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CHAPTER II  
ANALYSIS OF WORKS

***We Shall Overcome:*  
Dave McKenzie  
in Conversation with  
Karima Boudou**

*June 15, 2016, New York – Amsterdam*

**Karima Boudou:** To start this conversation with you, I came up by proposing you to discuss your performance *We Shall Overcome*, that you realized in Harlem's 125th Street. I am not a specialist of performance per se, I come from art history and have a certain knowledge about practices of performance which we would look at as historical today, tied to specific artists such as Adrian Piper or David Hammons. I thought it might be relevant to discuss with a younger generation of artists who carries on this legacy, and discuss the work you are doing.

You realized *We Shall Overcome* in 2004. What was the climate at that time in New York and more broadly in the US, besides the elections and the war in Iraq?

**Dave McKenzie:** I was in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem when I made *We Shall Overcome*. I was working in the museum and constantly looking out on the vibrant stage that is 125th Street. By chance, I read this *New York Times* article, "Dear

Mr. Clinton, Your Harlem Neighbors Need to See You More Often," which suggested that the former president was not available enough in the neighborhood that he had set offices up in after his two terms in office. I thought the article posed a complicated set of questions – not that the text itself was that interesting, but at the same time, there were interesting ideas around the text. One of those ideas was the joke about President Clinton being the first black president. I think it's a really complicated joke, not only about blackness but about what black or African American communities want and expect from elected political figures. Thinking about Clinton as a representation of the idea of a black president, I became curious about what it meant for people to need to see him in the neighborhood. I then took it upon myself to perform this ridiculous and absurd action – to make him visible in some comical way. Three years later, nearing the end of the Bush years, I reperformed *We Shall Overcome* as part of *Performa 07*.

**KB:** Did you reperform the piece in the same street and with the same elements [a suit, copies of the article from the *New York Times*, and a Bill Clinton mask]?

**DM:** The original performance happened on and off over the course of a year – just going outside, walking around, standing or whatever.



Dave McKenzie  
*We Shall Overcome*, 2004

**During the biennial, I did the piece on a single day. This was 2007, Obama was running for president and I felt that the performance operated differently. The country was moving towards electing, for the first time, an African American to hold the office of president. Maybe that joke of Clinton as the first black president wasn't interesting or funny anymore and maybe that explains why the piece seemed to change.**

**KB:** Is the title of your work a reference to something specific? I heard that it was a protest song?

**DM:** "We Shall Overcome" has a bit of a complicated history. It's essentially a protest/gospel song and where it comes from isn't quite clear. It has its roots in a gospel tradition, and then spreads through to the civil rights era in line with protest and labor movements. In the *Times* article, it mentions a violin rendition of "We Shall Overcome" that accompanied Clinton's relocation to Harlem. The playing of that song is interesting

because it is often used in moments of struggle, celebration, and hope. In the Clinton "move" the question of what is being overcome remains open, as does the "we." Nevertheless, I thought it made for an appropriate title.

**KB:** When the idea of your work *We Shall Overcome* came up, did you already know it was going to be a filmed performance? Or [did] you simply [think] of doing these actions without recording them?

**DM:** I thought both, actually. The yearlong performance is one thing, and the video is simply another thing or another way. While doing the piece, I learned different things, and it started to evolve. In the video you see me handing out this piece of paper: that came about after I had done the walk several times. I realized that even though I wanted this absurd image, I didn't want people to think that I was making fun of them. So I started handing out a copy of the article, and, even if people didn't read it, they laughed when they saw the title of the article. In terms of filming, I think that the piece occupies multiple spaces and times. The video becomes this document that we can watch in a museum or exhibition and that tells a certain story, but I also like the fact that someone from across the street or a block away saw this image and had all sorts of thoughts and relation-

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ships to Clinton's missing body and the kind of ridiculous hybrid that I created. A hybrid of one thing on top of another or one thing peeking through another – just strangeness.



**KB:** How did you choreograph your presence and your movements? I understood that push and pull between the intellectual core of the piece, and the absurd, embodied individual. It seems to me that being real is also about being open to what you are about, what artists are about, and when dealing with anything concerning performance. There is this double movement between the realism of you as an artist performing in the street and receiving reactions which you cannot predict; and on the other hand you also seem to use this strategy of camouflage between you as an African American subject and artist and the political figure you embody with the mask of Bill Clinton and the suit. How do you relate to that kind of realism and non-realism of the piece? Is it related to you defining a clear frame and references? It seems ambiguous to me.

**DM:** I think it is ambiguous due to all the relationships, images, and things

that the work could be touching upon. When I first walked around in 2004, I felt hypervisual and I was scared of the spectacle that I was making. In 2007 I felt invisible. For a brief moment I thought this was sad, but then I saw it as incredibly beautiful – to feel that walking around with this Bill Clinton head didn't seem to register.

A better example may be Obama's inauguration. During the inauguration, people had signs with WE HAVE OVERCOME, as opposed to WE SHALL OVERCOME. That's why I think that doing and redoing the piece was intellectually rewarding. I just let that absurdity play out and remain ambiguous – with no obvious answer.

**KB:** How do you play with the insertion of a figure in your work? What does it touch upon broadly about the body as a vessel, and broadly beyond *We Shall Overcome*? You described yourself in 2007 [as] performing and not being noticed, almost disappearing in the street. It seems to me very powerful in regard to the potential of performance, [not only] what it can reveal, but also what it can let go.

**DM:** To me, it is about a general sense of what it means as an artist and also a viewer for works of art to live and die. I am really invested in trying to think about keeping my works alive. Thinking about bodies to me is one

of the ways to keep things moving and changing – to think about the limits and possibilities of this thing that we all have. It's a very interesting thing to realize that although we all have bodies, all our bodies aren't seen the same way. A really clear example from my work is from this piece called *Self-Portrait Piñata* (2002). That's a life-size piñata in my image, and it functions as a traditional piñata in that it is filled with candy. I realized very quickly, however, that my figure as a black man in the form of a piñata clearly points to racialized violence – it couldn't be made sweet enough. If I had a different body maybe that pointedness would be elsewhere. I think about how bodies operate not only because we all have them, but also because they carry with them a certain material meaning.



**KB:** You often address topics from popular culture in your work; even while watching your video, we notice the music, the background with the streets of Harlem, and its cultural symbols, such as the Apollo Theater. Do you consider the street and its urban environment as

a form of decor? Or [do] you rely on the context as a form of improvised urban syntax that you can play with, something less static than a simple decor?

**DM:** Harlem has a very special artistic tradition, and it is one of the places where African Americans ended up in large numbers following their migration from the South to the North. As a neighborhood it is historically and artistically important, but there are a number of more recent issues in terms of change and gentrification as well. I think that if I wasn't at the Studio Museum, I couldn't have made the piece. A lot of things had to align, so in that way it felt like a knot: things had to be put together tightly.

**KB:** Your performance is filmed. How do you consider your audience (the ones who see you performing in the street) in regard to the structure of it? How much do you wish to interact or not?

**DM:** You can see in the video that people laughed, they waved to me, asked me questions. Unfortunately, I wasn't always able to communicate in a longer form or sustained way. Early on, someone asked me if I really wanted to be white that badly. It's one of the few things that I remember someone saying to me. I wished that I could have taken the mask off and simply had a conversation about these issues that we are talking

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about now. I remember feeling the piece had this way of going back and forth between the spectacle of the thing and the humor and uncertainty of it. When I thought that people were really unhappy and confused I would hand the article to them and they started laughing. I think that laughter meant something.



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**KB:** How do you relate to performance in regard to your practice more broadly? With all the angles this field involves, the way institutions include it, should we even still use the word *performance*? And how do you negotiate these aspects in your work?

**DM:** I am interested in the ready-to-hand-ness of making art. I try to make [it] in a way that feels urgent. Performance is a clear example of that: I read this article, and I ran into the street to try to make this thing. But beyond the performance, I am definitely someone who doesn't feel the need to operate in this world of performance as critique to making objects. In many ways, whether it's a performance or video, I think of myself primarily as an object maker.

And going back to trying to keep artworks alive, I think mostly about how my works could potentially become a platform. I like the idea of going to some amazing historical museum and being confronted by the fact that people who made those works couldn't always imagine someone like me. At the same time, I love that I am able to borrow from them and be inspired by them, or to take something that they did at a particular moment, being able to see that, and trying to use it in some ways for myself.

**KB:** On a recent visit to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, I stumbled upon a series of caricatures, thirty-six busts of well-known French politicians (most of them right-wing politicians) by Honoré Daumier, entitled *Les célébrités du juste milieu* and dated from 1832 to 1835. It seems to me that in *We Shall Overcome* you wish to communicate with humor the failure of artificial political languages – similarly to Daumier – and you use performance as a way to deconstruct them. To what extent do you think that humor and laughter can make things more complex and ambiguous, a form of catharsis?

**DM:** I am not really sure. I am really interested in jokes and the way that I think they can expose something dark and terrible. Comedy has this beautiful way of exposing something complicated through a structure

**that is often really basic. This allows you to do this intellectual work that some other form would take a really long time to fully articulate.**

**I think humor can do that catharsis. Thinking about what's beyond catharsis is how it can be pushed further toward a deeper engagement, or wanting more and continuing to realize that humor poses a question that needs to be thought about again and again.**

KB: Finally, the way you use music in the filmed performance gives this feeling of grandeur about America, but you also get the sense that there are failures behind that.

DM: "We Shall Overcome," as song, rallying cry, title, or simple text seems to point at the past and future at the same time. It always needs to be at the ready and especially so in a country like America, which loves the cult of progress and has serious memory problems.

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