

Green Chip

David Hammons at Hauser & Wirth

The last solo show David Hammons had in Los Angeles was a small survey in the student gallery at Cal State University, Los Angeles, in 1974. That same year, Hammons would move to New York. At the time, the city was arguably in much worse shape than Los Angeles. New York City would famously nearly go bankrupt in 1975, while the Southland was enjoying a housing boom that wouldn't bust until the Reagan years. As New York clawed its way up from rock bottom, Hammons built a career off of actions resembling busking, littering, scavenging, and good old fashioned antisocial behavior—pieces made in the possibilities of a fraying civil fabric.

Conditions were harsh indeed; just surviving was an art. Somewhere in Manhattan, the artist Tehching Hsieh was living on the streets, unsheltered, for 365 days (minus a few hours in jail), and calling it *One Year Performance 1981–1982 (Outdoor Piece)*; a group of artists called Colab were prying the locks off a Lower East Side storefront to mount the squat exhibition called *The Real Estate Show*, held on January 1, 1980.

Hammons' *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983) was another urbanist polemic: selling snow in a snowstorm, a white product in a white marketplace. In Hammons' recent and oblique retrospective at Hauser & Wirth (ostensibly a tribute to jazz musician, Ornette Coleman), there's a small tearsheet depicting the aftermath of another one of his public actions in Manhattan: a black and white photo by Dawoud Bey taken from the base of Richard Serra's sculpture *T.W.U.* (1980), three towering, self-supported panels in the shape of an extruded c-beam. The sculpture's lines plunge skyward—and there, dotting the rusty lip, are 13

pairs of sneakers tied by their laces. In another action, sometimes called *Pissed-Off* (1981), Bey's photos show a dashiki'd Hammons first posing with, then urinating into, the inside corner of Serra's *T.W.U.*

And then, gradually, wealth returned to New York. Hammons augmented his found materials (empty bottles of Night Train, piles of rubble, cigarette butts and hair clippings) with bought ones: basketball hoops with jeweled nets, artfully ruined fur coats, big abstract paintings draped with dirty tarps in a way that makes them no less big or abstract. Rather than resisting the entropy of the potholed streets, Hammons artfully, petulantly, entered the vitrification of the blue chip galleries that wanted to show him—that even tried, with mixed results, to sell his snowballs.

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And then, at Hauser & Wirth—the tents. The streets that spider away from the Arts District into Skid Row are lined with brightly colored tents. It looks for all the world like, after driving around Los Angeles a bit, noticing as one must the largest stable concentration of homeless individuals in the country, Hammons formalized that squalor into an installation. At Hauser & Wirth, a mess of tents fills the central courtyard as if to remind you that, hey, you may be enjoying that mimosa at Manuela, but in another life, or maybe even later in this one, “This could be u and u.” Hammons has stenciled this phrase in red on several of the tents. More tents, tumbled over in piles in the breezeway, lay beneath the rainbow irony of a semi-permanent neon by Martin Creed, which reads, “EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT.”

Hammons' installation depends, for its blunted sort of efficacy, on two pieces of information: (1) that Hauser & Wirth is a blue chip commercial gallery that is (2) located mere blocks from the Skid Row of a city that, hardest hit by the 2008 Great Recession, is



David Hammons (2019) (installation view).
Image courtesy of the artist
and Hauser & Wirth.
© David Hammons.
Photo: Fredrik Nilsen Studio.

currently in the thick of a full-blown homelessness crisis.

The contrast is so obvious, so harsh, like a sign on the wall warning us that inequality is as baked into the system as white supremacy. Then again, maybe we need such a sign. Maybe the outright leadenness of the gesture—the clean, proud, store-bought shantytown plopped into the literal middle of a blue chip gallery, the undercooked capital-g Gesture of the artist resisting the institution that would gladly sell anything he ever touches—is how Hammons has decided to negotiate the union of his past interventions in the urban with his interventions in the fancy gallery. And how, dear viewer, will you negotiate *your* presence here?

The gallery, for its part, inflicts its urban surroundings with white-walled fantasies. To wit—among the phrases Hammons has penciled on Hauser & Wirth’s walls, is WHAT WAS THIS PLACE BEFORE. (It was a flour mill, churning out another white commodity—then it was a graffiti spot.) The gallery’s PR campaign for the exhibition included black and white posters of Ornette Coleman (headlined ORNETTE COLEMAN, like it’s his show), wheat-pasted on construction barriers in New York City and Los Angeles. At Hauser & Wirth itself, a small unframed photo shows the poster taped to an actual Skid Row tent. Maybe this patent affront, though, is what is required to add that special Hammons flavor of disdain to the same-old polemic of big name institutional political art, in which irony and sincerity are portrayed as equally easy. It has to be this tough, Hammons seems to say—not just socially bad news, but cringeworthy art—for you to pay attention.

The piece seems to cry out for revision. It’s weird, and rare, for an artwork by such a late-career artist to so readily provoke visions of other, better versions of itself. So much so, that I’ve started to think that this—giving Hammons full credit—is what his tent city is actually about. For example, what if Hammons in fact just swept up people’s actual used tents and re-staked

them at Hauser & Wirth? Better, he could buy them out for the sum of a first and last month deposit and a year’s rent—what’s, say, \$30,000 to your average Hauser & Wirth-backed artist? Or maybe the people could come too, and live in the gallery for the duration of the exhibition. (Playing Santiago Sierra until August 11. August 12, back on the streets.) He could do this with new tents, too: turn the gallery into a functioning homeless shelter. Another version is to my mind the most radical: declare all the tents in Los Angeles—on overpasses and underpasses, Skid Row and Chinatown and Los Feliz—an artwork. Call it *Los Angeles*. Call it *Homes*. Of course, in that case—in a show without so much as a checklist to hold your hand—who but the most privileged collector would ever know what Hammons had done? It would harmonize nicely, Coleman style, with his mystique.

Instead, it seems like Hammons walked into an REI, produced his American Express, and cleaned them out. It is formally and conceptually the laziest possible execution of this idea, the most numbingly obvious political airdrop, a stupid-funny fuck you to Hauser, Wirth, and Hammons himself, for ever agreeing to this troll in the first place. Oh, and you—the viewer—fuck you, too. Maybe one day this could be u being homeless, sleeping rough in Los Angeles, and then again this could also be u and u entering willingly into the paradox of formalizing your distaste for the people who love the way you formalize your distaste.

That self-doubt makes Hammons a great artist. This, too, is a performance. Hammons can piss on a corten wall or dump paint on a fur coat, and the hammer-like elegance of such releases spreads like the melting snow across the formalism of Hammons’ “wall works,” masses of holey tarp and metal and rubber draped and fixed to cheerfully painted canvases. His warm condescension seeps westward to the accidental beauty of a blue tarp on a purple tent caught as sunrise races down Hollywood Boulevard to the sea. The wrongness of



David Hammons, *Untitled* (2017). Mixed media.
Image courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.
© David Hammons. Photo: Genevieve Hanson.

those hectoring, pretentious tents at Hauser & Wirth only formalizes, mimics, falls preposterously short of the unacceptable social formalism of the real tents a short stroll away.

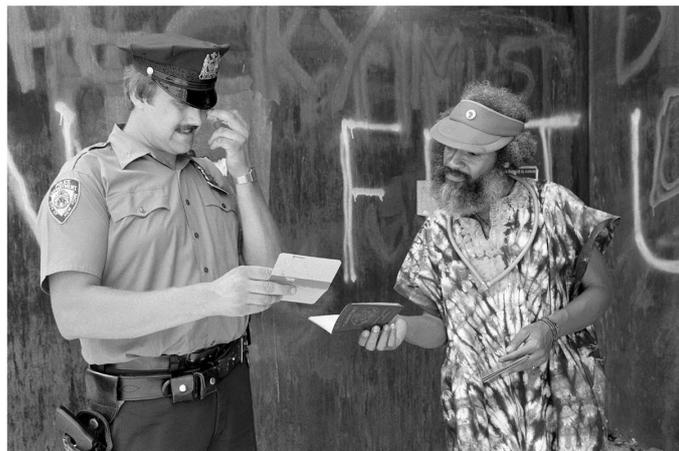
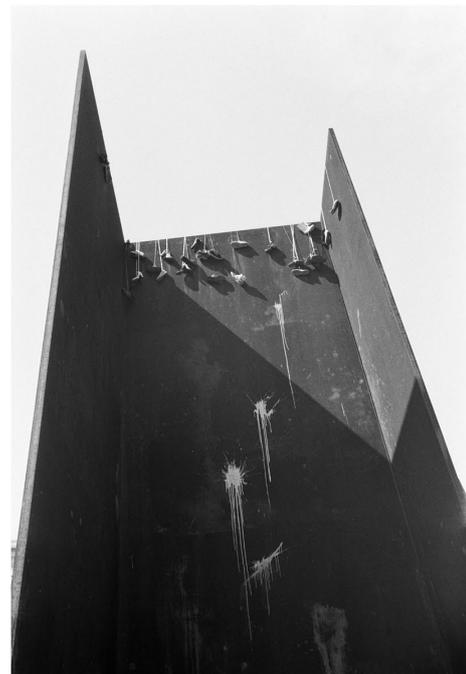
Together, the tents tell a dead serious joke—the woke equivalent of tossing shoes up on a Serra, of selling snowballs. Maybe, just maybe, it is actually funny. The *Bliz-aard Ball* joke still slays. At Hauser & Wirth, Hammons has installed a glass-top freezer, half filled with tousled copies of Elena Filipovic’s book on *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, still in their cellophane. There’s also, in another gallery, a little crud-ringed glass bowl on a shelf; framed beside it is a dryly delivered letter from a potential collector to a would-be dealer saying that, unfortunately, they can’t find anyone to insure a snowball, and do you have any other Hammonses.

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Poker chips, traditionally, come in three colors. White has the lowest value; then red; then the vaunted “blue chip.” The blue chip is the biggest, and when public companies want to hawk their stock as a sound, stable investment, that’s what they call it. And when art galleries, like Hauser & Wirth, don’t screw around with the small change, they’re called blue chip too. White, red, and blue. Hammons’ own poker set would likely use black, red, and green—the colors of his 1990 *African-American Flag*, an iconic work and as blue chip as it gets this side of Koons. When one came up for auction in 2017, the total price crested \$2 million. Commerce keeps the bitter jest above ground.

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Dawoud Bey, *David Hammons, Pissed Off* (1981).
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Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery.