

Black Visibility and Rhythmic Literary Richness in Drum Listens to Heart: Part III



By Paulina Félix Cunillé

Sound and writing as an artistic medium can provide many possibilities for imagination. In *Drum Listens to Heart: Part III* NIC Kay and Consuelo Tupper Hernández (CCA MFA 2021) turned this imagination into an engaged percussion from a political dimension through disruptive sound and rhythmic literary presence.

As soon as the visitor entered, they could experience a political percussive component through both Hammons' and NIC Kay's installations, which were the loudest in the gallery. Hammons' *Gong* (video, n.d.) and *Basketball Installation* (1995) converse with NIC Kay's commissioned installation in regards to Black links with education and culture links. *Deep down inside, deep deep inside, or Table thumping with Uncle Djembe* (2022) in contrast with Hammons' remnants of the bouncing basketball on the walls and the clashing sound of a construction site in his video, presents an invisible presence through subtle vibrations on the wall. These are synchronized with the artist's choreographed videos shown on a monitor high on the wall and a broken iPhone SE on the adjacent wall. Both displayed close-ups of Black students performing Djembe actions through hand thumping and pencil movements against the restricted educational spaces. Hence the desk popping from the wall a few steps away from the wall text. The accompanying sounds were rap songs distorted by the artist.

NIC Kay's installation responds to the various ways Black presence is currently obscured in social media. What began as an unplanned project during the beginning of the pandemic –when they started saving online videos of Black people dancing and performing– #blackpeopledancingontheinternet has now become an ongoing project by the artist that was exhibited at the New Museum in 2021. The Wattis' commission expands the scope of the previous project by including more audience participation in its arrangement. Both the display of the iPhone and the monitor's height demand a physical effort by the visitor. The monitor was set more than 6 feet high thus forcing the viewer to look up, an uncomfortable position. Just as the vibrations on the wall, the iPhone required people to lean closer and observe the oftentimes pixelated videos. This little effort should be understood as a call to action on social media, to actively consume Black content. Hence, the artist placed a QR code on the wall text that provided



From left to right: David Hammons' Basketball Installation and NIC Kay's installation.

a curated list of Black sources available online, ranging from books by Black authors to songs created by Black musicians.

Accepting that Black presence has been intentionally obscured by social media algorithms, the installation plays with the notion of invisibility and power in juxtaposition with sound. To allude to the previous, NIC Kay acknowledges creators on the wall text. Firstly, they abstracted the creators' identities by only displaying close-ups of their hands, thus acknowledging the challenges that still persist for them within the digital realm. Secondly, there is a moment of silence, of a black screen, which speaks of all the Black presence that continues to be ignored in the algorithm. Finally, the curation of videos of Black students thumping on desks overlapped by others playing the Djembe intertwines the argument that drumming continues to be a protest tool through which Black communities demand visibility, which is confirmed on the wall text.

Tupper Hernández's *Applause Dictionary* (2020-2022) could be found in the next room, where the visitor transitioned from active listening to reading. The presence of this piece felt more subtle than the other artwork in the room, Raven Chacon's brown military blanket titled *American Ledger No. 1* (located on a floor plinth), as the latter was more visible due to its materiality. Tupper Hernández's text piece required visitors to observe the minimal setup of the dictionary. As one of the only two text pieces in an exhibition where sculptures abound, this piece is worth exploring. Unlike Susan Howe's untouchable *Concordance* (2022), which was exhibited in a vitrine through all three parts of *Drum Listens to Heart* and accompanied by a recording in collaboration with David Grubbs, *Applause Dictionary* provided the possibility of being touched and taken home. Composed of 17 pages, printed

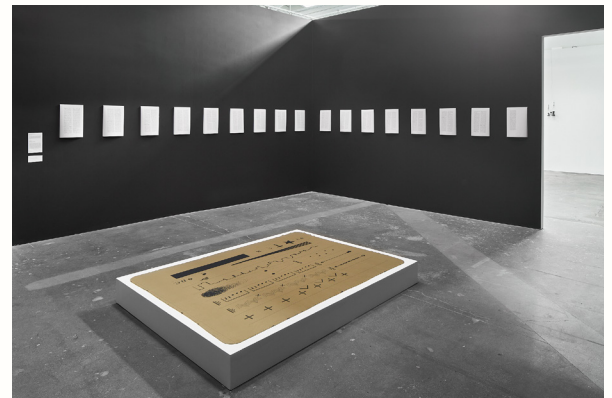
on off-gray Tabloid size paper, arranged at an average eye-level height along two walls. The text was presented with each individual page tacked onto the wall in pads of 100 copies. On the back of each page, all 41 applause descriptions were included in a smaller font. Hence, visitors had the opportunity to tear off all pages for a complete set.



Details of Applause Dictionary. © Wattis Institute

The 41 types of applause show a rhythmic richness in language expression. This rhythm is set by either two or three different

definitions accompanying each applause. The first one is the description of the percussive action, and the second and third are further explanations of the social interaction that leads to the applause. While reading each definition, it could be suggested that readers perform them in order to understand the social reference to which the artist refers. For example, *laughter applause* was first described as *a second physical manifestation operating simultaneously*. Its second definition reads as *a conscious gesture, it might be interpreted as a compliment to the recipient for making people laugh*. To those that have attended stand-up comedy shows, this activity resonated. This second definition can also be understood as an emotional explanation. Adjectives such as *conscious*, *motivation*, or *subjective* give a unique personality to each type of applause. The piece is a celebration of manual expressions that are part of a well-embedded social practice or desire within a specific scenario. Tupper Hernández proposes an abstract exploration of community on Latin American culture through applause. Latinxs speak with their hands, and thus that makes us overly expressive sometimes, but as Audre Lorde said, writing helps expand on already existing ideas. Her piece shows an invisible percussion action, the applause is nowhere to be heard but the literary source presents the influence that the finesse of the percussive action between hands can create community. Each definition explains in one way or another how collectives, groups, friendships, or individuals interact with the social expectations behind every specific applause. It is an invisible piece, as the main topic of it all, the applause is nowhere to be heard. Hence, the work proposes that applauding is a political action as it gathers people together, and its absence marks this necessity to convene.



On the wall: *Applause Dictionary* by Tupper Hernández. On the floor: *Chacon's American Ledger No. 1*. © Wattis Institute

Commissioning NIC Kay's installation shows a commitment on behalf of the Wattis to give space to those who have been demanding it. By understanding Black culture as the epicenter of drumming practices within the United States and other countries, it places NIC Kay's and Hammons' installation pieces as crucial for the exhibition, appropriately displaying the works as the first-encountered pieces for this last part. On the other hand, Tupper Hernandez's detailed dictionary expands the definition of percussion by attributing a community purpose to a percussive action. Finally, both pieces provided the exhibition with different

political meanings of the percussive: as the spoken exploration of communal interactions, and as the tool to disrupt and demand space.

Félix Cunillé had a work-study position as a Gallery Assistant at the Wattis Institute during Part II and Part III of the show.