

Decolonizing The White Box

This zine was created for **Decolonizing The White Box**

A community forum exploring the experiences of people of color in/around the art world.

Artists, audiences and art workers welcome.

One of the intentions for this conversation is to expand on collective response to the whiteness of recent surveys of contemporary art (The Whitney Biennial, Made in LA), and also to consider the positions of artists of color within/around/outside colonial and racist institutional spaces.

How to resist/challenge/bypass museum non-engagement with communities of color; how to resist/challenge/bypass art historical oblivion.

Honoring artists practicing on the “outside” of the museum but from the inside of a community, artists whose art is perhaps anti-art, artists who fought these fights in the 90s, the 80s, the 70s....

Moderated by Raquel Gutiérrez,

Hosted by HRLA on October 27, 2014.

Zine compiled by Oscar M. Santos through an open call via facebook.

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PEACE AND LOVE.

What is dissent for?
In prose, the exposition
of weakness goes
Unappreciated.

Here, a white woman less woman calls
big woman more woman the wrong name
the evaluative in her mind tumbles out.
multi-tasking is sabotage; take me away

Today a lack reigned in the garden of community
Engagement. I promised you utopia
And the white lady nice variety spills the bong
Water that trembles under her breath

Lady white nice; a minor dame
Surrounded by otherness and king makers
confuses the urban slippage. Field expertise.
The savages used to be nobler

Nice white lady does not do
the cult of due diligence.
Brown face jazz hands in the service
of multicultural qualitative data gathering

So this is the trenches where didacticism stops
me from experimenting; evens and odds together. Some
complain the money cannot forgive and the fuck-ups
still want validation. Timidity in English rose patterns

in constant repetition. I have a bias; a blind spot
as it is obvious the outfit on her ample back
Is monochromatic; the expectation to explain
all the colors obscures

By: Raquel Gutiérrez

MY ART IS NOT ANY LESS RADICAL BECAUSE OF MY RACE

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Submitted by: Caressa Wong

Storytelling: An Interview with Kerry James Marshall

Taken from <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/storytelling-an-interview-with-kerry-james-marshall/>

The painter Kerry James Marshall is known for taking on American history from a black perspective. A significant sampling of his work is on view in Washington, D.C., at the National Gallery of Art's first-ever solo show of a living black artist. "In the Tower: Kerry James Marshall" (through Dec. 8) is built around his painting *Great America* (1994), which re-imagines the journey of slave ships from West Africa to North America as an amusement park's haunted-tunnel ride. This 2011 acquisition, along with 9 other paintings and 23 drawings on view in the show, questions orthodox accounts of U.S. history while exploring African-American experience.

The Birmingham, Ala.-born, Chicago-based artist, 57, spoke with A.i.A. by phone this week about the National Gallery exhibition, the various U.S. histories and American dreams, and why he's committed to the emphatically black figure.

TRACY ZWICK What does it mean for you, an artist whose work is not always celebratory of American ideals, to have a solo show at the National Gallery of Art?

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL The National Gallery is the place that means to represent everything that's good and important in art and show what it believes everyone who is a citizen should recognize and engage. My dream was always to be in museums. It's a big and important milestone and a fulfillment of one of my primary ambitions.

We tend to assume there is one history of America: the mythical, heroic narrative of an all-inclusive, grand project that had at its inception the goal of embracing differences and treating all as equal. If we allow ourselves to be lost in this mythology, we overlook the more disturbing, less humane dimensions of our history. We don't always learn that our nation's triumphs were at times achieved on the backs of other people. Everyone should have both of these complicated narratives always in their consciousness.

ZWICK This exhibition coincides with the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, at which Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of an obligation to push for the full expression of one's rights even if it makes people uncomfortable. Does that admonition resonate with you?

MARSHALL For me, the picture is a catalyst; it will make people uncomfortable. But it has to become commonplace for people to see images like mine when they go to museums or turn on the television. If it's the exception to see images like that, then there's no way you can get past the notion that there is something fundamentally wrong with being that dark-skinned.

ZWICK Bang [1994], an acrylic and collage work on canvas, is part of this exhibition and is on loan from the Progressive Insurance Corporation. It features deeply black-skinned children saluting the American flag in a utopian 1960s-era suburban landscape, but is darkened by a halo of black smoke surrounding a charcoal grill and sinister drips from the phrase "Happy July 4 Bang." When it was installed at Progressive's Cleveland headquarters, it made some employees sufficiently uneasy that the company brought you to Cleveland to address the problem. What happened?

MARSHALL We had a conversation in front of all the employees, and opinions were divided. Some employees loved it and others were never going to get past the darkness of those figures. Some black employees said, "White employees call us names because that picture is up there."

People ask me why my figures have to be so black. There are a lot of reasons. First, the blackness is a rhetorical device. When we talk about ourselves as a people and as a culture, we talk about black history, black culture, black music. That's the rhetorical position we occupy. Somebody has to start representing that blackness in the extreme and letting it be beautiful.

ZWICK You create paintings that are captivating on their own terms and also readable for their myriad meanings.

Walter Benjamin, in his 1936 essay “The Storyteller,” considered the incommunicability of certain experiences, and the contribution a storyteller makes by imbuing narrative with “an amplitude that [mere] information lacks.” Are you telling stories?

MARSHALL Exactly! And these stories in my paintings are connected to larger stories. It’s more important to tell the story of a people by seeing myself as part of a people rather than an individual.

ZWICK You’ve called your technique “amalgamation.” What does that mean?

MARSHALL It’s the use and unification of various styles in the service of narrative. It’s a way in which the identity of each of the parts remains clear, and it’s the only kind of grand history painting I can make. I admire Géricault and Goya, but I also borrow from Haitian religious traditions. When I started using glitter, it had a lot to do with the fact that I was really impressed with and collected a lot of Haitian Veve flags, which are used in voodoo ceremonies.

ZWICK Speaking of vernacular traditions, a recent New Yorker article on the artist Thornton Dial and the collector Bill Arnett discussed so-called “outsider” or “vernacular” art made by black Southerners. Do you feel a connection to these artists?

MARSHALL This goes to a fundamental problem in the relationship between black folks and white folks in the U.S.—it has to do with who is in charge. Who has the capacity to create institutions and/or to create markets for work? People like Dial and other vernacular artists working outside of the established art world are driven by inner impulses to make stuff. But that work typically has to be brought to market by a white dealer or white investors, and it is often purchased by a white clientele. Major museums in the U.S. have generally not been directed by a person who is not white. And with the prices people are paying for art today, it’s very far outside the realm of consideration for most black people. It’s not part of the cultural foundation they came out of and

operate in.

There was an exhibition called “Black Folk Art in America” in the 1980s; it was the first time I saw work by [Bill Traylor](#). I was captivated by it. There’s a way in which, for me and other artists I know, we look at vernacular work as a way of trying to get to something that supports the idea of a black aesthetic. Is there something more genuine, authentic or true about the work these artists produce? A lot of us looked at work like Traylor’s as some evidence of a way of treating the figure, the black figure, so you’d get some of that honesty and authenticity. My approach gets blended with more critical approaches, more formal approaches, but there’s an undercurrent of desire to be connected to something that other black people made that you can begin to claim as a kind of aesthetic patrimony.

ZWICK Finally, let’s talk about the many drawings in this show. Is drawing central to your practice? Do you use drawings as preliminary studies, or to chart the development of your paintings and your thinking?

MARSHALL The drawings are preliminary to a larger project. They do evidence my thinking and on some level they demonstrate that making a painting is an intellectual activity. Paintings don’t just happen. I am not a proponent of the idea of an artist as someone who kind of magically makes things and has no real control or isn’t willfully producing a certain kind of thing. It is labor-intensive and it is research-intensive. You are making one decision after another, trying to get at something you think is important. I don’t often show drawings, but it’s important to know how things came to be as they are. That’s what I’m interested in.

Vernon Ah Kee - sovereign warrior by Gary Jones

Taken from <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/3361/ver-non-ah-kee-sovereign-warrior/>

Garry Jones teaches Aboriginal Studies and Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong. Through his mother he is of Gamilaroi and Ngemba descent from Brewarrina in north-western New South Wales. In Artlink's blak on blak issue he writes at length about the subtle and anger-driven art practice of Vernon Ah Kee whose work featured in the 2009 Venice Biennale in a group exhibition of early career Australian artists at The Ludoteca curated by Felicity Fenner.

"If I didn't have art as an outlet, I would be angry, really angry, and frustrated. Aboriginal people in this country are angry to varying degrees. Some are very, very angry; some have it on a low simmer; some hardly sense it at all. At different time, I experience all these things." (1)

Indigenous academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson has referred to Vernon Ah Kee as the 'sovereign warrior': an Aboriginal artist at war in the 'white postcolonial borderzone' that is contemporary Aboriginal arts.(2) As a contemporary artist of national and international distinction, Ah Kee's practice is profoundly underpinned by his personal experience as an urban based North Queensland Aboriginal person. While he may not have the reputation of the 'street fighter' that we see in his compatriot Richard Bell, Moreton-Robinson's 'warrior' appellation is appropriate as he possesses no less a fighting spirit; one that appears to be driven by deep resentment, and determined to disrupt notions of Aboriginal identity and the classification of Aboriginal art more specifically. However, the relationship between Ah Kee's practice and Indigenous sovereignty is far more ambiguous, particularly in his rhetorical pronouncements on the relative authenticity of 'remote' versus 'urban' Aboriginal people and art.

As a founding member of the Brisbane based proppaNOW urban Aboriginal artists collective, Ah Kee identifies vociferously as an 'urban Aboriginal Artist'. As observed by Robert Leonard (3) superficially he appears compelled to broadcast basic, clear, political messages about the Aboriginal experience. However, a more critical reading of his practice reveals that the power of his art lies in the way it negotiates ambiguities, double-binds, and catch 22s, and by the way it shift the onus back to the (presumably white) viewer, implicating them –in its inquiry. For Indigenous audiences, Ah Kee's practice can be seen to offer an example of a strong and self-confident artist, unrestrained in terms of technique and medium, while being inherently contemporary and uncompromisingly political. (4) Yet, Ah Kee presents challenges to Indigenous audiences also, demanding that they realise and declare their own authenticity, rather than playing out roles he argues are determined by the art market – a market dominated by non-Indigenous (white) interests.

Ah Kee has only been exhibiting for a decade now and in some circles is still regarded as an 'emerging artist'. Yet he is possibly one of the country's most controversial contemporary artists. Initially known for his direct and combatant neo-conceptual 'text works', he soon established his credentials as an 'artist's artist' with his elegantly detailed large-scale portraits of past and present relatives. He has since demonstrated a capacity to work across a broad range of mediums and styles, and his inclusions in the 2008 Sydney Biennale (What is an Aborigine/Born in this Skin), and more recently in the 2009 Venice Biennale (CantChant), demonstrate the breadth of Ah Kee's creative potential and the depth of his political convictions.

In the late 1990s Ah Kee undertook formal studies at the Queensland College of Art.(5) He had arrived at art school having been inspired by the race politics and activism of Malcolm X, the 1960s separatist African American Black

Power movement leader. At art school he read X's contemporary James Baldwin, who was also an 'angry, intelligent black man' at war with white (American) society. Inspiration closer to home was found in the writings of the Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist and activist Kevin Gilbert. Gilbert's 1973 text *Because a White Man'll never do it* provided Ah Kee with a clear and unapologetic summation of the Aboriginal position, politically, historically, and socially.⁽⁶⁾ While initially focused on honing his life drawing skills he was inspired by other Indigenous Queensland artists, particularly Richard Bell and Gordon Bennett, whose explicit artistic attacks on Australian colonial racism were achieved through the interplay of text and images. Art school also introduced Ah Kee to Russian Constructivist poster art and the contemporary American artists who drew on the techniques of this movement, such as Barbara Kruger.

Ah Kee's 1999 debut solo exhibition titled *ifiwaswhite*, loudly declared the artist's polemic: to challenge racism in Australia by drawing attention to the unquestioned normativeness of whiteness. By turning the tables on his audiences and switching the subjective positions between the viewer and viewed, Ah Kee seeks to make the 'coloniser' feel colonised. The opportunity to develop a 30 second video work for ArtTV in 2002, titled *whitefellanormal*, further articulated his interest in disrupting the ways in which racist values are projected onto Aboriginal people. In X-like fashion, Ah Kee challenges his audience 'to perceive the black man's world differently':

"If you wish to insert yourself into the black man's world with his history, in his colour and on the level at which you currently perceive him, then know that you will never be anything more than mediocre. You will not be able to involve yourself in the decision-making processes of this land, and you will not have any constructive access to the social and political mechanisms of this land. At times, this land will

shake your understanding of the world, confusion will eat away at your sense of humanity, but at least you will feel normal.” (7)

In 2004 Ah Kee returned to portraiture in the work *Fantasies of the Good*. Consisting of a series of large-scale charcoal drawings of male relatives, these developed out of a study of photographs that his grandmother had carried around in her purse. While he'd seen them since he was young they held no great significance. It wasn't until undertaking research into anthropological depictions of Aboriginal people years later, that he realised the images were reproductions of 19th Century photographs taken by the colonial ethnographer Norman Tindale. The initial project led directly on to an expanded study of living male relatives from his own photos, in which Ah Kee required his sitters to replicate the intense gaze of the subjects in Tindale's original images, a gaze the artist sees as an expression of their resilience and dignity.

Ah Kee's invitation to audiences to perceive the black man's world differently is developed dramatically in the installation *CantChant*. Created for Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art in 2007 the work was also selected for the 2009 Venice Biennale. *CantChant* confronts white Australian beach culture in the wake of the 2005 Cronulla Riots. The title is a sardonic reference to the chanting of (mostly white) rioters: 'we grew here, you flew here', which Ah Kee regards as an insincere excuse for racial violence. *CantChant* can be seen as challenging white Australian beach ideology by making visible the invisibility of Aboriginal sovereignty. (8)

The work has three components: an installation of custom-made surfboards bearing North Queensland Indigenous rainforest shield designs; a body of surrounding text works; and a 'surf' video which contains three scenes. The boards, hung vertically with the traditional designs facing the audience as they enter the gallery space, are arranged in a

formation which temporarily transforms them into warriors painted and prepared for battle; the viewers potentially the enemy. Once past the warring configuration the audience are confronted by something of a human presence protected behind and within the underside of the boards. What is present however are severely cropped large-scale portraits, most rendering a large single eye as the dominant feature, staring intensely, casting an 'evil-eye' on those who have intruded.

On the walls surrounding this installation is an assortment of text works, which engage the issues at hand in the ways made familiar in Ah Kee's earlier works: they are overtly political as a whole, while politicising the everyday. hangten for instance, an institutional reference to popular surf culture and surf fashion, starts to hint at more sinister undercurrents when read in conjunction with other texts such as yourduty-istoaccommodateme/mydutyistotolerateyou. While we/grew/ here is a direct reference to the chanting of the Cronulla rioters, Ah Kee appropriates it, as a correction to some fundamental misconception. The sound of gunfire in the neighbouring room, followed shortly by the thumping rhythm of the Warumpi Band's 1990s Aboriginal Rock classic Stompin Ground, coalesce to generate a sense of apprehension.

The video work is integral to how the larger installation is read. It consists of three separate but interrelated scenes: the bush scene, the beach scene, and the surfing flick. As a looped sequence there is no clear beginning and end. The bush scene starts with a picturesque but largely unremarkable bush landscape – not desert interior and not coastal fringe, possibly a hinterland. Nothing much appears to be happening, it just is. In a flash we are up close to a surfboard, entangled in rusted barbed-wire, suspended in the air. Next, another surfboard also bound with barbed-wired to a large burnt out tree stump. Suddenly, the explosion of a

gun, then the impact on the surfboard: a gaping hole blown into its pale fragile body. The board recoils in the air unable to fly loose of its tether. The other board is also fired upon with its nose blown away. It also recoils against the shot but is pulled up fast against its binding. We see the ominous sight of the barrel – long, slender, and black, but we see no hand, and no obvious clue as to who the perpetrator might be. Finally the violence is over and we are privy to the disposal of the victim; a bound and shattered board is tossed into a creek to let nature take its course and wash away the remains?

This scene can be interpreted as a metaphor for colonial violence against Aboriginal people – a lynching, a massacre site in Australian history, representing Australia's repressed memory maybe. While the metaphor appears appropriate, what Ah Kee has achieved is far more challenging. At first glance the whiteness of the surfboard is un-remarkable (as whiteness tends to be), until it is seen in contrast to the blackness of the tree limb from which it hangs. Suddenly the board is more than the stock standard off the shelf variety, it is a white board and by extension a white body. Correspondingly, the sleek black shaft of the rifle can be read as being attached to a black body.

The tables are turned in a way which unsettles the comfortability of even the most sympathetic audience. The idea of black violence against white Australia is not a concept readily toyed with. This may in part be a legacy of the colonial myth of peaceful settlement. Thomas Keneally's 1972 *Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* is the only mainstream narrative that comes to mind that explores this concept. However, Tom E Lewis's character Jimmy (in the later film adaptation) was nevertheless firmly positioned as a victim. This interpretation seems to sit with Ah Kee's practice of exploiting ambiguities, reversing roles between viewer and viewed, and his desire to make the coloniser to feel Othered.

Next, the beach scene has three young Aboriginal men arrive at a city beach all decked out in popular beach garb, with shield boards under arm. The Warumpi Band's Stompin Ground fires up. The scene is strikingly comic in contrast to the preceding segment; these guys don't quite fit. Is it, as Ah Kee argues, because of a popular perception that Aboriginal people are desert people, remote from the coast and from the mainstream? They seem over dressed and not quite convincing as 'authentic' surfers. They never enter the water but appear to be on the look out for something – a bit of 'action' maybe. Except for an initial glimpse of some passing bystanders the beach appears completely empty. In this context Warumpi's Stompin Ground lyrics are ambiguous, but the redemptive sentiment of the song is not lost:

Listen to me, if you wanna know
If you wanna change yourself, I know a place to go
We got a ceremony, I wanna paint your face
Just follow me, just walk this way
Stompin Ground (9)

Superficially it can be heard as a challenge, possibly an invitation to the Cronulla rioters, to settle a score, to clarify that misconception about who grew here. But fundamentally the song is embracing and inclusive, an offering to teach and to learn about what it means to be Indigenous; what it means to grow here.

The surf scene is a sublime declaration of the in-placeness of Indigenous people at the beach and in the mainstream, maintaining their sovereignty while participating in the 21st century. In true surf flick fashion Indigenous pro-surfer Dale Richards gives a demonstration of his grace and agility in the waves at Surfers Paradise, while demonstrating that Ah Kee's shield boards are the real McCoy. The scene allows the audience some reprieve, an opportunity to share Ah Kee's/Richards' joy in their contemporary indigeneity, and maybe a sense that experiencing the 'black man's world' isn't necessarily so fraught with danger and apprehension

– but not for long, before we know it we're back in the bush. The video sequence in some ways can be read as corresponding with the degrees of Ah Kee's anger indicated in the opening quote to this essay. He fluctuates between them, but he's not ready just yet to indulge any potential fantasy his audiences might have that reconciliation can be easily achieved.

Provocatively, Ah Kee has elaborated on the well-aired proppaNOW catch-cry that 'Aboriginal art is a white thing', and that by producing 'ooga-booga' art and catering to white market desires for the 'authentic', many Aboriginal artists have reduced themselves to neo-colonial clichés. While elsewhere he has suggested that Aboriginal art should be as varied as the lives of contemporary Aboriginal people, he rejects the authenticity of 'traditional' Aboriginal art, contending that it is urban Aboriginal people and their art that is most authentically 'Aboriginal'. However, challenging the authenticity of other Aboriginal people, who have their own cultures, their own histories, and their own relationships to broader Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society, seems disingenuous. Claims to greater or lesser authenticity based on relative degrees of 'white' influence, whether in peoples' lives or in their art practice, is highly problematic. In the short term it is divisive. In the longer term it seems counterproductive to the ongoing struggle for Aboriginal people to be recognised for all their richness and diversity, and ultimately undermining of legitimate claims to sovereignty.

Pre-colonisation, much Aboriginal art would be classified as inter-cultural, with over 60,000 years of sharing and melding of practices between different Indigenous nations. Post-colonisation, and particularly over the last four decades, 'Aboriginal art' has become irrevocably inter-cultural, where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal influences meet, compete, and affect new forms of practice. For many Aboriginal people (urban/rural/remote) art-making has provided great social and cultural benefits, it has been the basis of personal and collective pride and self-determination, and has been an important means of reconnecting with, reviving, and maintaining culture. For some it has delivered great economic returns, while for others it has provided an oppor-

tunity to break out of chronic material poverty.

Ah Kee's artistic practice has a valuable role in the discourse that is contemporary Aboriginal arts. Asserting the authenticity of urban Aboriginal identities and therefore the authenticity of urban Aboriginal cultural production, connects Ah Kee with a proud history of urban Aboriginal activism, a role that arguably has facilitated enormous developments in the awareness and recognition of Aboriginal rights nationally and internationally. Aboriginal art should be as varied as Aboriginal people, and the political strength of Aboriginal art today may be that it is an expression of contemporary Aboriginal sovereignty in action.

Footnotes

1. Quoted in Glenn Barkley, 'Vernon Ah Kee' in *borninthisskin: Vernon Ah Kee*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2009:22
- 2 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'ChantChant' in *borninthisskin: Vernon Ah Kee*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. 2009:66
- 3 Robert Leonard, 'Your Call' in *borninthisskin: Vernon Ah Kee*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2009:13
- 4 Glenn Barkley, 'Vernon Ah Kee: whitefella/normal', Artist Profile, Summer 2007, St Leonards NSW, 2007:53
- 5 Tess Allas 'Vernon Ah Kee', Dictionary of Australian Artists Online, <http://www.daao.org.au/main/read/6995>, <http://www.daao.org.au/legal/eula.html>
- 6 Glenn Barkley, 'Vernon Ah Kee' in *borninthisskin: Vernon Ah Kee*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2009:20
<http://www.acmi.net.au/whitefellanormal.aspx>
- 7 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'ChantChant' in *borninthisskin: Vernon Ah Kee*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. 2009:66
- 8 Sam Butcher and George Rrurrambu, song lyrics to 'Stompen Ground' on Too Much Humbug, Warumpi Band, Broome, 1992

The Poverty of Chicano Artists

By: EL CHAVO!

Taken from <http://www.chanfles.com/poverty.htm>

If the artist is not the most hated member of the Chicano/a community it is certain that a very healthy disgust towards the artist is felt by many in the barrio. In the artists attempt to express themselves, speak for La Raza, or to raise their consciousness, s/he comes short of the mark. The inherent poverty of the art scene is its inability to understand and change society, its refusal to see itself as a market place for one more commodity. This is what we detest. From cholos to viejitas, to mocosos and their relatives, everyone hates the false notion of the artist as a representative of our needs or as a spokesperson for change.

All the novelty rappers, uninspired singers, hack writers, crayola painters, pretentious poets, and the hardly-funny cartoonists and comedians that make up the Chicano And Chicana Artist (CACA) cultural scene imagine themselves to be that which they are not: for some reason they believe that they are a challenge or an opposition to the dominant culture. The truth is that they are merely another aspect of the same society or as some would accurately call it, they are part of the spectacle of negation. When a person's life lacks in meaning, pleasure, and they have no control over how to run their own lives, they look outside of themselves for salvation. The artist finds his calling in "self—expression", creating art pieces in which she can live out a dull reflection of what has not been possible in real life. That's not beautiful; it's pathetic.

In a world that runs on a heavy dose of alienation the reverence for art serves only to strengthen that society. The emergence of the Chicano Art scene is a movement of the forgotten commodity back into the flow of the marketplace; the desire to belong within the world of separation; to be bought and sold like everyone else. The artist has no vision.

She fails to see what is truly beautiful, just as they failed to see the poetry in the streets during the rioting in '92. Can their little doodles ever top the critique of daily life that the looters offered in their festive events? Of course not.

So what happens to La Raza once the artist sells his piece, gets her grant, or has that special gallery showing? Nothing. All the people that you aim to represent on your canvas or in your poems, we still have to exist in the same ghettoes, we still have to work in the same stupid jobs, or wait in the same welfare lines. We will never see you there. You will never mean anything to us.

We laugh at you and the society you reinforce. Give it up. You're headed nowhere.

Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926)

Taken from http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/mountain.htm

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet--not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America--this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.

But let us look at the immediate background of this young poet. His family is of what I suppose one would call the Negro middle class: people who are by no means rich yet never uncomfortable nor hungry--smug, contented, respectable folk, members of the Baptist church. The father goes to work every morning. He is a chief steward at a large white club. The mother sometimes does fancy sewing or supervises parties for the rich families of the town. The children go to a mixed school. In the home they read white papers and magazines. And the mother often says "Don't be like niggers" when the children are bad. A frequent phrase from the father is, "Look how well a white man does things." And so the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money. The whisper of "I want to be white" runs silently through their minds. This young poet's home is, I believe, a fairly typical home of the colored middle class. One sees immediately how difficult it would be for an artist born in such a home to

interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns.

For racial culture the home of a self-styled "high-class" Negro has nothing better to offer. Instead there will perhaps be more aping of things white than in a less cultured or less wealthy home. The father is perhaps a doctor, lawyer, land-owner, or politician. The mother may be a social worker, or a teacher, or she may do nothing and have a maid. Father is often dark but he has usually married the lightest woman he could find. The family attend a fashionable church where few really colored faces are to be found. And they themselves draw a color line. In the North they go to white theaters and white movies. And in the South they have at least two cars and house "like white folks." Nordic manners, Nordic faces, Nordic hair, Nordic art (if any), and an Episcopal heaven. A very high mountain indeed for the would-be racial artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people.

But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority---may the Lord be praised! The people who have their hip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round. They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let's dance! These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations. And perhaps these common people will give to the

world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself. Whereas the better-class Negro would tell the artist what to do, the people at least let him alone when he does appear. And they are not ashamed of him--if they know he exists at all. And they accept what beauty is their own without question.

Certainly there is, for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more advanced among his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material ready for his art. Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their "white" culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work. And when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country, with their innumerable overtones and undertones surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears. But let us look again at the mountain.

A prominent Negro clubwoman in Philadelphia paid eleven dollars to hear Raquel Meller sing Andalusian popular songs. But she told me a few weeks before she would not think of going to hear "that woman," Clara Smith, a great black artist, sing Negro folksongs. And many an upper-class Negro church, even now, would not dream of employing a spiritual in its services. The drab melodies in white folks' hymnbooks are much to be preferred. "We want to worship the Lord correctly and quietly. We don't believe in 'shouting.' Let's be dull like the Nordics," they say, in effect.

The road for the serious black artist, then, who would produce a racial art is most certainly rocky and the mountain is

high. Until recently he received almost no encouragement for his work from either white or colored people. The fine novels of Chesnutt' go out of print with neither race noticing their passing. The quaint charm and humor of Dunbar's' dialect verse brought to him, in his day, largely the same kind of encouragement one would give a sideshow freak (A colored man writing poetry! How odd!) or a clown (How amusing!).

The present vogue in things Negro, although it may do as much harm as good for the budding artist, has at least done this: it has brought him forcibly to the attention of his own people among whom for so long, unless the other race had noticed him beforehand, he was a prophet with little honor.

The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. "Oh, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are," say the Negroes. "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you," say the whites. Both would have told Jean Toomer not to write *Cane*. The colored people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. Most of the colored people who did read *Cane* hate it. They are afraid of it. Although the critics gave it good reviews the public remained indifferent. Yet (excepting the work of Du Bois) *Cane* contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of Robeson, it is truly racial.

But in spite of the Nordicized Negro intelligentsia and the desires of some white editors we have an honest American Negro literature already with us. Now I await the rise of the Negro theater. Our folk music, having achieved world-wide fame, offers itself to the genius of the great individual American composer who is to come. And within the next decade I expect to see the work of a growing school of colored artists

who paint and model the beauty of dark faces and create with new technique the expressions of their own soul-world. And the Negro dancers who will dance like flame and the singers who will continue to carry our songs to all who listen-they will be with us in even greater numbers tomorrow.

Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. I am as sincere as I know how to be in these poems and yet after every reading I answer questions like these from my own people: Do you think Negroes should always write about Negroes? I wish you wouldn't read some of your poems to white folks. How do you find anything interesting in a place like a cabaret? Why do you write about black people? You aren't black. What makes you do so many jazz poems?

But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul--the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. Yet the Philadelphia clubwoman is ashamed to say that her race created it and she does not like me to write about it. The old subconscious "white is best" runs through her mind. Years of study under white teachers, a lifetime of white books, pictures, and papers, and white manners, morals, and Puritan standards made her dislike the spirituals. And now she turns up her nose at jazz and all its manifestations--likewise almost everything else distinctly racial. She doesn't care for the Winold Reiss' portraits of Negroes because they are "too Negro." She does not want a true picture of herself from anybody. She wants the artist to flatter her, to make the white world believe that all negroes are as smug and as near white in soul as she wants to be. But, to my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through

the force of his art that old whispering "I want to be white," hidden in the aspirations of his people, to "Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro--and beautiful"?

So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, "I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet," as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world. I am ashamed, too, for the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange unwhiteness of his own features. An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he must choose.

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing "Water Boy," and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas's drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty. We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

THE NATION, 1926

City after Fifty Years' Living: L.A.'s Differences in Relation

Malik Gaines / July 17, 2012



Ice Cube Celebrates the Eames, poster, 2011 (artwork © J. Paul Getty Trust)

It's not about the piece but about how the pieces fit together. It's about taking something that already exists, and making something special.

—Ice Cube

A marketing triumph, Pacific Standard Time has been responsible for a series of promotional videos, slickly produced, that pair an honored artist with a Southern California celebrity. The shining success among these original works is the pairing of the late design team Ray and Charles Eames with the rapper and actor Ice Cube. The promo performatively enacts both the mainstream ambitions and the eccentric interests that play out in the larger scope of the Pacific Standard Time project. Important here, as in

other locations throughout PST that will be explored in this essay, a politicized racial subjectivity signifies a kind of vanguardism that, in this time and place, can finally be aligned with avant-gardist art strategies. Featured prominently on the Getty Museum's website, accompanied by Ice Cube posters on bus stops around Los Angeles, this promo is a touch more surprising than the museum's *de rigueur* videos with John Baldassari and Ed Ruscha. The Eameses come off as Ice Cube's California kindred spirits: like the rapper, they invented their own art forms and unique career paths. "Coming from South Central Los Angeles, you've got to use what you've got and make the best of it. What I love about the Eameses is how resourceful they are."¹ Shot in the gritty realness of black and white, the promo features Ice Cube giving a tour of quirky L.A. architectural landmarks from the driver's seat of his convertible. "405 traffic: that's bourgeois traffic. 110 traffic: that's gangsta traffic. There's a difference." Maintaining his attention to difference, the performer finally arrives at the famous Eames Case Study home, the star of the couple's films such as *House after Five Years' Living* (1955). Neither black nor poor, the Eames world was a long way from South Central. Nevertheless Ice Cube continues to draw parallels: "Before I did rap music, I studied architectural drafting. One thing I learned was, you've always gotta have a plan." He compares the Eameses' resourceful combinations of postwar prefabricated elements with the practice of sampling in hip-hop. Noting the house's sensitive relationship to the land on which it's situated, he declares to the camera: "This is going green 1949 style, bitch. Believe that."

What does that mean, Ice Cube? A contemporary environmentalist slogan is set into an historic time which the Eameses were so obviously ahead of. The performer uses his celebrity authority and his hip-hop credibility to affirm the veracity of this distant fact. But who is the bitch? Me? The Getty? All of us? Is that a term of endearment or a sign of

hostility? Are there misogynist or homophobic connotations? Why not just call us “niggas”? That would be too much, a transgression too far, and perhaps a less appropriate description of this audience. But have we come so far around that it's not too much for a onetime gangsta rapper and former avowed enemy of the LAPD, working on behalf of a conservative institution and under corporate advertising direction, to call the museum public a bitch to its face? Is this postmodern multiplicity, under which minority dialects are brought into equivalence with standard speech, where black colloquial talk is validated as one of many permissible languages that communicates with a decentralized apparatus? Or is this that postmodern assimilative force that renders all speech, all difference, all performativity meaningless under the auspices of spectacular dominance? Does this practice of equivalence, a deeply democratic notion, strengthen different voices, or finally order them into a more manageable and compliant public sphere?



Seymour Rosen, *Asco's Stations of the Cross*, 1971, gelatin silver print (printed 2011), 18 x 24 in. (45.7 x 61 cm) (photograph © SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments)

Like the region's oft-cited assemblage tradition pioneered

by artists like Betye Saar on one hand and Edward Kienholz on the other, Pacific Standard Time draws attention to differences in relation. It's about how the pieces fit together. Ice Cube and the Eameses represent the dramatic restructuring set in motion by Pacific Standard Time, an initiative involving practically every art institution in the region. PST's intention, laid out in the catalogue of the Getty Museum's own exhibition, has been to reorient a history of American modernist art practices to reflect those innovations developed in Los Angeles. This primary purpose proposes a modest change to the standard Europe-to-New-York history, but that proposition has mobilized a proliferation of alternate histories, many of which reflect political motivations far more radical than the Getty's own. Throughout Southern California, numerous PST exhibitions have featured formerly marginalized subjects, formerly marginalized mediums, or both, stretching modernist art premises in ways the Getty might not have initially imagined. As in the promotional video that pairs an idiosyncratic design collective with an innovator of West Coast hip-hop, the margins of the mainstream have come into specific focus through PST, and are building contextual relationships that distort the constructions of form, value, artistic practice, and aesthetic experience that have dominated modernist art ideologies.

PST's different history has become a history of differences. While the Getty Museum's own exhibition lays out objects associated with local finish-fetish trends and other refined formal projects of the post-mid-century, the city's largest contemporary art exhibitors have been a touch more daring. The Hammer Museum has presented a scholarly attempt to set a record straight in *Now Dig This! Black Art in Los Angeles, 1960–1980*, organized by the art historian Kellie Jones. At the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), in addition to an already existing installation of films by Kenneth Anger, a queer icon, and a show of Hollywood photographs by Weegee, both of which exceed the fine-art category altogether, an extensive review of local contemporary artists has been

presented in the curator Paul Schimmel's *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974–1981*, which jumbles together conceptualist, feminist, performance, and Pop art, as well as craft, political printmaking, murals, punk music, and photography practices, along with a handful of paintings, into a *mélange* of compelling and rewarding singular works. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presented a design show, which included the Eameses, but also two exhibitions with dense minoritarian vibrations: a retrospective of the performance collective Asco, and a long-hidden, room-size Kienholz installation, *Five Car Stud* (1969–72), that depicts the lynching of a black man.

Of course, these would be unlikely institutional occurrences during the years in question. One of the finest PST shows was *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, 1972–1987*, a survey of the group's work organized by C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez. Though the collective's members were engaged in visual art through other means as well, their collaborative work made in the 1970s was action-based, politically critical, and formally transgressive, helping to innovate a kind of performance art that has since endured. Within the group's theatrical, cinematic oeuvre, one resonant image is *Spray Paint LACMA (East Bridge)* (1972), a photograph of Patssi Valdez posed against the museum building, situated above graffiti inscribed by Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk, and Willie Herrón. While she emphasizes the text with her body, Valdez also disregards it, glancing instead over her shoulder, perhaps nervously. The group had tagged the LACMA building the night before, performing its exclusion from the institution by suggesting that that would be the only way the Chicano, semi-queer collective would be able to show art there. Valdez suffered her own exclusion, prohibited by her male collaborators from joining them on their graffiti mission the night before.²



Asco, detail of Decoy Gang War Victim, 1974, color photograph, 16 x 20 in. (40.6 x 50.8 cm) (artwork © Asco; photograph © Harry Gamboa, Jr., provided by the photographer)

Instead, Valdez's photographed body personifies the racial, gender, and political differences that played out against the body of the museum in this action, a museum that had a poor history of showing women artists, people of color, or performance art, even. Now, with a carefully curated exhibition, a gloriously thorough 432-page catalogue, and demonstrations of public appreciation that extended to the cover of the New York-based Artforum magazine, Asco has been reoriented.[3. Artforum, October 2011, cover.] The Asco exhibition, which transforms provisional performances, videos, and ephemera into a legible museum display, reasserts the question that lingers around so many of these projects: is this a radicalization of the institution or an institutionalization of the radical? The answer to this question, here and elsewhere, is yes, both. That this question has more than one answer is already a signal that the singular force of the institution can be unsettled by ambivalent production. While such institutionalization softens the rough edges of margin-

al practices, it also deconsolidates the centralizing power that the institution promotes. While this back-and-forth may limit radical possibilities, it also activates the critical potential in works and practices that agitate against institutional structures. While the LACMA exhibition partially serves as a self-exonerating corrective to the exclusions invoked in the spray-paint act, it also consecrates a critical acknowledgment of that exclusion, installing a recognition of racist histories into the official discourse. The enterprise proves less radical than the group's original street actions, more liberal than the exclusionary history of the institution. In a kind of dialectical synthesis, art history undergoes progress.

Even *Five Car Stud*, made by a prominent Los Angeles artist but not seen in L.A. at the time it was made, has shifted with the historical situation. Though Kienholz's largest undertaking to that point, it was shown only at Documenta 5 and a few other German venues. Until recently, it has been in storage in Japan, sequestered because the elaborate installation is difficult to transport and mount, but also because of its confrontational subject matter. It had never been on view in the United States before this LACMA exhibition. The work consists of five old cars arranged in a circle in a dark room, their headlights illuminating a central scene of grotesque white men, realistically scaled but made of plaster and rubber, who are gathered around a somewhat abstracted black man who lies on the ground. As a couple of the figures hold the black man down, another is posed to slice off his penis with a knife. The black man's torso is a small pool of fluid in which the letters N, I, G, G, E, and R float around with kinetic possibility. While the scene itself is disturbing, among the most eerie aspects of the experience are seeing one's own footprints along with those of all of the other gallery visitors that are registered in the sand covering the floor, leaving traces of everyone who has visited and thus participated in the scene, and creating an overlap between this flurry of activity and that. Another uncanny phenomenon results from

the way that viewers gather around the space and look in toward the lynching, replicating the positions and the gazes of the grotesque cast figures who watch from the periphery. For a moment, in one's own peripheral vision, one can confuse the presence of a museum visitor who is standing still with the presence of one of the sculpted culprits. The immersive environment, the theatrical lighting, the installation's various narrative suggestions, and the sense that these figures are posed mid-action—all enact a political drama that compels viewers to engage with the discursive terms of racial spectacle. The opposite of minimalist, *Five Car Stud* represents a specific cultural signifier at real scale, symbolizing a fundamental history of American racism.



Maren Hassinger, *Ulysses Jenkins*, and Senga Nengudi, *Kiss*, 2011, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2012 (artwork © Maren Hassinger, *Ulysses Jenkins*, and Senga Nengudi; photograph by Alan Kimara Dixon)

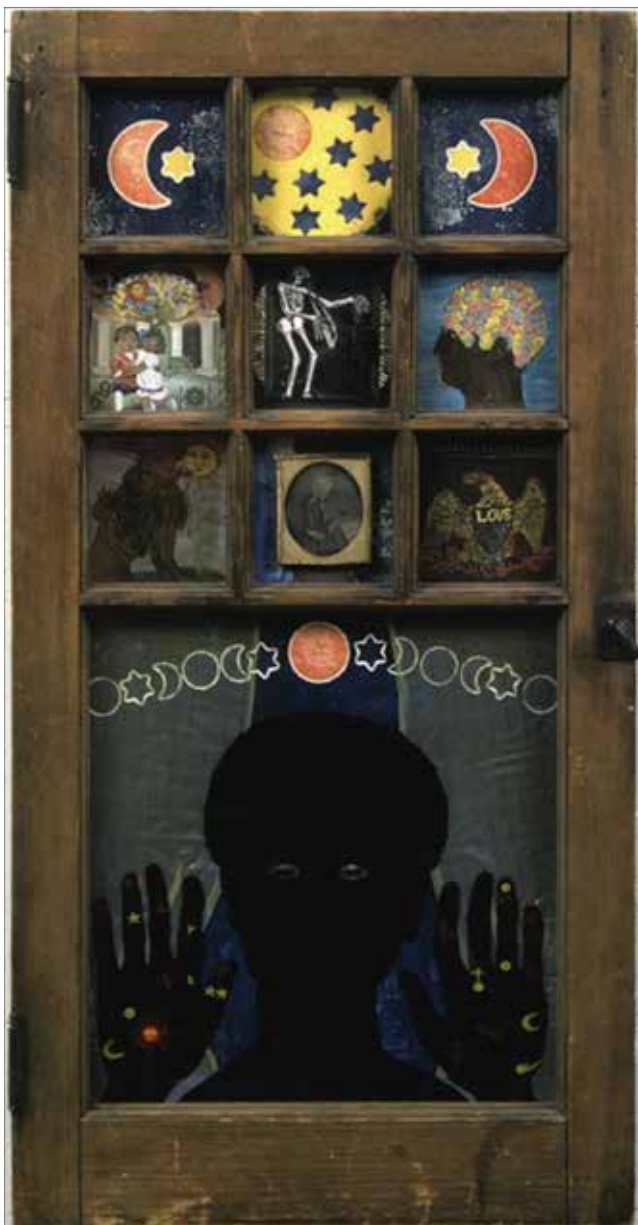
Made during the years when Black Power had overcome Civil Rights, when urban riots and prominent assassinations had rephrased the history of spectacular violence against African Americans, Kienholz's piece was perhaps too hot for American institutions and audiences of its own time. LACMA

itself had experienced a controversy with the artist's Back Seat Dodge '38 (1964), which produced a public outcry on the grounds of its sexual representation (it was called "revolting, pornographic and blasphemous" by the powerful supervisory board that oversaw, among other things, the the museum itself).³ One can speculate that Five Car Stud would have caused a stir as well in Los Angeles, at a time when Black Panthers and the LAPD were engaged in a televised street war. While evoking the racial tensions of its time, the piece in its latest form also asks viewers to meditate on what's changed since then. As the scholar Leigh Raiford writes in the exhibition brochure:

Edward Kienholz's Five Car Stud (1969–1972) remains as powerful and disturbing, overwhelming and irritating, as it was when it first appeared in Germany. . . . In this interregnum, history continued to move, challenging and correcting the violent wrongs depicted in this piece. While Five Car Stud slept in its crates, we have witnessed the end of Jim Crow segregation and the extension of democracy to all US citizens, and we have celebrated the end of Apartheid in South Africa and the election of a mixed-race black man as president of the US. Yet in the same decades we have built the largest system of mass incarceration in history—with 2.3 million Americans behind bars, the majority of them black or brown (far more men of color than attend college)—and witnessed the rise of a race-baiting political party that questions Obama's legitimacy as an American. Five Car Stud in its return to its country of origin at once transports us back to a time of unambiguous violence, hatred, and racial divisions, while alerting us to our own current crises.[Leigh Raiford, "Edward Kienholz: Five Car Stud 1969/2011," in Edward Kienholz: Five Car Stud, 1969-1972, Revisited, exhibition brochure (LACMA, 2011).]

In introducing the work, Raiford begins by contextualizing the difference between then and now. Interestingly, the shift from lynching to prison seems to mirror an epistemological shift Michel Foucault outlined in European history, from

punishment on the scaffold to the invisible institutional correction perfected in the panopticon. Important in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is the idea that power transforms rather than abates.⁴ While the lynching itself feels anachronistic, the problem of racial antagonism does not. *Five Car Stud*, in its current iteration, at once tells a story of progress and of the enduring institutional structures around which this progress maneuvers. The Los Angeles Times critic Holly Myers introduced the return of the work with careful uncertainty: "How it will be received today—whether as a historical document of the civil rights era or as lens to turn on the darkest tendencies of our own time—remains to be seen."⁵ Despite its explicit representation, we can now read the piece in multiple ways. The space between then and now is opened up in this dark room, unfolding in more than one direction, animated by ambivalent potential.



Betye Saar, *Black Girl's Window*, 1969, assemblage in window, 35-3/4 x 18 x 1-1/2 in. (90.8 x 45.7 x 3.8 cm). Collection the artist (artwork © Betye Saar; photograph provided by Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York)

Five Car Stud, along with the gallery full of historicizing (apologizing?) wall texts that one passes on the way into the exhibition, reflects shifts in the discourse around difference that have taken place over these past decades. While representation is one problem raised in this discourse, participation has been another, as the Asco show demonstrates. The first African American artist to have a solo show at LACMA was Maren Hassinger, in 1981, a fact that helps point to the exclusions that characterize the pre-1980 period of PST.⁶ In an inversion of that negativity, the Hammer Museum's *Now Dig This!* uses the PST structure to transform a set of historically marginalized artists into a major museum presence. Artists like Hassinger, who was commissioned by the Hammer to reconstruct a few large-scale wire sculptures, appear here, deservedly, in the corrective embrace of museum consecration. An important scholarly inscription in the art-historical record, the exhibition and catalogue connect a few well-known figures (Saar, John Outterbridge, David Hammonds) to an incredibly dynamic and productive art scene that at the time was "lacking representation in mainstream institutions," as Jones describes it.⁷ While most of the artists participated with official art culture on some level, through art schools or professional careers, most also worked beyond mainstream institutions and invented their own ways of showing art that would resonate with their African American experiences. Presented here in a series of thematic groupings, the erudite exhibition reveals practices in dialogue and collaboration, originating in self-run galleries and aided by communitarian friendships, demonstrating the best of the L.A. art spirit.

One of these friendships was made evident in the opening weekend's performance by Hassinger, Ulysses Jenkins, and Senga Nengudi. Reviving some elements of previous performance projects such as *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* (1978), which was designed by Nengudi using her signature pantyhose constructions and first performed under an L.A. freeway overpass by Nengudi, Hassinger, Jenkins, Ham-

monds, and others, this reunion appearance brought some of the ritualistic elements devised in those early performances into a multipurpose space inside the museum. The writer Nick Stillman describes Nengudi's recollection of the former public site: "Nengudi says she was drawn to that unexceptional patch of public land because the modest natural life persisting there—tiny palms and shrubs amid the dirt 'had the sense of Africa.'"⁸ While the Hammer's annex certainly does not offer a sense of Africa, the three artists reconvened there wearing pantyhose fetishes on their heads and bodies, and arranged within a space delineated by Hassinger's wire constructions, as a large audience of museum visitors gathered. In this simple act, a kind of convocation, the three artists distributed candles under projected starlight, kissed the cheeks of audience members, and offered the instruction that people should hug themselves, while they gently sang "This Little Light of Mine." Soon the whole room was quietly singing. This modest ritual, performed by artists who are over sixty, signaled a kind of calm vindication. Despite the campiness of Sengudi's remarkable costumes, and the slight silliness of seeing them on such mature artists, the short performance resonated with a sincere positivity. The radically inventive, provisional energy of Freeway Fets had dissipated; the museum space, however, provided a sense that with art-historical hindsight, artists whose work once thrived in marginal contexts might eventually be acknowledged on an official level. Returning to tactics from their youth, these artists reminded us that thirty-plus years later, *Now Dig This!* marks a kind of institutional debut.

The exhibition radiates with the warmth of this and other reunions, but the positivity is predicated on the negativity that had marked previous exclusions. Viewing the works of Hassinger, Nengudi, and Jenkins, one can imagine various chapters of art history in which they should have been included all along. Nengudi's brilliant sculptures, also using pantyhose and sand, can be thought of in an African American art context, but also should have always shared

galleries with Louise Bourgeois, Yayoi Kusama, Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, and other well-known artists who have challenged minimalist premises with crafty, biomorphic forms. Hassinger's ambitious formalism only obliquely suggests an African American context; the works included in *Now Dig This!* make industrial-material references that suggest human bondage but also modernity more generally. Jenkins's presentation in the show, occupying three video monitors that play lengthy loops of original video, is among the most revelatory—with the only video on view; Jenkins seems to have been alone among his peers in working with that new medium, a fact he partially attributes to his atypical access to university editing facilities.⁹ A few videos made with black-and-white Sony Portapak video technology document the art and music scene of the 1970s, including stirring portraits of other artists in the show (*In the Spirit of Charles White*, 1970, and *King David*, 1978). Another group of works shot on an early color camcorder, such as *Inconsequential Doggereal* (1981) and *Without Your Interpretation* (1983), transition into rather experimental forms, employing trippy montages, theatrical narratives, combinations of appropriation and original text and image, and Jenkins's own free-jazz musical performances, all of which present a kind of black criticality toward established social conditions. *Now Dig This!* recovers these materials, along with amazing pieces by predecessors Saar, Outterbridge, Charles White, Melvin Edwards, Alonzo and Dale Davis, and others, providing a platform for their current consumption, while evoking a melancholic sense that they should have been available to the mainstream art audience all along.



John Outterbridge, No Time for Jivin', from Containment Series, 1969, mixed media, 56 x 60 in. (142.2 x 152.4 cm). Mills College Art Museum, purchased with funds from the Susan L. Mills Fund (artwork © John Outterbridge)

Like Now Dig This! many of the current exhibitions illustrate apparently positive differences between now and then. Fascinatingly, PST's historicizing structure draws critical attention to the elided period, 1981–2010, when transformative debates around the politics of representation accompanied a reformation of the social sphere to acknowledge the interests of women, people of color, queers, and others. Identity politics influenced the art milieu. More broadly, a cultural assimilation of a diversity-tolerant form of liberal pluralism made different kinds of representations possible within powerful institutions during these years. Much remains unsaid

in PST literature about the ways a second history prepared this previous history for the present. In today's Los Angeles, when formerly marginalized artists and practices show up to be noticed, there is little outcry about a culture war being waged. Rather than silencing marginal histories, many L.A. curators used the various levels and kinds of support provided by the Getty to give voice to less-familiar artists and narratives, and to interrogate the reasons their works fell out of the dominant history. Many PST shows, like those mentioned above, raise deep questions about the notions of center and periphery, and whether or not that spatial sense of power is indeed still operable in 2012 in a centerless city, within a postmodern, multicultural linguistic space, or under the auspices of a collaborative, networked museological model. The ambivalent relationship to mainstream institutions and histories may indeed be a profound shift that says as much about now as it does about 1980.

In his 1993 catalogue essay for the exhibition *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, at the University of California Irvine, the artist Charles Gaines, my father, wrote, "It is virtually impossible to invoke the discourse of marginality without buttressing the implacable edifice of the mainstream. The black artist is engaged in a battle for her identity, and there is no possible victory, for to be marginal is to be in the battle."¹⁰ At the height of the identity-politics moment, Gaines describes marginality as an embattled position. The oppositional presence of the excluded serves to mark the centrality of the dominant. Gaines is among the artists reconsidered in PST, with work in *Now Dig This!* and *Under the Big Black Sun*, and a musical performance project included in the Performance and Public Art Festival. Gaines worked between Central California and New York City in the late 1970s, and was not part of a Los Angeles scene until the early 1990s. Despite this, his work serves important functions in the shows that include it. *Now Dig This!* slyly singles out one of the few African-American subjects in his *Faces* series (1978), so that Gaines serves

as an imaginative link between black California and New York conceptualism, a link that is tenuous to say the least. Before a deconstructive critique linked conceptual practices to identity projects, Gaines's work, which appeared in mainstream commercial venues, was not addressed as black art, despite whatever practical limitations Gaines may have experienced as a black artist. Accordingly, his text-based work *Incomplete Text* (1979) is grouped with works by Baldessari, Allen Ruppersberg, and Bas Jan Ader in the MOCA exhibition, orienting their pieces around formal rather than cultural similarities, presenting Gaines as an innovative text artist rather than an innovative black artist. In one show, race is a positivist force unifying diverse materials; in the other, material considerations propose transcendence over the limitations of identity. A resurgence of interest in Gaines's work suggests that some of the tension between black artist and conceptual art has receded of late, even since the time of his 1993 *Theater of Refusal* essay, which outlines the ways in which race framed the critical reception of artists working at that time. Interestingly, while no longer couched in terms of battle, that process can still be identified in the two ways Gaines's work is dealt with in these exhibitions.



Dale Brockman Davis, *Swept*, 1970, mixed media, 30 x 40 x 6 in. (76.2 x 101.6 x 15.2 cm). Blocker Collection (artwork © Dale Brockman)

Gaines quotes the artist Adrian Piper in *The Theater of Refusal*, who points out conspiratorially: “I really think post-structuralism is a plot! It’s the perfect ideology to promote if you want to co-opt women and people of color and deny them access to the potent tolls of rationality and objectivity.”¹¹ As Piper indicates, just as marginalized people sought to validate their own subject positions, critical theory came around to dismantle the very subject status to which these others had attained. At the same time, identity-oriented artworks and exhibitions were entering mainstream institutions and markets during the 1980s and 1990s. The exhibition Gaines curated and his essay illustrated that among the black artists who had by then begun to be recognized,

their works were typically received through the idea that race is a limiting factor. In his study of critical responses, this limitation was either read as an anti-aesthetic failure of the works, or a productive source of specific imagination and creativity for the artists.

That latter interpretation, which focuses on difference as creative inspiration, engaged in a kind of pro-difference politics that fostered notable shows of the period and in the decades since. These range from the 1993 Whitney Biennial and many other projects associated with the curator Thelma Golden that have focused on African American identity and representation, to exhibitions like the fairly recent WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution, curated by Connie Butler in 2007 at MOCA, which brought together major women artists whose works had launched critiques of the patriarchal claims embedded in universalist ideas of art. These and other shows made cases for both personal subjectivity and social pluralism as appropriate art content, moving from a place of invisibility for blacks, women, and others into an art world that now at least nominally acknowledges the diversity of its participants. While the term "identity" still causes alarm when it precedes art, there is now arguably a basic comfort with the idea that different artists have different bodies and come from different places, and that those experiences influence their works. This, after all, in a different form, is the premise of Pacific Standard Time. As in the broader culture, this sensitivity to perspective has accompanied race, gender, sexuality, and other identificatory structures as they became acceptable elements of not only countercultural, but institutional postmodern art discourse since the 1980s. Since then, the public art institutions themselves have changed. This is certainly so in L.A. In 1980 the Getty Museum was little more than a Greco-Roman urn collection in Malibu. The Hammer Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art had not yet been founded, nor had the smaller nonprofits that exhibit contemporary art in L.A. and that have also mounted PST exhibitions. Apart from some endur-

ing university galleries and the Watts Tower Art Center, few features remain from that period's landscape. LACMA did exist at its current, much-expanded site, and, as in the presentation of Five Car Stud and Asco: Elite of the Obscure, it subtly embodies the corrective spirit PST has engendered.

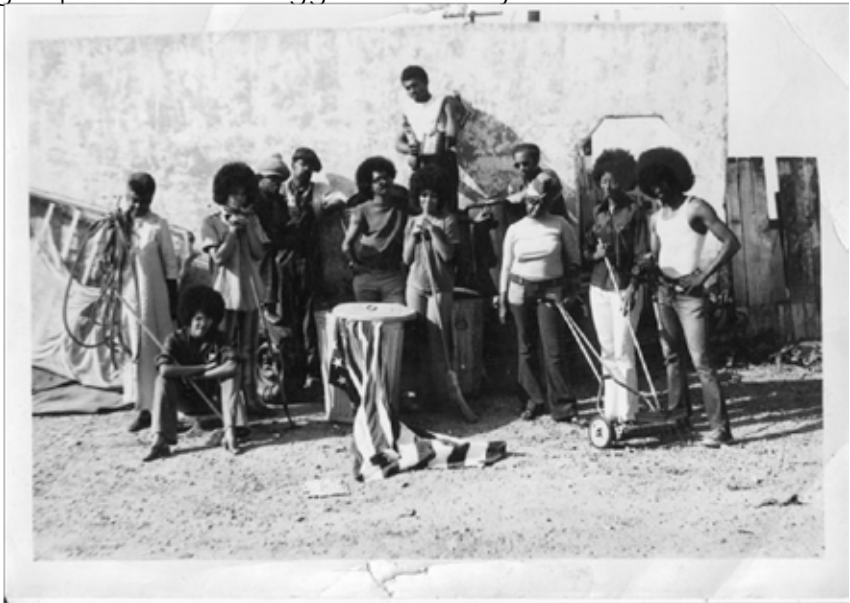


David Hammons, *Bag Lady in Flight*, ca. 1970, shopping bags, grease, and hair, 42-1/2 x 116-1/2 x 3-1/2 in. (108 x 295.9 x 8.9 cm). Collection Eileen Harris Norton, Santa Monica, California (artwork © David Hammons)

A return to the central question: does this change, in institutions, in representations, in modes of access, represent the amplification of radically different voices or the assimilation of these voices into a normative power structure? A Bakhtinian idea of carnival has its resonances within this citywide festival and its diversity of representations, and might represent one way to think about the answer to the above question. A carnivalesque, ambivalent, dialogic response might be “all of the above.” Despite the Getty’s monologic effort (the institution put a good deal of energy into overseeing all collaborations with smaller institutions and maintaining authority over press releases, schedules, logos, and the like), Pacific Standard Time cannot help but speak with multiple voices, enabling iterations that exceed the Getty’s managerial authority.

The Performance and Public Art Festival, coordinated by the

Getty and the nonprofit gallery LAXART, and presented over two weeks in January 2012, further demonstrated these ambivalent forces and, among other things, enabled specific instances for the embodied performance of marginalized racial and sexual subjectivities. The platform served as a site for many actions, reenactments, and inventive responses to the period in question, including a few events with which this writer was involved as a curator, featuring artists whose work has helped frame my own work as an artist working in performance.¹² These performance projects, part of a Talks About Acts series I organized in collaboration with Alexandro Segade, demonstrated a range of ways in which identity has been historically performed by California artists, and the shifting terms by which these performances can now be acknowledged and understood. The assimilation of these performances into the visual-art institutions that hosted them is another marker of a shift in the relationship between central authority and its irritants. Two of these projects brought race and performance into intimate contact: works by the group Bodacious Buggerrilla and by Eleanor Antin.



The Bodacious Buggerrilla, ca. 1973
(photograph © Bodacious Buggerrilla)

Supported by the Getty and hosted in its own auditorium, the reunion and reprise performance of a radical street theater troupe, the Bodacious Buggerrilla, began the series officially as a “pre-festival event.” The differences between the Getty Museum and the Bodacious Buggerrilla were stark. Founded by the artist Ed Boreal, the troupe satirized American politics and black political life in short plays and actions between the late 1960s and the early 1980s. The reunited troupe, composed of Boreal, Larry Broussard, Bobby Farlice, DaShell Hart, Tendai Jordan, Barbara Lewis, and Alyce Smith Cooper, came together for the first time in many years to perform a play and hold a conversation. They reenacted their short piece *Killer Joe*, in which a pre-tentious pimp gets taken down a few notches by his friends, by the Man, by the pigs, by his own hos. At the end of the play, despite his boasting, Joe is left pantsless, carless, and cashless, chased off the stage by his Bible-wielding mother. Timely in South L.A. during the early 1970s, this performance resonated with all sorts of real dynamics of that neighborhood. With the performers now in or near their seventies, the presentation in an auditorium atop a Brentwood mountain served to complete a historical record, to consecrate the group’s formerly fringe activities, and to contain those elements within the bureaucratic limits of the institution—but also to do the affective work of reunion that operated beyond institutional oversight. In the time spent preparing for, mounting, and reflecting on the event, bonds of friendship and camaraderie were renewed, important narratives were passed on and reconsidered, the bravery of the group’s antagonism was valued, and a sense of political continuity between then and now was articulated, for better or for worse. As moderator and facilitator of the event, I spent two days with the Bodacious Buggerrilla that were among the most memorable and influential experiences I’ve had working in the cultural sphere.

The troupe's director, Boreal, whose art figured prominently in the Getty's own PST exhibition, had previously used assemblage to draw racial critiques from found objects. Disillusioned with the art world, he dropped out and became a performer. An anthology of the political theater of the time captures his thinking:

Yeah, because it's like a never-never land; it's like a whirlpool in the sense that it feeds on itself. You don't need anybody, man, you know? You do your pictures; you're in a milieu. There are old, fashionable, wealthy ladies who don't know where they are; but it's fashionable to buy your stuff. It's fashionable to invite you to their house, have cocktails and you do somethin' weird, which increases your number, which sends you back, and you do another picture and then you come out to the cocktail party again. You do somethin' weird for them and give them a little story to tell the rest of the week; and you make some bread off it because you sell 'em a whole piece: Here's a picture by the guy who just did the funny story I just told you, right. And everyone else goes OOOOOHHHHH and that leads to the next cocktail party, you know, and it just goes on and on and on like that; it don't mean nothing at all. And all the time you are truckin' back to the ghetto, you know; I Am Going Back to the Ghetto. And all your fellow ghetto residents are going wow, man, you have a heavy thing goin', wow, that's really heavy. And you even think you got a heavy thing going. And the little rich lady thinks she's got a heavy thing going. She say: Well, I know some people in the ghetto. And her friends say: Really? Wow, you know . . . 13



Eleanor Antin, *Before the Revolution*, 1979, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1979, performance (artwork © Eleanor Antin; photograph provided by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York). Foreground: the artist as Eleanora Antinova

Bereal's transition from the art circuit to his own collective was a radical move. His audience changed, his work changed, and the risks changed. It is important that art is figured here as a compromised, elitist pastime, while theater is poised to engage with political realities. Bereal's recollections of the Bodacious Buggerrilla, described in the discussion at the Getty, include run-ins with FBI COINTEL agents who were cracking down on black radicals. In an allusion to the dangers of this work, the troupe reenacted an intervention it used to perform: during a politically direct monologue by Jordan describing the forces of conservatism that still operate in oppressive ways, a white audience member jumped up from his seat, argued with the cast using racist language, and theatrically shot Jordan with a cap gun. Jordan, prepared with a pellet of stage blood, was soon covered in red and fell to the floor. The stagecraft of this moment was a little less smooth than it might have been forty years ago. It perfectly expressed, however, the

social context for the original work, the continuously relevant real-life stakes of the political discussion, and the transgressive quality of this group, which had not warned me or the Getty that this messy episode would occur. While the Getty staff's nervousness about the event was evident to those of us who organized it and to Boreal himself (who carried his costume billy club with him during talks with staff), the museum's representatives proved quite flexible in their ability to support and accommodate black street theater as an example of important art from the period. No one on our end was reprimanded for the unannounced spilling of fake blood all over the stage.

Eleanor Antin's *Before the Revolution* was the grand finale of the Performance and Public Art Festival. Staged as an evening-length play at the Hammer Museum, it was a reworking of Antin's original narrative piece, performed by her and large Masonite dolls at The Kitchen in New York in 1979, for this expanded return. The play follows one of Antin's well-known characters, Eleanora Antinova, the black ballerina. In the 1970s, Antin, whose work brought eccentric theatricality to the emergent performance art of the time, not only performed Antinova, but attempted to live as her for a period, wearing slightly dark makeup and enacting a convoluted fantasy through which race, gender, and artistic mastery were cleverly entangled. While Antin's practice of cross-racial performance did and does raise eyebrows, it was a rare instance of racism being critically addressed within the milieu of that era's dominantly white cadre of influential artists. In Antinova's scripted arguments with her ballet master, questions of representation are tied to the powers of Eurocentrism and framed through estranged performances, drawing attention to ideas of performativity that would be more fully articulated in the art and writing of coming decades. The questions raised earlier about inclusion and representation are acted out in Antinova's insistence that she play Marie Antoinette, and Diaghilev's insistence that she cannot, that her body only authorizes her to play Cleop-

atra or Pocahontas.

In his curator's note for the 2012 program, Segade explains: The character is quixotic and quizzical, a great dancer whose career is negatively impacted by the fact of her race in contrast to her nationality (black v. Russian), her over-determined relationship to gender (ballerina!), and her place in history (Classicism v. Modernism v. Post-). . . . This radical figure functions as a site for critique of the contradictory and constructed divisions among races, classes, careers, histories, and even artistic forms.¹⁴



Eleanor Antin, *Before the Revolution*, 1979, performance, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2012 (artwork © Eleanor Antin; photograph by Omar Gaieck)

Segade taps into the disciplinarity that has been challenged throughout PST, drawing an important parallel between formal artistic distinctions and cultural divisions, and proposing the possibility that the critique of each is reflected in the other. Antin's own 2012 program note focuses on the difficulties of mixing theater and art that vexed her original work:

Performance artists were supposed to position themselves as anti-theatre. So Yvonne Rainer called her marvelous, literary, dramatic movements "anti-dance." Why would a sophisticated talented artist think that "dance" only meant ballet, modern, folk, ballroom, whatever? Why were sneakers any less a dance prop than toe-shoes? When Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh were chained together for a year, wasn't that theater? Wasn't Bas Jan Ader's kamikaze engagement with the Atlantic Ocean theater? More recently when Marina Abramovic in her favorite role of goddess held court inside the palace of modern art and looked into the eyes of strangers and changed their lives, wasn't that theater?¹⁵

Antin's stirring defense of theater, long-declared enemy of modern art, accompanied a new production in which she turned the primary performance responsibilities over to a cast of actors and a theater director. Early in the process, Alex and I encouraged Antin to cast an African American actress to play Eleanora Antinova. On my part, this was both from fear of facilitating, explaining, and even watching a blackface performance, but also from an equal interest in finally giving Antinova a black voice. In her piece, Antin had divided the performing presence between her authorial body and the inanimate dolls, a Brechtian critical complexity that could support the difficulties of the racial performance. But the piece was always designed as a play, and Antin's intention was always that it could be performed as such. Here was the opportunity to embody the characters in a troupe of actors under the artist's direction, reworking the role of identity vis-à-vis character. Here, the ideas of shifting racial categories and migrating art disciplines transformed each other. This project emerged as a central element of the fes-

tival, subject of several articles and profiles, symbolizing the recuperative powers of the series. In carnivalesque manner, these irresolvable categorical problems served to characterize the entire project.

These and other festival projects exceeded the official art-historical order, bringing unpredictable live interactions into the Pacific Standard Time sphere, and further insisting that while many things were done wrong in the past, some things were actually done quite well. It has been quite an experience to see Los Angeles of the present unfold backward through time, and to interrogate the terms by which L.A. art has been rearbitrated and renegotiated. The attempt to standardize a history of Southern California art has been met by the local tradition of history-less-ness that has made Los Angeles a place of radical reinvention. By depicting history not as a centralizing progressive force but as a collection of forces shaped by a particular provincial context, the Getty has used its singular resources to empower a series of historical interventions. The coalition of dominance and exclusion has produced a number of wonderful exhibitions and projects, plenty of awkward bureaucratic mismatches, and a revised record of alternative art histories. The local effort may appear as the apotheosis of provincialism to the outside world. Regardless, the project works beyond the specific historic content put forward, prominently modeling a contemporary arrangement of networked power, a structure that exceeds any central ordering authority, and drawing attention to that power's interest in and ability to administer differences.

Malik Gaines is assistant professor of art at Hunter College, CUNY, and a member of the group My Barbarian, which has performed and exhibited internationally. He has contributed writing to numerous art publications and catalogues, including monographs for Mark Bradford, Andrea Bowers, Sharon Hayes, Glenn Ligon, and Wangechi Mutu. Gaines holds a PhD in theater and performance studies from UCLA, having researched the transnational politics of race and gender in performances of the 1960s.

1. From the 2011 video *Ice Cube Celebrates the Eames*. During Pacific Standard Time, the video could be seen at the PST website. It is now (May 9, 2012) available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRWatw_ZEQI and several other websites. The video is also the source of the epigraph for this essay. Further quotations in this paragraph are from the same video.
2. See Chon A. Noriega, "Conceptual Graffiti and the Public Art Museum: Spray Paint LACMA," in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987*, exh. cat. (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 260.
3. See Holly Myers, "Confronting the Darkness of Ed Kienholz's 'Five Car Stud' at LACMA," *Los Angeles Times*, August 28, 2011.
4. See Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977).
5. Myers.
6. See Kellie Jones, introduction to *Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980*, ed. Jones, exh. cat. (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 2011), 22.
7. *Ibid.*, 20.
8. Nick Stillman, "Senga Nengudi's Ceremony for Freeway Fets and Other Los Angeles Collaborations," *East of Borneo*, December 7, 2011, online at www.eastofborneo.org/.
9. Ulysses Jenkins in conversation with the author, January 2012, Los Angeles.
10. Charles Gaines, *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, ed. Catherine Lord, exh. cat. (Irvine: Fine Arts Gallery of the University of California, 1993), 16.
11. Adrian Piper quoted in Gaines, 3.
12. To be completely clear: I serve on the staff of LAXART as curator-at-large. Alexandro Segade and I selected various performance works for the festival in the context of the Talks About Acts series we co-organize. My discussion here of two performances from the series is in no way intended as a review of the works, but rather as a consideration of themes and issues raised in the presentations—some of them rather surprising to me and the other organizers.
13. Ed Boreal quoted in John Weisman, *Guerrilla Theater: Scenarios for Revolution* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1973), 102.
14. Alexandro Segade, "Curator's Notes: Eleanor Antin's Revolution," program note for Eleanor Antin, *Before the Revolution*, January 29, 2012, Hammer Museum, UCLA.
15. Eleanor Antin, program note for her *Before the Revolution*, January 29, 2012, Hammer Museum, UCLA.
- See more at: <http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=2887#sthash.nYhF-9r7o.dpuf>

I have the paperwork
You, Three-card Monte
Now the populace can vision
itself as an audience
who hates their own passivity.

Do you ever tire of an artist's
credo. The purest form
of virtuosity as the unmoved
steed of creation;
wild and free

Those that took the money
And dissent against the money
We don't ask
for any of it back; untenable

Since college
The world costs more than
Money and it's been
Ten expensive years

By: Raquel Gutiérrez

The Yams, On the Whitney and White Supremacy

Ben Davis, Friday, May 30, 2014



HowDoYouSayYaminAfrican?, Still Flags.

Photo: Courtesy HowDoYouSayYaminAfrican?

The following is the complete transcript of an interview with members of HowDoYouSayYaminAfrican?, done via phone on Wednesday, May 28, 2014. It has been lightly edited for clarity. In the week to come, we will be giving the Whitney a space to respond.

BEN DAVIS: I think the context of the collective is important. So if someone could speak to that: How the Yams formed and what it means to be a part of the group.

ANDRE SPRINGER: We've all been working together in different iterations over the last 15 to 20 years. This iteration, us as Yams, was founded last year when we went to the "[Black Portraitures](#)" conference in Paris in January 2013.

SIENNA SHIELDS: Michelle Grabner came and visited my studio last summer. And the work that she saw was collaborative in nature. When she asked me to be a part of the Whitney Biennial, I thought about it for a while and decided it would be more interesting to me—and more true to the nature of the work—to par-

ticipate as a collective. Also, I was pissed off about the history of the Whitney and its lack of any kind of initiative in changing its white supremacist attitudes. So we formalized our collective and group to not only do this project, the movie, but to use this opportunity to infiltrate an institution and to experience firsthand what happens in the art world in terms of white supremacy, to expose how the doors are closed for the majority.

BD: A lot of people haven't seen the film that was in the show. Can you talk about *Good Stock On The Dimension Floor*?

AS: The way the film itself was made is this: We started by having conversations, a big thing in our group and our collective. We have conversations about topics ranging from intergalactic space, to crystals, to slavery, to the ancestors. We created this film through the group mind rather than the individual mind. From our conversations, Dawn Lundy Martin made a script, a poem in the style of an opera, and after that we took sections and reinvented them into sound or song. And then from the films we all put together costumes and sets. It was like a collage of minds to produce this avant-garde visual and musical onslaught of awesomeness. [Laughter.] There are some reoccurring themes, but there is no beginning, middle, or end.

SIENNA SHIELDS: We'd been working on video projects for a while. Grabner saw a two-minute segment last summer and asked me to participate in the Whitney Biennial. I have loved Dawn Lundy Martin's poetry for a decade now and thought she was my dream poet to work with so I asked if she would be interested in collaborating—in bringing the word to the table. We all began meeting for a month to discuss, plan, share, and rehearse. In the fall, Dawn wrote the piece. We spent two months creating the 34 songs, and a month

wrapping up filming and editing.

BD: Obviously, the Whitney has a history of not being very representative. That was part of the discussion for you going in from the start?

SS: Yes, it was why our collective was formed. I disagree with participating in the Whitney; it's tokenism, it's "diversity," and all of that bullshit. Every Whitney Biennial I have ever been to, you can barely count the number of black artists in the show on one hand. I didn't want to be a part of that. There are so many amazing artists of color that I have known in the past 12 years in New York that are essentially overlooked. But I just felt it was time for an intervention.

AS: The Whitney Museum promotes this idea that it is the voice of American art and speaks for the nation when it comes to what contemporary art is. But it's completely not diverse, and so it misrepresents the direction where art is going. I feel it's lost touch with what art is today.

BD: Was participating controversial within the group? The participation in the event itself?

SS: When Michelle Grabner looked at the movie, it wasn't finished. We were already working on it. So, I figured, participating doesn't really matter either way in terms of our art. What did matter was actually opening our mouths and voicing our concerns and changing this system. That was what was important.

CHRISTA BELL: One of the ways that we have discussed framing our participation—even before it started—was as a protest. Our participation inside of this white supremacist institution is a protest in itself. Of course we were aware of the politics of exclusion, the politics of white supremacy that make up the institution of the Whitney. I think a great way to consider this is that the entire participation was a protest, and the

withdrawal was part of the protest.

SS: Exactly. Saying “yes” was the first step to protest.

BD: But there was a specific flashpoint. Were you aware of Joe Scanlan’s work going into it?

SS: Not until the list came out. I mean, we were aware of Scanlan’s work. But that wasn’t even the flashpoint. There were so many other flashpoints.

CB: I want to clarify. This is not about Joe Scanlan. We are not protesting Joe Scanlan, or Michelle Grabner. We are protesting institutional white supremacy and how it plays out. A main part of our message is that we want to move the idea of white supremacy away from caricatures of white supremacy: neo-Nazis, KKK members, crazy kids who live in the mountains of Arkansas. White supremacy is embodied in these institutions that tokenize us, that invite us into spaces where they have absolutely no interest in ceding power. That’s the most important thing to get about this. This is not about Joe Scanlan. He’s this mediocre artist, he’s part of the Ivy League, institutional collective of Yale and Princeton and the Whitney. And it’s the larger part of his collective that we are concerned with.

BD: The Scanlan issue was the last straw that led to you leaving—I don’t know if I am characterizing that right.

SS: There were a lot of straws.

CB: The week that we actually withdrew, there was a meeting between representatives of the Yams and the curatorial advisers of the Whitney. And we recorded that meeting so that we could all participate in our own way. [Yams member] Mitch McEwen and Siena were suggesting ideas to the Whitney: How about making your curatorial processes transparent, so that

you can get help from the public or from other institutions that are doing a better job of being inclusive and at deconstructing white supremacy on an institutional level? We were coming up with suggestions like this, and it really just felt like the entire agenda of meeting with us was to quiet down the black people. They weren't sincere, or being proactive in coming up with solutions to their internalized racism as an institution.

I feel like that was a major turning point. Sometimes that's the way that white supremacy works: The actual people who are perpetuating it have no analysis, or they pretend to have no analysis, about what they are doing—and you just feel a deep hurt at not being taken seriously. Our souls, our art, our position, our politics, are completely not being given consideration. It's just, "yes, yes, whatever we can do to keep you quiet and in the show."

For me, that was the moment—and I don't want to speak for the entire group—but it was just like, what the hell? We couldn't get ahold of the curator. She refused to answer emails that Sienna was sending out. At the beginning, they weren't even going to have us open the Whitney, they were going to have us on the back of the bus. There were these different ways that they disrespected us. This series of microaggressions. When we did open the Whitney, we didn't have a fucking wall tag! Who presents work at a major institution and doesn't get a wall tag for their art? It was just all these little passive-aggressive, or micro-aggressive, racist things that were happening, and it just mounted. And so we enacted the final part of the protest, which was the withdrawal.

BD: And that was a whole part of the dispute that didn't specifically involve Scanlan's Donelle Woolford piece at all?

CB: Again, our largest concern is not Donelle Woolford. It is not Joe Scanlan raping black women conceptually through Donelle Woolford. Our larger concern is the way that institutional white supremacy reenacts itself.

AS: In the book that the museum put out about the Biennial, they let Joe Scanlan put in Donelle Woolford as a person in the Biennial. But they gave us hell to get all of our names in the book, on one little page. That's just a contrast in terms of that institutional bias—that shouldn't have even been a problem. Let alone leaving out the nametag of our collective.

SS: We are a collective of over 38 people all over the world. They put out the RSVP invite to the opening, and just in the few weeks leading up to the show, we found out that actually our piece is screening during the last two weeks of the Biennial. So they want us to come to make them look diverse, to come to the opening, but they don't tell us, "You're not screening until the very end." Michelle Grabner says, "Oh, I forgot to tell you." I don't want to be petty—this was not the big deal. This is just one of these little things...

CB: These micro-aggressions that happened throughout our participation/protest.

SS: It always felt like that 3/5th of a human being thing. The fictional character was promoted and 45 people of color didn't count. It was this constant battle. Being at the Whitney wasn't really our whole thing anyway. It was about exposing the situation. We've seen how the Whitney hasn't changed in its entire history. So this is our chance to say, "You know what? Things haven't changed." Things have not gotten better, since the '60s, the '70s; it's gotten worse in terms of these institutions of higher learning and art not be-

ing any more inclusive than the Republican National Convention.

BD: I've been following the debates about your protest, and there are really two themes that come up again and again from people who question your motives. The first is the question of timing, that the protest occurred at the end of the Biennial's run. People use the words "publicity stunt" a lot. What do you have to say about that?

CB: Like I said towards the beginning of the interview, our entire participation was a protest. Just because people don't know that doesn't mean it is any less of a protest. Withdrawal was the final act of protest. Black people en masse being inside of an institution like the Whitney, presenting art, is itself a form of protest. We just followed it through to its inevitable conclusion.

SS: I also don't know if you are familiar with the work of Stan Greenlee, the writer and director of *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, which is about a man who joins the CIA, in the Department of Reproduction of Records. So, he's inside, but then he goes off and becomes a revolutionary. And that was our entire foundation; we are all artists who have been aware of a certain history and decided to do something about it. So, just because mainstream media refused to write about that side, or didn't ask, just because mainstream media decided to take Michelle Grabner's word for it.... She describes it as "their long-discussed withdrawal," she's out there blasting that. Well, we don't care if she's saying that; it's just another example of white supremacy. We have the record, we have the e-mail exchanges. It's like—bring it on.

BD: You dispute Michelle Grabner's account of the way things played out?

CB: Yes, we do dispute Michelle Grabner. What she is

doing is spinning the conversation in a particular way. Our protest is about institutionalized systemic white supremacy.

SS: We all found this out the other day—this is another example in terms of the system—[Critical Practices](#) is this group that Michelle brought in, just two days ago to do a round-table discussion about all these issues, about representation. And they put our picture on their flier, across from a Donelle Woolford photograph. Donelle Woolford was credited; our picture was not. We were not asked for permission. In any case, at that discussion, there was not one black person present.

CB: We are very black. We are familiar with how institutions like the police will shoot or kill black people and then investigate themselves and then find themselves not guilty. What Sienna described is an example of how institutional white supremacy continues to reify itself. How do you have a conversation about race, about black people, with no black people in the panel or in the room? They are investigating themselves, finding themselves not guilty, and then releasing themselves. It's very hurtful. I almost feel like we are in an abusive relationship with an institution. We're coming from the perspective of mutuality and communication: "If they only understand where we are coming from... If they only understand what they are doing that is wrong, then they'll change." And they are coming from an entirely different reality, which is one of maintaining power. Honestly, I feel like us leaving as a final act of protest was a way of us symbolically leaving an abusive relationship. You have these people who are not interested in change at all.

BD: The other debate about your action that people bring up is that you are censoring Scanlan. That your conversation with the Whitney must have been: It's

him or us.

CB: That whole line is completely derailing us from our central issue. In terms of censoring, we are artists and we believe, generally speaking, in the ethic of non-censorship and we also recognize that that ethic was born inside of a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. So, there's going to be times, especially where the bodies of black women are concerned—sometimes you have to think outside certain hegemonic boxes that we have been given: “let white folks do whatever they want,» which is what it translates to, because they have the power and the resources and the institutions to perpetuate certain types of ideologies. In terms of censorship, the collective is absolutely anti-censorship until it comes to the severe conceptual rape of black female bodies—so there's that. And other people should weigh in. My opinion is not the only opinion in the collective.

AS: Everyone has the right to expression because of our freedom of speech; whatever they want to do, however they want to say it. But with all that, there's responsibility to be an intelligent individual, and as an individual who is an artist, to think about how your work influences people. And to have a mediocre approach to “questioning authorship,” and meanwhile exploiting a group of people and not having a sensitivity about that, makes us ask: What are you trying to say? You reserve the right to do that. We also reserve the right not to listen to it or listen to it or be a part of it.

SS: Can I just read something? Because the censorship idea is another part of the spin that Michelle put out there. This is actually one of our letters [to Michelle Grabner], and it makes it clear that we are not about censorship:

"I forwarded your thank-you letter to the HowDoYou-SayYaminAfrican? Google Group mailing list. I don't feel like your thank-you note was heartfelt with regard to our collective. Your actions and words put you squarely with the tradition of the kind of white feminism that throws women of color under the bus. I have no beef with the actor playing Donelle Woolford—actors are actors and that is their job. Whether the role be mother, murderer, rapist, or president, we don't pin the role on the actor (...) My beef is with your curatorial curriculum and what it really represents for people of color. You don't get it or maybe you do, which is chilling."

We never said, "Take down this work. This is creepy." We just wanted an open, honest debate about what it actually means. Especially since our curator called the show a "curriculum:" she's trying to teach something. Well, what is it you are trying to teach? Let's talk about it. Don't hush this up. That's the whole thing. Now they are saying we're for censorship. No. We were trying to have an open, honest debate about the very meaning of what this other artist was doing. That's not censorship.

BD: Was your proposal to have a formal debate about it? A public debate at the Biennial?

SS: Mostly we just wanted actually to have a conversation with our curator. What she told me at first was, "Why don't you talk to the actress playing Donelle Woolford." In other words, she was like, "Go talk to the black girl"—that's basically what she was saying. Not even the artist himself, and not even our curator. And then she refused to respond to any emails or phone calls. So you can just see the spin going on here by the Whitney—it stinks.

BD: There wasn't a request to remove Scanlan from

the show?

SS: No! We never requested that. That was never a thing. And we have all the proof of that. We have emails and videotapes that our whole discussion involved with the head of the Whitney. We never said that.

BD: I have heard people frame this that way, so I think it's important to clear up.

CB: It's all derailing. All of this is derailing and this is what happens when race comes up as part of the larger conversation.

SS: Let's discredit the people who are being abused. Like a woman who gets raped: "Oh, she asked for it." Here it's, "Oh, those black people, they're just complaining about something again, and they're just after publicity." It's totally white people gathering around their own, circling the wagons, and not confronting their racism.

CB: I love that metaphor. It's the same thing that happens when women are raped. What do you do? You attack her character. You talk about other shit. What was she wearing? Why was she in that place? Instead of dealing with the issue, which is that some motherfucker jumped her and raped her. Which is a great metaphor for what we are dealing with.

BD: As I understand it, there was debate within your collective about how to proceed. Or am I getting the wrong impression?

CB: I don't remember us saying that.

BD: In an update to the original Hyperallergic story you said, "We have been discussing this for weeks." So the impression that I got was that there had been debate over whether to take this decision for weeks, but maybe that's the wrong impression.

AS: Discussion, but not debate. Mostly discussion about the realities that were happening with this situation. It almost felt unreal. Our discussions were mainly about articulating what things are, and coming to the right thing to do, and making sure that it was well thought out.

SS: In the press they were saying, “They’re just flouncing out.” And talking about how we are emotionally charged versus the cool-headedness of Michelle Grabner or the Whitney’s response. All this coded language. We’re a group of people, and we live all over the place, and we have email exchanges, and phone conversations like the one we are having right now, where all these issues get talked out. And through all this, we arrive at a feeling about how to proceed.

And we’ve been investigating. We’ve literally been pulling up the history of our curator’s 30-year relationship with Joe Scanlan. We see how these institutions play off each other and reinforce each other. It’s really interesting how we get beat up for trying to get attention or furthering our careers. But look at this curator who is at all these concurrent shows while she is curating, and the same thing with Joe Scanlan—you know, the Armory, the Frieze Art Fair, whatever it may be. So talk about that. One part of racism is all about economics: black people are at a certain economic level, and we’re mad about it. It’s crazy how they want to hold onto their white male corner of the art world, in terms of who’s making the money, who’s in the gallery space, and then they dare to attack us. It makes me belly laugh.

BD: Did you get any feedback from any other artists in the show, either in support or against?

CB: Well, there are about 45 of us, so we got feedback from lots of artists in the show!

AS: There's another artist, A.L. Steiner, who brought to our attention Scanlan's attacks on her on the Facebook page for W.A.G.E. [Working Artists in the Greater Economy, a group that advocates for artists to be paid by museums]

SS: He would write things like, he basically believes that art is a meritocracy. Like if you are at the top, you don't have to worry about minimum wages, or protections, or insurance. He told them, "I'm not the one begging institutions."

BD: In the New York Times piece about your protest, Donna de Salvo says, "The Whitney looks at diversity in the broadest sense and does not talk about things in terms of numbers.» How do you read that?

CB: I read that in terms of how we need to stop talking about "diversity" and start talking about "institutional white supremacy." This is not an issue of diversity. I mean, clearly, you had over 40 brown people in the show.

AS: When you say "diversity" you mean that there is one core group that has to allow others to come in to create the appeal. That's the wrong way to think about it. That's racist. That's culturally wrong. We need to stop using diversity as an excuse.

SS: Because it makes whiteness the universal. It's like always using "man" for human. Some of our costumes we got from Material for the Arts, where artists and teachers can go to pick up things that have been donated. So, a lot of the fabrics that we use for our costumes have these tags that say "Noah" on them. They were from the Noah movie by the Black Swan director [Darren Aronofsky], with Russell Crowe. It had all white people in it, not one person of color. And when asked about it, the people involved in it said, "Well,

we didn't want it to look like a United Colors of Benetton ad. So we decided to go universal, to go white." That's what we are talking about: When Donna says something like that, that's what we're really talking about. Whiteness is invisible. Whiteness is the universal. And it's always going to be 98 percent, and 2 percent of others come in—that's what "diversity" is and that's what we are against.

CB: This is an American issue. This isn't about diversity. It's about making sure that we have systems that make sure that American art is represented, and not just the work of white men, even when white women are the ones who are negotiating for them. This is not a diversity issue; it's an issue for Americans, an issue of representation.

BD: What would you like to see happen going forward? What are the concrete steps?

AS: More transparency. Also, the idea of looking at inclusion not from the perspective of, "we need numbers," but actually of having the knowledge to understand different aesthetics, about where different art comes from and what that means. Not just, "We need two black people. We need an Asian. We need some queer people." We want to see people actually genuinely appreciate the aesthetic of the diversity that is America, and propel that into the art world.

SS: The art world is going the way of the Republican party, in a sense. The population of the US is radically changing. So are we going to be an apartheid system while the white minority increasingly controls everything and the brown folk are under that yolk, imprisoned by the institutions that bring division to America? When you think about museums and where their funding comes from, are they just going to alienate the majority of Americans and completely court white

oligarchs? Is that what they want?

I was at a Creative Time gala Kara Walker opening, and I just happened to get into a discussion with a board member of the Whitney. And under the sphinx, I was told, “The Whitney isn’t racist. I’m not racist. I did things for black people in the 60s.» That’s what she told me. Then when we proceeded to sit down at the table, a white man across the table looked over at a black woman who was also at the table and said, “Did you just say the Whitney was racist?”—as if she and I were interchangeable black women. Someone was already telling the whole table that some black woman was saying that the Whitney was racist. And I just think that’s hilarious, because you’re in a room with a majority of white people who are at Kara Walker’s sphinx opening, and they were all taking Instagram pictures of themselves smiling in front of the mam-mie, and they couldn’t actually get the art at all. Out of 1,200 white people, there were maybe a handful of black people in the room.

This is what I have been seeing in the art world in New York, and I am sick of it. HowDoYouSayYamin-African? is a response to an apartheid level of representation in the art world. There is vast talent and it is being locked out. And a certain white agenda is being promoted, and that’s got to stop. This is a wake-up call.

CB: I agree with Sienna 100 percent. But I also find your question a little unfair. To ask us, the Yams, “What are the steps? Can you give me a 1-2-3-step idea of what needs to be done...” It’s unfair in the sense that we have the least resources, we have the least institutional power to set the agenda. And yet the question is consistently pointed at us. Our entire purpose is to contribute to an environment in which

white supremacy is not tolerated. That's our first step, and it should be our last step.

After that it is the responsibility of the Whitney, or Yale, or Princeton, all of the institutions who are part of Joe Scanlan's arts collective, to investigate themselves, to interrogate their methods of curation. Let's turn the question part of this program back to them. We're just artists. I feel like we've done our part to bring attention to a problem that is just so embedded, so nasty, in the culture of art in this country. So let's turn that question to the institutions. What are they going to do? What's their 1-2-3 step plan?

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?

Thoughts about the Donelle Woolford Debate

by **Coco Fusco**

The recent decision by the Black artists group Yams Collective to withdraw from the Whitney Biennial in protest of the show's inclusion of Joe Scanlan's alter ego Donelle Woolford has [forced a long-standing private conversation among artists of color into public view](#). What remains troubling for many in a purportedly post-racial age are the politics of this artist's so-called conceptual performance, one in which he, a white middle-aged male art professor, outsources a black female character of his own invention to a series of younger, lesser-known black woman artists. Since Scanlan has only sought black women to play his black female character, this venture can hardly be described as non-traditional casting, but is it 21st-century minstrelsy, as some would have it? Is it an exploitative form of cultural appropriation? Can the young women who have been enlisted to incarnate his character over the years truly be considered collaborators as Scanlan claims if he chooses them, provides a predetermined character and script and uses his social capital to secure the gigs? If, as Scanlan asserts, these women are partners, why aren't his "collaborators" speaking publicly about the controversy? And finally, what does it mean for a major cultural institution with a history of underrepresenting women artists and artists of color to be validating an aesthetic gesture that presents a black female as a white man's invention?



Donelle Woolford performance of “Dick’s Last Stand” at The Kitchen.
Photo: Al Foote III.

Media coverage has contrasted Yams Collective’s emotionally charged protest with biennial co-curator Michelle Grabner’s cool-headed treatment of her decision to include Donelle Woolford as a shrewd way to court controversy. Scanlan has persisted with his defense of himself as above suspicion of racist intent based on his professional trajectory and what he characterizes as the [collaborative nature of the work](#). [The museum has issued a statement in support of Scanlan’s inclusion and Yams Collective’s withdrawal](#)—essentially defending everyone’s right to do what they want without addressing the cause of the controversy. To many of those who are participating in the discussions about the work that abound in social media and the blogosphere, however, this is a whitewash that does not hide the extent to which the art world remains divided on matters of race and power. The defense of Scanlan’s artistic freedom

reads as a thinly veiled act of white racial solidarity.

Up to now, the Donelle Woolford debates have revolved around the work, its discomfoting effects, and speculation about the artist's intent. Scanlan's detractors cast that discomfort as a sign of the work's uncritical revival of racist forms of ventriloquism and appropriation, while his supporters treat the discomfort as a sign of the work's being avant-garde—suggesting that smart, forward thinking people should want to be made uncomfortable, and that they are self-aware enough to be able to objectify race without engaging in racist behavior. The detractors' arguments are steeped in the language of ethics while the supporters rely on the notion that aesthetic endeavor can only truly be appreciated by disassociating the appraisal of its value from social function and context. While I would argue that it is virtually impossible to disentangle artwork involving the use of persons from questions of ethics, I find it unfortunate that Scanlan's critics rely so heavily on moral condemnation of his motives. The reduction of the Donelle Woolford problem to whether Scanlan as a white male artist should “have the right” to create a black female character and hire someone to embody her is not the most effective way to open up a discussion about questions of institutional power and racial privilege, particularly in a neoliberal era that champions the brash acquisitiveness of (white) elites and the erosion of social engineering carried out by states. In short, the appropriation of land, resources and culture by means of economic force

and legal subterfuge is the standard practice of the strong against the weak. Technically speaking, Scanlan does “have the right” to hire whomever he wants. But culturally speaking, no one makes such choices in a vacuum and not all gestures of this kind are interpreted in the same way or defended with the same intensity. Unfortunately, artists are often at a disadvantage when it comes to debating the cultural politics and historical legacies that inform the gestures they make—because they’ve been educated in the formalist hothouse of the art school crit.

I want to stress the central role of art school for this work for several reasons. The Donelle Woolford project was conceived at Yale when Scanlan was on the sculpture faculty and originally featured one of his black female students—Namik Minter, who soon reversed her original consensus and removed herself. Scanlan’s relationship with his black female fantasy is haunted by his lived pedagogical relations with black students. Furthermore, the debate rolling around Facebook and numerous art blogs resembles an art school crit that begins as a formal discussion about whether the piece “works” and then devolves into an ad hominem attack on the maker. Little attention is paid to the background, only to the object (i.e. the black body) in the foreground. As a visiting professor at Yale during Scanlan’s tenure there, I witnessed more than a few studio crits that followed that arc of development. Sitting together in white rooms with a student’s art works on display, the discussants were

not supposed to stray from what was in front of them. The dominant rhetoric was formalism mixed with heavy doses of bravado and personal opinion. As for references to the world outside, at most one might have introduced history by referring to relevant artists as references. Black students I met there at the time conveyed in private that they felt stifled by the terms of discussion, especially because white students would frequently claim that they were unable to relate to work by students of color because they did not understand their cultural references.

To embark on a discussion of cultural politics or institutional racism during a crit would have been viewed as impinging on the absolute liberty of the artist that the institutional structures of art school, the studio, and the gallery are supposed to protect. It might be acceptable to express subjective impressions as a person of color but an address to the context that informed race relations was viewed with suspicion. Thus, if you were an art student and you spoke up about institutional racism or cultural appropriation, it was quite likely that you would either be socially excluded by peers, reminded that identity politics are “over,” or admonished by mentors for not realizing that such concerns fall outside the boundaries of the aesthetic appreciation. The banishment of the political from the discursive space of the elite art school would be followed by unsolicited studio visits from peers who questioned your motives, and reinforced by private conversations with mentors who

make their preferences for “identity-free” art discourse quite clear. Since I circulated at Yale as an outsider and an older artist of color brought in at the behest of black students, I spent many a studio visit listening to their stories about the private forms of intimidation. The message being driven home was that for artists of color to succeed they had to avoid talking about racial politics and concede that their presence at the school was sufficient evidence of a post-racial art world. That social context makes Yams Collective’s decision to transform their opinion into public action exceptionally bold.

Yams Collective’s rupture with the Whitney is symptomatic of the lack of other discursive means within studio art practice for addressing social issues that implicate the institutions that sustain the practice of art in broader practices of exploitation and oppression. At the same time, the dueling pressures of an art market that fetishizes youth, blackness as style and sex, and a harsh economic reality that locks most young cultural producers into debt is producing heightened political awareness among young artists. The result is the recent plethora of performative protests about institutional ethics. Not surprisingly, Yams Collective’s withdrawal from the biennial took place not long after the GULF activists staged their action at the Guggenheim to raise awareness of the mistreatment of the laborers constructing a satellite museum in Abu Dhabi, and the boycott by several artists from the Sydney Biennial in protest of the event’s ties to Transfield, an Australian company that manages

offshore detention centers for asylum seekers. They were followed by a feminist performance protest inside the Whitney and another feminist performance invoking the memory of Ana Mendieta in front of the DIA Foundation's Chelsea space (scheduled to coincide with a lecture about Carl Andre's work taking place there). These are ruptures of decorum, in which artists are forcing the politically and racially antagonistic dimensions of relations between the museum, artists, labor, and the public into the open.

The Donelle Woolford affair is not the first time that the art world has been shaken up by controversy over a white male artist's decision to "play with race." When I read about the Yams Collective's decision to withdraw from the Whitney Biennial, I was reminded of the 1979 protests about the N*gg*r Drawings exhibition at Artists Space, which, despite the incendiary title, was an assembly of abstract charcoal drawings by the white male artist Donald Newman. The black artists and curators leading the protests were offended by Newman's invocation of the racist epithet in his title. They confronted a downtown milieu of white avant-garde artists and curators who perceived themselves as progressive (i.e. anti-racist) but who nonetheless tacitly condoned the use of racist discourse by advocating tolerance in the name of artistic freedom. The fracas eventually culminated in the creation of the ad-hoc organization Action Against Racism in the Arts (AARA) and ushered in an era of lively public debates about

institutional racism in the art world.¹ As a result of this sort of multicultural activism and affirmative action policies, elite art schools like Yale came under greater political pressure to accept students of color.

These shifts coincided with the introduction of postcolonial theory into the academy and the emergence of cultural studies that encourage sociological interpretations of art and popular culture. Artists and cultural activists of that era were not only concerned with exclusionary practices of galleries and museums: they also sought to analyze the contours and dynamics of Eurocentric aesthetics. As public culture came under the sway of postcolonial thought and political pressure, cultural journalism began to address issues of cultural appropriation, past and present. In 1988 Black British artist Isaac Julien and Black British cultural critic Kobena Mercer published a landmark essay in *Screen Magazine* about Robert Mapplethorpe's *The Black Book* that explored their ambivalence toward the fetishization of black gay male bodies.² Julien and Mercer received a great deal of "push-back" from gay community members who felt that it was not entirely fair to treat Mapplethorpe as a purveyor of a colonial gaze when he was operating within and for a sexual subculture, which eventually led Mercer to revise his position.³ In 1992, when white male artists Rob Pruitt and Jack Early decided to put posters of prominent black figures against paint-splattered walls at Leo Castelli Gallery, they were slammed in the mainstream press as politically incorrect and disappeared

from the art world for a few years, but have since returned and reestablish themselves professionally. Nonetheless, the era of hard-hitting multicultural inquiry in the art press was short-lived. When the Culture Wars reached a climax in the early '90s, identity politics was declared passé by conservative critics, which enabled the pent-up resentment of arts professionals who had felt stymied by multiculturalism to be expressed publicly without fear of reprisal. The subsequent art market boom in black art redefined what constituted empowerment for artists of color. The stress in the press since then has been on market visibility of black art rather than institutional practices of exclusion and containment. For those debating the Donelle Woolford project now, a key question might be whether the Whitney's tacit endorsement of Scanlan's project is symptomatic of a return to the institutional politics of the pre-N*gg*er Drawingsera, or a containment strategy for an era in which black artists constitute serious market competition.

There was a big difference between the way that racial politics and colonial practices were taken up within cultural studies and how they have been dealt with in the art world, especially in elite art schools. Cultural studies interpretations of art emphasize the context of production and reception in the construction of meaning. Our motives, tastes, and desires as artists and audiences are understood to be informed or conditioned by our social environment. Art schools like Yale, where Scanlan

taught for many years and where he developed the idea for Donelle Woolford, continue to treat art as a highly personal endeavor for the very talented, one in which creativity is an expression of intuition that is carefully honed by skill. To suggest that an artist's decisions are informed by forces beyond his control in that educational environment is often treated as an assault on artistic subjectivity and subject to visceral refusal. Thus, there can be little questioning of whether the pedagogical practices or selection criteria for Yale's art programs are culturally or racially biased—since everyone there is an exceptional being devoted to art above all else.

Scanlan's time at Yale School of Art coincided with a marked change in the student demographic. From the late '90s until the present, the number of black and Latino students increased considerably, and so did the presence of foreign students from the emergent elites of the global South. Not only did the composition of the student body change—in contrast to the Yale of the 1980s that produced the likes of Matthew Barney and Ann Hamilton, the Yale graduates of the 2000s who have garnered the most art world attention have been black or Latino: among them are Kehinde Wiley, Mickalene Thomas, Wangechi Mutu, Leslie Hewitt, and William Cordova. In contrast to earlier decades when art students relied on their professors to connect them with the New York gallery scene, the new crop of success stories made it without the old (white) boys' network. I think it is safe to say that this phenomenon made an

impression on the entire Yale faculty, not just Scanlan. The students of color could no longer be seen as the poor beneficiaries of institutional largesse—they were stealing the show.

It is out of this pedagogical scenario that Scanlan's decision to create a black female artist alter ego emerged and evolved. The first incarnation of Donelle Woolford was one of his former students. Other former black students of Scanlan's from that time recall that he would pepper his studio visits with questions about black culture, as if he were attempting to draw cultural knowledge out of them. It is not insignificant that while Scanlan's critics often depict him as an all powerful older white man taking advantage of younger black women, the context that gave rise to Donelle Woolford was one in which the racial balance of power in his workplace was shifting in favor of younger artists of color. That shift represented two intertwined threats: it challenged the presumed power relations between teacher and students, and also diminished the teacher's claim to mastery insofar as his students possessed characteristics and cultural knowledge that he could not consider his own or the result of his tutelage. Hence, rather than seeing Scanlan's work as a crude exercise in exploitation, we might conceive of it as a castration fantasy about white male erasure. The artist/teacher expresses his ambivalent attraction to blackness and femaleness while also achieving a kind of mastery over an insurgent otherness that he could not be guaranteed in the

classroom. We might begin to think about the whiteness of Donelle Woolford that is masked by the blackness of the performer, and the maleness in her version of compliant, and non-confrontational femininity. Donelle Woolford belongs to Scanlan in a way that his actual black students would not agree to. He produces her professional success while his real black students achieved theirs without the backroom machinations of the Yale School of Art professoriate.

Scanlan's critics have frequently invoked the legacy of minstrelsy in discussing Donelle Woolford, though I have seen nothing to date that relates Scanlan's 2003 self-portrait with his face covered in dirt to the minstrels' use of burnt cork to darken their faces. This distinctly American form of entertainment emerged in the 19th century and consisted of skits and variety acts that lampooned black people—and it was wildly popular with white audiences until the early 20th century.⁴ While the most grotesque caricatures of blackness were played by white performers in blackface, black performers from the time period were also called upon to play in blackface and imitate the demeaning enactments of blackness invented by whites: the makeup, the grimaces, the broken English, and the exaggerated dance steps. The market demand for incarnated black stereotypes was so strong that it limited the professional possibilities for black performers even if the popularity meant they had stage work. Cultural historians of blackface minstrelsy have

argued that blackface served many different functions for a 19th-century white America that was contending politically and psychologically with new challenges to its hegemony: the end of slavery and the specter of black enfranchisement.⁵ It was a way for white performers to express the emotional side of themselves that the Protestant culture of the time repressed. Its grotesque renderings of blackness served as a means of hiding white attraction to black bodies by visualizing those bodies as abject. And the market success of the form yielded a means of controlling the symbolic representation of blackness in a burgeoning mass culture.

Does it make sense then to view Donelle Woolford as an extension of that minstrel tradition? Few would argue that her physicality is grotesque. Scanlan has been careful to bracket her caricatured performativity within the rubric of iconoclastic black comedy, such as her recent impersonations of Richard Pryor. That said, she is a fantastic projection that emerged from a scenario in which the fear of symbolic castration was palpable—even though it is about as unrealistic as the prospect of whites losing power to blacks with the end of slavery. How and why do these fantasies come to life when they are so patently untrue? What is the collective emotional investment in a white male artist's fantasy of black female artistry in a milieu that is overwhelmingly dominated by white money, power, and tradition? Why does that milieu take great pains to mask the reality of white

dominance with a fetishistic display of black bodies and style? Indeed, the purported success of black art that is trumpeted daily by the mainstream media is wildly exaggerated in relation to art auction sales by white male artists, the presence of white male artists in major museum collections, and the representation of white male artists in commercial galleries. Were Donelle Woolford to capitalize on her visibility in order to address these contradictions, I might find the disturbance she generates a welcome wake up call. Sadly, up to now, she has obeyed the unspoken rules of the art school she came from and stayed away from politics.

1. Ault, Julie, ed., *Alternative Art*, New York, 1965-1985, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 56-57.

2. Julien, Isaac and Kobena Mercer, "De Margin and De Center," *Screen Magazine*, 1988.

3. Mercer, Kobena, "Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, (London, Routledge, 1994).

4. Bean, Annemarie, *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996).

5. Lott, Eric, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, (Cambridge, Oxford University Press, 1995).

review of “made in l.a.” at the ucla hammer museum

by Sesshu Foster taken from :

<http://atomikaztex.wordpress.com/2014/09/07/review-of-made-in-l-a-at-the-ucla-hammer-museum/>

it's okay that the artists are all white, even the nonwhite artists (2?) are kind of white

it's okay that the curators are all white, it's

okay that the l.a. reflected in this show is like the l.a. in robert altman's "shortcuts" which is a strange all-white l.a.

(in charlton heston's "omega man," (1971) i think the head vampire or whatever they were who was menacing the 'real' last human beings on earth, that is the humans who were not vampires or whatever (all white, except maybe the black woman hipster with her militant afro) was black)

let's not go into "planet of the apes" at this juncture, but in the apartheid imagination of the future white people are in peril, isolated with jutting jaw of manifest destiny determination like charlton heston with his guns and his alzheimer's

it's okay that the curators at the ucla hammer museum think that 'minorities' are best represented by white queer artists (that shows diversity like on "star trek" the aliens are white people who wear prosthetic make-up or paint their skin blue or green—that's a kind of diversity)

it's okay that the white artists who are queer artists don't

have anything to do with POC (people of color)

it's okay in the little museum labels where the curators note the background, issues and ideas in the artist's work, that none of it referenced POC even when it mentioned "highest rates of incarceration in the world in spite of having only 5% of the worlds population" (it's okay not to mention that blacks and latinos make up 60% of the incarcerated even though they are 30% of the american people)

it's okay

it's all right, like when i sat in one day in marilyn robinson's mfa writing class at the university of iowa and she shared her course reading list which was all white except for one book by the only black writer and only POC in creative writing at U of I, and she asked did anyone have any remarks or suggestions, and i said, apart from the one, the reading list isn't very diverse, it's all white

robinson didn't answer, she just smiled and white students (maybe i was the only nonwhite in the room) said, "it's a very diverse list, already" and "yes, for example, look at all the women writers" and "and kafka," one added

and robinson just smiled

and i left

that's all right

it's okay

that was in 1994, 20 years ago

it's okay 20 years later to walk through the ucla hammer mu-

seum through an all white show

when i was a kid i thought maybe american apartheid would slowly change

and now we have a black president who does everything white presidents do

he does everything just like them, all his policies are the same—he's like colin powell

and in the 1990s i felt like things could change, maybe

but now i see white thinking's not changing and this exhibit and the exhibits at every other museum in the city show this, but

it's all right because the ucla hammer museum curated and hosted "now dig this! art and black los angeles 1960 – 1980" which exhibited from october 2011 to january 2012

so it's okay, because "black los angeles" had its day

it had the one exhibit

it has black history month every year

it had wanda coleman (in those days)

so it's okay that all the official museums in l.a. show white art all the time

it's okay because you can go to the "california african american museum" if you want to see art by POC or you can drive to long beach to the museum of latin american art, or the l.a.

county museum of art probably has one or two frida kahlos
or diego riveras and some great precolombian ceramics

so it's okay

if the all the other museums like lacma and moca and etc.
show white art at all times

asco had it's one lacma show "asco: the elite of the ob-
scure, a retrospective 1972 – 1987" on exhibition from sept.
2011 to december 2011, so it's okay

they had that one

one is good, now we can go back to our regularly sched-
uled programming

like after a public service announcement

it's okay that the apartheid imagination remains in place and
is not disrupted

thank you

that reassurance is like walking on a broken toe

From An Interview with David Hammons:

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1. I CAN'T STAND ART ACTUALLY. I'VE NEVER, EVER LIKED ART, EVER. I NEVER TOOK IT IN SCHOOL.

2. WHEN I WAS IN CALIFORNIA, ARTISTS WOULD WORK FOR YEARS AND NEVER HAVE A SHOW. SO SHOWING HAS NEVER BEEN THAT IMPORTANT TO ME. WE USED TO CUSS PEOPLE OUT: PEOPLE WHO BOUGHT OUR WORK, DEALERS, ETC., BECAUSE THAT PART OF BEING AN ARTIST WAS ALWAYS A JOKE TO US.

WHEN I CAME TO NEW YORK, I DIDN'T SEE ANY OF THAT. EVERYBODY WAS JUST GROVELING AND TOMMING, ANYTHING TO BE IN THE ROOM WITH SOMEBODY WITH SOME MONEY. THERE WERE NO BAD GUYS HERE; SO I SAID, "LET ME BE A BAD GUY," OR ATTEMPT TO BE A BAD GUY, OR PLAY WITH THE BAD AREAS AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS.

3. I WAS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHY BLACK PEOPLE WERE CALLED SPADES, AS OPPOSED TO CLUBS. BECAUSE I REMEMBER BEING CALLED A SPADE ONCE, AND I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT IT MEANT; NIGGER I KNEW BUT SPADE I STILL DON'T. SO I TOOK THE SHAPE, AND STARTED PAINTING IT.

4. I JUST LOVE THE HOUSES IN THE SOUTH, THE WAY THEY BUILT THEM. THAT NEGRITUDE ARCHITECTURE. I REALLY LOVE TO WATCH THE WAY BLACK PEOPLE MAKE THINGS, HOUSES OR MAGAZINE STANDS IN HARLEM, FOR INSTANCE. JUST THE WAY WE USE CARPENTRY. NOTHING FITS, BUT EVERYTHING WORKS. THE DOOR CLOSES, IT KEEPS THINGS FROM COMING THROUGH. BUT IT DOESN'T HAVE THAT NEATNESS ABOUT IT, THE WAY WHITE PEOPLE PUT THINGS TOGETHER; EVERYTHING IS A THIRTY-SECOND OF AN INCH OFF.

5. THAT'S WHY I LIKE DOING STUFF BETTER ON THE STREET, BECAUSE THE ART BECOMES JUST ONE OF THE OBJECTS THAT'S IN THE PATH OF YOUR EVERYDAY EXISTENCE. IT'S WHAT YOU MOVE THROUGH, AND IT DOESN'T HAVE ANY SENIORITY OVER ANYTHING ELSE.

THOSE PIECES WERE ALL ABOUT MAKING SURE THAT THE BLACK VIEWER HAD A REFLECTION OF HIMSELF IN THE WORK. WHITE VIEWERS HAVE TO LOOK AT SOMEONE ELSE'S CULTURE IN THOSE PIECES AND SEE VERY LITTLE OF THEMSELVES IN IT.

6. ANYONE WHO DECIDES TO BE AN ARTIST SHOULD REALIZE THAT IT'S A POVERTY TRIP. TO GO INTO THIS PROFESSION IS LIKE GOING INTO THE MONASTERY OR SOMETHING; IT'S A VOW OF POVERTY I ALWAYS THOUGHT. TO BE AN ARTIST AND NOT EVEN TO DEAL WITH THAT POVERTY THING, THAT'S A WASTE OF TIME; OR TO BE AROUND PEOPLE COMPLAINING ABOUT THAT.

MY KEY IS TO TAKE AS MUCH MONEY HOME AS POSSIBLE. ABANDON ANY ART FORM THAT COSTS TOO MUCH. INSIST THAT IT'S AS CHEAP AS POSSIBLE IS NUMBER ONE AND ALSO THAT IT'S AESTHETICALLY CORRECT. AFTER THAT ANYTHING GOES. AND THAT KEEPS EVERYTHING INTERESTING FOR ME.

7. I DON'T KNOW WHAT MY WORK IS. I HAVE TO WAIT TO HEAR THAT FROM SOMEONE.

I WOULD LIKE TO BURN THE PIECE. I THINK THAT WOULD BE NICE VISUALLY. VIDEOTAPE THE BURNING OF IT. AND SHOOT SOME SLIDES. THE SLIDES WOULD THEN BE A PIECE IN ITSELF. I'M GETTING INTO THAT NOW: THE SLIDES ARE THE ART PIECES AND THE ART PIECES DON'T EXIST.

8. IF YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE THEN IT'S EASY TO MAKE ART. MOST PEOPLE ARE REALLY CONCERNED

ABOUT THEIR IMAGE. ARTISTS HAVE ALLOWED THEMSELVES TO BE BOXED IN BY SAYING "YES" ALL THE TIME BECAUSE THEY WANT TO BE SEEN, AND THEY SHOULD BE SAYING "NO." I DO MY STREET ART MAINLY TO KEEP ROOTED IN THAT "WHO I AM." BECAUSE THE ONLY THING THAT'S REALLY GOING ON IS IN THE STREET; THAT'S WHERE SOMETHING IS REALLY HAPPENING. IT ISN'T HAPPENING IN THESE GALLERIES.

9. DOING THINGS IN THE STREET IS MORE POWERFUL THAN ART I THINK. BECAUSE ART HAS GOTTEN SO....I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE FUCK ART IS ABOUT NOW. IT DOESN'T DO ANYTHING. LIKE MALCOLM X SAID, IT'S LIKE NOVOCaine. IT USED TO WAKE YOU UP BUT NOW IT PUTS YOU TO SLEEP. I THINK THAT ART NOW IS PUTTING PEOPLE TO SLEEP. THERE'S SO MUCH OF IT AROUND IN THIS TOWN THAT IT DOESN'T MEAN ANYTHING. THAT'S WHY THE ARTIST HAS TO BE VERY CAREFUL WHAT HE SHOWS AND WHEN HE SHOWS NOW. BECAUSE THE PEOPLE AREN'T REALLY LOOKING AT ART, THEY'RE LOOKING AT EACH OTHER AND EACH OTHER'S CLOTHES AND EACH OTHER'S HAIRCUTS.

10. THE ART AUDIENCE IS THE WORST AUDIENCE IN THE WORLD. IT'S OVERLY EDUCATED, IT'S CONSERVATIVE, IT'S OUT TO CRITICIZE NOT TO UNDERSTAND, AND IT NEVER HAS ANY FUN. WHY SHOULD I SPEND MY TIME PLAYING TO THAT AUDIENCE?

DAVID HAMMONS 1986



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