

4

A Question of Relevancy

New York Museums and the Black Arts Movement, 1968-1971

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Where has the Black Artist in America
been all this time?

He's been in the streets in Watts,
in Roxbury and Chicago.

He's been in his body. In hard times.

He's been in the eyes of people who love him
and in the eyes of people who hate him.

And he's been putting it all down.

On canvas. In stone. Out of wood.

—ABA: A JOURNAL OF AFFAIRS OF BLACK ARTISTS, 1972

The doors of a large metropolitan museum of art serve as a significant threshold, resonant with expectations. Inside wait carefully preserved masterpieces mounted on canvas and pedestal. These doors both promise and confirm the excellence of the works of art inside. Excellence substantiated further by the vaulted ceilings, marble staircases and uniformed guards charged with regulating voices (not too loud!) and bodies (not too close!). The ornate frames, the managed temperature, the skillful lighting . . . all these elements herald the importance of what is waiting to be viewed. Such rooms of hushed reverence impose their own expectations on the part of the visitors as well. In such a grand and sacred space, viewers are obliged not simply to look, but to *appreciate*.

The doors' power to command expectations derives from the power of exclusion. The works of art found inside are of "museum quality." By implication, those that remain outside are not. As arbiter of taste and authority on the singularly special, the art museum makes fundamental decisions over which pieces of art should be presented to and appreciated by the public as "genius."

If this particular visualization of the art museum gives the slightest pause, if perhaps the feeling persists that a museum *can be more, should be more* than the "temple of muses" its Greek etymology implies, an important but largely unacknowledged achievement of the Black Arts Movement in the United States is revealed. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, African American visual artists led an attack on the *de facto* segregation of the art world in all its institutionalized forms: the omission of historical and contemporary African American artists from the pages of art survey texts, racially biased art criticism, the absence of art education in urban ghettos, the dearth of teaching positions, scholarships, and grants for younger artists, and, most urgently, the absence of work by black artists on gallery walls throughout the country. But this challenge to the traditionally white art establishment went well beyond an "add-and-stir" strategy of inclusion. Instead, by asserting the African American community's identity both as creators and consumers of art, black visual artists offered nothing short of a revolutionary reappraisal of the meaning and function of the art museum in the United States.

In 1969, a thirty-four-year-old poet and painter named Edward Spriggs surveyed the "art Establishment" of the United States (his shorthand for the largest and most powerful fine art museums and galleries, their boards of trustees and their contributors) and wrote, "The thrust of the traditional museum's programs remains unchanged: they continue to be created by one small group for the benefit of another small group and still to be overwhelmingly oriented to white middle-class values and interests."¹ He described a "radical" new kind of art museum that both introduced the general public to gifted black artists long rendered invisible by the "institutional imperialism and racism" of traditional museums and, most importantly, embraced "a comprehensive and integral interrelationship with its community" by mounting exhibitions "with an eye to their *relevance* to black people."²

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, groups of artists in cities across the country echoed Spriggs' demand that art museums respond to the interests and needs of the black community. This critique drew its power from a language of self-determination articulated by the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. Calling for "relevance" rested on a critical understanding of culture's important role in the production of society's structures of domination as well as an optimistic assertion of its potential to alter these same oppressive power relations. In other words, art *mattered* dearly. Museums were instruments of power no less than political and economic institutions. While the protest efforts to combat the entrenched racism of the American art museum encompassed a spectrum of goals and strategies ranging from reformist to radical, the artist-activists involved all believed that their art was inextricably connected to the lives and struggles of the larger African American community.

As the newly crowned "center" of the Western art world, New York became the central target of the artists' dissent.³ Yet no adequate account of the black

artists' mobilization against the city's art museums exists.⁴ But such an omission only lessens our appreciation for the complexity of debate, scope of achievements, and diversity of participation in the Black Arts Movement. The campaign to radically transform New York City's art scene was one of great breadth and variety, one of conflict as much as consensus. Yet connected by their shared aim of facilitating full recognition and development of the African American artist, visual artists forced curators and trustees to rethink the *function* of the art museum and made imperative a substantial and significant discussion on the role of art in the larger battle for black freedom.

BACKGROUND: THE BLACK AESTHETIC

The visual artists' mobilization against the art museum took place amid the mass struggle against racial injustice in America by both moderate civil rights organizations and militant Black Power groups.⁵ The picketing, mass marches, and nonviolent protest of the older organizations and the more militant expressions of dissent by younger activists centered in inner cities drew attention to the racism prevalent in *all* aspects of American society, not simply its Southern voting booths. Dismantling Jim Crow was simply the *beginning* of the fight for African American liberation. For Black Power adherents, legal equality may have served as a starting point, but real freedom involved reaching beyond exclusively political goals to questions of economics and culture.

Black culture as an essential tool of liberation was anything but a new concept in the late 1960s. The culture created by enslaved Africans had nourished and sustained efforts to survive and ultimately win their freedom from bondage. Nationalists like Marcus Garvey celebrated the distinctive beauty and power of the clothing, music, and art of people of African descent. The Civil Rights Movement, although essentially about constitutional guarantees, drew its strength from the networks, philosophy, and music of the African American Christian church.⁶ But in the late 1960s, the Black Power Movement elevated culture to the heartbeat of its quest for emancipation and power.

Disillusioned by the slow implementation of the goals and ideals supposedly achieved by the Civil Rights Movement, new groups advocated a radical restructuring of American society to achieve true economic, political, and social justice. These groups, including the Black Panthers, the Black Liberation Front, the Black Liberation Army, and Maulana Ron Karenga's US Organization among others, held diverse, and even contradictory, strategic views on how to win the war on white oppression. Importantly, however, all rested their political and economic programs on an independent black cultural base.⁷ In the wake of centuries of white stereotypes of black inferiority, Black Power turned the racists' claim of racial distinctiveness on its head: Black Power asserted the remarkable beauty and strength of a black culture thriving and separate from that of white America.

Thus, "Black is Beautiful" was far from a mechanical or simpleminded rallying cry. Within these three deceptively simple words, the slogan held both a devastating critique of the psychic cost of racism and a cogent blueprint for

personal and group self-definition. Black Power advocates urged the effort necessary to uncover and bear witness to the distinctive history and culture of people of African ancestry too long denied and/or disparaged by America's dominant white culture. Embracing and celebrating "blackness" was the essential first step to self-determination. Racial pride, advocates believed, could and would replace the crippling sense of inferiority and self-hate inculcated by white racism. In a 1964 speech, Malcolm X told the crowd that "the cultural revolution" was necessary to "unbrainwash an entire people."⁸ Hoyt Fuller, the Black Arts writer and philosopher, explained: "Part of the struggle of Africans in America has been the affirmation of our special beauty in a land where everything about ourselves—our heritage, our physiognomy, our determination to survive—has been degraded and ridiculed."⁹ When self-hate was excised, *only then* could political and economic power become possible.

The creative arts were a necessary element of this revolutionary black culture. "Black art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the black power concept," explained writer and scholar Larry Neal in theorizing the distinctive, empowering expression of black creativity known as the Black Arts Movement.¹⁰ Cultural nationalists suggested that the aesthetic standards used to judge "great art" long assumed "natural" and "universal"—*everyone knows Shakespeare was a genius*—were fundamentally *subjective* and racist at their core. There was no "raceless" or "universal" experience in America, they argued. There was a black experience and there was a white one, only the black experience had not yet received its due on paper, stage, or canvas. "The white aesthetic would tell the Black Artists that all men have the same problems, that they all try to find their dignity and identity, that we are all brothers and blah blah blah. Is the grief of a black mother whose 14-year old son was killed by a racist the same as the grief of a WASP mother whose son was killed in a Saturday afternoon football game?" asked the poet Etheridge Knight.¹¹ Far from being a simple byproduct of white oppression, art and the Euro-American aesthetics used to police the boundaries of "great art" were instead "major tools of black oppression" and indispensable bulwarks for the white American power structure. This "Euro-Western sensibility" denied the black experience.¹²

Set free from assumptions of white superiority, unshackled from standards delineated by the white American experience and no longer "content to be a pale imitation of white middle class society," cultural nationalists explored a "black aesthetic" that was distinctive, meaningful, and authentically representative of the unique history, experience, and culture of people of African descent. But what did it look like? Black Art in all its forms, counseled the poet Eugene Perkins, must express "the total black experience." He discussed poetry as an example: "Black Poets should be concerned with creating authentic images of black people and dealing with the realities of black life as they actually exist, and not as some distraught illusion. They must be committed to describing the total feelings/emotions/attitudes and values of black people so that black people can better understand themselves within a black frame of reference."¹³ In opposition

to the dominant culture's effect of "negating" the black experience or distorting it to simplified caricature, he argued, Black Art should "awaken" in the black community "an awareness and appreciation of their own blackness." Such an awareness had profound political implications: it would "help enable black people to emerge from the depths of oppression and rise to self-determination, control of their destiny, and finally, complete liberation."¹⁴

Thus, fundamental to the black aesthetic was the creative artist's *responsibility* and *connection* to the black community. Instead of accepting Western culture's false assertion that art was "impartial" or apolitical, the black aesthetic asserted the liberatory impulse of the artist's craft: the black artist must realize, in the words of a Black Arts workshop director in Chicago, that "his primary responsibility is to black people and their plight."¹⁵ Larry Neal announced the Black Arts Movement as "radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community" and Eugene Perkins described artists as "missionaries."¹⁶ If an artist shirked this core responsibility, if his or her art did not "consciously support the revolutionary struggle" of the black community, the artwork "becomes irrelevant," warned Perkins.¹⁷ In this "period of sustained militancy" and "revolutionary warfare" against white violence and power, artists were no mere observers on the sidelines; instead, they were the vanguard of change.¹⁸

The urgent enthusiasm with which Black Power advocates heralded the arrival of a cultural renaissance was hotly contested within the larger African American art and intellectual community. Martin Kilson, a Harvard political science professor and critic of black separatism, found the concept of the "black aesthetic" "excessively political" without any "elements of form, style and sensibility."¹⁹ The Black Arts Movement's attempt to "make the creative process subservient to the new Black ideologies" was a "Frankensteinian travesty" that denied the "universal quality of humanity," he declared in a speech delivered at Lincoln University, a historically black college in Chicago.²⁰ Kilson outlined the fundamental divide in the black artist community over the very existence of a "black art": most artists, Kilson suggested, believed that art provided a fundamentally equal and apolitical meeting place for all cultures and races to contemplate the "nature of the human condition." *Great* art achieved a "universal statement" and *great* work by black creative artists was not determined solely by how well it served the black community but by how well it served the whole of humanity: "In other words, through Negro Jazz, men of profoundly diverse cultural, historical, religious, and racial backgrounds can discover something of their own fate on earth, something of their own persisting strivings to make life a more humanistically meaningful experience."²¹

Critiques of the black aesthetic elicited zealous responses from cultural nationalists insistent on the intrinsically political nature of art, the existence of a discrete and meaningful black culture, and the uselessness of the moderate civil rights agenda. Real emotion accompanied the studious arguments and heightened the intensity of the debates. Neal dismissed the criticisms of his detractors as "bullcrapping" and Addison Gayle, Jr., editor of *The Black Aesthetic*, called

Black Arts antagonists “Fridays”: a literary reference to a loyal black servant similar to “Uncle Tom.”²²

But the heated rhetoric between the most prominent spokesmen of the two camps notwithstanding, the debate within the black art community over the intersection of aesthetics and politics was much more searching, ambiguous, and fluid. Despite their detractors’ insistence that they were “telling other writers how to write,” in truth, Black Arts theorists shied away from a reductive blueprint.²³ So while the purpose of Black Art—liberation—was clearly defined, what the art would look like remained unspecified. The debate over form and function raised crucial questions for artists: What constituted the black aesthetic? Was it one particular style or subject matter? If so, did that delegitimize other styles identified with Western aesthetic conventions even if interpreted by an artist of African descent? What did an “integral” relationship with the black community mean for the individual artist?

Sharing a sense of urgency if not a fixed definition of the black aesthetic, creative artists during the Black Power era attempted to realize their relevance to the larger black community and its freedom agenda through wide-ranging experimentation. Far from evidence of the movement’s weakness, the diversity, complexity, and contradictions of “black culture” as lived, interpreted, and practiced by black Americans was for many participants the source of its vitality and strength. In responding to the charges of imprecision lodged against the “cultural spokesmen” as to the “content and character of Afro-American culture,” the Marxist sociologist Robert Blauner answered, “These questions are being hammered out in the black communities, and the culture-builders are not interested in satisfying the curiosities and the academic criteria of white intellectuals. . . . Most importantly, Negro culture is in process: it is a dynamic, open-ended phenomenon, and that is why it is becoming such a central concern of the protest movement.”²⁴ Dynamic experimentation was particularly true in the case of visual artists who were less apt to write manifestoes or articles than their literary brethren. While a complete chronicle of the vigorous popular movement to transform the “art Establishment” in New York City during the Black Power era is not possible here, dramatic highlights are recounted and assessed to provide an introduction to the artists’ groundbreaking ideas and audacious creativity.

THE NEW YORK ART SCENE

“We are here to discuss some of the problems of the Black artist in America,” the painter and collage artist Romare Bearden announced as moderator of a symposium held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the fall of 1968. Attended by six other black artists the discussion highlighted the shared concerns of visual artists surveying the history and future of the black artist in America, as well as their conflicting interpretations of what should be done.

All agreed with the kinetic artist Tom Lloyd’s somber pronouncement: “The Black artist’s existence has been denied for so long that people don’t know him—even in the black community.”²⁵ They discussed the unequal playing field

of the art world: art by African Americans was both underrepresented in history books and on contemporary gallery walls. Children in the ghettos of the city received little if any art education or exposure. The very future of art by African Americans was in dire jeopardy; with little institutional support from the major art institutions and few teaching positions, young black artists had little chance of making a living by their craft. The reason for the inequity of the art world was never under dispute: the prejudice that limited the professional success of visual artists was symptomatic of the pervasive racism of American society. Explained Jacob Lawrence, "You take a man like Bill Robinson, who never attains the same kind of recognition as Gene Kelly. They say we're supposed to be good cooks, but we've never been made chefs in the Waldorf-Astoria, we've never been asked to give cooking lessons on television. Why? Because this calls for a certain recognition on the part of the white community that you have an intellectual capacity that either they don't want to accept or are so brainwashed they can't accept." The white community and the white-controlled art world "refuse to see and refuse to recognize what we can do," he continued. "You take a man like Horace Pippin, who I'm sure was a greater 'primitive' than Grandma Moses. But compare the amount of recognition the two have received."²⁶

Lawrence's remarks were especially striking since he, as the young Lloyd admiringly commented, had "made it" along with Romare Bearden and Hale Woodruff. Indeed, the four younger men had also exhibited their work at prestigious museums or galleries and seemed well situated for continued success. But the frustration the group had with any suggestion that prejudice was no longer a factor for artists was similar to the impatience with which the larger African American community greeted the conservative responses of white Americans certain that the existence of a black judge or business executive proved "race" was no longer a problem in America.²⁷ Lawrence bitterly contested the white art critics' attempts to point to his fame as proof that equality of opportunity existed: "None of us wants to be selected as 'the one and only' or 'one of the few'. . . . None of us appreciates the idea of 'We'll accept you and this is it.'"²⁸ Lawrence defined the dilemma of the black artist in America in terms of access: prejudice rendered traditional art institutions and the white art critics who guarded them unwilling or unable to appreciate the work of African American artists, both past and present.

But if the discussion began in harmony, it quickly hit a discordant note over "the question of identity."²⁹ Tom Lloyd grew frustrated at the other participants' reluctance to call their work "Black Art" and their vociferous denials of a "black aesthetic." To him, Black Art was real, incontrovertible, and necessary. When Richard Hunt (a very successful fellow sculptor whose abstract metal sculptures were widely praised by critics) argued that his art was separable "from my life as a Black man in America," and further explained, "I see myself as a sculptor as being a person making things," Lloyd exploded, accusing Hunt of being a "conditioned Black man." Lloyd criticized, "To me you don't seem like a man concerned with Black people, with Black kids, with Black culture.

I don't think that enters into your feelings. And that bothers me, that bothers the hell out of me. You know, when I think of an artist, I think of a Black artist, not a Black white artist or someone who has given in to this kind of conditioning that the white people have put us in."³⁰

But Lloyd proved unable to clearly articulate to the others' satisfaction his meaning of "Black Art." Lawrence, William Williams, and Hunt tried to pin down a detailed answer from him: Was it a particular style or medium? Did it need to deal with a particular theme or subject? Was it art by any black artist? No, no, no answered Lloyd. Black Art could not be reduced to a blueprint like that; it was something so much more: "We're talking about communication. I don't know why we are talking about forms necessarily. It's like how you feel and what you are doing." What was Black Art? It was art "relevant to the Black community."³¹ The other symposium participants were hardly satisfied with his inexact and seemingly oblique reasoning. They pushed him to define "relevance," arguing that it was a "sociological" not an "aesthetic" term. Jacob Lawrence thought the term "Black Art" "sentimental slush," and argued that Lloyd's own abstract light sculptures in and of themselves refuted the idea of a uniquely black aesthetic: "From what I've seen of your work—although you may be a terrific artist—there's no possible way that I can see anyone in the Black community *relating* to your work. They may respond to it aesthetically, they may feel it is a terrific piece—but I can't see how anyone would *relate* to it, and I don't see why they should." But Lloyd was certain that it did: "It's related because I'm Black and I know where my feelings lie."³²

Lloyd was much clearer in explaining the role of the black artist in society. "I think he has a compact, a relationship with the people that the ordinary person doesn't have. I think he can bring about changes." And the changes he envisioned went well beyond the canvas or gallery wall: "I'm with a group called Black Visual Environments, and we're a big group of professional artists who hope to bring a big, big change about in New York through various means—putting pressure on people if we have to, but mainly by working in the Black communities. We're not going to teach art, we're going to be involved in the whole political structure."³³ Williams was not impressed: "(T)he nationalism you're talking about is a very dangerous thing."³⁴

When reading the transcript of the symposium, it is difficult not to be struck by how much the group agreed upon: the necessity of black-penned critical scholarship, more art education for children and scholarships and gallery space for young black artists, even future roundtable discussions to "sit down and beef like we're doing today." All expressed concern over the desperate conditions of an impoverished Harlem and all agreed with Woodruff's comment that the problems hindering the development of the black artist could only be solved through a "united front": "When we try to fight this battle singlehandedly we're lost."³⁵

But in terms of how that battle should be fought, the differences were meaningful. The majority of the group viewed the preferred strategy as one of increased access and inclusion: for Hunt it meant getting "more integrated in

the larger scene," for Bearden it meant getting "completely involved in the mainstream."³⁶ Both these phrases referred to places of power in the art world that Hunt and Bearden believed denied access to black artists due to white prejudice. Buyers, critics, and curators "don't always consider him" due to the black artist's skin color.³⁷ What they were asking for was a fair appreciation of the black artist's work and a chance to fully participate on equal footing with white artists. "We're always in *Negro* shows, not just shows," objected Lawrence.³⁸ African American artists were creating great works of art; the issue was that the white art community was willfully ignoring them.

But Sam Gilliam and Tom Lloyd spoke of "power" instead of "inclusion." When Lawrence advocated an infusion of federal government funds to support black artists, Lloyd scoffed at the suggestion and Gilliam suggested "Black-owned art galleries."³⁹ But there were important differences between the two as well. Gilliam objected to Lloyd's judgment of Hunt ("It's erroneous to presuppose that a person who doesn't follow a certain philosophy all the way doesn't care about his race or his kids") and believed that social concerns, while important and not necessarily antithetical to art, should never obscure the question of "quality."⁴⁰ The black community ought to have better access to great art by artists of every color, he argued. And to this end, Gilliam saw an essential role for the city's art museums: "It's easy to see that we could easily hustle up to Harlem . . . and put up alot of structures that would be meaningful. But instead . . . why can't museums really emphasize the kind of programs that will bring a person from where he is to where the better facility is? And when he's there why can't you make him actually welcome?"⁴¹

For Lloyd, however, there was no reason to go "downtown." It made all the difference if the artist worked in a predominantly black neighborhood; it made all the difference if the art was created above 110th Street.⁴² "I feel that the Metropolitan is a museum for white people, not for Black people," he said, and didn't see it changing. But at the moment, Lloyd did not share Gilliam's desire to change the institution either: "I still maintain that Black art should be separate. I feel that is the only way for us to make it."⁴³

The symposium threw into sharp relief the two major points of dispute within the black aesthetic debate. First, was there a distinctive form, style, or sensibility that made "Black Art" a discrete and unique category of art? And secondly, what was the specific responsibility of the visual artist to the black community? The questions were fundamentally intertwined: did the liberatory function of art dictate its form? Lloyd had answered no but he also argued art to be ultimately "secondary" to the freedom fight.⁴⁴ He implied that there might be a point where "relevancy" required the suspension of art for other kinds of protest: "I think we should be marching. I think we should do anything."⁴⁵

Lloyd imagined a kind of submersion of the artist into the protesting masses of the larger black community: "I'm talking about unity, I'm not talking about one artist going that way and doing his thing."⁴⁶ It was a revolutionary stance

that came into direct conflict with the traditional icon of the fiercely independent artist directed by inner muses, not outside social conditions. Sam Gilliam believed his move from figurative paintings depicting life in the black community to abstract canvases to be one of maturation: "But later on, you're a mature artist, maybe a great one, if you can personalize yourself, move from identification with something outside yourself to your own thing."⁴⁷ The ideal artistic "self" was apolitical and non-racial. As Hale Woodruff described, "It has nothing to do with race; it is that real spark, unfathomable, and unidentifiable, that is unassailable. . . it isn't black, white, green, or blue, but it is great art."⁴⁸

Thus, the subjugation of artistic freedom to "the Cause"—no matter how worthy—was a peril to avoid. Where Lloyd called for "unity," most artists continued to see their art as separate from social movements, and themselves as separate from society. "As for the civil rights struggle it's very hard to distinguish what you, on a personal level, can do. My feeling is 'different strokes for different folks.' I kind of take it as it comes and hope I'm doing the proper thing at the proper time," William Williams concluded during the Met symposium.⁴⁹ "Political and social aspects should not be the primary concern; esthetic ideas should have preference," Norman Lewis, the artist and co-founder of the New York-based black artist circle, Spiral, definitively argued in a 1966 interview. He expressed the view of most of the group's membership. Earlier, in 1964, a proposal to create a Spiral exhibit entitled "Mississippi 1964" was voted down as "too pointedly 'social protest.'"⁵⁰

But Lloyd's cultural and political nationalism ("I think there's going to be Black art, I think there's going to be a separate Black community") suggested the growing militancy of visual artists who questioned the conventional separation of art and politics.⁵¹ This impassioned, persistent debate among the visual art community initiated a wide range of activist agitation that left the city's art museums forever transformed.

ALTERNATIVE ART SPACES

An important extension of separatist politics was the idea of the independent black art institution. "For those of you who are willing to support the oppressive tradition of art institutions, I hope for you a recent and tragic death, as the reciprocal injustices reveal the grave that is your own rational fabrication," began the artist Randy Williams' fiery 1973 article celebrating the four-year anniversary of The Studio Museum in Harlem. In this article and others for the journal *Black Creation*, Williams discussed both the failings of the white-controlled museums ("museums of royal servitude") and the revolutionary importance of black art institutions.⁵² While at their most basic, black art museums and galleries provided prized *space* for black artists shut out of the "impenetrable museums and galleries of the white art world" to exhibit, the pioneers of the community workshop and gallery movement in the late 1960s articulated a much more revolutionary vision: "An art institution is not the measurement of

an artist's individual success, but rather is the measure of the achievements of a dialogue between the artist, the art institution and the community."⁵³

In the late 1960s in New York City, small storefront galleries financed by private sources, artist contributions, and city grants sprung up in all the city's boroughs. Such community workshops and galleries included Harlem's Studio Museum and Weusi Nyumba ya Sanaa ("House of Art" in Swahili), Greenwich Village's Acts of Art Gallery, Brooklyn's MUSE, Studio O and Operation Discovery, Inc., and Queens' Storefront Museum. This latter museum/community center averaged a weekly attendance of 300 people in its first two years of existence, many who were first-time museum visitors.⁵⁴

These alternative art galleries sought nothing less than a reinterpretation of the very nature of art museum. They did not want to be "a tiny satellite of the white world" or "downtown art brought uptown" explained Edward Spriggs, the second director of The Studio Museum.⁵⁵ To achieve "relevance" they sought "a comprehensive and integral relationship" with the black community. They offered free instruction in black art history, art workshops, free workspace, day care, school outreach programs, and mobile exhibitions. Organizations provided art instruction to upstate prisons.⁵⁶ Finally, the city offered the African American community spaces to acknowledge their "rich cultural and historical heritage" in the visual arts.

Such diverse programs challenged the traditional concept of an art museum as articulated by the professional organ, the American Association of Museums. "A museum of art is primarily an institution of culture and only second a seat of learning," wrote the secretary of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1917.⁵⁷ More than fifty years later, the chief art critic of the *New York Times* voiced a similar opinion on the role of the art museum: it was "to act as a disinterested custodian of the artistic achievements of both the near and the distant past."⁵⁸ Artist-activists rejected this "art for art's sake" philosophy and embraced a new vision of what a museum could do to empower a people. Black art institutions were not to be the "second choice" for black artists denied access to the white art world. They would be the *only choice* for artists committed to their community: "But why try for the Met, when black artists can show here?" Fred Lewis, the assistant director of The Studio Museum asked in 1973.⁵⁹ If Black Power's goal was the complete liberation of the African American community, black art institutions were understood as an essential vehicle towards this end.

But if the black galleries and museums celebrated their revolutionary distinctiveness from the traditional art museum and were united in their commitment to the black community, the question of quality proved meaningfully divisive. During the Met symposium, Tom Lloyd had bristled at William Williams' assertion that "art by nature is an aristocratic thing" and Randy Williams staunchly believed that black institutions were ideologically opposed to the white art world's "delirium of elitism."⁶⁰ Yet, "quality" was not a construct the cultural nationalists wanted to fully dispose of. They shared the integrationists' conviction that the underrepresentation of black arts on the walls of traditional

art museums was due to institutional racism. In creating their own institutions, they articulated an unwillingness to accept white critical assessment of their creative work as well as their politics. Implicit in the community workshop directors' and museum curators' discussions of their institutions was a confidence in the fineness of the works.⁶¹ In other words, even as they expanded the notion of "great art" to require a commitment and connection to the experience of the black community, cultural nationalists spoke of the technical proficiency of the artwork in terms shared with mainstream aesthetic theory. The authority of the city's large art museums and their critical custodians remained ever present even above 110th Street.

One of the most illustrative statements concerning this ambiguous separatism was Fred Lewis' articulation of his ambition for the future of The Studio Museum: "We'd like to see the day when black artists show down there because they can't show up here."⁶² While the independence of the black art institution was underscored, there still remained a desire for black art to receive critical acknowledgment from "downtown." Despite (or, in a very real way, due to) the vibrancy of the community workshops and galleries, artists continued to question why traditional museums stayed closed to them. Organized, artist groups attempted to democratize the New York City art museum.

OPENING THE DOORS

One of the first skirmishes between artist and museum materialized thirty-five blocks south of Harlem on the corner of 75th Street and Madison Avenue. In the fall of 1968 the Whitney Museum of American Art opened its exhibition, "Painting and Sculpture in America: The 1930s." As organized by white curator William Agee, no black artist was included. The exhibit served to mobilize a small segment of the black artist population. Henri Ghent, the director of the Brooklyn Museum's Community Gallery, acted quickly and organized his own survey of art in the 1930s, titled: "Invisible Americans: Black Artists of the '30s." It opened on November 19, 1968 at The Studio Museum in Harlem. As Ghent explained in the preface to the catalogue, "Our title of course refers to Ralph Ellison's superb image of the exclusion of blacks from consciousness by the white art establishment. They refuse to see us. Small wonder our artists have not been taken seriously."⁶³ To further fight invisibility, a small band of black artists picketed outside the museum, chanting, "Ignored in the thirties, ignored in the sixties."⁶⁴

In response, Whitney Museum director John I. H. Baur offered no apology, instead vociferously defending the Whitney's show. Any black artist, he asserted, "was to be judged on the same basis as any other artist—on the quality of his work."⁶⁵ Quality was Baur's gatekeeper, the allocator of access into his museum. Of course, defining what "quality" meant greatly differed for those on both sides of the Whitney's front door. For curators and critics confronted with the black artists' demands, quality was an objective, neutral standard of evaluation; an excellence defined not as opinion, but as fact. For members of

the African American community, however, the authority of the white “art Establishment” and its definition of “quality” was a social construct; a biased standard that served to narrow the canon of venerated “masterpieces,” to reinforce the institutional barriers against African American artists, and to suggest the inferior aptitude of black creative expression.

The critical reception of the show at The Studio Museum continued to dwell on this question of quality as well. Hilton Kramer, art critic for the *New York Times*, judged the show “extremely feeble.” Although he did acknowledge a few black artists who “would not have been out of place in the Whitney Show,” he denied racially motivated exclusion. In fact, he accused Mr. Ghent of a “double standard”: “Mr. Ghent is inviting us to judge black artists by standards greatly inferior to those we bring to the appreciation of—the term is absurd but unavoidable—white artists.” Mr. Ghent, he continued, had committed the worst sin of subordinating “art” to the “political ideal.” And on this, Kramer was extremely clear: while the plight of the African American might be regretted, “in matters of artistic standards, there is no justice in the social sense.” “Quality” could not be ignored to fulfill quotas.⁶⁶

Ghent’s response defiantly critiqued the logic of Kramer’s review. The white reception of black art was completely informed by politics rather than “untouched,” Ghent argued. Kramer, he pointed out, never offered a reason why those artists he deemed “acceptable” by Whitney standards were excluded. The word “quality” was simply a defense for racially motivated exclusion.⁶⁷

The conflict intensified in the next few months, moving uptown five blocks to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There the new director, Thomas Hoving, was making preparations for the exhibit, “Harlem on My Mind,” to open in January 1969. During the fall, the African American visual art community watched with measured anticipation. Thriving in the spotlight, Hoving gave interviews asserting that “Harlem on My Mind” would serve as a “turning point” for the Met and a rallying call to the museum world to become more responsive to the era’s social and political events. (“To get into the swim,” he quipped).⁶⁸ As he asserted in one press release: “(The Met’s) charter, which is almost a hundred years old, enjoined this museum to apply itself vigorously to not only the study of fine arts but to relate them to practical life as well. Practical life in this day can mean nothing less than involvement and active participation in the events of our time. . . . ‘Harlem on My Mind’ signals the turning point.”⁶⁹

Hoving saw “Harlem on My Mind” as the realization of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s founding mission. Artists warmed to this interpretation. His progressive rhetoric seemed to signal a metaphorical housecleaning of sorts for the Met: windows flung wide open with outside air and sunshine pouring in. His calls for “responsibility” seemed to echo the black aesthetic’s call for “relevancy.”

The black art community’s enthusiasm for the project, however, soon soured. No African American artist, scholar, or critic was consulted. The Harlem Cultural Council, led by the African American artist Ed Taylor, with-

drew its support when it was clear that it would not be given any input into the project. The community's anger spread with the unveiling of the exhibit in January 1969.

As conceived by Allon Schoener, visual arts director of the New York State Council on the Arts, "Harlem on My Mind" was a "multimedia event" taking up the whole second floor of the Met and all thirteen of its special event galleries. There were no paintings or sculptures, but several hundred photographs by the Harlem photographer James VanDerZee, taped interviews, slides, recordings, and even a TV monitor hooked up to a Harlem street corner. Its catalogue asserted its purpose to be a "a sincere attempt to increase the knowledge and understanding of the cultural history of Harlem by the public." The show was organized as a pictorial record of the different decades of Harlem's development. For example, the show opened with floor to ceiling photo enlargements of the Harlem tenement meetings at the turn of the century. In one gallery, the walls were placed close together so as to allow only movement by single file, thus invoking the constrained atmosphere of the Depression. Photos of black poets, musicians, and ministers filled more gallery walls, songs by Aretha Franklin and Billie Holiday played over the loudspeakers. The last gallery, titled "Militancy and Identity, 1960-68," held poster-sized photos of Malcolm X.⁷⁰

While Hoving found the exhibit "powerful . . . and unforgettable," the Harlem community took great offense.⁷¹ Where were the African American visual artists? Why *photographs*? Benny Andrews, a Harlem artist, described his reaction at a preview reception for the exhibit in this way: "I remember how helpless I felt as an artist and as an individual. The episode was to enable me to sustain a sense of indignation that will stay with me as long as I live."⁷² In response, under the leadership of Andrews and Romare Bearden, Harlem artists organized themselves as the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) and picketed the press preview of the exhibition on January 12, 1969. Holding signs reading, "Visit the Metropolitan Museum of Photography" and "That's White of Hoving!", they handed out leaflets urging blacks to boycott the show. Titled "Soul's been sold again!!!," the leaflets expressed outrage at the absence of work by black painters and demanded that the museum "seek a more viable relationship with the total black community."⁷³

The responses elicited by the exhibit "Harlem on My Mind" made clear the problematic relationship between the museum and the black visual art community. Although the majority of white art critics panned the exhibit, very few even questioned why Schoener and Hoving did not use paintings. "There were excellent reasons for not having any works of art, of course, and, in fact, they would have crippled the impact of 'Harlem,'" Hoving wrote in his autobiography, without further explanation of what these reasons were. For his part, Allon Schoener bitterly criticized the protestors: "I'm accused of having stepped out of line in trying to do something significant about blacks."⁷⁴

The exhibit, as orchestrated by Schoener and Hoving, offered an interpretation of Harlem that was palatable and easily digestible for quick, uncomplicated

consumption. One outraged critic of the show described seeing a white couple dancing to James Brown just outside the "Militancy and Identity" gallery.⁷⁵ In the age of Black Power, here was a packaged image that was acceptable to a white audience and even danceable. For many artists, "Harlem On My Mind" proved the unbridgeable distance between the "gilded halls" of culture and the city's African American community. Others, however, continued to pound away at the gates.

For artists who sought to reform the New York City's art museums, there were two main organizational bodies to join. The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) was an all-black organization. Members argued that prejudice blinded the "art Establishment" to the quality and diverse talent of African American artists. With approximately 150 members it concentrated its efforts on the Whitney Museum of American Art, demanding more positions for black curators, more one-man exhibits featuring black artists, and more black artists featured in the Whitney Annual.⁷⁶ But as articulated by Benny Andrews, one of the co-founders, the BECC had a comprehensive view of power that reached beyond the museum: "We're certainly not in this thing just to make sure black artists get their paintings sold. Social truths, injustices that are being committed need to be exposed *on a very deep level*. The black artist can do this. The organization needs to move in a political direction, to link up to all other human rights movements."⁷⁷ Their efforts continued into the 1970s.

Many younger artists found a niche within the ranks of the loosely organized interracial militant art group called the Art Workers' Coalition. Encompassing an eclectic group of artists—feminist, gay, black, white—they were united in their desire to radically change both the relationship between the artist and the museum, although the group splintered often over priorities and tactics. They viewed their art as fundamentally political and shared a mission of larger social change beyond the gallery walls. Meetings were held every Monday night at the MUSEUM, an artists' cooperative subsisting on contributions.

In January 1969, the Art Workers' Coalition submitted thirteen points to the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). The five resolutions most emphasized demanded: (1) a separate wing for black artists, (2) that museum activities be extended into the neighborhoods, (3) night hours once a week, (4) free admission at all times, and (5) more artist control over the decisions of the museum. In reaction to MOMA's vague response, artist and spokesman for the black artist subgroup of the Art Workers' Coalition, Tom Lloyd, issued a press release in March, reading, "The number of artists aware of their rights, duties and responsibilities is growing. They will resort to whatever action they deem necessary."⁷⁸ On March 22, the Art Workers' Coalition staged a small demonstration outside the museum. In response, MOMA's director issued a statement rejecting the possibility of a black artists' wing. Artists, he claimed, were chosen because "the curators believed in the quality of their works without regard to race, political creed or national origin of the artist. . . ." The young artists accused the museum of using the argument for quality to mask their racist agenda.

A much larger demonstration occurred on March 30. Three hundred demonstrators gathered in MOMA's garden. There, amidst signs like "Bury the Mausoleum of Art" young artists read the thirteen points and made countless speeches, repeatedly demanding a "Martin Luther King Jr. Wing for Black and Puerto Rican Art." A little over a week later, the Art Workers' Coalition held another "Speak Out" at the School of Visual Arts on East 23rd Street. Over 350 artists "mostly under thirty" assembled.⁷⁹

The snowball of protest grew, exploding into numerous graphic demonstrations. The Guerrilla Art Action group, a subcommittee of the Art Workers' Coalition, staged a "performance art" protest in the lobby of the Guggenheim Museum. Placing large packets of ketchup under their shirts, protestors "clawed" each other to release the red stain. Lying on the floor of the museum lobby, bloodied by ketchup, their bodies symbolized the "murder" of the artist by the Art Establishment. The Guerrillas also threw washable paint all over the museum's lobby.⁸⁰

Within the larger all-encompassing goals of the Art Workers' Coalition, the specific demands for fuller institutional support and recognition of the black artist could get lost. During the alternative "People's Show," organized by the Art Workers' Coalition in November 1970 at Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, visual artists shared the stage with poets, and Black Panthers shared the stage with Abbie Hoffman, the white feminist scholar and activist Kate Millett and members of the Gay Liberation Front. Yet, just as the Black Panthers promoted alliances with multiracial anticapitalist groups like the Brown Berets, Young Lords, Red Guards, the Young Patriots, and antiwar peace activists, many young visual artists did not see a fundamental conflict between their Black nationalism and their solidarity with other artists seeking to change the status quo.⁸¹

The most furious protests with the most sweeping agendas occurred in 1970. On May 18, 1970, two thousand artists gathered at the New York University's Loeb Student Center for a "tumultuous" meeting to raise the art agitation to a more grandiose condemnation of the Vietnam War and to make plans for a citywide "Art Strike." It was conceptualized as a complete shutdown of the city's museums to protest "racism, repression, sexism and war." Here, was a highly revolutionary attempt to redefine the role of the museum. Perhaps Thomas Hoving had challenged the art world to become more "relevant" to practical life, but these youthful agitators pushed the challenge even further: the museum as cultural institution must join in the protest of social injustice. The artists chose May 22, 1970 for the Art Strike to take place and began to dismantle their shows in preparation. As he pulled down his sculpture from the Jewish Museum, Robert Morris, a well-known white sculptor, told the press that the point of the strike was "to underscore the need I and others feel to shift priorities at this time from *art making and viewing* to unified action within the art community against the intensifying conditions of repression, war and racism in this country."⁸² While most artists complied and dismantled their shows, the four-day notice and the "dictatorial" tone of the protestors angered New York

City's **museum** directors. (One Met official likened them to "Nazis.") They also feared to take such an overtly political act.

The museums were plagued by an identity crisis. Was the role of the **museum** to be a "repository of treasures" or a "social instrument"? Was it the role of the art **museum** to criticize U.S. foreign policy? Despite the protests of many **museum** trustees, the Jewish and the Whitney closed down, the Guggenheim took down its art, and MOMA suspended admission and showed war photos and films. In solitary resistance, the Metropolitan **Museum** of Art stayed open five extra hours. In response, Art Strikers staged an orderly sit-in on the Met's steps.

Evaluating the success of the Art Strike proved elusive. The protestors celebrated their power and the transformation of the art **museum** (at least for a day). Feeling invincible, a delegation of young artists traveled to Washington to personally inform Senators Jacob Javits and Claiborne Pell of the New York City art community's condemnation of the Vietnam War. The Senators "expressed puzzlement, condescension and perhaps contempt, and implied that the disapproval of artists—unlike, they suggested, that of doctors or air traffic controllers—would hardly constitute grounds for change."⁸³ The focus abruptly shifted back to **museum** reform.

Back in New York, artists continued their protests. The first day of the 1970 Association of American Museums' (AAM) annual convention began quite differently than any other year. Before the first meeting could be called to order by president William Steere, members of the Art Strike entered the ballroom and positioned themselves along the walls and the doors. They wore stenciled signs reading, "Art Strike Against Racism, Sexism, Repression and War." One protestor walked up to the podium and announced that the convention had this new theme. Thirty joined him on the stage and demanded that their speaker, Ralph Ortiz, director of the community **museum** El Museo del Barrio be allowed to address the audience at once. Ortiz angrily denounced museums for refusing to take a stand on the "vital issues of the day." Although President Steere adjourned the meeting for that day, most delegates remained to listen and, in some instances, to confront the protestors. Many delegates were sincerely interested in the artists' grievances and participated in ad hoc committee meetings—they, too, were rethinking the role of the **museum**. In these smaller groups, the demands of the artists were debated and revised before being presented to the general meeting for a vote at the end of the week. The discussions tempered the original "demands" of the artists into more moderate "resolutions" agreeable to the attendant members of the AAM. For example, where originally the Art Strike demanded that: "All urban museums are to devote 15% of their total funds the first year, 20% the second year, increasing to 40% of their total funds toward decentralizing **museum** facilities and services, e.g. inner city museums, community art programs, establishment of intern programs for Blacks, Mexicans, American Indians, Puerto Ricans, and other oppressed

people,” the final proposal simply agreed to “give high priority” to decentralization efforts. In another original demand, Art Strike called for the AAM to “declare as inseparable from the freedoms under which the arts flourish, the immediate release of the Black Panthers and all political prisoners in this country.” Instead the final resolution read that AAM agreed to “oppose” “political arrests and persecution as that of the Black Panthers.”⁸⁴

Even with such changes in tone and specificity, only the first resolution (a bland proposal for a conference to discuss the role of the community in museum activities) even reached debate. Thomas Hoving introduced the resolution, emphasizing that “although the protestors were using harsh language, the goals they sought were essentially the same as being discussed at the conference—how to make museums more germane to the issues of our time.”⁸⁵ But debate stalled on the wording of the resolutions and it took an hour for a weak and toothless version of the first resolution to be passed. AAM members walked out to lunch and the Art Strikers’ attempted revolution ended. The week did draw attention to the art museum’s internal attempts at self-examination. As one observer put it, “The demonstrators served as a catalytic agent, speeding up a process already underway.”⁸⁶

Nevertheless, the “process” crept along too slowly for the Art Strikers and they sustained their protests into the 1970s. The militant tone remained, but fissures in the movement were evident. As we have seen, the specific concerns of the black community motivated much of the Art Workers’ Coalition and Art Strike agitation. This was due in large part to the leadership of Tom Lloyd. Yet there were times when the black artist subcommittee was at odds with the larger group of Art Workers’ Coalition. One example involved the Metropolitan Museum’s sixty million dollar master plan to expand its present structure into Central Park. The Art Strike and the Art Workers’ Coalition, as well as many other smaller black community groups, were opposed to this plan believing that the money would be better used to decentralize the museum and expand its community-oriented activities. They believed that the traditional art museum was a relic, irrelevant to the lives of their communities. Tom Lloyd, however, was deeply involved in talks with the Met to create a black art study center with a library, slides, concerts, and films. Despite his continued support for community art institutions, specifically The Studio Museum, Lloyd became vocal in support of the extension plan, securing the resentment of many of his fellow artists.⁸⁷

There were other cracks in the united front of black artists as well. With more and more museums mounting all-black exhibits in response to the artist-militant agitation, female artists (organized as WAR: Women Artists in Revolution) questioned the lack of art by African American female artists. The artist Dindga McCannon, who supplemented her canvases of black subjects and themes with multiple murals in Harlem and a children’s center, described how racial and sexual caste systems interfaced in black female artists’ lives: “First of

all there's the problem for any Black artist in this racist society. The Art world is nothing but a huge Bigot Now as a woman you've got a double problem. First of all, most people don't take you serious(Black institutions) . . . some will accept your work but they will not do the same things that they'll do for men; like heavy advertising."⁸⁸ But their efforts to get male artists to boycott in solidarity the shows that marginalized them were often unsuccessful. The lure of being shown in an art museum was simply too strong.⁸⁹

Finally, the theoretical debate over the meaning of the black aesthetic proved divisive, playing itself out in passionate angry rhetoric. In the Art Workers' Coalition's factious meetings in preparation for the Art Strike, artists hotly debated what black art looked like. Could artists agree on the stylistic manifestation of the black aesthetic? Most defined it by the art's *usefulness* to the project of black liberation. As phrased by artist Dana Chandler, "Black artists should devote their time to expressing the needs, aspirations, philosophy, and life style of their people. They should deal with the social problems that black people are having in this racist society, so that there will be an accurate record of our progress from an oppressed to a free people."⁹⁰

But what this record should look like divided the art community. Many artists explored African culture in their work and celebrated the African heritage. During this period, Benjamin Jones worked with plaster masks, painting each in bright colors inspired by the tribal rituals of Africa. Others took their inspiration from the city neighborhoods around them and painted scenes of the urban ghetto. Portraits celebrated historical figures and heroes in the African American community: Martin Luther King, Bessie Smith, Jack Johnson. Elizabeth Catlett's *Sharecropper* (1970) is a powerful, highly stylized woodcutting of the upper torso of an anonymous black sharecropper. All these works took for their inspiration subjects that were absent from the walls of the traditional art museum.

Confrontational canvases documented the racism of American life. The American flag, for example, served as a frequent subject of black art in the 1960s and 1970s. Philip Lindsay Mason's *The Deathmakers* (1968) depicts two skeletons in police uniforms pointing to the slain body of Malcolm X. The stars and stripes of the American flag function as backdrop to the death scene. In Faith Ringgold's *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (1967–69), the stripes of the flag spell "NIGGER." In another canvas, the stripes drip as if made of blood. Such paintings provided powerful indictments of American society. "Art should be inseparable from the reality of the black community," explained Edward Spriggs (director of The Studio Museum in Harlem) in describing the black aesthetic.⁹¹

In promoting the black aesthetic, many of the cultural nationalists condemned African American artists who continued to create art in the Western tradition. Tom Lloyd harshly condemned "brown art" by African American artists that he judged not "black" enough. What did that mean? As Amiri Baraka explained, they were "whiteartists in Black face," artists who were "brainwashed."⁹² But others criticized Lloyd's light sculptures as not "black" enough either. Such

accusations were ultimately vague and undermined the artists' solidarity. In turn, other black artists criticized the work of the more militant protestors. Henri Ghent, the original organizer of the counter exhibit to the Whitney Museum's all-white show on the 1930s, claimed that "nationalist" artists were "too preoccupied with *what* they have to say rather than how *well* it should be said." Other young artists denied the concept of "black art" altogether: "I have mixed feelings about anyone being cubby holed in a show of 'black' art," complained one young artist who preferred to describe his art as "mainstream" rather than "black."⁹³

Such emphasis on form by the agitators limited the success of the visual artists' agitation and the **museum** protests. Such contentious wrangling over formalistic categories tore at the organizational strength and unity of the protestors. Even today, this emphasis on form continues to limit understanding of the Black Arts Movement itself. For purposes of analysis, art historians quite reasonably classify the artists of this period into categories according to style and medium: one artist's work might be "mainstream" and another's "black." But this type of grouping obfuscates the vitality and vibrancy of the visual artists' contribution to the Black Arts Movement. For example, in a show mounted as a rebuttal to the 1971 Whitney Annual, the works by African American artist Betty Blayton were reviewed very favorably by a *New York Times* critic who suggested that she cannot "be called a black artist except by race." The critic goes on to wonder why she is involved in the boycott and "interested in what an artist happens to be."⁹⁴ It is true that her abstract oil collages, formless and nonrepresentational, deviates stylistically from some theorists' formalistic criteria for "Black Art." Yet as director of the Children's Art Carnival in Harlem, and advocate of art as a vehicle of self-actualization and black pride, she was an essential member of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. Ironically, even **Tom Lloyd**, militant cultural nationalist and Art Worker, is usually defined as "mainstream" in art textbooks. His sculptures are considered abstract and therefore incapable of making a social or political statement. But to distinguish **Lloyd** from the Black Arts and Black Power Movements is both ahistorical and absurd.

If attempts to define a revolutionary aesthetics undermined the solidarity of African American artists determined to topple the seemingly "impenetrable" walls of New York City's art museums, it still must be emphasized that a dialogue was produced that redefined the relationship between politics and culture. Black artists pointed out that "aesthetic merit" as defined by the New York "art world" was not objectively determined, nor universally accepted. Instead, cries of "quality" often masked deep-rooted cultural and racial prejudices that served to strengthen the maintenance of an unequal society. The Black Arts Movement opened the artistic canon. Although the quieting of the New York art world in the 1970s corresponded with the decline of the Black Power Movement, the legacy is one of revolution. Even if it would never become the political animal envisioned by the Art Workers' Coalition, the art **museum** continued to wrestle with its new identity as a social instrument in its community.

NOTES

1. Edward Spriggs, "The Studio Museum in Harlem," *Black Shades* 2 (November 1971): 46–47.
2. Ibid., 47–48; emphasis mine.
3. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Also, the artist Randy Williams' 1974 comment, "New York City is most likely the world center of chaos, as well as the heart of the art world." Randy Williams, "The Black Art Institution," *Black Creation* (1974–1975): 6.
4. While there are brilliant and comprehensive scholarly studies of African American art, they do not chronicle the social history of black art activism in New York City, which instead is found by examining contemporary newspaper and journal coverage. But for excellent overviews of the work of African Americans from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first, it is imperative to begin with Samella Lewis, *African American Art and Artists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) and Richard Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003).
5. As will be discussed in the essay, African American artists' efforts to combat the entrenched racism of the American art museum encompassed a spectrum of goals and strategies ranging from reformist to radical. Furthermore, it will be argued that many of the artists themselves simultaneously embraced goals that appeared contradictory: supporting separate black art institutions while at the same time continuing to seek more representation of African American artists in the larger museums, for example. It is the task of this essay to define the ideological differences among the coalition of activist artists while at the same time recognizing that the line between "moderate" and "militant" was often a fluid one (frequently dependent upon "the eye of the beholder"). In this regard, I am indebted to William Van Deburg's brilliant and nuanced portrayal of the Black Power Movement. In addition to scrupulously painting a multifaceted movement of ideological variance, he carefully acknowledges how the "empowering spirit of blackness" that animated the Black Power and Black Arts Movements were "evident, in embryo" in earlier, "moderate" Civil Rights programs and creative artists. "Nevertheless, the ultimate concerns of the two movements were more compatible than contradictory. The latter would not have existed but for the former while the former was an incomplete formulation of the latter." William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 24. Larry Neal, one of the most significant philosophers of the Black Arts Movement and, in his own words, "never an admirer of Rev. King," wrote of the importance of the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power Movement: "In spite of the short term goals of these organizations, they have contributed significantly to the growth of black consciousness. The freedom rides, the sit-ins, bus boycotts, Selma March, Meredith March, Harlem rebellion, Watts rebellion, Newark rebellion, school take-overs, and the explosion of black culture all grow out of a conglomerate will towards black liberation." Larry Neal, "New Space/The Growth of Black Consciousness in the Sixties," in *The Black Seventies*, ed. Floyd B. Barbour (Boston: Porter Sargent Publisher, 1970), 10.
6. Literature on the role of culture in the centuries old African American freedom struggle prior to the Black Power Movement is rich and extensive. The following is a small sample of the exceptional historical work available: Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); Maria

Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen, eds., *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Dexter B. Gordon, *Black Identity: Rhetoric, Ideology and Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalism* (Carbondale: South Illinois University Press, 2003); Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Stanley Nelson, prod., *Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind* (Boston: Firelight/Half Nelson Productions for American Experience/WGBH Educational Foundation, 2001); Wilson Jeremiah Moses, ed., *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Aldon Morris, "The Black Church in the Civil Rights Movement," in *Disruptive Religion: the Force of Faith in Social-Movement Activism*, ed. Christian Smith (New York: Routledge, 1996).

7. Van Deburg, *New Day*, 165; Scot Brown, *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). Larry Neal described precisely the multiple manifestations of "black self-determination" including the actions of people who never officially joined political groups: "For example, take the concept of 'Black Consciousness.' When the thing got really going, black people in different places developed unique and often contradictory attitudes toward it; they operated out of the principle along a variety of different styles. Some people joined the Muslims. Some people stopped eating certain foods. Other people, just as sincere as the first group, began to relish those very same tabooed foods. Some people put on African clothing. Most wore naturals. Some wore brighter colors. Some raised hell in school. Some left their white wives and black husbands. Some joined RAM or the Black Panther Party. Some dug B. B. King, and some dug Coltrane. But shit. *It was all good and on time*. It was collective energy that could be harnessed and organized." Neal, "New Space," 11–12.

8. George Breitman, ed., *By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews and a Letter by Malcolm X* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970) reprinted in Van Deburg, *New Day*, 5.

9. Hoyt Fuller, "The Question of Aesthetics," *Black World* 24: 2 (1974): 50.

10. Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1971), 257.

11. Etheridge Knight, as quoted in James Cunningham, "Getting On with the Get On," *Arts in Society* 6: 3 (1969): 390.

12. Elsa Honig Fine, "The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity," *Art Journal* 29: 1 (1969): 32; Robert Chrisman, "The Formation of a Revolutionary Black Struggle," *Black Scholar* 1: 8 (1970): 2; Fuller, "Aesthetics," 49.

13. Eugene Perkins, "The Black Arts Movement: Its Challenge and Responsibility," *The Black Seventies*, ed. Floyd B. Barbour (Boston: Porter Sargent Publisher, 1970), 88–89.

14. *Ibid.*, 88.

15. Francis and Val Gray Ward, "The Black Artist—His Role in the Struggle," *Black Scholar* 2: 5 (1971): 23.

16. "... missionaries who are dedicated to helping black people move from a negative state of existence to a positive state of survival." Perkins, "Black Arts Movement," 94.

17. "The art can remain legitimate only to the extent that it is relevant in helping liberate black people." Perkins, "The Black Arts Movement," 94.

18. Francis and Val Gray Ward, "The Black Artist," 23.
19. Martin Kilson, "What is a Black Aesthetic?" (speech delivered at Lincoln University in Chicago on March 21, 1974) reprinted in *Black World* 24: 2 (1974): 30, 44–48. Quote may be found on p. 44.
20. Ibid., 46.
21. Ibid., 47.
22. Larry Neal, "Black Art and Black Liberation," in *"Takin' It to the Streets": A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 163; Addison Gayle, Jr., "What is a Black Aesthetic?" *Black World* 24: 2 (1974): 31–43.
23. Gayle, Jr., "What is a Black Aesthetic?," 39; in his contribution to Addison Gayle's volume on the Black Aesthetic, theorist and poet Don L. Lee wrote, "a blk/aesthetic does exist, but how does one define it? . . . or is it necessary to define it? I suggest, at this time, that we not try." Don L. Lee, "Toward a Definition: Black Poetry of the Sixties (After LeRoi Jones)" quoted in William L. Van Deburg, *New Day*, 182. For an excellent discussion of the various manifestations of cultural nationalism during the Black Power Movement, see chapter 5 of *New Day*: "Black Power in Afro-American Culture: Folk Expressions."
24. Robert Blauner, "The Question of Black Culture," in *Black America*, ed. John F. Szwed (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1970), 119.
25. "The Black Artist in America: A Symposium," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 27: 5 (1969): 245.
26. Ibid., 246.
27. For an excellent discussion of the white emphasis on "moderation" as a key tactic in delaying social change, see William Henry Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).
28. "A Symposium," 246.
29. Ibid., 256.
30. Ibid., 258–59.
31. Ibid., 249.
32. Ibid., 256, 253, 251, 249.
33. Ibid., 248, 249.
34. Ibid., 252.
35. Ibid., 260.
36. Ibid., 253.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 246.
39. Ibid., 250, 254.
40. Ibid., 259, 251–52.
41. Ibid., 251.
42. "Black artists should be working in Black communities." Ibid., 248.
43. Ibid., 254.
44. "I'm not only concerned with art. With me art is a secondary thing." Ibid., 251.
45. Ibid., 260.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., 256.

48. Ibid., 253.
49. Ibid., 260.
50. Jeanne Siegel, "Why Spiral?" *ARTnews* 65: 5 (1966): 49.
51. "A Symposium," 248.
52. Randy Williams, "The Studio **Museum** in Harlem," *Black Creation* (Winter 1973): 50; Williams, "The Black Art Institution," 60–62.
53. Williams, "The Black Art Institution," 62.
54. "Community Galleries," *ARTGallery* 12: 4 (1969): 48–50; Jean Bergantino Grillo, "Studio **Museum** in Harlem: A Home for the Evolving Black Esthetic," *ARTnews* 72: 8 (1973): 47–49; Elsa Honig Fine, *The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 185–90.
55. Grillo, "A Home," 48.
56. *New York Times*, 16 November 1971; Richard Weiner, "Artists in Prison," *American Artist* 36: 354 (1972): 8.
57. Benjamin Gilman, *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1923), xi.
58. Hilton Kramer, "Artists and the Problem of 'Relevance,'" *New York Times*, May 4, 1969, 23.
59. Grillo, "A Home," 49.
60. "A Symposium," 259; Williams, "The Studio **Museum**," 50.
61. As will be discussed more directly in the next section, black **museum** curators defiantly responded to white critics' charges that their museums were "overly inner-directed" or "often exhibiting work of poor quality." But rather than abandoning the word "quality" as immaterial perhaps to their project of "relevance" they often justified their choices and the artists' work by appealing to dominant aesthetic values.
62. Grillo, "A Home," 49.
63. Henri Ghent, "White is Not Superior," *New York Times*, December 8, 1968, 39.
64. *New York Times*, January 15, 1969, 41.
65. *New York Times*, November 18, 1968; Ghent, "White is Not Superior," 43.
66. Hilton Kramer, "Differences in Quality," *New York Times*, November 24, 1968, 27.
67. Ghent, "White is Not Superior," 43.
68. Thomas Hoving, *Making the Mummies Dance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 165.
69. Benny Andrews, "The BECC," *Arts Magazine* 44: 8 (1970): 18.
70. Amy Goldin, "Harlem Out of Mind," *Art News* 68: 1 (1969): 52.
71. Hoving, *Making the Mummies Dance*, 169.
72. Andrews, "The BECC," 18.
73. *New York Times*, January 15, 1969, 41.
74. Hoving, *Making the Mummies Dance*, 167.
75. Jervis Anderson, "On the Edge of Hell," *New York Times*, January 26, 1969, 31.
76. Fine, "The Afro-American Artist," 193.
77. JoAnn Whatley, "Meeting the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition," *ABA: A Journal of Affairs of Black Artists* 1: 1 (1972): 5.
78. Therese Schwartz, "The Politicalization of the Avant-Garde, III," *Art in America* 61(1973): 67–71; *New York Times*, March 31, 1969.