

Painting into the Equation: The Vandalism of *How Ya Like Me Now?* and David Hammons's Portrayal of Race

Sam Bisno

In a Tortoiseshell: *In his essay, Sam delves deeply into the implications behind David Hammons's 1988 piece How Ya Like Me Now? At odds with the rest of Hammons's works, which involve raw and compelling depictions of Blackness in America, How Ya Like Me Now? is a painting that portrays Jesse Jackson, a prominent figure in the Civil Rights Movement and lifelong activist for justice for Black Americans, as white. The following excerpt highlights the way that Sam layers **motive** from both his primary and secondary sources to create an exemplary introduction.*

Excerpt

Its incongruity with much of Hammons's *oeuvre* notwithstanding—or perhaps on account of it—*How Ya Like Me Now?* has been the subject of little dedicated criticism. In the companion book to the 1990–1991 survey show *David Hammons: Rousing the Rubble*, Kellie Jones and Tom Finkelppearl (the latter of whom was the curator) ignore *How Ya Like Me Now?* altogether (15–37, 61–89). 25 years passed before the next comprehensive Hammons exhibition (Mnuchin and Rajaratnam 4), and in their essays for *David Hammons: Five Decades* (2016), Robert Storr and Alanna Heiss also neglect the Jackson portrait (7–11, 13). When curators and scholars pay the work any attention at all, they typically only note the rather obvious: *How Ya Like Me Now?* asks its audience how Jackson, who ran for President in 1984 and 1988 (Bruns 87), would have been received by the white American public if he shared their race. For the 2016 retrospective, Jones does provide a brief history of the painting and attempts to contextualize it within Hammons's corpus, but her analysis of its content does not go far beyond her statement that “Hammons' piece posed the question whether race, not platforms, policies or experience, predicted the political outcome” (18). Of course, Hammons said as much himself when the portrait was unveiled: “I think if Jackson had been white, he would have been elected long ago” (Kornheiser).

Given the relatively sparse critical treatment of *How Ya Like Me Now?*, it is perhaps unsurprising that one important detail surrounding the exhibition of the work has gone underexplored by present-day commentators: on the evening of November 29, 1989, in

Washington, D.C., it was destroyed before it could even be installed (Kastor). Jones mentions this fact in her *Five Decades* entry, writing that “*How Ya Like Me Now?* was shown in Boston and New York throughout 1988 without incident. However, the following year in Washington D.C. the object was attacked as it was being installed outdoors as part of Richard J. Powell’s exhibition ‘The Blues Aesthetic: Black Artists and Modernism’ at the Washington Project for the Arts. Since then Hammons exhibits the piece with the sledgehammers that brought it down along with an American flag” (18). But this account, while accurate, fails to capture crucial aspects of the episode, chief among them that the roughly 10 attackers were Black men previously unfamiliar with the work and that the Washington Project for the Arts (WPA) workers putting it up in a public parking lot on Seventh Street were exclusively white (“Portrait of Jesse”).

For contemporary observers, the act of vandalism defined the work, which until then had gained little traction in the press but became a major story overnight. *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post* all ran multiple articles concerning the incident. Coverage came from publications as far afield as the *Albuquerque Journal*, the *Calgary Herald*, and *The Guardian* (Moore; Greenaway; Rowan). Headlines ranged from the flatly factual “Portrait of Jackson as White Is Attacked” (Gamarekian) to the biting “Jackson Portrait Gets Public Veto — With Sledgehammer” (Moore). Moreover, as noted by Jones, the events of November 29 materially altered the visual content of *How Ya Like Me Now?*: the sledgehammers used to pummel the portrait were incorporated into subsequent installations (18). Hammons also preserved the dents they caused in the portrait’s tin backing (Kastor). That both public perception and the painting itself were forcefully shaped by the actions of those wielding the sledgehammers suggests that a robust interpretation of the piece must account more than superficially for the vandalism. This paper will use it as a starting point for analysis. It will attempt to demonstrate that the attack is far more than a sensational anecdote, but rather an integral feature of *How Ya Like Me Now?* and, in turn, a key that unlocks a fuller understanding not just of the work in question but of Hammons’s critique of race in the 1980s as a whole.

Author Commentary

Sam Bisno

When I told AnnMarie Perl, my professor for Supply-side Aesthetics: American Art in the Age of Reagan, that I was interested in exploring racial dynamics in the United States during the 1980s, she immediately recommended David Hammons. I had never heard of the artist, but a quick Google search revealed an extensive and subversive body of work. I was sold. I quickly settled on one of Hammons's most provocative pieces as the focal point for my essay. *How Ya Like Me Now?*, created in 1988, is a massive portrait of famed Black activist and politician Jesse Jackson in whiteface.

While all good scholarly arguments are prompted by gaps in the existing literature, some “motives” arise more naturally than others. I figured that it would be easy enough to find criticism of *How Ya Like Me Now?* given its disturbing and overtly political content: the painting was, after all, the cover illustration for a major recent work on the Black satirical tradition. But as I began to read up, I discovered that almost no critics, curators, or scholars were talking about the piece. It was as if no one quite knew what to make of it. The excerpt above is the extension of the confusion I felt at this inconsistency—a confusion that was only heightened when I learned, through reading newspaper articles covering the installation of *How Ya Like Me Now?* in Washington, D.C. in 1989, just how inflammatory the portrait had been. Indeed, the painting's immediate destruction at the hands of several Black men wielding sledgehammers serves as the point of departure for my analysis. When retrospective critiques of Hammons's corpus had paid *How Ya Like Me Now?* any attention, they uniformly dismissed its violent reception as a trivial detail. But, as I write in the excerpt, “for contemporary observers, the act of vandalism defined the work.” These mounting tensions feed directly into my thesis—that *How Ya Like Me Now?* cannot be understood without also understanding its demolition. Of course, since it is an art paper, my motive is partially visual: Hammons chose to incorporate the perpetrating sledgehammers in future exhibitions of the work.

I'll be honest: this was one of the first times I've written an academic essay without feeling like I was shoehorning my motive in after the fact. It's probably no coincidence, then, that the paper was a joy to write. One of my biggest takeaways from the experience is that the best scholarship is driven by genuine curiosity.

Editor Commentary

Emily Wu

Motive is a complex concept that all writers grapple with. It is, from my experience as a Writing Center Fellow, perhaps the most difficult lexicon term to get a grasp of. At first glance, its definition (provided by Gordon Harvey) is rather direct: “an incongruity, puzzle, or surprise in the primary sources or data; and/or holes, limitations, or disagreements in the secondary literature”. In reality, it is a slippery thing to pin down. What is an ‘incongruity’? A ‘puzzle’? How can one identify the limitations of a scholarly conversation? Uncovering a strong **motive** is a process that can take hours and hours of dedicated research and analysis, but it is an essential part of any piece of writing. **Motive** plays an important role in establishing the significance of an author’s contributions to an existing body of scholarly work in addition to convincing an audience that reading the paper is worthwhile. This excerpt, taken from Sam’s introduction, is exceptional not only because it demonstrates understanding of various aspects of **motive** but also because it is able to layer those aspects in a way that is compelling, concise, and complete.

The excerpt begins with an interesting observation: that Hammons’s *How Ya Like Me Now?* departs from his usual depictions of Blackness by portraying a Black American political activist, Jesse Jackson, as white. This small incongruity—a departure from what is typical—in the primary source is what motivates the topic of the paper and also serves as a stepping stone for the following sentences. In the latter half of the first paragraph, Sam provides a brief overview of existing scholarly works on *How Ya Like Me Now?*, or the lack thereof. By clearly identifying this gap in the scholarly conversation, he establishes *why* it is worthwhile to further analyze Hammons’s art as well as the originality of his own research.

The **motive**, however, does not stop there. In the following two paragraphs, Sam points out more puzzling details of the artwork’s history that deserve closer examination. He notes the (possibly unexpected) roles that race played in the work’s vandalism; it is interesting, perhaps, that it was Black men who damaged a piece that was apparently meant to question the unfairness that Black politicians faced. Again, it is small but puzzling observations like these that can be powerful motivators for academic writing. Here, Sam successfully establishes the significance that race played in public perception of Hammons’s art, an idea that he explores further in his paper.

What makes this introduction so exceptional is the author's ability to seamlessly layer the various aspects of **motive** with appropriate context to paint a complete and digestible picture of the issue at hand. In just a few masterful paragraphs, the audience is not only given a rundown of Hammons's *How Ya Like Me Now?* and its tumultuous history but also an understanding of *why* Sam is writing about what he is, and what he has to contribute to the scholarly conversation.

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Bios

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