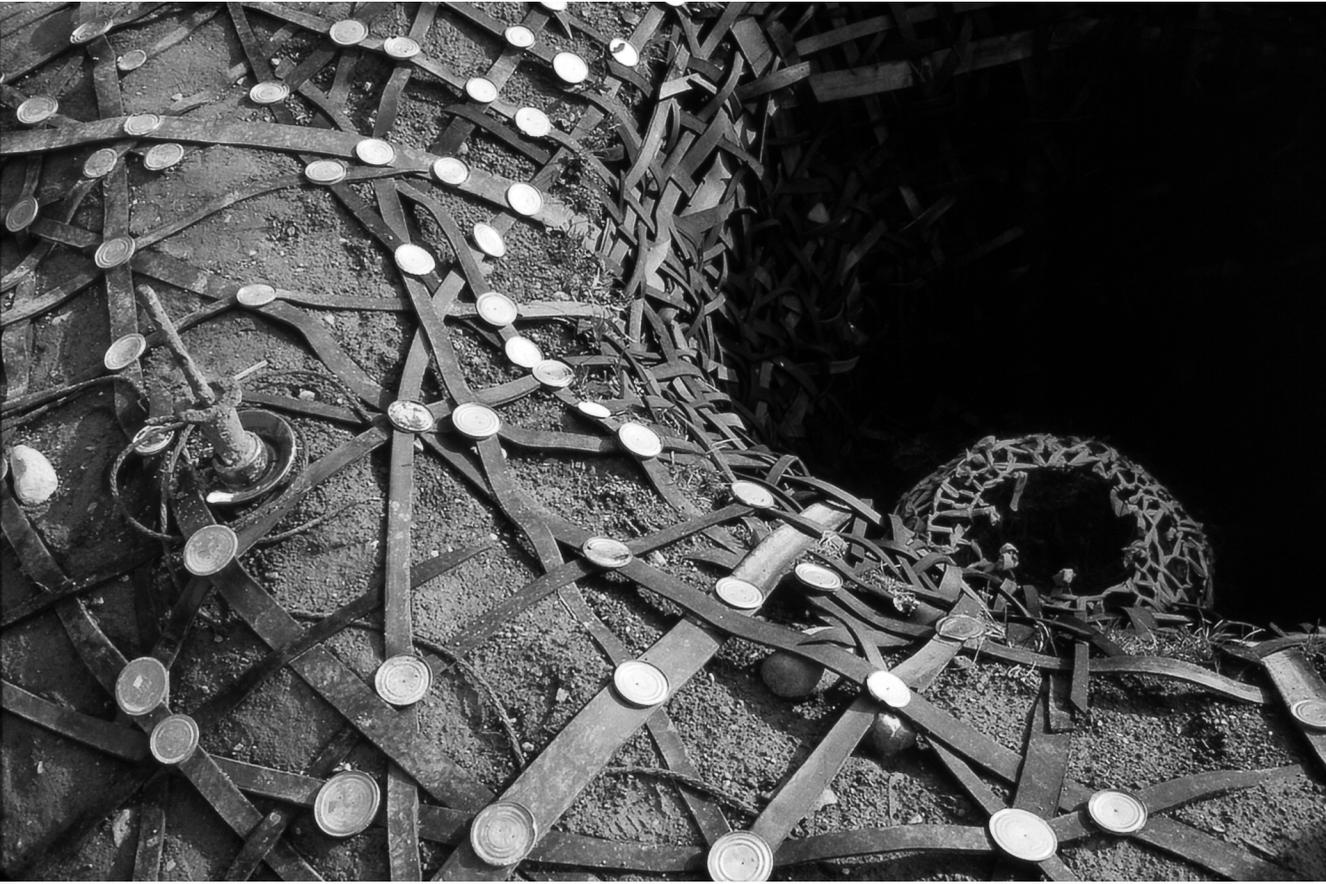


**BEING IN
THE WORLD**

**DIANA
NAWI**



1 *Praise I*, 1991. Barbed wire, cotton cloth, leather straps, tin can tops, and ceramic electric insulators, dimensions variable



2 *Praise II*, 1991. Wood, tin sheets, pipes, cotton, glass, tin cans, and bedsprings, dimensions variable

Nari Ward was 28 when he attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine in the summer of 1991. At the time, he had only recently begun to explore working in three dimensions and he decided that he would experiment beyond drawing, which had up until that point been his primary focus. He spent the majority of his summer engaged in two related projects, both of which were set on the outdoor grounds of the residency and employed found objects from the area. One of the works involved digging a large hole between two electrical poles in a field. Ward lined the hole with a woven mesh of leather straps and belts from defunct water mills; tin can lids sat at the intersections of the gridded straps. At the bottom of the hole, Ward built a mound that contained electrical insulators he had uncovered while digging. The other work was a large circle of broken glass strewn with tin cans. This form sat between four cross-like posts suspended from which was a large, rusty corrugated pipe, floating like a prostrate figure. Ward titled the resulting works, which fell somewhere between the categories of sculpture, installation, and land art, *Praise I* and *Praise II* (both 1991, figs. 1–2). An early engagement with the real world as a site for making, Ward's approach demonstrated not only an impressive ambition, but also a creative fearlessness and open-minded approach to space, material, and form in response to the environment in which he found himself.

Ward's determination that an installation could be a hole, that land art could bear the decorative addition of found materials, and that a conceptually based sculpture could contain religious symbolism is a testament to the multiplicity of influences and singular approach that he employs. There is an effortless sophistication to these works and a deft extension of art historical precedents within them, as well as a defiant position, reliant on chance and faith through materials, site, and process. Contained within this project are seminal ideas for the artist: responding to a site, allowing labor and process to direct a work, willing imagined meanings onto found objects, imbuing chance encounters with narrative, working and reworking and overworking, and using an unwieldy sense of scale that relates to the body and the built environment.

At the center of Ward's practice are two fundamental and married components: objects and labor. These two entry points into Ward's work are among the most common aspects writers and curators have honed in on. His bibliography, in catalogues and press, has struck a largely uncontested consensus that focuses on these dimensions. In these accounts, the artist's voice is given primacy and the analysis rests on his own explications of his thinking and processes, as well as his identity and biography. These are often informative and richly evocative approaches—best exemplified in the catalogue essays that have accompanied his exhibitions—but they have come to reflect a certain discourse that has calcified around Ward's work despite its ever-exploratory and experimental character.

This catalogue attempts to build on these conversations while also situating Ward's work within a more pointed analytical framework and a broader art historical ground. In what ways is his work indeed fixed, bound to the specificity of history, material, maker, and process, and in what ways is it an expression of a constellation of these dimensions? And, to take cues from Erica Moiah James's and Naomi Beckwith's texts in this volume, how can we untangle its mobility and multivalence and understand the myriad ways to be and be interpreted in the world that it embodies? This catalogue is intended to add to a conversation on an artist around whom the conversation is well established, but whose tangents, lineages, and paths forward remain open and uncharted.

Sun Splashed brings together work from 1990 to the present, a survey of Ward's production to date. While *Praise I* and *Praise II* demonstrate that an exhibition or analysis of his art making would not be well served by an evolutionary or trajectory-based format—Ward's earliest projects evince the ambition and ideas that remain with him today—an account of his artistic history serves to unpack the themes that have consistently run through his diverse and expansive oeuvre. This essay traces Ward's exhibition history chronologically, looking in depth at particular projects and the contexts in which they were received. Through this, it

illuminates guiding subjects and methodologies for the artist, and situates his practice within a contemporary art history in which he is a significant figure.

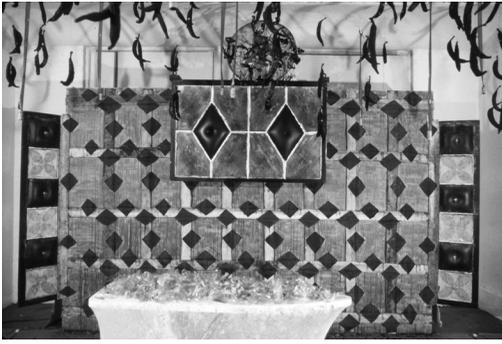
To establish a basis for understanding Ward's works, a discussion of his use of everyday objects, which the artist happens upon, scavenges for, or pursues, is critical.¹ The presence of these "real" things imbues his projects with a tangible and visceral relationship to the natural and material world, of which Ward feels he, and by extension, his artistic practice, is squarely a part. Ward's practice is deeply bound to material culture and the ways in which it evidences specific histories, economies, and social phenomena. The traces of use and past lives that haunt discarded objects allow him to locate stories within them, and to use both their form and these inherent narratives as generative points for his creative process. This use of objects and method of assemblage ties Ward's practice to a diversity of artistic influences and modes of cultural production, in particular to folk and traditional practices of African diaspora communities of the Southern United States and of his native Jamaica, to those of important African American artists on the West Coast in the 1960s, and to a history of the early 20th-century European avant-garde.

Ward attributes the beginnings of this mode of working in part to his experience of living in Harlem beginning in the late 1980s, when large parts of this neighborhood were ravaged by social and economic blight, as were many inner-city neighborhoods across the country.² Ward's practice of using refuse and the detritus of the streets, artifacts of the everyday realities of duress, emerged from a need to respond in a real way to this landscape of trauma, as did his predecessors John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, and John Riddle in the post-Watts riots Los Angeles of the mid-1960s.³ This impulse is also tied to the artist's upbringing until the age of 12 in Saint Andrew, Jamaica, a parish just north of Kingston, where a scarcity of resources means that objects are reused and repurposed and little goes to waste.⁴ This mode of living with things is commonplace throughout the so-called developing or third world and other economically uneven locales.⁵ Lastly, these objects are quite commonplace—shoes, shoelaces, clothing, fire hoses, strollers, wheels, tires, shopping carts, and televisions—and thus often bear a relationship to the viewer's own experience. In this way, they serve as an entry point for the viewer's engagement with the work, which is critical to the artist's thinking.

Ward's ways of working are typically incredibly labor-intensive and comprise processes and gestures—burning, wrapping, painting, tarring, accumulating, ironing, weaving, binding, and stacking, among others—that have come to constitute a signature vocabulary of sorts. As Ralph Lemon discusses in his text in this catalogue, "The Lightness of Ghosts" (p. 40), labor directs Ward intellectually and physically, and implores his haptic response. The sometimes massive scale of Ward's projects, whether achieved through making or accumulating, conveys this, as do the heavily worked surfaces of many of his objects, which have encrusted patinas of touch and thick palimpsests of marks.

Ward has cited an apocryphal conversation with David Hammons, a touchstone, fellow artist, and friend, in which he said, "Nari, they love to see you sweat."⁶ His implication, that an interest in Ward's labor is tied to a cultural need for exertion on the part of the black male body, would seem, while somewhat cynical, accurate given the ways in which this aspect of Ward's process has dominated discourse around him and because he is commonly represented "at work" in images that circulate of him.⁷ While Hammons's assessment points to a complex and problematic set of expectations that Ward may confront in his reception given his identity, Ward's approach to making as a sort of macho, hands-on undertaking is integral to both his process and his final works. There is a ritualistic aspect to the artist's obsessive making that also suggests a relationship to the body and the unconscious mind as generative sites.

Attuned to concerns permeating certain sectors of the art world in the early 1990s, Ward's presentation for his MFA exhibition at Brooklyn College partly consisted of a large work based on the form of an altar, *Marketplace Altar* (1992, fig. 3), which was made from an ironing



3 *Marketplace Altar*, 1992. Fire hose, ironing board with feathers, cheese cloth, rubber, glass, scissors, fly paper, plantains, and plastic, dimensions variable

board and other materials surrounded by hanging fly paper and blackened plantains, appearing like small, shriveled phalluses. Home altars, which are an important aspect of religious practices around the world, are a form that has been explored by many artists as a vehicle for invoking specific cultural traditions and identities, perhaps most famously by Amalia Mesa-Bains. Altars have also influenced the vocabularies of a number of contemporary artists exploring cultural hybridity, such as Pepón Osorio, who was active in the New York art scene when Ward was in school. For Ward, the altar was an outgrowth of his own spiritual beliefs and religious upbringing as well as a means of exploring his conflicted feelings toward organized religion.

His use of everyday objects to express his ideas was in part a strategy influenced by his teacher and mentor, the painter William T. Williams. Williams had emphasized the ways in which art is a vehicle to connect the artist and the viewer, a means to bring a person into an artist's world. This connection can be forged in myriad ways, but for Ward it has often meant exposing the personal and the spiritual, while using resonant objects as a means to embody his relationship to the world. Ward's use of scale also speaks of this desire. His works are often massive, engulfing, and immersive; they invite the viewer into them, sometimes literally, and always necessitate that we move around them, a choreographed circling by which we try to see the whole and its many parts. In working at this scale, Ward not only surprises and impresses, but also finds a mode through which he can invite viewers into his world. Rather than represent the world through drawing, as he had done in the past, sculpture, installation, and the use of found objects allowed him to re-create the world anew.

Despite a strong reception for his MFA work, Ward came to feel that the altar was too closed and too specific a cultural form, and that along with materials like plantains, these signifiers could quickly relegate him to the status of "other." He was cautious to avoid being pigeonholed as a strictly Jamaican or Caribbean artist and felt an acute self-awareness with regard to gestures or materials that could be perceived as self-exoticizing. Spirituality has remained a key theme for the artist into the present day, but it has taken on broader meanings and allowed him to bring rich possibilities of otherworldliness and moments of transcendence into the secular spaces of contemporary art.

Ward graduated from Brooklyn College in 1992 in the midst of what is now largely considered a critical turning point in the art world. This moment in New York was characterized by a market downturn, the continuing AIDS crisis, and the early seeds of globalization. Among other responses in the art world, it gave rise to a set of critical questions about identity, multiculturalism, and politics in art making and culminated in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, the so-called identity politics biennial, establishing new paradigms of inclusion in mainstream art institutions and discourse—the reverberations of which are still keenly felt.⁸ Ward was both exposed to and a participant in this moment as a young artist—granted access through his education and networks of peers and predecessors—and his work reflects the logic, critical positions, and reception of this period. He is not tethered to this history, but he is an artist who definitively comes out of it.



4 *Carpet Angel*, 1992. Carpet, plastic bags, plastic bottles, carpet runner, springs, wood screws, and rope, 120 x 138 x 36 inches. Installation view: *Carpet Angel: Nari Ward*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, May 7–August 15, 1993

After graduation, Ward was selected for a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, a program started by Williams. This opportunity afforded him the ability to stay in the city and create work and he produced a number of important projects during this period, both through the residency and outside of it. In the summer of 1992 he had a solo presentation at the New Museum of Contemporary Art (now the New Museum) in its former home on Broadway. The project on view, *Carpet Angel* (1992, fig. 4), consists of a large winglike form made from carpeting, plastic bags, bottles, and other garbage suspended over another pile of objects, almost rising from it. This was Ward's first major museum exhibition, and in her text accompanying the show, Mimi Young lays out central touchstones of the discourse that still surround his practice.⁹ She also discusses, at length, the work's relationship to Jamaica, rooting her analysis of Ward's use of found objects within this cultural context. Featured alongside his peers Andrea Zittel and Kazumi Tanaka, Ward seemed to embody a new



5 *Amazing Grace*, 1993. Baby strollers, fire hose, and audio component, dimensions variable. Installation view: *NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star*, New Museum, New York, February 13–May 26, 2013. Private collection

generation of cosmopolitan New York–based artists who exemplified a local art scene while bringing to their work identities and cultural sensibilities from elsewhere.

The best-known and most commonly cited work in Ward’s oeuvre, *Amazing Grace*, was created in 1993 and presented shortly after his New Museum debut. *Amazing Grace* is an immersive installation created with 365 abandoned baby strollers that the artist collected while in residence at the Studio Museum, fire hoses, and a soundtrack of the eponymous gospel song, “Amazing Grace.” Ward first exhibited this piece in November and December of 1993 in a firehouse on 141st Street in Harlem—a building that would later become his studio and home and that he still occupies today. The artist recalls in detail the process, creation, and exhibition of this work in his conversation with Philippe Vergne in these pages in “It’s OK to Disagree: A Conversation with Nari Ward” (p. 62). Operating with the same large-scale ambition as the earlier Skowhegan projects, the work begins with the pivot point of 20th-century avant-garde sculpture, the found object—in this case baby strollers—and then expands on and exploits it to such a degree that it becomes an immersive installation. In many ways, this work pointed the way forward for Ward’s practice, tied closely to urban sites and found objects, to personal memory and collective history, to ideas of trauma and redemption, and to installation and experience.

The work was well received when it was first presented, garnering attention in the press. In the *New York Times*, Roberta Smith cited the project in a review of an unrelated simultaneous exhibition, calling it “euphoric and elegiac, celebratory and grim.”¹⁰ Just two weeks later, the paper ran another story about the project in its neighborhood section.¹¹ *Amazing Grace* was also recently included in the New Museum’s 2013 exhibition *NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star* (fig. 5), which focused on works made or exhibited in New York in 1993; it again received favorable press.¹²

What is in some ways the most striking thing to emerge from Vergne and Ward’s discussion of *Amazing Grace* more than 20 years after it was created is the way it is interpreted and the ways in which this interpretation circulates. Most commonly, the elliptically shaped work is read as the hull of a ship, oftentimes related to the Atlantic slave trade, but also to issues of immigration, or to more general metaphors suggested by travel at sea. The abandoned baby strollers and gospel song seem to reinforce an interpretation tied to ideas of loss and trauma conjured by the Middle Passage or by perilous journeys at sea for migrants. For Ward, however, the vulval shape was in fact an outgrowth of thinking about the womb, a safe and originary place by which to redeem the strollers and their symbolism. Yet, the two readings—the artist’s “intent” and the other understandings of his work—coexist, both in the piece and in the world, allowing the viewer’s experiences and knowledge to define the project’s interpretation. It has come to be characteristic of Ward’s practice that a work emerges from a very particular set of inspirations and connections and evolves into something that has multiple ways of being and being read in the world, part of the multivalence to which James alludes in her essay “Sun Splashed” (p. 28).

Ward is very interested in how viewers, both art audiences and the general public, interact with and make meaning from his works; he actively encourages and fosters a multifaceted interpretative response. His work functions as a proposition to make meaning: a set of forms and gestures have been constructed by the artist according to his own logic, but remain open enough to ensure the primacy and sanctity of the viewer’s reaction. Ward has expressed that while he often takes on “heavy” subjects in his work—loss, injustice, trauma, race, and class—it is critical to him that works address and contain these ideas in such a way as to allow viewers room to engage them on their own terms. Ward’s consistent use of both white cube gallery spaces and public settings further attests to his desire to engage people who will bring a wide spectrum of perspectives to the work.

LIABILITY RELEASE

I UNDERSTAND THAT JANINE ANTONI,
MARCEL ODENBACH, AND NARI WARD,
ASSUME NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR
ANYONE ENTERING THE THREE
LEGGED RACE EXHIBITION
(SEPTEMBER 15 TO OCTOBER 28, 1996)

! AM VIEWING THE EXHIBITION AT MY
OWN RISK.

6 Liability release for *Three Legged Race*, 1996

The artist has often expressed his preference for non-art audiences, both because of the ways in which this further opens up the possible readings and reactions his work elicits and because issues of accessibility are important to him. This desire is well evidenced by a project Ward undertook with his friends Janine Antoni and Marcel Odenbach in 1996. The trio staged the exhibition *Three Legged Race* (fig. 6) in the firehouse where Ward previously exhibited *Amazing Grace*. The choice of the artists to show not downtown, but rather way uptown, in Harlem, was critical. Harlem was formative for Ward, a place he sought out as a young man, immersing himself in the diversity of black culture present in the storied neighborhood. He responded to this place in his work, and continues to do so, and his desire to create an exhibition with his friends there stemmed in part from questions related to who an art audience could be and who it should be. In his review in the *New York Times*, Holland Cotter made note of this impulse, describing it as “an example of the way art ought to go and is increasingly going: out of galleries and museums and into the world.”¹³

For *Three Legged Race*, Ward presented two works, *Hunger Cradle* (1996, fig. 7) and *Vertical Hold* (1996, fig. 8).¹⁴ *Hunger Cradle* is an immersive installation that operates on a similar scale as *Amazing Grace*. It consists of the debris that Ward had found in and around the firehouse, ranging in size from hand tools to furniture to car parts, which he strung up in a thick, cocoon-like web made from rope, string, and tubing. Viewers could walk into this work, moving through and under it. *Vertical Hold*, on the other hand, is simultaneously more formally restrained and, in some ways, more aggressive than this larger work. Made from old glass bottles Ward had found while in residence at a Shaker community in Sabbathday Lake, Maine, *Vertical Hold* is a kind of barricade made from these objects, which were elegantly woven together with string.¹⁵ Ward positioned this curtain—or “quilt,” as he has referred to it—in a doorway, blocking entry to another room while still allowing the viewer to see into it.¹⁶

Vertical Hold is in direct conversation with African and Southern black cultural traditions in the United States, namely the form of the bottle tree and, as Ward alluded to, quilting. Ward was inspired by Robert Farris Thompson’s discussion of the bottle tree in his book *Flash of*

the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy (1983), in which he traces this traditional, spiritual form from its roots in the Congo to its expression in the Caribbean and the American South. A bottle tree can take multiple physical forms and a number of contemporary artists, including Gary Simmons and Wangechi Mutu, among others, have invoked this tradition, regarded as a protective entity to ward off evil spirits. Ward’s reference to the bottle tree suggests a dialogue with regional production and a self-awareness of art and cultural history. It attests to his interest in giving new life to discarded objects not only as a means of connecting with the quotidian experiences of his viewers, but also as a self-consciously adopted methodology emerging from black diasporic traditions in the American South and his native Caribbean.

Earlier in the same year that he presented this self-initiated, artist-run project, Ward also had his first major gallery exhibition at Jeffrey Deitch’s space on Grand Street in downtown New York. Deitch and Ward first worked together after they were introduced by Antoni and Deitch selected him for inclusion in the 1993 Venice Biennale’s Aperto section.



7 *Hunger Cradle*, 1996. Yarn, rope, and found materials, dimensions variable

downtown New York. Deitch and Ward first worked together after they were introduced by Antoni and Deitch selected him for inclusion in the 1993 Venice Biennale’s Aperto section.



8 *Vertical Hold*, 1996. Yarn and bottles, dimensions variable. The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of the Hudgins Family in memory of J. I. Nelson and Sarita Nelson-Nunnelee, 2013

They would go on to work together for more than a decade. This first exhibition, *Happy Smilers*, consisted of a massive installation, *Happy Smilers: Duty Free Shopping* (1996, pp. 81–83) that took over the gallery’s main space. (It is being restaged for the first time in *Sun Splashed*.) James analyzes this piece in depth in her text, discussing the varied reads it engenders and disparate sites it invokes, and her discussion of the role of memory and cultural context within this work is crucial to our understanding of it. *Happy Smilers* also suggests Ward at his best; given free range to take over an entire space, his installation engulfed viewers and reflects the type of ambitious, spectacular (and often un-saleable) work for which Deitch’s gallery was known.

Deitch’s decision to show Ward is significant, marking a shift in the contours of the art world that he helped to bring about in the mid-1990s. Ward’s exhibition was the third of the gallery’s inaugural year, which also included shows with Vanessa Beecroft, Teresita Fernández, Mariko Mori, Jocelyn Taylor, and Chen Zhen—a diversity of artists working across a breadth of mediums. This roster exemplifies the ways in which Deitch Projects attempted to bring a global perspective to New York’s downtown art world and to destabilize the boundaries of center and periphery. For Ward, a lesson of this period was that it was possible to remain on the margin, but if the work was spectacular enough, loud enough, the center could be convinced to shift its gaze to the periphery.

The immersive installation of *Happy Smilers* brought the physical spaces of Ward’s Harlem neighborhood to lower Manhattan, but other related work from this period evinces one of the most critical aspects of Ward’s practice: the street as site. While he has worked in contexts and environments around the world, the urban street, particularly that of New York, would seem to be Ward’s home base. It is the place from which his materials come, its dynamism and mutability a visual inspiration, and its lived reality as a civic space central to his thinking. Like Hammons before him, whose works wryly employed the city, Ward’s best-known materialism is expressly tied to the urban milieu.

The year 1996 also marked the beginning of Ward’s collaboration with Ralph Lemon that would last through the decade, a mutually inspiring relationship that emboldened both artists’ practices, in the studio and on the stage, and which Lemon recalls in his text. Lemon approached Ward to make artworks that would serve as sets and props for the *Geography* trilogy (1997–2004), a suite of ambitious dances that Lemon had been commissioned to create. During this collaboration, Ward revisited and expanded forms he had been working with in his studio, bottle curtains and mattress springs among them. The other sculptural form Ward had been working with that found its way into Lemon’s work was a transfigured shopping cart (fig. 9). This “prop” emerged directly from Ward’s work *Savior* (1996, p. 119).

Savior and the related later work *Crusader* (2005, p. 120) take as their basis everyday shopping carts that Ward embellished and entangled with domestic items like chairs, mirrors, and chandeliers alongside more humble materials like plastic bags and carpet. The encrusted and amassed carts appear like regal versions of the carts that people use to collect cans or in which homeless people store and move their belongings. The titles of both pieces draw an association to Christianity and spirituality, but their humble origins and impoverished, decorative aesthetic deny the glorification one might associate with such terms. Both works exist as stand-alone sculptures, and both were also used in performative interventions on the street in New York. These performances, in which Ward primarily pushed the carts down the street like a strange, itinerant Messiah, were documented and exist independently as video works.

The interventions suggested by Ward’s work with shopping carts point to a consistent thread that has run through his practice since the mid-1990s, evidenced by his witty outfitting of a public phone booth with small hand drums, as in *Beat Box* (2000, fig. 10), and recent projects in which he has played the role of a street vendor with a traditional Jamaican cart (fig. 11). These works transform the day-to-day figures and objects that comprise the urban landscape. Like Hammons’s iconic *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983), William Pope.L’s *Thunderbird Immolation*



9 Ralph Lemon, *Tree* (part two of *Geography*, 1997–2004), performed at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2000. Pictured: Ralph Lemon



10 *Beat Box*, 2000. New York City payphone stand, drum, and fire extinguisher, approximately 69 x 14 ½ x 14 inches. Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg



11 *Sugar Hill Smiles*, 2014. Digital color video, 3 min., 53. sec. Produced for *If You Build It, No Longer Empty*, New York, June 25–August 10, 2014. Courtesy No Longer Empty, New York

(1978), or Francis Alÿs’s *Turista* (1994), Ward addresses the counter-publics that reside on the margins of a city’s social structures and economies—the street vendors, the homeless, the disenfranchised—with a trenchant humor and disarming strangeness. Ward’s use of his own body to enact the two shopping cart pieces further presses their politics and points to questions of the visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility of the black male body on the street.¹⁷

Another critical aspect of Ward’s practice, which he honed at this time, is his ability to work in site-specific, community-based modes. This impulse was present early on, but truly took shape in the mid-to-late 1990s, simultaneous to the rise of this trend more broadly in the art world at the behest of institutions and organizations who were compelled by various factors toward increased “community engagement.”¹⁸ While Ward’s practice is not commonly situated within a relational or social practice discourse, it is clear that this mode of working is an important component for him and one that shapes the work he does both in and outside the studio. In her text in this catalogue (p. 54), Beckwith uses the precisely descriptive term “elsewhere oriented” to suggest the ways in which Ward’s work is created and received in particular contexts, but seems to allow the viewer a perspective beyond that, pulling us to other places. Hinting at notions of mobility, nomadism, and diaspora, Beckwith offers an interesting perspective on how Ward engages and resists site-specificity, offering instead that it is in “site-responsiveness” that his work finds meaning.

Beginning with a 1994 exhibition at Le Magasin, Centre National d’Art Contemporain in Grenoble, France, Ward pushed his practice from one comfortably situated within his New York milieu to one that could respond to the specificities of other contexts. In Grenoble, Ward used material he found there—hundreds of cardboard boxes, oil barrels, and tire treads wrapped into a huge wheel—to create an environment (fig. 12). This project, *Idle/Drift*, revisited processes, materials, and forms familiar in Ward’s previous works, but because these materials were drawn from Grenoble and manipulated and worked there, the project was deeply tied to the local context. In many ways, Ward’s method of working—his engagement with materials and place—makes him aptly suited to meet the desire for site-specificity and local sensitivity that continues to drive institutional agendas.

Ward has not only been called on to make work for institutional contexts abroad, but has also increasingly been asked to collaborate, in some capacity, with the local community in these new contexts, be it a neighborhood, an art school, or a city. This is best exemplified in two projects undertaken in 2000, one at Museu de Arte Moderna in Salvador, the capital city of Bahia, Brazil, and one at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, which was curated by Vergne. His challenge in these instances, which remains central in these types of projects, is how to approach a community with humility and sensitivity, meeting them on their own terms. And, how to create a relationship that is meaningful to both parties.¹⁹

In Brazil, along with other international contemporary artists, he was asked to work with youths from the local community to collectively produce artwork. This meant a direct response to objects in the children’s daily lives—sugarcane, coffee vending pushcarts, and piggy banks. These elements, each of which speaks to the local economy of Salvador, became points of entry in which Ward and the children, enrolled in a dance program, could collaborate and make meaning together. This project took many forms, including dance and movement workshops, group discussions, museum visits, and ultimately an exhibition reflecting the collaboration.

Likewise, Ward’s project at the Walker, *Rites-of-Way*, began with his own research into local history, but was deeply indebted to the interactions he had with a number of different communities in Minneapolis, including teens enrolled in a theater program, the museum’s teen council, Laotian immigrants, a writers group, and former residents of a largely African American neighborhood that had been razed (fig. 13). Ward spent much of his residency at the Walker creating the physical artwork that would comprise this outdoor sculptural installation and engaging with communities through workshops in which participants exchanged



Nari Ward, *Idle/Drift*, 1994.
Tires, barrels, springs, food cartons, bedsprings, carbon, grease, metal fencing.
Grenoble, France.

12 *Idle/Drift* (1994), published in *BOMB* magazine 52
(Summer 1995)

stories and spoke openly about their lives, memories, and aspirations. Each participant was asked to donate to Ward's project an object that symbolized or spoke of home, which was incorporated in a large outdoor installation of house-like structures set on stilts, a reference to different architectural forms that Ward had researched that were native to the area. These objects—such as a hammer, a certificate of achievement, a teapot, a driver's manual, and a washboard—became part of the final work. They were first photographed, then packaged and sent to what had become nonexistent addresses in the old neighborhood. Having been returned to sender, the packages were then set into the raised structures alongside the photographs, visible to viewers from below as they walked through the installation.

Finding root in the symbolism and intimacy of objects in both projects, Ward was able to collaborate with individuals in varied locales and find shared meaning across experiences. Just as when he works close to home, in foreign contexts Ward is deeply interested in the marginalized or seemingly invisible populations that make up a city and in the issues that lie just below a city's surface—the often unspoken economic and social phenomena that dictate day-to-day realities for many people.

In the early 2000s, Ward also undertook two projects in the Caribbean, one for the Havana Biennial and one at the National Gallery of Jamaica in Kingston. He was concurrently working on projects in Italy, Switzerland, Germany, the United Arab Emirates, Taiwan, and Japan. His practice remained rooted in his Harlem studio, but he had become the “global” artist of this “global” era, on demand to participate in international exhibitions, and to translate his practice across local contexts around the world. In an increasingly diversified and diffuse art world of biennials, triennials, and festivals, Ward's career expanded accordingly. In 2001, he began a relationship with Galleria Continua, an Italian gallery that has spaces in Les Moulins, in the Parisian countryside, Beijing, and Havana, in addition to its original space in San Gimignano. Early exemplars of the impulse for international representation and multiple, international sites for their gallery spaces, Continua's relationship



13 *Rites-of-Way*, 2000. Ice houses, metal scaffolding, acrylic beads, photo images, and donated objects. Installation view: Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

with Ward speaks to the expanded contours not only of the institutionalized art world, but also of the market.

Simultaneous to this globalization of Ward's work in the early 2000s were a series of three exhibitions in which he was included that establish three critical lenses through which we can understand his work: Valerie Cassel Oliver's *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970* at the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston (2005), Franklin Sirmans's *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith* at the Menil Collection, Houston (co-organized by MoMA PS1, 2008), and Beckwith's *30 Seconds Off an Inch* at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2009–10).²⁰ This constellation of exhibitions suggests the diversity of ways in which we might understand the positioning of Ward's practice, both within and outside of a discourse oriented around the work of black artists. Each establishes a conversation that grows out of the black diasporic experience, articulating a contemporary art history on which Ward's practice finds firm ground.

Cassel Oliver's exhibition situated Ward's work alongside his peers and predecessors to explore the critical importance of conceptual strategies among black artists and the multi-valent forms such works have taken since the 1970s. Asserting that through its challenge to modernism, Conceptual art "has transformed the visual arts landscape, shifting the paradigm outward from an imperialistic and exclusionary center to embrace divergent and diverse artistic expressions, giving legitimacy to what was once utterly invisible," Cassel Oliver makes a salient case for how the strategies and underlying logic of conceptual art proved a vital analog and outlet for the production of work by black artists.²¹ The "Black Conceptualism" she describes, which brings together conceptual "strategies within the visual lexicon of a black aesthetic" would seem an apt description of Ward's work, which he self-consciously sites at the intersections of his myriad influences, chief among them his formal education in a history of the Western avant-garde and his experience of the diversity of black diasporic culture in the Caribbean and the United States.²² His work, like that of his peers, channels and reflects these multiple modes of making, thought, and tradition.

Three years later, Sirmans's *NeoHooDoo* cast a wider net, but one that nonetheless remained tied to a conceptualization of the black diaspora alongside the varied cultural influences that comprise the defining hybridity of the Americas. Sirmans frames this cultural context and suggests the ways in which it gives rise to the presence of spirituality within contemporary artistic practices emerging from or with an affinity to this part of the world. An often taboo subject in the art world, spirituality and otherworldliness remain important subjects and influences for many artists and this exhibition gave critical voice, precedent, and context to this impulse within Ward's practice. Included in this exhibition was a piece from a still ongoing series, *LiquorSoul*, a group of works made from out-of-use neon liquor store signs he found in New York, usually still installed on building facades. Interested in the multiple ways liquor functions—in celebration, ritual, and mourning, as well as its deleterious impact on families and communities—Ward decorates these large architectural signs with shoe tips—a signature material symbolizing human presence—as well as with shoelaces and artificial flowers and illuminates the "s-o-u-l" contained within the neon lettering. The final artwork feels like a fetishistic beacon, the product of a symbiosis of the urban street, communal ritual, and personal affect.

Beckwith's 2009–10 exhibition at the Studio Museum, *30 Seconds Off an Inch*, imparts perhaps the most relevant set of criteria through which to discuss Ward's work. Her exhibition brought together artists who primarily work outside or in defiance of traditional, studio-based approaches to mediums and art making, artists who "are outdoors collecting materials, walking along city streets and observing vernacular culture—finding inspiration in the makeshift qualities of everyday life and translating that casual imprecision into art."²³ Her description would seem to perfectly encapsulate Ward's practice, which is married to this "real world" mode of working. Beckwith's larger argument for the exhibition is that works of art should not be read through the artist, suggesting that we should resist "superimposing social analysis extracted from an artist's biography over a work of art."²⁴ Rather, we should ask what meaning is embedded in the work itself, through its materials, making, and form.

Ward's work in this show, *Blue Rung* (2009), is made from a ladder, a metal gate, shoe tips, and a bug zapper, among other things. *Blue Rung* resonates with Beckwith's ideas and her assertion that while its presence is sculptural, its logic is that of collage and we may read and understand the work through its aesthetics, presence, and the significations of its component parts. As much as Ward's work is generated from personal memory or experience, the objects themselves speak on their own terms. Ward's openness to interpretative responses to his work would suggest his desire to allow the artwork to bear the conversation, and for its form to speak of and back to the world from which it emerged.

While evading a directly biographical orientation or activist approach, Ward has taken on race and the politics of racial identity in the United States in a number of projects that now seem to have renewed pertinence. Through language, objects, and interventions, Ward imbues his works with the complexities and nuances of this subject matter. Tied closely to his investigations of power, the justice system, and citizenship, Ward avidly turned his attention to this subject between 2010 and 2012, a moment in New York that was marked by the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street movement and the height of the New York Police Department's stop-and-frisk policy, in which pedestrians could be stopped, questioned, and frisked for contraband without suspicion of a crime having been committed—a policy that is no longer in effect and which was shown to unfairly target black and Latino men.

Ward's production of this period emerged from a desire at this moment to question how art objects can assume an activist stance that challenges power structures. It culminated in the exhibition *Liberty and Orders* at Lehmann Maupin in 2012. This exhibition marked Ward's second with Lehmann Maupin, a blue-chip New York-based gallery with which he began working in 2009. Again Ward's career reflects broader trends in the art world, in this case the increasing number of black and African American artists who were joining the ranks of major American galleries, again suggesting a shift in the desires of the market. An installation featuring a large police watchtower, *T. P. Reign Bow* (2012), and a wall-based text piece that inscribed the opening line of the Constitution—"We the people"—in shoelaces, dominated this exhibition. It was Ward's most overtly political and included direct gestures to citizen's rights (and implicit abuses).

Homeland Sweet Homeland (2012, pp. 86–87) is a large wall-based mixed media work that appears from a distance to be a tapestry, its decorative surface and ornate script referencing a kind of patriotic domestic kitsch. On closer inspection, we can see the surface is made from such disparate materials as barbed wire, chains, spoons, feathers, and thread, destabilizing the initial appearance of the work. The text on the heraldic shield that sits at the center of this piece is based on the Miranda warning. This critical language within the US legal context felt sharply relevant in 2012, but in fact, Ward has been engaged with this concept for many years. Also known as the Miranda rights, the set of statements that detail one's claims to an attorney, constitutional rights, and freedom from illegal searches, have appeared on the back of Ward's business card since 1999 (fig. 14).²⁵ Ward's insertion of these points into the flows of commerce and professionalism, particularly in the art world, is a discreet but trenchant message about the force of power structures beyond one's control and the tools at our disposal to combat or simply try to survive these structures. Echoing projects by artists like Adrian Piper or Cildo Meireles, who inserted ideology and criticality into circuits of social and consumer exchange in discreet but pointed ways, Ward sought to infuse the quotidian exchanges of art business with a pointed gesture toward the daily realities of men and women of color.

Also on view in *Sun Splashed* is a series of works that were produced during this same recent period that relate to Jamaica. While he has gone back to visit his native country regularly, Ward's relationship to the island nation is marked by the broad distance created by migration and time. Ward's own conception of his place of birth is tinged by nostalgia as well as imagination; his work evidences that it is as much an idea as a place—not unlike the version of the country that plays out in the international imagination. The majority of the works on view in *Sun Splashed* that relate to this exploration were produced for his 2011 exhibition *Sub Mirage*

Notice to Police Officers and Prosecutors

- I do not wish to answer any questions without speaking to my attorney.
- I wish to speak to my attorney now.
- If you need my consent for any search or for any other procedure, I will not give it until I have spoken to my attorney.
- I will not waive any of my constitutional rights.

14 Nari Ward's business card

Lignum curated by Denise Markonish at MASS MoCA. Each includes elements tied overtly to a conception of Jamaica—mango seeds, for example—but wittily turns these materials on their heads, creating gestures ripe with memory and humor. Gone is the anxiety Ward felt in the early 1990s about readings of his work being limited to notions of cultural identity. As a mature artist he is able to self-consciously employ and subvert weighted, clichéd, or othering gestures—typically with a wry and playful wit.

Jacuzzi Bed (2013, p. 133) exemplifies this tendency. A set of wooden headboards arranged around heat lamps and fans, the work allows viewers, when standing close to it, to feel a strange approximation of a warm Caribbean breeze. Our experience of the work seems to invite us into a pathos-laden version of island life, an original object that becomes a strange imitation of the real world, invoking a sense of nostalgic displacement that emerges from the artist's own like sentiment. At this time, Ward was also finalizing the process of becoming a US citizen and this experience informed the exhibition as well as a number of other pieces. His works on this subject attempt to speak beyond the personal, critiquing and questioning issues of identity and nationalism. Notions of belonging, exclusion, and home are central to Ward's practice, increasingly so, and they speak to displacement, strategies of mobility, and the careful navigation of structures of power—all of which finds grounding in Ward's experiences and in the daily lives of the many publics who will see his work.

In this place, Miami—the so-called gateway to the Americas—and in this moment, 2015—so beset by questions of immigration and nationalism, and so terrorized by racially motivated violence and lethal abuses of power—Ward's works from this recent period feel all the more relevant. They point to systemic contradictions in the social fabric of this nation, and offer moments of transcendence, humanity, and empowerment. We need to be reminded of the cruelty of life and social structures, and we need to be transported from them, given otherworldly moments of redemption. Ward offers both.

Ward is everywhere present in his work and his objects are, often, beyond present—huge, immersive, radiating, dirty, deep—but there is always room for someone else within them. The viewer easily finds him or herself in the work because Ward has carefully assured a space for us through his open-ended propositions. His practice is inherently generous because it opens the frame of the artwork, and by extension the world, to the possibility of many interpretations and answers, and crucially, to continued questions.

Tempering this generosity, what gives Ward's work its trenchant edge are the questions he keeps asking, the skepticism that infuses his art making and his relationship to authoritarian and power structures. The phrase “so-called” recurs in Ward's speech and has done so consistently in published interviews and quotidian conversation for many years; it is also the name he gave to his most recent exhibition at the SCAD Museum of Art. An expression used in common parlance, but also pointedly by scholars and activists like Aimé Césaire and Malcolm X, “so-called” speaks to a deep and abiding mistrust of the status quo. To use this phrase to qualify something suggests an inherent understanding and rejection of the constructed nature of language, of naming things, of classifying them, of explaining them. So-called? By whom? And why? It is a polite but pointed refusal of assumed knowledge and suggests the interrogative position at the core of all Ward undertakes.

Ultimately, Ward's practice is informed by these two positions and engenders objects and installations that are dissonant and discordant. Objects that have funk and grit; that are awkward and graceful; that vibrate with tactility and give off a smell, a feeling, and a pulse. Objects that are heavy, but also light, ascendant, and aspiring. He affords objects new lives, allowing them to symbolize and to speak, reviving their spirits and transforming them into vessels for thinking about histories, economies, protestations, mourning, and redemption. These ideas and sentiments, conveyed through material and labor, infuse Ward's work with an intense ethic of being present. His practice is not about structuring a divide between the world and the artist; his art is resolutely present and, in turn, asks us to be as well.

I wish to thank the many people whose insights helped to guide this exhibition and essay: Naomi Beckwith, Layla Bermeo, Amy Cosier, Adler Guerrier, Elliott Hundley, Ryan Inouye, Naima J. Keith, Thomas J. Lax, Denise Markonish, Mylinh Trieu Nguyen, Kara Pickman, and Mari Robles. I also extend my heartfelt gratitude to my curatorial colleagues at the museum, who are exceptional sounding boards, supporters, and people: Jennifer Inacio, René Morales, María Elena Ortiz, and especially Tobias Ostrander. I reserve my deepest thanks for Nari Ward; it has been a consummate pleasure to work with him to realize this project and I am grateful for the depth, generosity, and sincerity he brings to his work and his relationships.

Notes

- 1 The term “found object,” while applicable, would seem to fall short of describing the ways in which Ward approaches material. It is productive to think instead of the term “sought objects,” as suggested by Naomi Beckwith by way of Rashid Johnson, whose practice likewise incorporates readymade objects for their significations and histories. Beckwith, telephone conversation with the author, spring 2015.
- 2 Ann Landi, “Poetic Justice,” *ARTnews* (January 2013): 82–83.
- 3 For a crucial discussion of this history, see Kellie Jones, *Now Dig This! Art & Black Los Angeles 1960–1980* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles; New York: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2011).
- 4 This is an idea the artist has returned to often when speaking about his work, and most recently explored the topic in an interview with Courtney Willis Blair. “In the Studio: Nari Ward, Part III,” by Courtney Willis Blair, *Forbes.com*, March 27, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/courtneywillisblair/2015/03/27/in-the-studio-nari-ward-part-iii/>.
- 5 One critical conceptualization related to this mode of living and the artistic, political, and social perspective it can give rise to is embodied in a term emerging from a Mexican American and Chicano context: *rasquache*. Well defined in scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto’s essay “*Rasquachismo*: A Chicano Sensibility,” the term relates to an “underdog perspective—a view from *los de abajo*. An attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability yet mindful of stance and style.” Ybarra-Frausto goes on to talk about the material implications of this state: “Limited resources means mending, re-fixing and reusing everything. Things are not thrown away but saved and recycled, often in a different context. . . . This constant Making do, the grit and obstinacy of survival played out against a relish for surface display and flash creates a florid milieu of admixtures and recombinations.” Although tied to a cultural context far from Ward’s, the artist’s use of found objects would seem to be well considered under this rubric. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “*Rasquachismo*: A Chicano Sensibility,” in *Chicano Aesthetics: Rasquachismo*, exh. cat. (Phoenix: MARS, Movimiento Artístico del Río Salado, 1989), 5–8, <http://icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/THEARCHIVE/FullRecord/tabid/88/doc/845510/language/en-US/Default.aspx>.
- 6 “Nari Ward with Phong Bui,” *Brooklyn Rail*, May 3, 2012, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2012/05/art/nari-ward-with-phong-bui>. Ward also ties this to his own biography, stating that his working-class origins instilled in him a relationship to and respect for the idea of hard work.
- 7 This reading would seem to be reinforced by the ways in which Ward was often depicted

in exhibition catalogues and on his gallery’s website at this time—working. A striking number of images of the artist himself, typically in action, appear in representations of his practice, including in early catalogues such as the Kröller-Müller Museum’s *Heart of Darkness* (1994), on the website of his former gallery, Deitch Projects, and even in his most recent publication created with LSU College of Art & Design (2015, forthcoming).

- 8 See Massimiliano Gioni, Gary Carrion-Murayari, Jenny Moore, and Margot Norton, *NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star*, exh. cat. (New York: New Museum, 2013).
- 9 Mimi Young, “Nari Ward, New Work Gallery, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, May 7–August 15, 1993,” exh. brochure (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993), 3.
- 10 In her review of an exhibition at Exit Art/The First World, *Poverty Pop: The Esthetics of Necessity*, Roberta Smith criticizes the exhibition and directs readers to installations by Nancy Rubins and to Ward. Roberta Smith, “Gallery View: Examining Culture through Its Castoffs,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/11/28/arts/gallery-view-examining-culture-through-its-castoffs.html>.
- 11 Nina Reyes, “Neighborhood Report: Harlem, Finding Beauty in Babyless Strollers,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/12/12/nyregion/neighborhood-report-harlem-finding-beauty-in-babyless-strollers.html>.
- 12 Holland Cotter, “A Time of Danger and Pain, Two Long Decades Ago,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/15/arts/design/nyc-1993-exhibition-at-new-museum.html?_r=0; Kimberly Chou, “Reclaiming a Moment of Grace,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323596204578243913182814872>.
- 13 Holland Cotter, “3 Legged Race,” *New York Times*, September 27, 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/09/27/arts/art-in-review-532584.html>.
- 14 In his text for this catalogue (p. 40), Ralph Lemon recalls coming to see this exhibition after seeing Ward’s work in the 1995 Whitney Biennial, and the ways in which the experience fed into their future collaboration.
- 15 The artist recalled that his residency here was somewhat difficult initially, given the Shaker ethos of not throwing things away and that garbage and detritus usually formed the inspiration for his work. After some consternation, he was eventually directed to an out-of-use dump for the village where the only thing that had not biodegraded were empty glass bottles. Walker Art Center, “Talking Dance: Ralph Lemon and Nari Ward,” YouTube video,

from a discussion filmed on September 28, 2000, posted by Walker Art Center, April 15, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pP1QMOjSek0>.

- 16 Subsequent to its display in this context in 1993, Ward reworked this piece and it now is in the form of a closed circular curtain. It is included in this exhibition, on loan from the Museum of Modern Art, New York, as such (p. 125).
- 17 My thinking on this subject owes a debt to Huey Copeland's discussion of it in an essay on Adler Guerrier and his analysis continues to ring sharply true in contexts across the United States. Huey Copeland, "Sinuous Coordination: On the Photography of Adler Guerrier," in *Adler Guerrier: Formulating a Plot* (Miami: Pérez Art Museum Miami, 2014), 42–49.
- 18 For a critical analysis of this history, see Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
- 19 Panel discussion with Scott Carter, :mentalkLINIK, and Nari Ward, moderated by Paul Laster, SCAD Museum of Art, February 17, 2015.
- 20 *NeoHooDoo* traveled to Miami Art Museum in 2009.
- 21 Valerie Cassel Oliver, "Through the Conceptual Lens: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of Blackness," in *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970* (Houston: Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, 2005), 18.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 23 Naomi Beckwith, "Reused, Repurposed and Remixed: The Object Need Not Represent," in *30 Seconds Off an Inch*, ed. Naomi Beckwith (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2009), 8.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 25 Ward's brother is a lawyer, and when he was employed by Legal Aid, he had these rights printed on the back of his business card. Ward's circulation of these statements in this form on his own business card is inspired by this.