
The Present Classification

Heather Hart, Steffani Jemison, and Jina Valentine

**“What is impossible is not the propinquity of the things listed, but the very site on which their propinquity would be possible.”
(Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*)**

Heather Hart (A '05), Steffani Jemison (A '08), and Jina Valentine (A '05) are planning a new tableau for a collection not yet acquired. Entitled *The Present Classification*, this project will assume the formats of exhibition and live performance.

But what exactly is a collection? How to define the parameters of a finite set? Do we define the characteristics of the collection in advance of its actual acquisition, then accept only those objects that qualify? Or do we determine the character of the collection by afterwards assessing the unifying traits of things amassed? The foundational principles we have established for *The Present Classification* reflect our collective interests. The intersection of two independent projects, and three individual “collectors” set the parameters for the proposed collection. These principles also frame a specific discussion that we, the proposed “collectors,” have the agency to define. The collection will comprise in various formats the sum of: a. text art b. submissions from Black artists c. submissions from Skowhegan alumni.

To further prescribe the parameters of *The Present Classification* is to imagine the character of the would-be collection in advance of its actual acquisition. On one hand, predetermination risks precluding the chance serendipitous submission. On the other hand, leaving the structure entirely flexible surrenders much of the impulse for creating a collection to the collective character of the objects themselves. We suspect that undertaking this project will require a bit of both methods: first drafting a wish list (of letter and of litter, of color and spatter, of spit and spam, of concepts and collapse) then negotiating the results.

The collection would consist of text-based contributions from Black Skowhegan alumni. It might be composed of rather diverse forms of text-art and text-artifact—like paintings and prints, diary and sketchbook notes, t-shirts and buttons, playbills and receipts. Via the new tableau, these seemingly incongruous items—a cross section of sentimental detritus and fine art work—can be provisionally, if temporarily, linked through the identity of its producers and the connections made through the objects themselves.

How do we set about attaining these objects? Do we present an open call to all Black, living alumni of Skowhegan to submit text-based works and objects? The success of such a query would depend on potential group constituents identifying themselves as such and mobilizing towards a collective identity. As with drafting parameters for the collection of objects, the alternative method for casting *The Present Classification* (the corpus) would be to individually solicit potential members.

The paradoxical relationship between the collection and its constituents (and between the collective and its constituents) has been exhaustively explored, recently by such diverse scholars as literary theorist Susan Stewart and political philosopher Giorgio Agamben. One of the most compelling discussions appears in the Deleuze and Guattari opus *A Thousand Plateaus*, wherein the formula $N-1$ is used to

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The original *Black Lunch Table* discussion at Skowhegan in 2005.

evoke the individual's power to escape the collective that contains it: "The only way the one belongs to the multiple: always subtracted." Here, N represents the whole, and 1 is a part dependent on the larger collection for its identity. The collection subsumes the singular object into its totality; as a result, the object's material history is suspended as the object is placed into a greater, atemporal narrative. Within the collection, all things accumulated are reclassified by their association to one another, providing a view of the forest despite the trees.

In 2005 Heather Hart and Jina Valentine organized a performance event entitled *The Black Lunch Table*—a precedent for *The Present Classification*. The impetus for this event was their wonderment over the lack of any such table at Skowhegan's daily group lunches. Together they decided whom they should invite to sit with them for one particular afternoon lunch. In curating the group of participants, Hart and Valentine did some guess-work, inviting as well those artists they thought might identify as Black. Those invited included other residents of African descent, the then director and dean, and several visiting artists. At the table, they discussed issues of being Black in the art world, issues of otherness in general, their individual relationships with actual and metaphorical Black lunch tables in grade school and higher education... and of course the irony of having these discussions at an invitation only all-Black lunch table. The hyper-classification, by way of self-segregation, of Skowhegan's Black residents functioned to both create a forum for topics discussed informally at other occasions, and highlight the fact that no such grouping of like-skinned people had naturally occurred thus far. Within that group of people, subsets included a. those not actually of African descent b. vegetarians c. those pending graduate

review d. those whose work explicitly addressed issues of race e. self-identifying as post-Black f. included in the present classification.

In 2010 Steffani Jemison organized *Future Plan and Program (FPP)*, a provisional publishing project featuring newly commissioned literary works by visual artists of color. *FPP* has published texts by Skowhegan alumni including Jemison, Valentine, and Jamal Cyrus (A '10). Like Valentine and Hart's *Black Lunch Table*, *FPP*, as a curatorial initiative, possesses a clear set of overlapping objectives: first, to create a new publication and presentation opportunities for artists of color; and second, to provide a context for conversation about orality and literacy, writing and transcribing, poetics and performance, that is informed by the authors' experiences as artists of color. These authors share a number of characteristics: each maintains an active visual arts practice, each is a person of color, and each is connected to a larger network of artists of which Jemison is also a member. The authors all address issues of race, autobiography, and "otherness" with varying degrees of conspicuousness. Moreover, similarities in style, humor, and tone, as well as overlaps in subject matter and external references, connect their work. As a result of their involvement with *FPP*, the authors frequently have the opportunity to perform, read, and exhibit together, further strengthening their creative ties and mutual influence. Finally, the authors share a conviction that writing non-fiction as a form of art and cultural theory challenges the perceived roles of practicing visual artists. As a precedent for *The Present Classification*, *FPP* likewise creates a tableau upon which seemingly disparate works and artistic pursuits might be considered as interdependent parts of a common narrative. *FPP*'s corpus is composed of a. former and future

in cellar store R.F. vans in cellar store R.F. patio furniture in Fresco Barn put storm windows

bookstore owners b. thespians c. those questioning the meaning of “of color” d. perennial students and teachers e. ones that from a long way off look like flies f. included in the present classification.

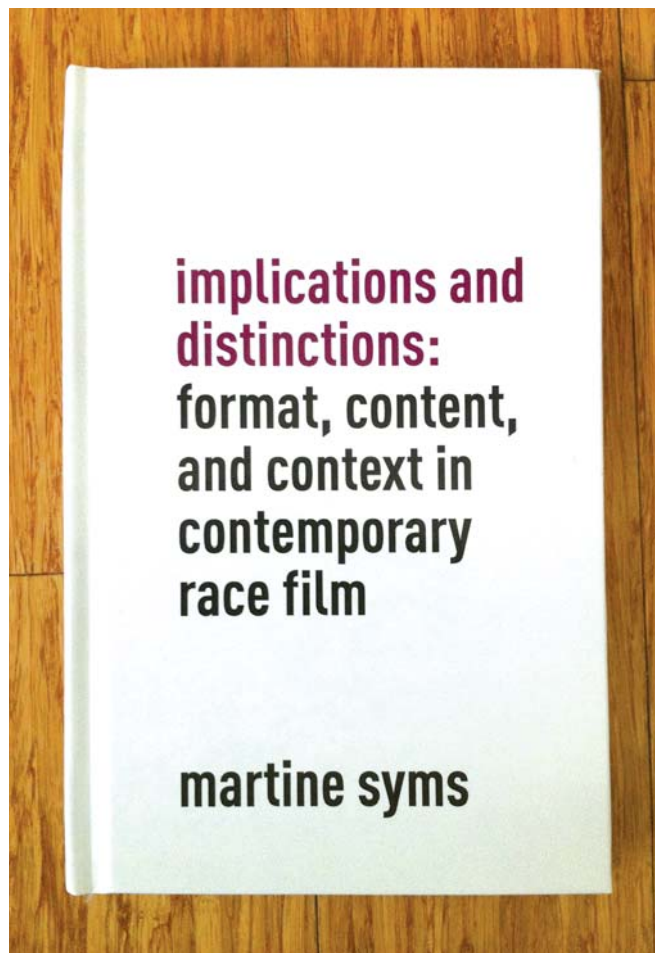
Neither the *Black Lunch Table* nor *Future Plan and Program* intend to create *new* parameters for classification; as with *The Present Classification*, we work exclusively within frameworks already existent. These projects simply serve as tableau upon which to make these social divisions visible: a. artists “of color” b. those embraced as radical-chic c. the marginal d. relevant to the larger art-historical narrative e. outsiders f. included in the present classification.

In Jorge Luis Borges’ description of the “Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge,” in *Book of Imaginary Beings*, he explains that animals are divided into the following categories:

- (a) belonging to the Emperor (b) embalmed (c) tame
- (d) suckling pigs (e) sirens (f) fabulous (g) stray dogs
- (h) included in the present classification (i) frenzied
- (j) innumerable (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush
- (l) et cetera (m) having just broken the water pitcher
- (n) that from a long way off look like flies.

Ideally classifying systems derive from the unique interdependence of objects within a specific collection, which constitute its overall character. Accordingly, the classification of *stuff* within any specific collection will be singular and inapplicable to any other collection. In “Preface” to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault wonders at the physical impossibility of a meeting ground for all these classified creatures and marvels that perhaps such a space exists only within a space created by language. Within the space of narrative, list, or fantastical description, the dis/similar find common ground and therein find their commonality. In fact, such a locus exists within this very text, wherein the concepts uniting disparate elements form a structure, a meeting ground for their coexistence.

The meeting ground can occupy a physical as well as discursive space. The first step in creating *The Present Classification* is both. We, “the collectors” propose a one-afternoon reenactment of *The Black Lunch Table*, during which participants would eat, discuss, and restage, in an expanded format, the 2005 event. Thereafter, the participants would be charged with the task of divining a common narrative out of the objects collected through submissions (including their own objects). Rather than *curating* the exhibition on the basis of an artistic statement or determining theoretical missive, *The Present Classification* seeks to let the works self-order within the rather broad grouping of “text art by Black alumni of Skowhegan.” Of course, this process of ordering and contextualizing texts will be a critical part of the success of the overall exhibition, and that those able to attend the Lunch Table will be charged with scripting a new narrative.



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Heather Hart, 37, makes installations that you should touch. She attended Skowhegan in 2005 and received her MFA from Rutgers in 2008. She lives and works in Brooklyn.

Steffani Jemison, 31, works in many media. She is a 2012-2013 artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Jina Valentine, 32, works with text and collage. She attended Skowhegan in 2005, received her MFA from Stanford University in 2009, and currently teaches at UNC Chapel Hill.

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