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David Hartt in conversation with Thelma Golden and Thomas J. Lax

The exhibition David Hartt: Stray Light takes a distinctive look at the Chicago headquarters of the Johnson Publishing Company—a paradigm of an American black-owned business, a purveyor of black taste and home to Ebony and Jet magazines. David Hartt (b. 1967), a Montreal-born, Chicago-based conceptual artist and 2012 recipient of a USA Fellowship, began the project shortly before Johnson Publishing sold the iconic eleven-story South Michigan Avenue building in 2010. Hartt captures the building—which remained virtually unchanged since its 1971 design by architect John Moutoussamy (1922– 1995) and interior designer Arthur Elrod (1926–1974)— through photographs, video and sculptures that convey a unique sense of both intimacy and detachment.

Stray Light was originally organized by Michael Darling at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. A monograph published by Columbia College accompanies the exhibition and includes contributions by Darling, Hartt and art historian Darby English. Hartt sat down with Director and Chief Curator Thelma Golden and Assistant Curator Thomas J. Lax to discuss the project's arrival at The Studio Museum in Harlem.

THELMA GOLDEN: In looking at any new work it is always important for me to go back to the beginning. So can you just say what made you become an artist?

DAVID HARTT: Oh wow. (laughs)

TG: What moment, what scene, what idea? I'm not looking for a chronologically exact answer, but what was the spark of the moment that made you an artist?

DH: I have to say, my mother is a pretty advanced amateur photographer. She took me in the darkroom when I was around eight years old, and it was just the most magical experience. Ever since then, I have always been deeply interested in photography. Whether I was thinking about it as art or not is debatable, but I was definitely deeply compelled to explore that tool as a mode of expression. It is something I did throughout high school, through amateur camera clubs.

TG: This opens up so many things. Tell me what your mother took pictures of?

DH: Well, I come from a multiracial family. My parents are white, Jewish educators and I have eight brothers and sisters, all of whom, except for my youngest brother, are adopted from around the world. I have a brother from Vietnam, a sister from Haiti, another sister from Bangladesh. I am mixed-race and so are a few of my brothers and sisters. Some of us are Jewish—my birth mother was Jewish, and one of my brothers is, as well. So my mother used photography as a mode of capturing this incredibly diverse family.

TG: So she was taking pictures of you all?

DH: Yes. Our whole house was decorated with the prints that she and I made. One night a week we would convert the downstairs bathroom into a darkroom.

THOMAS J. LAX: I'll start with another kind of beginning— a look at some of the projects that led up to Stray Light. In the Belvedere project (2009), you focused on the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Michigan, a free-market think-tank. In Reference area at The Bartholomew County Public Library, Columbus, Indiana (2008), you captured scenes from that city, Columbus, Indiana, a city that is home to the largest collection of modernist architecture in the Midwest outside Chicago. Your work with The Greening of Detroit(2008) looks at sites that promote sustainability and environmentally friendly growth. In each, you capture mundane and everyday moments whose actions— despite the specificity of their sites—could have taken place almost anywhere. Each of these different sites is politically and aesthetically different, but at the same time there are some through lines. Each speaks to a flash point in an ongoing history of modernism or ideological thinking in the Midwest. How do you approach an individual project, and how do you organize these very different sites as you look back at your body of work?

DH: What I am looking for are ideologically differentiated sites, different expressions of community, as arrayed within the American experiment. One of the things that excites me and interests me is the difference between the ideological potential of a site and how the space actually defines itself—that gap between one's experience of the space and one's knowledge of the activities that actually go on there. The work that I am doing currently, post–Stray Light, is starting to take me abroad. I think the work I have done in the United States has created a methodology of how I approach and interrogate different sites and explore their ideological potentials.

TJL: Can you talk to us about Elizabeth Catlett's The Black Woman Speaks (1970), featured on the cover of Elizabeth Alexander's book The Black Interior (2003)? I know the work and the book are both reference points for the project. Catlett's sculpture was made just a year before the Johnson Publishing building opened, and it also rhymes with the ideology of a black aesthetic of that time.

DH: I came to the sculpture and The Black Interior after I had already started on the project. But they helped me contextualize what I had done and better understand some of the possibilities for interpreting, extending, maybe even prioritizing, certain things that I found there. I loved the image of The Black Woman Speaks, and recognized immediately how it was an extension of the visual language that I found within the environment of Johnson Publishing. The Johnsons have an incredible collection not only of African-American art, but also of African art. I wanted to acknowledge the Catlett work as an extension of those aesthetics and reintegrate it into my visual vocabulary. So that sculpture is not the only thing that I am quoting. It is actually consistent with some of the other elements that
I found within the institution. Something that I didn't anticipate going in was how the environment became an expression of femininity. But once I immersed myself in the environment and had time to distill what I found there, I realized how strong and emphatic that was in my subjective reordering of what I found.

TJL: What was it specifically? Can you talk in sensual terms about questions of texture, touch and color? How did you come to foreground Eunice Johnson—John H. Johnson's wife, the founder-director of the Ebony Fashion Fair, and an executive at the company—and her sensibility instead of the narrative of Mr. Johnson's influence on the space?

DH: I think there are explicit and implicit points. So explicitly, in my conversation with [Eunice Johnson's daughter and current Chairman of the company] Linda [Johnson Rice], she told me about the color of her mother's office: ivory. The color palette throughout the rest of the space is shades of black and brown. Linda told me her mother was trying to deal with the full spectrum of possibility in terms of being African-American, and how that expressed itself through the color palette of the environment and reinforced it. She said that her mother felt ivory was an expression of femininity.

I thought that it was really interesting how different colors can be attributed with specific characteristics and values. And I loved how it lined up with some of the more implicit references. There's of course the art collection itself. In Award Room (2011), you see the awards room as it frames the hallway, where there are two pictures hanging. One of them is a gift from Jimmy Carter, a watercolor, I believe, of the White House, and the second one is an oil painting, a beautiful rendering of an African-American woman. I believe the title is actually Beauty. Then it is framed by this incredibly sensuous curved window.

TJL: Your photographs could be used as a device for a different understanding of what a black aesthetic might be today. The project exhibits both a reverence and apprehension about the terms of a black aesthetic, but, ironically, that personal ambivalence begins to articulate another shared black sensibility—a contemporary set of mixed emotions about the ways race and identity are correlated with aesthetics and artistic production. We know the critiques of a historic black aesthetic—its presumed masculinism, nationalism and heterosexism— but at the same time I think many of us still yearn for a supple enough reading of art and culture that can take questions of race and black collective identity into account. In what ways do you think the project might unintentionally channel what a black aesthetic might mean today, especially when seen in Harlem, at the Studio Museum—sites that are invested in redefining the meaning of authenticity?

DH: I think that my own relationship to participating within a black aesthetic was more antagonistic. It was something that I firmly rejected. You used the word "authenticity." I didn't feel as though I had a right to participate because it wasn't my own experience. So I was looking at it; I felt very much on the outside. [The curator] Hamza Walker is a good friend of mine. One of the things that he helped me get over was my inability to participate. And one of the things he made clear to me was just how generous that opportunity really was. And that all I had to do was take part. The technical meaning of "straylight" describes light in an optical system that was not intended in the design. For me, it also reflects an itinerant approach whereupon my methodology acts as a stray light within a system, a way of recognizing a different possible reading or a different possible outcome. So as opposed to having to conform, which is the way that I was thinking about it initially, instead it is about through the act of participation this aesthetic becomes expanded. Once I understood that as a possibility, I think I became liberated, if you will, to see where it took me. I have to say that part of what attracted me to the subject to begin with was asking, how do I acculturate myself in this? If I am already being thought of as part of it, then how do I get up to speed? (laughs)

TG: There was space for you in the conversation.

DH: Yes. And not only that, but [artist] Kerry [James Marshall] and Darby both expressed that it was almost necessary to have an outsider come in and do this kind of analysis. But through exploring that metaphor of stray light, there is also a necessity for a different reading, a different outcome, a different sensibility.