



Objects Specialty Group

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Source: *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Twenty-Four, 2017*

Pages: 372–387

Editors: Emily Hamilton and Kari Dodson, with Tony Sigel Program Chair

ISSN (print version) 2169-379X

ISSN (online version) 2169-1290

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www.culturalheritage.org

Objects Specialty Group Postprints is published annually by the Objects Specialty Group (OSG) of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC). It is a conference proceedings volume consisting of papers presented in the OSG sessions at AIC Annual Meetings.

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This article is published in the *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Twenty-Four, 2017*. It has been edited for clarity and content. The article was peer-reviewed by content area specialists and was revised based on this anonymous review. Responsibility for the methods and materials described herein, however, rests solely with the author(s), whose article should not be considered an official statement of the OSG or the AIC.

“DO WHAT’S RIGHT”: THE CONSERVATION OF A DAVID HAMMONS MUD SCULPTURE

SASHA DROSDICK, ROGER GRIFFITH, AND LYNDA ZYCHERMAN

“Do what’s right,” said the artist, without looking at the sculpture or asking what treatment we proposed. During a surprise visit to the Museum of Modern Art’s conservation studio, the infamously laconic artist David Hammons uttered these three words that encapsulate decades’ worth of conservation theory and ethical debates. What does it mean to do the right thing in art conservation? The 28-inch tall, mud sculpture with wire, human hair, and black-eyed peas presents a plethora of conservation concerns. In 2013, the Museum of Modern Art acquired the sculpture in what appeared to be a deteriorated and unstable state. It required a Plexiglas bonnet for its inaugural exhibition at the museum in 2015. As the work was being deinstalled from that exhibition, a small piece of mud fell from the sculpture and landed on its base. This event, in addition to the work’s condition, led us to question its overall structural stability and strategy for basic conservation maintenance. Without the artist’s explicit guidance, distinguishing between his intentions and the natural deterioration of the sculpture’s inherently fragile materials was challenging. However, finding a solution that would stabilize the work without diminishing its spirit was a challenge that we eagerly accepted.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary art, Conceptual art, Mud sculpture, Unbaked clay, Consolidation

1. INTRODUCTION

Unceremoniously, and unannounced, David Hammons appeared in the Conservation Center of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) on a quiet Friday afternoon in May of 2016. He was accompanied by AC Hudgins, his friend and long-time patron. Serendipitously, this surprise visit coincided with our treatment of a Hammons artwork, which happened to stand nearby, and which Hudgins himself had donated in 2013. Seizing upon the opportunity to speak with the famously reclusive artist, we asked him his opinion about the recent damage to his work and how he suggested we move forward. Turning away from the sculpture, he said, “Do what’s right,” and then fell silent.

But what does it mean to a conservator, to do what’s right? This article will present the treatment of an unbaked mud sculpture by African-American conceptual artist, David Hammons (b. 1943). By recounting the accident that affected the artwork’s condition and how it came to enter the lab, this article will unpack the two main themes surrounding our treatment, focusing on the material limitations of unbaked mud objects and the complexities of dealing with living artists. It will also expose areas where more communication between conservation specialties and research is required.

Ultimately, we were forced to treat a sculpture that was neither constructed to last forever nor intended to enter a museum, all while negotiating the cryptic wishes of a living artist. This situation was unique; however, given the state of the art market and artists’ current practices, it is becoming increasingly more common.

2. THE ARTIST: DAVID HAMMONS

“I am an artist” Hammons said in 2001, “but I am not on the side of the art world” (Solomon 2001, 556). This statement, which Hammons made during one of his few official interviews, typifies the artist’s persona. Words like elusive, prickly, unpredictable, and inaccessible are often used to describe him. In 2016, during one of many Wattis Institute (San Francisco, California) events within the yearlong initiative dedicated to Hammons, then director of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art,

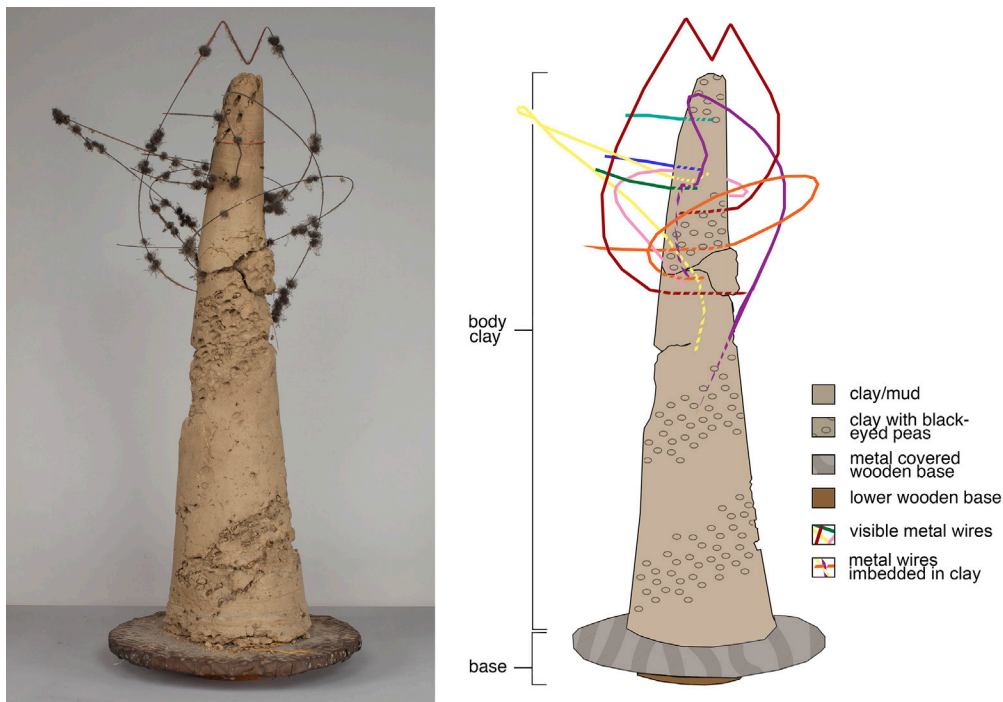


Fig. 1. David Hammons, *Untitled*, ca. 1976. Mud, metal, hair, wire, black-eyed peas, and rubber bands on metal base, 74.9 × 40.6 × 35.6 cm. Gift of the Hudgins Family in memory of Martina Hudgins. Museum of Modern Art, 52.2013. (Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

Fig. 2. Illustration of the three main components of *Untitled*

Philippe Vergne, played a recording of a rare lecture that Hammons gave in 1994. Hammons himself did not attend the Wattis Institute event. While artists are not often known for their smooth, social graces, it is *not* common for an artist who has done his best to avoid the art world to be so sought after by it. But despite his disinterest in the typical conventions of the art world, David Hammons is not an outsider artist. He is a California Institute of the Arts (Valencia, California) and Otis College of Art and Design (Los Angeles, California) graduate, and a MacArthur Fellow whose work is not only critically acclaimed but also financially lucrative (Schjeldahl 2002).

Unlike most contemporary artists who reach his level of success, Hammons has no traditional gallery representation. Nevertheless, he has had solo exhibitions at some of the most renowned galleries in the world, such as L&M Arts, Mnuchin Gallery, White Cube, ACE Gallery, and Tilton Gallery (Ruseth 2015). A “philosopher-artist,” as Franklin Sirmans called him in 2006, Hammons’s work maintains relationships with surrealism, Dada, and assemblage, as well as identity and class politics (Sirmans 2006). In terms of his material practice, Hammons is known for using an array of detritus in his artworks, including, but not limited to, glass bottles, bottle caps, plastic milk crates, greasy paper bags, chicken bones, taxidermy, found tarps, plastic sheeting, and even Kool-Aid powder (Huberman 2016).

3. THE ARTWORK: *UNTITLED*, ca. 1976

This article focuses on Hammons’s untitled, unbaked mud sculpture donated to MoMA in 2013 (fig. 1). The work is the only one of its kind in a museum collection and, unlike Hammons’s many rock head sculptures that often receive more traditional treatments, it has never been subject to a conservation

intervention. It stands at 29 in. tall and is comprised of three main components: a conical mud body, a circular wooden base covered in a thin sheet of metal, and metal wires with hair and string (fig. 2). Where it meets the base, the mud cone is at its widest, measuring 7 in. in diameter. It gradually narrows to 1½ in. at the top. The base extends approximately 2 in. outward from the cone on all sides. It should be noted that the term “mud” is the most accurate description of the material that Hammons used to make this object. Its exact contents are unknown, as is their source, but it does contain rocks and other inorganic materials, along with organics such as straw and grasses. Literature and treatment methods for both “mud” and “unbaked clay,” however, are often grouped within the same category. Though the authors are aware of the wide range of definitions and frequent misapplication of the term “mud,” we chose it consciously for the aforementioned reasons and will use it exclusively to describe this sculpture. While both materials can be “fragile and may be friable, crumbly, or cracked [...] extremely porous and sensitive to moisture” their compositions can be very different (Rozeik 2009, 70). This article will not delve into the specifics of the different materials’ compositions. It will offer only a summary of selected, relevant conservation treatments used for both mud and unbaked clay. It is interesting to note that while the literature on earthen architecture and mud brick is extensive and much discussed, the literature on treatment of unbaked earth objects is quite limited, especially considering the large number of such objects residing within museum collections.

The metal wires, approximately 0.05 in. in diameter, have been pushed into the mud. The ends either stick out at angles or are looped back through the mud, creating a series of orbit-like halos around the top third of the sculpture. Some segments of the wires are wrapped with colored string and punctuated with tufts of dark, curly human hair. Striations on the surface of the cone follow a spiral pattern, winding up from the base to the top. Following this spiral pattern, black-eyed peas have been pressed into a band that starts at the base and ends at the very tip of the cone. Encircling the top of the cone are remnants of colored rubber bands.

The work was first exhibited in 2015 for MoMA’s exhibition *Take an Object* (fig. 3). Its deteriorated condition was already a concern to the curator, conservators, and registrar, so they had it installed under a custom Plexiglas bonnet. As the work was being deinstalled from the exhibition that a small clump of mud fell from the sculpture and landed on its base. This event, in addition to the work’s condition, led us to question its overall structural stability and basic conservation maintenance plan. So precarious was the piece that the slightest vibration caused the cone to sway, creating a cloud of dust. Moreover, a large crack exposed an interior wooden dowel.

3.1 Condition

While its postexhibition condition included the loss of an additional clump of mud, its general condition remained much the same as before it went on display: it had numerous surface cracks, a 3-in. round partially detached clump of mud exposed the wooden armature, two fallen clumps of mud on the base, approximately 1-cu.-in. bits of unsupported mud dangled from crevices or sat in niches, the mud was detached from the armature, and there were points of weakness in the mud where the metal wires had been pushed through.

As if the condition of the cone were not challenging enough, various organic components added to the work’s complexity. The remaining rubber bands had deteriorated, faded, become brittle, and broken apart, and the clumps of hair were covered in dust. The wooden base was uneven and did not securely support the weight of the sculpture. Numerous black-eyed peas had fallen, leaving lacunae where they had once been embedded in the mud. Moreover, some peas showed signs of past pest infestation. The



Take an Object



Digital Image © 2015 MoMA, N.Y.

This image will display properly on a monitor calibrated to 5500 K, 2.2 gamma when using the embedded working space profile.

Fig. 3. Installation view of Hammons's *Untitled* installed between works by Lee Bontecou and Robert Rauschenberg in *Take an Object* at The Museum of Modern Art, August 22, 2015 to February 28, 2016. IN2334.7. (Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, photograph by John Wronn)



Fig. 4. Detail of peas and other organic materials (Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

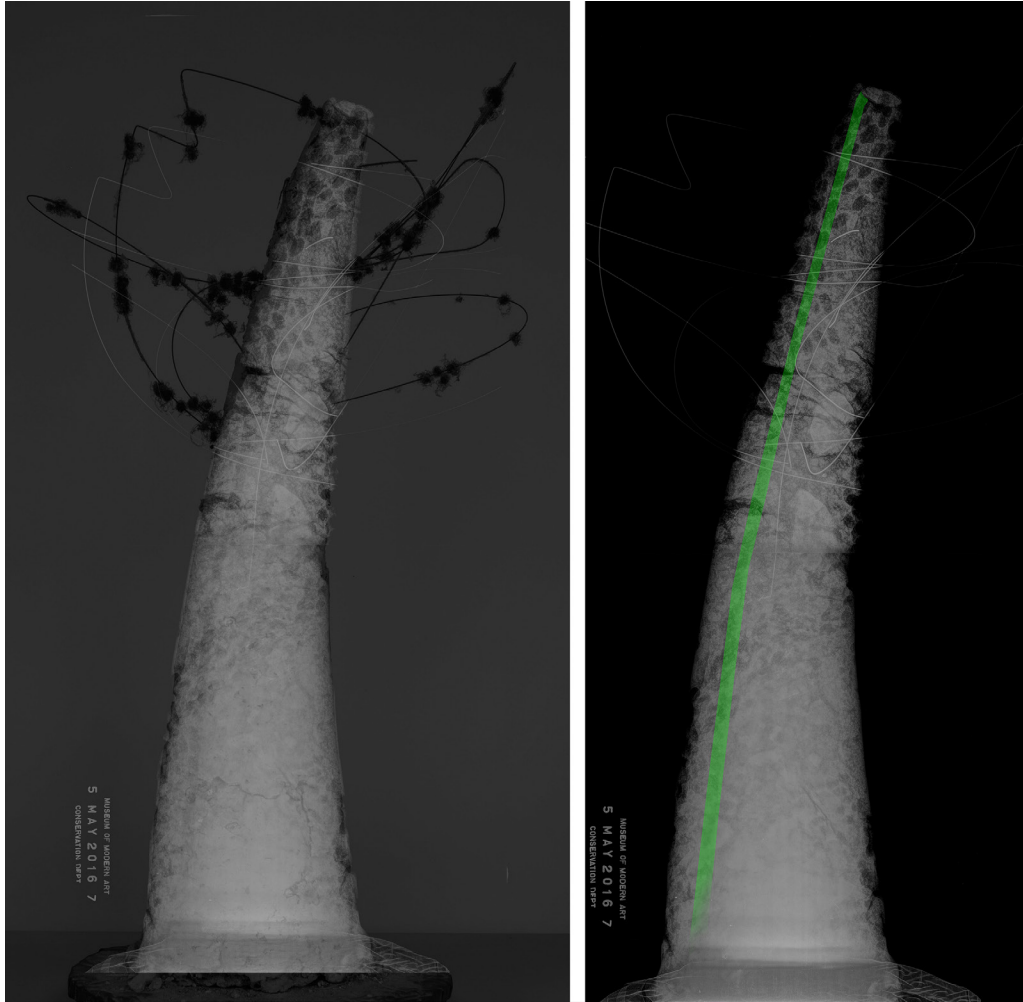


Fig. 5. Digital x-ray image (with visible image superimposed) (Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

Fig. 6. Digital image of annotated x-ray highlighting the presence of the wooden dowel (Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

metal sheet had also lifted from the edges of the wooden base, which was covered in dust, dirt, and cobwebs that had collected over time.

4. METHOD

The artist was not interested in discussing the conservation of this work further; thus, we had no guidance or recommendations. This limited our understanding of the circumstances regarding the production of the work, the artist's state of mind when making it, and his interpretation of the work. But while such information can be useful, working with artists can also have drawbacks. Conservator John Campbell wrote in his 2013 Object Specialty Group Postprints that when Hammons told MoMA conservators that the existing dust was integral to the understanding of his basketball hoop sculpture, *High Falutin'* (1990), they were hard-pressed to find a way to keep the dust undisturbed when designing a shipping crate (Campbell 2015). However, having been told specifically that the dust was essential, they did not have to attempt to decide what was relevant, or debate the appropriate level of cleaning. As difficult as their task was, it did not require guesswork. Given the complexity of this sculpture, its inherent fragility, and our

limited access to the artist, we deployed alternative methods to address such questions: namely, x-ray radiography, literature review, interviews, and the making of a technical facsimile.

4.1 X-ray Radiography

Digital x-ray radiography did not divulge much new information on the inner structure or base of the sculpture. The similar densities of the mud and wooden dowel made it difficult to distinguish one from the other, even with beam filters and postcapture digital manipulations. The images demonstrate that only one wooden dowel is present within a solid mud body. A stone, invisible in visual examinations, was revealed on the very top of the sculpture. Cracks, misaligned segments, and pea divots are also visible; however, much of this can be seen by the naked eye. What remains unclear is how, if at all, the wooden dowel connects to the sculpture's base.

4.2 Literature Review and Case Studies

Researching the literature associated with mud materials gave us a better understanding of the work itself and the ways that similar materials have been treated. Unbaked clay is most commonly found in ethnographic and archaeological contexts. Mud brick, adobe, and rammed-earth building have been studied within architectural and related conservation specialties.

When it comes to unbaked clay objects, however, there is less treatment-based literature. The most well-known unfired clay objects are probably cuneiform tablets. These have a unique conservation history: The British Museum used a firing-based treatment for the cuneiform tablets in their collection from 1948 to the early 2000s and, historically, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston also fired their tablets (Thicket, Odlyha, and Ling 2002; Gänsicke et al. 2003). As this was in no way an appropriate treatment for the object under consideration here, other areas of research were explored.

As mud brick is also found in architecture and archaeological digs, in-the-field treatments seemed a more relevant avenue of research to pursue. In situ, ethyl silicates have been used to consolidate adobe mud brick since 1969, before which they were used for stone consolidation since the 1890s (Chiari 1987; Ferron and Matero 2011). Giacomo Chiari mentioned the use of ethyl silicates for small, unbaked clay sculptures in the Italian excavation of Turkmenistan of 1987 (López-Prat 2012, 671). Since then, commercially available ethyl silicates traditionally used for masonry have been tested more extensively (Grissom et al. 1999; Ferron and Matero 2011). Despite recent studies, further research and experimentation is still necessary. Conservators treating monumental Buddhist clay sculptures in Central Asia noted that the “lack of specific research in the field of preservation of [unbaked] clay sculptures” has meant that techniques “derive from personal experience/knowledge and the information is transferred among professionals” (López-Prat 2012, 671). Their paper in *Rammed Earth Architecture* discussed using poly(butyl methacrylate) (PBMA) dissolved in xylene as a coating strong enough to allow for the sculptures, carved from earthen walls, to be removed from their original locations. Within a greater discussion of the benefits and pitfalls of extraction and in situ techniques, they also mention more conventional in situ treatments using Paraloid B-72 (ethyl methacrylate/methylacrylate copolymer) and Primal AC-33 (acrylic emulsion) (López-Prat 2012, 671). Other consolidants commonly used in the field for unbaked clay, mud, rammed earth, and other similar objects and architectural details include Klucel G (hydroxypropyl cellulose), Methocel A4C (methylcellulose), and Mowital B30H (polyvinyl butyral) (Ventikou 2001; Rozeik 2009, 72; López-Prat 2012, 672; Chrétien 2016).

The most thorough testing on the consolidation and joining of an unbaked mud object in a museum collection was published by Christina Rozeik (2009), who discussed the treatment of a previously

restored, ancient Egyptian unbaked mud statuette in the Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge, United Kingdom). She found that a 1% to 2% solution of Mowital B30H in Industrial Methylated Spirits (IMS) was not only effective for consolidation but caused the least amount of color alteration. Conservators at the Victoria & Albert Museum (London, United Kingdom) treated a Chinese unfired clay portrait with 4% Aquazol 500 [poly(2-ethyl-2-oxazoline)] in a 1:2 solution of water and IMS (Ventikou 2001). Similarly, at Matho, a Buddhist monastery in India, unfired clay ceremonial masks were consolidated using Klucel G and gap-filled with the same hydroxypropyl cellulose adhesive mixed with cellulose powder, chalk, and pigments. The rationale as to why Klucel G was selected was not revealed, but since the monks overseeing the treatment “needed their objects to have a perfect aesthetic” for religious reasons, it is likely that it was selected for its minimal surface alterations (Chrétien 2016, 32).

Understanding how these cultural forms related to Hammons’s mud sculpture helped us place them in context on an art historical level, and highlighted social and cultural implications affecting their immaterial value. For instance, when treating unbaked clay religious objects for Matho monks in India, “the religious use of these objects is inextricably linked to their aesthetic condition, and their religious value can be restored only if their aesthetic integrity is rehabilitated” (Chrétien 2016, 32). While this may not relate to Hammons’s work exactly, it does bring to light the importance of the immaterial value within objects for both spiritual communities such as Buddhist monasteries or Indigenous communities and artists whose works are based on conceptual practices (Chrétien 2016; Hornbeck and Moffett 2016).

Treatments performed on contemporary works such as those within MoMA’s collection also helped to establish possible treatment options. Soil and turf elements of Martin Puryear’s *For Beckworth* (1980), for instance, were treated at MoMA in 2009. Conservators coated the delaminating soil using two pressurized sprayers: one loaded with ethanol, the other loaded with the consolidation solution of 8.5% Aquazol 200 in a 1:1 mixture of deionized water and ethanol. For larger loose segments, a 20% solution of Paraloid B-72 was injected into the cracks using a syringe (Griffith 2009). Like the example with the Buddhist monks, the MoMA treatment was done in collaboration with the artist and staff in his studio. Comparing MoMA’s treatments of Hammons’s *High Falutin’* and *Untitled (Rock Head)* 2005 proved useful for the contextualization of the artist’s practice, but were not particularly relevant in terms of methodology and materials. MoMA’s *Rock Head*, like others in the series, had begun to shed hair; thus, the artist provided an envelope full of hair that he collected from a local barber shop. A crucial element that makes these case studies alike, from the Buddhist monks to Martin Puryear, is that they required intimate collaboration with the artist/makers or users of the objects.

4.3 Interviews

While some artists seek involvement with the conservation process, such as Martin Puryear, others, such as Hammons, sometimes prefer to be excluded. In Hammons’s case, this might speak to the high degree of control that he maintains over his own market, image, and persona, a possible change in his attitude about conservation, or just how he prioritizes his work and time. Fortunately, MoMA trustee and donor AC Hudgins generously offered to ask his good friend a few questions on our behalf.

Through a casual interview (Hudgins asked Hammons questions that we had sent Hudgins via email), we learned things about the object that we otherwise could have only guessed. For instance, we learned that the cone’s shape derives from the traffic cone that was used as a mold; that, at one time, the empty divots indeed had contained peas; and that more of the colorful rubber bands had once encircled it. We also learned that Hammons had unexpectedly brought it over to Hudgins’s home soon after he made it and that, while in Hudgins’s care, the sculpture had been knocked over. Having



Fig. 7. Image with traffic cone (Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

given the work to a close friend, Hammons had never considered that it would enter a museum collection.

While some of these answers yielded helpful information, they also left us with even more questions. When asked, for instance, how aggressively the museum should conserve the piece, Hammons deferred to the conservators. “They are the professionals,” he said. However, he then went on to say that “if they do too much it will not have the spirit.” But how do conservators ascertain the “spirit” of an object without assistance from the artist? If we do nothing and the piece falls apart, how much spirit will then remain? But how far can we go to save the “spirit” without losing it? Preserving the spiritual is, of course, a central concern for conservators whose work focuses on ethnographic art, and it often guides their treatments. Stephanie E. Hornbeck reminds us that conservators may consolidate friable or poorly bound pigments or coatings but would generally not add or retouch areas of loss on tradition-based objects (2009, 59). Given Hammons’s mandate and the slippery distinctions between contemporary art and ethnographic art, we were especially conscientious to negotiate these moral and spiritual concerns.

Past interviews and essays helped fill in more gaps. Because Hammons rarely speaks on the record, many of the quotes that are repeated in articles about him derive from a 1986 interview he did with art historian and curator Kellie Jones for the journal *Real Life* (1986). In these interviews, Hammons’s penchant for language-play is clear. Puns are common practice for Hammons, both in conversation and in his works, where he often chooses titles with cheeky puns that add levity to the often heavy subject

matter. It is no surprise, then, that his love of wordplay would extend into more abstract territory with the word “spirit,” which often comes up when discussing his work. Anthony Huberman, the Director and Chief Curator of CCA Wattis Institute, discusses the spirit in his essay introducing the yearlong series of events titled “David Hammons is on our mind” at the Wattis Institute: “He’s after the pun on spirit—as in the drink, but also as in the presence of something far more abstract.” Something much more than just the materials. “Materials are something one can see, and arguments are something one can understand, and that’s just not what Hammons is after,” said Huberman. He is not interested in things that are easily understood, or even seen. Not even things like the Whitney Biennial—the exhibition most artists spend their lives striving to be included in (Huberman 2016).

In the same vein of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Hammons’s interest in the nature of invisibility has been discussed at length by writer, poet, historian, and theorist Fred Moten. He desires to keep “the invisible invisible, or, at least...unrecognizable” (Moten 2017). This unrecognizable, invisible entity is what he is in search of—he “goes looking for spirits in music, poetry, and dirt” (Huberman 2016).

Hammons gave us his blessing to do what we thought was best. But, then, remaining consistent with both his genius and his persona, he added a pun, a riddle of sorts. If we do too much, it will not have the *spirit*, he said. But what is a *spirit* if not something invisible and unrecognizable?

4.4 Technical Facsimile

While waiting for Hudgins to conduct his interview, we made a technical facsimile to work through the sculpture’s possible construction. Although flawed because we were forced to use different materials, such as commercially purchased clay with fine particles and good bonding properties, this experiment remained informative, specifically concerning possible methods of manufacture. When making a replica, we were not able to recreate the exact type of mud and fillers that Hammons initially used, which made testing consolidation and adhesion problematic. Rolling the slab of clay through a bed of peas caused them to become embedded. As the clay dried and contracted, the peas began springing out. It is likely that the same process occurred on *Untitled*, which could account for the number of peas that were lost. Similarly, some areas between the pea divots delaminated and the replica cracked nearly in half, exposing our wooden dowel two-thirds of the way from the top.

After the experience of making the model and based on Hammons’s practice of using found materials as well as a visual examination of the surface, we assume that he used a found street cone as the mold for the mud that he could have found at the same site. The wooden dowel was likely inserted into the mold after the mud was packed into it and while it was still moist and malleable. Once the mud was dry enough to remove from the mold, we assume that the artist then rolled it through a bed of black-eyed peas. This would have pressed the peas into the surface, creating the spiraling striations. The pressure necessary to roll such a large piece of earth would have effectively embedded the black-eyed peas so that they would then be flush with the surface. The combined method of basically casting mud into the traffic-cone mold and then rolling the conical shape on a surface explains the overlapping, organically shaped borders in the clay and the presence of other organic materials seen fixed to the surface.

5. TREATMENT

Since determining the *spirit* was all but impossible, we used the limitations of the sculpture’s fragile materials to devise a plan. We could not coat the whole thing since it could alter the surface color and

texture. It could also create tide lines or a surface film that could later delaminate. The presence of the peas, wire, hair, rubber band, and colored string also complicated this procedure—we did not want to coat these elements unnecessarily or damage them further. The layers of dust on the surface would have been consolidated to that of the mud, which would have prevented deeper penetration and adhered these particles to the surface, making surface details more difficult to see. We could not use water or other solvents since there was little binder keeping the mud particles together and, since they were not bound to a stable armature, they could easily erode. We could not insert filler into the cracks since the cone was not stable enough to accommodate the added weight and pressure. Readjusting the misaligned sections was also futile since the area surrounding these breaks was so fragile that it could easily crumble if manipulated excessively, and returning powdery crumbles would have been all but impossible.

We could, however, determine the original location for the two largest detached clay clumps with the aid of images taken in 2013 and 2015 for the installation. These pieces were re-adhered using Jade R, the water-soluble, modified vinyl acetate copolymer, at stock concentration. The Paraloid B-72 solution that was used for the Puryear was attempted, but we quickly found that it was not compatible with the dried mud: it pilled immediately and was not absorbed. Unstable areas surrounding the area of loss would shift under even the lightest pressure; thus, the reattachment was performed carefully. Clumps that were being held in place only by gravity were also reattached with Jade R, which had good working properties and dried clear. Thus, inserting adhesive in inconspicuous locations behind the areas was done to limit additional losses. Areas that shifted when lightly touched were treated similarly using a syringe. This step occurred over several days, which gave time for the adhesive to dry and gentle tap testing could confirm whether sufficient adhesion had been achieved.

Once all loose elements were stabilized in their original locations, the wires and hair were gently dusted. Accumulated dust and cobwebs were also removed from the surface of the clay in localized areas with soft brushes and tweezers. This could be done only after the surface was more secure. Although very subtle, this minimal cleaning exposed fingerprints on the surface and enhanced the appearance of the colored string.

The last step of the treatment was to work with a crating company to design and build a storage crate that limited movement (fig. 8). Three guillotine-style braces were built to support the cone just below the metal wires, with one gently rested from above to prevent rocking. The base was cradled by five Ethafoam supports and secured to the frame by two padded two-by-fours. Both conservators and registrars agreed that the crate should allow anyone moving it to see how fragile its contents were; thus, plastic sheeting was wrapped around the plywood frame to allow for easy inspection. Lastly, the work was included on the “no travel list” in MoMA’s TMS inventory system. It is currently one of only four sculptural works at MoMA that cannot be transferred to storage in Queens.

6. DISCUSSION

The main issues that surfaced during this unique treatment were of a technical and theoretical nature. Technically speaking, the fragility and solvency of unbaked mud objects makes their treatments challenging, if not infuriating. In addition, treatments are unfortunately often confined within the archaeological and architectural conservation spheres. While adobe and rammed-earth architecture has been discussed at length, there is no established procedure for working with similar smaller materials within a museum context. Communication between conservators working in the field on such treatments and those in museums is limited to more casual discussion as opposed to published literature, which



Fig. 8. Image of the custom crate made to house *Untitled*, as seen before plastic sheeting was wrapped around it (Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

reduces accessibility. Details regarding relevant treatments performed within institutions are not often disseminated; thus, valuable options can be institutionally confined. The range of treatment methods discussed in subsection 4.2 show that while options are available, they are rarely systematically tested. This may reflect the unique nature of the objects themselves and how difficult it is to create representative facsimiles for experimentation.



Fig. 9. Detail view before treatment (Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York)



Fig. 10. Detail view after treatment (Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

From a more theoretical standpoint, the experience of working with a living artist can be as complex as working with a unique, fragile object. While artists can be a good source of information, understanding their “intentions” can be problematic (Wharton 2016). Artists’ practices are ever evolving; thus, their own understanding of their work and language used to describe it may change over time. Of course, without an artist’s explicit guidance, distinguishing between the materials they used, those that have collected over time, and the natural deterioration of said inherently fragile materials is challenging. While the concept of artistic intention is complex and should be thoroughly explored, the artist’s viewpoint is only one of several that must be considered when making conservation decisions. For example, the perspectives of the owners (MoMA in our case, but Buddhist monks in the case study from India), viewers, and donors contribute to an object’s values and historical position.

Given that Hammons seeks what cannot be understood (something’s *spirit*, almost by definition, cannot be understood) our aim to “define” said entity was doomed from the start. We, however, did not want our concern for “losing the spirit” to result in total avoidance of treatment, because the sculpture would not have survived much longer. If our fear of losing the intangible essence of the sculpture resulted in its loss, its material presence would also be lost—not only to the artist but to the museum, the public, historians, and the donor.

7. CONCLUSION

As contemporary artists such as David Hammons continue to explore materials and abstract concepts, their work’s circulation through conservation labs is inevitable. Increasingly, conservators and curators are developing protocol and surveys to make collaboration with artists and their studios more streamlined and accessible (Beerkens 2012; Cotte, Tse, and Inglis 2016). While this may help in many cases, it is important to remember that artists’ practices, backgrounds, communication methods, comfort levels, and general interest and understanding is as complex, if not even more so, as their objects themselves. From the conservator’s standpoint, and as much as we may fear admitting it, an artist’s active involvement in the conservation process does not guarantee a smoother or more successful treatment. Our story is one of many that conservators around the world experience when dealing with contemporary artists and experimental materials. By sharing our discussion and handling of Hammons’s *Untitled*, we offer, if not a precise treatment method, an example of how complicated objects and unanswerable questions can be approached.

Perhaps Hammons did not speak with us about *Untitled* because specific instructions are easily understood. Only by making us delve into the treatment without his guidance could we come to glimpse what cannot and should not be understood. So, we ask ourselves another unanswerable question: did we “do what’s right?” What we do know is that our treatment was a balancing act. We were able to slow the sculpture’s deterioration process without excessive intervention. When David Hammons instructed us to “do what’s right,” we were not sure if he knew what he was asking. But after exploring the artist, his practice, and this object further, we believe that he knew exactly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank David Hammons for his trust and unassuming wisdom; AC Hudgins for his eagerness to act as the bridge between the museum and the artist; Laura Hoptman for her guidance; and, last but not least, the construction crew at 53 W. 53rd for lending us their traffic cones.

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