

NEW YORK

Extraordinary Rendition

On the institutional kidnapping of Cady Noland and David Hammons

Aaron Moulton



This spring the alternative space Triple Candie in Harlem created two exhibitions around the artists David Hammons and Cady Noland, two legendarily reclusive yet highly influential figures from recent art history. None of these shows contained any original work or were done through any dialogue with the artists. “David Hammons: The Unauthorized Retrospective” received numerous reviews, mostly positive, and “Cady Noland Approximately,” on the other hand, was met with polarized sentiments. Ken Johnson of The New York Times declared their program, as a result of these shows, to be “confused, confusing and duplicitous.” This interview with Triple Candie directors Peter Nesbitt and Shelly Bancroft elaborates on their position behind making these shows and, in effect, outlines ideological and ethical codes for institutional license and responsibility while revisiting in a fresh light older subjects of authorship and objecthood.

Aaron Moulton: Why make exhibitions of work by artists who have actively or passively prevented them from happening?

Triple Candie: To give the public access to them. Our stance is educational, first and foremost, and we feel that Hammons’ and Noland’s work is really important, especially at this moment in time. They have had an enormous influence on artists in their thirties and early forties. At the same time, their works remain frustratingly elusive. Many artists in their twenties don’t know their work at all, especially Noland’s, but when they see it for the first time, there is sense of déjà vu. Almost immediately, they understand it as a precedent for their own work.

AM: There are interesting implications when an institution makes such a gesture, as opposed to an artist, in terms of the way you are sidestepping the institutional protocol, but also as an extension of institutional license. How have you as a nonprofit institution rationalized this situation?

TC: Alternative spaces should operate in a way that challenges the status quo. When we started, we didn’t consider ourselves an alternative space, in the conventional sense, because the type of art objects we showed didn’t necessarily challenge the prevailing norm. What made us different was our location in Harlem and the fact that we showed the work of artists with diverse backgrounds. And while this was important, we began to realize that for us, it wasn’t enough. Nonprofit alternative spaces in New York offer little that is alternative and most function like extensions of the gallery system. White Columns and Artists Space, for instance, have both abandoned their initial purposes and their programming is now indistinguishable from that of commercial galleries. Where is the alternative movement? We began to care about that, and became increasingly interested in challenging the ‘system,’ to unsettle basic assumptions about art and its relationship to the market and to the public. We felt that in order to be relevant we needed to confront the ideology of the institution. And because the mythology of the artist is so central to that system, it made sense to start there.

AM: Both of these shows are realized with an approximation of each artist’s art, the Noland survey being a bit more exact than the Hammons show, but both include an interpretation of the artists’

works and are not the faithful ‘exhibition copies’ typical of museums. You’re obviously not selling it as the original but you are violating some sacred and possibly outdated notion of how original artworks are meant to be experienced. What do you feel this type of homage does to the understanding of the original work?

TC: Both of these retrospectives make you want to see the original art, which is a catch-22. We curated these shows precisely because most people don’t have the opportunity to see the actual art. The exhibitions are meant to both reinforce your desire and crush your hopes simultaneously. Actually, whether or not the Noland show is more exact is an open question. In the Hammons retrospective, the experience of looking at the images in the reproductions was always an experience of looking at the real thing. The images were second-generation photographs of the original, so although they were degenerated — many were postage-stamp size or fuzzy — you always felt that you were looking at Hammons’ work and aware of having a mediated experience. The visitor was asked to accept the limitations of the viewing experience in exchange for the rare opportunity to ‘see’ —and better understand — a grand sweep of the artist’s work. The Noland survey is quite different; it’s almost the reverse experience. The objects themselves are very present, we relate to them as sculptures occupying real space. And though at first, the show evokes the idea of a survey of Noland’s work, anyone with firsthand knowledge of the subject will quickly realize that these are not replicas. The scale is off and certain pieces are incomplete. Most of the differences between the works in the show and Noland’s original

From left: Installation view of “Cady Noland Approximately”; Not titled, 1989/2006 (detail); Untitled (Brick Wall), 1993/2006; Installation view; Not titled, 1989/2006 (detail).

sculptures were the result of practical limitations, which we embraced, intentionally. These include an inability to source certain parts or materials, lack of information about scale, color, or materials, and a limited budget. In the checklist, we included notes about what substitutions or alterations were made. But we went to great lengths to make the objects “felt” finished as sculptures and were believable in that way. So, in effect, they are more believable as “artworks” than the Hammons reproductions. But they misrepresent the originals to a greater degree.

We realize that with these projects we are ‘toying’ with a conventional notion of the artist that remains deeply ingrained in our culture — and in the minds of many artists, who want to hold onto the myth of the artist as ‘untouchable’ and ‘sacred.’ These two artists are particularly ‘untouchable’ because of what they represent to different people. So making them the subjects of these projects amplifies the issue.

And because most people have not seen their work in real life, other types of mythologies around the work itself have also been created and perhaps distorted.

AM: What ethical implications are there in challenging an artist’s ownership or right to his or her own career decisions?

TC: On the contrary, we feel an ethical responsibility to show the artwork of artists who have been and remain influential but whose work has been hard to come by.

Both Noland and Hammons make work with liberal, social content. It is art 'from' or 'of' the people. And when it is inaccessible, how does it serve a purpose, social or otherwise?

Furthermore, neither exhibition directly challenged the artist's ownership of their work or career because we didn't include their actual work. But the exhibitions did challenge the artists' ability to fully control the way their work is experienced. We feel that artists who make discrete objects for the marketplace abdicate their control over those objects once they leave their studio. Shouldn't collectors, many who have owned the work for years, have the right to make their own decisions regarding where and when the objects are exhibited? Hammons doesn't allow museums to lend artworks they purchase from him, which means that museums that don't own his work but want to show it have to buy it. In some ways, it's a rather brilliant move on the artist's part. But for those who believe that museums act in the public trust, it is deeply problematic.

One question for us was when does the individual artist's rights trump those of the public? Shouldn't there be some consideration of the art-interested public in all this? After all, the making of an artist's career is a collaborative process; artists are part of a larger ecosystem that includes other artists, critics, curators, dealers, collectors, historians, arts administrators, the list goes on and on. The myth of the artist as autonomous, self-defining, and morally superior is a tired and dangerous one. Perhaps it is time to ask not only what is the responsibility of the institution but also what is the responsibility of artists to their public.

AM: *In the Noland exhibition, two of the four artists/producers are listed anonymously. Why do you feel they chose to remain anonymous?*

TC: We don't think of the participants as producers, more like

collaborators who define themselves as artists. When we started this project, it was just assumed that all four artists would be listed by name, like any other exhibition. Later, after a series of intense discussions, two of the artists changed their minds and decided to be anonymous, not because they had moral or ethical issues but because they were worried that any adverse reaction from the press or public might negatively affect their careers. We didn't agree with this decision, but accepted it. It was a reminder to us, however, that despite the outlaw mythology of the 'artist,' most, like people in general, don't like stepping outside of what is acceptable, and are uncomfortable embracing the unforeseen consequences of unusual actions.

AM: *What happened to the objects after the show?*

TC: They were all thrown out or destroyed, much as we have destroyed work after other shows. We had an extended discussion about this. We were all in agreement from the start that the objects were collaboratively authored and couldn't belong to any one person. But artists get very attached to the objects they make. So for a couple of the participants, the idea of trashing the objects was bittersweet.

AM: *Your actions have been interpreted in The New York Times as some kind of conceptual art project. What do you consider these objects to be and what is your feeling about that interpretation?*

TC: We don't consider the objects in either of these shows to be 'art,' we view them as ephemera. Nor do we think of ourselves as visual artists, though we are creative people, and art historians. Some people — mostly artists — angrily say that we are "curators wanting to be artists," we see it more like: we are people who curate on different terms. "Why should we have limits?" You would think artists would understand that. We're interested in an entrepreneurial



model in which the roles of the curator, the producer, the editor, the critic, and the artist are conflated. Artists that are critical of this have a very proprietary relationship to creativity. And critics who have a hard time with this are, perhaps unconsciously, protecting that position.

AM: *Have you had any response from either Noland or Hammons, and what have been the most extreme reactions from the public?*

TC: No. We haven't had any contact with either of the artists. Some have said the shows are unethical, while others think of these shows as historic, signifying a paradigm shift in curatorial practice. We'll be pleased if either show refocuses the spotlight on either of these artists. The Hammons show got a lot of press and stimulated a lot of discussion, not just for Triple Candie but also for Hammons himself. One person very close to him said that this show produced probably the most and the best press Hammons has ever received. We hope the Noland show does the same, mostly because her important legacy seems to be slipping away.

AM: *In what way would you see such a tactic developing?*

TC: We want to continue with these types of shows, but have yet to develop an overarching strategy

for their implementation. With our Anonymous Artist Projects in the summers of 2004 and 2005, we were already heading down this path by removing the identity of the artist. In those two projects, the names, gender, race, age, and experience of those artists wasn't revealed to the public. Nor will they ever be. Yet if the names were revealed most people would recognize them. For arts professionals who saw the shows the experience was quite disarming. Even though we look at work all the time without necessarily knowing the biography of the artist, the information is always right there for us to access if we choose, and is ultimately used as part of our interpretation and judgment of the work. A prominent international curator who saw the second Anonymous Artist Project said that the artist was either brilliant or terrible but he couldn't tell which. What binds the Anonymous Artist Projects to the Hammons and Noland exhibitions is that they are all, in different ways, exhibitions without artists.

Photocopy of a reproduction of the artwork "Higher Goals", 1986; Installation view of "David Hammons: The Unauthorized Retrospective"; Photocopy of a reproduction of the artwork "How Ya Like Me Know", 1989. Above: Not Yet Titled [Edition for Parkett 46], 1996/2006. All images courtesy Triple Candie, New York.

