

# ARTFORUM

September 2016

## David Hammons

MNUCHIN GALLERY

The whispers surrounding “David Hammons: Five Decades” were as important to the exhibition as the art itself. Accounts of the show tend to focus on how Hammons revisited the gallery on multiple occasions to contribute additional framed materials and reposition those artworks already included, and on how his last-minute changes to the show’s installation meant the works featured in the catalogue did not match up with the works on view, as if the *real* story was about Hammons and his enigmatic ways. Indeed, every exhibition review seems to describe a different show altogether, reflecting the way in which it changed from one week to the next. As such, “Five Decades” posed a critique of spectatorship and historiography that raises questions about the “career survey” genre. Hammons’s interventions served as acts of misdirection that operated as strategies to write history, forcing recursive, nonlinear, and speculative approaches to his particular form of Conceptualism.

Spanning two floors of Mnuchin Gallery, the exhibition featured twenty-one of Hammons’s ink-on-paper works, sculptures, and paintings. Wall labels written directly on the walls featured short phrases and inscrutable glyphs that refused the labor of telling viewers what they were seeing. During the run of the show, Hammons added what

amounted to thirty framed photographs and artifacts from ephemeral works, such as *Untitled*, 2003, and *Untitled (Global Fax Festival)*, 2000, to the gallery’s original installation, supplements that confused, rerouted, and derailed the show’s otherwise linear narrative, throwing the artist-object’s historical meaning into crisis.

Mnuchin Gallery’s original selections were themselves performative objects, but when coupled with Hammons’s interventions, they asked the viewer to fill in the gaps of meaning presented by display. In installing framed documentation of *Shoe Tree*, 1981, at the same height as the nearly fourteen-foot-high *Basketball Chandelier*, 1997, Hammons demanded the viewer consider the scale of her body in relation to the objects surrounding her—that she stretch to meet these objects where they were at, not where she wanted them to be. Housed in one room, *Spade (Power for the Spade)*, 1969, and *In the Hood*, 1993, foregrounded materiality, from the skin-to-paper contact sheets manifesting a blackness overwhelmed by stereotype to the guillotined hoodie positioned at such great heights that no body could assume the position. For *A Movable Object / A Japanese Garden*, 2012, Hammons literally pulverized the very ground upon which those myths, stereotypes, and violences that form and inform black life are made, and offered these fragments back to us as if to mark an aesthetic invested in the act of dismantling racial construction itself.

By literally and discursively rerouting conversations about his career and career-making works, Hammons proposes that the writing of the history of his work should occur at the level of the performative, the conceptual, and the formal—and not only its vernacular and playful interrogations of everyday black life. This may be why upon entering Mnuchin Gallery visitors were greeted by Hammons’s work *Tribal Art*, 2007, featuring the titular phrase stenciled in spray paint onto the cover of the Summer 2007 issue of *Artforum*, which features an essay by Jack Bankowsky on David and Chie Hammons’s show at New York’s erstwhile L&M Arts (now Mnuchin Gallery). *Tribal Art* reminds us of *Artforum*’s place in the art world as at once an object of history and one that writes history—as a publication whose attention can canonize an artist for future generations. Tagged with a phrase perhaps meant to caution against the urge to marginalize or exoticize Hammons’s work, *Tribal Art* charges us into a conversation about writing itself.

If we follow this provocation, we land back in historiography and its potential to account for the multiple and divergent strands of thinking in Hammons’s career. Perhaps the greatest coup of “Five Decades” was the way the artist made us unwitting players in the self-assessment of his career. With his sly misdirection, Hammons asserted his own hand as a method of writing his story, and in so doing secured his place within a history of Conceptualism in which he was often otherwise an afterthought. He reminds us that his art is always contingent and in process—always active and activating.

—Sampada Aranke



View of "David Hammons," 2016.  
From left: *Untitled*, 2014; *Untitled*, 2003; *Smoke Screen*, 1990–95; *Standing Room Only*, 1996; *Basketball Chandelier*, 1997. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging.