David Hammons: Concerto in Black and Blue

Ace Gallery, NY
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Upon entering Ace Gallery gigantic warehouse-like space, one wondered what music David Hammons had in mind when he orchestrated *Concerto in Black and Blue*. While the title echoes jazz resonance, Hammons chose the strident sound of the Japanese harp Koto to reveal his piece to the public of the opening night. (A Japanese woman played the instrument on a platform set at the far end of the gallery, much to the dismay of those who expected the blows of Jazz). *Concerto* has since remained silent. After the noisy fuss of the inauguration, nothing but the sound of the visitors' steps, whispers, and occasional laughs, was to be heard. Deceptive as the title sounds it roots the piece in Hammons usual play of words and makes it a statement in itself. As Hammons left the gallery empty, and in the dark, he reconstituted the parameters of an isolation chamber wherein, one having lost the sense of sight, the ear was enhanced to make up for that deficiency. Having trapped visitors in a black cube Hammons provided them with a lightening device emitting a blue flash beam so that their lost vision could partially be recovered. As the lights kept going on and off, they created an ever morphing sculpture of light that could otherwise be seen as a fireflies' ballet, depending on whether one wanted to take a conceptual or sensorial approach to it. Relying upon the phenomenological experience of color, light, space, and sound Hammons *Concerto in Black and Blue* was like a disconcerting hide-and-seek game where music sounded like a play of words, light failed to provide full visibility, and color remained helpless in grounding materiality. Deploying a wide range of effects, Hammons used the intricacies of language to exhaust the meanings of words heavily charged in racial and cultural connotations. He also used both light and color to foreground issues of visibility and invisibility, materiality and immateriality, specifically as they come into play in debates around race and essence.

Music—A Play of Words

Despite its free-flowing form and the jazzy resonance of its title, Hammons *Concerto in Black and Blue* was far from an improvisation. In his usual double entendre fashion, Hammons encoded complex references in his title that calls for an intertextual reading of the work. The texts here could be partitions, for *Concerto in Black and Blue* certainly recalls more than just one Jazz title. Coincidentally or not, the title that comes closer to *Concerto in Black and Blue* is that of a film short featuring a jazzman. In *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* (1932) Louis Armstrong, clad in faux-leopard skin was cast as a modern minstrel, a role that owed him much despise in the part of the black community and jazz critiques alike. The former dismissed his playing off of a derogatory vision of the black male, while the latter regretted that a great artistic talent had been taken over by the entertainment machine. Beyond arguments that could be made as to whether or not Hammons' *Concerto* is a clin d'oeil to Armstrong's *Rhapsody*, Armstrong performance in *Rhapsody in Black a Blue* offers a critical frame against which to reflect on the new development of Hammons work. Having left the street that had granted him relative independence and abandoned low-brow materials that located his work in the field of the subversive, how close to art-world spectacle is Hammons *Concerto* with its grandiloquent setting and fancy flashlights? Is the void in *Concerto in Black and Blue* transcendence or vacuity?

As a whole, the title grounds Hammons practice in the "signifyin'", a literary theory delineated by Henri Louis Gates and convincingly applied to his work by Coco Fusco[1]. Each word of the title further illustrates how hidden meaning can be revealed

David Hammons, *Concerto in Black and Blue*, Photograph by Katharina Bosse. Originally published in *The New Yorker*

through an alteration of the relationship between a given term and its usual meaning. If "Black" obviously refers to the color black, that of the darkness of the gallery space, and of night, and "Blue" to the color of the flashlight beam, both "black" *and* "blue" refer to skin color. In black talk, black people who are very dark skin are seen as so black as to being blue and are called as such. "Blue blacks" are so black that they are lost in the confines of the bluest night, the ultimate blackness. As the blue light casts all visitors in a blue shadow regardless of their skin color, the spectrum of race-defining terms in *Concerto in Black and Blue* is fully played out, and subverted, as darkness envelops them all and blue is their only color. This said, have visitors become all black (blue) or colorless instead?

Light and (In)Visibility—A House with Lights

Hammons' use of light in *Concerto in Black and Blue* is rooted in an African American tradition that sees blackness as the ultimate experience of invisibility. In Ralph Ellison oft-cited *Invisible Man* (1952)—to which Jeff Wall gave a brilliant illustration and interpretation in a recent photograph—light is used as a critical tool to give form to the concept of the (in)visibility of race. In the novel the black character needs more light than his white neighbors to see, and above all be seen. Interestingly enough, Hammons once contributed a piece to Tribes, the gallery of his friend the blind poet Steve Canon, in which instead of adding more light bulbs to the house as did the invisible man in his basement, Hammons replaced the existing white bulbs with blue ones.[2] If the *House of Blue Lights* (1993) as it was called is a forerunner to *Concerto in Black and Blue*, the latter problematizes issues of invisibility in a more elaborate manner. Where in *The House* participants could not avoid the blue light unless they hid under some piece of furniture, in *Concerto* it was up to them to turn the light on or not—that is to activate the flashlight—to remain in the dark or not, and they could not avoid it as there was no place to hide. Furthermore they were threatened by blindness. The uniformity of color of each and everyone in the room seemed to call for a metaphorical color-blindness. Blindness, at least temporary, was also very much real for it is the result of having a flashlight thrown into the face, an unpleasant reminder of nighttime security check. Within this spectrum, a few details become meaningful like the choice of Koto as the inaugural instrument, an instrument traditionally played by blind musicians in Japan. Unless, beyond experiments in the value of color in the economy of vision, *Concerto* was homage to Steve Cannon? Homage to man's ability to live without having to rely upon vision, necessarily rooted in the deceptive realm of images and objects that light and color help to shape. But in *Concerto* blindness was more punition than celebration. One way or another, we, *I vedenti* (Alighiero Boetti)[3] are all potentially bound to blindness in Hammons world, going blind and blinding one another in the process, as a result of our looking too hard and need to rely upon vision to define each other. In *Concerto in Black and Blue* Hammons defies our need to come into light as he ponders whether the predicament of race is being put upon us by force or whether we willfully embrace it.

Color and (Im)Materiality—Transbluency?

Colorful or colorless, certainly color matters. But why blue? The electric blue of *Concerto in Black and Blue* is reminiscent of Yves Klein's *IKB* (International Klein Blue), the color he patented and that came to stand for the materialization of space. Klein's blue, which he reportedly was able to capture after years of looking at the Mediterranean sky in an attempt of finding its essence, when translated on canvas in his monochromes, opened up the field of vision as it expanded outside of the frame in a well-known visual effect. It is that effect, "the pictorial climate of the sensibility of immaterialized blue" that was sought in *The Void* (1958). Commenting on the filiation between Hammons' *Concerto* and Klein's *The Void*, the emphasis has been placed on the all encompassing experience of nothingness—white for Klein, black for Hammons—failing to recognize how much of an experiment on the value of pure color it was. In fact, Klein had placed blue elements outside the gallery space proper (blue curtains, entryway painted blue) so that filling their eyes with blue visitors would be able to recover the "aura of blue" once in the whitened gallery space. While blue in the monochromes and *The Void* was used to capture the essence of space ("the blue of the blue depth of space") Klein used it to capture the essence of the body—as it was, mostly female—in his *Anthropometries* to which Hammons *Spades* series bears some interesting resemblance in the imprinting process. In *Concerto,* if color reduced to simple light was far less material than painting in the *Anthropometries* and the *Spades*, it equally served to convey the phenomenological presence of the body in an almost photographic process.

A struggle between light and color in a darkroom where one is threatened to have his image fixed according to his likeness, *Concerto in Black and Blue* is an impossible dilemma between materiality and visibility or the lack thereof. Hammons talent resides in his ability to transfer longstanding art historical debates on the power of color and light in defining essence, into contemporary American debates of racial belonging. His achievement lies in his managing to encapsulate the essence of each and every man, not just black, and in recognizing his ontologically fleeting quality. Not unlike Thomas Hirschhorn's *Cavemanman (2002)* but with means phenomenological more than political, Hammons *Concerto* seems to veer toward the conclusion that a man = a man. Hammons however, is not advocating for a color-blind world but for a more enlightened one. He, for sure, is beginning to see the light. "I am beginning to see the light" "Blue Light: Transbluency" as Duke Ellington wrote on his partitions.[4] Neither vacuity, nor pure transcendence, as it is very much preoccupied with essence, *Hammons: Concerto in Black and Blue* is transbluency. What best but music and a made-up word to wrap up a Hammons piece?

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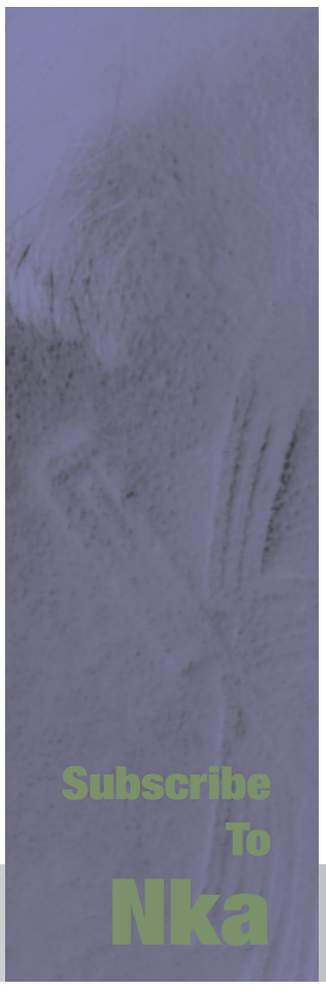
1 Coco Fusco brilliantly applied Henry Louis Gates literary theory of the "signifyin'" to Hammons artistic production. A "quintessential form of black creativity" signifyin' in Fusco's words opens up a space for "a culturally specific practice of creating new meaning through an alteration of the relationship between a given term and its usual meaning." See Coco Fusco, "Wreaking Havoc on the Signified: The Art of David Hammons," *Frieze* no22, May 1995, pp. 34-41. Republished in Coco Fusco, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours and other writings* (London; New York: Routledge and INIVA, 2001), pp. 43-48

2 *The House of Blue Lights* was created to celebrate the gallery's 15th Charlie Parker Anniversary. Jazz, once again proved to be the inspiration and core of Hammons artistic practice.

3 *I Vedenti*, the term used by the blinds to designate those who can see was used by Alighiero Boetti from 1979 onwards to remind us that vision is just one of the perceptive means that we have at our disposal.

4 *I am beginning to see the light* and *Blue Light*. *Transbluency* are titles of Duke Ellington pieces.