

SEANKELLY

Lakin, Chadd. "When Dawoud Bey Met David Hammons." *The New York Times*. May 2, 2019.

**The
New York
Times**



Bliz-aard Ball Sale I" (1983), a street action or performance by David Hammons that was captured on camera by Dawoud Bey, shows the artist with his neatly arranged rows of snowballs for sale in the East Village. Credit Dawoud Bey, Stephen Daiter Gallery

In 1981, the artist David Hammons and the photographer Dawoud Bey found themselves at Richard Serra's T.W.U., a hulking Corten steel monolith installed just the year before in a pregentrified and sparsely populated TriBeCa. No one really knows the details of what happened next, or if there were even details to know aside from what Mr. Bey's images show: Mr. Hammons, wearing Pumas and a dashiki, standing near the interior of the sculpture, its walls graffitied and pasted over with fliers, urinating on it.

Another image shows Mr. Hammons presenting identification to a mostly bemused police officer. Mr. Bey's images are funny and mysterious and offer proof of something that came to be known as "Pissed Off" and spoken about like a fable — not exactly photojournalism, but documentation of a certain Hammons mystique. It wasn't Mr. Hammons' only act at the site, either. Another Bey image

SEANKELLY

shows a dozen pairs of sneakers Mr. Hammons lobbed over the Serra sculpture's steel lip, turning it into something resolutely his own.

Soon after he arrived in New York, from Los Angeles, in 1974, Mr. Hammons began his practice of creating work whose simplicity belied its conceptual weight: sculptures rendered from the flotsam of the black experience — barbershop clippings and chicken wing bones and bottle caps bent to resemble cowrie shells — dense with symbolism and the freight of history.

His actions, which some called performances, mostly for lack of a more precise descriptor, were the spiritual stock of Marcel Duchamp and Marcel Broodthaers — wily and barbed ready-made sculptures, created by inverting spent liquor bottles onto branches in empty lots, or slashing open the backs of mink coats, or inviting people to an empty and unlit gallery.

The practice for which Mr. Hammons is best known, perhaps, is his own legend. Not much for holding still, and uninterested in accolades or institutional attention, he cultivated an enigmatic persona predicated as much on conceptual rigor as resistance to public life.

The “Pissed Off” images are several in a suite Mr. Bey made in New York in the early '80s of Mr. Hammons and other artists as they floated in and around Just Above Midtown, known as JAM, Linda Goode Bryant's gallery devoted to contemporary African-American artists in a time when few other institutions were providing such a platform. Mr. Bey's images of Mr. Hammons, which are set to go on view this week in a special section at Frieze devoted to JAM, are striking, not least because they are rarely exhibited, but also because the total visual record of Mr. Hammons and his work in New York is so spare.

Mr. Bey, who was born and raised in Queens, N.Y., and whose own practice has been concerned with ideas of community and the continuum of black life, met Mr. Hammons early in his tenure in New York. Mr. Bey had recently begun photographing street life in Harlem and was showing his images at the Studio Museum of Harlem, where Ms. Bryant was working. When she left to open JAM on 57th Street and Fifth Avenue, Mr. Bey fell in with its circle of artists, many of whom, including Mr. Hammons, Senga Nengudi, and Maren Hassinger, had been working in Los Angeles.

“There are these deep connections she made that I don't think we saw in commercial spaces,” said Franklin Sirmans, director of the Pérez Art Museum Miami and curator of the tribute to Ms. Bryant and JAM at Frieze. “Dawoud being one of those younger artists she worked with early on, and someone who

SEANKELLY

obviously was already coming into his own. His Harlem series was shown at Studio Museum in 1979, so although young, he had a presence. Thinking about the connection to his friend David Hammons, whom he's also photographing, then you're talking not only about the documentation of a friend and artist, but you're widening the circle. And I think that's one of the big takeaways from Just Above Midtown, that there was this incredible laboratory of ideas that was being exchanged between different artists."

As that circle became more defined, it also developed a reflexive support system. "We were all part of that community," Mr. Bey, who is 65, said. "So when JAM opened, we knew to show up. I don't know if any pieces of mail ever went out or anything, you know, it's what you did. You showed up and supported each other. And you show up at the same place with the same people long enough, you get to know them, and you become friends."

Showing up meant Mr. Bey was usually present when Mr. Hammons unfurled one of his actions. "They were spontaneous, unannounced," the photographer recalled. "Which was the beautiful part about it — it wasn't a performance for the art world. He would say, 'I think I'm going to do something. Be at Cooper Square tomorrow, 12 o'clock,' you know, and I'd say 'Sure, man.' It was more about documenting our presence, because, I thought, if we don't document ourselves, no one will."

Two such documents concern Mr. Hammons rehearsing a dance piece at JAM. In one, he and the video artist Philip Mallory Jones frame the dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones, barefoot and in mid-movement, as Mr. Hammons is rapt with a folded piece of paper. In the other, the men pose for Mr. Bey — Mr. Mallory Jones in the middle, flanked by Mr. Jones, shirtless, his face turned away and eyes closed in gentle repose. Mr. Hammons looks directly into the camera, his gaze piercing the surface, implicating the viewer.

Much of Mr. Hammons' work has anticipated the upheaval of urban life, chiefly black urban life, in forms that collide symbols of race, class, and wealth. He sold snowballs like bootleg luxury goods outside the Cooper Union, 30 years before the historically free art school, overextended with construction projects, began charging tuition. He raised 30-foot-tall basketball hoops studded with bottle caps in Harlem and Downtown Brooklyn before those neighborhoods were made smooth with glassy high rises. He mounted the hood of a sweatshirt lopped off from its body, like a mask or a trophy, in 1993 — 20 years before that piece of clothing became a charged symbol of a reignited civil rights movement. In all of it there's a furious sense of social realism, oriented toward an audience that the standard gallery and museum system wasn't capable, or willing, to address.

"I was trying to remember where the first 'Higher Goals' was placed," Mr. Bey said. "It was 121st Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, but it's hard to go there now and visualize that. It was the Harlem of vacant lots, which is where David was making a lot of his work. That work was of a moment. And of course who knew that? You can't peer into the future. All you can do is make the work in

SEANKELLY

the circumstances you had.” He paused. “It was about doing something meaningful at that moment, for the people who would be encountering it.”

As alive as Mr. Hammons’ work was to the fabric of society, he resisted engaging in the art world machinery, becoming something of a benevolent ghost. That gave his work the cast of the shamanic, even if its real power was in the space between what was and wasn’t visible. Mr. Bey’s images refocus that visibility, giving shape to a long-gone version of New York, and to the ephemeral strands of Mr. Hammons’ art, which are discussed now in near-mythological terms.

“It’s like that whisper game that by the time it gets to you it’s all wrong,” Mr. Bey said, laughing. “There are very few people who can provide the firsthand information about any of it. So people just start filling in the blanks.”

He added, “In David’s case, it’s because there was, for the sake of the work, an understanding that you don’t explain it. There were no news releases. No yakety-yak. No theorizing. What happened before, where those snowballs came from — between David and I there’s always been an agreement: don’t talk about it. That’s part of the aura of the work. And because David still probably doesn’t have a telephone, and probably wouldn’t answer it if he did, it’s up to me to at least put that much out there, to be accountable to and for that history.”

The artist Theaster Gates put it this way: “He ain’t going to be at the parties, he’s not going to be at the openings, he’s not going to be at the news conferences. And it means then that he has more time. There’s not very many that have had the power of resistance that Hammons has had. And that resistance is not a strategy, there’s a powerful lesson that has something to do with the right to be a maker. It’s not about the participation or lack of participation in the art world.”

Mr. Bey agreed, recalling the opening of a gallery show in SoHo that included work by Mr. Hammons. “Everybody was so sure that David was going to show up, and people were asking me, ‘you think he’s going to come?’ And I’m like, what makes you think anything’s changed? Standing in the room so everyone can pat him on the back, it was never about that. We were just doing what we do. We were just two friends making stuff, you know? At the time, that’s what it was. Now, you know, it’s at Frieze.”

SEANKELLY



David Hammons, "Pissed Off," 1983. The images are part of a suite of photographs Mr. Bey made in New York of Mr. Hammons and other artists. Credit Dawoud Bey, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery



One of the rare formal portraits of David Hammons, under an arch of empty bottles, a preferred material, taken by Mr. Bey in the artist's Harlem studio in 1984. Credit Dawoud Bey, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery

SEANKELLY



Portrait of Dawoud Bey. His images of Mr. Hammons are set to go on view in a special section at Frieze that will highlight artists from Just Above Midtown (JAM). Credit Whitten Sabbatini

SEANKELLY



At left, the dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones, the video artist Philip Mallory Jones and David Hammons at Just Above Midtown/Downtown Gallery, 1983. At right, Mr. Hammons and Mr. Mallory Jones frame Mr. Jones in mid-movement. Credit Dawoud Bey, Stephen Daiter Gallery, Rena Bransten Gallery



David Hammons's "Higher Goals" (1983), a towering basketball hoop studded with metal bottle caps in Harlem. "It was 121st Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, but it's hard to go there now and visualize that," Mr. Bey said. "It was the Harlem of vacant lots, which is where David was making a lot of his work." Credit Dawoud Bey, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery

SEANKELLY



Mr. Hammons engaging with potential customers in "Bliz-aard Ball Sale II," 1983, which he set up alongside other sidewalk vendors to hawk snowballs. Credit Dawoud Bey, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery