In the photograph within Leslie Hewitt's photograph Make It Plain, 2002-2005, two worn paperbacks, both published in 1968, sit on a tabletop. One is the Kerner Commission's report on the race riots of the year before, the other Joanne Grant's historical study Black Protest. At once elegiac and enigmatic, Hewitt's work implicitly asks the question at the heart of curator Jeffrey Grove's exhibition "After 1968": What do the 1960s mean--what can they mean--to African-American artists too young to have experienced the social upheaval of those times directly but who know the era through books, family stories, and media images?

Hewitt also seems to raise (but not answer) the question as to whether those books, and the politics they espouse, are relics of another time or speak to our current reality. Other artists in the exhibition probe related questions, likewise eschewing definitive answers. In Jefferson Pinder's multiscreen video installation Juke, 2007, young African Americans, shown in close-up, lipsync the words to a variety of pop songs by white artists, thus challenging entrenched distinctions between "black" and "white" music. In his deadpan, room-filling installation Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America from 1968 to 2008, 2008, Hank Willis Thomas reproduces magazine advertisements that depict African Americans, but he removes the text. At first glance, the point seems obvious: The civil rights movement did nothing to change the commercial exploitation of the black body. But the installation is more provocative than that: It allows the viewer to consider the positive and negative connotations of each image and wonder just what would count as progress in this arena.
Both Deborah Grant and Adam Pendleton rewrite history to foreground suppressed stories and draw out previously unseen connections. Grant's The Flaming Fury of Bayard Rustin the Queen at the End of the Bar, 2008, a suite of twenty-four mixed-media panels reproducing parts of images culled from the High Museum's collection of civil rights-era photographs, sparsely evokes the violence and tensions of the times. Its title suggests that the work is meant to celebrate the late Rustin, a crucial but often overlooked figure in the civil rights movement who was also a gay rights activist. Pendleton's 2008 "Black Dada" paintings—which place the letters of the phrase "black data," from Amiri Baraka's poem "Black Dada Nihilismus," published in 1964, against the edges of the canvas in arrangements that evoke LeWitt's "Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes," 1974—are testaments to his practice of intertwining the history of modern art with African-American political and cultural history.

Other works address the civil rights movement and its legacy more straightforwardly. Nadine Robinson's Coronation Theme; Organon, 2008, an imposing installation made of audio speakers arranged to resemble the facade of Martin Luther King's Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, features a sound track mixing choral singing, sermonizing, and protesting. Because the sound track plays at a low volume, however, the monumentality of both church and history gives way to an intimate act of attentive listening. The artist collective Otabenga Jones and Associates aligns itself with the black political and cultural radicalism of the '60s, even presenting an artists' statement as a redeaction of a Black Panther Party statement. The group's Grow Black Growth Action and Activity Book, 2008, ostensibly a coloring book for children, promotes awareness of major black political and cultural figures through line drawings and puzzles. But it's not all fun and games: The booklet's final selection, an essay by sociologist Assata Richards, critiques the exclusion of women from positions of power in the civil rights movement.

The questions of racial and cultural politics that animated the debates of 1968, this exhibition suggested, are still very much with us. But most of the artists here address those questions more inquiringly, and less programmatically, than did some of their predecessors, who—no doubt out of historical necessity—tended toward direct confrontation.

COPYRIGHT 2008 Artforum International Magazine, Inc.
COPYRIGHT 2009 Gale, Cengage Learning