout the exhibition, faxes sporadically spewed down to litter the pavilion floor. The faxes were solicited from the public and random in terms of their content. Like much of Hammons' work, *Global Fax Festival's* tension resides in a play of opposites. Here, Hammons juxtaposes the fixity of the ornate iron and glass architecture against the subtle chaos created by the faxes; equally, the technological advances of the Industrial Age posited against those of the digital. Importantly, the success of this juxtaposition is reliant on the participation of those individuals sending the faxes, rather than Hammons directly, which echoes his more overtly collaborative projects.

Abstract works such as *Global Fax Festival* have become more prevalent in Hammons' oeuvre in recent years. Installations like *Blues and the Abstract Truth* (1997) and, most recently, *Concerto in Black and Blue* (2002), have been similarly interactive and minimal in their means. For example, in *Concerto in Black and Blue* shown at Ace Gallery in New York, Hammons presented several pitch-black rooms. Viewers were given tiny LED flashlights to illuminate their way. When pressed, the flashlights sent shafts of blue light across the darkened space. Again, the viewer literally activated the work of art. For the preview, a female Japanese singer performed traditional Japanese music live in the darkness. To me, such works are primarily concerned with confounding expectation. In his account of the Ace Gallery preview, Norman Douglas recalls one viewer asking, "Why didn't he have jazz?"<sup>36</sup> I am arguing that Hammons' abstract works provide a foil to his more figurative, overtly politicised works, particularly within an art market where identity politics is a commodity. Such tactics surely make Hammons' work less easy to define and delimit. Works such as *Global Fax Festival* do not make a direct reference to the cultural identity of the artist, but

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<sup>36</sup> Norman Douglas, *David Hammons: Concerto in Black and Blue*, [http://www.tribes.org/reviews/nd\\_david\\_hammonds\\_concert\\_0103.html](http://www.tribes.org/reviews/nd_david_hammonds_concert_0103.html), 2002

given that Hammons is the artist, issues of representation become an implicit rather than explicit factor. It is my view then, that these works challenge the very notion of cultural specificity within Hammons' art. As Diawara reiterates, Hammons' work "*always takes a more circuitous approach to the politics of representation.*"<sup>37</sup> And, as Hammons himself has noted:

*"Everyone knows I'm black, so my work doesn't have to shout it out anymore...I am black. The work will automatically be thought of as part of my African-American culture."*<sup>38</sup>

As Hal Foster outlines in his notion of the "autobiographical mode," cultural specificity can be problematically taken for granted, especially within the case of politically motivated art. Foster's particular concern is when the artist's work relates directly to some primary aspect of their identity, so that the artist is ultimately expected to perform their difference via their work. As I explain, these tendencies can unnecessarily restrict an artist's work. This issue of confounding expectation is arguably crucial to Hammons' modus operandi, which I will address directly in Section 3 of this chapter.

Before discussing how these abstract works relate to Foucault, I want to briefly contextualise the issue of abstraction within Hammons' practice. Amongst a diverse list of influences that include film director Federico Fellini, Jazz musician Miles Davis and architect Simon Rodia, Hammons also cites certain abstract, assemblage-oriented sculptors, such as Senga Nengudi and Noah Purifoy as being extremely important to the development of his early practice. Common to both these artists' respective practices is a use of the detritus of everyday living, and a concern for abstraction over figuration. Equally, both artists have a contentious relation to what might be termed 'the political' within contemporary art. For example, Purifoy was a key figure in the Californian assemblage art movement of the 1960s and '70s. He is perhaps most famous for *66 Signs Neon*, a series of abstract sculptures which the artist contentiously made from the debris of the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles. Purifoy, himself a civil rights activist, saw this work as a means of reviving the damaged city. Despite his civil rights background, Purifoy was extremely reticent about the merits of what he termed "protest art." In an interview from 2002, the veteran Purifoy articulated the problem of the commodification of politically oriented practice, and differentiated his own position, stating that, "*Some African Americans are still doing protest art because it sells well... Protest art is not the best part of yourself. Its underneath.*"<sup>39</sup> In my view,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., Diawara, p.123

<sup>38</sup> From, 'Interview with Robert Storr (1991),' reprinted in, 'Black Light: David Hammons and the Poetics of Emptiness,' Glenn Ligon, *Artforum International*, September 2004, p.243

<sup>39</sup> 'Interview with Roy Hurst,' *Noah Purifoy: Art as Elegant Wreckage*, <http://www.npr.org/features/feature.php>

Purifoy's act of regeneration evident in *66 Signs Neon*, reads as a profoundly political gesture, although it may not be in keeping with the kind of oppositional and coalitional politics of many art practitioners at that time. The work responds creatively to the destruction of the city, it also refuses to comply with the status quo of politically motivated art practice.

I now want to discuss Senga Nengudi's work. In the mid-1970s, Nengudi produced a series of dynamic installations made by stretching, knotting and tying women's worn nylon stockings and tights to create environments and soft sculptures within the gallery space [Fig. 27]. She sometimes filled these items with amorphous materials like sand, or stuffed them with rubber tubing as part of live performances. *The Panty Hose Pieces* have been described in terms of their relation to the body, their performativity and relation to dance.<sup>40</sup> According to Hammons, during the 1970s, Nengudi's work received hostile reception from the black art community, many of whom were making overtly political art, and who failed to see the value in her abstraction. Hammons gives the following account:

*"No one would even speak to her because we were all doing political art. She couldn't relate. She wouldn't even show around other Black artist her work was so 'outrageously' abstract. Senga came to New York [from Los Angeles] and still no one would deal with her because she wasn't doing 'Black Art'".<sup>41</sup>*

In my view, Hammons' comments, like those of Judith Butler, recognise the potential for identity politics to create its own exclusive practices. So, that here the definition of 'political' is ultimately too rigid to encompass Nengudi's work. Equally, Nengudi resists the label of "Black Art" as defined by many within the black art community. Interestingly, Nengudi has described these works in relation to the changes in the female form during pregnancy. Also, in the conception of these works, many shaped like breasts, Nengudi evidently considered the role of black wet nurses "*suckling child after child – their own as well as others – until their breasts rested on their knees, their energies drained.*"<sup>42</sup> Conversely, Nengudi's motivations for the work reside in body politics as much as race; yet, because the works were rendered in abstract rather than figurative form, the black art community ostracised Nengudi. In his reference to Purifoy and Nengudi's respective practices, Hammons raises the issue of political signification and its relativity to context, which is surely contestable.

My aim here is not to privilege abstraction over figuration, but to propose that within David Hammons' practice these two aspects exist within a dynamic relation. So, one

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<sup>40</sup> Meghan Dailey, 'Senga Nengudi: Thomas Erben Gallery New York,' *Artforum International*, November 2003, p.191

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Interview with Kellie Jones,' p.209

<sup>42</sup> Senga Nengudi, quoted in Leslie King Hammond's essay, 'Theme and Content,' in *Art as a Verb* exhibition catalogue, Maryland Institute, 1989, (unpaginated)

allows the other to occur. In my opinion, abstraction could not occur in isolation of figuration in this instance, and vice versa. So, how do works like *Global Fax Festival* and *Concerto in Black and Blue* relate to Foucault's notion of critique? I think that in Hammons' practice, abstraction is as much a response to the overly prescriptive demands of what Hammons refers to as 'Black Art' to those of the art market that has commodified notions of 'difference'. As such, I would argue that these works respond to prevalent power relations and are, therefore, dependent on that power for their existence; and so fulfil the third aspect of Foucault's notion of critique.

### **3.0 DAVID HAMMONS' MODUS OPERANDI & FOUCAULT'S NOTION OF CRITIQUE: INTRODUCTION**

In this section, I will examine David Hammons' modus operandi.<sup>43</sup> My concern is to what degree it provides a means for Hammons to exercise an ongoing criticism of the contemporary art world. How does this criticism operate in relation to the artist's distinct interrogation of identity politics that I have outlined above? I will consider this by briefly discussing Hammons' modus operandi in relation to the three aspects of critique that Foucault has identified. How does Hammons' modus operandi impact on a notion of critical art practice?

David Hammons has openly declared his particularly ambivalent attitude towards the contemporary art world. As I will discuss here, Hammons is wary of co-optation and commodification; but, equally, he acknowledges his necessary engagement with the art market and is very much aware of his own market value. So, just as David Hammons notes the influence of a maverick artist such as Noah Purifoy on aesthetic aspects of his practice, he also notes Purifoy's influence in terms of his attitude to the art world. For example, David Hammons recalls the activities of Purifoy and, fellow artist Roland Welton, during his early career in Los Angeles, noting that:

*"These cats would be in their sixties, hadn't had a show in twenty years, didn't want a show...outrageous stamina. They were like poets, you know, hated everything walking, mad, evil; wouldn't talk to people because they didn't like the way they looked... they didn't care how much money that person had."*<sup>44</sup>

Hammons has surely incorporated such reticence into his own modus operandi. Hammons articulates his often-combatative attitude towards the art world by three key means that I will now address. These means involve Hammons' profile within art-related publications; his direct engagement with the art world; and, his instigation of

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<sup>43</sup> Here, I am specifically referring to how Hammons negotiates his relationship with the various individuals and institutions within the art world.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 'Interview with Kellie Jones,' p.209



art world gossip. I am going to consider each of these distinct means in relation to Foucault's notion of critique.

So, firstly, I will consider the tenability of the art-related publication as a site for critique in Hammons' practice. I am referring specifically to the interviews and articles written about him in the art press and mainstream press respectively; within art publications, such as exhibition catalogues. Before discussing Hammons' critique in published form, I want to briefly consider its relation to three of his contemporaries; namely, Lynda Bengalis, Jimmie Durham and Adrian Piper respectively. All of whom have used, in quite distinct ways, the art publication as a site for their critique. It is worth noting that David Hammons does not write critical texts as part of his practice like certain contemporary artists such as Jimmie Durham, Adrian Piper and Carl Andre and Robert Smithson, who have published their critical writings within exhibition catalogues and monographs, as well as the art press. For example, Jimmie Durham is well known for his writings on the nature of art, culture, language, history and critique, for instance.<sup>45</sup> Also, Durham's writing takes the form of criticism, prose and poetry; and, as with his art practice which I discussed in Chapter 2, it is difficult to tie down to one set of concerns, or one particular form. Significantly, Durham has noted the problem of the commodification of identity politics and its delimiting effects. In 1995, he stated:

*"As 'minority artists' we feel a need to use art to search for our identity, which a strange mind-set to me. It seems terribly self-indulgent and goes nowhere...it seems like the most crass way of presenting a fictional sense of self to the public and...hoping to get paid for it."*<sup>46</sup>

Durham's comments echo the problematic that I outlined in my discussion of *The Politics of the Signifier* debate; in which so-called 'minority artists' comply with the demands of the art market that expects them to make work about a specific aspect of their identity. It is my view that, like Hammons, Jimmie Durham is also keen to confound with the viewers' sense of expectation. As such, his writing can seem oblique, often using various foreign languages side by side. In these texts, Durham arguably tests the relation between words and their meaning. He interrogates the parameters of language, where it falls short of fully conveying meaning, and where approximation is necessary. For instance, in *Gado usdi hia?* (1993), Durham used Korean to introduce his text, stating that:

*"I started to write this text in Korean. ' Gado usdi hia' means 'what sort of thing this is it?' Except there is no word in that phrase which means 'thing'.*

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<sup>45</sup> Durham has published throughout his career, for example, 'Mr Catlin and Mr Rockefeller Tame the Wilderness' in, *An Anti-Catalog*, Artist for Meeting for Cultural Change, New York, 1977; *A Matter of Life and Death and Singing*, Alternative Museum, New York 1985; *A Certain Lack of Coherence: Writings on Art and Cultural Politics*, ed. Jean Fisher, Kala Press, 1993

<sup>46</sup> 'Jimmie Durham: Interviewed by Mark Gisbourne,' *Art Monthly*, February 1994, #173, p.7

*The phrase contains 'what' and a verb; no noun or pronoun. I do not know of a word in Korean which means 'thing' or 'object'.*"<sup>47</sup>

It is my view that writing such as this surely leaves much room for misunderstanding – which, of course, maybe Durham's intention. To what degree is this attempt on the part of Durham to forestall the consumption of this work, by confusing meaning? This may be a similar ploy to Hammons' use of abstraction, as means of countering expectation within the art market. So, I am arguing that Durham's published works further embody the heterogeneous notion of critique that is evident within his art practice I discussed in Chapter 2. This claim for heterogeneity could extend to a consideration of David Hammons modus operandi.

Before discussing David Hammons use of the art press any further, I want to consider a second way that contemporary artists critique the art world, specifically using advertising space. Since the 1960s, artists from quite distinct artistic and political backgrounds have used this practice to challenge the art world status quo. For example, in Adrian Piper's series *Mythic Being* (1972-75), wearing drag, she performed the role of a fictional black male alter ego that appeared in the galleries page of New York's *Village Voice* magazine at monthly intervals from September 1973 onwards [Fig. 28].<sup>48</sup> In Piper's sequential adverts, a stereotype of the black working class male (sporting huge afro, sunglasses and moustache) literally infiltrated the exclusive culture of the New York art scene, and Piper (herself a light skinned middle class African American woman) simultaneously raised complicated issues pertaining to race, gender and class. In this work, the artist locates her critique within one of the art world's most powerful apparatuses of signification, the art press.

As an introduction to Hammons' use of the art press, I want to consider a final example. In November 1974, sculptor and video maker Lynda Bengalis infamously posed naked in an *Artforum* photographic advertisement promoting her then forthcoming exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery. Bengalis' pose is reminiscent of a 'glamour' model, in which she stands three-quarters to the camera, left hand on hip, her knees slightly bent and her back slightly arched; in her right hand she holds an extremely long and detailed dildo; she wears only a pair of white sunglasses [Fig. 29]. The advert was evidently a response to a self-portrait by Robert Morris in which he stood in sado-masochistic gear, naked from the waist up wearing sunglasses, an army helmet, handcuffs and chains for an exhibition poster earlier that year [Fig. 30]. Bengalis had collaborated with Morris on a body of sexually explicit portrait work around this time. According to Bengalis, the art world during the 1970s was a "big,

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<sup>47</sup> Jimmie Durham, 'Gado usdi hia? (1993),' *Jimmie Durham*, Phaidon, 1995, p.128

<sup>48</sup> Adrian Piper, 'Notes on the Mythic Being,' published in, *Adrian Piper: Out of Order Out of Sight, Vol. 1: Selected Writings in Meta Art 1968-92*, Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, p.137

*macho game, a big, heroic, macho, sexist game*” that she sought to challenge, in part with this gesture, which was very much at odds with the process based sculptural practice for which she was best known. Bengalis was mainly famous for her large scale, amorphous, abstract sculptures that she produced by pouring liquid materials such as latex and polyurethane foam and allowing them to set. Another important expansion of her practice at this time, involved the incorporation of performance-based video. Bengalis continued, “*It’s all about territory. How big?*”<sup>49</sup> In Carter Ratcliff’s analysis of the Bengalis incident he notes that, the issue of ‘How big?’ that Bengalis articulates in brandishing the huge dildo, refers to, “*How big is the zone you capture and occupy with your painting, your floor sculpture, your video piece, your public persona?*”<sup>50</sup> I would argue that both Bengalis’ and Morris’ individual self-portraits were equally a critique of this culture.

Ironically, Bengalis’ advertisement caused a huge rift between *Artforum* editors, some of whom regarded it as a vulgar piece of self-promotion that made a mockery of feminism.<sup>51</sup> The misreading of Bengalis’ critique is worthy of note. Evidently, her action did not fulfil the criteria of feminist activity as identified by certain politically conscious editors of *Artforum*. As I have noted, for Bengalis, the advert was intended as a response to the competition amongst artists for validation in the art world. The editors of *Artforum* considered Bengalis’ advert as a means of self-promotion rather than as a means of addressing the prevalent power relations of the art world. I would argue that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Again, in this instance, I would argue that Bengalis’ lens based work, which incorporated the photographic self-portraits and video works, formed an important counterpoint to her process-based sculpture. As Robert Pincus-Witten describes, in his essay on Bengalis’ overall practice, this diversity is a means of avoiding negative delimitation, and “*contradicts the prevailing view of the artist [Bengalis] as single-mindedly devoted to eccentric substances and physical processes.*”<sup>52</sup> I am arguing that Bengalis employed these various aspects of her practice to avoid being pigeonholed and, as such, her practice is heterogeneous in its critique. I will return to discuss some of the implications of Bengalis’ critique via her use of advertising space shortly. With regard to David Hammons’ modus operandi and its relation to publishing, it is worth noting that this critical use advertising space is not something that he engages in. However, some of

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Pincus-Witten, ‘Lynda Bengalis: The Frozen Gesture’, *Artforum International*, November 1974, p. 58

<sup>50</sup> Carter Ratcliff, *The Fate of a Gesture: Jackson Pollock and Post-War American Art*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, [http://www.artnet.com/magazine\\_pre2000/index/ratcliff/ratcliff6-13-97.asp](http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/index/ratcliff/ratcliff6-13-97.asp), 2004

<sup>51</sup> Those associate editors who took offence to the advert included Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson and Lawrence Alloway. *Ibid.*, Ratcliff

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Pincus-Witten, p.54

issues raised above, particularly concerning the relation between self-promotion and critique are evident in Hammons' manipulation of published material.

### 3.1 DAVID HAMMONS' MODUS OPERANDI & FOUCAULT'S NOTION OF CRITIQUE: REFLEXIVITY

So, now to return to David Hammons and his use of published material as a mode of critique and its relation to Foucault's notion of critique's reflexivity. It is worth pausing at my choice of the term 'use of' here, which is certainly contestable; particularly since I outline that Hammons neither publishes his own writing, nor does he place adverts in the art press as part of his critique. In my view, Bengalis, Durham and Piper are far more direct in terms of their intent to critique. That is to say, they actively seek to publish their criticism – whether as an advertisement in the case of Bengalis and Piper, or an essay in the case of Durham. I think that tactically Hammons is more opportunistic in his relation to publishing than any of the aforementioned artists. To explain, David Hammons it is far more likely to articulate his contentious views on the problematics of the art world via an interview, or an article on him, for instance. Given that Hammons may have to wait many months for an appropriate article or interview situation to provide a platform for his views; on one level, his relation to this published material is relatively passive. This is not to say that David Hammons does not equally make 'use of' the published space. I will discuss this idea further in Chapter 4.

The following excerpts from interviews with Hammons give a sense of his concerns, particularly with regard to how the politically motivated artist should respond to the demands of the art market. For example, in this first excerpt, from his 1986 interview with Kellie Jones, Hammons describes how he incorporated specific materials into his work that have a symbolic resonance to black audiences – like elephant dung, for instance. Hammons discusses the problematics of this as a strategy; and, eventually, uses this issue to berate the artists of New York for not challenging the art world status quo. He states:

*“In this country, if your art doesn't reflect the status quo, well then you can for get it, financially and otherwise. I've always thought artists should concentrate on going against any kind of order, never accepting any order, not even their own, but here in New York, ...I don't see any of that kind of gut.”<sup>53</sup>*

Hammons' criticism is not solely directed at artists. He has been equally outspoken in designating all institutions, whether public, commercial or otherwise, worthy of critique. In 1990, an interview with Maurice Berger appeared in *Art in America*, as

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 'Interview with Kellie Jones,' p. 212

part of a larger article concerning race, museums, patronage and the role of the art market in which Hammons declared his position with regard to these issues. He stated:

*“I’m really in the middle of the battle, and not, as most artists believe, on the outside looking in. I’m directing my work toward the galleries, toward the museums and toward the people coming into these places. As an artist, I’m not aligned with the collectors, the dealers, or the museums; I see them all as frauds.”*<sup>54</sup>

Hammons is candid in revealing his attempts to negotiate a critically tenable position within the art world. He, equally, manages to articulate the wearying effects of his own modus operandi on him as an artist. In an interview with Louise Neri from 1992, Hammons describes his oscillating proximity to the art market. Neri asked whether he exhibited in galleries in order to separate his work from that of Outsider Artists; given that, particularly during the 1980s, much of Hammons’ ad-hoc brand of art occurred on the streets of New York and much went undocumented. Hammons responded:

*“Any direction you take is madness. I am caught in between, romantically in love with all those concepts – keeping it to myself, laying it all out... showing it, not showing it. Sometimes I wish I could be an outsider and have no idea what I’m doing. I tried to do it once but it drove me totally mad.”*<sup>55</sup>

Hammons comments give a glimpse of the effort required to sustain his modus operandi that is in a state of continual renegotiation. Hammons also acknowledges that operating from the outside is not an option; his position is very much within the art world. This view is very much in keeping with Foucault’s notion of governmental power relations, which are necessarily interdependent. So how does Hammons’ use of published space relate back to Foucault’s notion of critique’s reflexivity?

Each of the excerpts here indicate how David Hammons refuses to align himself with any particular group or coalitional politics – whether those of the alternative sector, the Black Art movement, the commercial galleries or otherwise. Hammons speaks only for himself, and as such, he directly locates his practice at the centre of that which he criticises. Also, Hammons’ words have appeared in important art journals like *Art in America* and *Artforum*, as well as mainstream publications like the *New York Times*. Of course, their appearance in such publications validates Hammons’ opinions. In my view, these articles provide a succinct means (he literally doesn’t have to make an approach to a publisher or self publish) for Hammons to disseminate his critique. Equally, I am arguing that just like Piper’s *Mythic Being* series or Bengalis’ advert, Hammons’ critique utilises the apparatus of the cultural status quo – the art magazines, culture pages in the mainstream press, etc – and locates itself at the very centre. So, I am arguing that Hammons shows reflexivity in his criticism of the contemporary art

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<sup>54</sup> Maurice Berger, ‘Speaking Out: Some Distance to Go,’ *Art in America*, v.78, September 1990

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., ‘No Wonder: David Hammons and Louise Neri’ p.50

world; and, in this instance, Hammons critique complies with the first aspect of Foucault's notion of critique.

### 3.2 DAVID HAMMONS' MODUS OPERANDI & FOUCAULT'S NOTION OF CRITIQUE: PARADOX

Here, I will address how David Hammons' modus operandi relates to Foucault's notion of critique's paradoxical aspect. Having discussed David Hammons' use of published material as a means of articulating his ambivalence to the art world, I now want to consider a second means by which Hammons' articulates his measured engagement with the art world and its various agents and institutions.

In my view, Hammons has been comparatively reticent about the maintaining a profile on the international art scene. For instance, prior to his exhibition at Ace Gallery in 2003, Hammons was reputed not to have shown in his adopted city of New York in the previous ten years.<sup>56</sup> Equally, he has frequently turned down invitations to exhibit at prestigious exhibitions such as Venice Biennale and the Whitney Biennial, for example. Also, he has reputedly declined offers to publish monographs on his work from notable art publishers such as Phaidon. This is not to say that other artists have not made similar decisions; however, most do not readily offer up such information to the art press.<sup>57</sup> I would argue that Hammons' contrary persona, combined with his limited presence on the art scene ultimately adds to his art world cachet. Paradoxically, Hammons often promotes himself through an absence, as much by what he does not do as what he does. As Manthia Diawara notes in his 1998 article *Make it Funky*, one of Hammons' many mottos is, indeed, "*Those who know, don't show.*"<sup>58</sup>

It is worth noting that despite Hammons' declared ambivalence towards the art world, since his major retrospective exhibition, *Rousing the Rubble* in 1991, he has also enjoyed the position of a major international artist.<sup>59</sup> He has exhibited at some of the most renowned galleries and museums internationally. These include, the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1991 & 1998); Documenta XI, Kassel (1992); The Royal Academy of Art, London (1993); Watari Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (1995); Die Kunsthalle, Bern (1997); and White Cube Gallery, London (2002). Hammons has also been the recipient of some prestigious awards internationally; these include, the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (1991); plus, the Prix de Rome for

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<sup>56</sup> Although in his review of Hammons' Ace Gallery exhibition, Norman Douglas contests this point, noting that Hammons had actually had a small solo exhibition, entitled *So What?* at Tribes Gallery in the spring of that year. Ibid., Douglas

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., Schjeldahl

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., Diawara, p.120

<sup>59</sup> *Rousing the Rubble* showed at the alternatives space P.S.1 Museum on Long Island.

sculpture (1989); as well as a German D.A.A.D award (1992). Despite this success, Hammons seems determined to engage with the art world on his own terms.

And whilst David Hammons has entered the rarefied environment of the international art scene, he has evidently continued to challenge the status quo. In fact, Hammons' target is often specifically aimed at the upper echelons of the art world of which he is part. For example, in Peter Schjeldahl's recent article, Hammons criticised the circuit of international festivals and exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, Documenta and the Whitney Biennial that regularly show the same artists. For Hammons, this circuit is a trap, and a glamorous means of co-opting the artist. As Hammons states:

*"The way I see it, the Whitney Biennial and Documenta need me but I don't need them."*<sup>60</sup>

Hammons' comments are a stark contrast to the reality of the BECC who campaigned tirelessly for the right for black practitioners to be included in such exhibitions during the 1970s. It can also be argued that Hammons' lack of allegiance to any particular group has been key to his critique. For instance, the diversity of locations where Hammons presents his practice is very broad; he has not followed the route of going from alternative space to commercial, nor of remaining in either alternative or commercial arenas. So that, despite his fame in more recent years, Hammons has continued to operate between the various environments (alternative space, museum, non-gallery space, etc) in the manner he established in his early career. In 2002, for example, Hammons had a solo exhibition entitled, *So What?* at Tribes Gallery, a modest alternative space on New York's Lower East Side that is run by writer, Steve "the blind guy" Cannon. I think for David Hammons, not affiliating with any particular institutional framework is a means of maintaining some control over his practice. Hammons does not find himself in a position of total dependence on the institution, as certain alternative artists found themselves reliant on public funding during the Culture Wars, for example. In his interview with Maurice Berger, Hammons revealed that early informal financial support came from one individual, A.C. Hudgins, a black stockbroker who has bought his work since the 1970s. Of Hudgins, Hammons explains:

*"He's been my only patron. He lends me money, and I'll pay it back with a piece, or he'll buy something to keep me going."*<sup>61</sup>

I think that Hammons intentionally plays down the significance of Hudgins' role in his career. In my view, Hudgins' support is crucial in allowing Hammons the room to

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<sup>60</sup> It is worth noting that Hammons has shown in both the Whitney Biennial (1997) and Documenta IX (1992). It is clear that Hammons distinguishes his single appearance in these festivals, with the repeated appearances of certain artists. Ibid., Schjeldahl

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., Berger, p.80

manoeuvre between the alternative, commercial and his own self initiated projects. David Hammons' resistance to fixity and co-optation is evident from the examples I have given so far. But also, Hammons is curiously resistant to the commodification of his work. For example, in his review of *Concerto in Black and Blue*, Norman Douglas refers to an earlier incident involving Hammons whilst installing a new work, and his contrary attitude to its potential sale. Douglas recalls that:

*"One day, I walked into Steve Cannon's<sup>62</sup> to discover Hammons with a stencil-cut roller, applying gold paint to the wall he'd already covered in red, [coat] hangar [sic] wire wrapped in hair spanning the top. 'Try and sell that' Hammons quipped at one point..."<sup>63</sup>*

Whether Hammons is entirely serious in his comment is debatable. However, I want to raise the issue of resistance within Hammons' practice, which is evident in many of his comments and actions that I have referred to in this chapter. Douglas' account shows Hammons simultaneously denouncing the commodity status of his work, whilst in the very act of presenting it to the art market. This paradoxical aspect is key to the workings of Hammons' modus operandi. And as Douglas' account reaffirms, that modus operandi is intrinsically linked to the artist and his work.

In relation to Foucault, I am arguing that David Hammons' critique is paradoxical in the artist's insistently contrary means of engaging with the art world. Particularly, in the way that Hammons professes to despise the very field of practice – not only that he is part of, but, also, that he is highly respected and highly successful within. I would also argue that as with Lynda Bengalis' *Artforum* advert, David Hammons articulates a critical mode of self-promotion that challenges art world conventions – such as not openly discussing the negative machinations of the art world. Now, under Foucault's terms Hammons is surely at once a 'partner and adversary' of the contemporary art world. However, in my view, the irony is that his critical modus operandi ultimately secures his work's high commodity status. This leads me to my next point concerning Foucault's notion of critique's dependency on power.

### **3.3 DAVID HAMMONS' MODUS OPERANDI & FOUCAULT'S NOTION OF CRITIQUE: DEPENDENCE ON POWER**

Finally, I want to consider how David Hammons' modus operandi relates to Foucault's notion of critique's dependence on prevalent power relations.

Now, a third means by which David Hammons articulates his modus operandi is via the art world gossip that he often instigates. Gossip is an activity that Hammons cannot fully control. However, it is surely a significant tool for him because it has the

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<sup>62</sup> Hammons has had various exhibitions at Tribes Gallery over the past decade.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., Douglas



potential to embellish even the most banal narratives, making them extraordinary through their repetition. It is also arguably a means for the artist to remain in the public consciousness, when he is not exhibiting. Hammons has a reputation for being very secretive about his work prior to its showing, and prefers to give an account of particular art works and his motivations retrospectively. Although sometimes, Hammons will tease both the art press and the art community with snippets of information forthcoming works initiating art world gossip himself. As Manthia Diawara recalls in his article *Make it Funky*, prior to showing his video *Phat Free* (1997) at the 1997 Whitney Biennial, “it seemed the whole city had heard about the video, but only a handful had seen it.”<sup>64</sup>

I want to give an account of an event involving Hammons from 2001 that directly relates to the artist’s instigation of gossip. Hammons is reported to have placed his own work for sale at Phillips Auctioneers, rather than selling via a dealer. The work was entitled *Basketball Lamp* (2000), and comprised of an ornate brass and crystal rococo-styled chandelier, approximately 1.5m<sup>2</sup>, made in the form of a basketball hoop, net and backboard [Fig. 32]. In Adrian Dannatt’s account, published in *The Art Newspaper*, the work was listed in the Phillips auction catalogue as having come “*From the artist*” as opposed to a collector or institution.<sup>65</sup> Dannatt explains that many successful artists have to pay their dealers as much as 50% commission on a sale, which major artists such as Jasper Johns have contested. Dannatt concludes that given Hammons’ position as “*feisty outsider to the White art world...its hardly surprising that he should have taken a somewhat scandalous approach to the auction machinery, putting his own work up for sale.*”<sup>66</sup> Dannatt misreads Hammons’ position within the art world; I would argue that this is because Hammons’ market value did not necessarily correspond with the respect he commanded in the art world at this point, evident in his impressive curriculum vitae. In line with this view, a Phillips spokesperson stated that they facilitated Hammons’ sale because the artist had not been “active” at auction and since he did not have a dealer, they saw the sale as a means to “*introduce him to an international audience.*”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, in 1999, the highest price that Hammons’ work had fetched at auction was \$18,000; whilst at the Phillips auction of May 2001, his work sold for \$370,000. And, importantly, given that Hammons chose not to involve a dealer, the money from the sale went directly to

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., Diawara, p.123

<sup>65</sup> Adrian Dannatt, ‘Cutting out the Middle Man,’ *The Art Newspaper*, #115, June 2001, p.77

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., Dannatt, p.77

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., Dannatt, p.77

him.<sup>68</sup> Dannatt's account refers to the gossip surrounding the sale and the conjecture over who actually owned the piece up for sale. He states that:

*"Rumour claimed the piece belonged to Bernard Arnault<sup>69</sup> himself, bought out of the studio. But in fact, Hammons was consignee, perhaps prodded by Arnault."<sup>70</sup>*

Clearly, Dannatt's account of the work's questionable ownership further perpetuates the gossip, and in turn, the mythology surrounding David Hammons and his mischievous modus operandi. Dannatt praises Hammons' critique, exclaiming "*How much easier this will make the business if artists just put their pieces straight into auction from now on.*"<sup>71</sup> Again, echoing his comments on New York artists' lack of gumption vis-à-vis challenging the art world status quo, Hammons takes on the role of vanguard, almost daring other artists to also make a stand.

Now, essential to Hammons' action achieving a critical reading is the knowledge that he placed his own work at Phillips Auctioneers himself. Like Dannatt, those who were party to the rumour mill of the New York art scene would no doubt have heard the story evolve in the days immediately before and after the auction. However, an article that appeared in the British art magazine *Art Monthly* during July of the same year, gave a very different account. Colin Gleadell does not mention Hammons as the consignee of the work; and he includes "*the artists dealer Jeanne Greenberg*" and "*Agnes Lee, wife of British collector, Edward Lee*" amongst the bidders, and names Christie's owner François Pinault as the possible buyer of the work.<sup>72</sup> Gleadell also refers to the gossip surmising that, "*According to more than one source, François Pinault had expressed interest in buying the work when it was at the artists studio and may have been the purchaser.*"<sup>73</sup>

There is a clear conflict between the accounts of Dannatt and Gleadell respectively. On one level, it seems crucial that Hammons' critique of the auction system is acknowledged as such – as in Dannatt's account. However, Gleadell's report, involving the upper echelons of the art world lends a sense of intrigue to the Hammons sale. I would like to reiterate my point that gossip enables Hammons to maintain a profile that does not centre on him exhibiting his work. And, in relation to Foucault, I would argue that Hammons' modus operandi is very much dependent on the existent power relations of the contemporary art world – in this instance, those that financially

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<sup>68</sup> As I have already noted, Hammons has a patron, A.C. Hudgins, who has supported his work for many years; an 'agent', Jeanne Greenberg, who organises sales for him; and a space in Park Ave, New York where he holds viewings of his work, plus a number of assistants.

<sup>69</sup> Bernard Arnault is the wealthy French entrepreneur, and chair of Moët Hennessey Louis Vuitton.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., Dannatt, p.77

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., Dannatt, p.77

<sup>72</sup> Colin Gleadell, 'New York: When Logics Die,' *Art Monthly*, July/August 2001, #248, p.55

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., Gleadell, p.55

disadvantage artists via the workings of the auction system – in order to exercise its critique.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have sought to introduce David Hammons' practice and to establish the parameters of his critique. It is my view that Hammons represents a useful example of how the individual artist might exercise critique within a governmental system. As such, I have discussed both Hammons' work and modus operandi in relation to the three principles of critique that Foucault describes – namely, paradox, reflexivity, and dependence. I have argued that Hammons practice does indeed adhere to these principles. However, in Chapter 2, I also argued that the strategies of artists groups within the alternative sector such as the BECC, or many of the artists with the 1993 Whitney Biennial also adhered to Foucault's theory of critique, yet were equally susceptible to the delimiting constraints of the institution. It is clear from my analysis here, that David Hammons' practice avoids many of the pitfalls of politically motivated art that Foster, Krauss and Kwon address in *The Politics of the Signifier*.

I would contend that the heterogeneity of his practice – that it literally operates on so many fronts – plays a large part in its success. I have addressed the various devices within his practice like, his elusiveness, his use of abstraction, gossip and the art press – as a means of at least attempting to avoid negative delimitation. Arguably, such devices also enable Hammons' career longevity. Indeed, heterogeneity is one means of countering the delimiting effects of the 'signifying economy' that Judith Butler has identified.

Also, Hammons is highly conscious of the negatively delimiting potential of contemporary art world. And this consciousness tempers every aspect of his engagement with that world, from his dealings with curators and other artists, to the work he shows and his engagement with the art press. So, in this sense, I would argue that Hammons' practice does indeed '*acknowledge its own siting within different discursive institutions*' under Hal Foster's terms.<sup>74</sup> This reflexivity, evident in Hammons' manipulation of art world conventions of which he is part – such as in his Phillips auction stunt – lead me back to consider Judith Butler's notion of the performative; and particularly how performative practices inhabit the very subject positions they seek to undermine.

It is my view then that it is necessary to go beyond the description of critique that Foucault provides in his text, *What is Critique?* In order to do so, there is one final aspect of Hammons' practice that I want to address here – specifically, the role of

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., Foster, 'The Politics of the Signifier,' p.9

photography as a critical device. I want to consider why this aspect of his practice has not been critically discussed in detail, also to consider its tenability as a critical device. I will consider this aspect of Hammons' practice in relation to Judith Butler's analysis of performativity.

CHAPTER 3: ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 22: David Hammons, *How Ya Like Me Now*, 1989

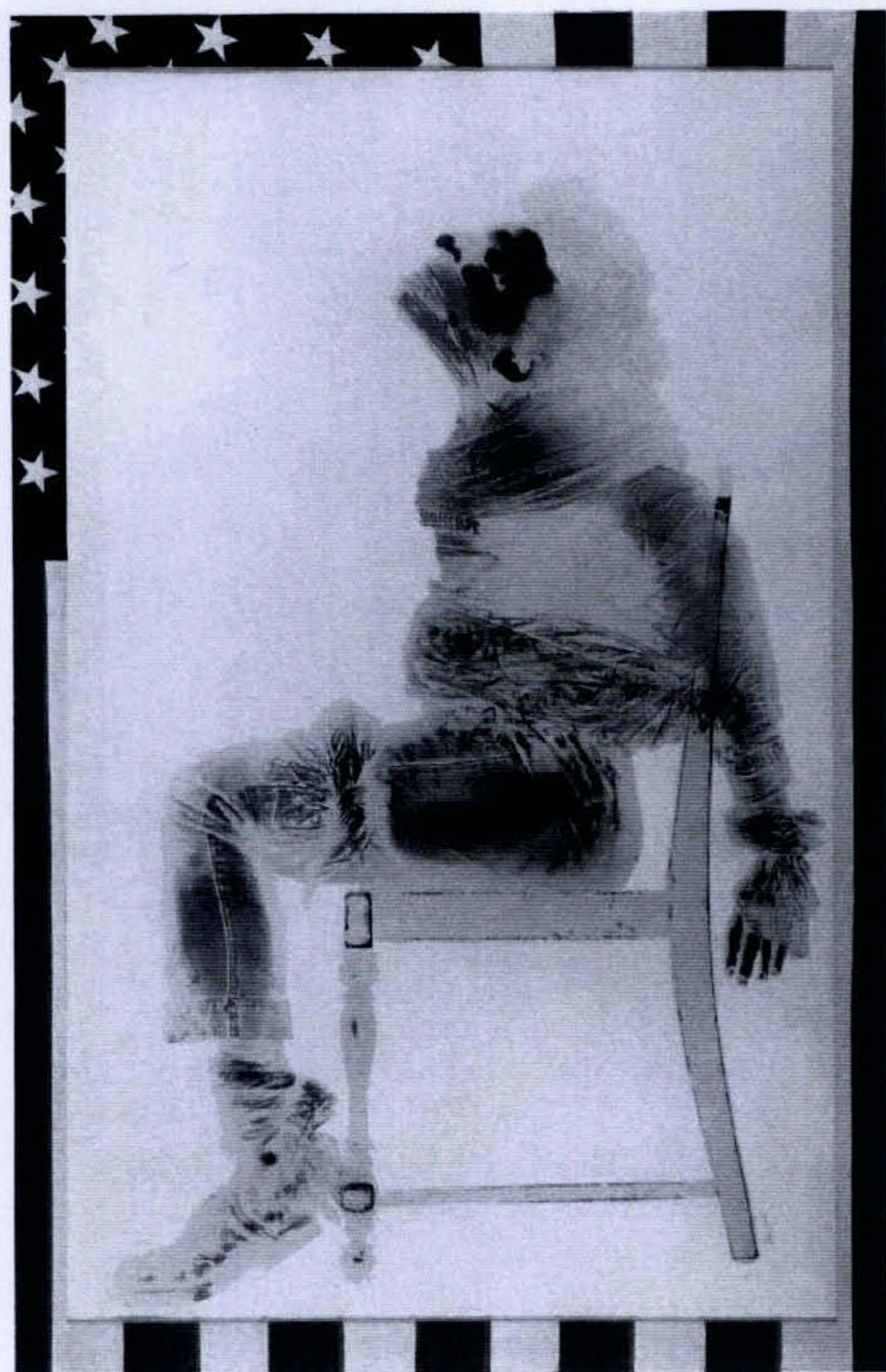


Fig. 23: David Hammons, *Injustice Case*, 1973



Fig. 24: David Hammons, *Spade*, 1974

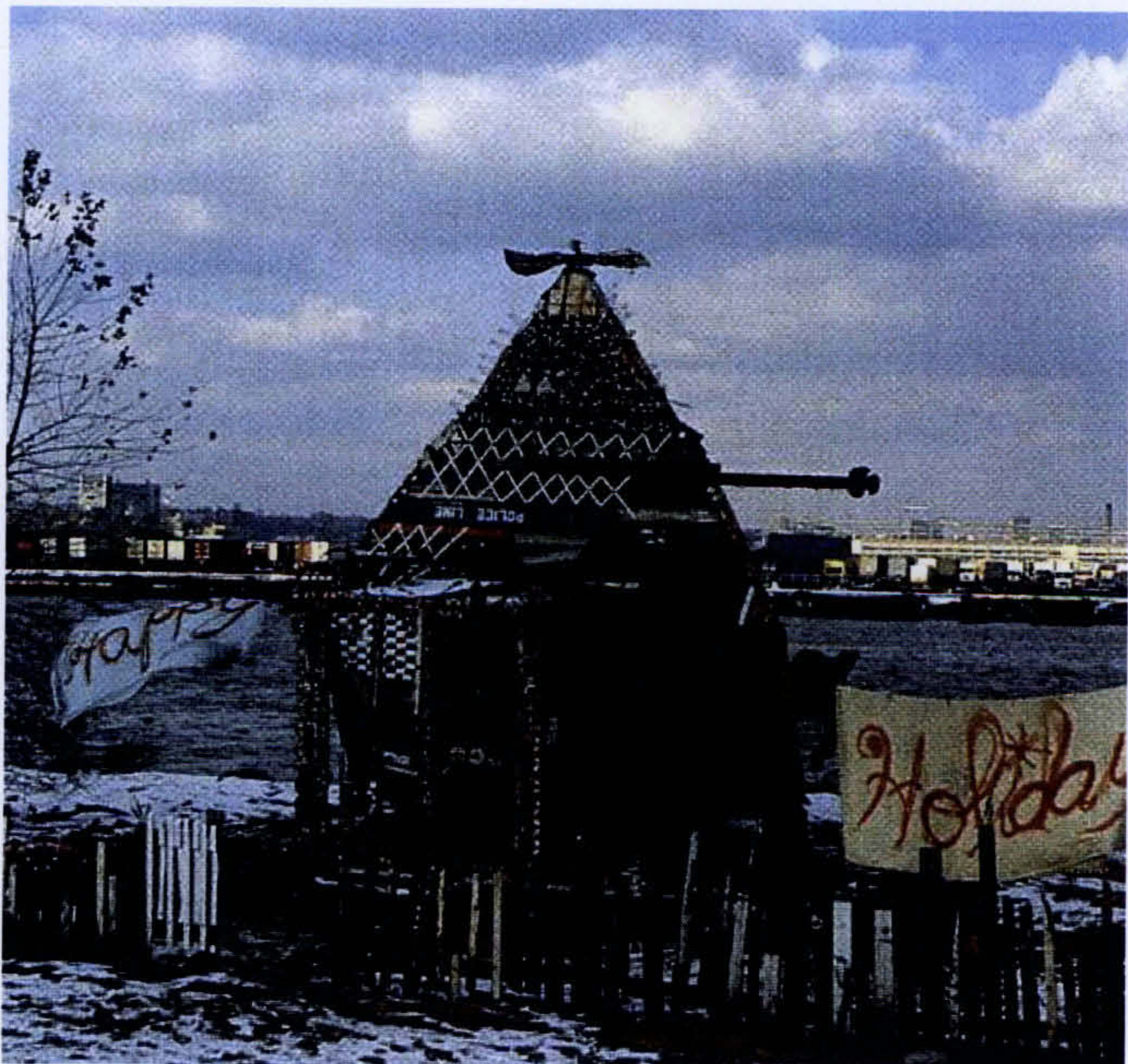


Fig. 25: David Hammons, *Delta Spirit*, 1985



Fig. 26: David Hammons, *Global Fax Festival*, 2000

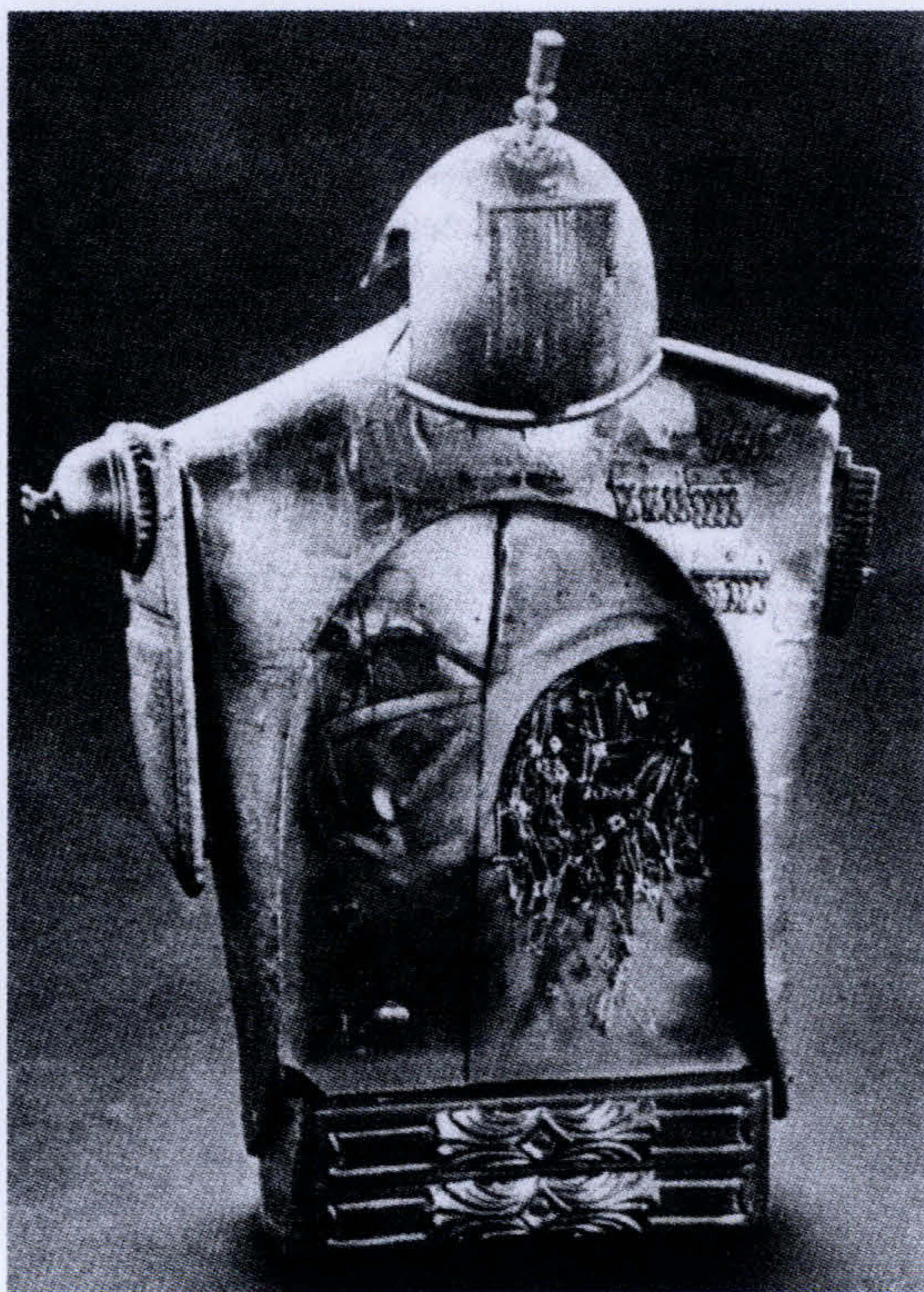


Fig. 27: Noah Purifoy, *Sir Watts* (1966)

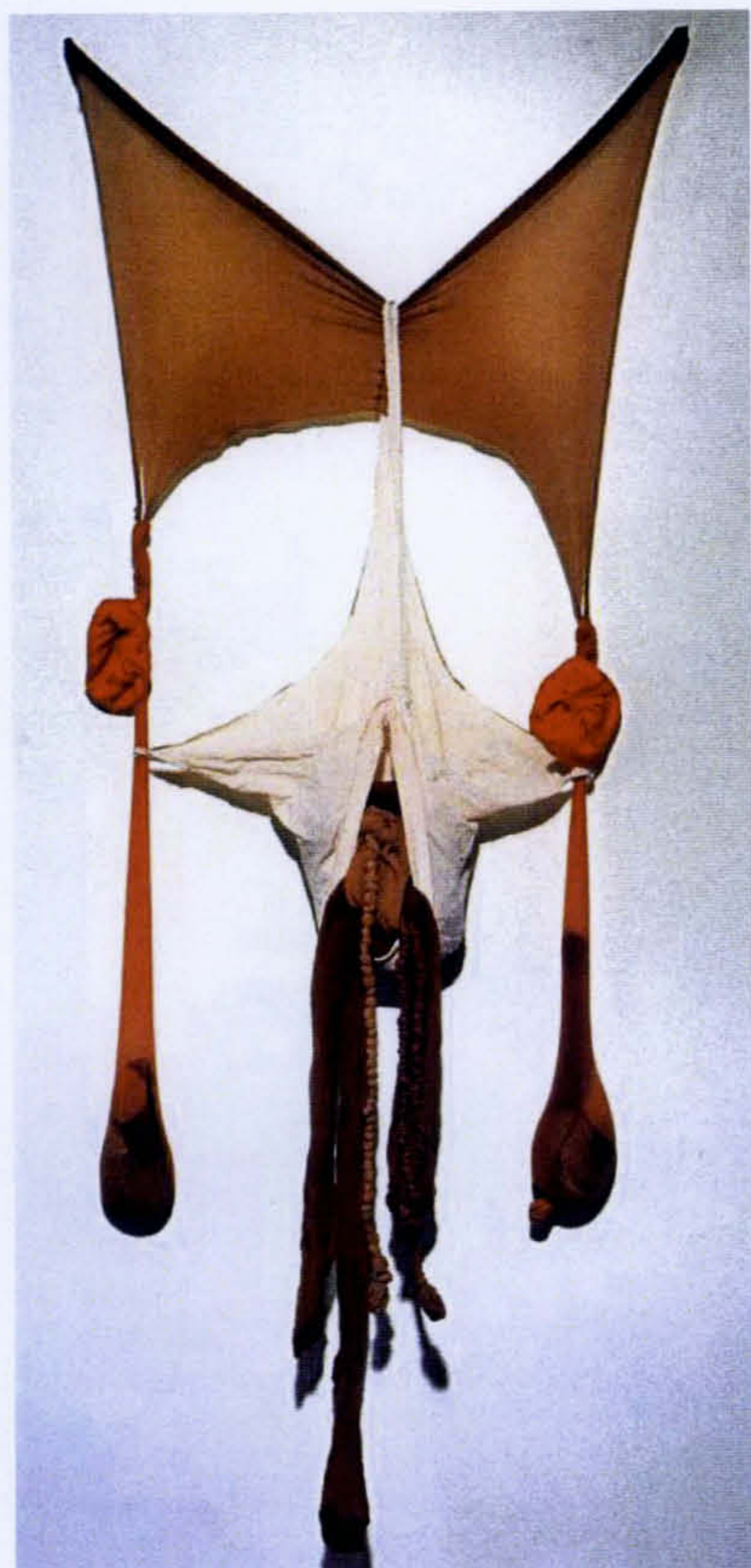


Fig. 28: Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.*, 1977

<p><b>GALLERY</b> 575 2107 10 SAT.</p>	<p><b>CARELLA</b> Paintings April 26 - May 15 THE FIRST STREET GALLERY 118 Prince St.</p>	<p>Paul Sha Thru May Bykert Downtown 484 Broo</p>
<p>15 SPRING</p>	<p>Visit America's Largest Art Gallery <b>CIRCLE GALLERY, LTD.</b> Weekdays 10 to 10/Sun. 12 to 8 1081 THIRD AVE. &amp; 64TH ST. (212) 752-2577</p>	<p><b>MYLOG</b> NOW TH WAVE 103 WAVERLY PLAC Open daily 1-9PM</p>
<p><b>ACH OME</b></p>	<p>I REALLY WISH I HAD A PHARMACOP ON REALITY. SOMETIMES I THINK I HAVE BETTER IDEAS THAN ANYONE ELSE AROUND WITH THE EXCEPTION OF SE- LEWITT AND POSSIBLY ROB SH- RON, WHOSE IDEAS I REALLY RESPECT. 4-12-68</p>	<p>BENEFIT MAY 1</p>
<p>HINA HOUSE GALLERY presents <b>C BUDDHIST ART</b> Guest Curator, Eleanor Olson Fully illustrated catalog available \$5.75 plus 30 cents postage East 65th Street, New York 10021</p>	<p><b>nad</b> OF HAITI ART GAL Baruch Co 155 E 673 MADISON AVENUE TELEPHONE (212) Entrance 25 East</p>	
<p><b>town</b> The Seventh Annual show of artists</p>	<p><b>llor</b></p>	

Fig. 29: Adrian Piper, *Mythic Being, Cycle 1*: 4/12/68, 1974



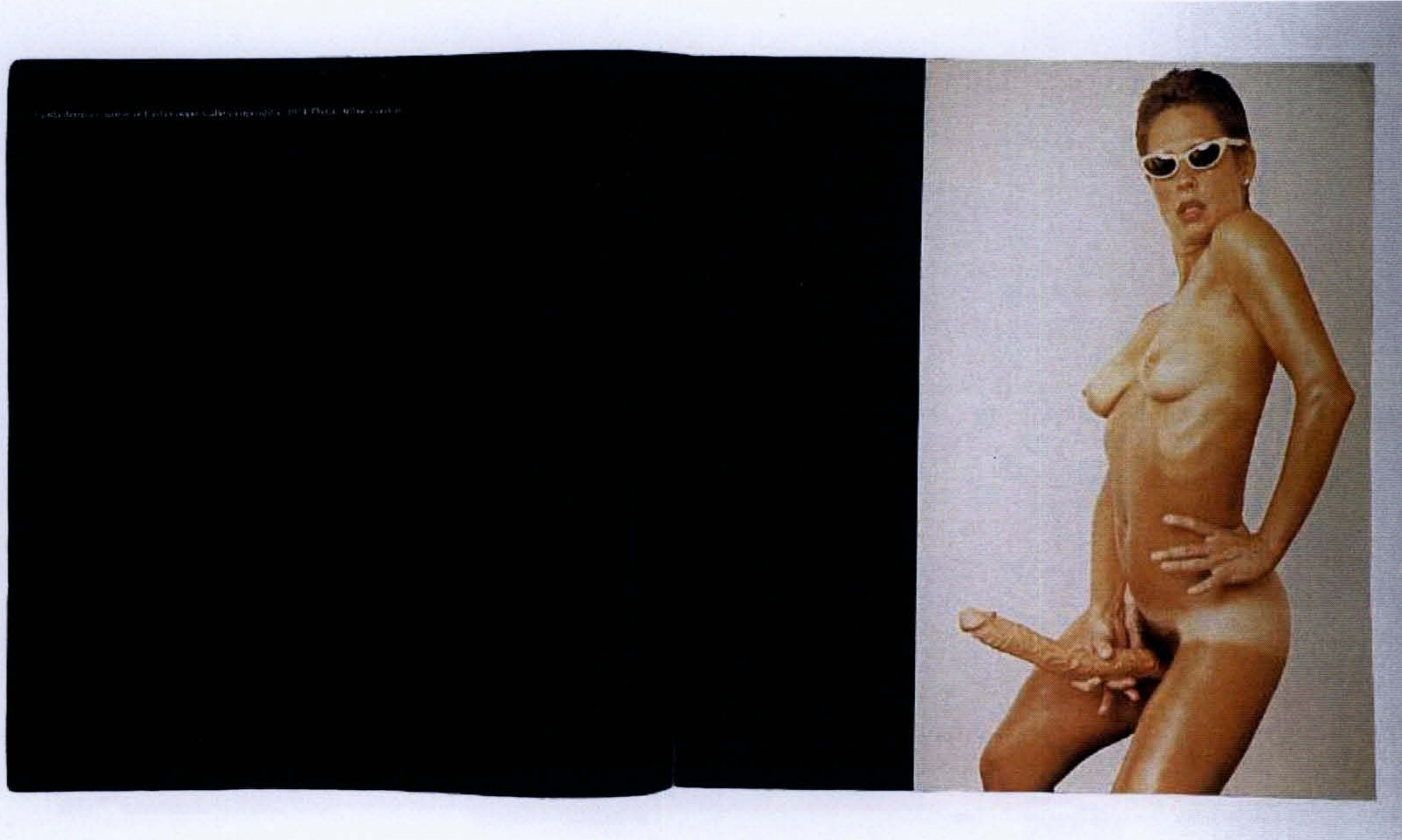


Fig. 30: Lynda Bengalis, advertisement, *Artforum*, #13, November 1974

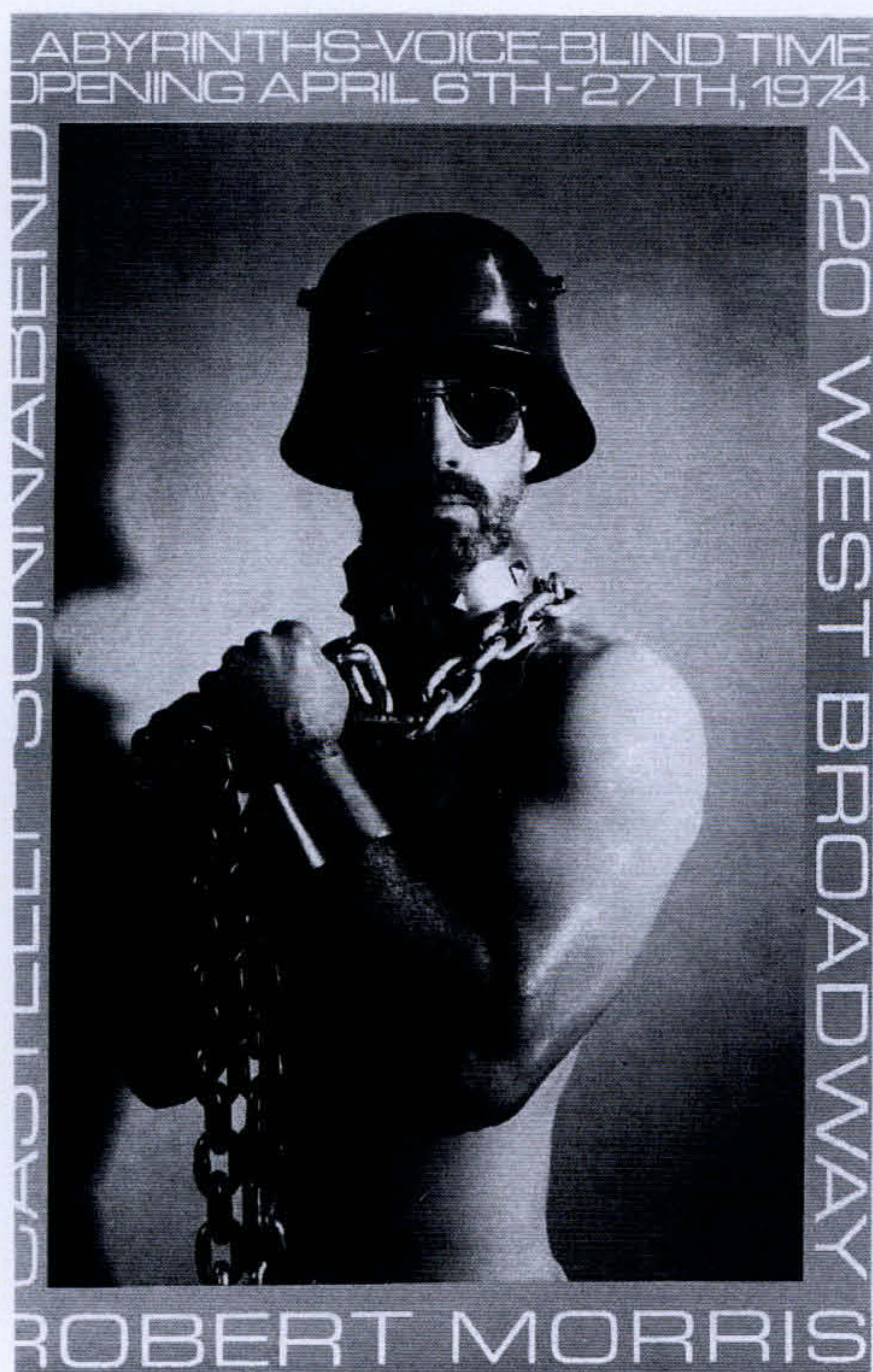
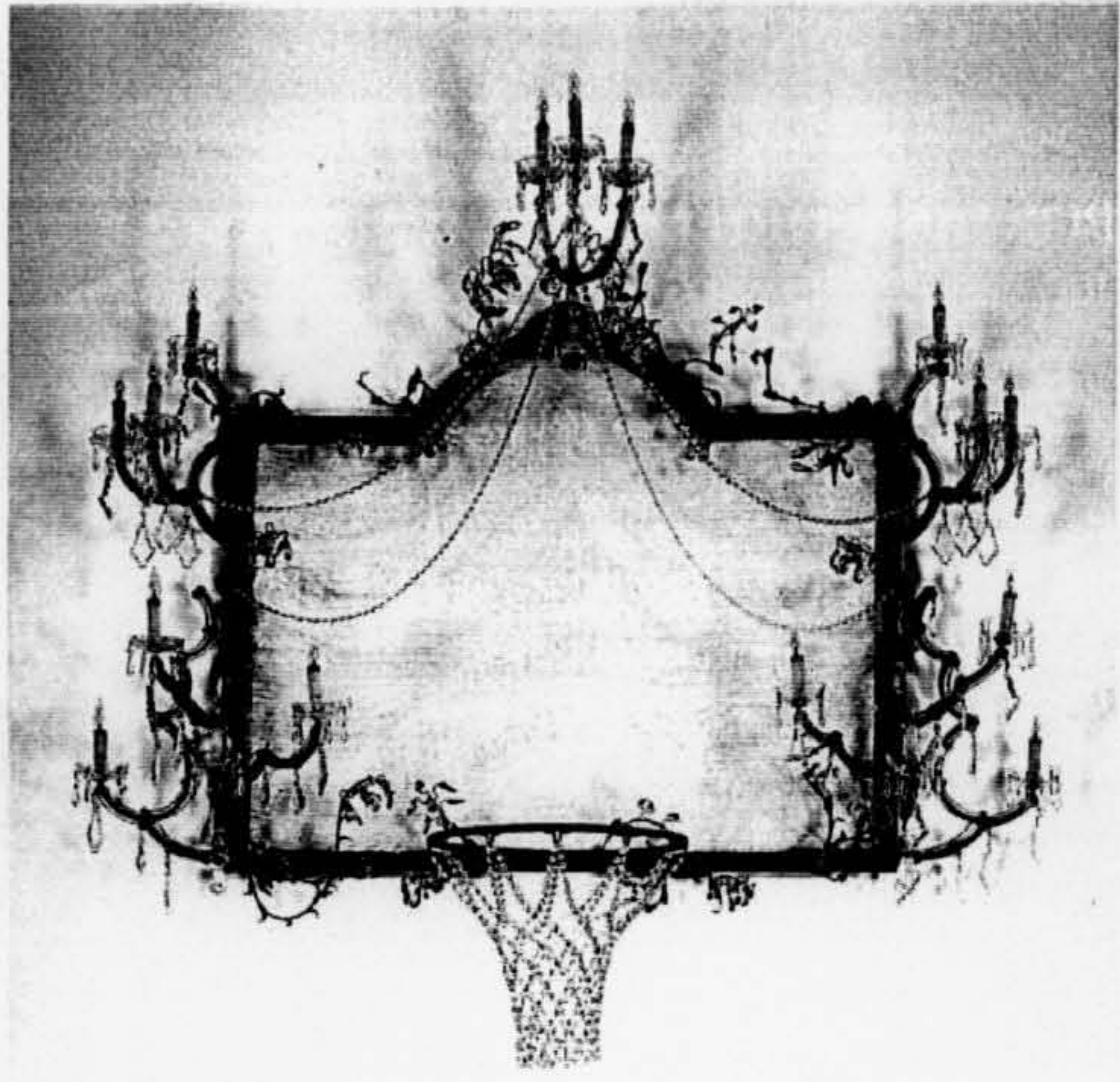


Fig. 31: Robert Morris, exhibition poster, 1974



DAVID HAMMONS  
BASKETBALL LAMP  
2000  
CRYSTAL, BRASS,  
FROSTED GLASS,  
LIGHT BULBS,  
LIGHT FIXTURES  
AND HARDWARE  
24 X 20 X 18 IN.  
121.2 X 102.4 X 40.6 CM  
ESTIMATE  
\$200,000 - 300,000

NEW YORK 14 MAY 2001

## CONTEMPORARY ART

**AUCTION**  
CONTEMPORARY ART  
PART I  
MAY 14 7:00PM  
RESERVED SEATING ONLY  
PART II  
MAY 15 10:00AM  
**VIEWING**  
MAY 9-13  
10:00AM TO 3:00PM

**INFORMATION**  
SIMON & PURY  
DANIELLA LUXEMBOURG  
441 22 902 30 00  
441 22 902 30 01 FAX  
212 931 2810  
212 931 2804 FAX  
MICHAEL MCGINNIS  
212 570 4830  
212 570 2207 FAX

**PHILLIPS, 86 PURY**  
4 LUXEMBOURG  
3 WEST ST STREET  
NEW YORK  
TICKET RESERVATIONS  
TERENCE RYAN  
212 570 4830  
212 570 2207 FAX

**PHILLIPS**  
AUCTIONEERS

Fig. 32: David Hammons, Phillips Auctioneers advert, *Art & Auction*, May 2001

## CONCLUSION:

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

To conclude this thesis I will discuss David Hammons' use of photography. I think that there are ways in which Hammons uses photography that encompass critical aspects of his modus operandi and practice that I describe generally in Chapter 3 via Foucault. I will address in detail *Two Obvious* (1996), a photographic cover image from *Artforum* that appeared in 1998. Here, I am proposing a political motivation in Hammons' use of photography that extends beyond Foucault's notion of critique. Via Roland Barthes, I identify certain aspects of photography that Hammons articulates critically. As I will explain, it is still possible to describe Hammons' photographic works as critical under Foucault's terms. However, in my view, Hammons' specific articulation of critique's reflexivity, dependence on power and paradox constitutes a performative gesture that, in turn, responds to Butler's notion of the 'signifying economy'.

I want to open by establishing the significance of photography in David Hammons' practice and modus operandi. I believe that photography is significant in terms of perpetuating Hammons' perceived elusiveness. It also allows him a very specific means to disseminate his mythology, since it accompanies the majority of material written on the artist and his work. In Chapter 3, I establish that David Hammons' work mainly takes the form of transitory sculptural and performance works using the detritus of so-called 'daily life'. Given the ephemeral nature of this practice, photography is a key means of documentation. As such, one could argue that photography serves a primarily pragmatic function, with that function being to provide a permanent documentary record of the artist's work. So, the presence of photography in David Hammons' practice is not overly significant. What concerns me is *how* Hammons articulates photography.

One reason I am discussing this particular area is that despite the transient nature of Hammons' work, the issue of photographic documentation remains notably absent as a subject for discussion amongst his critics. For example, in the course of my research, I have collected over eighty articles, interviews, reviews and catalogue essays on Hammons, spanning between 1970 and 2004.<sup>1</sup> I have found only a handful of passing references to photography within this material. For example, in the Hammons monograph *Rousing the Rubble*, Tom Finkelpearl mentions certain "*photographic*

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<sup>1</sup> J.E. Young, 'Two Generations of Black Artists,' *Art International*, v.14, October 1970; Glenn Ligon, 'Black Light,' *Artforum*, September 2004

*collaborations*” between Hammons and the artist Angela Valeria, but does not elucidate any further.<sup>2</sup> Is photography then a means by which Hammons successfully eludes art criticism? If this is the case, what might be the function of doing so?

## 2.0 OVERVIEW: PHOTOGRAPHY IN HAMMONS’ PRACTICE

It is worth explaining that David Hammons is not a photographer as such. A variety of professional photographers that Hammons has commissioned since the 1970s have taken most of the published photographs of his work.<sup>3</sup> He may not necessarily take the photographs I will discuss here, however, he is directly involved in their staging. I will mainly discuss photography that comprises the documentation of Hammons’ sculptural staged works.<sup>4</sup> I would link Hammons’ photography, in which he plays the role of art director, to his earlier collaborative works, such as *Delta Spirit*, which I describe in Chapter 3.

With regard to the dearth of critical writing on the role of photography in David Hammons’ practice, I should note that the artist has not foregrounded a photographic aspect to his practice. If anything, he has been decidedly reticent about discussing photography’s significance. He has stated that he began working with photography in the late 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Unlike an artist such as Gabriel Orozco, whose work I will discuss shortly, Hammons does not sell his photography. According to Hammons, he has taken only one photograph that has been produced as an edition for sale.<sup>6</sup> This work, entitled *Money Tree* (1992) [Fig. 33] was a C-type photograph of a bicycle tyre wedged high up into the knar of a tree; the tyre serves as a makeshift basketball hoop. It is my understanding that *Money Tree* is in keeping with Hammons’ ongoing works on the relationship between class, aspiration, basketball and the market amongst African American males. The photograph was produced as signed edition of 70 for *Parkett* editions.<sup>7</sup> In my recent conversation with Hammons, he declared an ambivalence towards photography, particularly concerning the ubiquity of photographic editions currently on the art market. When asked why he does not sell his photographs, Hammons responded that “*I know there’s money to be made, but I don’t want to be on every bandwagon...*”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Finkelppearl, p.85

<sup>3</sup> Currently, Hammons has a photographer, Erma Estwick, with whom he has worked since the early 1990s. Other photographers include Dawoud Bey and Bruce Talamon.

<sup>4</sup> Hammons has also curated photographic images within publications. See, for example, ‘No Wonder’ in, *Parkett*, #31, 1992; also, ‘Mood Swing,’ in *Artforum*, September, 2003. Also, I believe that some photography of Hammons’ performances falls into the category of documentation with a critical intent. For instance, the documentation of Hammons’ 1981 performance, *Pissed Off*, that appears in *Rousing the Rubble* that Dawoud Bey photographed.

<sup>5</sup> See, Virginia Nimarkoh, *Conversation with David Hammons* 22/04.03, p.9

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Nimarkoh, p.4

<sup>7</sup> ‘Money Tree’ also appears as a sepia toned, black and white reproduction in *Parkett*, #31, 1992, p.60

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Nimarkoh, p.3

Despite this ambivalence, in his 1986 interview with Kellie Jones, Hammons makes a brief, but important, comment that suggests an intent for photography beyond the purely documentary. Hammons discusses the prospective dismantling of his public artwork *Delta Spirit*. He describes his plan to set fire to the work “...and then shoot some slides. The slides would then be a piece in itself. I’m getting into that now: the slides are the art pieces and the art pieces don’t exist.”<sup>9</sup> Beyond my conversation with Hammons in 2003, his fleeting comments to Kellie Jones evidently represent his most explicit description of any kind of relationship with photography.

In my view, Hammons’ comments to Jones are very much in keeping with his various strategies of the 1970s and ‘80s’ where he attempted to forestall the commodification of his work. To recap, Hammons moved from producing object-based to more process-based work at this time. As I outline in Chapter 3, Hammons had become concerned that the commercial success of his body prints undermined their critical efficacy. Hammons’ attempts to forestall the commodification of his work included producing work that was not for sale; as well as, using unconventional and impermanent materials, such as fried chicken and ice, within the museum and gallery context. These attempts to de-commodify his work must surely be considered in relation to the non-commercial strategies of certain alternative and conceptual artists of this period. Now, there have been major shifts in Hammons’ proximity to the art market since the 1980s, as is reflected in the record sale price of his work in the Phillips auction of 2001. To what extent then can Hammons’ current ‘not-for-sale’ photographs share a critical motivation that relates directly to his approach of the 1970s and ‘80s that I describe above? What are the critical implications then, if according to Hammons, the ‘*art pieces don’t exist*’? What is the function of Hammons’ photography?

Formally and conceptually, I would link Hammons’ staged photographs to those of a contemporary artist like Gabriel Orozco. Common to both artists is a use of detritus, the urban location and sculptural assemblage that incorporates readymades. Consider for instance, Orozco’s staged for the camera work, *Island within an Island* (1993) [Fig. 34]. Here, he creates a small, ad hoc sculptural work in a New York street from litter such as wood and cardboard. The final sculpture echoes the Manhattan skyline evident in the background of the photograph. Given the framing of the photograph, the image literally depicts an island of detritus within the island of Manhattan. Hammons’ *Drinks on the House* (1992) [Fig. 35] depicts two brown paper carrier bags (the type associated with American liquor stores), doubled up and filled with unlit Molotov cocktails made from cheap alcohol bottles. The bags sit on a littered pavement beside a further Molotov cocktail. My understanding of this image, given its title, concerns the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., ‘Interview Kellie Jones,’ p.214

prevalence of alcohol in poor urban areas like Harlem; and, the latent potential for resistance amongst its communities. The similarity for me is that both artists' photographs appear to be simply photographic documentation, when, in fact, they have been staged solely for the camera. Indeed, both have been photographed as though the work were incidental to the street location. The main distinction, however, is their commodity value and their status as art objects.

Jeff Wall makes an important observation concerning conceptual artists' attraction to photography during the 1960s and '70s. The issue Wall raises, addresses the relation between photography, critique and the market. In "*Marks of Indifference*": *Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art*<sup>10</sup> Wall's survey of photoconceptualism, he notes that in America during 1960, it was possible to buy key works of art photography for as little as \$100. For Wall, this indicates that the recognition of photography as an economically viable medium had yet to occur. Conversely, this lack of market interest in photography imbued it with a utopian appeal for conceptual artists that had implications beyond the world of art. He states that:

*"Thus, the thought occurred that a photograph might be the Picture which could not be integrated into "the Regime," the commercial-bureaucratic-discursive order which was rapidly becoming the object of criticisms animated by the attitudes of the Student Movement and the New Left."*<sup>11</sup>

Wall observes that, ironically, these very concerns of photoconceptualism encouraged a use of photography that facilitated its eventual acceptance as art; and, ultimately, its absorption into the art market. So, as Colin Gleadell reports in 2004, photographs by contemporary artists like Cindy Sherman and Charles Ray fetched record prices at auction. Gleadell notes that during the Phillips de Pury & Co auction sales of November 2004, Sherman's *Untitled No.92* (1987) sold for \$478,400 and Ray's portrait *No* (1993) for \$534,000.<sup>12</sup> If photography's significance for conceptual artists lay in the fact that it had not yet been assimilated into 'the Regime' – is its critical potential now diminished? Wall observes that for conceptual artists of the 1960s photography represented the "undervalued." He notes that, "*undervaluation implies the future, opportunity, and the sudden appearance of something forgotten.*"<sup>13</sup> I think that David Hammons' reticence in declaring photography's significance within his practice, and its absence from the art market relates to this issue. Of course, it is too late to return to the idealism of the 1960s. However, as I note, Hammons does not

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<sup>10</sup> Jeff Wall, 'Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art' in, Ann Goldstein & Anne Rorimer, eds, *Reconsidering the Object of Art 1965-75*, Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Wall, p.252

<sup>12</sup> Colin Gleadell reports on New York auction sales during November 2004. The works listed include Sherman's *Untitled No.92* (1987) and Ray's portrait *No* (1993). See, *Salerooms* in *Art Monthly*, February 2005, #283, p.38

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., Wall, p.252

exhibit his sculptural tableaux in galleries, or the documentary photographs. He does not sell them either. Hammons is acutely aware of the commodity value of photographic editions, but chooses not to produce them. In 2004, a series of seven staged photographs by Gabriel Orozco, entitled *Gato en la Jungl (Cat in the Jungle)* (1992) fetched \$117,600 at auction, which indicates the market potential for such photographic works.<sup>14</sup> And, indeed, Hammons' record price at the Phillips auction confirms the market value his sculptural works alone. Ultimately, works like *Two Obvious* elude the market as both as sculptures and photographs. I do believe that were Hammons to draw attention to his photographs, it would surely encourage their absorption into the art market. In my view, this would close down the potential for photography, as a site for play and critique that currently exists for Hammons.

### 3.0 HAMMONS, PHOTOGRAPHY & BARTHES

David Hammons' staged for the camera, sculptural tableaux entitled *Two Obvious*, is a work photographed by Erma Estwick. To reiterate, the image appeared on the front cover of *Artforum* magazine in May 1998 [Fig. 36]. In the following two sections, via Roland Barthes, I aim to identify two specific aspects of photography that I think Hammons exploits critically; the first aspect concerns indexicality and, the second, photographic signification.

*Two Obvious* (1996) [Fig. 37] features a pink, porcelain piggy bank that lies upturned and broken in half, from its belly spills tens of cowrie shells. In Hammons' oeuvre, documentation such as this generally features sculptural assemblages apparently staged and lit in a photographic studio, presented on a white background. In keeping with Hammons' preoccupation with symbolic orders, he juxtaposes the piggy bank as a symbol of the West with the cowrie shell that was historically used as money in non-western cultures including Africa, China and Arabia. As such, I understand the work as making a succinct commentary on the unjust legacies of colonialism that benefit the West rather than so-called 'developing' countries; vis-à-vis world debt, trade restrictions and so on. And with the piggy bank's belly smashed, the cowrie shells are up for grabs.

I will now outline the indexical aspect of photography as it relates to Hammons' photography. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes endeavours to locate the "*specialty of the photograph*."<sup>15</sup> He describes his attempts to understand the factors that set photography apart from other forms of representation, such as painting and drawing. Barthes argues that obvious distinctions can be made in terms of technology, use and

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Perloff's, 'The Photograph Collector Newsletter,' *E-Photo Newsletter*, Issue 82, at: [http://www.iphotocentral.com/news/article\\_view.php/88/82/441](http://www.iphotocentral.com/news/article_view.php/88/82/441), 10/12/2004

<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, London: Fontana, 1980, p.3

ubiquity, but that these distinctions fall short of arriving at an ‘*essential feature*’ of photography.

According to Barthes, photography’s essential feature relates to indexicality. To explain, photography is indexical in that the camera records an image of an object or subject onto photosensitive film. Photochemical processes make that image visible and permanent; the photograph is the photosensitive surface onto which the image is reproduced. So, the first thing that we generally see in a photograph is that which it depicts, rather than qualitative aspects of the photograph such as lighting, etc. This perceived ‘transparency’ of the photograph, plus Hammons’ reticence towards it, may also go towards explaining the lack of critical writing around the role of photography in his practice. Critics may literally not ‘see’ his photography as such.

For Barthes then, the indexical characteristic of photography, ties the photograph implicitly to the object it depicts. Photography embodies what he refers to as, “*the This... the Real.*”<sup>16</sup> To illustrate his point, he describes how the person showing a family photograph always accompanies the act with the phrase “*this is my...*” brother/friend/mother/lover etc. Indeed, for Barthes, photography amplifies the perceived objectuality of that which, in temporal and physical space, has already gone. I would describe this relation between absence and presence as a paradoxical aspect of photography that David Hammons exploits.

To explain, Hammons’ staged works exist solely as photographs. The sculptural tableaux are set up for the camera and dismantled after shooting. The only means by which the viewer encounters them is in published form. A number of these works, including *Drinks on the House* that I mention above, have appeared in print. This particular work appears in the 1992 Documenta IX catalogue as an example of the artist’s previous work.<sup>17</sup> These are specifically the kind of works that I believe relate most directly to Hammons’ proposal of the photographs being the art pieces ‘and the art pieces don’t exist.’ Since Hammons does not announce their temporary nature publicly, I would argue that these photographic images give the illusion of sculptures existing where there are none. The image we encounter in the magazine is a lithographic reproduction of the photograph; this further enhances the elusive aspect of Hammons’ project. In fact, the reproduction is twice removed from the sculptural object; and once removed from the photographic object. This, I would also link to Foucault’s notion of critique’s paradox.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.4

<sup>17</sup> *Documenta IX, Volume 2*, Stuttgart: Edition Cantz & New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1992, pp.216-7



It is my view that, like Barthes, David Hammons is keenly aware of photography's ability to enhance the perceived objectuality of that which it depicts. I link this tactic to Hammons' decommoifying practices of the 1970s and '80s. However, now, rather than attempting to forestall commodification of this work, I believe that this current practice is designed, in part, to enhance the artist's cachet. I believe that Hammons uses the elusive aspect of photography (that the object depicted is always already gone) to create a desire for his work that cannot be physically satisfied. Again, this raises the issue of the uneasy relation between self-promotion and critique. Key to the presentation of such works in art publications is surely an issue of artistic control. Via photography, Hammons arguably achieves a particularly photogenic view of his sculptural works, presented in some of the art world's most prestigious publications. I consider this use of photography as means by which Hammons controls the consumption of his work. This I would link to Foucault's notion of critique's reflexivity. I will return to the issue of reflexivity shortly.

Given the temporary, seemingly ad hoc nature of Hammons' assemblages, they do exhibit a performic aspect. In *Two Obvious*, Hammons uses a tactic similar to that employed in his earlier work, *Delta Spirit*, whereby he evacuates the body from the scene, heightening a sense of presence. In fact, I would go as far as to say that, in using his trademark found materials and method of assemblage, the image serves as a shorthand for the artist. This gesture, I would link performativity.

#### **4.0 HAMMONS, PHOTOGRAPHY & PERFORMATIVITY**

In *The Photographic Message*, Barthes considers what distinguishes the photographic message from that belonging to any other type of image. In this essay, he specifically addresses the press photograph.<sup>18</sup> Barthes describes how, in the context of the newspaper, the structure of the photographic message is not singular but multifarious. It is this idea that I want to consider in relation to David Hammons' use of photography within the art publication.

I have established that for Barthes, photography's indexical nature makes it "*the perfect analogon*" of reality. Barthes lists the qualitative aspects necessary to encoding the photographic analogue; these include lighting, special effects, cropping, layout, etc. So, for example, in David Hammons' *Two Obvious*, the specific arrangement of the cowrie shells and broken piggy bank pieces; plus the lighting and its presentation on the white backdrop allow signification to occur. Equally, Barthes makes clear that the

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<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Photographic Message', *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, 1977, pp.15-31. I would not describe David Hammons' photographs as 'press' photography, per se. However, the issues Barthes raises here are particularly pertinent this discussion, given the siting of Hammons' photographs within the art publication.

creation of meaning, resides between various parties; in this case, the artist (Hammons) who arranges the objects, the photographer (Estwick) who photographs them, the picture editor (*Artforum*) who selects the image and the audience that reads the magazine.

Importantly, Barthes identifies an “*ethical paradox*” that is key to the relation between photography’s indexicality and its qualitative aspects. He states that:

“*When one wants to be ‘neutral’, ‘objective’, one strives to copy reality meticulously, as though the analogical were a factor of resistance against the investment of values (such at least is the definition of aesthetic ‘realism’); how then can the photograph be at once ‘objective’ and ‘invested’, natural and cultural?*”<sup>19</sup>

So, what values are being resisted in the photographic works I discuss here? My understanding is that Barthes suggests an implicit critical potential within the paradox I describe above. I believe that Hammons exploits this conflict between ‘objective’ and ‘invested’, ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ in his use of the photograph within the art publication context. So, for example, the type of photography Hammons favours to document his work appears relatively ‘objective’. The photograph, *Two Obvious*, does not overly draw the viewer’s attention to the photography, although it does present a relatively photogenic view of Hammons’ sculptural assemblage. At the same time, the objects presented (the piggy bank and cowrie shells) have a symbolic significance ‘invested’ in Eastern, Western and African cultures respectively.

In keeping with Barthes analysis, it is my view that an issue of resisted values is evident here. On one level, I would argue that the overt message *Two Obvious* conveys is one of resistance to the exploitative values associated with globalisation. Equally, I believe that, via photography, Hammons contests certain values pertaining to what constitutes a viable work of art now – such as objectuality and marketability. Hammons’ photographic works raise questions like: Does a sculpture need to be an object? Does it need be sellable? Can a reproduction of a photographic image constitute a work of art? Similar issues emerge in relation to Lynda Bengalis’ *Artforum* advert, which simultaneously challenges objectuality in art, feminist politics, and art world sexism. But key to either such work reading critically is surely the context of *Artforum* magazine, a microcosm of the art world, in which both artists are known. This issue of context brings to mind Foucault’s notion of critique and its dependency on power.

Within Barthes’ model, the production of signification in photography is ultimately complex. Further, Barthes identifies a mode of resistance attendant to this model that is equally complex. The aspects of the photographic message that I outline here, according to Barthes, are common to all press photography. But what concerns me,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Barthes, ‘The Photographic Message,’ pp.19-20

particular, is what occurs when contemporary artists appropriate the photographic message in the context of the art publication. I propose that in appropriating the photographic message, the artist engages in a reflexive use of that message; and this I link to performativity. So, how might Barthes' idea of photographic signification based on heterogeneity serve Judith Butler's call for critique to extend beyond the binary model of the 'signifying economy'?

To reiterate, Barthes lists the qualitative aspects necessary to encoding the photographic analogue; these include lighting, special effects, cropping, layout, etc. To this list, I would add the artist's persona, which I propose that, in this reflexive use of the photographic message, is key to achieving critique. In the case of Bengalis and Hammons respectively, the artist plays a key role in staging the photographic message; and, ultimately, the critique. Consider for example, Bengalis' choice of her own body; those specific sunglasses and the larger-than-life dildo for her advert, or Hammons' signature arrangement of 'everyday' objects in the photograph *Two Obvious*. And, for both Bengalis and Hammons' photography, *Artforum* is a crucial 'discursive site' in which they perform their critique.

Consider Hammons' use of photography in relation to the following description of performativity that Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson make in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*. They state that:

*"The...performative highlights the open-endedness of interpretation, which must thus be understood as a process rather than an act with a final goal, and acknowledge the ways in which circuits of desire and pleasure are at play in the complex web of relations amongst artists, patrons, collectors, and both specialized and non-specialized viewers."*<sup>20</sup>

Jones and Stephenson acknowledge the heterogeneous nature of signification that Butler points to in her notion of performativity. By locating performativity in the art arena, they also address the need for critique to be reflexive under Foster's terms. Jones and Stephenson offer the potential to describe Hammons' photography as an ongoing process, rather than an act with a particular outcome. If Hammons' photography is performative under these terms, does it render certain art conventions redundant? If Hammons' photographs are part of an ongoing process, is the photographic object necessary? And further, does the performative aspect of Hammons' photography preclude the need for a photographic object that can be bought or sold?

Related, but seeming to contradict Jones and Stephenson, I use J.L. Austin's notion of performativity to highlight more specifically how it might be possible for Hammons' photographs to render certain art conventions redundant. Austin's notion has its basis

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<sup>20</sup> 'Introduction', in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson eds, London & New York: Routledge, 1999, p.1

in linguistics. He states that in terms of language, the performative “indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something.”<sup>21</sup> Austin gives the example of how terms like “I do” or “I thee wed” function in a marriage ceremony. Here, I am applying this idea to contemporary art and, specifically, how Hammons’ photographs function in the magazine context. It is my view that they are not simply documentary photographs, but they enact their critique as magazine images. It is evident that under Hammons’ terms, his photographs could not function critically as art objects for sale. This renders a photographic ‘object’ redundant to his critique.

To summarise, it is my understanding that artists like Hammons and Bengalis exploit the inherently multifarious construction of meaning that occurs within Barthes notion of the photographic message. I believe that photographic works like David Hammons’ *Two Obvious* that appear only in published form, confuse the relation between signifier and signified. These projects blur the relation between artwork, documentation and reproduction; so, in the case of Hammons’ *Two Obvious*, one might ask, “What is the signifier?” It might easily be the sculptural assemblage, or the photograph or the magazine article. In which case, the question surely then arises “What is the signified?” And so, implicitly critique moves beyond a binary relation between power and opposition or, what Butler refers to as, the “closed circuit of signifier and signified” since it operates on so many levels. My point then is that, via his use of photography, Hammons succeeds in offering up a ‘different’, heterogeneous, set of critical terms that extend beyond the oppositional.

## 5.0 OVERVIEW

As a practitioner, this thesis serves a pragmatic function; it enables me to consider the tenability of attempting to exercise a critical art practice at this time. The analytical and archival methodology has allowed me to examine theoretical ideas concerning power, signification and critique, relative to historical case studies. It has also allowed me some understanding of how power operates in relation to art practice. And, in turn, I have been able to consider what an effective critique of that power might be.

I discuss various means by which power (state, market, etc) impacts on art practice. In my introduction, I outline the effects of privatising culture in Britain; particularly the emphasis on commercial modes of practice that preclude certain types of politically motivated art practice and, by default, certain sorts of artist. Conversely, in America, Kwon identifies the practices of art institutions that select certain artists specifically because of their difference. In this instance, institutions conflate the artist’s difference

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<sup>21</sup> J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, J.O. Urmson, ed., Oxford University Press, 1962, p.6

with a notion of the political. Kwon accuses artists of complying with such practices. In my view, both scenarios are equally problematic; one concerns exclusion on the ground of identity politics, the other concerns inclusion, again on the grounds of identity politics. Judith Butler acknowledges the problematics concerning identity, which I, in turn, apply to art practice. She states that:

*“The mobilization of identity categories for the purposes of politicization always remain threatened by the prospect of identity becoming an instrument of the power one opposes. That is no reason not to use, and be used by identity.”<sup>22</sup>*

The issue I have sought to address here is how, as a practitioner, one effectively negotiates this terrain. I explain in Chapter 1 that within Foucault’s notion of governmentality, the use of ‘laws as tactics’ is symptomatic of modern governance; and that any organisational entity may exercise power in this manner. This is evident in the sustained cuts in arts subsidy in America under both Republican and Democrat administrations, for example. One important tool in the Republicans’ assaults on publicly funded arts was the use of symbolic rhetoric as a means of promoting their conservative values. So, Republican rhetoric compelled subjects to conform to stereotypes, e.g. ‘the family’, ‘the mother’, ‘the embryo’, etc. Those not conforming to this narrow construct would still be defined using symbolic rhetoric, e.g. ‘the single mother’ and, indeed, ‘the transgressive artist’. Ultimately, anyone falling outside of this construct was considered a threat to the state. My aim here is not to favour the significance of symbolic rhetoric over the very real actions the Republicans took to subjugate the arts in America. But I do believe that the use of symbolic rhetoric that renders subjects as stereotypes has insidious ramifications that are equally damaging – e.g. the Rodney King beating.

As I describe in my discussion of the Culture Wars, the types of practice coming out of the alternative art community at this time effectively put it at odds with the normative construct of society that the Republicans promoted. It is my view that the Republicans’ symbolic rhetoric limits the potential for complexity and contradiction within society in general and identity specifically. The Republicans promoted a notion of society that operates along a binary model of signification – either normative or other. This notion also coincides with Butler’s signifying economy, in which power relations are effectively binary.

Just as Foucault describes governmentality as the ‘art of government,’ he also describes critique as ‘the art of not being governed so much.’ In describing critique as an ‘art,’ he suggests a potential use of tactics as a means of achieving a particular end, as in the use of laws as tactics in governmental governance. Via the BECC in Chapter 2, I argue that

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.xxvi

there are dissenting practices that may comply with Foucault's idea of critique, but also fail to avoid the pitfalls of a governmental regime. Primarily, my view is that the BECC's critique operated along an oppositional and, therefore, binary model. Krauss and Kwon raise the issue of a perceived division in art criticism and art practice between signifier and signified that effectively limits the potential of critique. Like Krauss, I do believe in the critical potential of the signifier. And like Kwon, I am conscious of the problematics of concentrating primarily on the signified, particularly within politically motivated work. Under the terms that Kwon sets, the BECC's strategy could be described as oriented towards 'the signified'.

Group Material offer up a different mode of critique that complies with Foucault, but operates along a more heterogeneous model. The complexity of their practice which works on social, political and aesthetic levels made it less easy to define and, ultimately, to ignore. Group Material's practice deals equally with signifier and signified.

In terms of other practices that exercise a heterogeneous notion of critique, I discuss that of David Hammons. I propose his critical art practice as a response to governmentality that complies with Foucault's notion of critique. I have described Foucault's governmentality as non-partisan. In Chapter 3, I give an overview of David Hammons' fractious relationship with the art community – artists, curators, commercial galleries, museums, etc. Whilst Hammons' critique may comply with Foucault's critique, I also propose a performative aspect of Hammons' critique as a necessary response to governmentality. In works as formally and conceptually diverse as *Spade and Pissed Off*, Hammons inhabits the stereotype of the transgressive black male in order to destabilise it. As Butler argues, performativity involves the subversion of stereotype that ultimately allows for heterogeneity within identity. Hammons' attempts to subvert the stereotype, surely contest the kind of flattening of identity promoted by Republican symbolic rhetoric.

By addressing one aspect of David Hammons' practice in detail, in my conclusion my aim has been to further explore the issue of heterogeneity. I also wanted to see what in photography might lend specifically it to a critical application.

In Hammons' photographic works, the issues of signification and critique are complex. Consider, for example, a photograph like *Two Obvious*, contests the free market principles of the West that suppress the markets in developing countries. Consider, also, its siting in *Artforum* magazine. I discuss via Barthes, how photography inherently confuses the relation between signifier and signified. Hammons' photographic works also confuse the relation between what might be termed 'the work' and its documentation. This has further ramifications concerning the

photographs' value within the art market. And, this in turn becomes a moot point given the artist's decision not to sell them.

In this work, Hammons instigates a critique that simultaneously attempts to challenge the institution, form, language, materiality and politics. Equally, given the manner in which the works are produced Hammons' confuses his role as artist (playing multiple roles – artist, art director, editor, etc). The sheer range of Hammons' critique and the various levels on which it operates make it difficult to confine him or his work to any one category. Equally, this complexity allows him to circumnavigate many of the cul-de-sacs pertaining to inclusion and exclusion that I outline above.

In Chapter 1, I raise the issue of complicity and critique in my discussion of the Culture Wars, specifically concerning in the Corcoran gallery's act of self-censorship. I asked whether, "given governmentality's basis in interdependent power relations, whether complicity is inevitable for those subjugated by such regimes. And, if so, what are the implications for critique?" I think that, to a degree, complicity is an inevitable consequence of the governmental regime. Arguably, there is an element of complicity necessary to allow a critique from 'within' strategy of practitioners like Group Material, for instance. Foucault states critique emerges out of existing power relations. Butler argues for the potential 'to use and be used by identity'. Could the same not be said of the complicity that emerges with critique? The issue then is surely how we as subjects respond to that complicity. Foster contends that for politically motivated artists to avoid the negative delimitation that the institution can impose, his or her work must 'acknowledge its own siting in arts discursive institutions'. Foster's call to artists echoes Butler when she states:

*"There is no political position purified of power, and perhaps that impurity is what produces agency as the potential interruption and reversal of regulatory regimes."*

It is true that David Hammons operates a uniquely critical art practice, and many of the opportunities available to him as a wealthy, esteemed, international artist, are not available to most. However, it is my view that artists such as Hammons, Bengalis and Durham, acknowledge their own position of power within the art world; and, the privileges their status allows them. From that position, they use their public persona as a means of achieving critique – by breaking art world conventions, for example. Consider Bengalis' naked image or Hammons' Phillip's auction. It is my view that this use of public persona is a further manifestation of performativity. In the case of Bengalis and Hammons at least, this strategy has put often them at odds with the same art world that celebrates them. I would like to end with Judith Butler's comments from her analysis of Foucault's *What is Critique?* Butler asks:

*“And shall we assume that...[Foucault’s] theory has no reassuring answers to give? I think that we can assume that the answers that are being proffered do not have reassurance as their primary aim.”<sup>23</sup>*

I think that Hammons practice shares this lack of resolution with Foucault. Hammons’ practice provides a catalyst that we often may not even recognise as critique. Hammons may not offer any reassurance, but I believe that he continues to issue a challenge to other artists to exercise their own modes of critique.

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<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, ‘What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue (2000)’, in *The Judith Butler Reader*, Sara Salih ed., Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p.307



CHAPTER 4: ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 33: David Hammons, *Money Tree*, 1992



Fig. 34: Gabriel Orozco, *Island within an Island*, 1993



Fig. 35: David Hammons, *Drinks on the House*, 1992

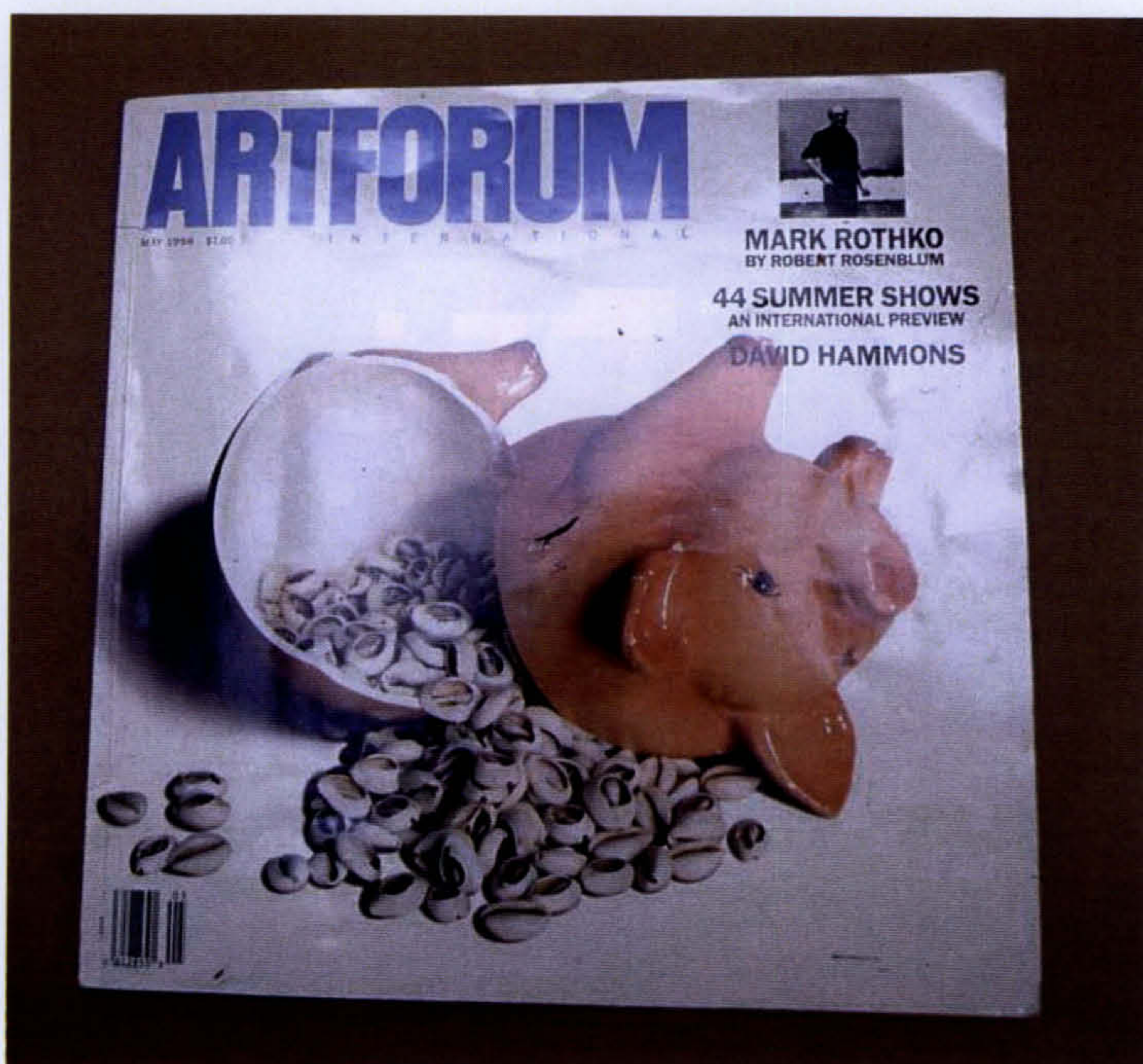


Fig. 36: David Hammons, *Two Obvious* (1996), *Artforum*, #9, May 1998

MAY 1998 \$7.00

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

**MARK ROTHKO**  
BY ROBERT ROSENBLUM

**44 SUMMER SHOWS**  
AN INTERNATIONAL PREVIEW

**DAVID HAMMONS**

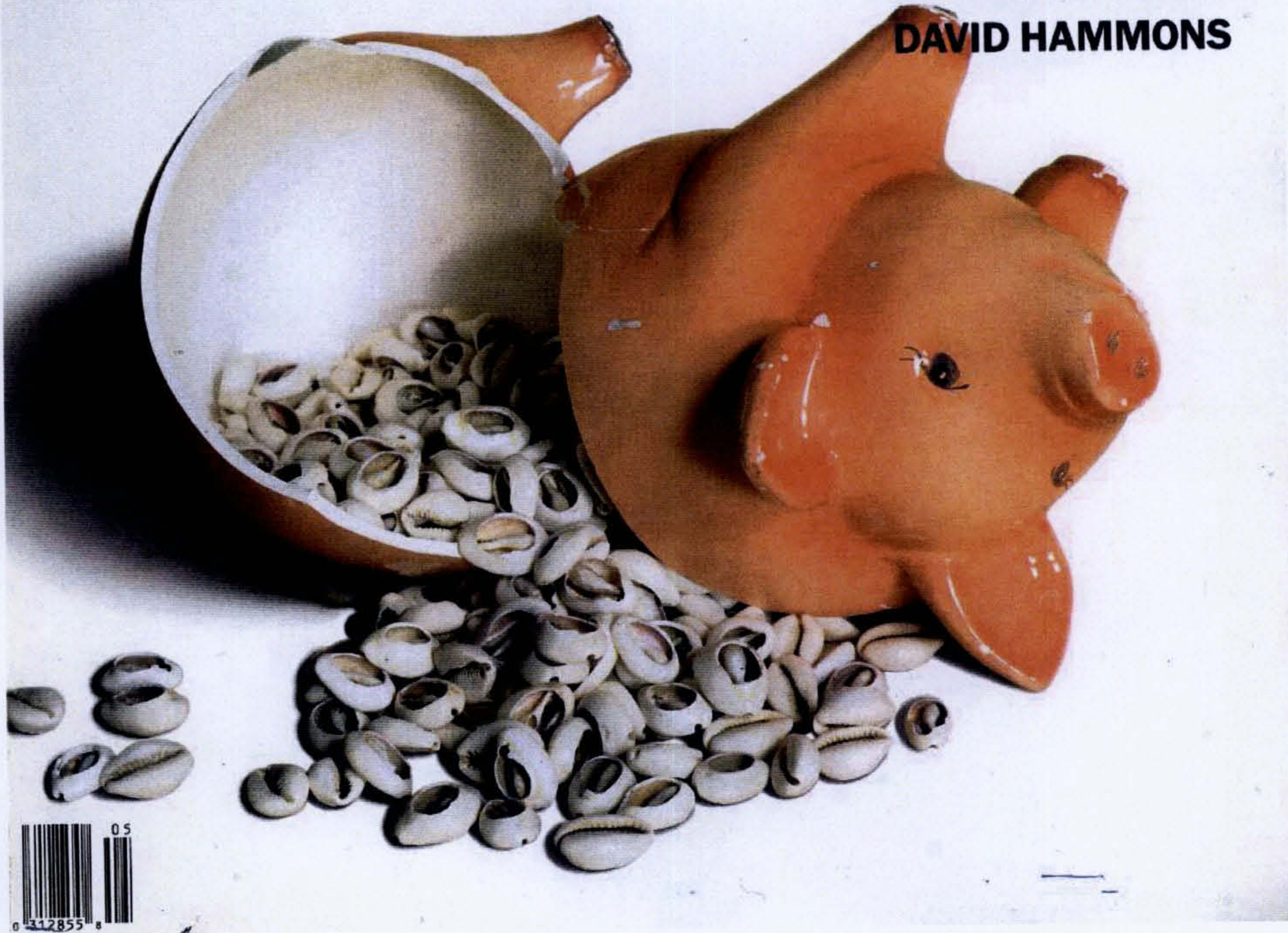


Fig. 37: David Hammons, *Two Obvious* (1996), *Artforum*, #9, May 1998 (detail)

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## APPENDIX 1

### VIRGINIA NIMARKOH: CONVERSATION WITH DAVID HAMMONS 22/04/03

The aim of this conversation was primarily for me to find out more about the role of photography in David Hammons' practice. I wanted to know whether he was employing it critically or not. The discussion quickly moves into other areas that I have described elsewhere in the thesis. For example, we talk about the longevity of his career as an artist, his collaborations with other practitioners, abstraction and this antagonistic relationship with the art world, etc. I do not want to explain too much about the text, as I feel that it is self-explanatory. Indeed, it is my view that here, as in many of his interviews, Hammons articulates a critical position that could be described as performative, in that what he reveals literally enacts a critique of the art world of which he is both part and highly conscious. The overwhelming sense I get from re-reading this text is that of a practice in a continual state of flux and renegotiation. Also, that Hammons' contentious modus operandi does put him in a vulnerable position.

**VIRGINIA NIMARKOH:** *Can you tell me who your current photographer is?*

**DAVID HAMMONS:** Her name is Erma Estwick, a black woman from Barbados.

**VN:** *And how long have you been working together?*

**DH:** About eight years.

**VN:** *You had a more informal arrangement before that, no?*

**DH:** I had a photographer before that called Dawoud Bey.<sup>1</sup>

**VN:** *And what was the arrangement? Was he your official photographer?*

**DH:** No, this one is.

**VN:** *So, what's the arrangement?*

**DH:** She works and I pay her.

**VN:** [Laughs] *Fair enough.*

**DH:** She shoots for a lot of artists.

**VN:** So, she's a jobbing photographer?

**DH:** Yes.

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<sup>1</sup> Dawoud Bey photographed some key works by Hammons, such as *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983) where he sold snowball in the street at Cooper Square, New York; and *Delta Spirit* (1985) his architectural collaboration with Jerry Barr, and his body prints from the 1970s.

VN: *I see. Can you tell me something about the 'Doll Shoe Salesman'? I've read quite a lot about it, but never seen any images.<sup>2</sup>*

DH: It's never been documented.

VN: *Was that intentional?*

DH: No. Just didn't happen.

VN: *That's quite an important piece, isn't it?*

DH: I wouldn't say so.

VN: *You wouldn't?*

DH: Well, it led me to the snowballs.<sup>3</sup>

VN: *So, its important in that sense?*

DH: Uhum.

VN: *OK. Can you tell me about the cover you did for Artforum in '98 [Two Obvious], where you have the cover with the broken piggy bank and the cowrie shells inside? Was that image staged just for the camera?*

DH: Yes.

VN: *And who selected that image?*

DH: I think that all the photographs were given to them and they selected what from I gave them.

VN: *So you gave them a selection of images and they chose one from that?*

DH: Right. I didn't want that for the cover at all.

VN: *Really?*

DH: No.

VN: *What would you have gone for, then?*

DH: I wanted the jellyroll.<sup>4</sup>

VN: *And the jellyroll piece? Was that staged for the camera as well?*

DH: Sure.

VN: *And Erma Estwick took that one as well?*

DH: Right.

VN: *Both of them?*

DH: Mm.

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<sup>2</sup> *Shoe Doll Salesman* (1986) was a performance piece in which Hammons sold hundreds of pairs of tiny doll's shoes on the street at Astor place, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Hammons is referring to his performance, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*.

<sup>4</sup> *See Sharp* (1997) features close up of a piano keyboard, with open packets of smashed jellyrolls, strewn over it. The piece references the pioneering Jazz pianist and arranger, Jelly Roll Morton (1890-1941), who despite playing an influential role in early Jazz, died in poverty and obscurity.

- VN:** *And Frieze '95, there is a cigarette holder piece. Was that ever exhibited anywhere?<sup>5</sup>*
- DH:** I think so, or something like it.
- VN:** *So, that one wasn't just staged for the camera?*
- DH:** No. I think someone bought that piece.
- VN:** *OK. And did Frieze select those images?*
- DH:** I don't have any idea about that. Maybe Christian [Haye] got it — he could have gone to a gallery and got that image. Sometimes writers go to a gallery and get images.
- VN:** *So some of those images aren't in your control at all?*
- DH:** Right. Most of them are; most of them they don't even know exist.
- VN:** *And then, sometimes they are published in these kinds of articles?*
- DH:** Right. I've got more stuff than they do.
- VN:** *I had a feeling you did. So how do you go about placing them? Do you just wait until the time's right?*
- DH:** Well, if I have an idea, I go out and take images of that idea, just to get the idea over, out of my system and on to paper. Otherwise, it just hangs in there for a long time, you know.
- VN:** *But these aren't the kind of things that you're selling, though, are they?*
- DH:** I'm really going through that right now, what to do with them. I know there's money to be made, but I don't want to be on every bandwagon... I just really don't know what to do with them, you know.
- VN:** *Because you could make quite a lot of money out of them as editions, if you wanted to.*
- DH:** You know, that's what I'm thinking... I keep saying I'm going to the photographer, but I never seem to get there. And now I'm working on watercolours, made out of Kool-Aid. I don't know if you know what Kool-Aid is?
- VN:** *It's a drink, right?*
- DH:** Yeah, it's a real ghetto drink, so I'm making these watercolours out of this Kool-Aid, this really nasty stuff that I grew up on.
- VN:** *Is it like a powder?*
- DH:** Yes, it is.
- VN:** *So do you think they are similar to the basketball drawings?<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> A photograph Hammons' *Cigarette Holder* (1990), incorporating a roughly crafted wire 'holder and six lit cigarettes accompanied the article, 'Wreaking Havoc on the Signified: The Art of David Hammons' by Coco Fusco and Christian Haye, *Frieze*, Issue 22, May 1995, pp.34-35.

<sup>6</sup> In recent years, Hammons has made a number of drawings by bouncing a basketball covered in Harlem dirt onto paper or directly onto the gallery walls. Hammons showed such works in his 2002 solo exhibition at Inside the White Cube gallery in London.

- DH: Yes, they are, actually.
- VN: *The photos you make with Erma Estwick, they seem like readymades.*
- DH: Oh, my lord. What does that mean? What do you mean by “readymades”?
- VN: *Well, I mean that, the photo gives you this perfectly constructed image of your work you can place in the art press – that is readymade. So, I'm wondering if that's what's of interest to you?*
- DH: Well, documentation of a thought pattern I see them as, documentation of an idea. But I'm just not into photography like that. I don't know... The basketball Parkett one [Money Tree], I took that photo.<sup>7</sup>
- VN: *Oh, right, the one that they did for the edition?*
- DH: Right. That was one of your questions.
- VN: *Yes. Also in that same issue, in your interview with Louise Neri you used the Basquiat and the Warhol image...<sup>8</sup>*
- DH: Right. That's the poster.
- VN: *Yes, the poster. Who selected that to go with the text?*
- DH: I did. I selected all of it.
- VN: *OK. So, what was the intention there?*
- DH: I think it was a show on racism. I don't remember how the text went with it, but that's the same kind of poster as those racist posters of watermelons and crocodiles; it goes right along with that. You have them over there, don't you?
- VN: *Yes, I know what you mean.*
- DH: Yeah, well, that's the same kind of poster. You're getting slugged in the face, right? I just wanted to show how he [Basquiat] was the puppet and a pawn. Andy Warhol's not getting splattered all over the face.
- VN: *Also, I was thinking about that photograph you made for Parkett. They had a show of Parkett editions at the Whitechapel a few years ago, and that's the only time I've ever seen a photograph by you in that sort of context. So, I suppose it's going back to what I was asking you before, whether you saw that as a future for the photos, or whether it's just...*
- DH: I got to do something with them.
- VN: *Do you see photography just as a means to an end?*

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<sup>7</sup> A photograph, entitled *Money Tree* (1992), featuring a bicycle tyre wedged into a knar in a tree trunk to make an impromptu basketball hoop, was shown in *Parkett*, #31 in 1992. The work was also sold as a Parkett limited edition work.

<sup>8</sup> Accompanying Hammons interview with Louise Neri was one of the posters for the Andy Warhol and Jean Michel Basquiat exhibition at Tony Shafrazi Gallery in 1985. The poster took the form of a boxing promotion advert and featured Warhol landing a punch on Basquiat's left cheek. See, Louise Neri, 'No Wonder', *Parkett* #31, p.51

- DH: Well, I want to make some money off of it, but I just don't know what size. I really have a problem with the size, more than anything. I don't know maybe 20 images... or at least 15.
- VN: *What, like a folio or something?*
- DH: No, I'd just have photographs. Some of them are incredible. But I just don't know what to do with them yet. Maybe make an exhibition of it.
- VN: [Laughs] *Do you think that's likely?*
- DH: I don't know. I don't like photos behind glass. All the artists are doing this, you know. I just don't like doing what everybody else is doing. Maybe I'll wait till this photograph thing is over, and then I'll get in the middle of it, you know, after it's over. Plus, they don't sell for that much. A small edition... maybe if I do three of one, I could sell them for \$100,000 each.
- VN: *Does that interest you, the idea of making them into editions like that? I mean, do you see them being in a magazine or exhibition...*
- DH: I think it's too ordinary.
- VN: *As an edition or in a magazine?*
- DH: As a work of art. You know, I don't like seeing photographs. I just don't like them that much.
- VN: *Do you think that when you're doing these photographs in magazines, that they're doing something different than when they're in a gallery?*
- DH: Yeah, they reach a larger audience. I get to get them back...[rather than selling them] Did you see the one in Artforum, when they asked artists to curate...?<sup>9</sup>
- VN: *Yes, I saw that.*
- DH: That was very interesting, especially putting that mosque up on the full page.
- VN: *It's a kind of curating. Because you did the show at Christine König, where you curated the space?<sup>10</sup>*
- DH: Right.
- VN: *Do you see that sort of curating as different?*
- DH: Different in terms of what? You know, she [Christine König] hated it because the blackness wasn't obvious. They hated it. Now she likes it because it got a lot of talk, and now she's all behind it. I stopped speaking to her, anyway. One of the artists is going to have a one-person show.

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<sup>9</sup> For the Summer 2000 edition of *Artforum*, Hammons curated 'Mood Swing,' a collection of images ranging from a full page photograph of the Shah mosque in Iran, to one of NASA's robotic 'microrover' *Sojourner Truth* on Mars (named after the eponymous 19<sup>th</sup> African American slave turned abolitionist and suffragette). It is worth noting that Hammons' feature also includes the work of sculptor, Senga Nengudi. See, *Artforum*, Summer 2002, pp.162-157

<sup>10</sup> Hammons curated *Quiet as its Kept*, which showed the work of three African American abstract expressionist painters – Ed Clark, Stanley Whitney and Denyse Thomasos; 16<sup>th</sup> May to 6<sup>th</sup> July 2002 at Christine König Galerie, Vienna.



- VN: *At the same gallery?*
- DH: Uhum. She sold, I think, one or two of his pieces.
- VN: *Because I looked at their web site, and it looked like there was a misunderstanding of work. Like the idea that some work is 'black', some work is 'white', and I wasn't sure whether that was intentional. It felt like the artists were being set up in way.*
- DH: What do you mean? I haven't seen the web site.
- VN: *Well, it just talked about how, even though these artists are black, their work is white. [DH laughs] You know, there was an idea that there's black work and there's white work, rather than the fact that these people just continue to make this work, even though it's not necessarily fashionable or whatever.*
- DH: Well, yeah, it's like crossover.
- VN: *Yes, exactly.*
- DH: I mean, that's what all of those diva opera stars do, who sing opera, those black American women.
- VN: *Yes.*
- DH: Classical.
- VN: *What, like Jessye Norman?*
- DH: Who is that?
- VN: *She's a black opera singer.*
- DH: Sure, like Johnny Mathis. You know, that's what their show was about, and that's what we kept talking about, that we're not a monolithic culture. I mean, Colin Powell's an example of that. The only reason why I curated it is to push that. And these artists will never be accepted, you know, because the blackness isn't... you know, they want the Kara Walkers. They really hate African-American artists who make European art. They can't tolerate it. That's why I forced it on them.
- VN: *I think there is similar situation with the Duchamp book, you know.<sup>11</sup>*
- DH: Sure, yeah. I mean, it's like Delano [Greenidge]. I mean, as black as he is, for what he does, that's the most outrageous piece of art I've ever experienced. What his product is, and him and who he is.<sup>12</sup> I mean, his appearance, what he does... there's no way, and it's impossible for them to accept it, especially here. He doesn't [publish the work of black artists]... well, he's

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<sup>11</sup> I am referring to David Hammons' *Holy Bible: Old Testament* (2002), artists' bookwork, which I co-produced with Richard Hylton, under the name of Hand/Eye Projects. The book is and is the artist's first published bookwork and took seven years to produce. The publication is an appropriation of Arturo Schwarz's *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (softback edition), and has been rebound to resemble a bible. The details of which are as follows: 1002pp, 225 colour plates, soft cover, leather-bound, gilt edged, gold tooling, plus slipcase. Approximately 30 x 24 x 2.5cm in size. Weight 8.6 kilos.

<sup>12</sup> Delano Greenidge is the publisher of *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*.

had one book, I think, one black book he just did of a photographer. Jules Allen, Black News, I think it's called. I think it's the first one he's done. And the books that he makes are always really high-quality, of unknown or not so known top-of-the-line artists.

VN: *So you think it's important to keep people guessing?*

DH: Of course. Including you.

VN: [Laughs] *Yeah, well, you certainly won on that count.*

DH: Including me, I should say. [Laughter] Really, I'm serious.

VN: *You know, with 'The Holy Bible', I think some people are quite upset by it...*

DH: Sure. Of course they are. That's the purpose of doing it. No, I mean, that's not the purpose of doing it — it's all of those reasons: to displace the blackness, you know, put the blackness wherever one wants to; especially take it away from where they think it should be. That's the main issue. It's very hard, though, for me to... I can't make white art without it being based in something of my experience. That's why I have to use Kool-Aid. I mean, it's too late because I couldn't do it with watercolours — there's no point. And they smell, too; you can smell them through the frame.

VN: *Sweet.*

DH: Yeah.

VN: *Like I was saying, with the König show, I've got a sense that there was this big misunderstanding on the part of the gallery of what it was you were trying to do... and, with the 'Holy Bible', there's a confusion, there as well. Does that bother you?*

DH: That's good. Art should be confusing. There's not much of that around. Most of it is pretty easy to read.

VN: *And, so you don't mind disappointing your fans?*

DH: That's my job. They're the first ones who have to be shipped out. I don't want any fans. Listen to this quote: I think it came from Yves Klein... it said: "An idea that is not dangerous is not worthy of being called an idea." That's another one of Delano's books, Yves Klein: Long Live the Immaterial. I mean, can you imagine that, a black man doing a book about Yves Klein? [Laughs] I think that's the most outrageous... I mean, I can't think of anything really more outrageous than that, more revolutionary. I really can't. ...You know, James Lingwood had the nerve enough to ask me to contribute a piece of art to his auction, for his business.

VN: *What, Artangel?*

DH: I couldn't believe it.

VN: *Was this recently?*

DH: I couldn't believe it. Yes.

VN: *You're not still pursuing anything with them? Or they're not pursuing anything with you?*

DH: No, no. Too easy.

VN: *Just going back to the photography: you don't sell or exhibit these photos, but I wanted to know what the aim was, in letting these staged-for-the-camera images go into circulation in the art press.*

DH: I don't understand the question.

VN: *Well, you don't show them in galleries, you don't sell them...*

DH: No, not as yet.

VN: *Not as yet, OK.*

DH: But I do plan to.

VN: *OK, well, that's good to know. Because what's interested me about the images that have been just staged for the camera: if they appear in the art press, it creates a kind of presence, you know, when you're not there. You don't have to be actually showing, but the images are in the art press and they're in the public psyche, you know.*

DH: Yeah. I'd rather show in those venues than in the gallery. I'm really interested in putting the [Hand/Eye Projects] web site on the wall, because that's it's like information on where to find something, a posted image; it's a direction, giving the viewer a direction to find something. They can look at the...

VN: *The web site...*

DH: Right, it'll be on the wall and they can go and look at it and see the image, as opposed to seeing it in the gallery space. It would be nice, I was thinking, to have all web sites on the wall, and then they have to go and look at it. They're everywhere else in the media, and on billboards.

VN: *OK. When did you first do these works just for the camera?*

DH: Oh, probably late Sixties. Way back.

VN: *Because in 'Rousing the Rubble' there are those early photographs images of you in the studio doing the body prints.*

DH: Oh, that's another artist friend, Bruce Talamon. I forgot about him. I always hang out with the photographers — you know, they can become useful — or electricians or video cameramen.

VN: *Those photos, they remind me of those Hans Namuth photos of Pollock painting in the studio. What were you trying to do with them? Was it literally to show how you make the body prints?*

DH: There's another, Jules Allen.

VN: *Another photographer?*

DH: Yeah. I forgot about Jules Allen. Wow, how could I forget him?

**VN:** *So just going back to those photos in the studio, I was interested in what you were doing with those, whether they were literally you documenting how you make the body prints, or whether you were performing something for the camera.*

**DH:** Yes, because I had to document these things, you know. I have a lot of them. In Japan, I did a whole catalogue of pieces like that... I just don't understand why I don't produce them. It's so fashionable — that's the main reason — so fashionable to do photography that way.

**VN:** *But then you've been doing it for some time. Like you said, you've been doing it since the Sixties; you predated that fashion...*

**DH:** Well, yes, that happens sometimes. But I still don't really see them as art, though. I've never seen photography as art. But then it's become that.

**VN:** *I've been interested in how, in those photos, you can allow certain images to come to prominence at different times. So you could show a piece of work in a magazine that was a few years old, that's never been seen and there's a kind of delay there.*

**DH:** Well, that's why I keep them so long, for that delay.

**VN:** *So, what, that gives you some space?*

**DH:** Uhum. About three or four years' worth.

**VN:** *Right. I don't know if I've told you much about my thesis. But basically, I'm not looking directly at the work, but at issues around the work. Like how an artist might create a kind of aura around themselves; so I'm looking at things like the photographs and also the kind of rumours that have been spread, either by you or in association to you, that create a kind of presence.*

**DH:** Yeah. Some magazine said I'm becoming a cult figure. I think it was Time Out.

**VN:** *What do you think of that, then?*

**DH:** Yeah, my kind of stuff.

**VN:** *Can you tell me why you don't take the photos yourself. Is that just because you're not interested in photography?*

**DH:** I direct them. No, I just want them to be good photos, because I just took some bad, horrible photos of a piece I was working on, and they're really bad. You know, especially longevity and stuff.

**VN:** *What do you mean?*

**DH:** I mean, you know, thinking 100 years from now.

**VN:** *What, so you need to have them a certain standard?*

**DH:** Sure. Sometimes I like mine because they're not good. I think if you keep them small, they look good. It's like that basketball piece is small, because when you blow them up, then they get fuzzy.

- VN:** *You just talked about the idea of directing the photos, and in some of the other projects you've done, like...*
- DH:** Yeah, I have to choose the angles. You know, all they do is, they [the photographer] just click it.
- VN:** [Laughs] *I bet they wouldn't say that.*
- DH:** Well, it's true. But a lot of times I have them take like four or five photos, and then I choose from what they take. I mean, now they shoot like 20 sometimes, and they put them to the computer thing, and I think there were 50-something the last shoot we just had, and I chose about five out of the 50 that they shot, so it's really like that. I don't direct [Estwick] anymore because, you know, we've worked so much together.
- VN:** *But then, that idea of being some kind of art director...*
- DH:** Most of them are just frontal [views] not an issue. You know, they set up tripods and that kind of thing. But they tell me a lot of stuff too — you know, “You should do this,” and “You already did that the last time. Why don't you try something else?” We have a good dialogue.
- VN:** So it's quite collaborative?
- DH:** I think so. It is, more than ever now. We just had a shoot last week.
- VN:** *Again, there's this idea of being some kind of art director – not literally just in the photos, but as a curator...*
- DH:** I think it's more a conductor. I would prefer ‘Arkestra’ leader.<sup>13</sup> I feel more comfortable with that, composer. It's a lot of fun. Vienna was a lot of fun, doing that. Because, you know, artists always want to put too much in, and I wanted blank walls, and they brought over more paintings and they kept trying to get me to put more pieces in, and I said, “No, I'm not doing it.” You know, I just wanted a very few pieces and a lot of empty space, and not to give too much information, not to expose too much of who we were.
- VN:** *And that feeds back to other projects, doesn't it, like the work with Sun Ra and the more architectural projects with Jerry Barr. Do you see those as ‘Arkestrating as well’?*
- DH:** Right, uhum. Yeah, I think I want to do more of that.
- VN:** *So, what does that give you? Why is that important?*
- DH:** Something to do that's different, you know. Exciting. To see what I can get away with, basically.
- VN:** *Can you tell me who your current dealer is? Do you have an agent or a dealer?*

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<sup>13</sup> The term “Arkestra” comes from Sun Ra the experimental Jazz pianist and arranger, and his unique approach to orchestration. Hammons has frequently cited Sun Ra as an influence. He performed in front of Hammons’ *Delta Spirit* in 1985.

DH: Oh, I've got more dealers than... about four. I just got another one now who wants to handle my work.

VN: *And where's that? New York?*

DH: Well, we haven't done any business yet, just mentioned it. But there's Vera [Gioia] in Naples and Greenberg, and sometimes Jack Tilton, and this other woman named Lawson.

VN: *Is that Jeanne Greenberg?*

DH: Yeah, I don't know how much longer I'm going to be with her, though.

VN: *Is she based in New York?*

DH: Yes, she's got two galleries. One she calls Salon, her new place, Upper East Side, and the other one is called Greenberg Van Doren Gallery... Complex, isn't it?

VN: *Yeah, it is, because I'm trying to write about this and it's quite elusive.*

DH: Well, that's...

VN: *I know that's the plan, I know, but the thing is...*

DH: Yeah, but it fits me.

VN: *Of course.*

DH: It fits. What I'm trying to do, is to not be pigeonholed.

VN: *Absolutely.*

DH: And this one woman [dealer], she hates all of them. She keeps telling me I'm giving them too much. I'm giving them 25%, and she says it's too much. [Laughs] I said, "You don't want them to have anything." She said, "You're right about that." But it works, though, you know. It's like getting three estimates when you go to the doctor, or talking to different lawyers about something... You know, you get three estimates, and you can see where they're coming from.

VN: *You mean having a number of dealers?*

DH: Yeah. You can cross check, you know.

VN: *I suppose, that means that they don't get over-confident about their role in your...*

DH: Exactly. Yeah, right, I keep them on a short leash. And if they don't like it, I tell them to walk, I don't care. You have to, though, really, otherwise they'll take you for granted.

VN: *Do you remember the '93 Whitney Biennial that Thelma [Golden] curated part of?*

DH: OK...

VN: *I see that show as representing something quite problematic. You see the idea of race or gender or those kinds of issues, starting to bind artists. And so, as a black person, or a woman, therefore, you represent race or politics or whatever, rather than something broader. So, I'm trying to work out how an artist might try and function under those kinds of constraints; when you're being pigeonholed from various positions. So, things that you might*

*have done 5 or 10 years ago, you have to keep adapting your position in order to stay ahead really.*

**DH:** That's no different than with cars. You know: cameras, cars, they have to reinvent themselves... a new camera comes out every six months to compete...

**VN:** *So artists are commodities, then?*

**DH:** Yeah, I see it much more as a business than before. Yeah, it's all business. It's no longer fun. There's more fun in the business.

**VN:** *Do you think that your project is more to do with the market now?*

**DH:** Yeah, I don't see it as art anymore. I don't see it as art for art. I'm interested in messing with white folks' minds, basically. I like making fun of Europeans, how they look at art, how they deal with it. You haven't seen my latest piece... you've got these African statues, and then these... they're empty latrines, you know, those European art Plexiglas cases.

**VN:** *Where's that?*

**DH:** It'll be in Switzerland. But they're African statues underneath the boxes. The boxes are up on four legs, wooden, with beautiful Plexiglas. You know, they call them "latrines", don't they?

**VN:** *Vitrines* [Laughs], *not latrines. A latrine is where you take a shit.*

**DH:** I know, but I like that word. Anyway, the statues are underneath them. All you can see is the feet and the legs. So, they're in protest at being inside the boxes. They look like Donald Judd's empty Plexiglas cases, so people have to get on the floor to look at them, to see what's underneath them. So they're absent; they're in protest at the presentation.

**VN:** *Now that's very different from the Duchamp book, isn't it? I mean, apart from, obviously, there's a kind of readymade issue that runs across the two, but this one seems very racially motivated.*

**DH:** Well, again it's my view of how Europeans look at art. I mean, the book's coming out of their [reality], not my reality. I'm just looking at them; that's my interpretation of the white power structure. That's all basically it is, and I'm reacting to it. It's amazing how white folks look at art and build the kind of shrines that they put their work in. Making art on canvas is quite bizarre, I think, and behind glass, and all that old bullshit. That's why I'm playing with it, I'm playing with their vocabulary. It's like Coltrane and Miles; these are classical instruments they're playing. And English is not our language: we use their language. That's why I love Ben Okri so much, you know, how he uses English.

**DH:** You haven't mentioned the *Phat Free* video.<sup>14</sup>

**VN:** *Oh, what, in terms of the documentation?*

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<sup>14</sup> *Phat Free* is the video Hammons made in 1996 with Alex Harsley that showed at the 1997 Whitney Biennial. The work is sold on DVD in an edition of 20.

DH: Yeah. You know, I worked with a photographer, he videoed it.

VN: *That's Alex Harsley, right?*

DH: Right, right. He's all pissed off because his name's not on the [gallery] wall. I stopped speaking to him; I haven't spoken to him for six months. He's been phoning up PS1 hollering and screaming because his name wasn't on the wall. I told him, I can't control these things. Just because it's in the show, I don't run out there and make sure that what's on the wall is correct.

VN: *But what was the deal, what was the arrangement?*

DH: [His name is] on the box [of the editioned DVD], but he wants it on the wall whenever it's shown. This DVD belongs to the collector. The collector lends the work to an institution.

VN: *So the actual inclusion in the exhibition didn't have anything to do with you.*

DH: Exactly. I heard it was in there, and he wants his name printed in everything, and I said, "Look, I can't control that."

VN: *Oh, dear, so he's not happy.*

DH: Well, you know, he got paid.

VN: *So was his job to be just cameraman, or was it a collaboration?*

DH: Yeah. I'd be walking down the street with this bucket, kicking it, and he said, "Keep going," you know, so we collaborated. We went into the studio and rented it by the hour, and he controlled the surround sound, because I don't know anything about that. Then I packaged it. So, it was a collaboration.

VN: *Right. But it's not read as that.*

DH: Well, basically, when someone gets paid... you know, like I collaborated with the photographer, too... but when they get paid, that ends their... you know. Sometimes I try to put her [Estwick's] name in, but I keep forgetting to put her name as photographer of a lot of my things. I'm constantly doing that, and I have to get better at that, you know Erma's name as the photographer of the photos. A lot of times they ask, but most of the time they don't. And I tell her when I see her in the street, or I call her up. You know, sometimes I tell them and they don't put it in, so...

VN: *But that 'Phat Free' is seen as your work, isn't it, really?*

DH: Yes, it is my work.

VN: *Yeah, but it's not read as a collaborative piece, it's read as a David Hammons...*

DH: He [Harsley] just follows me with the camera. You know, when I've paid them, well, that's it. You know, then all rights are mine. It's no different from when Miles has Coltrane and whoever playing, it's the Miles Davis Quartet. I usually see it that way, the way a musician sees things, and they get in the credit line — you know, Wayne Shorter or whoever, they're in the credits but it's still Coltrane's or whoever's quartet. Sidemen, I see it as sidemen.



**VN:** *So, for you, the photographer's serving a function, which is to document.*

**DH:** Exactly.

**DH:** Oh, also Corinne Simpson — she's taken a lot of photographs for me. A lot of these are professional art photographers, and Erma, she's not an art photographer, she just shoots photos for artists, but she's the only one who is... a “photographer's photographer” and “art photographer”.

**VN:** *OK. So in the past, when you had done something like 'Bliz-aard Ball Sale,' would you invite the photographer down and say, "I'm doing such and such. Come along"?*

**DH:** Right. Yeah, we make a date to be there, just to shoot what I do.

**VN:** *Right. Because quite a few articles make reference to the 'Doll Shoe Salesman', and I was curious about how many people had actually seen it, and the fact that it there is a bit of a myth about this particular piece of work.*

**DH:** Keith Haring, he bought some.

**VN:** *Did he? Did many people attend?*

**DH:** Well, this happened for two years, maybe three years, every summer. I needed money; I didn't have any money, and this was making a living. I'd make like \$10-12.

**VN:** *A doll?*

**DH:** A day.

**VN:** *But it wasn't documented, I'm just interested that a lot of people talk about it — is that just because of the period you did it over?*

**DH:** People would just see it. People used to call me “Shoes” in the neighbourhood. This friend gave me all these rubber shoes, hundreds and hundreds of little rubber shoes. He moved into a doll factory, a loft or something.

**VN:** *And that went on for a couple of years?*

**DH:** Yeah, about three years, before I ran out.

**VN:** *So there's a natural conclusion to the piece?*

**DH:** Uhum.

**VN:** *OK, are you going to come over for your show [in Switzerland]?*

**DH:** I have to, because I can't trust their installation. They purchased the pieces in advance, so I can't trust them to display it properly. I would never have done the show with these people, but I'm just going to make sure that I'm represented well. I've never had anyone buy pieces in advance for an exhibition.

**VN:** *That's interesting, but when you did the White Cube show, they bought the work too, no?*

**DH:** I didn't care what they did with that. They could have thrown it out the window. I just dislike that man [Jay Jopling] so; I just can't take being around him. But that's the only way they could have gotten it, is to purchase it in advance, and they tried for a couple of years to buy that and I wouldn't even sell it to them. There was no other way. They tried other ways to get that one.

**VN:** *So was it a matter of them buying it? They didn't couldn't borrow work, from elsewhere?*

**DH:** I just know they weren't going to get it unless they paid cash up front. That's the only way I was going to deal with them.

**VN:** *And where is the work now?*

**DH:** I heard it was in the art fair in Florida. They tried to unload it. That's where all that garbage is; it ends up in the art fair.

**VN:** *So the work in Zurich has also been pre-bought?*

**DH:** Mm.

**VN:** *Is that what you do when you don't like the dealer?*

**DH:** Well, there's no other way they can get it. I'm not going to show it with them. This is a new phenomenon starting to happen. And I guess they buy it for prestige, to be a part of my... whatever. I don't know what they buy it for, but as long as they've got a cheque in the mail, they can do what they want with it at this point in my life. And Christine [König] was highly upset because I didn't put a piece in the show. She went off because I wasn't including myself in that exhibition. You know, they see you as a cash cow.

**VN:** *What, you mean in Austria?*

**DH:** Uhum.

**VN:** *What, you showing with the Abstract Expressionists?*

**DH:** She didn't care. She wasn't even looking at it that way; she missed that. She just wanted me to pay her rent, basically. And I refused to be a part of it, and she was just outraged...  
...Virginia, I don't like being mean. I have no choice; I got to protect myself with these people. You know, they'll have you hanging on a string and you won't even know it, if you don't protect how you want it to be. It doesn't matter what you do; they still see you as a nigger — that's what I've found out. They're not going to let you off the hook; it doesn't matter what you do. The flashlight show,<sup>15</sup> they just... they write about it, you know, they still write what they want to hear; you know, and there's no way out. It doesn't matter how far you try to get off of it. So, it's even more fun to get away from the blackness and see how they tie you back into it. It doesn't matter what I do; they're going to make it black-related. They can't handle you being outside of their identity. And that's what makes the Duchamp book so powerful, because it's just not acceptable. They have no place to put that; it's completely outside of their radar

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<sup>15</sup> Hammons is referring to his solo show at Ace Gallery, New York in 2002.

system, completely unacceptable. But then, this wonderful article that came out in the New Yorker,<sup>16</sup> we talked about it and he [Peter Schjeldahl] was telling me, “In order to cure an epidemic, you have to use the poison to cure the disease with.” And that’s what the Duchamp book is about, using it as a medicine to cure the epidemic, which I thought was brilliant when he said that.

**VN:** *One thing I wanted to ask you was about the show in Austria; why your name went ahead of everything...*<sup>17</sup>

**DH:** She [Christine König] paid for everything, you know. She paid for the catalogue, she paid for a hotel, she paid for the plane tickets; and did not speak to us the day we arrived. We walked into the gallery and she was talking to someone else, and had us standing there for five minutes before she acknowledged us. The woman isn’t wrapped too tight. But once the white folks liked it, now she likes it. But she was terrified of the show because she thought she was going to be laughed at.

**DH:** And then she said, “The young kids, they don’t care about the blackness the way we do. You know, they just make art.” I said, “Well, good for them, you know. It’s great that they don’t have to go through this.”

**VN:** *Who did she mean?*

**DH:** Just the young artists, they don’t have the same issues that we do. You know, they just make art for art’s sake and it’s accepted.

**VN:** *Really?*

**DH:** That’s what she said.

**VN:** *I have to see the catalogue, because I’m only really going from their press release and their web site, but it was just interesting how you were profiled above the other artists. I presume that’s not you, that’s the gallery doing that.*

**DH:** Yeah. It was kind of humiliating when the press came, that they didn’t talk to the artists, so I left the gallery, and she went off. I went down the street to a coffee shop. I refused to be there when the press came, and made them focus on talking to the artists. And we did a radio interview also. But Stanley Whitney, he’s very intelligent, very, very smart, he did most of the talking, and I refused to get involved with too much dialogue about the show. And of course, you know, she got pissed. And then, she starts talking to us the last day...[Laughs]

**VN:** *So would you do any more curated projects like that?*

**DH:** I don’t think so. But it’s kind of interesting, you know, getting everyone tickets and, you know, if they don’t get paid, I have to go tell that such and such that we owe him money. Plus we had

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, ‘Rediscovering New York with David Hammons,’ *New Yorker*, December 23<sup>rd</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> 2002.

<sup>17</sup> David Hammons is the only person credited on the cover of the *Quiet as it’s Kept* exhibition catalogue.

two black writers who wrote for the catalogue. And this one white boy wrote something, and I said, "I don't want you to put it in the catalogue," because she [Christine König] was so concerned with everything being black, but she wanted the white boy's essay to be in it, and I said, "Forget it." I wouldn't let her put it in. She tried to sneak in essay by a white boy. He didn't have anything to contribute. I didn't want to hear his point of view on anything. The white boy, when he heard this, he was mad. I couldn't care less.

**VN:** *Do you think that they would put on a show of African American Abstract Expressionists if hadn't come through you?*

**DH:** There's no way it could have happened. No, because these artists, there's no way they could... That's the reason why I'm showing them. You know, the door is not open that wide. I'm trying to make these white folks buy abstract art from black artists, that is 100% abstract, and they have to find the blackness — it's in there, but it's not where they want it to be. It's usually in the sense of colour, and a lot of people picked up on that. A lot of the people who came to the show were amazed at the colour: very, very African in terms of its colour — and not afraid of it.

**VN:** *But it's you they want, really.*

**DH:** Sure. But you don't want to go in there by yourself. It's a trap. I'm not doing that. Vera [Gioia]<sup>18</sup> is the same way; she gets very upset. Me and Stanley [Whitney], we've done shows before. I just invite him; I don't even ask her. I said, "If you want me, you have to bring this person also," and they have no choice. I make them an offer they can't refuse. Because it's not beneficial for me to be standing up there by myself. You know, I got trapped in this other one unfortunately because I'm concerned about the presentation.

**VN:** *Oh, the show in Zurich?*

**DH:** Yeah. There's no way they could present it the way [I want] I can't allow it to be in their hands. Even Louise [Neri], you know, she had to bounce that ball on the wall.<sup>19</sup>

**VN:** *She did it herself?*

**DH:** Right. Then she sent the ball back to me. I showed her how to do it.

**VN:** [Laughs]

**VN:** *OK, David. It's nearly midnight here. Well, thanks very much for that. You've filled in a lot of gaps for me, because sometimes I try and piece things together and it doesn't fit. And also, because some of the aspects of your practice, they're not what you would normally call a strategy. You know, they don't follow an obvious logic, so it's quite hard to prove...*

**DH:** There is a strategy. It's just that it's a strategy and a logic that's just different than the white boy's. It runs parallel; it's just a different...

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<sup>18</sup> Vera Gioia is Hammons' dealer in Naples.

<sup>19</sup> Louise Neri was the curator of Hammons' solo show at Inside the White Cube in 2002. The wall drawing was made by slamming a Harlem-dirt covered basketball against the gallery wall.

**VN:** *Trajectory?*

**DH:** Sure. A different culture. It's full of logic... You know what they say: "Don't get even, get odd."  
[Laughter] You could have that as the name of your paper.

**VN:** *Yeah. [Laughter] Well, I think I'm done.*

**DH:** OK.

**VN:** *All right, well, you take care of yourself.*

**DH:** OK. Good. Talk to you, Virginia.

**VN:** *Yeah, thank you David.*

**DH:** OK.

**VN:** *Bye.*

**DH:** Bye Bye.

(END)

## APPENDIX 2: HAMMONS TEXTS

I wrote the following texts early in my research as a means of documenting my relationship with the artist David Hammons.

## WAITING

We are in New York for five days. It is our inaugural meeting with David Hammons. At this point, the project is about a year old. The arrangements – we later come to realise – are characteristically loose. We have somehow found ourselves in New York with no date, time or venue for the meeting and no direct contact with the artist. Our contact is A.C. Hudgins, a stockbroker, agent and friend of Hammons. He has given us dates of when Hammons will be in New York and seems relatively confident that he will see us. We may only call Hudgins after 3pm – before that, he works the stock market from home.

Each day, we call Hudgins after 3pm. Each day, there is no response from Hammons. Hudgins is still relatively confident. By the end of Day 3, our nerve is slipping. We are aware that many a good curator has fallen at this first hurdle. It is clear to us that if we don't meet him on this trip, then the project is off (we are travelling on public money). To maintain some sense of control, we go through the motions of research; we meet other artists, we visit galleries, we buy books – then relent to ring our hotel to see if he has left a message. Still no word. Hudgins is now tired of us calling. Richard and I have started to bicker. This is my first visit to New York and I am supposed to be having a good time. By now, we reckon that we're more likely to pass Hammons in the street than meet with him, and given that neither party knows what the other looks like, we probably have.

By Day 4, we are reluctant to get out of bed. I take my shower at midday. The phone rings – Richard picks up. It's him: he will meet up the next day, 11am at Spring Natural Restaurant on Spring and Lafayette. Despite the fact our plane back to London checks in at 4pm that same day, the sense of relief is immense. Any feelings of bad will we might have been feeling towards Hammons have subsided. All we have to do now is prepare.

We talk to Tim Rollins. Although he doesn't know Hammons well, he does know that he likes whole foods. He advises us to research the Spring Natural menu and work out the most advantageous tables in the restaurant. To us, this seems a little excessive. However, given the trial that it has been organising even this first meeting, a little advice cannot hurt. Tim Rollins reckons that you can never be too prepared. Richard and I therefore dine at Spring Natural. We check out the menu, the prices, the seating, the time it will take us to get from our hotel to the restaurant (by cab, by subway, and on foot); we organise our catalogues, proposals and business cards. We go through what we are going to say, who is going to say what and when. There is nothing left to do now but wait.

Day 5: 10.15am. We sit in Starbucks, and go over everything one last time. 10.45pm, we arrive to find Spring Natural shut and not open to midday. We had neglected to find out the time it opened and realise that we do not have a B Plan. By 11.10am, Hammons has arrived. Our inaugural meeting is held around the corner in Starbucks.

## FAX

8am. I wake to hear Richard on the telephone to New York leaving our number and address on Hammons' answer phone. I don't think it is a good idea. Sometimes Hammons doesn't write things down. I decide to fax him the details once I get to work. It is not something I need to discuss with Richard. I send the fax, but do feel slightly guilty that perhaps I might be undermining Richard's authority. I decide not to worry about it.

Later that evening, while we're eating dinner, Hammons faxes us back my fax with the message, "I don't understand this fax," written down one side. Richard looks bemused. "You rang him this morning with our address," I state. "No" he replies. I try to cover my tracks by suggesting it was his idea: "You told me to fax him our address this morning." "No," he insists, "...anyway, you know he's got our address."

It begins to dawn on me that Richard's telephone conversation never happened. We have been in contact with this artist for a number of years and the last thing he would need is our address. I have acted on one of those half waking dreams. Richard's face bears a look of part amusement and part concern that I might have finally lost it. He immediately calls Hammons. Richard confesses for me. Hammons reckons I was having a "daymare" about the project. They laugh together for a full five minutes. Feeling slightly betrayed and more than a little stupid, I wonder if I am taking the project too seriously.



## CAMERA

After dinner at Kelly & Ping, we fall into a slow meander around Soho. True to form, Hammons is talking and kind of leading the way. We come to a halt outside an apartment building somewhere off Greene Street. Hammons points out a piece of his work installed in the lobby. It is a basketball hoop chandelier. The 'net' is made of crystal. The chandelier is illuminated by those cheap, candle-shaped bulbs that flicker orange light. Perhaps it is the location of the marble-clad lobby, or the prestigious company, or the fact that I was unprepared for viewing a work of art, but as we stand outside looking through glass doors, the piece strikes me as beautiful.

I think that maybe I should document it. I ask Hammons if it OK. He says yes and that I should actually be documenting everything because these things are important. This passing comment changes the complexion of the situation. I had naively thought we were off-duty. I now feel the heavy weight of expectation descend upon me. What I had intended as an 'informal snapshot' has now become an archival record of the project.

Unfortunately, I am overcome by the situation – Hammons, his daughter, Richard (and the fact that they are all waiting for me to take the photograph), the artwork, New York. As I pull out my camera, it appears like some alien instrument to me. I can't remember the rule about photographing through glass. And what do I do about the flash? All I remember is that I exchanged my colour film for black and white earlier that day because I thought I might take more atmospheric shots. This is not good. Perhaps I should just confess.

As I take the photograph, I have no idea what I am focussed on, or what any of the camera settings are. The flash goes off and everyone seems happy. We walk on. My panic attack appears to have gone unnoticed.

## GUN

Thursday, 2pm. Hammons decides we should go and buy a gun. He wants to see what will happen. This is two days into his first research trip in London. I am less than enthusiastic. I am confronted by the reality that despite this being David Hammons, and us having worked for three years to get him over, I don't want to spend our project money on a gun.

Hammons is persistent. Each time he mentions guns over the course of the day, I try to look purposeful, but endeavour to let the matter drift into general chitchat. Yet I don't want to appear spineless, uptight or inefficient. I realise this is some kind of test. By the end of Day 3, he is still keen. Confrontation is clearly not an option. Richard tells me not to worry and that Hammons will eventually change his mind, as he has over just about everything else. So diligently, I do my research for the next day. Tomorrow, we will go to Catford Gun Company.

Saturday, 12.15pm. Richard calls Hammons to check he is up. We go and fetch him in the car. He is in good spirits. Our plan is to breakfast and then buy the gun. We set off. Within seconds, the journey is aborted. From a side street emerges a youth on a bicycle. Focused on friends gathered at the opposite corner, he crosses two lanes of oncoming traffic. I believe that he will stop. As we slow down, he hits the side of our car. Youth and bicycle somersault separately over the bonnet. They hit the ground. Strangely, the youth seems to bounce upright again. The youth is in shock. He is trying to save face, which makes him look much worse. I feel a compulsion to hug the youth, but decide that it would be inappropriate. I look at Richard and Hammons; both wear the same slightly dumb expression of concern and disbelief.

The youth is unconvincing in assuring us that he is OK. His arms are grazed and he is trying to disguise a pain in his side. His friends look afraid, more than he does. Collectively, we manage to persuade the youth to let us drive him to casualty. We set off again. Immediately in the car, the youth pulls out a mobile phone. He informs a friend that he will be "about fifteen minutes late" and that he got "mashup" – a term that implies more that he has been in a fight than road accident. The youth is in denial.

As I escort the youth into Kings College Hospital Accident & Emergency Unit, he assures me that "Nothing will come of this." I take this to mean that he will not be suing us for the accident. The compassion I have felt for the youth is waning. I make sure that he signs in, get him to call someone to meet him, we swap numbers. I don't know what else to do, so I leave.

Outside Hammons is waiting. Richard is with the car. Hammons reckons that Richard deserves a gift. We track down the minuscule hospital florist shop. From a sorry selection, Hammons puts together a curious bunch of marigolds, carnations and Septembers wrapped in leopard skin paper. At the car, Hammons places the bouquet on the bonnet. He is not laughing. Hammons concedes that even thinking about guns can make bad things happen.