DEADPAN

THE

AESTHETICS OF

BLACK INEXPRESSION

TINA POST

2

MINIMALISM AND THE AESTHETICS
OF BLACK THREAT

A man of clear ideas errs grievously if he imagines that whatever is seen confusedly does not exist; it belongs to him, when he meets with such a thing, to dispel the mist, and fix the outlines of the vague form which is looming through it.

—John Stuart Mill, from "Bentham," *Early Essays*

In the August 1966 issue of *New York,* a New Journalism–style article by Tom Wolfe describes a meeting in support of the Black Panther Party's legal defense, held at the home of Leonard and Felicia Bernstein. Wolfe begins his essay, "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's," with a dream Leonard Bernstein had on his forty-eighth birthday. In the dream, Bernstein delivered to the starched crowd of Carnegie Hall an antiwar message, which took the form of declarations of love. Or rather, he attempted to deliver it, for his efforts to convey this simple message were interrupted, again and again, by a spectral "superego Negro," who rose up from the curve of the grand piano to narrate the audience's embarrassment. This black man isn't described except through his words, which are noticeably detached and condemning: "The audience is curiously embarrassed," he says. "The audience thinks [Bernstein] ought to get up and walk out. The audience thinks, 'I am ashamed even to nudge my neighbor.'"[1]

Wolfe intends "the Negro by the piano" to be the overriding metaphor of Leonard and Felicia's Bernstein foray into social justice via the Black Panther Party—hence the dream figure's place at the opening of the essay.[2] Just as the black figure in Bernstein's dream reveals the absurdity of his antiwar pronouncements, so does the Black Panther Party reveal the superficiality of liberal New York. As in the dream, humiliation follows the Bernsteins as their social justice narrative spirals

away from them: Felicia intended to have a meeting and yet the press makes it into a party; Leonard intended the meeting to be informational and yet Jewish organizations make him out to be a Panther-loving traitor to Israel. They *meant* well. Still, Wolfe's essay suggests, those who attend and host such parties are more interested in posing alongside a cause célèbre than in truly righting social wrongs.

Twelve or thirteen Black Panther Party members were present at the Bernsteins' meeting, but Wolfe's narration centers on one: Don Cox, field marshal of the Black Panther Party and the meeting's primary speaking guest. And although Cox's words are represented in the essay, Wolfe's greater preoccupation is with Cox's performative presence. Wolfe writes of Cox's cadences, his clothing, and his movement through the space of the Bernsteins' apartment. Throughout Wolfe's essay, Cox is at once visible and yet unknowable. It's certainly possible that this was exactly the subjectivity that Cox wished to project. It's also possible that it was a product of Wolfe's literary construction. Certainly, Wolfe builds his metaphors to highlight this nexus of visible and unknowable, even going so far as to turn Cox into the literal embodiment of the dream figure that opened his essay: "And a tall back man rises from behind one of Lenny's grand pianos . . . *The Negro by the piano* . . . The Field Marshal of the Black Panther Party has been sitting in a chair between the piano and the wall. He rises up; he has the hardrock look, all right; he is a big tall man with brown skin and an Afro and a goatee and a black turtleneck much like Lenny's, and he stands up beside the piano, next to Lenny's million-dollar *chatchka* flotilla of family photographs."[3] Like the black man in Bernstein's dream, Cox looms, indelibly out of place. He is described as "hardrock" in a thoughtfully elegant home. Moreover, Cox's rise from the chair transforms the chatchkas atop the piano into a flotilla, metaphorically setting these pieces abob in the wake of his obtrusive physical presence. To this reader, the most striking thing about the description of this figure is how very *unspectral* he is in spite of his uncanniness.

A photograph of this moment accompanied Wolfe's text (fig. 2.1). Stephen Salmieri's image captures Felicia Bernstein at the photograph's center. She is, however, at a good distance; her face is sized to fit into one of the frames on the piano, which are perhaps somewhat less insubstantial than Wolfe's text would lead one to believe. In the middle distance are some of Cox's listeners: a black woman turned away from the camera and, as the caption tells us, the lawyer Leon

Figure 2.1. "Hard by the million-dollar chatchkas, Don Cox. Leon Quat, a lawyer for the 'Panther 21,' listens," 1970. Photo by Stephen Salmieri. *New York* magazine.

Quat. On the far right-hand side of the image, so close as to be slightly out of focus, is Cox himself. Cox's head and torso run from the very top of the image to the very bottom. His black turtleneck runs three-quarters of that length, rendering the better part of Cox as a long, black shape. His blurred face appears in profile, perhaps mid-word but not obviously so. In fact, compared to the clearer faces of the smiling photographs or the audience members who lean in postures of attention and concern, it's hard to say anything at all about Cox's expression or bearing *except* that the image confirms his presence as distinctly unspectral: he is undeniably present, even as his blurriness disturbs the haptic certainty of his image. The situation of Cox at the far right of the image, large and out of focus, reinforces the sense of his looming.

In the opening photograph of the article, Cox also looms. The image (fig. 2.2) is of the Bernsteins along with Cox. Leonard sits in an armchair; on his right, Felicia perches on its arm and leans into him. Cox stands on Leonard's other side. Felicia wears a smile that

Figure 2.2. "Felicia and Leonard Bernstein and guest Don Cox," 1970.
Photo by Stephen Salmieri. *New York* magazine.

is set off by the bright arch of her necklace. Leonard's face is fairly inscrutable. The corners of his mouth might be the slightest bit up-turned, but it is hard to say. In lieu of clear expression, the viewer is given Leonard's centered position, the embodied lean of his wife, and an explosion of floral décor, all positioning Leonard as the head of a domestic space.

Beside them, Don Cox looms. This is partly a matter of height and distance. As Leonard and Felicia both sit, their faces are inches away from one other. Cox leans into them only slightly. He might have moved behind the chair for closer proximity; instead he stands slightly apart, a head taller and a foot away. Felicia's hand on his wrist does nothing to draw him into the couple's circuit. Instead it highlights

Cox's hand hanging next to Bernstein's face, an object apart. Cox does not appear to smile or frown. Instead, the notable aspects of his face are his large eyes and thick eyebrows, and their complement in the thick downturn of Cox's mustache. Cox's sense of looming is exacerbated by the camera angle, which looks down on its subjects and therefore subtly emphasizes Cox's standing presence through the lines of the background curtains, which are wider at the top than at the bottom. While the photograph ostensibly centers the three, the magazine's layout team expanded the image onto the recto page, with Cox's left shoulder falling into the gutter. As a result, he once again appears as a large, dark figure on the margin.

Here is the second definition of "loom" in the *New Oxford American Dictionary* (the first concerns the object used for weaving):

> Loom²
> *verb*
> [no *object*] appear as a shadowy form, especially one that is large or threatening: *vehicles loomed out of the darkness*.
> - (of an event regarded as ominous or threatening) seem about to happen: *there is a crisis looming | higher mortgage rates loomed large last night*.
>
> *noun*
> [in *singular*] a vague and often exaggerated first appearance of an object seen in darkness or fog, especially at sea: *the loom of the land ahead*.
> - the dim reflection by cloud or haze of a light that is not directly visible, e.g., from a lighthouse over the horizon.[4]

Loom's definition is tied to a sense of threat, which might be rooted especially in large size or other forms of exaggeration. Additionally, looming is an affect of future imagining—to loom is to *seem* about to happen. Finally, looming's sense of threat is linked to opacity or indiscernibility: darkness, haze, and fog obscure clear viewing.

This chapter takes up the aesthetics of looming to show how specific performances can evoke or intervene in the free-floating association of blackness and threat. In the lexicon of affect theorist Brian Massumi, threat is an abstract yet immanent quality made tangible in the world through the tangibility of emotion, an ambient "felt quality."[5]

Because threat is atmospheric, it is freed from the need to instantiate. It is "independent of any particular instance of itself, in much the way the color red is a quality independent of any particular tint of red, as well as of any actually occurring patch of any particular tint of red." Just as "red" needn't attach to a particular shade or patch of red, "threat" needn't relate to any actualized danger—on the contrary, threat is made real precisely through its *non*-actualization. This is because threat is a foreshadowing, "the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future" or "the felt reality of the nonexistent, loomingly present."[6]

Massumi's use of the word "nonexistent" is an important detail in my willingness to attach "threat" to "blackness," for I do not mean to suggest, in so doing, that blackness is itself a vehicle of danger, but rather that others feel danger there and that this makes our shared reality. Massumi argues that threat is a manifesting affect—that is to say, as a feeling that self-fulfills as reality, an affect that becomes a fact because *the affect is itself the overriding fact*. Because threat has yet to arrive (and never *can* arrive and still be threat), "its nature is openended. It is not just that it is not: it is not in a way that is never over. [. . .] There is always a remainder of uncertainty, an unconsummated surplus of danger."[7] This unending quality renders threat unmoored, self-renewing, and nebulous. In other words, it makes no difference if this "might be" is, by evidential standards, unreal. Threat is rendered real through the affective workings of a conditional future.

To summarize three qualities of threat, then: (1) threat does not need to be factually real to be affectively factual; (2) threat is rooted in the unmet future, which makes it interminable and inconsummate; and (3) threat involves the affective as atmosphere, as loomingness. These qualities of threat accrue particular resonance in tandem with blackness—or, more accurately, in tandem with the persistent cultural tendency, in America, to sense blackness generally, and black masculinity in particular, as potential menace. This tendency is especially acute (and historically weighty) in instances where white individuals project black threat onto black bodies and then respond to that projection with terror and rage. This viewing paradigm accounts for Darren Wilson's characterization of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown as a "demon" capable of "bulking up to run through the shots" that Wilson fired at him, fatally.[8] This viewing also enfolds the longstanding (and ironic) white cultural terror of black male rapists—a self-renewing and

largely inconsummate future-imaging that nevertheless spawned (and spawns) real fear and real violence.[9]

These examples of violent response are far too frequent, and are important to reckon with. Furthermore, they rightly raise the question of why I do not frame the aesthetics that inflect such encounters as aesthetics of "dread" rather than "threat."[10] Implicit in this question, I think, is the acknowledgment that as astute as Massumi's diagnosis is, it is unlikely to correct the prevailing sense that threat is located within the looming object rather in the perceiving subject, (or, at a minimum, somewhere between the object and its perceiver). Said differently, even after acknowledging that threat, of necessity, poses no real violence, isn't there a still a danger in the rhetorical attachment of blackness and threat? To this I would answer absolutely, yes. Nevertheless, black performing subjects sometimes embrace this danger themselves, whether to perform threat on its own terms or slightly askance. My goal is not to extract actors' intentions (nor to deny that they might have some), but instead to read the e/affects of deadpan's mobilization. And if one is concerned with what the performer (or performing object) bodies forth through deadpan, the instantiation of threat, rather than the perception of dread, will be the primary focus, even if recognizing that instantiation depends, at times, on reading the negative space that surrounds (white) dread.

Moreover, dread isn't the only affective response to black threat. As scholars such as Jennifer Doyle point out, people react to aesthetic stimuli with an unpredictable range of emotions.[11] Threat is not exempt from this range. Reactions to threat might include studied obliviousness, fascination, attraction, idealization, or pity. And while culture might overdetermine reactions to threat as perceived in or alongside blackness (and culture certainly has scripted the conjunction of blackness with threat in the first place), instances abound in which white *and* black people view black threat with something other than terror and rage. Consider Norman Mailer's description of George Foreman in *The Fight*, which oozes a kind of begrudging awe rooted in the fetishized overlap of Foreman's blackness and his menace.[12] Alternately, consider how James Baldwin consistently casts black threat as the promising young understudy ready to step into the American dilemma should love or forbearance ever fail to show.[13]

One might argue that these reactions are troubling in their own right. I welcome that work, but it isn't mine. I am troubled by the

implications of Massumi's analysis of threat for blackness, even while (or especially because) I can't see that it yields wrong results. The fact that threat, as an affective reality, is born from the unactualized—indeed that it *must* be born from the unactualized—helps explain its persistent, sticky surplus. If indeed threat has no true referent but self-renews atmospherically, that bodes badly for black futures. And yet isn't that exactly what we see happening in the ambient and self-perpetuating associations that cause black school children to seem older and garner more severe punishment, or that cause black people to be killed more often by police?[14]

If the overwriting of threat onto blackness will not be quick to disappear, it is at a minimum worth better understanding those responses that are not rage and violence. Beyond that minimum, though, I hope that clues for exhausting the surplus of threat, or for subtly editing the cultural script around blackness and menace, might lie in aesthetic response. Therefore, in this chapter I explore rejoinders to the paradigm of black threat through the works of four minimalist artists: Adrian Piper, Martin Puryear, David Hammons, and Robert Morris. Their sculptural and performative works enfold the visual and the embodied, for black threat lives in just this concatenation of the visual (black) and the embodied (threat). But I also choose them because their mode *is* minimalist, and is therefore, I think, specially poised to register black threat's aesthetic.

Of these artists, Morris is the only one who is consistently framed as minimalist, and while I believe all four work within minimalism's purview, they do not all themselves embrace the label. Puryear, for example, has said that that he "tasted [minimalism] and spit it out"—specifically citing the prefabricated as the rejected tenet.[15] Given the narrow confines of minimalism as the art establishment has curated it, it is not surprising that some artists have eschewed the label. As Maurice Berger has argued, critics attempting to name and define minimalism linked a cadre of white male artists whose philosophical and stylistics concerns were not necessarily as coherent as the critical narrative would lead one to believe.[16] Many of the presumably defining characteristics of minimalism—such as prefabrication—do not squarely apply to Morris, for example. The result of this narrow and self-perpetuating definition of minimalism is that a small band of artists qualifies. Some artists (such as Eva Hesse or Martin Puryear) are written out of an originating impulse and into a "postminimalism"

while others (Morris) are written in, arguably based more upon the art establishment's reading of the maker than the reading of the work.

John P. Bowles has argued that Adrian Piper is among those artists who have been written out of minimalism's lineages through the tautology that first produced the canon of minimalism out of white male artists, and then denied the works of non-white and non-male artists as minimalist. Bowles set out to reinstate Piper as a minimalist practitioner through her early object-based works, suggesting that as Piper claimed a racialized body in her art, she moved away from minimalist and conceptualist works that elevated an unexamined universalism.[17] Other critics claim Piper for minimalism due to her own embrace of the label—and here I am thinking particularly of Maurice Berger in *Minimal Politics*, in which he discusses Piper's *Black Box/White Box* (1992).[18] Beyond honoring Piper's self-identification, Berger argues that minimalism, like its close cousin conceptualism, is always already political. As a consequence, Berger is able to situate Piper within minimalism's boundaries well after Bowles would have her abandon them. If minimalism's objects are performative, he reasons, then the demand for relation is itself a political act. This is all the more true when that object is a performing body.

I agree with Berger, but want to push a bit more on minimalism's deraced onto-epistemological politics. For though Berger takes up *Black Box/White Box*—a piece about the Rodney King beating—as a signature example of minimalist politics, he says relatively little about the racial specificity of this artwork (or indeed of any of Piper's works) beyond noting that racial specificity is important to it. Yet over and over in Piper's works—in *Black Box/White Box*, *Vote/Emote*, *Cornered*, and a host of other works—the political relation in question is charged with a sense of threat.

Unsurprisingly, most of the artists I see as responding to black threat belong to historical moments of especially fraught racial relations; moreover, these moments carried a heightened sense of crisis around black visuality in particular. Artists working in the late 1960s and early 1970s brought the racial activism of the broader culture into New York's art world in hotly contested ways.[19] Artists working in the late 1980s and early 1990s did so against the backdrop of race as a photographic and televised spectacle that included the 1992 beating of Rodney King and the ensuing LA riots, the televised confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas, the invocation of Willie Horton in the

1988 election, and the darkening of O. J. Simpson on the cover of *Time* magazine.[20] While the distinct political reality of these moments is less my focus than the trans-historical interpellation of blackness into paradigms of threat, I here remind readers of the historical realities that surround my case studies so that their particularities can help color the argument that follows.

ART AND OBJECTHOOD

In performance studies, scholars discussing minimalism still largely labor under the critical terms of engagement set by Michael Fried in "Art and Objecthood." Fried is, famously, no fan of minimalism (or, as he prefers to call it, literalism). For Fried, minimalist artworks are too stubbornly persistent in their objecthood. He explains, "There is [. . .] a sharp contrast between the literalist espousal of objecthood—almost, it seems, as an art in its own right—and modernist painting's self-imposed imperative that it defeat or suspend its own objecthood."[21] Modernist painting, in other words, *transcends* its objecthood in a way that minimalist art cannot or will not. Fried asserts that literalist art is essentially theatrical because it relies on the creation of a situation, namely the viewer being made stubbornly aware of herself in relation to the object in space. For Fried, this awareness necessarily "*distances* the beholder—not just physically but psychically" (emphasis in original). This distancing becomes, for Fried, a core element of minimalist aesthetics. As he says, "the beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended—and unexacting—relation *as subject* to the impassive object on the wall or floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another *person*" (emphasis in original).[22]

Fried goes on at some length about the disquietingly anthropomorphic qualities of minimalist art, in spite of his simultaneous concern with minimalism's stubborn persistence in objecthood. He is helped along in this by the fact that minimalist sculpture is often roughly the size of a person—quite an intentional choice, as Robert Morris explains in his "Notes on Sculpture." Unsettled by the minimalist object's anthropomorphic size, Fried ascribes it a character: the "work in question has an inner, even secret, life," he says; "obtrusiveness and, often, even aggressiveness" are its traits.[23]

The charges Fried levels against minimalism bear a great resemblance to discourses that surround the black subject. For example, Fried begins his essay by introducing minimalist art as "the expression of a general and pervasive condition" belonging to "the history—almost the natural history—of sensibility."[24] The language of "condition" has ample parallels in discourse that equates blackness with social problems, including the roughly contemporary Moynihan report (1965)—officially titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action"—with its characterization of female-headed black households as a "tangle of pathology."[25] Yet more poignant than the general "condition" is the turn to natural history in tandem with it, a rhetorical move rampant in the literatures of racial hierarchy. In particular, Fried's invocation of a natural history *of sensibility* evokes nineteenth-century racial discourses. As Kyla Schuller details extensively in *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, a profoundly influential school of American biologists, following in the tradition of evolutionary theorist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, located racial difference primarily in divergent levels of impressibility.[26] For the neo-Lamarckians, impressibility was a refinement of the nervous system that determined how responsive a population was to its environment. The more refined a race, the greater its sensibility—and the greater the danger that undesirable forces might induce a slide back down the evolutionary ladder. According to this philosophy, the black race was a vestigial holdover; black individuals felt less, both physically and emotionally. Accordingly, Fried's sense that a literalist artwork is dumbly inexhaustible—which explains his own preference for the literalist label—resonates with the myth of black durability. Minimalist art is "inexhaustible," he writes, "not because of any fullness—*that* is the inexhaustibility of art—but because there is nothing there to exhaust."[27]

Finally, the consignment of minimalist artwork to an object status resonates with critical black studies because of the ways Fried *also* grants these minimalist objects a set of intentions and limitations—a liveliness, as it were. In other words, the minimalist object is, for Fried, *simultaneously subject and object*—or, to borrow a phrase from Saidiya Hartman, a "curious hybrid of person and property."[28] Hartman uses these words to describe the American chattel condition, in which "the acknowledgment of the slave as subject was a *complement* to the arrangements of chattel property rather than its remedy" (emphasis added).[29]

The slave's doubled existence was a creation of the law and those who made it. Yet, Hartman points out, it came to characterize the resistances of those who lived under such conditions, too. In the practice of "stealing away," for example, Hartman spies an exploitation of "the bifurcated condition of the black captive as subject and object by the flagrant assertion of unlicensed and felonious behavior and by pleading innocence, precisely because as an object the slave was the very negation of an intending consciousness or will."[30] This double-edged resistance resonates with the oppositional stance Fried sees, and disdains, in the minimalist object—its willful assertion of presence and its refusal to transcend human relation (which is, for Fried, treasonous) and, *concurrently*, its stubborn reliance on its own objecthood. As Fried lingers on the anthropomorphic dimensions of the willful object—its uncanny near-person size—the embodied black subject haunts his margins even more. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Michael Fried was secretly writing about race all along.[31] Rather, the aesthetics of minimalist art as Fried sees them are consistent with ways that black subjects have been, and continue to be, described— obstinate, aggressive, secretive, untranscendent, inexpressive, and above all, stubbornly, uncomfortably, theatrically *present*.

The imputation of these traits to black Americans has been present since the birth of the nation, and is, importantly, tied to a sense of affective impenetrability. Even at the beginnings of the American republic, black countenances perturbed Thomas Jefferson for reason of their inscrutability—and, already, this perturbation was juxtaposed with looming violence. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in answer to the rhetorically posed "Why not incorporate blacks into the state?" Jefferson replies,

> Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.—To these objections, which are political, may be added others, which are physical and moral. The first difference which strikes us is that of colour.—Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin

itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race?[32]

In the space of a few sentences, Jefferson moves from black people's recollections of injuries sustained and the possible eventuality of race war to the "immovable veil of black" that obscures the emotions of black people through their inability to blush. In 1781–2, when Jefferson composed *Notes*, a quick associative leap connected black inscrutability with black threat.

What's remarkable is how much the impression of unreadability in blackness has been maintained over time—even though (or perhaps partly because) blackness *also* came to be associated with excess emotion. This, too, was in place in Jefferson's writings: he argued that black people's lack of self-regulation could be seen in their loving (not tenderness but eager desire) and their sleep (too easily sloughed when amusements were to be had).[33] White observers are not the only ones to write excess emotion into blackness, however. In the 1920s and 1930s, such excess was embraced by a section of black culture makers; it runs through Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression," to name but one example.[34] Yet as rendered in Hurston's folk tales (as well as in "Negro" folk tales relayed by white authors such as Joel Chandler Harris), excessive black expressiveness is in no small part duplicitous. And if black expression cannot be trusted, what can be known of black expression?

Much has been written about verbal tricksterism in the form of signifyin'. Deadpanning is different from signifyin' (as well as dissemblance) in important ways: for one thing, deadpanning presents an inscrutable face rather than a false one; for another, deadpan does not necessarily invite intimacy or trust as signifyin' and dissemblance do (even if only to abuse or refuse them).[35] Yet if black deadpanning is not a form of signifyin', it certainly bears a relation in its

determination to withhold and its ability to back-foot a white counterpart. Discomfited white observers might frame black duplicitousness as more or less transparent, or more or less sinister. But whatever that nuance, the suspicion of duplicity is stubbornly present. Take, for example, a quotation from *Esquire*—a magazine on the forefront of presenting the nation's race problem in the middle decades of the twentieth century. In an article that questioned the wisdom of pressing the South to change its ways with speed, the author wrote (with an excruciatingly misguided sincerity): "And there were other questions for the heart: What would happen to the virtues of that paternalism which had bound black and white together in a relationship that, however unprogressive, was often warmly human in its sharing? If the Southerner *knew* he did not understand the lesser figure in this bond, was it not frightening to be forced to comprehend that this friendly, agreeable and sympathetic soul that jollied him and nursed his children was in reality a total stranger who changed vocabularies at quitting time?"[36]

In this representative quotation the white man knows, deep down, that the black folks who surround him are strangers—persons unknown. While far less explicitly tied to countenance than in Jefferson, there is nevertheless the sense that the black caretaker before the white protagonist is an unknown *and unknowable* entity. Once again an immovable veil of black obscures the true emotions of the black person at hand; once again this is a source of affective threat. If Jefferson felt that skin itself precluded him from knowing black people, the source of their obscurity is somewhat less clear in the 1962 *Esquire* article. There is a greater sense of agency on the part of the black figure, whose "change in vocabularies" seems voluntary if also socially inevitable. As black demands for justice became more strident, the implicit belief in the determined *performance* of inscrutability seems to have grown—with no lessening of the commensurate sense of its threat. It makes sense, then, that an artist would turn to performance to explore the arranged American marriage between blackness and threat. And in her Mythic Being performances of the 1970s, this is exactly what Adrian Piper did.

Although my original intention was to dive directly into these performances, I must begin with a more recent occasion of withholding. Adrian Piper declined permission for images of her artworks to be included in this text. Though I wrote to explain the orientation of the Minoritarian Aesthetics series and my own commitment to the constructed nature of race, as well as this book's inclusion of artists such as Robert Morris and Buster Keaton in its discussions of black performance, I received the explanation that my "request does not comply with Adrian Piper's policy of not participating in racially segregated events or publications."[37]

It's hard to know where to begin with this wrinkle. One supposes this stance is an expansion of Piper's disappointing withdrawal from the 2013 exhibition *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*—though not, as Uri McMillan points out in his excellent coda on this decision, from the catalogue of the exhibition.[38] I do not believe this book is a racially segregated work. Furthermore, given that images of the artworks I discuss are widely available, their omission from these pages is more a matter of lost convenience for my reader than it is a blow to my argument.[39] But never mind this book. Piper's position, at least as it was articulated when she withdrew from *Radical Presence*, is that an artwork measured within the world of black art cannot be measured truly—that the yardstick is not of the same length within the world of black art as across a wider swath of art production. On the face of it this might seem a reasonable position. But when artworks produced by white artists are surrounded by and judged against other such works, they are not subject to the accusation that the ruler is missing some inches. Ironically, Piper's refusal of "segregated" black company implies that black art production must lack variety at best, or quality at worst. For this assumption to hold—that is, for a black artist–produced artwork to need artwork born of a different racial origin in order to find something to rub up against, or to truly know its worth—blackness must be monolithic. Moreover, for black art to *necessarily* form an ineffective corpus for productive judgment, blackness must inescapably inhere in the artworks themselves, having transferred, somehow, from the makers to the artworks. Certainly, this *can* happen—there is art of racially explicit content or racially allusive form—but I don't believe it *must*. Similarly, while I believe the

curation of all black-produced artworks can be (and indeed, has often been) guilty of unsophisticated groupings or essentialist assumptions, I don't think this is the only way that all black artists can be brought together.

In any event, as McMillan has already suggested, Piper's withholding has had the effect—strategic or not—of heightening her visibility in and as black art. Rather than showing up to withhold, Piper's latest position withholds to show up. As a look at her earlier works will demonstrate, this is no new trick. Whether or not Piper's recent decision not to participate in projects organized around race is a "performance" in an intentional way, the decision itself performs a consonance with earlier performance works.

The most famous example of this is the Mythic Being persona, which, in John P. Bowles's words, Piper did not so much create as "[appropriate] from the popular imagination" when, around September of 1973, Piper donned a mustache, Afro wig, sunglasses, and cigar, to stride about New York City as a man.[40] In addition to making appearances on the streets of New York, the Mythic Being also made his way into the pages of the *Village Voice*, accompanied with thought or speech bubbles containing quotations from Piper's own journals. Eventually this two-dimensional iteration of the Mythic Being took over, spawning photographic artworks in which Piper used the signifiers of black masculinity to her channel feelings of anger, resentment, or horniness.

Piper's false mustache, Afro wig, shades, and dark clothing are generally framed, rather simply, as the costuming of a stereotypical black male persona. This much is true, but these objects not only portray stereotypical blackness but also render the "stereotypical black male" as a kind of minimalist object. Further, through this minimalist objecthood, Piper grafts the aesthetic affects of looming into her performance. For example, in the triptych *It Doesn't Matter* (1975), the Mythic Being says in block letters, "It doesn't matter who you are / if what you want to do to me / is what I want you to do for me." In the first panel—the darkest of the three—the Mythic Being stands level to the viewer, one arm bent upward and holding a cigarillo while the other extends, palm forward, as though signaling the viewer to stop. In the next two panels, his previously extended arm is held across his chest and underneath the upturned arm in a posture at once closed and powerful. Meanwhile, the viewer's perspective comes closer and lower. By the third panel, the viewer is essentially positioned at crotch

level, looking up at the mythic being as though poised for fellatio.[41] Through this depiction of looming, Piper wields the threat implicit in deadpanned black masculinity, here explicitly tied to sexuality.[42]

My reading of the Mythic Being builds on the work of Uri McMillan, who importantly focuses on the art object as an avatar of Piper and *for* Piper in her intellectual journey as an artist and philosopher. I will follow instead the affects and aesthetics of the Mythic Being himself— that is, what his objecthood allowed and allowed for, whether or not the artist herself intended or noticed. Said differently, while I concur with McMillan's concern that the Mythic Being has become "a think-piece on race and racism" at the expense of its beginnings as "a bodily and psychological experiment in transcending the boundaries be-tween subjecthood and objecthood to become an art object," my own purpose is to think the first part of this equation through the second.[43]

To do so, I return briefly to Wolfe's "Radical Chic" to excavate one more detail about the minimalist aesthetics of the Black Panthers. Oddly, at least three times in the course of his essay, Wolfe emphasizes the "reality" of Cox and the other Panthers, and seats this reality in stereotypical objects:

> Anyway, the white guests and a few academic-looking blacks were packed, sitting and standing, into the living room. Then a contingent of 12 or 13 Black Panthers arrived. The Panthers had no choice but to as-semble in the dining room and stand up—in their leather pieces, Afros and shades—facing the whites in the living room. As a result, whenever anyone got up in the living room to speak, the audience was looking not only at the speaker but into the faces of a hard front line of Black Panthers in the dining room. Quite a tableau it was. It was at this point that a Park Avenue matron first articulated the great recurrent emotion of Radical Chic: "These are no civil rights *Negroes* wearing grey suits three sizes too big—these are *real men*!"[44]

The woman's observation links black "realness" with strident mas-culinity. But this "realness" is also wedded to the materiality of the Panthers' sartorial effects. The reality of their physical presence is transferred into their "leather pieces, Afros, and shades." Ironically, though this lends them the impression of being "*real* men," the Panthers are hardly bodies at all, but rather a conglomeration of accoutrements. The objects that constitute the Black Panthers' dress

come to contain their very presence; they become fetish objects and *as such* contain black manhood.

Moreover, Wolfe makes this move over and over in his essay. At another point he writes, "Christ, if the Panthers don't know how to get it all together, as they say, the tight pants, the tight black turtlenecks the leather coats, Cuban shades, Afros. But real Afros, not the ones that have been shaped and trimmed like a topiary hedge and sprayed until they have a sheen like acrylic wall-to-wall—but like funky, natural, scraggly . . . wild [. . .] —*these are* real men!"[45] Here the definitive presence of black manhood is fetishized into Afros, shades, and leather jackets, alongside tight pants and black turtlenecks. Oddly, no sense of bone or muscle fills out these pants and turtlenecks—no bulge of calf or pectoral, no sinewy line of neck. Instead, the closest the Panthers come to live embodiment is when their Afros form scraggly brambles in lieu of topiary hedges. Wolfe continues: "Shootouts, revolutions, pictures in *Life* magazine of policemen grabbing Black Panthers like they were Viet Cong—somehow it all runs together in the head with the whole thing of how *beautiful* they are. *Sharp as a blade*" (emphasis in original).[46] And with this introduction of a blade, Wolfe revisits the leap that Jefferson made centuries before: blackness can't quite be read, and surely there is danger there.

Besides this whiff of danger, Cox and the other Panthers are characterized through their size, movement, and wardrobe. Upon their introduction, Wolfe writes, "That huge Black Panther there in the hallway, the one shaking hands with Felicia Bernstein herself, the one with the black leather coat and the dark glasses and the absolutely unbelievable Afro, Fuzzy-Wuzzy scale in fact—is he, a Black Panther, going on to pick up a Roquefort cheese morsel rolled in crushed nuts from off the tray, from a maid in uniform, and just pop it down the gullet without so much as missing a beat of Felicia's perfect Mary Astor voice . . ." Wolfe once again draws our attention not so much to the personage of the Black Panther but to the objects that signal that personage—the Afro, the dark glasses. The quotation, too, reveals that these particular object symbols of this particular blackness have an affective result (and it is an incommensurate affect to that of Roquefort cheese, whatever affect that might be).

Wolfe notes a certain titillating incredulity flowing through the party's white attendees as a result of the Panther's "reality," writing, "Harassment & Hassles, Guns & Pigs, Jail & Bail—they're *real*, these

Black Panthers. The very idea of them, these real revolutionaries, who actually put their lives on the line, runs through Lenny's duplex like a rogue hormone."[47] In addition to being a rogue hormone, the particular blackness of the Panthers is described as "delicious," "funky," and an "electrifying spectacle."[48] It brings romance and excitement; it generates emotional momentum.[49] As Wolfe repeatedly reveals through the figure of Cox, these affects are generated not through anything the Black Panther says or even does, but rather through the fact of his incredible yet undeniable presence. They are generated, in other words, through the phenomenon Fried names as "the literalist espousal of objecthood"—the aesthetics of black threat.

Returning to Piper by way of these observations, one can see how, in donning the stereotypical markers of a certain mode of black masculinity, Piper "operated as a confrontational art object," in McMillan's words.[50] Furthermore, one can see how the Mythic Being embodied something more than stereotype. Stereotype *abstracts* particularity, substituting an imagined idea—and certainly the Mythic Being does this. But the Mythic Being also *effaces* particularity through the objects that represent inscrutable black looming. Put differently, the accoutrements Piper adopted do not just call up stereotype, they use that stereotype to force the (presumably white) viewer into an awareness of him- or herself in relation to the anthropomorphized object before them, and to beg an affective response.

The Mythic Being therefore bears more than a passing resemblance to Piper's *Untitled Performance at Max's Kansas City*, in which Piper "made an object of herself with the intention of defending her autonomy from the imposing presence of those around her. Sealed off from sensory perceptions, she would present herself as insular and individualistic."[51] Piper wore street clothes, a blindfold, gloves, and nose- and earplugs. These objects are a far cry from the symbolic clothing of a Black Panther, but they similarly assert themselves over the presence of the person who wears them, eclipsing her singularity and forcing relation in objecthood. Piper ultimately felt that the piece—which was executed as part of an exhibition—was less successful than she had hoped. The attendees, for the duration of the performance, used the space of Max's as a performance venue rather than a bar. Piper didn't bump into enough people, and she wasn't obtrusive enough to cause in her viewers the excitement of being hailed as subjects in relation. In short, her objecthood didn't loom.[52]

Piper's invocation of black threat through the Mythic Being is not *simply* a matter of embrace, as it may at first glance seem. Take, for example, the images and text of *I Am the Locus* (1975). Visually, *I Am the Locus* trades in the aesthetics of looming. As the panels proceed, the Mythic Being comes closer to the photographic frame, increasing in size and forcing the viewer into ever more direct relation, while also obscuring individuality with the stereotypical objects of inscrutability and threat (Afro, shades). As many others have noted, Piper's idiosyncratic textual additions, which represent the Mythic Being's interiority, run counter to his anonymity. More significant to my mind is the way the text also runs counter to the visual register's subject/object arrangement. The panels of *I Am the Locus* declare in uppercase lettering: "I am the locus of consciousness / surrounded and constrained / by animate physical objects / with moist, fleshy, pulsating surfaces . . . / Get out of my way, asshole." Piper's text locates consciousness in black objecthood and unknowability in the white subjects that surround the Mythic Being. In so doing, *I Am the Locus* explicitly invokes objecthood and looming but complicates its terms, seeding consciousness in the looming figure against the historical interpretations that surround inexpressive blackness.

MARTIN PURYEAR

Martin Puryear, an African American visual artist whose primary medium is sculpture, also nuances the relation of black objecthood and consciousness. Puryear openly acknowledges blackness as an occasional subject. His explicit engagement with figures of black history, including James Beckwourth and Booker T. Washington, suggests that he's not an artist who wishes to foreclose race as a valid site of inquiry. Yet critics seem tentative to engage Puryear's African American identity as an aspect of his work.[53] Curator Margo Crutchfield illustrates this point when she writes, of Puryear's engagement with African American subjectivity, "While a number of his sculptures specifically reference his African American heritage, Puryear's work for the most part transcends the specific for the most universal concerns."[54] Crutchfield's syntax pits African American heritage *against* universal concerns; his artwork attends to one thing *or* the other. Implicitly, Crutchfield suggests that any given piece *does not* reference his African American identity *unless* that reference is made explicit.

Yet surely it is possible for the works of a black artist to deal with universal concerns as they manifest in the particulars of African American subjectivity.

Too often, an artist's engagement with the "universal" is announced as the proper abandonment of a bodily (and raced) particularity, as if one might effortlessly leap from embodied specificity to universal humanity, somehow leapfrogging their nexus in selfhood. Yet selfhood is that liminal space in which the particular and universal meet and are negotiated, and it should therefore be possible for the subject to engage universal themes within that space without abandoning the racialized bodily. Curator John Elderfield seems to allow for the possibility when he says that Puryear's sculptures "halt us in contested areas where the artist's freedom of thought met the resistance of the external world, and deep spaces of imagination opened in the attainable."[55] Though his engagement with race in Puryear's work is also, on the whole, quite limited, Elderfield suggests that Puryear's sculptures unfold in the negotiated space between the individual and the world, between imagination and pragmatism—a space we might call selfhood. To my mind, this also suggests that universals ("deep spaces of imagination") can *also* reflect particular histories ("the attainable") in the mediated space of subjectivity.

Elderfield warns against interpreting Puryear's sculpture as "some unmediated outflowing of his private self"—a valuable caution.[56] Far from asking Puryear's engagement with subjectivity to stand in as "unmediated outflowing," my intention is to highlight the ways the (raced) self might *never* be an unmediated outflowing. A number of Puryear's works, I argue, can be read as embodying or performing a mode of black selfhood through the conjunction of their presence and their materiality. They insist on the prerogative of the black subject to loom as an object. Yet even as they insist on the prerogative of an object to loom, Puryear's works also defuse the sense of danger that characterizes black threat through the beauty of their handcraftsmanship.

Martin Puryear's *Self* (1978) is a dark, heavy-looking form, one suggestive of a smooth, massive stone rising out of the earth (fig. 2.3). Puryear described *Self* as looking "as though it might have been created by erosion, like a rock worn by sand and weather until the angles are all gone."[57] It is large—indeed, at 69 × 48 × 25 inches, the sculpture is many inches taller than most viewers. *Self*'s large size and its appearance of weight and solidity make the sculpture formidable, as it

Figure 2.3. Martin Puryear, *Self*, 1978. Painted and stained cedar mahogany, 69 x 48 x 25 in. © Martin Puryear. Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery.

places its viewers in the phenomenological relation so characteristic of minimalist works. Its heaviness is illusory, though: *Self* is a work of laminated cedar and mahogany, thin layers enclosing a hollow core. The sculpture is surprisingly lightweight.

Untitled (1997) is somewhat similar (fig. 2.4). Another hollow, dark monolith, *Untitled* (1997) is more reminiscent of a head, evoking the concept of selfhood not through its title but through its shape. As with *Self*, *Untitled* is a figure of outsized proportions—it is only one

inch shorter than *Self*—and it presents a similarly smooth, rounded, and polished surface. As Crutchfield points out, this surface both absorbs and reflects light, thereby adding to its sense of unbroken enclosure.[58] Like *Self*, *Untitled* seems impenetrable, but not unalterable. For one thing, the sculpture's surface reveals more of the seams of its assemblage. If it invites associations with stone forms, it is because the shape—by teetering at the edge of figuration—harkens to stone

Figure 2.4. Martin Puryear, *Untitled*, 1997. Painted cedar and pine, 68 × 57 × 51 in. © Martin Puryear. Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery.
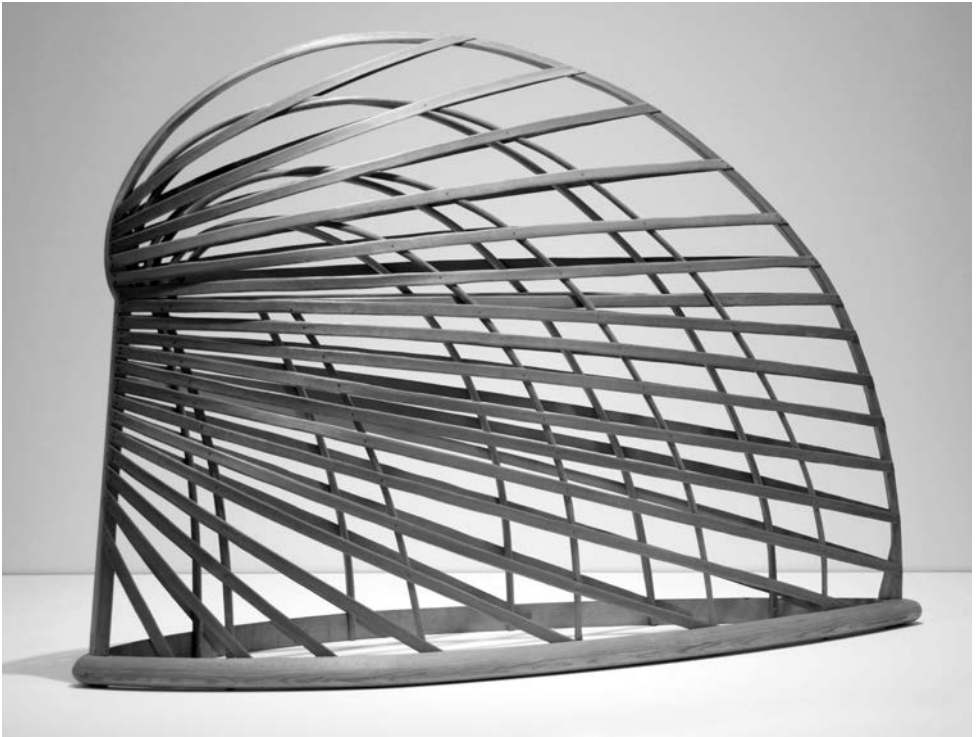
Figure 2.5. Martin Puryear, *Bower*, 1980. Sitka spruce, pine, and copper tacks, 64 ¼ × 94 ⅝ × 26 in. © Martin Puryear. Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery.

monoliths carved by human hands. Both sculptures suggest the influence of external elements (whether environmental or human) on the shape of the object and, in turn, on the space of the interior. And Puryear thinks a great deal about the interior.

According to the artist, in *Self* (and, it would follow, in *Untitled*), hollowness "remain[s] locked away inside, inaccessible and unknowable to others."[59] Yet Puryear plays with the inaccessibility of the interior in other works (fig. 2.5). In *Bower* (1980)—a bit reminiscent of *Self* in shape, but constructed as an airy frame of Sitka spruce and pine— the artist offers "a contrasted imagining of a secret place hidden in full view."[60] This self is not worn down, but built. This work is penetrable; its airiness matches its lightness. Yet it is also a body that maintains clear boundaries. It has a delineated volume, and while its interior is permeable, it nevertheless remains distinct from its surroundings.

Several recurrent themes of Puryear's work are present in these works: the tension between exterior appearance and internal space; the relationship between the visible and invisible surface (as in *Bower*, where the exterior of the sculptural form is delineated by gap as well as substance); and, I think, in the concept of selfhood as formed in the spaces between self-directed technologies of making (such as in the techniques of assembly that shape these wooden sculptures) and the effects of external forces on an originary body (as in the reductive sculptural techniques or erosive elements that shape the rock forms they harken to). Puryear's sculptures, in other words, propose a mediated black American subjectivity in which the self is formed not simply through the wearing effects of social or elemental forces, nor through a pure self-making, but rather through a negotiated crafting and shaping of self in dialogue with other forces. Moreover, the presentation of interiority that is delimited and yet available, hidden and yet discoverable, protected and yet vulnerable, interacts with the representational legacies of black subjectivity in particular and generative ways.

Puryear builds objects that can evoke those affects of looming that so define minimalism: they are large enough to force viewers into a phenomenological relation, large enough to tip into the anthropomorphic and, yes, the theatrical. Art critics have described Puryear's sculptures as "unfamiliar objects that encourage but frustrate a wish to identify them,"[61] and as "elemental forms remarkable for their unusual beauty and metaphoric resonance." Surely these impressions are compounded in objects (like *Self* and *Untitled*) that are dark and impenetrable. The ambiguous forms of Puryear's anthropomorphic objects result in a desire for relation *and* an unsurety about the nature of that relation—just the impossibly delicious combination that Tom Wolfe ascribed to the Panthers.

Yet if Puryear's objects loom through their size and their unreadable form, they also refuse to threaten through the substance and surface of their material subjectivities. Their carefully (one wishes to say "lovingly") handcrafted surfaces; their material composition of wood, a warm medium; and their quietly waiting and sometimes visible interiors all invite a deeper relation than does shape alone. Indeed, Puryear has said of *Self* that its hollowness "gave rise to the title and to the notion of the work as a place as much as an object."[62] Puryear suggests that the object's hollowness does not mean emptiness so much as an awaiting

presence. Nothing about this presence invites the affective relation that is threat. For one thing, its phenomenological constitution (as a place as much as an object) suggests a receptive rather than aggressive stance. For another, its material qualities—the evidence of its careful making, its warm material—might be interpreted as placid or inviting.

"Puryear's protagonist is a quiet one," critic Robert Storr has said, "and, although it may yearn for peace and perhaps transcendence, never, in the manner of the expressionist self, does it proclaim aloud its erstwhile struggles."[63] Storr's statement does a great deal of work in a short space, and is therefore worth parsing a bit. To begin with, Storr references "Puryear's protagonist" as though it is possible to identify a singular character in Puryear's works. Although Puryear's works present a coherent vision, I am resistant to naming a singular protagonist in them, as that would veer close to insisting that the artist has (re-)produced autobiography, rather than social vision, through his works. Still, regardless of whether a singular protagonist may be found in Puryear's works, subjectivity is a recurrent motif—and if Puryear's works do not proclaim expression*ist* selfhood, neither do they decline to express selfhood. Rather, in their material, form, and processes, Puryear's works speak to a black subjectivity that does not shy away from objecthood but rather insists on its nuanced ability to speak to, and for, blackness.

DAVID HAMMONS

If Piper largely (though not exclusively) embraces the aesthetics of black threat and Puryear largely (though not exclusively) rejects them, David Hammons takes the most ambivalent stance of the artists I discuss here. His 1993 sculpture *In the Hood* (fig. 2.6) is a ready example of this ambivalence in the way it combines the high visibility and charged symbolic structure of a hoodie with the absence of the young black male who presumably occupies it. Like the other works in this chapter, Hammons's sculpture insists that there is something or someone to witness while simultaneously refusing some aspect of that act's fulfillment. The piece trades in the anthropomorphic objecthood of the minimalist object, not only in referencing human form but in that the work is mounted well above the ground: it looms. For viewers who have been conditioned to fear men in hoodies, the piece may well feel threatening due to its height, its suggestion of human form, its dark and shadowy hue, and its association with black crime. Yet while

Figure 2.6. David Hammons, *In the Hood*, 1993. Athletic sweatshirt hood with wire, 23 × 10 × 5 in. Tilton Family Collection.

Hammons presents his viewers with a symbol of blackness, there is no physiognomic blackness here. *If the object will stand entirely for blackness,* he seems to suggest, *then let it. I'm out.*

But if the black body is fugitive in *In the Hood*, neither is it quite free. The symbolic structure that would entrap blackness feels too ready to claim its own—at least in *this* political moment, when Trayvon Martin's death looms as a not-so-distant and dreadfully recurrent future-past. The hood lacks a head, but also its own body, and the cut at the neck is jagged. For the black spectator, the violence of that cut, the

absence of the body, and the historical sectioning of black bodies on display let the hood bear witness to a different violent history—one perpetrated *against* black men—standing in lieu of the black body.

Another historical instantiation of black threat against which to read Hammons's work is the July 1968 issue of *Esquire*. The cover story for this issue is an interview with James Baldwin. Though the magazine cover bills this article as "James Baldwin tells us all how to cool it this summer," the heading on the article instead asks, "How can we get *the black people* to cool it?" (emphasis added). In this interview, black people are called on to cool the nation's rising racial tensions, a call that Baldwin refuses:

> Esq: How can we get the black people to cool it?
> James Baldwin: It is not for us to cool it.
> Esq: But aren't you the ones who are getting hurt the most?
> James Baldwin: No, we are only the ones who are dying fastest.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Esq: Is there any white man who can . . .
> James Baldwin: White by the way is not a color, it's an attitude. You're as white as you think you are. It's your choice.
> Esq: Then black is a state of mind too?
> James Baldwin: No, black is a condition.
>
> [. . .]
>
> You talk about us as though we were not there. The real pain, the real danger is that white people have always treated Negroes this way. You've always treated Sambo this way. We always were Sambo for you, you know we had no feelings, we had no ears, no eyes. We've lied to you for more than a hundred years and you don't even know it yet. We've lied to you to survive. And we've begun to despise you. We don't hate you. We've begun to despise you.
> And it is because we can't afford to care what happens to us, and you don't care what happens to us.[64]

Baldwin reiterates that blackness is a condition, in counter-distinction to whiteness, which is a choice. Fried's language of condition echoes once again. He then describes the ways blackness is called into this condition through the equation of blackness with a lack of feeling, a
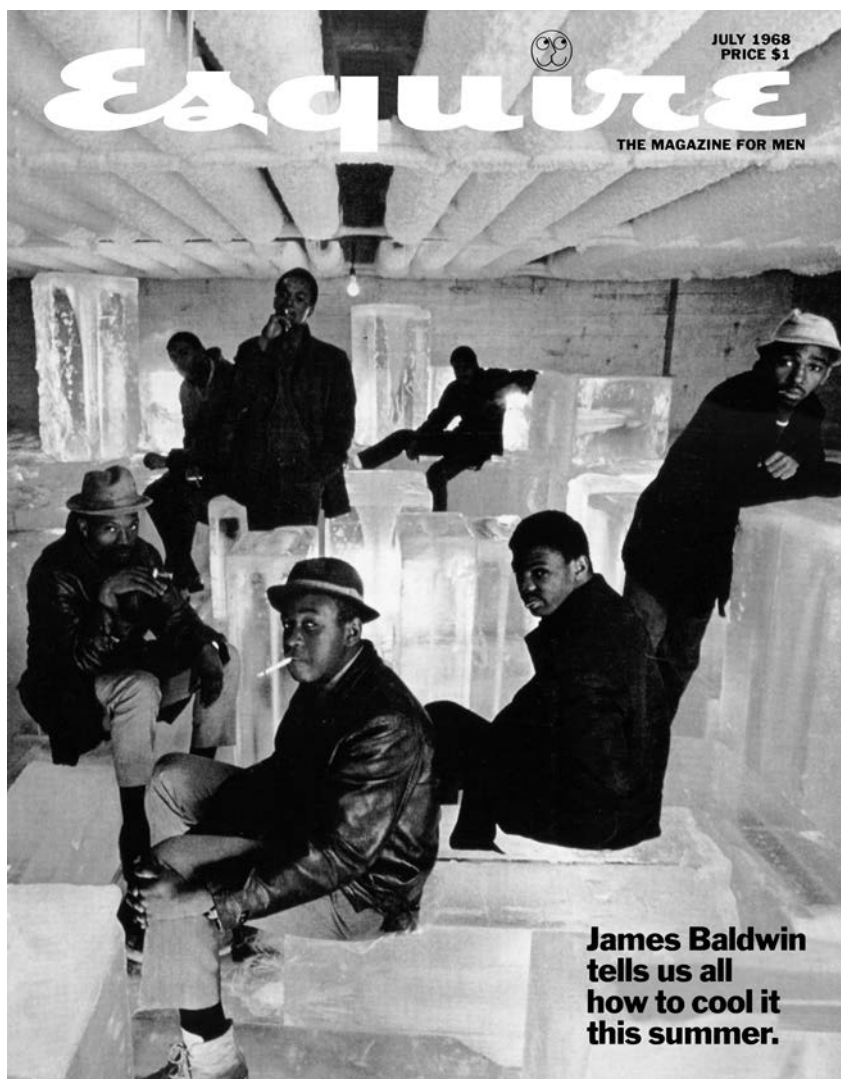
Figure 2.7. George Lois, *Cool It*, 1968. *Esquire*.

lack of sense—no ears, no eyes—like Piper at Max's Kansas City—and situates disingenuousness and threat as the natural consequence.

The incendiary and now legendary art director George Lois designed the magazine cover that accompanied Baldwin's interview (fig. 2.7). The image features seven young black men arrayed in an ice warehouse. They sit on ice, lean against it, and stand among blocks of it (and each other); they smoke and leer at the camera (or at the

photographer) with a certain aloof remove. The closest of them is reasonably well lit, the farthest mere silhouette. Lit or not, the image trades in their icy and inscrutable presence. Here's how Brian Horrigan, curator of *The 1968 Exhibit*, described the cover:

> Seven young black men—anonymous, black-jacketed, smoking, staring at the camera—are assembled in an ice warehouse. George Lois and photographer Carl Fischer pressed these men (actors? models? guys pulled in off the street?) into a single role, one with a long history in American popular culture—the Black Man who Terrifies White People. Cool. Insolent. Arrogant. Tightly wound. "Powderkegs," each of them. Still, the photograph manages to control them: they are inside; trapped, in a way, in a space that could pass for a prison; like animals or carcasses in a meat locker; isolated from each other, not part of a larger group. Not part of a community at all: no women, no children. Just black maleness, an immense threat to white American males, overwhelmingly the readership of *Esquire*, "The Magazine for Men," as it says just above the head of the black guy on the far right.[65]

Horrigan, in his professional capacity as curator, recognizes black threat in the aesthetics of Lois's image, and ties it to the threat of black masculinity. As a viewer I cannot myself see these men as animal or carcass-like, nor do I see insolence or arrogance in their expressions, which seem to me reservedly skeptical. Yet this is exactly the point, that the aesthetics of black threat—the fact of their looming—invites a quick trick in which the unknown black men ("actors? models?") become a known affective quantity (insolent object) through the aesthetic fact of their looming.

It is with this image in mind that I see David Hammons's *Cold Shoulders* (fig. 2.8) enacting its aesthetic intervention. As a work of minimalism, *Cold Shoulders* might be placed in conversation with Robert Morris's *Untitled (Four Mirrored Cubes)* (1965). Yet I think it makes as much sense to think about the ways *Cold Shoulders*, as a work of minimalism, is in dialogue with Lois's image. In *Cold Shoulders*, massive blocks of ice suggest human forms. In substituting looming blocks of ice for the looming black body, Hammons is able to signify on the aesthetic traditions of black threat—for even if he isn't responding to this exact image, the assumptions that underlie Lois's image hold beyond its borders. Coats of fur and wool—rather than the haptically cooler

Figure 2.8. David Hammons, *Cold Shoulders*, 1990. Installation view, Jack Tilton Gallery, New York.

leather—are draped on the ice blocks, softening and warming the presence of these "bodies" at the same time that his substitution of ice renders them harder and colder. But importantly, the substitution of ice for bodies allows for a degree of fugitivity for the black subject that the sculptural hoodie of 1992 might not (or might no longer). Threat melts into nothing.

Hammons threads his needle quite exactly—he doesn't defuse threat, as Puryear does, nor does he embrace it as Piper does. Instead, he proffers a performance of conspicuous abstention. "Blackness appearing tonight!" he seems to promise, yet *blackness* fails to show—for some. Some relic of the raptured black body always remains behind, but he leaves it to his viewers to determine whether, or how, to invest that relic with meaning.

ROBERT MORRIS

Unlike the other artists I have discussed in this chapter, Robert Morris is white. He shows no explicit preoccupation with blackness in the course of his extensive progressive activism. Morris is, however, acknowledged as a leading practitioner of minimalism, and his works

can be seen as instances of a phenomenon in which blackness disappears from view yet infuses other scopic and affective vehicles. To consider this possibility, I will take up two of Morris's works that evidence hints of blackness: *Site* (1964) and *Untitled (Box for Standing)* (1961). There is no evidence that Morris intended to inflect these works with a cross-racial chromatic. Still, both flirt with aesthetics of black threat by surrogating the black body.

Theorized by Joseph Roach, surrogation is a cultural process by which people who experience a hole in their social fabric—most often caused by death or departure—attempt to find a satisfactory substitute. "Because collective memory works selectively, imaginatively, and often perversely," he says, "surrogation rarely if ever succeeds." Success, however, matters less than the attempt. "I believe," he continues, "that the process of trying out various candidates in different situations— the doomed search for originals by continuously auditioning stand-ins—is the most important of the many meanings that users intend when they say the word *performance*."[66] Although Roach focuses on losses caused by death or departure, the peculiar institution's afterlives have, for many white Americans, rendered the black American an unknown (or unknowable) entity—an unspectral absence deserving effigial proxy. And there is reason to believe that Morris's works offer such effigies by tapping the cultural tropes of blackness—especially, if not exclusively, through the aesthetics of looming.

Morris's sculptural works "radicalized the heretofore passive relationship between art object and spectator," in the words of art critic Maurice Berger.[67] This was Morris's intention all along: he was well aware that human-sized objects insist upon person-like relations. "This is undoubtedly why subliminal, generalized kinesthetic responses are strong in confronting [the new sculpture]," he wrote. "Such responses are often denied or repressed since they seem so patently inappropriate in the face of non-anthropomorphic forms, yet they are there."[68] As Fried makes clear in "Art and Objecthood," he experienced this relation with an impassive object as confrontational. Morris predicted this, too, explaining that the large size of much minimalist sculpture was "one of the necessary conditions of avoiding intimacy."[69] By intimacy he means, in particular, the instinct to get very close to or to touch objects smaller than oneself. Morris wants his objects to insist upon the distance of interpersonal relations. He knows that he is aligning qualities of sculpture to a purpose that is aesthetic but also phenomenological.

Moreover, Morris objects to additions that might detract from the *physical* relationship of the object to a viewer. Take, for example, his thoughts on the addition of color. He writes, "The qualities of scale, proportion, shape, mass, are physical. Each of these qualities is made visible by the adjustment of an *obdurate*, literal mass. Color does not have this characteristic. It is additive. Obviously things exist as colored. The objection is raised against the use of color that emphasizes the optical and in so doing *subverts the physical*. The more neutral hues, which *do not call attention to themselves*, allow for the maximum focus on those essential physical decisions that inform sculptural works" (emphasis added).[70] In not calling attention to themselves, neutral hues are a form of quietude that complements the stubborn, inexpressive presence of human-sized objecthood (and here we might hear the faint echo of Jefferson's immovable veil of black). Morris's own favorite neutral was a signature gray, a mix of black and white hues.

Morris knew that he was aligning qualities of sculpture to a purpose that was aesthetic but also phenomenological. "Unitary forms do not reduce relationships. They order them," he wrote.[71] This assertion comes at a turning point in Morris's first "Notes on Sculpture." Just before making it, he discusses various elements of the new sculpture, so that one could read the "relationships" as those between shape, color, size, and so forth. But immediately afterward, he turns to the human-object relation—meaning that a "unitary" form might also order human-object relations. Yet curiously, even while acknowledging that the object has the power to order relations, Morris doesn't say much about the *nature* of this anthropomorphic object thrust into relation with the human spectator by virtue of its size. The object approximates a human relation, and that is enough. Yet mightn't we think of black threat as the presentation of a unitary form that orders relations through performance?

Untitled (Box for Standing) (fig. 2.9) is an example of looming anthropomorphism in Morris's work. Originally a fir wood structure, *Box for Standing* accommodated Morris's body with little room to spare. He himself called it coffin-like, and said it emerged during a period of his artistic practice—the early 1960s—when he wanted a "totalising, enclosing space within which I exist with the object." Morris roots the works of this time in a particular set of personal circumstances, saying that his exploration of the premises of sculpture coincided with

Figure 2.9. Robert Morris in *Untitled (Box for Standing)*, 1961. © 2021 The Estate of Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the Castelli Gallery.

"an increasing negativity toward and incapacity for personal relations. [. . .] Only the inanimate object is alive for me in these years, and making objects becomes my bulwark against the threat of the other, and every other is regarded as threatening, especially those who would try to get close to me."[72] While I often avoid the biographical in discussing an artist's work, Morris's plainspoken admission of his desire for the object to stand in lieu of human relation supports the sense that *Box for Standing* explicitly surrogates the human form in addition to calling the body into relation with it.

Indebted to Fried, many critics of Morris's sculpture focus on what his objects do to the spectator through their imitation of the body's phenomenology. Therefore, a good deal of criticism focuses on the viewer's experience of the sculptural object.[73] Much rarer is an interrogation of *the object's experience of the viewer*. Yet as a hybrid sculpture and performance work, *Box for Standing* suggests an interchangeability between the box and the person standing within in, reinforced by Morris's own expressionless affect when he inhabits the box. They feel of a piece, as though Morris without the box, or the box without Morris, would essentially continue to exhibit the same thing. The human, in other words, is a surrogate for this box as much as the box is a surrogate for the human. And what does the box want of out its exchange with the people who view it?

According to Morris's sculptural ideals, it wants physical presence more than an optical one; it wants to loom. But also—as "Notes on Sculpture" suggests and Morris's personal description of the era seconds—the box wants to force its viewer into relation without abandoning a bulwark of protective objecthood. Morris suggests that this objecthood is adopted in response to a perceived threat. I do not mean to negate or disregard Morris's personal experiences, or to suggest that they were not highly individual. But at least as these feelings have manifested in Morris's objecthood, transfigured into art "as a closed space, a refusal of communication, a secure refuge and defense against the outside world, a dead zone and buffer against others who would intrude"—*that* objecthood resonates with a certain performed and/or performative mode of blackness.[74]

Morris's works—sculptural or live—never perform black threat per se. They tug at the edges of it by performing objecthood, looming, and an unreadability that trades unitary form for intimacy or detail *while simultaneously* (and, for some, uncomfortably) insisting on human relation.[75]

Figure 2.10. Robert Morris with Carolee Schneemann, *Site*, 1964. © 2021 The Estate of Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. © 2021 Carolee Schneemann Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P·P·O·W, New York. Courtesy of the Castelli Gallery. Photo by Peter Moore; Peter Moore Photography Archive, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Libraries, © Northwestern University.

As I hope is clear by now, my contention is not that black Americans are the only people who connect to or perform these embodiments, but rather that we have a long and societally reinforced (perhaps even mandated) relationship with them. Morris's reliance on looming does not, therefore, constitute a "true" performance of blackness—if such a thing can be said to exist at all; instead, his reliance illuminates one way that the aesthetic realm can call on the cultural imaginary of blackness in order to do its work. Admittedly, it is something of a trace in *Box for Standing*, but that isn't always the case in Morris's oeuvre. *Site*, a performance piece conceived by Robert Morris and executed together with Carolee Schneemann in 1964, is far clearer in its hail.

Simply put, *Site* (fig. 2.10) riffs on the iconography of Édouard Manet's well-known painting *Olympia* (1863) (fig. 2.11), which portrays a prostitute and her black attendant. At the start of *Site*, as it is

Figure 2.11. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. Image courtesy of the Musée d'Orsay.

described by Berger, Morris's audience sees three objects: downstage right, a white box, out of which issue the sounds of jackhammers; upstage center, a large structure of whitewashed plywood; and upstage right, Morris, standing with his back to the audience, dressed in work clothes, boots, and gloves. After several minutes, Morris walks to the plywood structure and begins to disassemble it. As he turns to this work, the audience can see that Morris wears a papier-mâché mask "designed to reproduce, without expression, his facial features."[76] As Morris moves the heavy boards of the upstage structure, he reveals Schneemann reclining in the manner of Olympia, wearing nothing but "a dusting of white powder and a ribbon around her neck."[77] "After Schneemann is fully revealed," Berger says, "Morris walks downstage left, where he moves one of the sheets of plywood into various positions (e.g. carrying it on his back, kneeling next to it). Several minutes later Morris walks back to Schneemann and covers her with the board. He then returns downstage left and turns his back to the audience as the house lights dim."[78] Morris and Schneemann both seem object-like in this performance, although her purpose is

stasis while his is motion—he is an object that makes other objects move, impassively.

Site amounts to repetition with a difference: it cites Manet's painting in the iconography of Olympia herself and in picturing two figures, one of whom labors and one of whom reclines (although certainly another form of labor is implied in this reclining). Yet while Manet's work offers two female figures, one white and one black, Morris's piece offers one male figure and one female figure, both white. The fact that it *is* a repetition allows us to parse the symbolic structures that underlie this substitution. For one thing, Morris's piece is consistent with Manet's in making Olympia's companion a worker—support staff, even. In both cases Olympia pays little heed to her attendant, but the attendant's labor nevertheless helps dictate the terms on which Olympia is seen: in Manet's painting, the woman behind Olympia holds flowers; in Morris's performance, his labor reveals and obscures Olympia. Moreover, the boards Morris moves are echoed in the dimensions of the lounge on which Schneemann reclines, implying that she is supported by that labor as well as revealed through it.

For Berger, a comprehensive critic of Morris's works, *Site* stages an analogy between workers and artists in which "the affectations of 'artistic temperament'" are eschewed.[79] Berger reads Morris's masked face as operating against an art historical modernism that elevated the rarefied, avant-garde artist, thereby returning the artist's affiliation to the industrial order that had spurred modernism's idealization of individual expression in the first place. He also reads the mask as reflecting the anonymity of labor. To a large extent I agree with Berger, especially as he emphasizes the anonymity of labor. Building on his insight, however, I want to highlight the fact that anonymous labor has racialized associations in the American context, especially as anonymity intersects with expressionlessness and objecthood. Whether or not Morris's larger oeuvre calls the unnamed worker into being as an unraced (or even deraced) figure, Morris's masked labor in *Site* steps into a structure of meaning already established by Manet. Given this fact, Morris's labor *here* substitutes for a *particular* unnamed laborer who is certainly not unraced. Olympia's attendant is black, and she is inscrutable.

Olympia's attendant is not expressionless, exactly, but neither does her expression give itself over to easy naming. Is this because she wishes to be an unnameable entity (whether "she" refers to the

character in the painting or the model who portrayed her)? Or is it because Manet cannot himself *see* her expression? I pose an unanswerable question, but its consequence for Morris's embodiment might be the same: the mask. The expressionless mask that Morris wears is not a race-neutral prop, but rather a substitution for unreadable blackness. Once again, my point here is not that Morris is performing blackness per se, but rather that *cultural* blackness infuses the signifiers that Morris has substituted for blackness's visible (physiognomic) presence.

A final substitution occurs via gender: the flower-wielding woman of Manet's painting becomes a plywood-toting male; the copious pink fabric that obscures her body (in contrast to Olympia's) becomes instead a T-shirt and jeans, work gloves and boots. I read this change to Manet's painting through Hortense Spillers's insights regarding the ungendering of the black female wrought through the workings of slavery—the denial of family integrity, the denial of feminine delicacy and its commensurate calls to protection, and so forth, until, "in the historic outline of dominance, the respective subject-positions of 'female' and 'male' adhere to no symbolic integrity."[80] Morris might easily step into the black female's place because in his cultural imaginary she, as a placeholder, isn't all that "female" to begin with. Morris's mask, stationary pose at the beginning of the piece, and unaffected dance with the wooden boards all suggest that Morris envisioned his own performing body to be an object among objects in this piece and, as an object, perhaps genderless. But in surrogating his body for hers, thereby overwriting the black woman's body with masculinity, Morris flirted with the signal sources of black threat that we recognize so readily in the cross-gendered performance of Piper's Mythic Being.

In suggesting that signifiers of blackness reverberate in Morris's work, I follow the example of Petrine Archer-Straw, who, in the stellar *Negrophilia*, diligently draws out the (white) European avant-garde's fascination with black essence and forms.[81] While certainly not *all* of American culture is at its core about blackness, blackness informs far more than is widely acknowledged. This blinkered view is due partly to Americans' persistently narrow view of what blackness is and how it operates—that is, we fail to recognize blackness in a certain aesthetic because culturally, we have denied that aesthetic as a register *of* blackness. In discussing the work of black abstractionists, art historian Darby English suggests the term "racial discomposure" as a way to discuss, in positive terms, the cultural mixing that he believes to be the true

province of black modernism. He writes, "Racial discomposure [. . .] occurs whenever a politico-aesthetic event jeopardizes the chromatic stability underwriting blackness at the level of cultural description. [. . .] At one level, *discomposure* is just a way to refer to the contested and changing nature of historical signifiers of difference [. . .]. But the term may also apply in any number of instances that present blacks' embeddedness in a larger scene of differences [. . .]. *Discomposure* is apt whenever the objective conception of racial blackness encounters an incontestably subjective factor. Discomposure is what happens when blackness *adapts*."[82] English, in this passage, suggests that racial discomposure happens when blackness doesn't present as *obviously* black, when it reveals instead its constructed and contested nature in a wider field of difference. "Discomposure" is what happens when race begins to come apart at its seams through aesthetic means.

I am grateful for English's formulation and its attention to blackness as expansive, contested, and constructed, and in pointing out how Morris's artworks might quietly trade on the cultural signal of black threat, I hope to push against any implicit sense that black people's embeddedness in a larger scene of difference should influence *only* blackness and black cultural makers. Blackness is not the only chromatic subject to destabilization, nor the only one that can benefit from it. As I have previously suggested, racial discomposure can apply as well to whiteness, which, in spite of its tremendous ability to absorb otherness due to its dominance, is not immune to the gravitational effects of other racial bodies. In Morris's work, I spot the possibility of a black influence in white cultural production that is not simply a surface appropriation but rather a deeper pull. Furthermore, if Morris's work can be thought of as performing a mode of black inexpression, other realms of performance—across other bodies and forms—also come into play. For example, how might we think differently about raced inexpression if, say, Yvonne Rainer's minimalist dance could be thought of as working through or alongside the knowledges of deadpan performance?[83] How might Rainer's famous "No Manifesto," and the task-based movement that it described, change if viewed through a darker lens?[84] Though I've elected to raise this possibility without adding a movement analysis adventure to the aesthetic modes already explored, I nevertheless invoke Rainer's minimalist, modernist embodiment as a way of moving into the next chapter, where more feminine embodiments entangle with raced inexpression.