It's A Black Thing—You Wouldn't Understand:
The Wall of Respect, Africobra, and the Birth of a New Aesthetic

By

JAMES WELLINGTON PHILLIPS
B.A., The University of British Columbia, 1997

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

In
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Department of Fine Arts)

We accept this thesis as conforming
To the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

OCTOBER 2000-10-14

James Wellington Phillips, 2000
In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of **Fine ARTS**

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date **October 17, 2000**
ABSTRACT

FOR US BY US: BLACK POWER POLITICS AS ART

It's tough to make a living when you're an artist,
It's even tougher when you're socially conscious
Careerism, opportunism, can turn your politics into cartoonism...

Michael Franti

During the late 1960's in America, Black people began to realize the failures of the Civil Rights Movement. Their previous desire for non-violent integration, --which had sparked behavior in the white community ranging from violent opposition to benign neglect—had radicalized to embrace a notion of separatism and liberation from America. Black Cultural Nationalism called for Black Power and an affirmation of the currency of Black culture that required representation. The Black Arts Movement attempted to meet these needs by attempting to establish a Black Aesthetic. Qualities of Black art and the Black aesthetic were hotly debated in the media as both black and white writers argued the relevancy of black art. The Black aesthetic advocated a return to figuration and social realism, deemed essential to communicate with the black masses, as well as an espousal of the political responsibility of the artist. The critique of a black art was based on the argument that the category ghettoized and essentialized black artists. Instead a Greenbergian modernist aesthetic was embraced that favored abstraction over figuration, perceiving figurative art as low art. This was the dilemma faced by the politically minded artist in Franti's lyric. How can an artist make aesthetically valid art and maintain its access—and relevancy to Black people. An articulation of these black cultural problems needed a specific visual vocabulary.

In my paper I will examine the art coalition called Africobra—The African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists-- as they attempted to negotiate the fine line between socially relevant and aesthetically viable art. Formed in Chicago in the wake of the 1968 Democratic Convention Riots, Africobra wanted to produce and exhibit art specifically for Black people without their art being dismissed as protest art. By merging their figurative art with African color schemes and textile patterns, Africobra aspired to create their own type of African-influenced social commentary. They chose Africa as a source of pride as the 'dark continent' had recently shed its colonial ties to emerge as a free land for Black
people. Africa thus represented ties to a forgotten past, and hope for an independent future for American Blacks.

My thesis will focus on an event that galvanized the Black Arts Movement, and brought together the artists that would later form Africobra. That event was the 1967 creation of the Wall of Respect, a public mural on the south side of Chicago that depicted images of Black heroes and contemporary politics. Using the mural as well as Africobra prints and paintings, I will argue that their work questioned conventional aesthetics and endeavored to create a space for a new black aesthetic. This merging of social realism and African color was made more poignant by the inclusion of African notions of the functional communal object. By returning to their African roots, Africobra was critiquing the Western art world while glorifying their own heritage. By doing this they believed that they could inject some much needed color into White America.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT**

**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

**INTRODUCTION**

PART I: Say It Loud I'm Black and Proud: A Fertile Genesis

PART II: The Black Arts Movement and the Rebirth of Pan-Africanism

PART III: Black Power—Takin' It To the Streets

PART IV: The Wall of Respect Heroes: The Politics of Inclusion (and exclusion)

PART V: Revolutionary Art: A Mexican Import

PART VI: Black Face vs. Art World Interface: A New Criticism Was Needed

PART VII: Fanon and the Colonized Mind

PART VIII: The Ghetto Museum vs. White Museums—Black Art Activism

PART IX: The Harlem Renaissance and the Birth of Pan-Africanism

PART X: Black Art and White Critics—A War of Words

PART XI: A Change Is Coming: A Painted Newspaper—A Ghetto Construct

PART XII: Cobra vs. Africobra—In Search of a Nationalist Audience

PART XIII: Some Final Thoughts On Africobra, Black Identity and Hip Hop Culture

**ILLUSTRATIONS**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

APPENDIX I: OBAC Visual Arts Workshop Wall of Respect Heroes

APPENDIX II: Poem 1 by Gwendolyn Brooks. Poem 2 by Don L. Lee

APPENDIX III: CONFABA- Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. OBAC, Original Wall of Respect mural, 43rd and Langley, Chicago 1967.
4. Diego Rivera, Man At the Crossroads, 1932.
5. Rivera, Man At the Crossroads, detail.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I consider myself very fortunate for having chosen the University of British Columbia as
the place to complete my graduate work. The openness of Professor Serge Guilbaut to
my topic, and the generous and rigorous critique of Professor Scott Watson were both
instrumental to me finishing this thesis. I am grateful for the camaraderie of the students
and the mentality, encouraged by faculty like Professor Ryan among others, that helping
one another should take precedence over competition. In my tenure at UBC I have
realized that the approachability and accessibility of the faculty that is a privilege that I
am exceedingly grateful for.

I would like to thank those of my friends that listened, seemingly tirelessly as I thought
my thesis into being out loud in phone calls and conversations. There are many people I
could single out, but Chantal Gibson for all she has done and for all her encouragement,
intelligence, and insight, and Geoff Reid, my technical expert and supportive friend even
while on his sickbed. Sandy rosin was an unlikely, but invaluable resource that gave me
a base to work from, and Melanie O’Brian’s criticisms helped me to finally be pleased
with my own work. I would also like to thank the multitude of people who made it a point
to ask me how my thesis was going just to show they cared.

Most of all I would like to thank my family who, despite being far away let me know that
they supported my efforts. My only regret is that my mother never lived to see this
project through to completion, but I know that wherever she is, she is beaming with pride
and love.
INTRODUCTION

Art projects beyond race & color, beyond America. Counter-racism, hyper awareness of difference of separateness arising within the black artist himself, is just as destructive to his work, and his life - as the threat of white prejudice coming at him from outside.¹

Raymond Saunders

The battle we are waging now is the battle for the minds of black people... It becomes very important then, that art plays the role it should play in Black survival and not bog itself down in the meaningless madness of the western world wasted.²

Maulana Ron Karenga

During the 1960's the struggle for civil rights in America began to fracture as Negro radical groups, dissatisfied with the incremental gains of pacifist lobby groups that had attempted to redress racial inequalities through constitutional amendments. This emergent radicalism demanded a cultural aspect that became known as Black cultural nationalism. The alteration in the term of self-identity from Negro to Black person became the cultural marker that delineated the new Black radicalism from the integrationist Civil Rights Movement. Opposition to the Vietnam War united disaffected youth of all races who rebelled against the hegemony of the military industrial complex, the real basis of American democratic practice. In fact, “[t] he Viet Nam War was a lightning rod for the social disaffection mirrored in the struggle of Black Americans for equality and justice. In America, liberation and revolution became the watchwords of the decade, as resistance to the war made strange bedfellows of radical youth, hippies, musicians and artists, Labor, feminists, and politicos of every stripe—from the Black Panthers and the White Panthers to the Yippies and the Weathermen.”³ The uniting of radicals for the attainment of the common goals of equality and liberation experienced major setbacks when the agendas of radical groups clashed. The Black Nationalist Movement separated itself from the White radicals but in order to present a united front,

¹ Raymond Saunders, Black Is A Color, self-published pamphlet. Oakland, California 1967. An excerpt was of this essay was published in Arts Magazine (Summer 1967) 6, as a letter to the editor in response to an on article on Black art by Ishmael Reed.
they attempted to adopt an, 'end justifies the means policy,' by squelching ideological differences to act in unison.

The opening two quotes illustrate two differing views on how the Black Nationalist attempt at hegemony in the arts was fracturing into factions that became harder and harder to bridge. Raymond Saunders, an Oakland-based artist, was disturbed by cultural nationalists like Maulana Ron Karenga, who attempted to enforce a specific role for artists, and to denounce any artists who did not ascribe to the edicts of cultural nationalism. Black Nationalist belief held that contemporary Modernist art practice was devoid of social value, as it contrasted with African art, which was deemed functional as art objects were utilized in ceremonies and other communal events. Pan-Africanism, an aspect of Black Nationalism, became the resource for a disenfranchised Black people to identify with a culture that was different than European culture (which they saw as decrepit), and Africa was promoted as the source of Black identity and empowerment. The debate around how the Black struggle for liberation should be depicted, was essential, and often essentializing to many African-American artists. Africobra, a Black art coalition from Chicago responded to this crisis in representation by merging popular culture, music and pan-africanist imagery to negotiate the slippery slope that the espousal of a Black aesthetic had become by the late 1960's.

The birth of Africobra was also a renaissance of mural art as the format to depict revolutionary ideology. Africobra formed from a group of young Chicago artists who came together to form the Visual Arts Workshop of the community-based Organization of Black American Culture or OBAC. OBAC's only group work was the Wall of Respect, an outdoor mural executed on Chicago's South side in the Black ghetto. OBAC used media-style images of Black subjects that they deemed heroic in their historic or contemporary striving for Black empowerment. These Black heroes were selected from various disciplines including sports, theatre, film, religion and politics that meshed with certain Black Nationalist beliefs. The selection of subject matter for a public art piece is often problematic and the powder keg that was race relations in America did not help, as the Wall of Respect became the death knell for OBAC. The artists that went on to form Africobra continued the use of heroic Black images and their concerns for public art in their easel painting and prints. Africobra and their art was a response to a particular
moment in American racial politics as the battle over identity demanded new strategies, and Africobra replied with poster-style imagery designed to uplift the ‘souls of Black folk,’ engage them aesthetically and politically, and reconstitute Blackness and heal the fractures that were forming.

Part1: Say it loud I’m Black and proud: A Fertile Genesis

Imagine that you are a Black youth walking on Chicago’s south side in the wake of the latest and most devastating rash of civil insurrections in 1967 that have also decimated other urban centers such as Newark, Detroit, and Watts. Your meandering gaze encounters dismal tenement housing, vacant lots, broken glass and other detritus, and most strikingly, abject poverty prevails. As you come to the corner of 43rd and Langley, the concrete conformity produced by economic depression is ruptured as an awesome sight confronts you (figure 1). Bursting from the two-story wall are not faded or tattered billboard adds selling cigarettes, alcohol or some other unhealthy product to those who can barely afford it, but instead bright and colourful images of Black people ‘advertising’ Black pride and history. Upon closer inspection we can recognize some of these figures from television, magazines, and other media. In the central position, occupying the bay window is the outspoken boxing champion Muhammad Ali, fists raised triumphantly as if celebrating one of his many boxing victories. On the upper left are militant political activists Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown and at eye-level we are face-to-face with the Honourable Elijah Mohammed, spiritual leader of the Nation of Islam as he gives a speech. This ‘colourful’ wall is a visual lesson in Black history and culture—figures from literature, politics, sports and entertainment are depicted in majestic poses of dignity and pride—certainly worthy of our admiration and respect. The Organization of Black American Culture or OBAC, a community-based organization that coordinated local cultural projects in writing, music, theatre and the visual arts, executed this mural. It is no wonder that this mural became the impetus behind an urban mural movement that has produced at least fifteen hundred murals nationwide.

Indulge me as I transport you once more, this time to The Studio Museum in Harlem for the 1970 exhibit by Africobra, entitled “10 In Search of a Nation.” The ten refers to the artists who adhered to a notion that their art was for Black people only, and they created
a program of aesthetic criteria designed to facilitate more direct communication with the Black community. Africobra, an acronym for African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists produced what they considered African influenced 'bad' or funky art that was direct and relevant to contemporary social issues involving the struggle for a liveable black identity within the racist melting pot that is America. At the Harlem exhibition, prideful images of Black people rendered in what the artists call 'koolade colors' dominate the gallery's white walls. Glossy semi-psychedelic portraits by members Wadsworth Jarrell and Nelson Stevens (figure 2), feature scenes and portraits that are constructed with bold, cartoon-like text to ensure their comprehension and impact on the wounded psyche of Black Americans. These images worked to project a nationalistic consciousness of capability and pride for and among Black people. They flirt with abstraction with complexity and humour as the works conflate social awareness and aesthetics in a melange of visually activated and racially concerned messages. Africobra shows an awareness of some of the possible pitfalls of socially conscious artwork that could possibly override the aesthetic concerns of the group and leave them with angry images that might evoke criticism as crude or unskilled. Their diverse modes of representation are linked in their adherence to an aesthetic that was optically captivating and ethnically expressive.5

These sardonic and ethnically expressive textual messages practice the French Situationist concept of detournement—the act of taking an artifact of the establishment and orienting it in a still recognizable fashion that changes the meaning in order to at the same time critique the establishment from which the artifact comes. In order to remain relevant to the Black community, but also to be taken seriously by the White American art establishment, Africobra needed to navigate specific issues of aesthetics in accordance with notions of social relevancy, in an attempt to negotiate a space for their attempts to define and delineate Black art as it was perceived in the late 1960's. By using images that were influenced by certain aspects of West African culture, they hoped to create an art that was descended from a Black cultural source.

Africa had become symbolic of independence and freedom since African nations, starting with Ghana in 1957 had begun to free themselves from European colonialist yokes and were being recognized by the United Nations as newly emergent nation

4 For a full list of the figures on the Wall of Respect, and the artists who painted them see Appendix 1.
states. Africobra and other groups with Black Nationalist concerns were inspired by the aspect of free Black nations and they focussed primarily on the Yoruba and Swahili speaking cultures as a way to get in touch with their 'roots.' Africobra consciously instilled an aesthetic in their work that would distinguish it from prevailing modernist paradigms and metanarratives and have thus been excluded from any discussions on contemporary art. They were most interested in promoting Black pride, as well as community and cultural awareness, which they did by the reaffirmation of ties to the history and culture of Africa. Using figurative images, bright colours, and calculated exhibition strategies, they aspired to create work that functioned as a visual equivalent to the Black Power Movements call to arms.

What do a 'Wall of Respect' in Chicago's South side and an art exhibition in uptown New York have in common? Five of the artists that created the 1967 mural formed the nucleus of Africobra's ten-member collective.⁶ Their mode of representation changed as did their audience to some degree, but their belief in the transformative power of art to uplift the spirit and pride of Black people remained unchanged. Africobra attempted to answer the question of representation in the Black Arts Movement: what kind of representation do Black people need? And what objectives should Black art aspire to? It is perhaps a testament to their tenacity and validity within the Black Diaspora that they still exist today and exhibit internationally as a group. I want to address the social and political issues at stake as Africobra attempted to forge a new Black Nationalist identity through their art. As Keith Morrison, artist and critic writes, "Africobra pioneered the use of stereotypical imagery as a basis for broad popular art. In a sense, this reflected a Black counterpoint to Pop Art. However, whereas Pop Art satirized melodrama, Africobra made expression from symbols of socio-political discontent."⁷ To Morrison, Pop art lacked serious social engagement; ambiguity and humour often diluted social messages, while Africobran edicts of cultural commentary were based on a belief that their aspect of critique was necessary to the scope of emerging modes of articulating Black identity. By analyzing the act of the creation of the Wall and its success, I will show how and why

⁵ Jeff Donaldson, “10 in Search of a Nation,” in Black World (October 1970) 80-89
⁶ The members of the group have changed over the years, but at the time of the 1970 exhibit they were, Jeff Donaldson, Nelson Stevens, Wadsworth Jarrell, Jae Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu, Ben Jones, Carolyn Lawrence, Omar Lama, Sherman Beck, and Gerald Williams.
Africobra navigated discourses in contemporary aesthetics to arrive at their strategy of producing their distinctive glossy poster-like images as a means of communication with their audience.

Part II: The Black Arts Movement and the Rebirth of Pan-Africanism

The *Wall of Respect* became the symbol of what the term Black art would come to describe—publicly circulated work in service of a cultural revolution. Blackness was already a politically loaded term and Black art became the way to measure the authenticity of art production by Black artists. Whether it was a measurement of how much soul one had, or if you were cool enough to be friends with a Black Panther, Black people were forced to declare themselves either for or against the Cultural Revolution that was to produce Black liberation. Black art took the place of Negro art, which was defined as art by those who sought White approval in their work, which could include artists that dealt with non-political topics or abstract forms. To the artists that considered themselves Black—those who brought politics into their subject matter—Abstractionists were sell-outs regardless of race. To better understand why Africobra chose poster style art that utilized abstract means as their medium, an analysis of OBAC’s earlier communal attempt to produce ‘art for the people’s sake’ is necessary. This notion defied the Eurocentric art world’s early modernist doctrine that art should not refer to social concerns, but only to its own precepts of form, in short, art for art’s sake. Instead, this group of Black artists viewed art as socially useful (or functional as they called it), and as such its primary function was to raise the consciousness of the people. For Africobra, art for the people should be produced with community input for the community and located within the community to create an ongoing dialogue between artists and their community. Thus the alienation and heroization of the artist were notions that the Black Arts Movement and Africobra were against. Communal projects and anti-individualism were the lofty anti-capitalist goals of this coalition of relevant artists. The question then became what mode of representation or medium would they choose to communicate their ideas of Black pride and consciousness? They chose the medium of posters, as posters were historically linked to the working class and the socially marginal as well as being inexpensive to reproduce. Art Historian Richard Powell described *Unite*  

---

9 “Is It Too Late For You To Be Friends With A Panther?” *Esquire Magazine* (November 1970) 144  
(figure 3), a work by Africobra member Barbara Jones-Hogu as a successful image for communicating the type of nationalist ideas that Africobra favoured. "The smooth colour overlays and poster-like colours illustrate how the silkscreen is a medium easily suited to the transmitting of fast information, polished polemics and media-bent message units."\(^{11}\)

In *Unite*, as in some of the group's other work, abstract forms are interwoven with realist figures so that it is extremely difficult to categorize them. By displaying their ability to utilize abstract concepts in these ways, they served notice to American critics that although their work was figurative, they were certainly aware of modernist debates over figurative and non-figurative works. *Unite* combines Black figures rising from an amorphous pool of Blackness to terminate in powerful raised Black fists. The area that the fists punctuate is full of colourful diagonal logos that announce through text, the theme of the image—unity. The bright colours and high gloss finish were designed to communicate with a particular audience—Black people who have lived their lives in the ghetto ostracized from White society. These images fill the space between commercially successful Black painters/collagists like Romare Bearden and the graphic poster production of Black Panther Minister of Culture, Emory Douglas. With the retrospective vision of nearly three decades, popular imagery from the 1970's has a resonance of authenticity as it captures the wit, humour and anger of those protesting on the margins. With this in mind it is clear that, "political posters--often considered the poor stepchildren of graphic arts because they sell unpopular ideas rather than a consumer product—must be viewed as potent graphic statements in their own right, not just because they are aesthetically engaging, but also because of what they say."\(^{12}\) As the excluded stepchildren of American culture, Black artists in the 1960's adopted this populist mode of dissemination of images to illicit community responses on social and political issues from ghetto poverty to police brutality.

The late 1960's were a moment when the schism between the Civil Rights liberals and the Black Nationalist militants demanded of its artists new modes of representation that embodied political messages. The integrationist agenda of the Civil Rights Movement had begun as a plea for equality with Whites based on the Democratic precepts of the

\(^{11}\) Richard J. Powell, "I Too, Am America, Protest and Black Power: Philosophical Continuities in Prints by Black Americans" *Black Art*. Vol. 2 no.3 (Spring 1978) 19

\(^{12}\) Susan Martin, "The Left Turn" *Decade of Protest: Political Posters From the United States Vietnam and Cuba 1965-1975* (Santa Monica 1996: Smart Art Press) 12
American constitution. The shift to Black Nationalism occurred when the open-handed plea was, in effect, slapped away by social practice of prejudice and racism and the rebuked open Black hand curled into an angry Black fist as many Black people no longer sought to prove their equality with Whites, but concentrated their efforts on building a separate Black Nation within America. Voting rallies and registration drives educated blacks on their ability to elect Black candidates that had their own concerns at heart, while writers and artists set about creating a separate Black art and culture that had at its base a repudiation of white values.

These artists looked to Africa, in particular West Africa as the ancestral home of African Americans through the advent of slavery. They studied Yoruba (West Africa's largest tribe) sculpture, music, textiles and literature as a way to reconnect with their cultural roots; a step Black Nationalists felt was imperative to establishing a culture based not on what was deemed White precepts, but on Black ones. The Civil Rights Movement's focus on integration lacked a critique of White American society beyond the issue of racial equality and had no concrete agenda for the role of art as they were not focussed on trying to build a Black culture. Civil rights doctrines merely wanted equal access to the culture-at-large, which was of course White society, and Civil Rights Negroes found themselves reliant upon the White media for imaging aspects of their struggle for equality. The Black Nationalists corrected this oversight by instituting and encouraging the Black Arts Movement—cultural nationalism that affected theater, music, literature and the visual arts. The time was ripe for a new Black avant-garde that represented Black Americans at a moment when they were emerging from their own colonized mindsets to embrace a pan-Africanist identity.

By this time in America, the attempts of civil rights action groups to lobby for legislated equality of black people reached an impasse. Although the Brown vs. Board of Education decision desegregated schools legally, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 guaranteed Blacks and other disenfranchised groups their constitutional right to vote, these measures were viewed by most blacks as token concessions. These statutory amendments could not and did not repeal attitudes enforced by centuries of prejudice and segregation. With the civil rights bid for equality and integration falling short of its
aim, the door was opened for a more strident action. Young student leaders, impatient with the lack of results that going through the proper channels produced, began to preach more extreme measures be taken.

Part III: Black Power—Takin' it to the Streets

With the advent of television, Black leaders had an unprecedented opportunity to inform White America of their plight and their strategies for change. The problem remained now that America was listening, what to say and how to say it. R & B singer James Brown expressed the prevailing sentiment among Black youth when he penned the lyrics to his hit single from 1969 *Say It Loud (I'm Black & Proud)*. Black Nationalism came to the political forefront as Black Americans began to realize that 20 million Black people in America constituted a nation within a nation. With this empowering knowledge, the integrationist approach was seen as a denial of Black cultural value, and gave way to an attempt to establish a more affirmative notion of an economically and culturally autonomous Black nation.

Any separation of a nation within a nation becomes, by definition, a civil war. The Watts Uprising in summer of 1965 sparked a series of summer rebellions that held America in paralytic indecision for two years. Following the 1967 riots in Chicago Detroit and Newark, Lyndon Johnson created the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders chaired by Illinois governor Otto Kerner. The exhaustive 600-page Kerner report controversially stated that *White racism* was essentially responsible for the explosive mixture, which had been accumulating in major American cities since the end of WWII.

According to the commission, the ingredients of this mixture the included:

*Pervasive discrimination* and segregation in employment, education and housing, which have resulted in the continuing exclusion of great numbers of Negroes from the benefits of economic progress.

*Black in-migration and white exodus*, which has produced the massive and growing concentrations of impoverished Negroes in our major cities, creating a growing crisis of deteriorating facilities and services and unmet human needs.

*The Black ghettos where segregation and poverty converge* on the young to destroy opportunity and enforce failure. Crime, drug addiction, dependency on welfare, and bitterness and resentment against society in general and white society in particular are the result.

---

Frustrated hopes are the residue of the unfulfilled expectations aroused by the great judicial and legislative victories of the Civil Rights Movement...

...A climate that tends toward approval and encouragement of violence as a form of protest has been created by white terrorism directed against nonviolent protest.\(^{14}\)

Despite the specific resolutions and redress that the Kerner Commission recommended to remedy the underlying causes of civil unrest, the government ignored the report and the problems that led to the urban outbreaks of violence continued. The summer of 1967 was the worst outbreaks of civil disobedience on record. Wholesale riots and looting left 40 dead, hundreds injured and arrested and 250 million dollars in property damage in Detroit alone.\(^{15}\)

Chicago also suffered much rioting, but the extensive property damage coincided with the civic governments desire for urban renewal. Relocation of poor Blacks to project housing literally paved the way for further commercial development and industrialization. Many Blacks quipped that the process of urban renewal was just an excuse for ‘Negro removal,’ as neighborhoods were demolished and Modernist Projects like the infamous Cabrini Green ghettoized Blacks into conformist cubes of living space. Writing about the failure of modernist architecture, Postmodernist Charles Jencks confesses that in his opinion it, “failed to remain credible partly because it didn’t communicate effectively with its ultimate users—and partly because it didn’t make effective links with the city and history.”\(^{16}\) Jencks writes that this failure resulted in public housing being destroyed as ‘social failures’ and ‘alienating housing.’\(^{17}\) In July 1967 the failure of this architecture became evident when Chicago’s south side around 43rd and Langley ‘went up,’ as riots caused extreme property damage, and the demolition of this building and several others faced the community. Nelson Stevens of Africobra agreed with Jencks when he stated in an interview on the function of public mural art that, “Cities weren’t built with beauty or Black people in mind. The landscape reflects a preoccupation with industry.”\(^{18}\) Therefore the painting of Black images on ghetto walls was perceived by many Blacks as a way to


\(^{17}\) Ibid. Pp15

\(^{18}\) Rich Thompson and Ron Alexander, “Public Art—The Aesthetics of the People: An Interview with Nelson Stevens.” Drum vol.6 no.1 (Winter 1975) 19
humanize their environment. The act of painting images of Black people worthy of respect was a guerrilla action, a way to focus community support and to culturally occupy community buildings and effectively stall their demolition. The more famous the walls became, the more embarrassing to the civic administration as their plans for urban renewal were frustrated by community pride in their walls. In 1969, some of the muralists from the Wall of Respect returned to this same intersection to paint a Wall of Truth across the street. A sign over a doorway on the second mural proclaimed their assertion of appropriation stating that, “We the People of this community claim this building in order to preserve what is ours.” Thus mural art became a way to assert cultural dominion over property within the Black community that its residents had been economically disenfranchised from. The Wall of Respect was an attempt to have art function in the service of the people, as paradoxically, the images decommodified the ghetto walls as communities rallied behind the works as community property that forestalled urban renewal projects—and thus profits—for many years in some cases.

The Visual Arts Workshop of OBAC (pronounced O-bas-ee, the Yoruba Word for chieftain) provided a necessary cultural ingredient by creating the Wall of Respect in conjunction with the Forty-Third Street Community Association. The project was thus a collaboration of cultural and community groups. OBAC had been formed the previous summer and was doing workshops in the community with people in the visual, literary and performing arts. The organization was founded by a group of Black intellectuals that included Gerald McWorter, a sociologist, Hoyt W. Fuller, the editor of Negro Digest (later Black World), and Jeff Donaldson, an artist and art historian, as well as members as diverse as a scientist, an attorney, and several university professors. According to Donaldson, OBAC’s goal was to “organize and coordinate an artistic cadre in support of the 1960’s bare-bones struggle for freedom, justice and equality of opportunity for African-Americans in the United States.” These artists perceived their work as a necessary cultural adjunct to the burgeoning Black Power political movement as they met to try and establish a socially conscious Black art practice.

21 Ibid. Pp 50
22 Ibid. Pp22
23 Ibid. Pp22
Part IV: The Wall of Respect Heroes: The Politics of Inclusion (and Exclusion)

William Walker, an interior muralist and professional sign painter, who had been living in the community for twelve years, brought the idea of a mural site to an OBAC meeting suggesting that there was adequate space on the 60ft x 22ft wall for other artists to “do their thing.” The Visual Arts Workshop decided that the theme for the wall would be Black heroes as they felt that Blacks in America lacked these type of images, and then submitted a list of Black athletes, entertainers, political and historical figures to the local community association to be voted on. The theme for the work was to be Black Heroes, role models for positive self-identification and guidance toward Black liberation. The workshop agreed on three specific courses of action; “first no signatures on the wall, second, all statements to the media would be subject to approval by the entire group, and finally the wall belonged to the community and there would be no individual or group attempt to capitalize on its popularity.”

It is significant to note that images of Civil Rights leader Reverend Martin Luther King jr. was vetoed, as was Roy Wilkins head of the NAACP in favor of Adam Clayton Powell jr., Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X. This signalled a particular bias toward the emergent Black Nationalist heroes and a rejection of the integrationist policies of the Civil Rights Movement, which had rapidly come to be considered a conservative bastion of American racial politics. The basis of their exclusion was not based on a rejection of the non-violent aspects of Civil Rights, but rather on the belief that the future of Blacks in America rested on the necessity of building a coherent Black culture, and therefore the Black Nationalists were given precedence.

By July 1967, the group had contributed enough of their own money to begin the project to build their new culture visually. Their intention was to create a site of memory for Black People with very specific connotations. The heroes on the wall were heroic in that they embodied Black Nationalist practices that had gained contemporary currency. In light of the cultural upheaval that characterized the struggle for civil rights, historic figures like Marcus Garvey, the leader of the Back-to-Africa movement, and WEB DuBois, a Harvard professor who wrote about the psychological schism between being a

---

25 Jeff Donaldson, The Rise, Fall and Legacy...Pp22
Black man and an American gained new audiences and cache in the late 60's. OBAC wanted to beautify the community and thus to beautify what Dubois described as the 'souls of black folk' by offering them heroic representations of Black People. By depicting Black heroes on a giant wall, they were trying to produce images of Black history within a society that had denied the existence of these heroic Blacks in most school histories. This erasure was not without consequences on the self image of Blacks as art historian and Africobra member Jeff Donaldson pointed out, “in 1967 Black people did not see themselves on billboards and in advertisements. These images presented a rare opportunity for Black people to experience a sense of solidarity with public imagery.”

Although the link between promoting historic figures and advertising seems contradictory, OBAC was using advertising strategies to promote interest and knowledge in separatist Black political history. The Wall of Respect celebrated Black achievement in theater, sports, music and literature as well as Black religious and political leaders. Of course, as in any cultural circumstance, there were exceptions like Jazz and Blues, which enjoyed fame and popularity among Whites also, but even these alternate cultural fields were mediated by the White power structure to maintain economic and critical control. Revolutionary musicians like John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman never attained the commercial status of a Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie or Louis Armstrong. The mural was an attempt to subvert the pervasive wall of silence around the production and reception of Black visual art and Black history. Black art and experience were conspicuously absent from mainstream culture and thus Blacks had been historically governed by the White race's standards of aesthetics and cultural practice.

Before the wall's dedication on August 24, 1967 with a poem by Pulitzer prize winner Gwendolyn Brooks, the “Great Wall of Respect”, had become a shrine to black creativity, and a national symbol for the heroism of the black struggle for cultural agency. Published in an Ebony magazine feature that gave the group and the mural national attention, OBAC's public statement of purpose asserted that:

"Because the Black Artist and the creative portrayal of the Black experience have been consciously excluded from the total spectrum of American arts, we want to provide a new context for the Black Artist in which he can work out his problems and pursue his aims unharnpered by the prejudices and dictates of the mainstream."^27

The wall was also viewed as a way to circumvent the black artist's exclusion from the mainstream gallery system and to provide a forum for Black artists to show their work publicly. Black mural art was perceived as a method to publicly validate Black art production by showing it in the community rather than hoping for approval and exhibitions in white-run institutions. As Boston artist Dana Chandler said, "Black art is not a decoration. It's a revolutionary force. There is no black art in the museum of Fine Arts, so we are going to utilize the facade of buildings in our community for our museum." The Wall then figured as a statement against the Western art world in both its subject matter and mode of representation. The work existed as an artwork outside of any kind of art institution. It represented the artist's projection of Black culture right into the heart of the community. The advent of the wall was an attempt to portray images expressly for Black people, but problems arose when issues of the stewardship of the Wall came into play. Who owned these images and who had a right to alter or maintain them? The liberating aims of OBAC were transformed into a hegemonic censorship as executive decisions over the space of the wall were contested as its popularity grew. The tale of the Wall of Respect is a tale that navigates the confusion characteristic of the 1960s, as many artists, Black and white, faced with cultural upheaval, felt compelled to comment on societal inequities.

Criticism of the Vietnam War, a point of contention between Civil Rights leaders and Black Nationalists, became a rally point for artists of any color. In the White art world, artists were also critiquing both governmental practice and the hierarchy in the art community that left the artist as the disempowered producer of a commodity who had no say as to how and where it might be exhibited. The Art Workers Coalition was formed in response to these issues as a lobby group to deal with the major museums. In 1967, Angry Arts Week took place in New York as a protest against American involvement in the Vietnam War. This demonstration utilized an ideology of purposefully ugly aesthetics in its Collage of Indignation to comment on the ugliness inherent in American foreign
policy. In Los Angeles a Peace Tower was also constructed as a war protest as artists contributed works to form a giant mosaic of art that espoused their political engagement. *Art Forum* published responses to the question of how art should engage life entitled “The Artist and Politics: A Symposium,” in 1970. Questions arose such as when trying to speak for certain interests how does an artist or artist coalitions decide who should be represented and more significantly, how should they be portrayed? To discuss these issues and how they affected Black artists who were effectively excluded from the art world at the time an analysis of the walls ‘heroes’ is necessary.

The heroic image of Muhammad Ali framed by a bay window, occupied the central position on the Wall (figure 1). In 1965 Ali refused to accept his draft card and would not comply with induction into the United States Armed Forces to fight in Vietnam. As a Muslim minister he was legally exempt from combat on religious grounds, but he was nonetheless charged and served a three-year term in prison from 1967-1970. The issue of Vietnam was pivotal to America, but specifically to Black people, as it represented on the one hand, another attempt by white colonialism to subvert non-white people; and on the other hand, reports suggested that Black males were dying in Vietnam at alarmingly higher proportions than white males. While only six percent of the American population were Black men, they comprised fifty percent of the troops on the front lines and more than thirty percent of the casualties. The Civil Rights Movement fractured as only radical Black leaders would dare criticize American foreign policy and speak out against the war in Vietnam as it was effectively removing the most volatile element in American society during the late 1960’s, namely, the young Black male. With Black troops fighting the Vietnamese, the American government was able to rid America of the destabilizing element that led to civil unrest, and to simultaneously purge the world of a ‘communist threat.’ Muhammad Ali threw a wrench in this plan when he became Heavyweight Champion of the World and publicly declared himself a member of the Nation of Islam and a Black Muslim. The former Cassius Clay, a small town Kentucky ‘boy’ was transformed into Muhammad Ali, an outspoken and articulate Muslim minister. When he

---

31 Gwendolyn Patton, “Black People and War.” *Liberator,* vol. 7 no.2 (February 1969) 10
refused his draft card he exhorted, "No Vietnamese ever called Me nigger," reminding the American public that the one's who had insulted him and were thus deserving of his audacious wrath were right here at home in America.

With raised arms and naked torso, Ali represents an American paradox that the White public had a very hard time digesting; Ali was America's champion, but as its greatest fighter he refused to endorse the war and fight in Vietnam. His gloved hands cover Black fists—symbols of Black power and resistance. Of course the fact that Ali was a minister for the Nation of Islam—the same organization that produced Malcolm X alarmed many conservatives. According to federal law, religious ministers were exempt from the draft. What would America do if Black youth, used as cannon fodder in the war effort suddenly declared themselves ineligible for the draft by joining the Muslim movement? Ali was stripped of his boxing titles and his passport for his refusal, as well as mocked and scorned in the press. He was unable to box during his trial that eventually led to a prison term. In 1970 the Court of Appeals overturned the decision and he was freed from prison. He had lost three years of his career but retained his principles and his heroic status. Ali's central position symbolized his victories in the ring as well as his politics outside of it. Criticism of the war in Vietnam and its link to Black consciousness had produced an American cultural hero in Ali. As protests to the war mounted, Ali's image became iconic as a symbol of protest against the white establishment as he clung to his right to self-definition, to name himself and to define his culture. The centralization of Ali's image on the wall grants this work the dictate of refusal and protest as its central theme. It locates sports at the centre of American racial politics, an issue that still prevails today in various forms and discussions in both the popular media and in academia.

---


33 See the above-mentioned documentary for a good discussion of the events both before and after his suspension.


35 Ibid. Pp54

36 For a discussion of sports, politics and race, see John Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race*. 
Malcolm X, another famous minister for the Nation of Islam believed that the nature of the struggle for culture would be fought and won by controlling and asserting Black social values through the production of art and culture. He extolled cultural affinity with Africa saying that even the term Negro was harmful to the Black psyche as it erased any referent for country, language, history or religion. The Negro was a non-being, and the need to reconnect with other blacks around the world was essential to the eradication of the white colonialist construction of the Negro. Malcolm X believed that: “We must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the hands of white supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to un-brainwash an entire people.”

Malcolm X understood that the revolution in cultural perception had to be a grassroots movement like the Civil Rights Movement had been, but it must occur in the northern urban centers, in the neighborhoods where Black people lived out their lives. The Cultural Revolution he foresaw had to give Blacks a cultural pedigree by recreating ties with Africa. To be effective the revolution must:

Begin in the community and be based on community participation. Afro-Americans will be free to create only when they can depend on Afro American support; and African American artists must realize that they depend on the African American community for inspiration...Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle. We must take hold of it and forge the future with the past.

Malcolm was assassinated in 1965 at the Audobahn Ballroom in Harlem less than a year after he broke from Elijah Mohammed’s organization to form the Organization of Afro-American Unity; an organization based less on Islamic beliefs and more on What He felt was the political necessity of the unity of all Black peoples. Fitting with his role of outspoken advocate of African- American rights, Malcolm’s effigy on the Wall of Respect looms largest, as it occupies the right-hand position beside Ali’s window. Malcolm X became a martyr for many Blacks despite his ideological split from the Nation of Islam. He embodied another powerful and articulate Black man that was hated and feared by many whites and even conservative Blacks. He appealed to the young, especially students as a leader who preached pride, Black manhood, and an uncompromising program towards Black empowerment. His famous rhetorical demand for freedom ‘by

38 Ibid. Pp55-56
any means necessary’ still echoes in American culture 35 years after its utterance. The older conservatives feared his anger and brashness as a potential danger to all Blacks while the youth, not willing to wait with the patience of their parent’s generation insisted on immediate action and agency. Although Malcolm did not preach violence he certainly did not advocate non-violence as a doctrine. His rebellious attitude towards the white liberals and even some Negro politicians positioned him as the ultimate angry Black man, a rebel who followed no doctrine save his own. The prevailing belief that Mr. Mohammed had ordered Malcolm’s death resonated visually when Norman Parish Jr. depicted Malcolm directly above and in much larger scale than the Honorable Elijah J Mohammed. The giant head of Malcolm X seems to float above the Nation of Islam leader perhaps suggesting visually that in martyrdom, the teachings of Malcolm had transcended the limiting scope of the American Muslim movement. Among the other statesman were Paul Robeson, an actor and opera singer who became an outspoken advocate of Marxism during the 1930’s and 40’s to the detriment of both his career and social life, and Marcus Garvey with his unmistakable plumed hat was the leader of the United Negro Improvement Association that promoted the back-to-Africa movement during the early twentieth century. Stokely Carmichael, seemingly small and remote on Ali’s far right was the charismatic leader of the Student Non- Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who espoused a doctrine of self-determination and black self-identity that he called Black Power. In his book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation In America*, Carmichael defined Black Power as, “full participation in the decision making process affecting the lives of black people, and recognition of the virtues in themselves as black people.”

For Carmichael, the originator of the Black Power tenet in its contemporary usage, the loaded term contained notions of self-government and economic autonomy as well as self-affirmation and pride. While the Civil Rights Movement was characterized as a plea on bended knee for legislated equal status, Black Power was viewed as a prideful demand for a sense of autonomy--or else. The plea for integration had changed to a demand for Black Liberation as Black leaders came to understand that what was oppressing their people was an economic power structure that espoused liberal rhetoric.

---

but required racism to sustain itself or at least was unprepared to make the sacrifices necessary for anything other than incremental change.

The Black Arts Movement had been developing as “an aesthetic and spiritual sister to the Black Power concept.”40 It became a means for blacks to define the world according to their own ethical and aesthetic values and do denounce the art world’s cultural edicts. The discussion of aesthetics was fruitless for many Black intellectuals since:

What the Western white man calls an “esthetic” is fundamentally a dry assembly of dead ideas based on a dead people; a people whose ideas have been found meaningless in light of contemporary history. We need new values, new ways of living. We need a new system of moral and philosophical thought. Dig...It is a cold, lifeless corpse they speak of; the emanations of a dead world trying to define and justify itself. 41

The Wall was a populist attempt to enliven art practice and its reception, to breathe new life into what some Black artists and critics perceived as a static and staid American culture. Their critique was somewhat unjustified, as Pop artists like Andy Warhol’s Race Riot Series and James Rosenquist’s F-111 were breaking the monotony of Eurocentric white art by critiquing aspects of Americanism using consumerist images that questioned the commodification of art as well as culture. This Black art reform was to be accomplished by involving the local community in the selection process and the reception of art, and to address the art to what these artists considered specifically Black social concerns, such as housing, music, sports and Black history. The collective work on the side of a building at the corner of 43rd and Langley was to symbolize the communal nature of the OBAC, and their community-based aspirations for their work.

Part V: Revolutionary Art: A Mexican Import

The mural idea was particularly appealing to OBAC, as Black artists had worked alongside White artists during the Depression to produce interior murals as part of the Federal Arts Project of the Work Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA provided federal funding for the visual arts as a way of maintaining national morale during the

41 Larry Neal, “Black Art and Black Liberation” The Black Revolution: An Ebony Special Issue (Chicago 1970: Johnson Publishing Co.) 33
Depression under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. The dominant aesthetic of representation was social realism, as it was successful in depicting the realities of American social conditions in easy to understand, populist modes. This activity was related to, and heavily influenced by the revolutionary Mexican mural movement headed by artists Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco & David Alfaro Siquieros. Black artists like Hale Woodruff traveled to study under Rivera, and Charles White and Elizabeth Catlett studied at the Taller Grafica Popular in Mexico City. What Black American artists found compatible was the ways that their Mexican counterparts conflated the ideals of their freedom struggle and the indigenous traditions of their people, without ignoring the stylistic idioms of twentieth-century modernism. When the Mexican Revolution took place after World War I, the government chose the visual arts as a way to buttress and maintain their new status with the citizens and to propagandize their revolutionary precepts. In 1923 the Mexican government formed the Syndicate of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors and Engravers and offered the muralists public walls, materials, and salaries.

Their art celebrated the ideals of the revolution: the rights of labourers, agrarian reform, and the beauty of indigenous Indian and Mexican culture, armed struggle, and popular heroes of the revolution. Their art possessed a deep sense of the necessity of recalling and recording the past in both its literal and mythic fullness, and contained the possibility for self-definition and self-invention.

Both Diego Rivera and Orozco, despite their controversial leftist politics were also commissioned to complete several murals in America during the 1930's. The most famous, or perhaps infamous of these works was the mural Rivera executed for the Rockefeller Center in New York. Rivera was very critical of Stalin, and had been expelled from the Mexican Communist party because of his support of Trotsky. His acceptance of a commission for two covers for Fortune magazine and murals for automobile magnate Edsel Ford left Rivera vulnerable to criticism from the Stalinist left, and in dire need to assert his socialist credentials. Rivera accepted the commission to

44 Ibid. Pp49
45 Robert Sommer, Street Art (NY 1975: Links Books) 25
46 Campbell, Pp49
48 Ibid. Pp49
paint a mural for the newly constructed Radio City Music Hall in 1933, itself a symbol of
the new order as it displaced the Metropolitan Opera:

Rockefeller center was the heart of the culture industry on the east coast, and it
was built at a moment when that industry was preparing for major expansion into
the era of television... Rivera's mural brought to the surface conflicting visions of
the relationship between science and social change at a sensitive moment in the
formation of a new social constellation of consumerism, technology and mass
media.\footnote{Ibid. Pp50}

Rivera's mural entitled \textit{Man at the Crossroads} (figure 4) proved to be even more
scandalous than the one he had completed for Ford at the Art Institute in Detroit. The
center of the work contains a worker at the controls of a machine; on his left were a
nightclub scene, a battlefield, and a demonstration of unemployed being clubbed by
police. These images were certainly controversial for a public art piece during the
Depression, but the real issue of unacceptable contention was that on the other side of
the worker was a portrait of Lenin clasping the hands of a Black man and a Russian
soldier (figure 5). When the knowledge of this image was made public, Rockefeller
demanded that he paint over the face of Lenin.\footnote{Roger Eric Hoyt, “The Explosion of a Dormant Art Form” \textit{Chicago History} vol.3, no.1 (Spring-Summer 1974) 30} At stake here is not just an objection to
Lenin, but also Rivera's visual unification of Black people, presumably Black Americans,
and the Russian military. The radical chic notion of having a Mexican revolutionary paint
a mural that critiqued capitalism was perhaps amusing to wealthy industrialists like Ford
and Rockefeller, in the quest to see whose commission pushed the boundaries of
capitalist practice further. After all it was a foregone conclusion that Rivera would critique
capitalism in some way, but the test was to see who would, or could put up with the
worse affront.\footnote{By depicting a suggestion of equal rights for Blacks during the
Depression Era, Rivera went too far. The work was destroyed when Rivera refused to
alter it, but he later repainted it at the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City.}

The affiliation of Blacks with leftist politics has historically made America nervous at the
very least, and violent at its most dramatic. Paul Robeson was blacklisted and stripped
of his passport for his espousal of communist doctrines and membership in the
communist party. In 1967, the Black Panthers became a target for a veritable pogrom by
COINTELPRO, the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s counter-intelligence and
propaganda task force, and Angela Davis, UCLA professor of Philosophy and Panther affiliate was removed from her post when she affirmed her communist beliefs. With this kind of history it should come as no surprise that the association of mural painting, with its leftist history, and a commune of Black artists painting images of prideful Blacks during the tumultuous 60s would attract the attention of the FBI. The revival of murals initiated by the Wall of Respect reminded a reluctant America of its own spotted past with communism and censorship; and it did so with a vocabulary and mode of representation that was consciously anti-capitalist. An excerpt from a manifesto written by a group called the Chicago muralists, which included Walker and Eugene Eda--two members from the Wall of respect project--charges America and American Art History with a bias towards certain types of public art:

We hope to end the conspiracy of silence under which the work of the Mexican muralists and the public art movement of the 1930's in the US are not mentioned in textbooks and lectures in art schools throughout the country.52

Through the WPA artists in America, the Mexican influence was present in imagery, execution and mindset that evolved during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The OBAC project would differ from the WPA mural projects of the 1930's in that it would be a mural sponsored by the artists themselves and was not exhibited in institutions such as post offices or municipal buildings but was an exterior mural located within the community whose needs it hoped to address. "Mural painting is not inherently socialistic but it is social. Anyone who undertakes a mural is enrolling in a curriculum that includes the politics of art, the basis of territoriality, and the nature of community standards."53 The new mural movement sparked by the success of the Wall of Respect was also different from the Mexican muralists in that the cohesive nature of complex imagery that Rivera utilized gave way to a collage of images--posters really--of Black celebrities and historical figures. According to Alan Barnett, "the increase of socially engaged poster art, due to increased activism, was the precursor to mural art, but specifically the mode used on the Wall. This 'struggle art,' whose wit and humour owed something to psychedelic posters, used symbols that increasingly replaced text on picket signs and graffiti."54 Barnett suggests that the graphic work of Emory Douglas, the Minister of Culture and

51 Linsley, Pp51.
53 Robert Sommer Street Art (NY 1975: Links Books) 27
graphic artist for the Black Panther Party, as well as the work of William Walker and the other muralists was of a specific confluence with respect to a new mode of representation and circulation for the espousal of Black Cultural Nationalism within their respective communities.

Part VI: Black Face vs. Art world Interface: A New Criticism Was Needed.

The Visual Arts Workshop attempted to become the visual source of Cultural Nationalism on Chicago's south side. The community-based workshop included painters and print makers Sylvia Abernathy, Elliott Hunter, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones Hogu, Carolyn Lawrence, Norman Parrish, William Walker, Myrna Weaver, and Jeff Donaldson. Photographers Billy Abernathy, Darrell Cowherd, Roy Lewis Roy Sengstacke also worked on specified sections of the wall (see Appendix 1). The group agreed on an essential function of "a people's art" to build self-esteem and to stimulate revolutionary action.

The execution of the mural was appealing also as a guerrilla action as the absentee owner was never consulted, thus the execution of the mural would be a revolutionary act. The artists themselves funded the project and the local community association approved a selection of heroes to be portrayed. The project began in late June and it often drew unsolicited criticisms from passers-by and local armchair critics as much of the work had to be done onsite. The work became an activity performed in conjunction with members of the community, giving them insight into the inherent power of visual imagery to engage people. It was a recreation and reinterpretation of images of Black people from popular culture in the context of an event that constituted cultural solidarity. As Jeff Donaldson recalls, "Curiosity seekers, uneasy tourists, art lovers and political activists of every stripe congregated daily and in ever increasing numbers. Musicians played as the artists painted and writers recited their works." The Wall proclaimed that Black people had the right to define Black culture and Black history for their own selves, to name their own heroes and to teach a history that included these accounts of Black heroism and struggle. This 'Black Happening,' as *Ebony Magazine* called it, embodied a significant moment in the history of Black art and culture. A group of artists came

---

54 Barnett. *Community Murals*. Pp 45
55 Donaldson. *The Rise, Fall...*Pp22
56 Ibid. Pp23
together to make a mural of black pride and their unifying principle had little to do with their medium—artists who were easel painters worked alongside those who were photographers—but was instead based on their ethnicity and the belief that public communication of Black pride, accomplishment and self-respect superseded any differences between them.⁵⁷

Aesthetically significant ethnic differences were went against American modernist scholarship that demanded that art was aesthetically valid only insofar as it did not intersect with lived existence. Clement Greenberg, a major critical force in American Modernism, maintained that successful art enters into a formal dialogue with itself such that non-aesthetic issues are not relevant to the production of good art. In other words, Greenberg felt that art must be void of social concerns and cultural dialogue to maintain its integrity. He was careful to avoid any discussion of the ideology of form and suggested that form had no cultural meaning. Art practice that took up figuration or narrative themes was not high art but popular art or kitsch, an association Greenberg made with the art for the masses under Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini. Abstract Expressionism became not only the mode of art championed by critics, but it was considered the only art form for contemporary American artists to pursue. In his 1939 Partisan Review article entitled “Avant-Guard and Kitsch,” Greenberg argues that avant-garde practices in Fascist and Socialist countries were restricted as the cultural practices of these axis powers were not as advanced as Western Europe and America.⁵⁸ For him, the authentic path to high art realization was through abstraction and Avant-garde practice, which was not responsible to the society but only to itself. Despite his waning authority by the 1960’s, Greenbergian modernism lived on through his own writings and those of Michael Fried, a Greenberg proponent. Perhaps it was Fried’s influence that allowed Greenberg to publish his article Modernist Painting as late as 1961. Thus for Greenberg aesthetics was merely a philosophical endeavour, not, as it were a cultural one, and any criticism in painting was to remain within the medium of painting or risk a theatricality that undermined the work itself. “The issue of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself—not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Eva Cockcroft. Toward a People’s...Pp3
⁵⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” Partisan Review VI, no.5 (Fall 1939) 34-49
Thus art, as certain very influential critics articulated it in the 1960's was only a valid aesthetic practice when separated from cultural politics—a notion that seemed absurd for Blacks in the middle of a struggle for civil rights and cultural empowerment. In Don L. Lee's poem *The Wall* (see Appendix II) we get the sense of how the new generation of black artists rejected the White art world's notion of the function of art:

...Wh-ite people can't stand the wall,

Killed their eyes, (they cry)

Black beauty hurts them

...Brothers & sisters screaming

"Picasso ain't got shit on us,

Send him back to art school."

We got black artists

Who paint black art

The mighty black wall...

A black creation

Black art, of the people,

For the people,

Art for the people's sake

Lee suggests that to engage in the practice of Black art one requires a different and specific type of schooling. For him, art is not for institutions but for the people; art should allow Blacks to see themselves in the images and feel empowered. During the 1960's, many artists rankled under the commercial restraints of art that were necessary to work
within for an artist to be considered successful. Underground art movements like assemblage, Happenings and performance expanded the boundaries of art and assaulted the art world's notion of what is acceptable subject matter in art and what was an acceptable way of making art. The promotion of the fact that art was a commodity with the advent of Pop Art, and the use of mundane commercial images—was intended to place contemporary art in closer touch with quotidian reality. The irony is that at the same time that Black artists were being maligned or ignored for their realist modes of representation and their social engagement, White artists, many of whom had established professional careers, began to question their own lack of cultural engagement in light of major social upheavals that included the fight for civil rights and the Vietnam War. White artists formed activist groups such as the Art Workers Coalition mentioned earlier, to combat the current gallery system and to empower artists to control the post-purchase utilization of their works. This mirrored the activity of black artists who were searching for a Black aesthetic that critiqued the criteria that had been established for a so-called universal modernism, but which had effectively kept racially motivated subject matter out of the major art institutions.

Part VII: Fanon and the Colonized Mind

This new Black aesthetic embraced the catchphrase 'Black is beautiful,' and set about erasing centuries of a colonized mindset that had been articulated by Frantz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*. His 1967 English translation provided many Black people with a vocabulary that might today be called post-modern, to discuss and analyze their psychological, social and political status in America and throughout the Diaspora. Fanon was a psychiatrist who worked in Algeria during their struggle for independence with France. He observed that colonialism was not just a political manifestation; it attacked the minds of its victims, turning their own past against them by distorting and destroying the history of the colonized nation. For Fanon, the colonial wars being fought in Africa during the 1950's were also culture wars whereby the Africans needed to regain a sense of their history and culture separate from the white race's standards that had been impressed upon the Blacks for at least a century. To combat these colonized mindsets, the artists of these newly independent nations needed to rebuild the culture

---

61 Campbell Part I, Pp 51.
and history that had been damaged by colonialism. This process of the artist/intellectual rediscovering his own culture (artists were no more immune to the effects of colonialism than regular citizens) and instructing others was outlined in what he determined to entail three phases:

In the first phase, the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. His writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite numbers in the mother country. This is the period of unqualified assimilation...

In the second phase we find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is. But since the native is not a part of his people, since he only has exterior relations with his people, he is content to recall their life only... Sometimes this literature of just-before-the-battle is dominated by humor and by allegory; but often too it is symptomatic of a period of distress and difficulty, where death is experienced and disgust too.

Finally in the third phase, which is called the fighting phase, the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the people's lethargy an honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature. During this phase a great many men and women who up until then would never have thought of producing a literary work, now find themselves in exceptional circumstances feel the need to speak to their nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people and to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action.  

Fanon’s words were prophetic as he explained how he perceived the formation of a Black Avant-garde in oppressed African communities. His notion that people who had not previously been artists would be motivated by a cultural imperative to produce art in the service of the revolution was irreconcilable with the Greenbergian idea that the artist's place is above or at least separated from, his community. As a consequence, the artist/intellectual never knows his community and has never had to be responsive to its needs. In order to sustain this mentality of aesthetics over social functionality, the doctrines of individuality, creativity and freedom of expression are utilized to increase the separation of the artist from his community. While writing about Fanon's third phase in reference to 1960's Black America, OBAC co-founder Hoyt Fuller suggests that the


63 C.H. Fuller, “Black Art & Fanon’s Third Phase” Liberator vol.7 no.7 (July 1967) 14.
Western concept of art is based on three principles: individuality, creativity and freedom of expression. He posits that the state encourages these principles as they avoid any criticism of state power. Freedom of expression is a consequence of what the government allows, therefore its arenas of impressionability are limited to those issues that do not threaten the hegemony. Fuller asks the question: What are we arguing for when we argue for these principles of art in the context of Western world government? We are in fact defending the hegemonic constraints that we are supposed to be freed from.64

The unity of all Black peoples or Negritude as it was known in the 1950's, though salient to the Black struggle in America (as American Blacks were geographically cut off from other Black people), was criticized by Fanon as it provided the West with a singular handle with which to direct and comment upon the cultures of Black peoples. Fanon critiqued the notion that the differences between race and culture could or should be erased or ignored for an appearance of unity. He would have agreed with a 1987 article trying to create a space for identity politics using anthropology in its discussion of art. "Often in multi-racial or multi-ethnic societies racial and ethnic distinctiveness combine in a single group to cause what is cultural to be identified as racial and what is racial to be identified as cultural. The term race is nothing more or less than a fundamental social definition that ultimately transcends intra-group diversity in physical and cultural characteristics while being informed by both."65 Fanon opposed Negritude, espoused by African leaders like Leopold Senghor of Senegal and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, he felt that the internationality of Negritude—which suggested universal attitudes of Blackness—was too homogenizing and that each country needed to find its own national culture and arts based on its own experiences. The hegemonic assertions inherent in the espousal of Blackness became problematic for OBAC and other Black cultural groups when they attempted to define themselves as separate from White America.

Part VIII: The Ghetto Museum vs. MoMA, the Whitney and the Met—Black Art Activism

---

64 Ibid. Pp15
The Wall of Respect and the subsequent rise of the urban mural movement, along with televised demonstrations organized by emergent Black radical groups, gave Black culture in America a new visibility and new voice that demanded a response from white institutions. This visibility of Black American culture and their insistence of recognition produced a phenomenon that at first glance seemed to be a magnanimous gesture by the national art museums. In actuality, the series of hastily organized Black art shows by the Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of Art, infuriated many Black artists and intellectuals. The shows were presumptuous in scope and homogenizing in nature to a degree that was deemed unacceptable by many of the Black intelligentsia. The shows were characterized by a general lack of complexity and depth as well as a dearth of serious analysis that quality shows tended to portray. In January 1969 the Harlem On My Mind exhibition opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (figure 6). Thomas Hoving the museum director announced that the show was in response to “social and political events” and would demonstrate the museum’s desire to address social concerns.66 Thus by his own admission the show was not based on some heretofore unrecognized talent of Black artists, but rather it was in response to social pressures and the current chic of Black culture. The show used photographs by Black artists as a background to media text and film documenting Black culture in its American cultural cradle, Harlem. Black artists and even some White artists picketed the show on the grounds of misuse of the photos of James Vanderzee and the exclusion of other Black artist’s production, such as painting drawing or sculpture. In short, the kind of works the Met would exhibit in a show of some aspect of White culture. Harlem On My Mind was the first American art exhibition “devoted to the accomplishments of the living people of a non-Anglo, so-called minority culture.”67 Called by its curator in retrospect, “the most controversial exhibition presented in an art museum in the last 100 years,”68 the show attempted a new populist strategy to portray Black American life located thirty blocks from the doors of the Met. The show had video monitors, music (for dancing), giant projections, and was buttressed by some 700 photographs (ranging in size from 11x14 inches to 18x50 feet).69

---

68 Ibid. Introduction, np
As *Harlem On My Mind* was the first big show of African-American cultural works at a major institution, Black artists were infuriated that none of their works were included. A Black art show with only photography sent a message to Black artists and American society that the only art worthy of being exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum were photographs. The *NY Times* chief art critic John Canaday flayed the show as he proclaimed that the exhibition, “...includes no art...I cannot see that an art critic has any business reviewing the exhibition unless he is sure of himself as a sociologist, which leaves me out.”\(^{70}\) A faction of the Black cognoscenti, the Harlem Cultural Council refused to endorse the show citing a breakdown in communication. In a *New York Times* article a month before the opening, Edward Taylor the council’s executive director stated that, “they (the Metropolitan Executive) haven’t really begun to consult us. We’re expected simply to be rubber stamps and window dressing.”\(^{71}\) Besieged by conservatives as an unfitting show at the bastion of fine art, and criticized by Black artists as exclusionary and insulting (not to mention charges of anti-Semitism in the original introduction written by a seventeen-year-old Black high school student), the show drew massive crowds despite the removal of the catalogue from sale, and picketing by artists.\(^{72}\)

One might think that other art institutions having witnessed the fiasco of the *Harlem* show would be at best reticent to venture into the territory of Black art for fear of controversy. But in actuality the shattered attendance records and the sweltering racial climate proved that controversy sells, and this produced several Black art shows with varying results. In 1971 *Contemporary Black Artists In America* opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Having not heeded the warnings of Benny Andrews one of the founders of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, or BECC, a coalition formed to “serve as a watchdog for the Black community in the graphic arts,”\(^{73}\) Robert Doty, a white curator, proceeded to curate the show and write the catalogue essay with no Black advisory committee. Doty refers to a quote from Black artist Romare Bearden when he pigeonholes the *Wall of Respect* as an attempt by Blacks to, “increase[ing] the self-awareness of Black people will therefore enlarge the opinion they have of themselves—

\(^{69}\) Ibid.
\(^{70}\) Ibid
\(^{71}\) Ibid.
\(^{72}\) Ibid
as well as the opinion other people have of them."\textsuperscript{74} Doty suggests that Blackness is limiting and detrimental to the art production by young Black artists. He argues that now in the face of notions of Black empowerment, the artist must ignore his 'cultural loyalties,' and that both the artist \textit{and his audience} must learn to respond to "the authority of the created thing, that unique quality which originates only with the creative individual, and which flourishes only under a spirit of free inquiry."\textsuperscript{75} Doty's comments as well as the exhibit itself created much controversy as many of the artists (15 of the 75 in fact) pulled out of the show once it was realized that the Whitney refused to have a Black guest curator work alongside Doty as a cultural advisor for the show. A group of Black artists and art historians wrote a statement against the Whitney show and their comments evolved into a pamphlet entitled \textit{Black Art Notes}, edited by artist Tom Lloyd. In his introduction Lloyd wrote directly against the precepts of the Whitney show while outlining the motivation and the goals of his publication. What began as a rebuttal transcended its original precepts to become a "concrete affirmation of Black Art philosophy."

Black artists of the many disciplines embodying Black Art express the spirit of the Black Arts Movement here. Their positive philosophies affirm a need for a collective effort to project, glorify and protect Black expression from the destructive forces that threaten its survival. Many included are undergoing a baptism of thought; all are formulating principles and criteria as it relates to the Black aesthetic and the struggle for Black Liberation.\textsuperscript{76}

The group included Lloyd, himself a former art instructor and a community art program organizer in Queens, Amiri Baraka writer and poet, a prime force in the Black Arts movement, and Jeff Donaldson a member of Africobra and chairman of the Art department at Howard University. On another front the BECC was critiquing the lack of real effort on the part of the Whitney to produce a 'Black' show. At this time a rupture became apparent in the Black arts 'community.' Some of the best-known artists resented being ghettoized in a purely Black context as if they were anthropological specimens themselves. Some artists, resented the notion that their work was to be categorized as


\textsuperscript{75} Doty Pp13

\textsuperscript{76} Tom Lloyd, "Introduction" \textit{Black Art Notes}. A privately published pamphlet (NY 1971)
Black. As Daniel Larue Johnson said, “From the outset of the show, we felt it was going to be disastrous because of the confusion of race and aesthetics.”

Thus with a committee of abstract artists that included Dr Ralph Bunche, the Secretary-General to the United Nations for clout, Whitney director John Baur was again called to task. Asked if the museum was specifically involved with aesthetics or polemics, Baur answered polemics; which begged the response then why a Black exhibition at all? Artist William Williams, spoke out against Black shows saying that, “We say any museum show ought to be about aesthetics, scholarship, [and] quality. They say this one’s about being a nigger. This is a denial of the basic principles of the art concept.”

Keith Morrison a Black artist, curator and writer discussed the relationship between aesthetics and criticism that sheds light on the ‘black bind’ that the artists in the Whitney show found themselves in when he wrote that:

Aesthetics, of course, is not taste, but that branch of philosophy that analyzes the nature of taste. Principles of aesthetics may be universal but taste is regional or cultural. From their own cultural contexts people involve themselves in matters of aesthetics; the hierarchy of preferences that they evolve is what is considered taste. The phenomenon of describing and analyzing taste is what we call art criticism.

Morrison goes on to say that art criticism’s goal is to promote ideas for the artists and audience to act upon or, in other words, to produce culture. He does consider art criticism an aspect of sociology that is socially active and therefore inherently political.

What Morrison is writing against is the prevalence of modernist criticism levelled at Black art that pretended some notion of a universal aesthetic. The ideological split among Black artists over the Whitney show could be viewed as a product of Fanon’s first phase of assimilation in which the artist adheres to the colonial powers standards of aesthetics and beauty when making and evaluating art. The idea that aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy, cannot also be an instrument of social repression is not convincing when we leave the theory of forms and analyze the way the term aesthetics has been politicized and wielded as a bludgeon against new and different forms of art. It is this mode of historic and hegemonic repression in the arts that Larry Neal critiques when he wrote that as Black artists and adherents to the goals of Black Nationalism we must, “when we

---

77 “In A Black Bind” Time Magazine (April 12, 1970) 80
78 Ibid.
79 Keith Morrison, “Art Criticism: A Pan-African Point of View” New Art Examiner 6 no 5 (February 1979) 4
speak of an esthetic, we mean more than the process of making art, telling stories, of writing poems, of performing plays. We mean the destruction of white ways of looking at the world.\footnote{Larry Neal, “Black Art and Black Liberation” first published as a special issue of Ebony Magazine August 1969, reprinted as Black Revolution (NY 1970: Johnson Publishing Co. Inc.) 39} Neal subscribes to a prevailing notion in Black Nationalist literature during the late 1960's and early 1970's that like those leaving a sinking ship, Black people should desert White culture in order to survive and not be destroyed when the 'inevitable' demise of white culture took place. This of course relates back to Fanon's colonized mindset, and the destruction of White ways of looking is an attempt to throw off the colonial yoke and assert a Black ideology of cultural practice.

When a critic like Hilton Kramer inaccurately lambastes exhibitions of art by Black artists as regressive art that merely engages in social realism, he is involving himself in the espousal of a hierarchy of contemporary preferences rather than expressing some timeless universal concept, as his rhetoric would suggest. His actual 'concept' appears to be the protection of a value system that utilizes the commodification of art objects to produce cultural mores for those that have access to, and ownership of, both material wealth and cultural wealth in the form of these art objects. Kramer is certainly not a liberal critic and in fact his conservative viewpoint makes him an easy target, but what is significant is that he was far from alone in his criticism, and he wrote for the New York Times at a time when art practice whether by Black or White artists was in a state of extreme duress due to the cultural upheaval and social activism of the period. Through Kramer, Canaday and Grace Glueck, the New York Times with its slogan 'all the news that's fit to print,' is promoting an outmoded art criticism whose heyday was pre-world War II America. Even though much of the art intelligentsia may have deserted Greenberg's modernist rhetoric, the reverberations of his beliefs allowed Kramer to echo his sentiments right into the 1970's in the art column of the newspaper that covered the most important art community in the Western world, New York. In a climate wherein the sudden political tangibility and visibility of Black life in America was bewildering to many and threatening to many whites, institutions like the art museums and universities suddenly found themselves under tremendous pressure to provide programs either involving or expressly for, Black people. The hyper-conservative viewpoint espoused by some critics can be seen as an attempt to depressurize a potentially volatile situation and rebut the fashion of Blackness that was beginning to permeate the art community.
Part IX: The Harlem Renaissance and the Birth of Pan-Africanism

The current of Black cultural chic in the late 60's was disconcerting to many Black artists. The media dramatized and homogenized the situation around certain artist's protests and suddenly all artists who happened to be Black were lumped together as militant activists. Worse, their art was 'legitimized' as Black art through labels like protest and realist art. If the artist's production did not fit in this genre, he or she was suddenly deemed a sell out or Uncle Tom. Some artists were faced with the violation of their principles just for the opportunity to have their works shown in venues like the Whitney or the Museum of Modern Art. This created a split between those who just wanted a piece of the pie and those who wanted to eat at the table. Audience reception was a major consideration, as one of the major concerns of the Black power movement was not to make the same mistakes that the Harlem Renaissance made. Negro artists of the 1920's had their work co-opted by White society as if they were fetish objects from a ghetto safari. This active collecting by voyeuristic Whites left Negro communities without access to the images and literature of the movement. As Larry Neal asserted in his essay "The Black Arts Movement":

I mean the "Harlem Renaissance" [which] was essentially a failure. It did not address itself to the mythology and the lifestyles of the Black Community. It failed to take roots, to link itself concretely to the struggles of that community, to become its voice and spirit.82

It Came down to a crisis in audience reception, an indecision between who the art of the Harlem Renaissance was for economically and culturally. Few Negroes at that time were in a position where they could afford the luxury of art, so the subject matter may have been directed at Negro communities, but the artists targets were wealthy white patrons who bought up most of the art. The storied prolific cultural production of Black artists during the 1920s became classist in orientation as only wealthy Negroes and Whites were even aware of the diversity and modes of art being produced in Harlem by what was known then as the ‘talented tenth.’ This split between what has historically been perceived as cultural assimilationism (integration) and cultural isolationism (segregation), has been an integral part of Black consciousness and Black culture since the start of the

---

twentieth century when Black writers first began to write about their own art and culture in earnest.

In the wake of World War I, Southern Blacks in America began to migrate north, which created large accumulations of young Black people in urban settings that now had attained, relative to their life in the South, a newfound freedom and solidarity. At the heart of this sense of community was the identification with a politicized notion of the new Negro, one that was Pan-Africanist in orientation as a shared legacy, and communal in practice. This new identification with Africa sparked a cultural explosion that permeated the arts and created institutional forms that are still associated with Black communities today such as gospel music and storefront churches. In 1925, Harvard philosophy professor Alain Locke edited *The New Negro*, a work that gave a name to the type of people who desired a more comprehensive and assertive African-based identity. Locke privileged African art (which he described as craft-based), as one of the grand traditions of world art. He observed that Negro artists of the 1920’s had become alienated from their African-based arts practice (due to the impossibility of painting and sculpture during the hardships of slavery), and practiced what he considered European derived art. In order for the Negro artist to attain some aesthetic direction, Locke felt that a return to the study of African art was essential to reclaim their ancestral legacy of aesthetics, and from which Black artists could develop a unique style of art based on their natural racial heritage. The naturalness of race was and is a highly contested notion, but the lack of social power and duress suffered by Black people has historically enforced a racial communalism where individuality has been sacrificed for the propagation of a united front. For Locke, Africanness was more important than tribal or regional delineations.

His views were buttressed by the African derived Modernist projects of European artists like Picasso and Modigliani. If they could be inspired by African arts could Negro artists—descendants of these same Africans--do any less? Locke felt that the American Negro was in a unique position as the generational recipient of the African art

---

84 Tilden J. & Margaret G. LeMelle, Pp23.
tradition and as an artist exposed to European forms of art, but living on the margins the Negro artist was poised to merge his African affiliation and his Americanness to become the consummate artist of American life.\textsuperscript{87} Paradoxically it is precisely this double identity that W.E.B. DuBois Harvard scholar, and founder of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) termed the schizophrenic schism that has wounded the psyche of all Negroes. Dubois predicted that in the twentieth century the main social issues would be characterized by the problem of race.\textsuperscript{88} In his seminal book *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois wrote that:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.\textsuperscript{89}

He suggests that the history of Negroes in America is one in which these two issues are unresolved despite the most intense wishes of Negroes to be both Africans and Americans. The Negro would not “Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa, [but neither would he] bleach his soul in flood of White Americanism,”\textsuperscript{90} for in this act cultural aspects of Negro life were certain to be lost. This psychological/social/spiritual schism is what was still at stake in the White art world’s hostility to Black artists attempts to assert Blackness in their art in the late 1960’s. The attempts of Civil Rights assimilationism, by 1969 had failed miserably in that it was evident that White America had little interest in Black cultural identity outside of perhaps music. Pushed together by social circumstances, artists sought legitimacy amongst themselves as distinct groups or cooperatives. Often the only legitimacy that material produced by Black artists attained was by proxy “as the emotional, mystic counterpart to

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid Pp256.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid. Pp3
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid. Pp3
a rational White America—the former the heart and soul; the latter, the head and mind. Therefore to the white cultural seeker, Harlem was black exotica.\textsuperscript{91}

Part X: Black Art and White Critics--A War of Words

Thus in 1969, the attempt of the Metropolitan Museum to broadcast the history and current state of Harlem (a synecdoche for Black America) was a project rife with problematic politics over the stewardship of Black culture. In “Harlem On His Back,” historian Eugene Genovese wrote a scathing critique of the cultural politics of the exhibition and of the state of white criticism of Black art. Using the history of Jazz he asks why, if there is an acceptance of Black music modes, the art world is so resistant to the possibility of the existence of a Black visual aesthetic?\textsuperscript{92} The effort of the show amounts to, in Genovese’s opinion, what he terms St. Gronlesex paternalism, or the paternalism slaveholders had for their slaves. The main difference between the aspirations of the Metropolitan Museum exhibition and slaveholders writes Genovese, is that “the slaveholders, after all, had the wisdom and decency to own their niggers outright before they presumed to run their lives”\textsuperscript{93} The right to determine their own lives of course runs into the obstacle of the interface with the white society. The main corollary to the search for a Black aesthetic is that art does not exist in a social or historical vacuum any more than the artists themselves do. This may seem logical today, but in 1969 the creation of an art form based on Black experience to satisfy the political and spiritual needs of Black people was anathema to the conservative critics of art at the time.

What the Hilton Kramers of the world ignored was that form has an ideology of its own, and the espousal of any formal aspect as an empty cipher was an attempt at naturalization of that ideology. Form is always linked to content and thus a purveyor of cultural meaning. Therefore when critics recall the suppression of the Russian avant-garde by Stalin or the contemporary Cultural Revolution in China, and the promotion of social realism, and compare this to 1960’s America, they are dramatically mistaken. The use of realist images when utilized by a less powerful minority lack the hegemonic force of a government backed aesthetic edict. The realism of images inherent in the Black Arts

\textsuperscript{91} LeMelle, Art and Race. Pp24
\textsuperscript{92} Eugene Genovese, “Harlem On His Back.” \textit{Artforum} (February 1969) 36
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid. Pp37
Movement do not function the same as Russian realism or Fascist heroic portrayals as the dogma backing these images is the empowerment of the disenfranchised seeking a space for voicing issues of identity, not the conversion/subversion of the masses. Without the cultural power to enforce an aesthetic upon the masses, Black Art relied upon acceptance and agreement to circulate their ideology.

Critics that argued against the inclusion of politics within art were ignoring the fact that all art is political if not in form and content, then in the art world itself that receives circulates and promotes images. To create abstract images at a time of cultural upheaval is one way to avoid overtly addressing contemporary politics. In other words, when there is intense social unrest, the establishment acts in order to maintain the status quo by privileging certain forms of art they deem to be hegemonic or at least not destructive to the social order. If this means the promotion of images that glorify certain aspects of culture non-threatening to those in power, then that is what will transpire. Since a moratorium on art exhibitions that critique the establishment would meet too much public outcry, the poisoning of the collective imaginary is a very effective way of rendering the images invalid. A notion akin to the Emperor's New Clothes is put forth and the viewer has the option of finding lowbrow popular images captivating and thereby exposing his lack of aesthetic sophistication, or pronouncing the works immature or crude and to maintain their status as cultural connoisseur.

A crystallization of these issues occurred when Edmund Barry Gaither, a Black curator assembled the largest show of Black art at the Boston Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, an institution funded by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The exhibition was called Afro-American Artists New York and Boston, and took place May 19-June 23, 1970. The paradoxical nature of art production as well as the Art world's hypocrisy, enabled the prejudices and biases inherent in the evaluation of art were brought to light in a series of articles in the New York Times that critiqued the Boston exhibition. Controversy and criticism like this was not of significant issue to many Black artists like those in Africobra. For them the pontifications of an insular art world were already so alienated from the masses that they had forgotten that art was at its base a form of communication. A dialogue involving Hilton Kramer, Times critic, Edmund Gaither, and Black artist and founder of the BECC, Benny Andrews illuminates the some of the issues at stake in the reception of Black American art. Newsweek art critic
Douglas Davis wrote that the new Black school of art was “grounded in representation,” and was likely to flourish, “precisely where White critical opinion is least comfortable.”

This seems to be exactly what transpired in a series of *New York Times* articles that spoke both for and against the new Black art.

Anticipating harsh criticism, or perhaps merely aware of the difficulties in mounting what he considered the last Black show, Gaither wrote his catalogue essay addressing why he felt the show was both necessary and productive. The essence of Black shows, according to Gaither, was to announce what in 1970 was a supremely obvious fact—there are many talented Black artists at work in the United States. He wrote that a Black show is merely a show of art by Black artists. The term Black does not to him act as an art historical definition and the shows are outgrowths of social events and therefore expose their aesthetic problems in any exhibition. Gaither addresses the ‘Black bind,’ that I articulated earlier writing that although an artist may be Black and therefore have similar cultural experiences of other Black artists he may choose to “work outside of the traditions of that community. He may regard himself as a cosmopolitan artist. Depending on his political and social ideas, he may wish to cut all ties with the group. The group may pose a threat to his freedom and may reject his chosen style.”

He differentiates between Black art and art by African-Americans in that Black art is “a didactic art form rising from a strong nationalistic base” and characterized by its commitment to a broad base populist communication.

Black art usually uses past heroes, contemporary political events, or utopian visions of the future to uplift Black people and grant them a form of imagined community or cultural nationalism. Gaither explains that since Black art is concerned with social activity, it usually utilizes realism as its most common visual denominator, and therefore is easily communicative. Despite the fact that less than one-fifth of the works in the shows were what could be termed Social Realism, Hilton Kramer wrote a scathing critique of the show referring to the works as reliant on “a visual language of outworn devices and established clichés. These images address themselves to emotions already rubbed raw

---

98 Ibid. np
by the march of events. They deal in practiced responses, and add little or nothing to the true language of feeling—which, after all, it is the function of art to modify and enlarge." Kramer's comments reveal much. First what is this 'true language of feeling' that he refers to? Where does one find this truth? Perhaps for him in the insular community that is motivated by cultural hegemony and practices under the guise of the 'natural' or 'universal' aspects of art. These aesthetic notions do not exist in a social vacuum. If they do, then how does art modify and enlarge feelings? He manages to contradict himself as he reveals his inability to address the issue at hand; the notion of aesthetics is in question here, not in its philosophical definition, but in its practical applications.

Kramer poses the question, are artistic standards simply a form of white racism? Benny Andrews answers Kramer with a list of seven points that need to be avoided in order to keep aesthetic notions from being racist. His protests included the critics ability to see Black figures as other than political or propagandist, impartiality regardless of the type of show, criticizing curators or museums for not putting on Black shows, giving the impression that exhibitions are conceived in a social vacuum, and asking oneself how many great White exhibitions there have been lately? "It is only through these earnest practices," writes Andrews, that a "fair and unbiased criticism can come about." In actuality, an unbiased criticism is as unlikely as the success of a universal aesthetic, all one can really hope for is a chance to exhibit your work and hope public opinion will have a space to evaluate it. Gaither also responded to Kramer's critique noting that the doctrines implicit in Kramer's formulations leave him unable to see beyond any societal construction but his own. He argues that the aesthetic blindness of 60's criticism needs to be overhauled and he calls for a new criticism that is able to include within its scope the "total matrix out of which art comes."

This new criticism would "distinguish between effete social realism of the Old Left and the socio-political art of current nation builders." Gaither's refutation, states that

100 Hilton Kramer, "Trying To Define 'Black Art': Must We Go Back to Social Realism?" New York Times May 31 1970: D 17
101 Ibid
103 Ibid. 22
105 Ibid.p21
according to the edicts of the art canon, an artist may use whatever mode he chooses to portray his subject as long as he exhibits control over the technical aspects of that mode. Those artists who addressed their art to social and political issues were not diminished artistically, after all, "was not Goya an artist? Is not Guernica art?" He argued that much work that now forms the basis of a discussion of aesthetics was art that had social issues at its heart. The social artist is crucial to societies as a builder of culture as his works become more than just eye candy for the elite. Gaither's argument reached its ideological apex when he wrote that:

Perhaps the surest sign of cultural decay is the segregation of art into the category of nonessential objects existing only for esthetic or monetary purposes. And simply because white America has come to such decadence and sterility, there is no need for committed black artists to surrender their role in shaping tomorrow[s].

Gaither goes on to remind the reader that much of the work in the show is abstract, kinetic and conceptual. The only catchall term that adequately describes the aesthetic scope of Black art is diversity. Gaither's response refers again to the cultural decay apparent in Western European art practices, as they differ from the Pan-Africanist view of the social function of art. He questions the art world's desire to remain loyal to the New York School, and suggests there are other alternatives that may lead to something akin to a "true language of feeling."

Part XI: A Change Is Coming: The Painted Newspaper—A Ghetto Construct

This true language may be seen to be both the mode of representation and the subject matter of the Wall of Respect. It fulfilled the edicts of Dana Chandler and other muralists who felt that art's higher calling was to be presented to its intended audience, and to beautify the ghetto, the source of their subject matter. The Wall became a dynamic ghetto newspaper that changed according to contemporary cultural and political events. In light of the debates around the promotion of a Black aesthetic, it is very significant that as we look at appendix 1, containing the breakdown of the figures from history, politics, and the arts, that this group of painters elected to exclude Black visual artists from the wall. Although there were certainly artists that they may have chosen as very accomplished—Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence spring to mind—there were no

106 Ibid p.21
painters or sculptors included on the list of cultural heroes. Is it that OBAC decided that the visual was still under too much controversy for the choices to be meaningful to the mental and spiritual revolution that the Wall was supposed to illicit? To answer this question a further analysis of the Wall itself is productive.

The section devoted to Jazz musicians was executed by Jeff Donaldson and Elliot Hunter, and included a photograph of singer Sarah Vaughn by Billy Abernathy. This section is the largest perhaps indicating the import of the cultural endowment that jazz had bequeathed to America. Jazz was very significant in the quest for cultural validation in that it was now considered a high art form and was developed in America by African American musicians. Music development, it was argued, surpassed the plastic arts as slavery did little to arrest certain forms of recreation, but by the 19th century the trade white migrants to the South circumvented skills of Blacks. Therefore access to the materials necessary to make art objects was extremely limited and as it was material objects, not necessarily transportable from plantation to plantation. There was a prevailing belief that in the hierarchy of 'successful' arts visual arts ranked beneath music and literature. In fact “while the music that Black America developed seemingly paradoxically as the free creative expression of a socially oppressed people, the graphic and visual art of the Black American had its roots in the other.” The white audience was therefore the target for the plastic arts while music was kept as entertainment for other Blacks. The suggestion implicit here is that to create a valid art form one needs to address your own cultural group first. The notion that Black artists could be the avant-gardes was extremely empowering, although it was also true that many Blacks did not find the Avant-garde efforts of bebop and free jazz modes accessible. The irony was that by the 1960's the roles of music and the visual arts had exchanged places in the sense that there was a movement within the visual arts to address Black people more directly while in Jazz (or the New Music as performers called it) there was an alienation of the Black audience as the music form developed.

OBAC was linked to avant-garde jazz directly through an affiliation with the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music (AACM), and its affiliate, the Art Ensemble of

107 Tilden & Margaret LeMelle, Pp23
108 For an interesting discussion on this notion see the film Mo’ Better Blues directed by Spike Lee in which two musicians in a contemporary jazz quartet argue over why the content of jazz audiences has
Chicago. During the formation of the *Wall of Respect* members of the AACM were also members of the music workshop of OBAC and played their music as a creative expression accompanying the artists, and also provided background beats for the poets as they read their poetry at the Wall. This link between jazz and poetry pushed the literary boundaries as the new poetry emerged from a situation whereby the poets were increasing performativity, breaking the traditional boundaries to communicate directly with Black people. On the Wall beneath Muhammad Ali, writers gather around, as W.E.B. DuBois seems to be performing LeRoi Jones’ poem *SOS* (figure 7), which calls all Black people to arms to achieve self-consciousness and save their own souls. Jones (known also as Amiri Baraka) was the leading practitioner of this new poetry and a political activist whose essays and poems were extremely influential in the Black Arts movement. He appears in a photograph above the other writers at a podium performing his poetry illustrating the importance of performativity in this new poetry. Baraka’s poem transforms the wall into not merely a depiction of heroes to respect, but a militant call to arms for Black people. He wrote prolifically about the role of Black art as being socially and politically active rather than divorced from everyday life. In a poem entitled Black Art Baraka wrote:

'We want poems that kill.' Assassin poems,

Poems that shoot guns. Poems that wrestle

cops into alleys and take their weapons leaving

them dead with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland...

We want a black poem. And a Black World.¹⁰⁹

The Black world of the *Wall of Respect* consisted of portraits of famous black people grouped by their areas of influence: musicians, singers, writers, sports figures, actors and political leaders. Most of the portraits are not original works but painted replicas of popular images garnered from movies, album covers, magazines or books. The wall

---

became a giant billboard in effect, commodifying black culture which was significant as according to Donaldson in 1967 "You didn't see black images. It was necessary to create them."\textsuperscript{110} The wall became an attempt to create a Black world wherein popular imagery was directed toward, and produced by Black people.

There was a caption located on the bevelled corner of the building at 43\textsuperscript{rd} and Langley overlooking the intersection and visible from three directions as an announcement of the visual feast to come. It read \textit{This Wall Was Created To Honor Our Black Heroes and to beautify our community} (figure 8), which it did, but the beauty was not just a geographic beauty but also a cultural one. The Wall announced that Blackness—the radical assertion of racial identity—could beautify the minds of Black people. The Wall was painted to raise the awareness in the local Black community of their soul, creativity and social power, a consciousness that was expressed by the new affirmation "Black is beautiful."\textsuperscript{111} It proclaimed that Black people have the right to define Black culture and history for themselves, and to define the world according to their own ethical and aesthetic values. In short it was an attempt at a cultural revolution that Malcolm X had called for as a means to Black agency and empowerment.

The political statesman section painted by Norman Parish underwent a significant change as an ideological split occurred within the group. The rupture was over whether or not the communal aspect of the Wall should remain intact once the fame of the wall became surpassed the group's expectations. It was initially agreed (at least according to Donaldson), that no one would sign his or her works or attempt to market any personal gain from the project. Tension mounted as members of the group had experienced death threats, harassment and their personal lives were surveilled and disrupted by the police and Federal Bureau of Investigation's Counter-Intelligence Program or COINTELPRO.\textsuperscript{112} Distrust, frustration, and differences over how the Wall should be promoted in the media led to the break-up of the group by the time the it was actually completed. William Walker took over the wall's stewardship with the dissolution of the OBAC visual workshop, and authorized the painting over of Parish's section citing poor quality as his reason. Even before the August 24, 1967 dedication ceremony, the wall was repainted.

\textsuperscript{110} Alice Thorson, interview with Jeff Donaldson. "Africobra—Then and Now." \textit{New Art Examiner} vol.17, no.7 (March 1990) 26
\textsuperscript{111} Alan Barnett. Community Murals. Pp50.
\textsuperscript{112} Jeff Donaldson, The Rise, Fall... Pp23-25.
and the images of the statesmen were shifted and redone (figure 8). Walker later articulated his reasoning behind the censorious act in an interview saying that the portrayal of Malcolm X, which covered a recessed window was visually "too weak."  

Parish claims he was told that he "was not Black enough in my thought." Either way it became obvious that the expression of Blackness was a contested site even within this group of artists. The new statesman section now contained Malcolm X, H Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael and Angela Davis. In between Carmichael and Rap Brown, the two most famous advocates for Black Power, an artist not affiliated with OBAC Eugene Eda, executed a great black fist, a symbol their political rhetoric. The fist was a militant call to arms and simultaneously functioned as an iconic image of Black unity. It echoed the raised fists of Ali--black empowerment equals Black victory. The fist altered the semiology of the wall as it changed from populist media-style images of Blacks to an overt declaration of a specific political and racial doctrine. Thus, by the time of its public dedication, the imaging of the Wall of Respect had embarked on a particular exclusionary path that seemed less concerned with community involvement and more concerned with glorifying the radical aspect of contemporary Black leadership.

The new image of Malcolm X replicated a popular photograph on a giant placard that sat overtop of a boarded-over window (figure 9). This new placement eased some visual tension as Malcolm was previously situated directly above the Honourable Elijah Mohammed, his former leader and the man widely believed to be responsible for his assassination (figure 10). The repainting illustrates that although the Wall was to reflect Black pride, it was a very specific type of pride that was being articulated. One of the problems with contemporary political imagery is that politics fluctuate and so must the images to maintain their currency. By 1968, Stokely Carmichael, the spokesman and chief advocate of Black Power had left the SNCC and was appointed the Prime Minister of the Black Panther Party For Self-Defense. He had co-written Black Power, and had popularized the usage of the term as economic and social empowerment for Black people. H Rap Brown another popular young radical SNCC leader also joined the Panthers and had recently written a scathing autobiographical indictment against white society entitled Die Nigger Die. These two figures had left a non-violent lobby group to join the organization the Federal Bureau of Investigation considered the greatest threat.

to national security, the Black Panther Party. The emphasis placed on these two figures on the Wall illustrates the political metamorphosis that was taking place in America especially in the youth populations. The painting of the fist became a visual requiem for non-violence, which had been a very significant maxim for those involved in the struggle for civil rights. These alterations to the Wall signify its conversion from a collection of media portraits to an articulation of Black Nationalist political doctrine. The wall's iconography gained further potency as the famous Mexico City Olympic Game's Black Power salute in 1968 by athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos lent the clenched black fist further cultural currency as an image of specifically black empowerment on the international stage (figure 11).

The statesman section was repainted once more in 1969, but this time the work was transformed from militant portrayals to a depiction of violent urban conflict between Blacks and police (figure 12). The image shows police beating and urging their dogs to attack Blacks reminiscent of the many civil rights images from the South in the early 1960's. The image burns red with both blood and incendiary politics as the consequences of state sponsored racism that was being exposed and critiqued. The brutality of the police was the primary platform in the formation of the Black Panther Party and was perceived, especially by ghetto dwelling Blacks, as the most significant characteristic of the police. In the ghetto, the motto 'to protect and serve' was a farce as the police were as feared as any criminal might be. The Wall completes its image of racially motivated hate and violence as the image of police brutality is hauntingly overseen by an allegorical figure of a Ku Klux Klan member holding a rifle in one hand and a lit torch in the other, suggesting the 'spirit' in which these violent acts of ghetto suppression were carried out.

When the wall was altered, it became a societal barometer deciphering the moods of the community and responding with new imagery. In light of the contemporary political events taking place in Chicago, the violent images function as a protest of police brutality during the 1968 Democratic Convention. Mayor Richard Daley declared war on protestors and his sanctioned police department mercilessly beat peaceful protestors in front of nationally broadcasting television cameras for all America to see. Jones' poem about needing poems that kill, and kill Irish cops, seems to arise from this type of KKK.

\[^{114}\text{Ibid. Pp11.}\]
inspired police brutality and scenes of violence. The KKK member represents not just the racist mentality of the police, but also the brand of injustice and prejudice that America has habitually visited on its black inhabitants.

The wall takes on the function of a painted newsstand, or a television newscast, broadcasting the current events to the community, as it becomes an ephemeral record of contemporary sentiment. It defies the notion of the permanent art object preserved in the museum and instead becomes a work in progress that changes both through weathering and by the contemporary events that affect the Black community. The wall began as a series of media-based, graphic portraits, but the wall’s resonance was shifted to imaging a coherent socio-political doctrine. The alterations to the Wall of Respect were considered by most of the artists to be very damaging to the aesthetic they were trying to establish. This pollution of their aims no doubt led to a formalization of their aesthetic practice once they formed Africobra, in which they pointedly differentiated their work from portrayals of what they defined as protest. Protest was often characterized as art works in which the Black subject was a victim of abuse, either physical or societal. Although the most difficult type of protest work is one that critiques contemporary ruling establishments, the mural movement at least initially, circumvented the need for critical acceptance by remaining outside the gallery space as a form of community action.

The panel that had previously portrayed the image of Elijah Mohammed and Nat Turner was also painted over. The image is a scene of a contemporary demonstration in which people carry signs saying SEE, LISTEN, and LEARN (figure 13). A man in African print garb points an accusing finger at a group of conventionally dressed men seemingly calling them to accountability. This image certainly recalls cultural nationalism that demanded affiliation to Africa and to African cultural products as a way of rejecting European ideals. This movement lost energy as consumerist culture quickly assimilated African styling, turning its revolutionary intent into a statement of fashion rather than a cultural imperative. By 1970 one could buy an African print dashiki shirt as Sears as the small ethnic boutiques were swept away by a democratization of pan-African garb, which guaranteed a lower price but certainly incurred cultural costs. This event was precisely

the situation that Fanon feared by a non-specific negritude, which would be easily appropriated by American society as a fashion style. The final change abstracts the anger from the demonstration image by pitting five black faces against five non-black faces encapsulated in an oval of hands of different races grasping the oval to form a cross with the words PEACE, SALVATION, PEACE, PEACE bordering the oval (figure 14). The pared down symbol for race relations suggests that peaceful confrontation between the races is necessary to our mutual survival.

The Wall of Respect and other walls like it became a podium for Black artists to make statements of protest and hope, and to put a black perspective on contemporary events. There were other artist's protests that were taking place in Chicago following the 1968 Democratic Convention riots. Artists including Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Kenneth Noland and James Rosenquist joined the moratorium on exhibiting in Chicago until Mayor Daley's term was over in 1970. Richard Feigan, a gallery owner who had just lost a Claes Oldenburg show due to the boycott, proposed an exhibition in protest of Mayor Daley instead. Black artists were not afforded an opportunity to contribute to this protest exhibition, so the mural was one way they could make their statement—on their own ghetto museum walls. The Wall of Respect was mysteriously burned down in 1971, ending the standoff over the issue of public cultural property that had raged for four years as the scheduled demolition of the building had been waylaid by public outcry on several occasions. After the burning however, opposition evaporated and an urban renewal project quickly razed the building to the ground. The proposed community art center that was to take the place of the wall was never completed.

To suggest that the Wall of Respect was aesthetically anything other than a collage of images including poetry, photographs, portraits and social scenes, would be inaccurate. The significance of the mural was not something that most art critics could qualify as a valuable aesthetic contribution to the world of art. The Wall was important as it signified the proactive attempt of Black artists to establish a new art form to deal with their status (or lack of) during the late 1960's. The mural these artists made, however crude in its conception, has become an overwhelming choice of poor, urban non-white artists to express either their dissatisfaction with their environment or pride in their people. The Wall of Respect became simultaneously a galvanizing force in the Black Arts Movement,

and an activity that sparked a contemporary mural movement that is responsible for over fifteen hundred murals nationwide. Graffiti art in America is now an essential part of Hip Hop culture, which is itself quite dominant in its influence over youth and popular culture. Tours in cities now include the most famous walls as part of the urban history and magazines publish the newest graffiti as this art form now has legitimate status as a valid artistic expression. After a fashion, perhaps the prophecies of Malcolm X have come to pass through the commodification of Hip Hop as the mural movement has reverberations in this cultural revolution that locates urban Blacks as the tastemakers for popular culture dress, music, and to some extent, lifestyle. Alan Barnett writing on urban murals in 1984 wrote:

The people’s murals that began appearing in 1967 arose out of a matrix of activism that produced posters, demonstrations, educational innovations, vocational experiments, community-initiated services, civil-rights and anti-war agitation, and a communitarian kind of farm worker organizing. These varied phenomena have frequently been called “the Movement,” sometimes a “cultural revolution.” If culture is understood in the broad sense of a meaningful way of life, that is, a body of behaviour and technology connected by common values and a coherent way of perceiving the world, then, indeed, a cultural revolution was in the making.118

The formation of OBAC was one of several community-based attempts to establish a foundation for this revolution in culture. The Visual Arts Workshop however short lived, devised an aesthetic program, utilizing populist images of Black cultural heroes that resembled posters and other media images. The Black Nationalist movement adopted the graphic mode of representation, as the images were inexpensive, easily circulated and highly communicative. The OBAC members that went on to form Africobra carried with them these ideas as they used portrait images, often of famous Black people merging bright colours and textual messages to concoct a method of communication with their young, Black, and politically conscious audience.

Part XII: Cobra vs. Africobra—In Search of a Nationalist Audience

Despite the dissolution of the Visual Arts Workshop, the lessons of how to work out ideological differences and how to deal with COINTELPRO subterfuge led Jeff Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones and several others to form a smaller
group less susceptible to these earlier disruptions. They called their group COBRA, the Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists, and they formed as a political action group in response to societal events that characterized the late 1960's. The deaths of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, and the Chicago police murders of Black Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in their sleep, ignited a sense of protest that Donaldson cites as the foundation for the formation of COBRA. In his Africobran manifesto “10 in Search of a Nation,” Donaldson specifically points out that the nationalism of Africobra is different from the anger that spawned COBRA.

And then the dreamer’s dreamer had his balloon busted on a Memphis motel balcony. And that was the last balloon. And it was Chicago again and Harlem again...And COBRA was born. And we realized that sleepers can die that way. Like Fred and Mark and very legally. And COBRA coiled angrily. Our coats were pulled. And the anger is gone. And yes Imanu, it's Nation Time.119

The anger that created COBRA was perceived as disruptive to the aesthetic aims of the group, so before the group could attain a coherent nationalist visual program, their anger had to be dissipated or at least tamed. Thus the coalition of revolutionary artists becomes AFRICOBRA, the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (figure 15). The Black revolutionary is forsaken and is instead reworked as bad, relevant, and pan-Africanist in orientation. Bad becomes a style motif, an assertion of coolness, toughness and street savvy—the Shaft of the art world. While writing on Black poetry in the 60's, Philip Harper posits that the designation Black at this time represented, “an emergent identification among nationalist activists and intellectuals and not generic nomenclature by which any person of African descent might be referenced.”120 Thus, by using the term bad rather than Black they reassert their connection to the ghetto community, and serve notice that they are hip and a force to be reckoned with. The issue of relevance is of extreme importance to the group’s aims as it delineates the fact that as a coalition of artists they are responsible primarily to their audience. “It’s NATION TIME and we are searching. Our guidelines are our people—the whole family of African people... Relevant images define/describe themselves.”121 With the reference to African peoples we are given the scope of the audience; no longer the generic Black, but the politically and

119 Jeff Donaldson, “10 in Search of a Nation.” Black World (October 1970) 82
120 Phillip Brian Harper, “Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960’s.” Critical Inquiry 19 (Winter 1993) 251
historically more specific reference to Africa recalling the birthplace of all Black peoples and the styles of art that could be drawn from there. As if there was any doubt, Donaldson presses his point further and suggests that he is well aware of the debates concerning Black art when he writes:

We strive for images inspired by African people/experience and images which African people can relate to directly without formal art training and/or experience. Art for people and not for critics whose peopleness is questionable. We try to create images that appeal to the senses—not to the intellect.  

Donaldson delineated his intended audience as well as denouncing the racially biased criticism that Black art had received. The group was trying to communicate with those outside of the insular artistic community, they wanted their work to be visually accessible to Black audiences. Paradoxically this is an attempt to engage in pure aestheticism—the notion that merely the activity of visuality is all that is needed for the communication of their ideas and ideals. This presupposes a commonality among all Blacks similar to Negritude. In order to achieve this level of open communication with all people of African descent, AFRICOBRA adhered to a strict set of aesthetic codes to insure the directness of their message and the quality of their works. The three categories for Africobran images were, definition, identification and direction. Their work was further broken down to images that deal with the past, relate to the present, and project the future. These principles of subject matter became some of the basic tenets of Black Nationalist art. An identification of the past was necessary to understand the present, and the ideas of the present must be projected into the future to make nationhood a reality. Their work exhibits an aspect of Marxist critique when they state that their images made with mass production in mind that devalue the European notion of the art object. “An image that is valuable because it is an original or unique is not art—it is economics, and we are not economists. We want everybody to have some.” The fact that most of these artists were academics and thus did not make their primary living by the sale of their works, enabled them to experiment with the formulation of a communal art, as they critiqued the over commodification of the art object. For them, art carried what they interpreted as an African notion of art, as community-owned and serving some communal function. Their art production, at least in theory, was to devalue the economic aspect of their work but to

121 Ibid. Pp82, 86.  
122 Ibid. Pp83.  
123 Ibid. Pp83.
maintain its cultural value. Their most significant ambition was direct communication with their intended audience. This notion of Africobran art for Blacks only created a critical stir\textsuperscript{125}, as some critics read the art as hostile, and therefore offensive. Africobra and their works are a Black Nationalist response to an art community that was indifferent or even hostile to any incursion by African American artists.

Although I have made some seemingly blanket distinctions between Black and White art and the insular community that produces and circulates the work, I want to clarify that many Black artists did not embrace this dogma of the Black Arts Movement. The opening quote to this paper by Raymond Saunders, a Bay Area artist and instructor, defines the schizophrenic situation of being a Black person and a Black artist during the turbulent 1960's. There were several symposiums that attempted to define and discuss how Black life and experience could intersect in art or if it should be a consideration at all.\textsuperscript{126} In 1969 the Metropolitan Museum held a symposium of five Black artists that included venerable collagist Romare Bearden, Richard Hunt and Tom Lloyd.\textsuperscript{127} Significantly, the young artists included in this symposium were both abstract artists. Tom Lloyd did work with light sculptures and Richard Hunt was a metal sculptor. The discussion quickly deteriorated into an argument between the commercially successful artists beliefs that their art was judged fairly, and Tom Lloyd who paradoxically argued for a Black art while having to concede that his art contained no aesthetic aspects of Blackness beyond the fact of his own ethnicity. \textit{Negro Digest} also had a write-in symposium on the nature of Black art and \textit{Art Gallery}, and \textit{Arts and Society},\textsuperscript{128} had special issues that not only featured Black artists, but also had discussions about whether merely being a black artist made his work Black or if there were intrinsic visual characteristics to Black art. With the art world in general in a state of flux and disarray, the formation of the Art Workers Coalition and the art-based protests against the Vietnam incursion, as well as the backlash against the international promotion of

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid. Pp85
\textsuperscript{125} Paul Richards, "Black Art, Politics, Messages." \textit{Washington Post} (April 29 1973) B1,and "Africobra: African Art For Africans Only" \textit{Washington Post} (February 27 111972) B1. Both these articles discuss Africobra in a positive light, despite outlining the group's desire to specifically address Black people.\textsuperscript{126} See both special issues on Afro-American art, "Black Art: What Is It?" \textit{The ARTgellery Magazine} vol. 13 no. 7 (April 1970) 32-35 Also \textit{The ARTgellery Magazine} vol. 11 no. 7 (April 1968)\textsuperscript{127} "The Black Artist In America: A Symposium" \textit{The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin} vol. 27 no. 5 (January 1969) 245-260\textsuperscript{128} See Arts and Society no. 5 (Summer/Fall 1968) for several articles on the Black artist and the revolution and also photographs of the Wall of Respect.
Minimalism at Documenta IV\textsuperscript{129}, the desire to define Black art against this unstable backdrop became a way to promote the cultural validity of Black people. Dana Chandler underscores the scorn some artists had for the art establishment when he said, "Frank Stella? So much crap! It's decorative and it costs lots of money and it doesn't say anything. Earthworks? What the hell does it mean to Black people if you get bulldozers and dig holes in the ground? All this stuff whites are buying tells the black man a lot about where the white community is at, namely nowhere."\textsuperscript{130} The cultural awakening of Black people seemed to coincide with a destabilization of the status quo in which the art world—previously one of the major sources for producing American culture—was perceived as faltering or even worse, wallowing in its own decadence at a time of social upheaval and crisis. The integral validity of expression that Black artists had been pursuing since the Harlem Renaissance now was being deserted as the culture of the West was perceived as "a dying creature bereft of spirituality."\textsuperscript{131} Their art was to have a spiritual aspect that functioned within the community in keeping with their perception of the functional aspect of African art. According to Black Nationalists, the ship of Western European culture was sinking and the best advice for young Black artists was strike out on their own and swim toward some West African shore. But debate raged on as Black artists tried to establish themselves and to maintain their integrity in the face of the ability of consumer culture to commodify objects and thus render their works commercially successful, but culturally invalid to Black people. The political climate of Chicago during the late 1960's certainly contributed to both these modes of representation, and the subject matter that the artists took up. Chicago attracted attention from other Black artists whose aesthetic agendas were both similar and very different from the group. By focusing on a particular aspect of the 60's—the COINTELPRO sponsored witch hunt and persecution of the newly formed Black Panther Party For Self-Defense, we can see how Chicago was imaged on a national scale by other artists.

After the Democratic Convention riots, Chicago remained in the news with respect to their treatment of black radicals because of two highly visible media events. David Hammonds \textit{INJUSTICE CASE} (figure 16) from 1970 refers to the trial of the Chicago 8 (later Chicago 7), and specifically the treatment of the Black Panther's co-founder Bobby

\textsuperscript{129} Dana Chandler Jr., "Art—Object: Diversity." \textit{Time Magazine} (April 6 1970) 56

Seale. While being tried for inciting youth to riot during the 68 Democratic Convention along with Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman et al.,\textsuperscript{132} Seale was ordered bound and gagged by the judge for insisting on his right to refuse court appointed counsel and to represent himself. The notion of tangible materiality in art practice is again called up as Hammonds used his own body covered in oil and silver oxide dust to make himself into a body print of this bound Panther.

In 1969, the aforementioned police execution of Black Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark attracted much public attention as the police statement was shown to be false by a forensic report. The report showed that the police had broken in while the Panthers slept and fired some 80 unanswered rounds. This event exposed the police intention and ability to murder black activists and escape unscathed. Although the police escaped prosecution, the everyday ghetto reality of police brutality and violence was given a national spotlight when charges were brought against them. Boston artist Dana Chandler gives his protest to the event visual expression with his work *Fred Hampton's Door*. The forensic examination of Fred Hampton's apartment door is what led to the formal investigation that showed the police to have violated protocols of conduct. In this work Chandler uses real bullet holes to lend a chilling materiality to the handiwork of the Chicago police that is "government approved." Time magazine photographs him in his studio (figure 17) with a giant Free Huey Newton poster to hammer home Chandler's revolutionary nationalist allegiances. Chandler also painted several murals in the Roxbury section of Boston, because, as he said in an interview with art historian Eva Cockcroft, "We wanted to do some Walls of Respect in the Black community like the one that was done in Chicago."\textsuperscript{133} The Wall of Respect became an icon of Black art practice and cultural production, as the activity of producing the walls became metonymic of nationalist doctrines. Chandler speaks of his work as revolutionary and states that his art is not aesthetic because he wants his message of revolution clear. Artists such as Leon Golub proclaimed that art could be intentionally ugly to underscore the ugliness of the subject matter during Angry Arts Week.\textsuperscript{134} These are the kinds of pitfalls that Jeff Donaldson and the newly formed Africobra The African Commune of Bad Relevant

\textsuperscript{132} The Chicago Seven (excluding the gagged Seale) were Rennie Davis, David Dellinger, John Froiñes, Tom Hayden, Lee Winer, Abbie Hoffman, and Jerry Rubin. Sharon F Patton, *African-American Art*. Pp 200

\textsuperscript{133} Eva Cockcroft, Toward A People's Art. Pp8.

\textsuperscript{134} Leon Golub, "The Artist As An Angry Artist: The Obsession With Napalm." *Arts Magazine* (April 1967) 48-49
Artists were trying to avoid, as criticism of black art in the public media became a veritable minefield.

With their show at the Studio Museum in Harlem they nationally announced their transition from muralists to studio artists. The *Wall of Respect* had granted the artists national acclaim as it had been depicted in *Ebony, Arts and Society, Time Magazine,* and *Esquire* not to mention the fact that nearly every essay written on or around Black art mentioned the Wall as a nexus of Black creativity. The biggest concern was to adhere to what they had set out to accomplish, as they were well aware that with national attention would come extremely meticulous criticism. Africobra attempts to take familiar imagery but to project it into the future by putting a contemporary twist on images and icons of Black culture. Jae Jarrell’s *Revolutionary Jumpsuit* (figure 18) is the current fashion for the well-dressed sister of the revolution. She wears a revealing short skirt, but the blouse/blazer is studded with real bullets putting a dangerous twist on an outfit that at first glance might have made Jackie Kennedy yearn for a pillbox hat to match. Funky but practical shoes accessorize her smart and sexy suit, while her hat is replaced by a bushy, natural Afro hairstyle. A caption beneath the suit on display left no doubt as to the audience they wished to address, “This suit is not for honkies, strictly for Black people in the present revolution.” Jeff Donaldson modeled his *Wives of Shango* (figure 19) after Jae’s design as he clothes the wives of mythic Yoruba god of thunder and lightning in her revolutionary jumpsuit. Donaldson goes one step further as he depicts them with rifles as well as bullets thus downplaying the fashion aspect and increasing their militant function. The image has many contradictions as the women wear Christian crosses and Egyptian ankh symbols around their necks while earrings with the star and crescent are symbolic of the Nation of Islam. Their revolutionary ‘suits’ are cut with contemporary American brevity while the colours hint at African textile patterns. The three women look in different directions perhaps referring to the Donaldson edict that Black art must look to the past to confront the present which in turn projects into the future. Three is also a sacred number in Yoruba complex of symbolism as it represents the deified earth, the home of the ancestors, and it also signifies mystery.

---

137 Donaldson, “10 in Search of a Nation.” *Black World.* Pp83
Women occupy a very significant role in Africobran visuality. They are full of dignity, agency and strength, something that was certainly missing from most media portrayals of Black Nationalist practice. Nubia Kai, a curator for Africobra’s 20th anniversary exhibition, quotes a Ghanaian proverb that states that “When you educate a man, you educate that man, but when you educate a woman you educate a nation.” This proverb sums up the Africobran notion of womanhood as guardian, protector and procreator; in short women are the living embodiment of Black culture and thus Black future in the Africobran aesthetic. The elevated status of women might seem at odds with doctrines of Black Power as the movement is often conceived as a male movement towards a re-emasculcation that was given a visual vocabulary through groups like the Black Panthers and was typified in the Blaxploitation films of the early 1970’s. Africobra seems to have learned the lesson that:

> When the black man went as far as the adoration of his own genitals could carry him, his revolution stopped. A big Afro, a rifle, and a penis in good working order were not enough to lick the white man’s world after all.

The sexualized politics of the Black nationalists is erased here as Africobra is almost in conflict with the traditional symbols of Black power that had been perverted by media proliferation. Instead images like Donaldson’s *Wives of Shango*, of Nelson Steven’s *Sister Spirit* or *Towards Identity* (figure 20 & 21), prompt Nubia Kai to describe the images as embodying:

> Strength, awe, courage, hope, longing. Vision, glow from the pensive eyes of the woman in *Sister Spirit*. She is the spirit of Black women, the spirit of unity, the spirit of the race. More than a Black fist breaking through glass or lettered Black Power slogans, these portraits exude a defiance that is confident, determined, and transcendent. It is a face holding the promise of freedom.

The anger inherent in the Black Power movement was muted in the principles of Africobran aesthetics. The utopic future they aspired to could not be mired in quotidian

---

139 Nubia Kai, “Africobra Universal Aesthetics.” *Africobra: The First Twenty Years* ex cat (Atlanta 1990: Nexus Contemporary Art Center) 13
140 Ibid. Pp13
143 Kai. Pp12.
hatred, instead their images were witty and sardonic, they incorporated aspects from youth culture such as colourful psychedelic images (figure 22 & 23) and visual rhythms of music, especially jazz (figure 24). In Black Prince and Revolutionary, both from 1971, Wadsworth Jarrell creates a new spin on the poster art he executed for the Wall of Respect. Here he uses popular media images of Angela Davis and Malcolm X, but using bright colours and psychedelic patterns akin to LP record covers from the time, he redraws the historical figures using words and letters from their famous speeches. Malcolm X becomes his own oratory as the image constructs his famous visage with his own famous speech. Angela Davis has an Afro made of “revolution and resistance” as well as a row of bullets sewn into the canvas that suggest she wears her own ‘revolutionary jumpsuit.’ This promotes the idea that Africobra is the source for the visual aspect of Black liberation. In Coolade Lester, Jarrell constructs the musician from his music. The letters flow and bop and bounce, as they seem to stream from his fingertips as he coaxes notes from his stand-up bass. This jazz player is a “Bad MF,” as music and revolutionary tendencies are visually linked in this “coolade colored” image. The bright colours were an aesthetic must to the group as they felt that colour in fact had power. “Color that is free of rules and regulations. Color that shines. Color that is expressively awesome. Color that defines, identifies and directs...Coolade colors for coolade images for the superreal people.” Donaldson wrote that the color must be bright to describe colorful living of Blacks in American ghettos and in the Caribbean and in African cities from Dakar to Johannesburg. His appeal is therefore to the Black Diaspora in the sense that Africa is the spiritual and geographical home of all Black people and we must look to Africa for our cultural affiliation and inspiration. When we look back to Nelson Stevens Our Nation Calls Now (figure 2), we understand what Donaldson means when he credits Stevens with bringing shine to the group in 1969. The shine that he talks about is not some aesthetic term with abstract and inaccessible language; rather shine, a major quality to the group, is the shine of, “the rich luster of a just-washed ‘Fro, of spit-shined shoes, of de-ashened elbows and knees and noses. The Shine that escaped the Titanic...patent leather...cars, ad shineum” For Africobra the trappings of everyday street life are what embodies shine and emboldens their spirit. Shine who escaped the Titanic is a mischievous Black folk hero of superhuman abilities that is always able to escape peril. While adhering to a fairly strict aesthetic doctrine, these images are playful,

145 Ibid. Pp86.
witty and captivating, but they maintain what they consider technical excellence, a factor that Donaldson feels separates them from some artists of the Black Arts Movement that placed content over aesthetic excellence. This may seem like it is at odds with much of the discussion and analysis in this paper, but Africobra attempted to formulate a philosophy of art by the focusing of African art practice and incorporating these elements into "an atavistic style."  

An innate knowledge of art based on African cosmogony, mythology, culture and history ancestrally or genetically transmitted through the collective consciousness...There is no difference, at least stylistically, in the interpretation and explication of Black art in the United States, the Caribbean and Africa.  

Their position is problematic as the espousal of alleged innate or spiritual characteristics in their art invalidates the visual politics of the works and legitimates an apolitical analysis of their art. Their attempt to unify all Black people becomes a kind of cultural terrorism, as political art that attempts to speak for a marginalized people also homogenizes them in very dehumanizing ways. Although this perspective grants a kind of critical invulnerability to their work--at least by white critics who of course lack these innate spiritual characteristics--this position inadvertently plays into the hands of those cultural imperialists who categorize and stereotype according to racial characteristics. Bolton, an artist, questions the premise that political art speaks for a particular marginalized public. He suggests that art practices that assume to be capable of giving voice to the concerns of a particular group, are as homogenizing in their efforts to delineate a problem, as those who would stereotype them in order to ostracize them. He sees the creation of these false or imagined communities as particularly dangerous as they seem to have garnered a right to speak, while eschewing criticism by claiming an outsider's position. Armed with a knowledge of African culture, a sense of technical excellence in terms of execution, and of course social responsibility, Africobra and other like-minded artists were able to make images of "expressive awesomeness," and which embody "free symmetry." These images are based on the human figure, as from an African point of view, "socially irrelevant art is not art at all since it fails to fulfill the purpose for which art was cosmically designed." Paradoxically then, despite Africobra's

147 Ibid. Pp7.  
148 For a discussion on the possibilities of cultural terrorism in political art, see Richard Bolton, "What Is To Be Un-Done: Rethinking Political Art." New Art Examiner vol. 18 no. 10 (June/ Summer 1991) 25-28  
149 Ibid. Pp27
belief in art expressing the everydayness of Black experience, their quotidian artistic expression has spiritual and cosmic reverberations that depoliticise the works which are supposed to be socially based. The more grounded in real life the work is, the more it expresses the spiritual aspect necessary for building towards a united African-American nation.

After convening the 1970 Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art (or CONFABA, see Appendix III) at Northwestern University where Donaldson taught, the group gained national exposure through an exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, an art gallery that was created expressly for the viewing of Black art by Black artists in 1969. Their exhibition was unusual in that the works themselves were not immediately for sale. They composed a survey questionnaire in which the public could chose the works they liked and these were reproduced for sale through a mail out. This activity emphasizes how Africobra was committed to the notion of relevancy and functionality of their works to a Black community. They violated most art precepts when they wrote in their 1973 catalogue that “We invite you to judge our efforts. If we are moving in the right direction we would appreciate hearing from you. If we are moving in the wrong direction a coat-pull would likewise be appreciated.” The goal was to produce posters of the original works and to sell them at affordable prices and to involve the audience in the process of image production. The group conceived images that would lend themselves to high quality reproductions that could be sold for between $10 and $25. Thus the edict that Donaldson wrote of in his exhibition catalogue essay rang true as he described their art as “poster art—images which deal with concepts that offer positive and feasible solutions to our individual, local, national, international, and cosmic problems.” This method of distributing their work beyond the scope of their exhibitions was short-lived as certain interests began to buy up the posters and sell them at inflated prices—a fitting welcome to the commodification abilities of New York art world.

Part XIII: Some Final Thoughts On Africobra, Black Identity and Hip Hop Culture

152 Alice Thorson, “Africobra—Then and Now.” New Art Examiner vol.17 no. 7 (March 1990) 28
An article by Ralph Pomeroy from 1969 entitled "The Dilemma: Art Is Basically For Protest Is Against," denounced 'protest art' as aesthetically invalid:

...All art is the result of thought, care, standing back, even if only an inch or two. It is the act of making life possible and this is a profoundly positive act. Tearing things down, is, it appears, a far more trenchant social/political action—as students are proving all over the world. I feel sorry for art, I feel sorry for us.  

Pomeroy suggests that the critical social realism in art is somehow removing beauty from the world and invading that sacred space the museum with its vulgar self. By today's standards this may seem an archaic perspective, but even into the 1970's some critics were still upholding these notions. Black power art is a cultural response to the American political climate, the strategies artists utilized to maintain a sense of validity in the face of criticism exposed racial and cultural biases by these critics.

I am arguing for a critical awareness of Africobran aesthetics and the art practices of 60's Black Nationalist artists like Benny Andrews or Dana Chandler, however boorish this may seem in this era of exploding the canon. Their adherence to a particular aesthetic program that utilizes engaging colourful images that are parodic, collagist, and full of references to the history of art (albeit to critique its historic practice of privilege) is certainly worthy of further documentation. This type of communal production has an element of cultural tyranny as individuality is quashed to facilitate a group aesthetic. The sliver of political protest art that usually gets talked about are images like Picasso's Guernica, Goya's 3rd of May, James Joyce's Ulysses. This is a diverse group of art and artists and I choose them to illustrate my point that the criticisms that were levelled against the Black Power aesthetic are criticisms that are conspicuously absent from these supposedly 'classic' works. In Guernica and 3rd of May, these artists works gained access to the canon because the regimes that they critiqued were already defeated or general sentiment found them politically unfavourable. Thus the emotionality of Picasso and Goya that Pomeroy et al. derides is excusable since everyone knows that Napoleon was a tyrant, and that Hitler's Fascism was the worst outbreak of a tyrannical attempt at world domination since Napoleon. My theoretic formulation as to why social realism has been ghettoized as protest and therefore invalid; social realism has been the product of Communist and Fascist regimes, therefore how could America treat these art practices with anything less than derision? In order for realist images to have shed their populist

154 Art & Artists vol. 4 no.5 (August 1969) 62
stigma and be recognized as high art, there needed to be an association between these images and some aspect of American ideals. Since the dismantling of the Supremacist art movement by Joseph Stalin after World War I, realism has had an uneasy affiliation with totalitarian regimes. It has also been utilized as a leftist tool against capitalist oppression, and in America during the rise of the New Left; Marxist doctrines trickled down to comment on the place of art in a cultural revolution. The works of Africobra were dismissed by the intelligentsia as too populist and not aesthetically complex, but now in a new era of criticism these works are long forgotten and although the cultural biases that ghettoized these works are no longer prevalent, their exposure and effect is still limited by its exclusion from art texts that include little, if any Black art. Perhaps it will take the dismantling of the white supremacist regime that is America before these works can be appreciated. This work becomes a way to trace the roots of contemporary Black artists practice, by exposing some of this repressed art production. The contemporary graffiti movement that exists today as an essential aspect of Hip Hop culture can trace its origins back to the Wall of Respect and OBAC, and with the currency that Hip Hop now exercises in American culture, the roots of the movement need to be unpacked.

Despite the cultural success and prevalence of Black urban culture today, visual culture was one area where Black cultural attempts were consistently rebuffed. To invalidate a cultural activity based on complex aesthetic criteria is one method of hegemonic constraint; one that validates itself through a dogma of naturalization that has been attacked by critics like Richard Dyer. Dyer has written extensively the naturalization of western culture through the hegemony of Whiteness in film narratives. By producing what is promoted as a natural order of culture, film narratives are able to other cultural values that are in opposition to these mores. The 1960's belief that 'protest' images of Black people's lives of was not 'universal' enough subject matter for consideration as serious art was a racially motivated farce. Although this paper is a discussion around the highly contested notions of Black art, the question what is Black art? Seems ridiculous when we try to answer the antipode what is White art? How are the lives of Irish peasants or ancient Greeks anymore classical or universal than the lives of Black people? Perhaps the Black art of this period used figuration and overt politics (rather than the covert political agenda of say abstract expressionism), because of their beleaguered existence under the oppressive political and cultural regime (see Norman
Mailer's essay *The White Negro* for an articulation of this situation) that is Americanism. The answer to White domestic imperialism was to respond with Black cultural activity that reacted against racist values.

Africobra's graphic styles and patterns recreate graffiti-style effects that problematize classifications of popular or high art. The art of the city is street art, and the poster qualities of Africobra's works— even while being exhibited in a gallery—speak of the street. Certainly it can be stated that graffiti art of the 1980's in works by Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat owed something to the urban mural movement and by extension to the artwork of OBAC and Africobra. They negotiated the pitfalls of being labelled protest art firstly by only using prideful assertive images (as opposed to images of victimization), and then by naming their work poster art, they effectively remove it from the critical accessibility of most critics, the labels no longer fit. The notion that Black visual art has innate and intrinsic creative components characteristic of a specific ethnic group is certainly in the intellectual climate of today, alarmingly essentialist. That many artists disagreed with the categorization of Black art illustrates that the classification was and is contentious. What cannot be argued with is the fact that Africobra has, by adhering to its aesthetic criteria, attained its status as a venerated Black art coalition that not only pioneered a cohesive mode of representation, but has also become internationally influential in scope by exhibiting with artists from both the Caribbean and West Africa over the last quarter century. Their work today has shifted toward an abstraction that appears to mimic African textiles patterns, and no longer relies on the human subject to grant it legitimacy. Their influence has spread partially through the appointment of at least four Africobrans to professorships at various art institutions including University of Georgia, Howard University, and UMASS Amherst to name a few, thereby a new cadre of students with a similar Pan-Africanist aesthetic orientation has arisen, and some former students are now part of the collective. Africobra's refusal to accept the sterile urbanity of Chicago's ghetto, led to what might be construed as a 'postmodern moment of rupture,' that characterized the Africobran belief that in order to become and remain effective artists, they had to produce and preserve a space for a diasporic African-American art production. Their point of departure from other pan-African groups was in using a popular culture form of graphic posters that were

155 Richard Dyer, “White” *Screen Magazine* 29 (Fall 1988) 44-64
becoming a political force in America with the social unrest generated by the visibility of 60's activism. American commodity culture, indeed capitalist culture in general seems to have an almost bottomless capacity for commodifying the dangerous aspects of society and rendering them politically impotent and the Black Power Movement was no exception. By the end of the 1960's department store chains were cashing in on a kind of radical chic by selling African dashiki shirts and other 'African' wares including beads and combs.\[157]\n
The imagined community of radical Blackness in America was pulled back into the melting pot of Americanism through popular commodification of their ideals. By not protesting against, but merely questioning the relevance of American art world aesthetic practice, Africobra managed to create something unusual in contemporary art practice, a graphic mode that while realist in application, flirts with abstraction and African textile patterns as well as integrating the popular tendencies of psychedelic posters and media images. The sense of empowerment and self-definition that enabled Black people during the 1960's is visually present in the images and ideologically present in their aesthetic coda. If one agrees with Matisse, then the art of Africobra qualifies as great art as it is intentionally mired in its social and historical context; with their work, the metanarratives of universality are finally erased.

The artists of Africobra embraced their cultural difference from White America and in fact emphasized their otherness by looking toward particularly Yoruban art practices and mythology as West African culture and history was perceived as the basis of their historical and cultural identity. They did not want their art to 'pass' for anything other than work by politically conscious Black artists. Africobra refined the OBAC project of public art, as they defined their audience no longer on strictly geographic terms, but more on radical affiliation. One of the problems with political art is the necessary formation of an imagined community that the artists claim to speak for. The creation of a public leads to an essentialism of expedience as common characteristics are articulated and granted to a given 'community.' The establishment of a revolutionary visual vocabulary is often short-lived, as the community that was formed in a crisis situation again must have issues of identity elision. The artists of Africobra still exhibit, as the politics of emergent African nations are still relatively unsettled, as are race issues in America. Despite the

fact that the precepts of Africobra may be outdated or even politically incorrect by today's art community standards, their international exhibitions illustrate that there is still a need for the unifying principles found in their works.

What is the colour of revolution? The Wall of Respect became a genesis for the urban mural movement that has become an essential aspect of Hip Hop culture in contemporary America. The prevalence and diversity of Hip Hop, one of the most significant cultural forces in America today, has its roots in the espousal of identity politics that sprung from the art of Africobra and OBAC. To endeavour to define an artist by race today is even more ludicrous than it was a generation ago. Contemporary Black artists like Glenn Ligon and Cara Walker involve their Blackness (using contemporary racial nomenclature, African American ness) in their work as they attempt to reconcile personal identity issues with those brought on by the history of racial practice against Blacks in America. The legacy of Africobra is not their radical doctrines, nor the spiritual aspects of their works that in effect depoliticise the scope and environment of their art. Their legacy is the notion that Black identity can be brought into the work of an artist by creating a mode that ideologically agrees with the subject matter. Their poster prints have a street quality; they suggest a sense of musical movement, psychedelic culture, and pan-African identification.

Contemporary cultural activity sometimes has a way of legitimating academic pursuits if we are so fortunate. The central theme in the Spike Lee directed 1989 film; Do The Right Thing film is an argument over the use of popular images to create a Wall of Respect. The ideological clashes that occur over this racialized space (Figure 25), enunciates many of the issues that I outline in my thesis. In the film the central conflict occurs when S, an Italian pizzeria owner has a Wall of Fame in his restaurant, but his restaurant is located and patronized by Black members of the ghetto. A politically minded local youth satirized by Lee as Buggin' Out, decides that the Wall of Fame should include Black people in order to represent Black ghetto interests. What Sal is attempting to establish in the film is a site of memory, Italian-American memory, within the Black ghetto space that he earns his living from. The argument becomes a battle over the cultural space, owned by Sal, but located within and reliant upon the Black community for its survival. The film distils the arguments over Black Nationalism during the 1960's and 1970's and the contemporary aspects of Black Nationalistic culture most, obviously located under the
aegis of Hip Hop culture. It shows that the battle over cultural space, especially between minorities is far from over. Today artists connected with this Hip Hop movement produce work that is either an affirmation of African-American existence, or a cultural critique of White America's repressive tactic against people of colour. It is certainly not within the scope of this paper to delve into an in depth analysis of Hip Hop, but when thinking about the legacy of Africobra and the Black Arts Movement, it is clear to me that Hip Hop has brought Black culture into many White homes and although one could argue that the Hip Hop industry, especially music is mostly White-owned, cultural bridges have formed between Black and White culture through fashion and lifestyle that may one day encompass ideology as well. Africobra was an attempt negate the historic invisibility of Black people and to establish a Black Art, which meant an art practice with the African-American experience as its main subject matter. White ways of looking at the world may still prevail in the institution of American cultural policy, but the fascination with and education about Black culture that was begun in the 1960's by groups like OBAC and Africobra, may lead to new levels of cultural understanding and exchange through the art, both visual and musical, of the Hip Hop movement. While commercialization and exploitation are prevalent within the dissemination coding of specific aspects (often negative) of Black culture that are promoted through popular culture, the window into a previously segregated culture is invaluable as our quest for identity continues.
Figure 2 Nelson Stevens, Our Nation Calls Now, 1971. Acrylic on canvas 3' x 2'
Figure 5  Diego Rivera, *Man At the Crossroads*, 1933, detail.
HARLEM

CULTURAL CAPITAL OF

EDITED & WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY ALLON SCHOENER

AND WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY HENRY LOUIS GATES JR.

BLACK AMERICA, 1900-1968

Figure 6 Metropolitan Museum of Art Exhibition Catalogue cover reprinted in 1995.
Figure 7 OBAC, *Wall of Respect* detail, 1967.
Figure 8. OBAC, Corner of 43rd and Langley, Wall of Respect, 1969.
Figure 9  OBAC, *Wall of the Respect*, Dedication day, August 27, 1967.
Figure 10  OBAC, *Wall of Respect*, Detail, The Honorable Elijah Mohammed, 1967.
Figure 11 Black Power Salute, T. Smith and J. Carlos, Mexico City Olympics, October 1968

Figure 15 Africobra 1970, group portrait.
Figure 16 Dana Chandler, *Fred Hampton's Door*, Boston, 1969. Oil on wood.
Figure 17 David Hammonds, *Injustice Case*, New York, 1971. Body print and silkscreen.
Figure 18 Jae Jarrell, *Revolutionary Jumpsuit*, 1970.
Figure 19 Jeff R. Donaldson, *Wives of Shango*, 1968 watercolor. 31” x 29”
Figure 20 Nelson Stevens, *Towards Identity*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas 4' x 4'
Figure 21 Nelson Stevens, *Sister Spirit*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas 4' x 4'
Figure 22 Wadsworth Jarrell, *Revolutionary*, 1971. Acrylic on canvas, 63 ½" x 50 ½"
Figure 22  Wadsworth Jarrell, *Black Prince*, 1971. Acrylic on canvas, 64" x 44"
Figure 24  Wadsworth Jarrell, *Coolade Lester*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas 50” x 24”
Figure 25  Wall of Fame in Sal’s pizzeria, film still from *Do the Right Thing* 1989.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Van Deburg, William L. *New Day In Babylon: The Black Power Movement and*


Articles


--- “The Emerging Importance of Black Art In America.” New Art Examiner 7 (June 1980): 1,4-5.


"Soul Heroes." *Esquire* 69 (April 1968)


(972): 7-11.


APPENDIX I

OBAC VISUAL ARTWORKSHOP
WALL OF RESPECT BLACK HEROES

RHYTHM & BLUES
Painting by Wadsworth Jarrell
Billie Holiday Aretha Franklin Dinah Washington Muddy Waters Smokey Robinson and the Miracles The Marvelettes James Brown Stevie Wonder Ray Charles Photograph of Stevie Wonder by Billie Holiday

JAZZ
Painting by Jeff Donaldson and Elliot Hunter
Charles Parker Ornette Coleman Nina Simone Sarah Vaughan Max Roach Miles Davis Thelonious Monk Charlie Mingus John Coltrane Eric Dolphy Lester Young Sonny Rollins Photograph of Sarah Vaughan by Billy Abernathy

THEATER
Painting by Barbara Jones
Claudia McNeil Ruby Dee Cecily Tyson Sidney Poitier Ossie Davis Oscar Brown, Jr. Dick Gregory Photo of dancer Dralene Blackburn by Roy Lewis

STATESMEN
Painting by Norman Parish

RELIGION
Painting by William Walker
Elijah Muhammad Albert Cleage Nat Turner Photo of Elijah Muhammad’s granddaughter by Robert Sengstacke

LITERATURE
Photography and painting by Edward Christmas
W. E. B. DuBois Gwendolyn Brooks LeRoi Jones John O. Killens Lerone Bennett Photograph of LeRoi Jones by Darrel Cowherd

SPORTS
Painting by Myrna Weaver
Lew Alcindor Bill Russell Muhammad Ali

DANCE
Painted on newsstand by Carolyn Lawrence
APPENDIX II

The Wall

August 27, 1967
[the day of its dedication]
Humbly we come.

South of success and east of gloss and glass are
saddles;
flowercloth;
grave hoops of wood or gold, pendant
from black ears, brown ears, reddish-brown
and ivory ears;

black boy-men.
Black
Box-men on roofs fist out "Black Power!" Val,
a little black stampede
in African images of brass and flowerswirl,

fist out "Black Power!"—tightens pretty eyes,
leans back on mothercountry and is tract,
is treatise through her perfect and tight teeth.

Women in wool hair chant their poetry,
Phil Cohran gives us messages and music
made of developed bone and polished and honed
cult.

It is the Hour of tribe and of vibration,
the day-long Hour. It is the Hour
of ringing, rouse, of ferment:
festival.

On Forty-third and Langley
black furnaces resent ancient
legislatures
of ploy and scruple and practical gelatin.
They keep the fever in,
fondle the fever.

All
worship the Wall.

I mount the rattling wood. Walter
says, "She is good." Says, "She
our Sister is. In front of me
hundreds of faces, red-brown, brown, black, ivory,
yield me hot trust, their yea and their

Announcement
that they are ready to rile the high-flung ground.
Behind me, Paint:
Heroes.

No child has defiled
the Heroes of this Wall this serious Appointment
this still Wing
this Scald this Flute this heavy Light this Hinge.

An emphasis is paroled.
The old decapitations are revised,
the disposessions breakless.

And we sing. 19

The Wall

sending their negro
toms into the ghetto
at all hours of the day
(disguised as black people)
to dig
the wall, (the weapon)
the mighty black wall (we chase them out—kill if
necessary)

white people can't stand
the wall,
killed their eyes, (they cry)
black beauty hurts them—
they thought black beauty was a horse—
stupid muthafuckas, they run from
the mighty black wall

brothers & sisters screaming
"picasso ain't got shit on us,
send him back to art school."
we got black artists
who paint black art
the mighty black wall

negroes from south shore &
hyde park coming to check out
a black creation
black art, of the people.
for the people,
art for people's sake
black people
the mighty black wall

black photographers
who take black pictures
can you dig,
blackburn
le roi,
muslim sisters,
black on gray it's hip
they deal, black photographers deal blackness for
the mighty black wall

black artists paint
du bois/ garvey/gwen brooks
stokely/ rap/james brown
tran/miracles/ray charles
baldwin/killens/muhammad ali
alecindor/blackness/revolution

our heroes, we pick them, for the wall
the mighty black wall/about our business, blackness
can you dig?

if you can't you ain't black/some other color
negro maybe??

the wall
the mighty black wall,
"ain't the muthafucka layen there?" 18
APPENDIX III

CONFAB A - CONFERENCE ON THE FUNCTIONAL ASPECTS OF BLACK ART
by Jeff Donaldson

As a faculty member at Northwestern University in the spring of 1970, with the invaluable support of students from my African American art history class, I convened the first working conference to organize the study of African American art. It provided a firme foundation whose superstructure, when completed, will properly preserve, protect, and project our visual art history. A diverse group of 50 historians, educators, visual artists, with scholars from other disciplines met and worked from May 7-9, 1973. The personnel and findings recommendations of the six task forces were:

TASK FORCE 1: EDUCATION - Theresa Christopher, David Driskell, Eugene Grigsby, Donald Joyce, Willie Moore, Hughe Lee-Smith, Shirley Woodson Reid:
- acute need for basic research in all areas of African American art history
- creation of a central clearing house for the collection and dissemination of information with a focus on African American artists and secondary concerns for other black artists and art in the Western hemisphere and Africa
- publication of a quarterly journal
- interview and record/document information about older black artists
- discover and preserve art works made by black captives in the Americas
- publication of African American art picture books for children
- maintenance of exhibitions and collections of African American art works that could travel to black colleges, communities, and museums
- offer first opportunities to publish books and other kinds of publications about African American art to black publishers
- preserve and renew the concept of the "Cabinet" as keeper/protector/arranger of the history and mythology of our people

TASK FORCE 2: RESEARCH - E. Barry Carter, Allan Gordon, Eugene Grigsby, Donald Joyce, Willie Moore, Hughe Lee-Smith, Shirley Woodson Reid:
- artists must reach out to people, architects, decorators, etc., to create human types of environments for the enrichment of the total community
- establishment of a newsletter to include resources for black artists, legal information, etc.

TASK FORCE 3: PHILOSOPHY - Ada (Cecile McFarland), Skunder Boghossian, Marie Johnson, Barbara Jones-Hugh, Paul Keene, Columbus Kepler, Valerie Maynard, Larry Neal, Eddie Reid, Josephus Richards, Payne Weaver:
- we are concerned with continuity and change...the dynamics of this situation emphasizes the urgency and reality of the PRESENT — the NOW philosophy is never complete until it is backed by action. Art is action.
- function of art is to liberate man in the spiritual sense, to provide more INTERNAL space.
- THERE WOULD BE NO BLACK PEOPLE WITHOUT BLACK ART.
- WE ARE FAMILY.

- KOOL AID IMAGES OF THE CONTEMPORARY US

TASK FORCE 4: AESTHETICS - Sylvia Boone, David Bradford, Dana Chandler, Floyd Coleman, Sylvia Kinney, Ibn Pori Picar:
- WE ARE AN AFRICAN PEOPLE.
- AFRICAN CREATION IS THE CELEBRATION OF LIFE.
- RITES OF SOUL replaces the term "art"
- African creation may not be dogmatically circumscribed, they must remain free to express themselves in infinite forms so long as those forms are consistent with and grow out of our collective experience

ELDERS OF DISTINCTION: Romare Bearden, John Biggers, Margaret Burroughs, Aaron Douglas, John M. Howard, Jacob Lawrence, Hughie Lee-Smith, Elizabeth Catlett, Marcia Hall, Hughie Lee-Smith, William Walker, Charles White, Paul Robeson, "in attendance," barred by U.S. State Department: remaining vinylized vinylized message/CONFAB.


SENIOR CADRE: Thomas Burroughs, Edmund F. Gaither, Douglas Harris, Barbara Jones-Hugh, Edward S. Spriggs, Nelson Stevens

STUDENT CADRE: Andre Bell, Errorma Black, Wilmmer Butler, Basil Bechley, Jacqueline Collins, Gillan Escobedo, Khalil Harris, Leslie Harris, Dorothy Higginson, Stanley Hill, Gale Johnson, Marlene Jackson, Janet James, Charles McElhiney, Brenda Max, Barbara Perkins, Dee Redmond, Clive Twa, Joyce Smith, Daphne Tebbt, Wayne Watson, Delores Wilson, and Cheryl White, student cadre coordinator.