

## An Elective Affinity

### David Hammons's *Hidden from View* and *Made in the People's Republic of Harlem*

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#### I

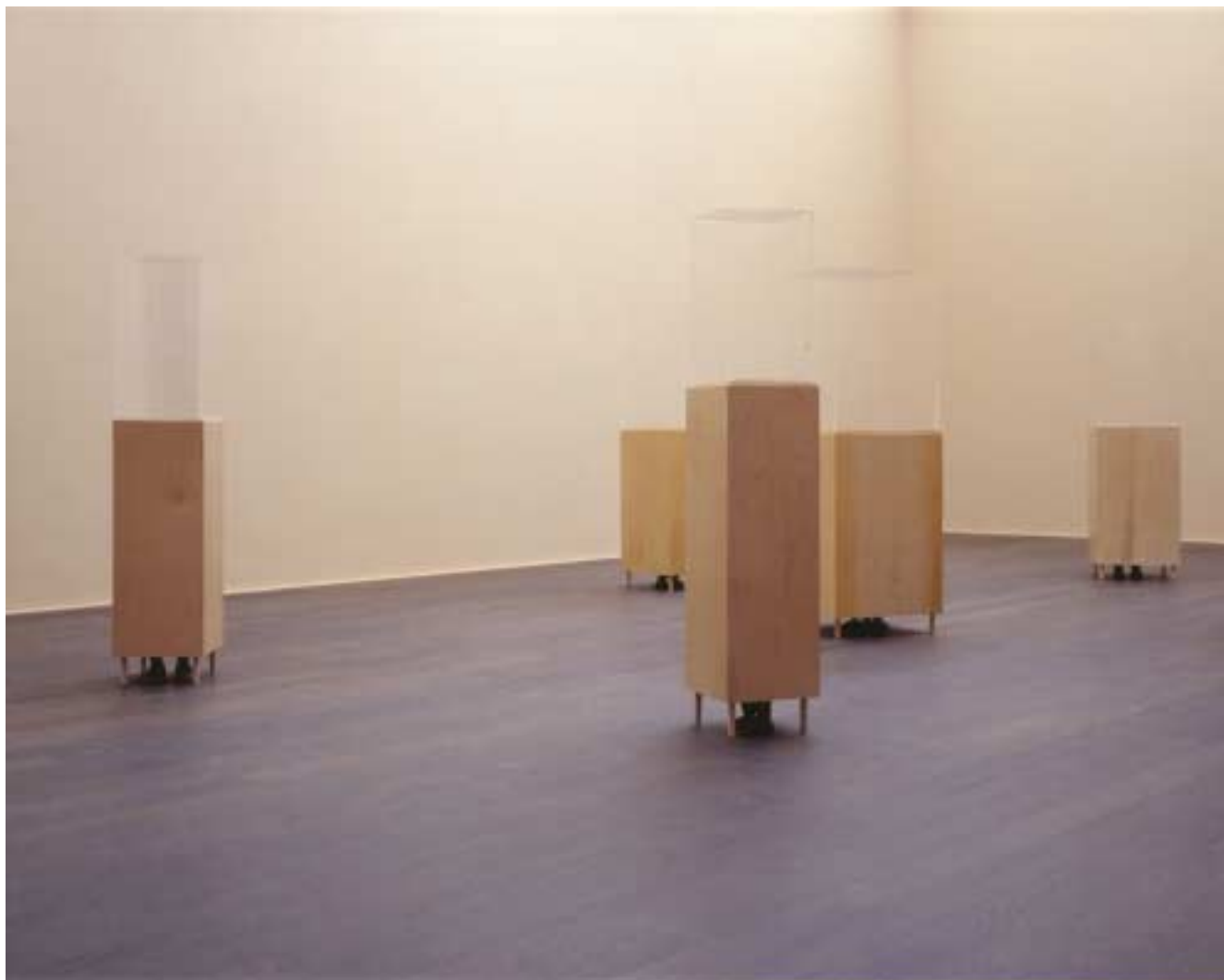
*We owe primarily to the convictions of the pioneer modern artists [tribal objects'] promotion from the rank of curiosities and artifacts to that of major art, indeed, to the status of art at all.*

William Rubin<sup>1</sup>

James Clifford once referred to tribal objects as 'travellers' who 'have been around'. In *Hidden from View*, David Hammons shows the travellers on a precarious journey. Down from the pedestals that granted them visibility, they have vacated their *vitrines* and have gone underground. As they hide from view, only their naked feet remain to be seen, and although they are immobile, their scattered positions suggest that they are on the move again.

Clifford tracked down the travellers at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984 and wrote his observations in *The Predicament of Culture*, his *carnet de voyage* to ethnography, literature, and art in the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> All of them went by the name Tribal. Most had an enviable background: they were polished and patinated, and did not shy away from the brightest lights. Some belonged to the lowest classes, as attested to by the clothes they wore. These rags were made, at best, of mended fabric, at worst of dried vegetal matters. Other Tribals bore the stigmas of the hardships of their travels. Others yet got lost on arrival, or simply never made it. A gathering hosted by William Rubin prompted the Tribals to call at MoMA; it was a celebration of their kinship with their more sedentary cousins, the Moderns. The Tribals and the Moderns rubbed shoulders for a few weeks and then the Tribals took to the road again. The event, remembered under the title "'Primitivism" in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern' had a

1. William Rubin, 'Primitivism' in *Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, vols I and II, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984, p 7.
2. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 1988, pp 189–91.



David Hammons, *Hidden from View*, 2003, mixed media, dimensions variable, photo, courtesy Galerie Hauser & Wirth

long-lasting impact. It enshrined in history the myth of the modern origin of tribal art.

By the time they reached Galerie Hauser & Wirth in the summer of 2003, the travellers carried a heavy burden of wood and plexiglas. They had known many different situations, on a shelf or on a pedestal, with or without a *vitrine*, in the dark or under bright spotlights, but they had never been – had never dared go – under their pedestals. From Surrealist *cabinets de curiosités* and cubist *ateliers* to ethnographic reserves and museum galleries, the Tribals had been left to collect dust atop shelves or were conscientiously protected from dust under *vitrines*. Often they were stripped bare of their clothes or vegetal ornaments. But never had they been left on the ground. They had also known many a rechristening. Once considered curios, alongside shells and other wonders from the natural world, they became artefacts next to the remnants of other mate-

rial cultures, and finally reached the status of art in the company of Picasso's painted prostitutes and Max Ernst's fabulous figures. Their semantic upgrade was concurrent with the taxonomic shift they underwent, from artefact to art. The possibility of a metonymic shift from objects to subjects nowhere is made more visually pregnant than in *Hidden from View*. Because of the sculptures' anthropomorphic qualities, and the emphasis placed on their feet, the statues call to mind images of maroon slaves in disguise. The African slaves to whom the statues seem to allude certainly made a long journey. They also underwent a semantic upgrade – from 'niggers' and 'Negroes' to 'Afro-Americans' and 'African-Americans' – concurrently with their taxonomic shift from commodities to citizens. The fact is that the aesthetic appreciation and cultural assimilation of tribal objects as *objects d'art* was consonant with changes in scientific discourses around race. Evolutionary theory saw Africans as inferior, and cultural anthropology eventually granted them full humanity; their material productions followed a similar path in the realm of objecthood.<sup>3</sup>

On both sides of the metonymy, whether on the side of subjecthood or of objecthood, displacement applies. For the tribal objects, displacement is a strategy of display that follows modern art museums' standards of aesthetic presentation yet runs counter to their purposes. The display at Galerie Hauser & Wirth is a paragon of the modernist setting pushed to its very extreme – a vast expanse of space with polished wooden floors and neutral-coloured walls untarnished by obstructive texts of any kind. By hiding the Tribals under their *vitrites* and pedestals, Hammons subverts the orthodoxy of the museum using its own tools and techniques, turning the apparatus of display into a hindrance rather than an enhancement. He also defines for the viewer the conditions of an unusual encounter. By setting the sculptures off base, Hammons operates a debasement of the gaze, if not of the visitor. Expecting to meet an object of timeless beauty at eye-level, the viewer finds him- or herself looking down onto the wooden bases of the *vitrites*, if not crawling on the floor on all fours, only to face the unsettling vision of wooden feet. The face-to-face on offer is not quite the one a viewer might expect. It is not the representation of the Other and the exotic in the guise of a little statuette from an unknown foreign setting. Rather, the confrontation is with the viewer, or rather the viewer's own reflection. Once he or she is again upright and wants to make sure that nothing on view has been missed, he or she gazes at the voided glass, inspects it further, and catches sight of his or her own likeness. The debasement of the viewer, more metaphorical than real, goes hand in hand with the denial, and even the temporary neutralisation, of the ethnographic gaze as it is trapped for seconds inside the translucent display case.

Instigating displacements inside the museum or its commercial equivalent, the gallery, and challenging the traditional viewing experience are not new to Hammons. Two examples of his earlier work are particularly relevant when considering *Hidden from View*. One of these is especially apt particularly when considering the title of the exhibition in which it was featured, 'Dislocations', organised by Robert Storr in 1992 at the Museum of Modern Art. The work itself was called *Public Enemy* and consisted of a large-size photograph of the equestrian statue of Theodore

3. Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 1988, pp 124–5.

Roosevelt and his Native American and African-American acolytes, complete with police barricades. By bringing the outside inside, Hammons 'dislocate(d) the very site-specific institutional traditions of the Museum of Modern Art' and frontally confronted the viewer with ideological and political statements rarely seen at the Modern, the standard-setting institutional reference in terms of museum display and the definition of Modern art itself.<sup>4</sup> Hammons also notoriously brought the inside outside, by setting performances and ephemeral objects in the street, not so much turning the street into an open-air museum as rejecting the museum altogether. More recently, Hammons did go back inside, even though he didn't bring much to it. He notably created a series of works on the phenomenological, social, and racial experiences of light, colour, and music, which culminated in 2003 in the presentation of *Concerto in Black and Blue* at Ace Gallery.<sup>5</sup> But the series had started with *House with Blue Light* at 'A Gathering of the Tribes' (1993), went on at Kunsthalle Bern with *Blues and the Abstract Truth* (1997), and on again at Ujazdowski Castle with *Real Time* (2000). Each time, Hammons did bring a few small objects and devices to those spaces, whether light bulbs, blue gels, or flashlights, but he mainly removed objects or left spaces empty in those subtle exercises in nothingness. His tactics of removal and emptiness in the museum and the gallery have given way in Hammons's new work to a strategy of displacement on the scale of the glass case, a similarly confining and artificial setting.

Regarding the more specific issue of the display of African art that is at play in *Hidden from View*, Hammons inscribes himself within the lineage of other African-American artists who have made critical use of African art. In *Colonial Collection* (1990), for instance, Fred Wilson featured a Dan mask blindfolded and muted by fragments of the British flag, eloquently pointing to the silencing of the people of Ivory Coast by Great Britain's colonial power.<sup>6</sup> In her 1991 series of black-and-white photographs, including *Flipside* and *Vantage Point*, Lorna Simpson juxtaposed the backs of black women with the backs of African masks. By doing so, Simpson resorted to an 'antiportrait strategy' as a way to deny the ethnographic gaze access to its favourite objects of consumption: primitive art and the black female body.<sup>7</sup> Like Wilson and Simpson, Hammons is well aware of the economy of the gaze and attempts to disrupt it. Where Wilson blindfolds a mask and Simpson turns it inside out, Hammons hides a statue under its pedestal. Like them, he also challenges the tradition of the medium he uses for his formal and conceptual subversions. For Wilson, whose medium is the museum, the reorganisation of collections results in institutional critique.<sup>8</sup> For Simpson, the colonial ideology inherent in Western photographic practices is dissected and exposed. In the work of Hammons, the history of Modern sculpture is revisited in light of its different and at times clashing historical traditions.

## II

[Western connoisseurs] essentially see themselves as doing for African sculpture (for example) what Andy Warhol did for Brillo boxes or, more strictly speaking, Marcel Duchamp for urinals.

Sally Price<sup>9</sup>

4. Ibid, pp 304–6.

5. See Claire Tancons, 'David Hammons: *Concerto in Black and Blue*', in *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no 18, Spring/Summer 2003, pp 94–5.

6. Daniel Shapiro, *Western Artists/African Art*, exhibition catalogue, Museum for African Art, New York, 1994, p 93.

7. Lauri Firstenberg, 'Autonomy and the Archive in America: Reexamining the Intersection of Photography and Stereotype', in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, eds Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, exhibition catalogue, Harry N Abrams, Inc, New York, 2003, p 320.

8. Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999.

9. Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1989, p 104.

It may seem that the story of *Hidden from View* has become only about the Tribals and their perilous progression in the world of museums, leaving the Moderns alone in their settled ways of masterpieces. But it is still very much about the Moderns and their progeny, the Postmoderns. The myth of the modern origin of African art is well established and is retraced above. It is not without its false starts and dark spots, but it is basically the story of an ascending movement. As African artefacts are literally lifted from the ground, they are also elevated to the rank of art objects. The myth of the African origin of modern art is much muddier, the stuff of scavengers of flea-markets and adorers of tribal fetishes. It is basically the story of a descending movement, a metaphorical return to darkness and an actual descent to the floor as artists believe in the redemptive power of the primitive and rid their sculptures of their pedestals.

In both accounts, the pedestal is central to the refashioning of African art and Western art. At the same time that it was placed underneath African artefacts to grant them the sacred status of artworks, the pedestal was removed from under Western sculptures in a countermovement of desacralisation of the art object. Before it was removed, however, the pedestal was integrated with the body of the sculpture itself. Brancusi is the modern master who, learning from African sculpture as a result of his era's general enthusiasm for things primitive, rooted his sculptures in the real world by integrating their bases to them. The results of Brancusi's African lessons cannot be seen anywhere better than in a sculpture from 1914–26 aptly titled *Caryatid*.<sup>10</sup> Like *Hidden from View*, *Caryatid* is an anthropomorphic sculpture with an African touch, made of a pedestal. *Caryatid* has clearly gouged-out legs protruding from a more compact capital and entablature and the reference to African sculpture is diffused, conceptual as much as formal. In *Hidden from View*, the reference to African statuary is very pointed. What Brancusi tried to hide, Hammons reveals with humour as he revisits the Primitivist origins of modern art.<sup>11</sup>

If the joint mythical origins of African and Modern art are more or less known, the myth of the postmodern origin of African art is not widely acknowledged at all. It is true that it follows a different tradition, that of the ready-made, a tradition that remains problematic to this day. Yet, the Duchampian ready-made trend in sculpture is chronologically contemporary with the Brancusian primitivist impulse and of equal if not superior importance for understanding the affinity of the Tribal and the Modern. But the ready-made had to wait until the 1960s to have a conceptual impact on the way sculpture was made – or rather not made – and experienced. It may not be a matter of chronology alone, but rather one more piece of evidence that postmodernism is contained wholly in modernism. Indeed, when William Rubin states that 'we owe ... modern artists [tribal objects] promotion from the rank of curiosity to ... the status of art' he strongly echoes André Breton's classical definition of the readymade in the *Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism* (1938) according to which a readymade is 'an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist'.<sup>12</sup> Sally Price only goes a step further when, establishing a direct relationship between *Fountain* (1917), Marcel Duchamp's most famous ready-made, and Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964), she proposes the idea of African art as ready-made.

10. Friedrich Teja Bach et al, *Constantin Brancusi 1876–1957*, exhibition catalogue, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 1995, pp 234–5.

11. *Ibid*, p 45. Like Picasso, Brancusi always denied any direct influence from African art, going as far as destroying one of his sculptures, *The First Step* 1913–1914 – in actuality an unlikely mix-match of different African sculptural styles – which he felt made that influence too obvious. Brancusi did not destroy *Caryatid* but in 1926 he shortened its legs, allegedly to attenuate its African look.

12. André Breton and Paul Eluard, *Dictionnaire Abrégé du Surréalisme* (ref.), 1938, p. 23, TK.



Contiguous to *Hidden from View*, Hammons had installed another work, consisting of identical cardboard boxes reading *Made in the People's Republic of Harlem* in red lettering. The stacked boxes of *Untitled (Made in the People's Republic of Harlem)* were left on their pallets, as if in transit, in a space closer in feel to a loading dock than to a proper gallery – a trend, that of the rough warehouse-like space, very much in fashion for the display of contemporary art.<sup>13</sup> There the floor was concrete, the ceiling supported by obtrusive white-tiled pillars, and the light harsher, not as homogeneously diffused. The boxes were reportedly filled with used garments purchased by Hammons in Harlem. The people of the Republic of Harlem are well known for their spirit of recycling, so it should come as no surprise that their products of exportation would be, so to speak, second-hand ready-mades, as opposed to brand-new manufactured objects. One should not be surprised by the fact that Hammons declares the secession of the people of Harlem from the rest of the United States. In 1990, he had designed the *African American Flag* bearing the colours of Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanism – red for the blood that was shed, black for the people who died, green for the land that was lost – making clear his non-alignment with mainstream US politics. That in 2003 the geographical entity he proclaims as an independent country follows China's communism, rather than the US capitalist model, is not only another jab at the political establishment. His cardboard boxes filled with invisible clothing found in Harlem seem to bring to a close the promise of a less hierarchical relationship to objects in the realm of art, a promise contained in Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, which they so clearly reference. With this reference in mind, one starts to envision how, taken together, *Hidden from View* and *Untitled (Made in the People's Republic of Harlem)* retrace a history of sculpture in the form of a visual essay whose central articulation may be what links traditional African art to Brillo Boxes: ready-mades.

13. I have made no distinction between the museum and the gallery, seeing the latter as the commercial counterpart of the former; both share the same modernist tactics of display. However, I do believe that Hammons's choice of a gallery setting for some of his works is not the result of chance and that the influence of commercial galleries on contemporary artistic practices could be analysed in the same way that Kynaston McShine analysed the influence of the museum on the artistic practices of the twentieth century. I also see Hammons's choice of the more traditional gallery space for *Hidden from View* and of the rougher, more contemporary one for *Untitled (Made in the People's Republic of Harlem)* as intentional. The former is wholly governed by the paradigm of the Modern while the latter is ruled by the Postmodern.

African art is readymade as surely as Duchamp's urinal is. If, unlike most ready-mades, African objects have kept their functional names, they have lost their original functions as surely as Duchamp's have. Caged in by a plexiglas *vitrine*, the typewriter's cover no longer protects the Underwood against dust (...*pliant...de voyage*, 1916) nor do Akan gold weights weigh gold dust or provide busy traders with proverbial advice. The loss of functionality is one of the key traits by which to discern an artwork from a mere object in an increasingly commercialised art world where consumable products of all sorts find their ways into galleries and museums alike. Plexiglas cases and other display apparatuses that freeze an object in time and space by defining it as unique and authentic and removing it from the realm of the utilitarian have been used to legitimise African objects as art, as opposed to mere artefact. But since Duchamp's ready-mades, techniques of display have also been useful cues for distinguishing artworks that bear a resemblance to (or actually are) banal mass-produced objects from mere functional objects. With *Hidden from View* and *Untitled (Made in the People's Republic of Harlem)*, Hammons interrogates the status of the art object, not just traditional African art, under modern strategies of display. The fate shared by traditional African art, modern art, and postmodern artistic practices is not the least of the ironies that Hammons reveals in *Hidden from View*. Articulating the concussion of the postmodern with the post-

colonial, he questions the increasing commodification of art and suggests that the Tribals, hiding as they do in *Hidden from View*, may ultimately escape more successfully than can the Moderns and the Postmoderns, who have become so dependent on their apparatus of display – or lack thereof – that they are caught in their own game of make-believe. No one should indeed be fooled: the elective affinity between the tribal and the modern is none other than the rule of the market.