

Artsy, January 17, 2016



Welcome to the Black Lunch Table: Jina Valentine and Heather Hart on Creating Space for Communities of Color in the Art World

by Olivia Jene-Fagon and Ellen Yoshi Tani

I was the last to take my seat at Jina Valentine and Heather Hart's "Black Lunch Table" session at the Creative Time 2015 New York Summit this past November. Twelve writers, artists, and teachers of color crowded around one table in the empty cafeteria of the Boys and Girls High School in Brooklyn. I joined in the middle of a heated conversation between a Brooklyn schoolteacher and the Arts Outreach Leader at Kickstarter on the politics of white celebrities like Miley Cyrus who ostensibly appropriate black popular culture while remaining silent on issues of black victimhood. As I sat down, Jina silently slid a playing card to me with a conversation prompt that read: "Does less vulnerability to violence = empowerment?"

Valentine and Hart have been staging similar events since 2005, and their formula is simple: bring artists and educators of color into guided conversation together at one table. The effect? The creation of a temporary art community both real and imagined. For the next hour our conversation moved quickly, from the impact of government surveillance on the Black Lives Matter Movement, to political correctness on college campuses, to the recent controversy over Brooklyn Museum's hosting of a real estate summit. The number of approving mmmhmm's and head nods amongst the audience—and the shared laughter and outrage—suggest that these educators, artists, and community leaders perhaps lack enough sanctioned spaces to talk freely about those issues most essential to their communities and work.

A school cafeteria is often a battleground of social dynamics for kids as well as a prime-time arena for swapping and often authoring popular trends and culture. At almost any given U.S. high school, you're likely to find an all-black lunch table. Given patterns of institutional exclusion as well as self-selection, why is this type of forum still such a rarity in the art world and in academia? (The flip side is that when these forums do exist, in the art world and in academia, people of color often feel as though they're participating in an echo chamber.)

Responding to this need, Valentine and Hart's project is interested in exploiting the creative outcomes of the lunch table, as well as revealing the social and political realities that determine who sits at which one. Their work falls in line with recent efforts at creating a more inclusive account of modern and contemporary art history, attending to the work of artists whose races or ethnicities led to their omission. Evidently, this approach resonates: artists like Carrie Mae Weems and Theaster Gates have participated, sharing their personal histories in tension with what frames and defines the work of black contemporary artists.

Artsy spoke with Valentine and Hart about the experience of being a person of color in the art world, the personal political responsibility of artists, and how they've pursued these discussions through their series of national participatory events, including a recent Wikipedia-edit-athon at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Museum of Modern Art, as well as their individual artistic practices. This is The Art Genome Project's second virtual roundtable (see our flagship iteration here), part of a series of ongoing discussions in which we gain insight from artists and thought leaders on a range of aesthetic and art-historical topics. What follows is an edited version of the conversation, moderated by Ellen Tani, contributor on The Art Genome Project.

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Ellen Tani: What is The Black Lunch Table, and how did it start?

Heather Hart: It started in 2005 at an artist residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture that Jina and I participated in. It was an idyllic setting: both of us were experiencing a really integrated environment, which is unusual in places like that. It's unusual in general, for that matter, since we'd often experienced self-segregation in school and other institutions. We wanted to unpack that, to explore the function and the drawbacks of that concept, so we literally segregated a lunchroom at Skowhegan and let chaos ensue. [Laughs]

Jina Valentine: When it started, we thought about it as more of a performance, right? Like, isn't it odd that all of the black people haven't yet sat together at lunch? Because it was very much like a high school lunchroom, and segregation is a phenomenon that occurs at every level of school and in the work environment. It's a metaphor for how things work in the larger art world, too. There is this nebulous black lunch table that exists—there is a community—just in some undeclared space. So that's how it began, and it's had several iterations since then. When we were both in grad school, we wanted to mend or meld the community. We wanted to make a project that addressed an issue that we identified in all of our schools, which is that there were only two or three black people in a program of, say, 100. Or none at all.

ET: What came out of those discussions? Did you notice interesting threads of conversation?

JV: Well, for B.A.R [Black Artists Retreat], we gave everyone participating in the project a deck of 13 playing cards. The questions printed on the cards prompted conversations; everything from "Talk about what 'post-black' means now," to "Talk about targeted hiring initiatives" or "Talk about—

HH: Ken Johnson.

JV: [Laughs]. Yeah, Ken Johnson.

HH: Or Joe Scanlan.

JV: Yeah. Or to talk about what is black curatorship or black collectorship and how have these things changed in the past few decades? It was interesting to have elders, like Carrie Mae Weems and Dawoud Bey, who can speak to what the art world was like two or three decades ago, in conversation with people who are just graduating from MFA or BFA programs talking about their experience. We recorded these conversations for an archive we're creating.

HH: And so after that we took it to different cities. There were audio-recorded projects, similar in format to the one at BAR, in Omaha, and in Durham and Chapel Hill. We've been invited to Boston, New Orleans, and Houston, and we've done a bit in New York as well.

JV: The edition in Durham and Chapel Hill, titled "Black Lunch Table: Black Lives Matter," was co-organized with Hong-An Truong, who is also a professor at the University of North Carolina (UNC), and an artist and friend. We were interested in using the Black Lunch Table format to generate discussion among different communities in the Research Triangle in North Carolina. We invited activists and artists, professors from UNC and Duke, and high school art teachers and their students to sit down and talk about issues to do with police brutality and institutionalized racism. Everybody left there really charged, asking us, "When are you going to do this again? We need to do this again."

ET: Black Lunch Table has also been organizing Wikipedia edit-a-thons at certain art institutions. Is there a strategy behind those partnerships? Why host one at the MoMA library instead of at the New York Public Library, for example?

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HH: I think it was appropriate for us to do the first one at the Studio Museum in Harlem just because of their history of supporting and promoting artists of the African diaspora and engaging the public. We wanted to begin by hosting them in the context of an art institution, and later find hosts within communities, at rec centers, libraries, or other alternative public institutions. And, practically speaking, we need something with a really wide broadband so we don't get shut down. To that end, the edit-a-thons have really been helped along by volunteer Wikimedians like Richard Pharos (who hosts a monthly edit-a-thon at MoMA) and Alice Backer, who runs AfroCrowd. It is a kind of digital activism (as described by Kim Drew, who founded the Black Contemporary Art Tumblr, which aggregates posts about black contemporary art and has around 150,000 followers).

JV: We're also interested in how we could use the library materials in these institutions, and how we could tap into the communities that tend to gravitate around these spaces.

ET: It's amazing how institutional critique has transformed in the age of the internet. It's odd to think of an act of radical activism as plucking away at a keyboard in MoMA's library. It's no longer a case of throwing blood on the museum floor and rolling around in it (as with the collective Guerilla Art Action Group's 1969 performance). Rather, you're digging around in a museum's archives and doing something with them. And that brings me to the question: Who is your audience?

HH: Essentially we want as broad an audience as possible because our point is to make an addendum to art history that is both a radical commentary and widely accessible, to illustrate that black art is art in general and that it's not something that you can define. It's important for these conversations to be accessible to anyone and be included in a mainstream art history class taught by a white professor. But it's also important for black artists to witness and participate in this kind of art historical addendum because we all missed it growing up and in art school.

ET: I'm curious to know if there is a specific work of art that you've encountered or had an experience with that really sparked your approach toward race and visual culture.

HH: For me, David Hammons and Terry Adkins provided pivotal experiences. David Hammons's basketball hoop series, and the basketball prints—those were the earliest and most influential that I can think of right now. It made me understand that I didn't have to be painting the figure, and that I could make conceptual art and still talk about race, but not have to be so didactic. And that it was important to complicate things and kind of manipulate the viewer into taking some responsibility in the art-viewing process, to be an active art viewer.

ET: Can you describe those works?

HH: Yeah. There's quite a few basketball hoops, but I think the one I remember from art history in undergrad was one in a vacant lot in Brooklyn that was probably three stories tall. The hoop was at the very top of this spindly pole. And the print series is what I think of as performance evidence, where he rubs the ball in dirt and bounces it on the paper. The result is really formal and clean, but it's got so many layers.

ET: And sometimes it's specified as dirt from Harlem, which is an interesting site-specific gesture. David Hammons once talked about his own encounter: he described seeing the work of Mel Edwards as the moment he realized that "you could make abstract art with a message." I think it's so interesting to have these moments as a viewer, when two things that seemed rather contradictory, or that you hadn't seen coexist before can, in fact, coexist very powerfully in these practices by black artists who are well-versed in both Eurocentric, avant-garde histories and vernacular practices associated with black culture.

HH: Yeah. I'm not really sure what took me so long to find my voice or my language. My parents and both sets of grandparents were artists, so they spanned a few different art movements, and I grew up with my dad

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making sculpture kind of like Mel Edwards. But I think because you react to your parents in some way, and because I grew up in Seattle, which is a very craft-based, figurative place, I didn't find someone like Terry Adkins until I moved to New York. I feel like I was trained to look at black art as something that you can see a black figure in. I was trained to see black art as something limited—I guess that's what I'm trying to say. And so people like Hammons and Adkins helped me understand that black art can take every form.



Terry Adkins, Muffled Drums (Installation view), 2003; From the series Darkwater

JV: My experience is not just with artworks in particular but with people, like Terry Adkins, who are rare. Terry passed away two years ago; it's still hard to talk about him. It's probably safe to say that no one like him has ever existed. I studied with him for a year; and with Coco Fusco, who was a visiting critic at UPenn when I was there. They were the only two people that really took it upon themselves to shake me and say, "Look: This is what you're doing. This is what you could do. This is your responsibility. Do you know that you have responsibility to yourself as a woman, as an artist, as a black woman, and to some larger community?" And I was like, "Do I have a responsibility? I'm a black woman. Do I have to make work about my experience? Do I have to make work about identity?"

Their point was that no matter what I make, it's always going to be read that way. You need to at least reflect on that, if not make work that explicitly addresses these issues. And I was 25 and I understood that this was possible, but I couldn't figure out how to not see it as a burden. I had just come back from the Atlantic Center for the Arts, where the master artist was Dennis Oppenheim. And I was like, "Dennis Oppenheim doesn't have to worry about his work being read like that. Why should I?"

HH: What impressed me about Terry's work and his vision was that he "composed sculpture and sculpted music." I love the concept of that—so simple, that you could mash up different forms and that it could have the same language. Between that and a few studio visits with Ellen Gallagher, at Skowhegan, I understood what I needed from my own work. There are all these people being generous to the next generation, so it's less looking at works of art than it is meeting people who care enough to share their knowledge with you and push you forward in your own career and develop your vision for your work. And that's what we want the Black

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Lunch Table to witness.

ET: I noticed that both of your practices seem to be strongly informed by Conceptual Art. Could you talk about those methods?

HH: Adrian Piper's practice has strongly informed my own work. Her work resonates after witnessing it, and it plays with roles of power and preconception. I'm interested in engaging the viewer longer than the actual art-viewing event. For example, in *The Porch Project* [a solo project from Hart] a simply constructed porch (maybe evoking Vito Acconci's *Seed Bed* or a Gordon Matta-Clark/ Rirkrit Tiravanija collaboration) is this liminal space between the house and the field. And it's a space of shifting power. In an earlier porch project, a viewer from Cuba was like, "Oh, it's a pallet raft." Another person was like, "Oh, it's a theater stage." And there are visceral things like the smell of wood. And nostalgia. Because you have a choice of going underneath or on top, underneath becomes this kind of safe, fort-like space, where a lot of people had experiences as children. This brings up the idea of safe spaces or vulnerable spaces, or the Underground Railroad—dichotomies that we're really familiar with but that we might not read into a simple, minimal porch space in a gallery.

JV: I think the conceptual bent of my work is probably indebted to the education I received at Carnegie Mellon, where I did my BFA. Folks like Satoru Takahashi, Steve Kurtz, and Martin Prekop really pushed me to examine the techniques employed by '70s-era conceptual artists. My projects' origins are generally pretty personal, but tied to popular narratives or the current zeitgeist. I conduct rambling yet extensive research around events, people, concepts related to the original sentiment. Working with found objects involves negotiating with their latent histories, material compositions, social value, and engaging them in dialogue with my research. Any new materials undergo similar evaluation.

ET: Lastly, I want to follow up on what Jina said about responsibility, and ask how you come to understand that notion as an artist, and also how you want to see that responsibility carried out by other members of the art world—writers, curators, critics, and educators?

HH: When someone isn't responsible about the work they put out there, it becomes like a lightning rod for criticism pointing back to the work that's really significant. That's almost the only critique I have of work, is when an artist isn't self-conscious or doesn't take responsibility for what they put out there into the world—specifically about race.

JV: I teach art at UNC in Chapel Hill, which is a bastion of liberalism in the conservative South. Despite that, it's still a very conservative place to teach art. I've been teaching Art 101—an introduction to contemporary concepts and ways of making in the art world—and until this year, I taught identity in a way that allowed the students to speak to misconceptions (or misperceptions) about their own identities, very broadly conceived. But with everything going on in the country affecting the black community, and of course the shooting of the three Muslim students in Chapel Hill, it was very important to talk about these things directly. So can we say black lives matter? Can we say Muslim lives matter? Can we say all lives matter? What's the difference between saying all of these things? And it was really the first time that I put myself out there as the black woman teacher, to make a space for talking specifically about black people and how our lives matter.

Ellen Tani recently received her PhD in Art History and is currently a curator based in the Portland, Maine, area. She has been a contributor to The Art Genome Project since 2013.

For any feedback on the roundtable or to contribute to the conversation, please send to theartgenomeproject@artsymail.com.