

Getting Outside an “Always-already”: Form, Medium, Figure.

A Conversation with Hamza Walker

by Kristin Juarez



Hamza Walker

Following the events of the *liquid blackness* symposium, I had the opportunity to sit down with Hamza Walker to pick his brain about curatorial processes, identifying how audience reception shapes artwork, and homegrown scholarship. Our conversation began with a follow-up to his lecture on his 2008 exhibition *Black Is Black Ain't*. The exhibition book, published in 2013, features writings by Huey Copeland, Krista Thompson, Darby English, Greg Foster Rice, Amy M. Mooney, and Kimberly Pinder.

Walker spoke of a desire to capture a particular moment in which prominent scholars addressing race and blackness in the arts were all working in the same backyard of Chicago. This idea of harnessing the local for the production of concentrated scholarship resonates with the goals of *liquid blackness* as a research group. In many ways, the conversations we are having and the theories we are wrestling with have broader significance, and they are being played out in popular visual culture across the country. Our focus on local cultural producers attempts to mark a moment of convergence of scholarly work, a significant art scene, a specific hip-hop identity, and burgeoning film and television production.

Creative Loafing heralds the legacy and comeback of hometown heroes Outkast, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* gets recapped on the radio, and the High Museum of Art collaborates with Art Papers to interview T.I. in a “rap session” at the museum. This feedback becomes a point of pride: to watch local acts get swept into the jumble of the mainstream milieu allows us to see how blackness is proliferated within a commercial network and reflected back at us. Their images are reshaped from individualistic to polished surfaces where local identity becomes part of what Walker describes as a “black public sphere.” I believe this simultaneously provides more material to a prismatic idea of blackness but it also flattens its multidimensionality, perpetuating its overdetermination.

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As part of a network of cities rooted in particular histories of black migration from the South to urban areas such as Chicago and Los Angeles, local specificity refracts the larger system of people and institutional structures. For Walker, moments like the destruction of Cabrini Green housing projects is locally important but also symbolic of a larger national moment that changed the skyline of Chicago and resonated with the politics of project housing across the country. As such, Daniel Roth's *Cabrini Green Forest (Portal)* (2004) illustrates the artist's investment in place that visualizes both a formal and social inquiry that simultaneously engages with a political environment through satire.

One of Walker's goals for the show was to explore a concept of race that did not already seem overdetermined but instead playful and open ended. What arose from our conversation was the way blackness moves in and out of popular culture, fine art culture, and personal experience. This fact makes addressing blackness in art a matter of refraction—identifying how the idiosyncratic personal expressions of an artist are visualized and later interpreted, utilized, and popularized by a larger audience. This came to bear as we discussed the way that audience, in very concrete terms, has to come into the conversation. The following is an edited excerpt from the interview

KJ: You mentioned that you initially never wanted to do a show about race and blackness, but that as you explored your rejection of the topic you realized that you, in fact, *needed* to. How did *Black is Black Ain't* emerge? Were there certain works you felt you *had* to have in a show about race?

HW: The show considered representation (at a literal level of image making) of a black subject that considered how black subjects appeared before the lens as an "always-already." The works of art have a measure of self-consciousness and reflexivity about what it means to portray a black subject speculating on knowing the self—getting outside of an

"always-already" subject in representation. So it's not necessarily affirmation, but a questioning. The show emerged as a dialogue between works, and as I added and removed works I would see how these speculations created a circle or loop. As a result, the show cannot be reducible to any singular premise, but it is a set of coordinates.

KJ: What became visible in your show and also visible in the artists on our panel was a slippage for artists to work between different mediums. Is there something more at stake when black artists move between mediums—something beyond the idea that many contemporary artists select whatever medium suits the issue they are trying to resolve?

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HW: Yes and no. It's not a question of medium, it's a question of the *figure*. So how do performance, photography, and video lend themselves to reflections of subjectivity, and what are the pitfalls when it comes to "representing THE self" when thinking that "THE self" has already been spoken for? So that's something when it comes to the body, questions—if one's going to use oneself, or who is one representing, who's representing whom—at this point are wrought for everybody. Now the issue of race alongside that of feminism and queer theory are the places that the most sustained critique of subjectivity is taking place. And for that critique to proceed, it is incumbent on the figure. So it's not necessarily fraught only for black artists, but the way black artists and women artists, because of their interrogation and investigation, have to consider the self, makes it so that anybody who is going to deal with the body—even if you are

white, male and straight—are all marked. So that's where I would want to position black artists and the stakes of the figure. So how the figure works its way into paint is going to be a different thing than photography and other modes. Each medium is freighted with a different kind of discursive baggage, from an art historical point of view, so that's that. But I still think it's first and foremost a question of the figure. And maybe there's a hierarchy of performance and the way it has a greater purchase on immediacy, in the here and now. And performance is just a different discourse than how photography treats immediacy.

KJ: During the panel discussion, you asked the artists about their commitment to depicting the body, and their stance on abstraction, noting that they all relied on the figure through their various media of choice. The question prompted a back-and-forth between you and Derek Murray about the historical role of abstraction and identity. Could you elaborate on this

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idea of abstraction, and do you think the reliance on the body is set within a particular contemporary movement?

HW: After multiculturalism and after a particular moment of race and representation, artwork was being guaranteed a measure of cultural authenticity because of the race and gender of its maker. That seems to be taken for granted now. What I meant by abstraction is an almost ideological sense, where one would have to insist on the elimination of the figure. When I say abstraction, I mean a “no shit” abstraction. What are the



stakes and the political ramifications of deciding that one was going to entertain the purging of history, memory, and biography from their artwork, in a bid to go where? [For young artists] working with the figure seems to be ideological in so far that ideology is invisible, taken for granted, and the everyday. It's the reigning ideology that we've naturalized especially given that the dominant discourse that's been done is about race and the self.

KJ: It was interesting to me that the panel as a whole turned towards this historical conversation about the role of the black artist that's been taking

place for a long time, that ultimately worked to recreate an unending thread to this old conversation about the social responsibility of “black art.”

HW: We didn’t talk about audience—you know no matter what you do, how do you communicate to the people looking at your work? How a work communicates is more important than intention, in a way. Yes, as much as one would want to see their work as it tethers itself to a larger historical conversation, if you think about it, to what extent does that history stop one from really asking—in terms of race, representation, and dialogue—where that stuff is in popular culture? In terms of other narratives, the work—just as soon as it’s having a dialogue with some kind of historical mandate—should in fact have its eye much more toward popular culture if you want to talk to a black audience, and secure a position for your work. So if you take a painting and ask, who is the audience? You may be making Romare Bearden-based collages, but what does that say about the use of photomontage by the makers of *South Park*?

But that’s a general problem. Art is a bubble that’s navel gazing. You could ask the average person what the last artwork they saw was and they wouldn’t be able to tell you. They watch TV and go to the movies. This is where the discussion is actually happening in a certain sense. That’s not to say there isn’t room in fine art in this kind of reflection. But I think the issue of race and representation and audience has always really been the issue of the black public sphere and of popular culture, making the general

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public a much more permeable membrane than a fine art audience. It’s not just about a message to our folk, but how are you going to get that message out?

KJ: We’ve been discussing work that expresses ideas of increasingly nuanced identity or conceptions of self that converge at multiple intersections of identity. Where is there room for audience investment in work that is increasingly idiosyncratic?

HW: What I was saying about a critique of subjectivity, of self, of a lack of articulation—this is a space where those terms are being mapped with increasing refinement and reflection so that there’s no corresponding binary of masculinism or whiteness. The very questions of what constitutes “we” or “I” in a very critical fashion—as difficult as it is to cake words on that subject—you have to start somewhere. And when you get that spark—it’s not that David Hammons or Felix Gonzalez Torres came out of nowhere. It’s powerful work when it speaks for and on behalf of people. So that’s the greater investment. What do we say about work that forsakes its autonomy? That says “This is not a Jonald Judd.” I want the work to say something for people to people. That turn, that work that ideologically and consciously wants to do that—that’s a very strong position to take. And who’s doing that kind of work? Artists from the margins, the periphery. That’s where the stakes are. What does it mean when David Hammons blackens out a room and just has the lights? That’s the answer to James Turrell. It’s a different kind of phenomenology.

KJ: So where do you fall on form? Are you interested in work that is strictly formal?

HW: Work has to work. And how does work work? Form is the medium through which something speaks. But it can also be ab-form, un-form, anti-form, the choice not to have objects, the choice to be a performance

artist, language—all these things as form and formlessness. A pitch-black room is a counter or opposite to Richard Serra's all form.

KJ: So for me, the best theory is meant to help you live your life better. Can art do this? Can it help you change the way you see other people?

HW: Yes, but it has to release you. Art is not an end in itself, it's a means to an end, where I choose to apply meaning. Is art a privileged site of meaning? In some sense, yes. But I'm thinking about whether I am able to apply that meaning out into the world and not exclusively to art. So I can see better, or more clearly. For example, I can be a better reader, or read more closely. But it's not all with the crusade that art can change your life. I think there are plenty of things that can do that. Art is not the only place where that can be done.

KJ: So after a symposium that's trying to frame or pose the concept of black liquidity or "liquid blackness," does it resonate with you as a term that needs wrestling with, that needs questioning, or does it seem intuitive?

HW: It seems intuitive. I mean I don't have a problem with it. I have my own wrestling with the very notion of blackness. But I definitely prefer that it be liquid. So the idea of being fluid or some how transmissible, or having attachable-ness is something to think about and play with that's beyond essentialism. I have a problem with term, "black-ness." The "ness" part. I suppose we can trace it to Ellison, but where is it, what is it? Can we use "black" as a weapon against that kind of essentialism, and talk about it as always becoming, a state of becoming? Becoming black—what a beautiful thing.



Flo (bcarr[works], 2014), frame grab.

Hamza Walker is the Director of Education and Associate Curator for The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. His curated exhibitions include *Several Silences* (2009), *The Age of Aquarius* (2011), *Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven: In a Saturnian World* (2011), *Local Metrics* (2012), and *John Neff, Photographs 2010-2012* (2013). He was the recipient of the 2005 Walter Hopps Award for curatorial achievement, a 2006 Emily Hall Tremain Award for the landmark exhibition *Black Is, Black Ain't* (2008), and the 2010 Ordway Prize given to an outstanding contemporary art curator and essayist for their influence in the field.