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Schöneberger Ufer 65 | 10785 Berlin
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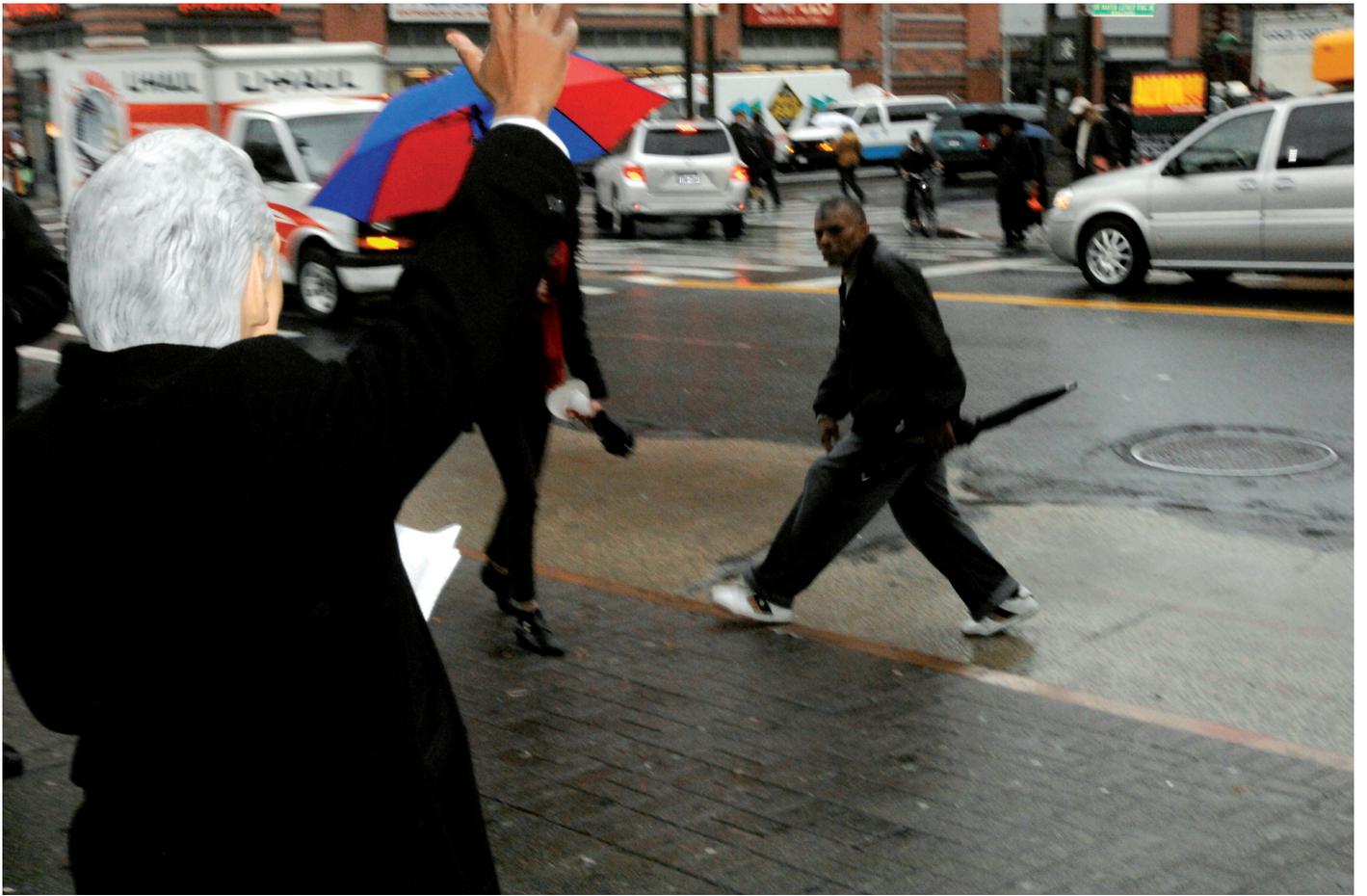
Firstenberg, Lauri. "Hit Me, Take Me, Wear Me, Fake Me." Figuratively Brochure, New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2004.

Hit Me, Take Me, Wear Me, Fake Me

Lauri Firstenberg

Dave McKenzie has engaged in an ongoing weekly site-specific performance called *We Shall Overcome* (2004). Inspired by a New York Times article written by Alan Feuer entitled "Mr. Clinton, Your Harlem Neighbors Need to See You More Often," the artist has literalized the Harlem community's suspicions about the former President's glaring absence from his purported new hub, an office at 55 West 125th Street. The article recalls Clinton's promise, "I want to make sure I'm a good neighbor in Harlem." However, employees of local spots like M&G Soul Food Diner, Slice of Harlem, the Lenox Lounge, H&M, Old Navy, and the Apollo Theatre are reported to have seen no sign of Clinton. In close proximity to this site, McKenzie takes the community's contention as a key tenet in his artistic activity during a residency at The Studio Museum in Harlem.





Wearing a Clinton-caricature mask, McKenzie hits the street, strolling along with plasticized wavy white coiffure, bulbous nose and large grin, greeting passersby to make good on Clinton's original vow. A masked McKenzie is recognized as a Clinton impersonator or misrecognized as "that President"—Carter or Nixon. Somehow, in this guise, these public characters are collapsible or interchangeable, all perhaps subject to vulgar imitation. The video documenting the artist's jaunts through Harlem records the multitude of responses this activity elicits—from laughter to hostility—as McKenzie is embraced or berated.

This brazen caricature performance is a subject-position that McKenzie frequently occupies. He inserts himself into scenarios that play out chronic cultural stereotypes in no uncertain terms. Inhabiting the position of a rehearsed, reoccurring, produced, and reproduced type is at the heart of McKenzie's practice; he takes his own pared down self-image through the ringer of repetition, misrepresentation, mistranslation, and degradation. This network of self-identity experimentation is most glaringly animated in McKenzie's performance entitled *Self-Portrait Piñata* (2002) for the Queens Museum of Art. For this piece, McKenzie commissioned a piñata in his likeness. At the opening, he recorded museum-goers taking delight in swinging a bat to his head. His remains hang from the museum's rafters, battered and assaulted—a pop-cultural simulation of racial violence referencing America's history of lynching and genocide. This absurd, playful attempt at gesturing to atrocious brutality attributed to American race-related mob violence is intensely sadistic. The viewer becomes acutely aware of what it must be like to witness racial violence, automatically inhabiting the position of the apathetic, yet self-consciously uncomfortable spectator, akin to those individuals who find themselves on Fox news for videotaping a crime rather than calling 911.

PREVIOUS PAGES:

**WE SHALL OVERCOME, 2004
YEAR LONG PERFORMANCE WHILE IN RESIDENCE AT
THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM
WITH NTSC COLOR VIDEO WITH SOUND (5:47)
DIMENSIONS VARIABLE**



In his new video *Watch the Sky* (2004), McKenzie appropriates footage from the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and superimposes his own exaggerated patent features over the Little Bill float based on Bill Cosby's popular cartoon character. Looming over Manhattan's Madison Avenue, McKenzie's self-projection as superhero is investigated through this surrogate self-portrait. How is McKenzie engaging with trajectory of contemporary artists' interventions into the logic of the stereotype? Does McKenzie's intervention merely signal an inversion of the language of the stereotype? This operation does indeed occur in his work titled *Inside Out Basketball* (2002). Herein, McKenzie performs a simple gesture of dissecting, reversing, and re-suturing the two halves of a basketball into a sculptural diptych. These objects, literally turned inside out, take on a charged corporal signification at once, insistently visualizing stereotype.

What does it mean to produce a vague self-portrait as piñata, bobble head, action figure or parade float replete with jeans, Adidas and thick, dark rimmed bifocals—the artist's signature attire? What is at stake when one, who is not Britney or Beyoncé, can conceive of oneself as “collectable?” Can this level of identification with pop-cultural representation or with objecthood be critical at such a late date? Is this work a contemporary nod to Fannon, yet again? How can self-fetishization sit within the larger contemporary practice? Does McKenzie's perpetual participation in this logic of mass production and consumption of identity in commercial terms distance, sanitize, eradicate, and neutralize the motivation of mainstream marketplace puppeteers?

In *Portrait as a Ghost* (2004), McKenzie's emblematic style is relocated in the form of a crude miniature doll. This denim, trainer-sporting specter with white sheet is Casper as Everyman, like Ellison's *Invisible Man* or Genet's apparition. McKenzie conflates, with ease, theoretical and popular preoccupations to negotiate context—a definitely American context—where problems of race and representation cannot be easily expelled from contemporary art discourse and will continue to be rearticulated on both political and personal levels again and again.

PREVIOUS PAGE:

**PORTRAIT AS A GHOST, 2004
CLAY AND ACRYLIC PAINT
2.5" X 2" X 2"**