

Faith Ringgold's *For the Women's House* (1971)

From Prison to Museum: A Cultural History

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----------------|
| Introduction..... | Page 5 |
| Kennedy, Nixon and Ringgold..... | Page 9 |
| Art for the People..... | Page 15 |
| The Canvas..... | Page 23 |
| The Canvas Continued..... | Page 41 |
| Conclusion..... | Page 49 |
| Bibliography..... | Page 51 |
| Images..... | Page 55 |

Introduction

For nearly four decades, Faith Ringgold's last oil canvas, *For the Women's House* (1971)(Image 1), hung not in a major museum or on a collector's wall but rather in the women's prison facility on New York's Rikers Island. Not until 2010 was it exhibited in an art museum for the first time, at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York. This work was last seen by the general public as part of the exhibition *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85*, organized by the Brooklyn Museum of Art. After a four-city tour that lasted from April 2017 to September 2018, the painting was returned to the prison complex. Now, with the closure of Rikers Island Prison imminent, the painting's future is uncertain.

This study of *For the Women's House* (1971), demonstrates the validity of a multipronged approach, as its context, locations, and subjectivity place it solidly within the realms of site specificity, art as political protest, and feminism. Yet the most telling form of analysis is the multidimensional iconography. The iconographic analysis encompasses the social history, the feminist activist agenda, site and even crosses over temporal divisions.

To fully engage with the painting, the artist's own politics and the historical context must be considered. Faith Ringgold, a black American woman, artist, teacher, and mother was also a passionate activist during the 1960s, was born and raised in Harlem, New York City, where she would also raise her own daughters. She was an active participant in the nationwide civil unrest of the era. Such protests led to the passage of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Further protests would follow, provoked in large part by Nixon's election to the presidency in 1968.

The first section of this paper explores the significance of the social and political environment in the years before Nixon's election and after his ascension to the presidency. To many, his election was a vindication; to others, such as Ringgold, it was an omen, a warning that hard-won civil rights could be taken away. At the very least, progress could be halted: The Civil Rights Act was only one step and did not itself change the hegemonic systems and structures then in place—some of which still are. Ringgold's status as both a Black American and a woman put her in the midst of some of the fiercest racial and gender disputes of her day. As a mother of daughters and a teacher of children, she deeply desired to protect and expand the definitions of civil justice and equality. Both the conditions of the country and of the artist's experience of those times are thus essential for seeing *For the Women's House* in its full dimension. The second section investigates the pretext of the painting's conception, its chosen location and audience.

This work of art, Ringgold's last oil on canvas, was the culmination of her *Black Light* series. As a resident of Harlem, she had witnessed racial police violence and the six days of riots that resulted in 1964.¹ Notably, on July 20, 1964, on the far right of the last column of its front page, the *New York Times* ran a small article headlined "Violence Flares Again in Harlem; Restraint Urged." The article positions the threat as coming from angry rioters, saying that "[g]roups of Negroes, roamed through the streets, attacking newsmen and others. Negroes standing on tenement roofs showered policemen in steel helmets with bottles and bricks." Later, the article's author pleads with state troops to protect the people of Harlem and denies allegations that police fired indiscriminately into crowds—in both cases implying that the victims were to blame. Faced with such slanted news, Ringgold sought to reframe the events of

¹¹ Spencer Stultz, "The Harlem 'Race Riot' of 1964," *BlackPast*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/harlem-race-riot-1964/>.

her day, documenting the barbarity through words and images in her *American People, Black Light* series, a heart-wrenching examination of barbarity toward Americans of color, those who did not partake in the racism seen in Ringgold's recent past and present.

For the Women's House (1971), Ringgold's last oil on canvas after completing the series, stands apart from it, for in it she shifted from a corrective retrospective mode to a prospective one: instead of amending the mediated recent past, she advanced alternative models of the future for her initially selected viewers—all of whom were in transition themselves. As a result, the canvas, itself, was transmuted geographically, symbolically, and in relation to its audience over the decades after its creation.

Those seeking to holistically embrace the breadth of *For the Women's House* (1971) will find ample verbal and visual clues. In chronological order, the third section explores the coded iconography within the canvas, peeling back the layers of paint and the creative process to reveal a personal journey that references a local and national historical past while projecting an imagined and improved future. From the onset, it becomes a site-specific work connected to the artist's chosen audience and tailor-made for Rikers Island.

The fourth section addresses the transmogrification of the painting's value that occurred as designated viewership changed from women inmates to males. During that period, the physical vandalizing of *For the Women's House* was equally a violation of its message. Passage of time and the increasing renown of the artist played their own parts in the recovery and restoration of the image, giving Ringgold the opportunity, decades later, to see her painting again. In 1999, the painting left the prison for a costly rehabilitation, and by 2010, the eight-by-eight-foot square had made its way to a museum for the first time. In this way, as the canvas moved through different spaces and eras, its function mutated, and its importance grew. Today,

the voyage of *For the Women's House* is still not over—its next destination remains unknown at the time of this writing.

Kennedy, Nixon, and Ringgold

The 1960s brought a tidal wave of political and social awareness to the United States of America. Protests erupted around the country during the fight to redefine equality in the eyes of the law, and the presidency of John F. Kennedy introduced new social constructs that would find result in the Civil Rights Act, the women's movement, and government support for the arts. The potential for continued meaningful and positive change seemed limitless. However, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and President Kennedy brought an end to this youthful optimism. This brief period of radical social change created gaping intergenerational divisions that manifested in the election of Richard Nixon as president in 1968.

Although during his campaign Nixon had urged the end of the Vietnam War and pledged to encourage growth in the arts, science, and technology, dissonance grew between his campaign promises and his actions as his administration took shape. Ringgold was among those who feared that hard-won civil rights were in jeopardy—and these fears seemed to have become reality when the murder of Fred Hampton in December 1968,² the trial of Bobby Seale in 1969,³ and the imprisonment of Angela Davis in 1970⁴ showed civil rights continuing to be stripped from U.S. citizens of color despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

² According to a *Chicago Tribune* article of December 7, 2007, a thousand rounds of ammunition were used by the Chicago police during a night raid on the apartment of Black Panther leader Fred Hampton as the pregnant mother of his child lay beside him. Nineteen people were in the apartment, from inside which only one shot was fired.

³ In 1969, when Bobby Seale, also a Black Panther, was tried for intentionally causing a riot during antiwar protests held during the Democratic National Convention, he loudly insisted on exercising his right for legal representation but was repeatedly denied it. When he continued to claim his legal rights, he was bound and gagged, as described at <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/bobby-seale-gagged-during-his-trial>.

⁴ Davis, charged with aiding George Jackson in his escape attempt, served about eighteen months in jail before her acquittal in 1972. In her subsequent writings, she revealed the criminality of the abusive jail system and spoke out against the legal practice of imprisoning women awaiting trial for crimes that they might not have committed, with those able to pay bail allowed to leave but those unable to afford it remaining incarcerated, so that the financially privileged continued their lives while awaiting trial even as those in greater need of revenue were prevented from earning any.

Ringgold, a thirty-eight-year-old black American artist and outspoken activist, was deeply moved by this social and political turmoil. In 1964, she had witnessed the racial riots in Harlem, which had been provoked by police brutality, and was galled to see them minimized and misrepresented in mass media coverage. Her artistic endeavors from this period reveal much about American social and cultural responses to injustice, alternative truths, and dictatorial leadership. By documenting through her art the events around her, she ensured the accuracy of their impact.

As Ringgold recounts:

[d]uring the years from 1968 to 1970, I was caught up in a steady stream of activities protesting MOMA's exclusion of black artists. I stayed up many nights typing press releases. I spent many days at the museum distributing questionnaires to museumgoers in an attempt to expose the racist exclusion of black art from the MOMA exhibition schedule. Needless to say, I did not produce much art during this time.⁵

In November 1968, the Whitney Museum opened its exhibit *The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America* without featuring a single work by a black artist. During a group gathering at the Brooklyn Museum's Community Gallery, Ringgold suggested the staging of a protest. *New York Times* art editor Grace Glueck, assigned to cover the demonstration, interviewed Ghent, Bearden, and a few other men, but Ringgold was not mentioned in the published article—despite her prominence as a voice in the Black Arts Movement. In 1971, Ringgold, who had also designed posters for the Black Panthers, only to see them rejected,⁶ cofounded a black women's group called Where We Are At.

⁵ M. Wallace, "America Black: Faith Ringgold's *Black Light Series*," *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 29 (2011): 56.

⁶ The Black Panthers did not use her posters, which now hang on museum walls. On April 28, 2017 the Brooklyn Museum of Art published on Youtube Catherine Morris' interview with Ringgold. 4.54 minutes into the interview she speaks of the common lukewarm reception of her posters by the Black Panthers. Catherine Morris is the curator of the exhibition "We Wanted a Revolution". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_kSzPMoPNI Again in an article in ArtNews Ringgold says of the Black Panther men and the posters: "They didn't like them. I couldn't get them to like anything" article by Russet, Andrew, "The Storyteller: At 85, Her Star Still Rising, Faith Ringgold Looks Back on Her Life in Art, Activism, and Education" ArtNews March 1, 2016

In her *American People, Black Light* series (1964–1969), Ringgold explored race and gender in a flat pictorial style, including references to African, pop art, and Pablo Picasso while infusing both colors and imagery with tension.⁷ In her *American People Series #18, The Flag Is Bleeding* (1967), a brown-skinned man and a Caucasian woman and man stand with arms interlocked, the American flag superimposed on them: the brown-faced man on the left, holding his heart as red globs ooze from between the fingers on his chest; the red stripes of the flag dripping with blood; and the woman in the middle—the central link of the group. The painting asks an implicit question: how much blood must be shed before all Americans can be equal? In *American People Series #20, Die* (1967)(Image 3), a blond-haired little boy and brown-skinned girl weep at the painting's center as women of various races sprawl across the canvas, bodily seeking to stop the carnage. One extends her arms out of the canvas to the left, seeking to remove a biracial child from the chaos. The men depicted in the painting either are pink-skinned and yellow-haired or have curly black hair and brown skin; all are dressed in the same black pants and white, bloodstained shirts, daring the viewer to think that the pink skin is white or the brown skin black. A brown-skinned man, emotionless, his eyes blank and wide, forms a half-circle around the two children crying as a yellow-haired man points a pistol at a woman of similar racial type, who is standing over the corpse, shielding the frightened boy and girl. Another brown man brandishes a knife at the pistol-wielding man; in front of him, to the bottom right of the painting, stretches a woman, her terrified face resembling that of the sobbing little girl as she too seeks to defend the little ones.

This visceral imagery begs viewers to contemplate the injustice of legal and experiential definitions of equality, questioning whether the noble U.S. nation is seeking to protect all its

⁷ In several of Ringgold's interviews with CUNY TV, she described how Picasso's *Guernica* had inspired her by its merger of formal qualities and political protest—so much so that she had traveled to Madrid to see it.

citizens, regardless of their gender and race. In both paintings, women protect, women unite, women plead and weep. They are the bonding element in the canvases, stylistically and symbolically. Thus, Ringgold's unwavering conviction and activism in the feminist movement are evident. Her universal experience of misogyny in the art world pushed her activism toward the feminist movement, she joined Poppy Johnson, Brenda Miller, and Lucy Lippard in founding the Women's Art Committee, which protested the 1970 Whitney Biennial for being predominately white and male and then went on to stage sit-ins and demonstrations. According to Ringgold,

[t]he Whitney Museum became the focus of our attention. We went there often to deposit eggs. Unsuspecting male curatorial staff would pick up the eggs and experience the shock of having raw egg slide down the pants of their fine tailor-made suits. Sanitary napkins followed Generally, everywhere the staff went they found loud and clear messages that women artists were on the Whitney's case.⁸

Ringgold passionately felt a moral responsibility to expose truths that would facilitate societal change. As a participant in and a supporter of protest groups, she was keenly aware of the discrimination within even these groups, both as a woman in the Black Arts Movement and as a black woman in the feminist movement. Her mission was that of an artist—and, equally, that of a rewriter of social and cultural identity, applying paint to canvas in a bid to document what would, in later years, be a more complete picture of U.S. national history. Ringgold did not allow racism or sexism to obstruct her from producing her work, even as other black artists advised her not to paint in protest, warning her that she would never be represented by a gallery or see her work in a museum for fear that it would anger clients. Indeed, representatives of Chase Manhattan Bank, contemplating purchase of her *Flag to the Moon, Die Nigger* (1967/1969) were so shocked to find the word DIE written in the stars of the U.S. flag and the word *NIGGER* written

⁸ Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, Duke University Press: 2005, pp 175-178

in its stripes that they stormed out of the gallery.⁹ Later, the bank opted for a mild reference to the United States of Color, purchasing a canvas that was renamed from *Six Shades of Black* to *The American Spectrum* (1969), showing six faces of descending intensity of brown to beige. This, Ringgold's first big sale, brought her \$3,000. However, in general in that era, her oil paint on canvas artworks were not selling, she adapted her practice to supports and mediums that were more fundamentally, and financially aligned with her drive to create.

Ringgold felt, in 1971, that she had no choice but to put on canvas her convictions and her desire for awareness, regardless of the prospect of not selling her work or otherwise being represented. In this way, the *American People, Black Light* series parallels her personal commitment to justice through activism. After her creation of this series, in 1971, Ringgold became the first recipient of a grant from the Creative Artists Public Service Program (CAPS)—and it is here that the tale of *For the Women's House* (1971) continues.

⁹ Wallace, "America Black," 57.

Art for the People

The moment of national and local history preceding the awarding of the CAPS grant to Faith Ringgold in 1971 was replete with a normalization of racism, sexism and jingoism. Ringgold was a visible face among the dissenters, as she maintained her conviction that a more egalitarian civilization was possible. Being born in 1930 New York, Ringgold was cognizant both of the evolution that the US had undergone by 1970 and, that cultural bias was deeply ingrained despite political efforts to establish civil rights. One personal example from the artist's life demonstrates this duality. It shows Ringgold's resiliency and sheds light on the meaning of *For the Women's House* painted thirteen years later.

Ringgold was born and lived in Harlem close to the City College which is part of the City University of New York (CUNY). She said that that she would walk past the school, see the boys come out of the subway to go to class and would tell her mother that she too would one day attend the university. Even though the artist believes that her mother knew the University was only open to boys, she had never told the little girl, while growing up, that she could not possibly enroll. The thought had simply not occurred to Ringgold that she would not be admitted because she was a young woman. Ringgold attempted to register at CUNY in 1948 and was disqualified: the reason being that it was a boys' school. With the unwavering support of her mother, combined with her own tenacity, she was, in due course, permitted to undertake a degree in Arts Education as the school continued to asseverate that the liberal arts degree was not available to women. Women could be trained as teachers but not as artists. In other words, they could teach art but not be artists. By 1955, Ringgold completed her undergraduate and graduate studies at CUNY.

Ringgold deeply appreciated the opportunity that the university had afforded her in 1948 even if she could not pursue a degree in fine arts as she had initially wished. She understood the privilege of having an education, as an African American woman in the early 1950s. That, after receiving her CAPS grant, she thought first to offer to paint a canvas for the university is evidence enough. Included in the stipulations of the grant was the obligation to perform a public service of some kind. She had decided to create a work of art for display in a public space. Her conviction in the importance of higher education was incarnate in the proposal to produce a canvas for her alma mater. The institution, however, turned her down - again.

To fully grasp the resulting work that was produced, the significance of the intended initial location and subsequent refusal warrant parsing out. CUNY was, and is, the centralized system of higher public education in New York City, and from the 1920s had as its mission:¹⁰ “that in a democratic society, the higher reaches of education are not the exclusive privilege of an elite, but an opportunity and a necessity for all qualified citizens regardless of race, creed, or color.” In this quote, no mention is made of equal rights for men and women. It was a legacy that, while paying no heed to race, creed, or color, was tacitly open only to men. The idea of equal opportunity was the concept upon which the university had prided itself since the founding of the Free Academy in 1847. Nonetheless, women had been excluded from this mission statement, as they were from many other higher educational institutions well into 1900s. It is therefore, no surprise that when Ringgold attempted to register at CUNY for a liberal arts degree in 1948, it was disallowed.

¹⁰. The quote is from lawyer Gustave Rosenberg, chairman of the Board of Higher Education, who had coordinated the higher learning educational system in New York since the 1920s.

The institution declining the artist's donation, in 1971, leads to speculation. Perhaps, despite CUNY being one of the most diverse US public institutions of higher education, then and now, the refusal could reflect exclusionary tendencies. CUNY received both Federal and State funding. The elected US and NY state administrations both had practices and policies that the artist was, in 1970, passionately, speaking, protesting and painting against. Perhaps, the main concern was losing public funding by accepting a gift from such a vociferous alumna activist. Or, it could have simply been that there was no process in place to accept such a gift or that Ringgold was the first artist to make such a donation. That being said, all the decision makers of the period have since retired and attaining conclusive proof is problematic.

Ever the resilient optimist, a quality Ringgold credits her mother with having imparted to her, she did succeed in displaying her work in a large public institution: Rikers Island Women's Correctional Facility. The prison was, a public venue that, the artist said, would have the lowest chance of rejection¹¹ and was in desperate need of the qualities that her art characterized. Ringgold's resolve contoured the fact that institutions of higher learning and museums do serve an economic and ideological function—one not aligned, in 1971, with the ideals of a black female artist and activist. The deliberate, calculated decision on the location is part of Ringgold's creative process of protest that began well before paint ever touched the canvas.

The viewership in this instance was confined to a building. This edifice was built on land that is itself, of uncanny import. Rikers Island is named for a Dutch immigrant, Abraham

¹¹. "An Evening with Faith Ringgold," The Museum of Modern Art, last modified December 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fq6jgQ6HrDo&t=3099s>. Ringgold is on record here as saying that she sought a public institution which would not refuse her.

Rycken,¹² who acquired the land in the seventeenth century and whose family owned it until 1884, when it was sold to the city. His descendent, Richard Rikers (1773-1842), was a judge who infamously abused the Fugitive Slave Act¹³ by sending and selling African Americans to slaveowners in the south. Consider this: free US African Americans were illegally kidnapped and sold to the south for commerce. Thus, a heritage of exploitation originated with its Dutch colonialist owner, stigmatizes the island to this very day. Whether or not Ringgold was aware of the history of the island, it remains: a land that had been, all but, stolen from the native tribes and a site of human exploitation, by a man who was supposed to uphold the law. It was here, that the new and improved prison facility was to be built and *For the Women's House* was to be exhibited. The painting took its place in a space of captivity, its role to bring mental and spiritual liberation by an artist whose oeuvre was to create awareness of the injustice of national racial and sexual prejudice.

The historical context of the artist, the place, politics and society lay a framework upon which *For the Women's House* (1971) can be interpreted. Further revelations are in the very name of the canvas. The title of the painting is undeniably, a political statement. *For the Women's House* does not refer to the facility on Rikers Island; the titular "Women's House" is, in fact, the Women's House of Detention on Greenwich Avenue in New York City, which was open from 1932 to 1971.¹⁴ This edifice had housed many female activists including Dorothy

¹² Mariya Moseley. "Rikers Island was Named After a Judge who was Eager to Uphold Slavery," *Essence* (April 6, 2017), <https://www.essence.com/culture/rikers-island-slavery-ties/>.

¹³ A series of Fugitive Slave Acts were signed throughout the 1700s in an effort to create more unity between the South and the Northern states. Many petitioned Congress to abolish the practice. Amendments stated that a runaway slave could be recaptured by her slave owners and their 'agents'. The Northern states, excluding Judge Rikers, refused to be complicit to slavery and sought to protect freed blacks. However, many free blacks were illegally captured and sold into slavery. Source: <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/fugitive-slave-acts>

¹⁴ <https://hyperallergic.com/399211/keeping-faith-with-ringgold/>

Day, Ethel Rosenberg, and, more pertinently for this essay, Angela Davis in 1970.¹⁵ After her acquittal she spoke out and wrote about the corruption and systematic mistreatment she saw and endured while held there. This influenced and triggered the prison's closure and demolition a year later. Her detention made plain the injustice of politically motivated imprisonment. It profoundly affected Ringgold, who was herself a visible, vociferous activist and supporter of the Black Panthers. The Women's House on Greenwich Ave closed in 1971, when the new "Correctional Institution for Women" opened on Rikers Island: This was where *For the Women's House* was destined to be seen exclusively for 39 years, with one brief and notable exception in 1999 which will be addressed later in this paper.

In 2017, after decades of scandals, abuse, and vehement protests, the city of New York unveiled a 10-year plan to close Rikers Island prison complex. 48 years after Angela Davis' protest, imprisonment at the Women's House of Detention and Ringgold's dedication of this canvas, New York may end the custom of incarcerating those awaiting conviction for alleged non-violent low-level offenses. This practice is biased against those with low-income. Without the financial wherewithal to pay for bail: jobs, homes and children are lost. This is a striking parallel with Judge Rikers's trespasses. Race, money and social status protected him from being punished for breaking the law while the innocent, free people he sold were imprisoned in a life of slavery. In 1971 and still today, women, who have yet to be judged, await trial on Rikers Island. They are and were stripped of their liberty and abused, for some, their only crime being lack of

¹⁵ Angela Davis (1944-) joined the Black Panthers and all-black Communist party group. She was a professor at UCLA. She was charged with aiding in the attempted escape of the black radical George Jackson. She served 18 months in prison before being acquitted.

funds to be released before their court hearing. In the words of Faith Ringgold, *For the Women's House* was made for the women of Women's House as "the blood guilt of society."¹⁶

Part and parcel of the production of *For the Women's House* (1971) was its physical, geographical location and the contribution of the targeted audience. The artist's political activism, her beliefs were intertwined with her creative process. Having the destined viewers be fundamental to the making of the eight-foot by eight-foot canvas is a key element of the protest process. Before producing the work, the artist conducted extensive interviews with the female inmates. Their stories, and what they wanted to see in their daily lives, underpins the work's nascence. These women formed a diverse community forcibly anchored to a specific location. Ringgold, was keenly aware of the importance of her viewers' participation for her public work of art which is why she took care to understand what would make a positive difference to their lives and how, through her work, she could give them agency, instruct and share her advocacy. Ringgold, envisioned their potential rather than the viewers' current state of incarceration.

Ringgold cast a wide net, that extended to the past, referenced the present and projected a future as feminine and fierce. She showed a vision of a future world, one that did not yet exist with phenotypes that the prisoners could spy rather than the upper-middleclass, blond, blue-eyed, anorexic females most commonly seen, in the 1970s television, billboards and magazine covers. The aim was to stoke their imaginations of the material possibilities of what they could be. The images were to reformulate the female American self-identification. It was imperative that the artwork affirm and elevate the women's sense of self. By including the inmates in the preparation of the canvas, she offered them an opportunity for social and political self-determination. The work in its chosen location, its name and the participation of its audience

¹⁶ Kolber, Ramsay, "An Exhibition About Revolution that Keeps Faith with Ringgold", Hyperallergic, September 15, 2017

was a method for site specific art that was decades ahead of and a more accurate example of the 1990s art world's reshaping of the 1960s-70s definition of site specificity as "New Genre Public Art"¹⁷. Ringgold faced hegemonic hurdles. In leaping over them, she took flight to become a visionary ahead of her time.

Ringgold said¹⁸ that the inmates wanted to see a path, a road out of the prison and a better future. In her own words she said: "*For the Women's House* was done with a desire not to upset; I didn't want to add to their problems. I wanted it to be uplifting, inspiring, forward-moving, hopeful; I wanted to give the women some reason to be proud of themselves and to believe in themselves."¹⁹ Consequently, the artist thought it essential to include images of women in activities and professions from which they had been excluded in 1971 but were nevertheless capable of doing. The canvas was a subjective projection of a future that she desired for herself, her progeny, the inmates and one for which she fought. Motherhood and marriage are represented, as is a woman of color being sworn in as President of the United States of America at the top right-hand corner, to the right of a yellow-haired, blue-eyed bus driver. With grace, Faith Ringgold's *For the Women's House* (1971) dances an iconographical choreography and shifting temporality. Through an examination of this imagery in depth, the aim of this paper is to acknowledge this work as a pivotal—if long neglected—example of intersectional art as it is a heavily-coded, site specific, feminist, social and political oeuvre.

¹⁷ 1993 Presentation of Suzanne Lacy defined a new genre public art as "Culture in Action". Curator Mary Jane Jacob legitimized this premise by her essay "Outside the Loop", in *Culture in Action*, exh. Cat. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995)

¹⁸ Ringgold said this in an interview at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Dec 7th, 2016. Streamed on YouTube

¹⁹ Wallace, Michelle "*Invisibility Blues From Pop to Theory*", Haymarket Series New Edition (July 17, 2008) p. 40

The Canvas

For the Women's House (1971) (Image 1) depicts women: only women, adamantly and explicitly. It was named after, created for, and honors women who, like Ringgold, may have never seen, in 1971, a female police officer of color or thought that women would one day play on professional sports teams. Ringgold's conversations with the prisoners and the themes that they wanted to see represented are indelibly imprinted on the canvas in color and purpose. The prisoners said that they wanted to see the way out of the prison and the road to a better tomorrow. As the role of this artwork was, and is, to instruct and uplift, it had to be easily understood. Ringgold stood in service to her designated public and tasked herself with facilitating a shift in the cultural and experiential self-identities of the prisoners, committing to canvas and launching into the future what had not yet materialized, but what she hoped would appear.

For the large, square painting, Ringgold adopted a compartmentalized folk-art style presaging her future patchwork and quilting work. The 8' by 8' base of *For the Women's House* is divided into eight triangles of equal size. Each image is bordered directly by two other images with no frame or dividing line between them, as pieces of a quilt would be. Quilting has a long American and feminist history. Indeed, it was assumed that women would partake in the work with cloth, thread, and needles, as Ringgold's family had done; her mother was a clothing designer and seamstress. Michelle Wallace, Ringgold's daughter, said that she believed her mother's creative practice that evolved to soft sculptor, performance artist and quilt maker is the culmination of their family tradition as all the women in the family have been contributors to the quilt and soft sculpture oeuvre. Wallace goes on to say: "My childhood evenings were often

spent in a circle of women, drawing, cutting, sewing – making things.”²⁰ Moreover, quilting traditions like the quilts Ringgold made and make and those of Gee’s Bend represent a unique African American craft legacy. For five generations, the women of Gee’s Bend, Alabama have been making quilts²¹, some of which now hang in museums and American embassies across the world. Initially, the rural African American community in Gee’s Bend made quilts because of the hardships that befell them; quilts were practical and were used for warmth in winter when there was no heating. However, the act of quilting also embodied the experience of feminine solidarity, merging beauty with utility. Singing, praying, and working in groups of eight on one quilt at a time, the women combined diverse pieces of material to make one unified, functional item of beauty. The quilts are a symbol for life: we must take what we have and make something of it, and why not something beautiful? In a similar fashion, *For the Women’s House* took eight storybook pictures and combined them to make one female futurist world, and the painting exhorts its audience to take the lives that they have and make good use of them.

The canvas portrays women supporting women, teaching, learning, inspiring, leading, and embodying roles that were seldom allowed in 1971. *For the Women’s House* was not for, nor about, the artist, a chic gallery, or wealthy buyers. There was no erudite inside knowledge needed to fathom the artist’s intention. Ringgold was aware of the socio-cultural effect on aesthetic perception, and she knew that the way that female viewers interpreted the work of art was subject to their own experiential constructions of their worlds. For this reason, the piece is subjective, overtly empowering, and political because of its chosen site and audience.

²⁰ Wallace, Michelle “Invisibility Blues”, Haymarket Series, New edition(July 17, 2008) p. 27

²¹ <http://www.quiltsofgeesbend.com/history.html>

<https://www.auburn.edu/academic/other/geesbend/explore/history.htm>

After her training at CUNY, Ringgold went on a quest to discover as much as she could about African art, craft, and culture, as the only reference to African art that she had come across during her studies was related to Picasso. Her intent was to establish African history as a part of her own history and as a legitimate part of American culture. Based on: Ringgold's extensive research into African art traditions and that Ringgold herself declares herself a storyteller through her art, there is one mythic character that comes to mind, Anansi. In West Indian and West African folklore, Anansi, the spider, is a savvy, storytelling trickster and the god of all knowledge. It is tempting to think that Ringgold took the place of the male storyteller, the god of knowledge, Anansi, as she wove the feminist tales on this canvas.

Starting with the uppermost left-hand triangle, flat representational forms show a female bus driver with pale pink skin, a yellow bouffant hairstyle, blue eyes, and red lips who is gripping the steering wheel of the vehicle. A passenger dressed in pine green descends through the open door behind a white grid to the rear of the driver. Depth is depicted by solid swaths of color; for example, the bus driver's blue uniform is sky blue on her chest, royal blue on her belly, and almost indigo on her thighs. The sky blue of the chest area suggests that she is illuminated by light from the window of the bus, and the indigo delineates the horizontal lap of the seated woman. While it may seem unremarkable today that the bus driver is a woman, Myrna Wright became the first US female bus driver in 1975²², four years after this painting was executed. Therefore, neither the inmates nor the artist had ever seen a woman in this kind of job. It was a projection, from 1971, of a future with more gender equality, a future where women were free to be what they wanted to be, perhaps, in this instance, precisely because of the absence of men.

²² <https://www.loc.gov/item/2013650080/>

The bus is painted the recognizable sage green of the 1970s prison buses that all of the prisoners would have been able to identify. There is deeper symbolism in the bus; it is a core icon of civil rights in the US history of the era. In 1961, the Freedom Riders rode across the South to shed light on unconstitutional segregation in Southern interstate transportation facilities after the 1960 case of *Boynton vs. Virginia*²³. The police turned a blind eye to mobs that physically attacked the Freedom Riders who got off the bus at each stop. However, the riders bravely continued their tour and succeeded in galvanizing the civil rights movement by bringing national attention to the disregard of federal law and the localized socially-accepted violence used to bolster segregation in the Southern states.

The destination posted above the driver in *For the Women's House* is "ZATOS.TRUTH SQUARE." In the USSR, ZATOS were closed, hidden, secured cities established in the 1940s and which are still in existence. Entry was only granted to those with a special pass and access was forbidden to the public²⁴. Rikers Island prison complex also has restricted access, with multiple security checkpoints and a series of heavily-bolted doors inside each building. Moreover, the fact that the prison complex is on an island facilitates the exclusion of the free public.

"TRUTH SQUARE" signifies the necessity of facing the unpleasant truths that resulted in incarceration. Marcus Garvey, one of the strongest voices for black pride and establishing US black history, stated: "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds!" His bombastic speeches from his thirteen-city US tour, organized by Booker T. Washington in 1916²⁵, are legendary. The message on the bus's destination sign is a call for the

²³ <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/freedom-rides>

²⁴ https://www.rbth.com/politics_and_society/2016/05/02/a-sheltered-existence-life-in-russias-closed-cities_588975

²⁵ <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/marcus-garvey>

radical self-responsibility that is necessary for mental liberation. The artist includes the message to stand up for the truth because it will, as the old adage instructs, set you free. The image is also a reminder to the prisoners of their release, of the way out, and of the liberty to come.

Each section of the canvas carries and transmits history while skipping through time to envision a more equal nation. In the section to the lower left of the bus driver, there is a brown-skinned doctor with the iconography of a stethoscope around her neck, which makes her role effortlessly identifiable (Image 4). The circular teal label on her white coat pocket reads “Rosa Parks Hospital” in white letters, yet, in 1971, no such hospital existed. It is a historical reference to civil rights bravely won. Chunks of color continue to function as indicators of three-dimensionality in otherwise flat imagery; for example, the white sleeve and lapel of the doctor’s coat contrast with a swath of gray that indicates the front of the coat. Instead of shading shadow on the face with grey or shading, the artist used teal and royal blue. The upper eyelids of the student are blue, the crease between the nose and cheek and under the eye are teal to demonstrate more depth. The same technique is used throughout the canvas. A woman is sitting at a school desk to the right of the doctor reading a book entitled “Narcotics Handbook.” On her left ring finger is a yellow band, a wedding ring. This symbolism will be discussed in more detail in subsequent paragraphs. During her discussions with the women in the jail, Ringgold heard desperate stories involving drugs which had led to incarceration. This image subverts the concept of the prisoners as victims of drugs and converts it to that of people with agency. Based on what is written on the blackboard and on the cover of the textbook, the lesson being taught here is about drug prevention. Written in white on the blackboard is the phrase “Drugs, Prevention & Cure” with a date and time and a signature ending in “VIS.”

The letters VIS under the date and time suggest the name of the doctor. In 1864, Rebecca Davis became the first African American female doctor²⁶. She administered her services to indigent ex-slaves, and her remarkable achievements are highlighted by the fact that in 1860, out of some 54,000 US physicians, only 300 were female. In 1864, 301 were female and only one was African American. In *For the Women's House*, Ringgold attempted to fill in the gaps in US History books by highlighting achievements that had been omitted but which were extraordinary feats that all American girls should learn about and aspire to. In fact, Michelle Wallace, Ringgold's daughter says in her book "Invisibility Blues": "My mother subscribed to the school of thought that said anything that didn't have an educational value didn't have any value at all". This section of the painting imparts to the viewers that education is a viable way out of the illicit drug industry. It is the manifestation of the artist's personal conviction in the power of higher learning, which she substantiated by first offering to paint a canvas for CUNY. More importantly, this is the section where Ringgold signed her name, which is yet another affirmation of Ringgold's passionate belief that education is a formidable way to transform lives.

Traveling counterclockwise from the doctor and the student, the next section depicts a bride in a white dress and a veil and two other women standing to the right. Notably, the hand of the minister, in the lower left-hand corner, is a woman's hand. The woman directly next to the bride appears to be her mother, giving away her daughter. The women all have jet-black hair, dark brown eyes, and orange-pink skin. There is a feeling of the matriarchal strength of a united family, women supporting women, and of the traditionally-male role of minister being filled by a woman. Women can lead, and women can consecrate, and it was a radical change to be blessed by a spiritual leader who was a woman and who might have understood what that embodiment

²⁶ <https://www.auamed.org/blog/african-american-doctors/>

meant. As the decades have passed, temporal social contingencies have made the connotations of this section shift. In a lecture by Faith Ringgold on September 18th, 2018 at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, some questioned whether the artist was foretelling the legalization of same-sex marriage. I attended the event, saw that Ringgold smiled jokingly and shrugged her shoulders as if to say, “Why not? Sure, okay.” Ringgold’s daughter, Dr. Michelle Wallace, who was present at the lecture, categorically refused this interpretation. It may be true that in the moment of its making this was not the artist’s objective. Considering that the canvas has changed locations and viewers over time, it also follows that its function and meaning would do the same. Time is another ingredient that has the power to alter how the individual, contingent on his or her own time and context, comprehends the artwork. The artist, ever the visionary, was evidently content to have temporality push the meaning in formerly unaccepted and unintended directions. In the words of Ringgold herself “I don’t demand that the message be interpreted exactly as I intended”.²⁷

The next section, at the bottom left, depicts a ponytailed drummer. The musician is wearing a body-hugging blue leotard over darker blue tights. In the shadow behind her are the legs and hips of a female dancer. The hoop earrings worn by the musician are indicative of a culture of people of color from Africa, the West Indies, and South and Central America and, by extension, the urban culture of New York City, which was home to the painting. Ringgold has said that there was a legacy, at the time of painting and before, of women being permitted socially to *do* but not to *be*. She gives the example of a woman who could do art, but it was not acceptable for her to be an artist, just as a woman could play music but not be a musician, particularly not a drummer. As a young woman, Ringgold had wanted to study at CUNY to be an

²⁷ Wallace, Michelle “Invisibility Blues”, Haymarket Series, New edition(July 17, 2008) p. 40

artist, but when the school accepted her for a teaching degree instead, she recounts that her family was relieved because it was more acceptable for women like Ringgold to be teachers. Furthermore, Ringgold was raised in Harlem during the artistically fruitful Harlem Renaissance; Duke Ellington lived down the block, so did Max Roach. She grew up with Nipsey Russell, Pigmeat Markham and Red Foxx playing at Harlem clubs. Ringgold's first husband was a musician, so Ringgold had an intimate experience of the attitudes of male musicians. She wanted the viewers of *For the Women's House* to envisage a world where women could be accepted in roles that they were contemporaneously restricted from, including the arts and playing an instrument that was conventionally considered 'male'. To this end, she painted a woman bedecked in yellow hoop earrings, an arm band, and rings who is reaching across societal barriers to beat a drum.

In the bottom right center, after the wedding and the drummer, we find an image of a biracial child on the lap of her mother (detail Image 5). It is the same biracial child that appears in *American People Series #20: Die*, painted in 1967, the year that the *Loving v. Virginia* decision in the Supreme Court deemed all state miscegenation laws unconstitutional. This was only a short four years before *For the Women's House* was painted and six years before the parents of author of this paper eloped in Jamaica to get married. The biracial child reappears here with her mother, whose yellow hair hangs loosely to her shoulders. The mother's head is tilted, and her blue eyes stare thoughtfully past the viewer. Both of her arms are wrapped around her child in a protective, endearing embrace. The little girl's hair is reddish-brown and curly, and her eyes are two distinct colors: brown and blue. She is the only figure in the entire work who has a slight smile, as opposed to a serious expression. The impression of her curls is conveyed through shape and color rather than textural line. Royal blue gives the effect of depth and shadow on the

faces of both figures. This technique calls into question the viewer's instinctive assumptions about race and color, as the uniformly-colored shapes allow space for cultural bias to fill in the details. For example, the pink hue of the mother's face, her yellow hair, and her blue eyes evoke the identification of "white." The purely visual definition of the colors, however, proclaims that she is something other than white. The cultural identification clashes with the visual perception to make us question our learned definition of "white." In the same way, her child is not black, nor even brown, but a subtle tone somewhere on the spectrum of the socially-taught characteristics of color.

Unlike the student in the classroom discussed earlier, the mother here does not wear a wedding ring. The absence of the ring implies that of the father as does the absence of a father giving away the bride. Then, as now, the US was facing the crisis of millions of US children being raised without their biological fathers. Such children are four times more likely to live in poverty, and they are more likely to face abuse and neglect, suffer emotional problems, and commit a crime. One in five prison inmates had or had had a father in prison, according to the Department of Justice²⁸. That said, the male absence, in this canvas, in this section liberates the viewers as it does the protagonists in the work. We see an honest, beautiful image where shame holds no power over the mother or child. The male absence heroizes the mother and the little girl. The absence of a father in this section of the painting is made even more poignant by the open book next to the mother and daughter with legible quotes from two national heroes, Rosa Parks and Coretta King. On the left-hand page of the book is written: "I knew I had to take the first step. Rosa Parks." This is the second allusion in the painting to Rosa Parks, who did something simple: she sat down, maintained her truth, and triggered a movement. The page on

²⁸ <https://www.fatherhood.org/the-father-absence-crisis-in-america>

the right reads: “Women, if the soul of the nation is to be saved, I believe you must become its soul. Coretta King.” Ringgold is semiotically acknowledging the situation of the time and encouraging and reminding the women who were to read those words that they are the mothers who raise the nation’s next generation and are the catalysts for change. The instructive objective of this work is evident, as is its racially inclusive message. Ringgold embraced a stance of equality among all races and was mindful of not perpetuating the same bias against which she was fighting. In an interview she gave to Michelle Wallace, Ringgold was irresistibly uplifting about this section she said:

Unwed mothers are a reality, and there is no such thing as an illegitimate child, although sometimes we have illegitimate parents. It is unfortunate that all children don’t have the right to equality in this society, but one thing we can do is stop calling children illegitimate. This section also points out that the mothers of many black children today are white. This white woman is paying her dues; we don’t have to condemn her. She is already condemned to paying for having dared to have that child. Rather than stressing the importance of the father who is absent, let us stress the importance of the mother who is present. And look at what she is doing. She is teaching the child about history.²⁹

In the paintings *American People Series #18: The Flag Is Bleeding*, (1967) and *American People Series #20: Die*, 1967, the women in both works unite the other figures. In *The Flag is Bleeding*, a woman is the link between a brown-skinned man and a pink-skinned man. In *Die*, the women, both brown- and pink-skinned, sprawl across the image, saving and protecting the children and trying to reason with the men amid the bloodshed. Their expressive bodies and faces tie the composition together. Evidently, the power of women to enable social change is a subject that Ringgold had been mulling over in her practice before *For the Women’s House* was painted. The latter is the culmination of this effort in more ways than one. It was hung in an all-women’s facility, and it was pointedly the last oil painting on canvas that Ringgold produced.

²⁹ Wallace, Michelle “Invisibility Blues”, Haymarket Series, New edition(July 17, 2008) p. 40

Henceforth, the artist found a uniquely feminine form of canvas; she began to work with quilts and the easier medium of acrylics and experimented with her soft craft-like sculptures reminiscent of rag dolls.

Continuing to the bottom right side of the canvas, standing in front of a black sign surrounded by white circular light bulbs, a female police officer with sienna-colored skin and a whistle in her mouth is signaling to another woman with a similar skin color who has a sliver of hoop earring visible in her profile. Blue is again used to indicate facial contours. Behind the police officer is a female construction worker in blue overalls and an orange construction hat, a lunchbox under her arm, and a wedding ring on her left hand. The woman in overalls represents the capability of women to work in the male-dominated construction industry, and in parallel infers the strength and steadfastness that women possess to rebuild their own lives. If there is any doubt on this, the logo on the construction worker's hard hat clarifies it as it reads "The Peoples' Construction Company, Build Baby Build" (Image 6).

According to *Police: The Law Enforcement Magazine*, the first female patrol officer in the USA hit the streets in 1972, so the women who were in Rikers Island prison in 1971 had never seen one. Looking closely at the sign behind the officer, a partial view of the word "LOVE" can be seen. The lightbulbs around the sign indicate that the setting is Times Square, which in 1971 was known for its brightly lit signage, strip bars, and prostitutes. Prostitution, indeed, was one of the minor crimes that landed many of these women in jail, and their boyfriends were often their pimps. Ringgold has also said that many of the women she interviewed were in jail for deeds they did on behalf of their boyfriends. The word "LOVE," the white circular lightbulbs surrounding the word, and the presence of the police officer imply actions carried out in the red-light district out of love or in the hopes of receiving love.

The next section of this work shows two female basketball players, one wearing a jersey representing the New York Knicks, a men's professional team, with her ponytail swinging and a fierce expression of concentration. The dominance of men in professional sports is brought into question, as women are just as physically capable of playing professionally. The other player wears a jersey emblazoned with "Chamberlain," a reference to the legendary male basketball player Wilt Chamberlain, of whom Ringgold would go on to make a sculpture in 1974. He was considered one of the best players in history, as well as a notorious womanizer, a reputation he stoked by saying that he had had sex with over 20,000 women³⁰. Ringgold would further poke fun at his boasts by creating a soft, floppy sculpture of the sportsman, complete with bare chest and gold chain. Could this female, pink-skinned player be the child of one of the many affairs he boasted of? Is she the result of a patriarchal African American culture of fathers abandoning their children? Regardless, the painting was finished in 1971 while the WNBA was not created until 1996. It is the seventh out of the eight segments of the portrayed fictional reality covered so far in this paper that has come to pass in the intervening years: women drive buses and trucks, and there are a growing number of female doctors, spiritual leaders, musicians, police officers, construction workers, and professional athletes.

Continuing counterclockwise to the top right and center, we find an image of a female US President. Three years before the canvas was painted, in January 1968, Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman elected to Congress, announced her candidacy for the Democratic nomination for President. Chisholm ultimately lost the race, but the major win was, and is, that she facilitated a shift in societal perceptions and kindled the thoughts of the artist who did the same for the public destined to live with *For the Women's House*. Here we observe a female US

³⁰ <http://mentalfloss.com/article/12310/did-wilt-chamberlain-really-sleep-20000-women>

President of color speaking in front of a group of microphones and backed by two other women, implying that the success of one woman is always underpinned by the prevailing support of other women. A young girl is standing in front of the speaker: the next generation. The tail and talons of the bald eagle on the Seal of the President of the United States of America frame the President.

The reference to Shirley Chisholm, is a precursor to a thangka feminist series within it, is a piece painted by Ringgold shortly after "For the Women's House" (1971) was unveiled in 1972. Thangkas are Tibetan religious hangings, laden with iconography painted on silk. They consist of a painted or embroidered picture panel, a textile mounting and wooden dowels at the top and bottom. It was originally intended as a record of contemplative experience. Wallace and Ringgold repeatedly in interviews and in Wallace's books refer to this series as thangkas.³¹ It is a quilted work, with painted imagery and words. The cloth frame has a red piped border, a dark paisley fabric inside of that which itself surrounds a jungle landscape on unstretched canvas. Above the trees on the blue sky is a quote painted in gold paint "Of my two handicaps, being female put more obstacles in path than being Black" Shirley Chisholm 1970 Wash DC Painted by Faith Ringgold."(Images 7 and 8) Ringgold refers to these pieces as thangkas making them, the painted feminist quilted oeuvre and the social movement for equality sacred³².

A close-up of the microphones in front of the President is a selection of media entities in New York and the nation's past, present and future (Image 9). They all huddle together to receive word from the President, who is female and brown-skinned. Ringgold put on canvas a scene that was implausible in 1971 and may remain so for many today.

³¹ Ringgold, Faith "We Flew Over the Bridge, The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold" pp.194,195, 197-199, 207 Duke University Press, Durham and London 2005

³² Uncanny symbolic parallel is that the Farancz Restoration company restored "For the Women's House" (1971) in 1999. The company specializes in restoring Tibetan Thangkas.

One of the broadcasting devices is labeled WLIB for Women's Liberation, a crusade that Ringgold dynamically participated in and one that the original viewers would have been keenly aware of. The effort to eradicate misogyny is still ongoing close to half a century after Ringgold protested with Lucy Lippard in front of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the same year that *For the Women's House* was completed. The symbol WLIB is a remnant of 1971 while continuing to be an icon for the #MeToo years. Temporality is the medium that peels back the layers of this seemingly straightforward painting to reveal engaged activism and foresight.

Another microphone reads WWRL; this was the call sign of a radio station purchased in 1964 by Egmont Sonderling, New York resident, businessman and African American. It was the first station to focus on the tastes of African Americans and to broadcast soul music. It was also, to date, the first and last black-owned radio station in New York City, and was sold in 2016.³³ In 1971, the inclusion of this station in the painting gave a message of hope and signaled that positive civil change had happened and would continue to take place. It was a sign of cultural pride in the artistic innovations originating from US citizens of color.

The next microphone call sign, WRVR, belongs to a religious and jazz music station, which began broadcasting in 1961 and continues to do so today. It had been in 1961, was and is owned by Riverside Church, which was associated with the American Baptist Churches denomination and was a noted interdenominational and diverse community. It was on this station in 1967 that Martin Luther King's seminal speech "Beyond Vietnam" was broadcast. In the speech he proclaimed that it was ludicrous to spend millions of dollars on a war that was supposed to protect Americans if black American citizens in Selma in 1965 were not protected.

³³. Boyd, Herb. "WWRL, Last Black-owned Radio Station in NYC, Sold." New York Amsterdam News. February 11, 2016. <http://amsterdamnews.com/news/2016/feb/11/wwrl-last-black-owned-radio-station-nyc-sold/>

His voice brought together and ignited young American men who were threatened by Nixon's draft. The controversial speech sparked youth uprisings across the country, as Nixon's campaign promise to end the war was contrary to the policy that he intended to enact. The inclusion of WRVR in *For the Women's House* in 1971 after the violent and deadly quashing of the Kent State University protestors on May 4, 1970 and the ongoing protests across the country and in Washington D.C. is irrefutably a political statement. The same can be said of the microphone labeled WBAI, a mostly volunteer-run and politically progressive radio station that started its programming in 1960 and remains currently active.

WQ is the beginning of WQXR,³⁴ which was a solely classical music station in 1971. It is the only New York radio station at the time that started with WQ. Classical music is associated with conservatism and the elite. ABC, NBC, and CBS all have microphones; they are big media companies with hegemonically-aligned ideologies. Another microphone reads NET, which has yet to be irrefutably identified through my research.

The women in the group portrait and the way in which they are rendered create a seeming spectrum of races and ethnicities. The wavy yellow haired and blue eyed, the sepia skin tones and straight haired to the chocolate brown with afros the racial typing, in *For the Women's House (1971)* does not create division but unifies and balances the composition. The sections are separated by pigment, with variations of greens, blues, oranges, and browns blurring the idea of division. The forms that make up the women mirror each other rather than show marked individuality. The bus driver, the doctor and her student, the women at the wedding, the little girl, the police officer, the construction worker, and the President and her entourage all have the same rounded forms used to depict hair (Image 1), which suggests an era with the yellow

³⁴. There is only one radio station in New York beginning with WQ.

bouffant hair and ethnicity with the afros. This technique is seen again with the bride, the yellow-haired mother, the drummer, and the basketball player. Slightly wavy lines are used in the solid color blocks to show fluidity of movement of hair which is relatively straight.¹⁴ of the 18 faces have fixed frontal gazes, engaging the viewer. The arms of the mother hugging her child reflect those of the drummer and the basketball player in motion, as the arms of the bus driver reflect those of the student and the bride. The background color of four of the sections each has a partner on the other half of the canvas. The classroom features the same royal blue backdrop as that of the police officer and the construction worker. Deep teal green surrounds the portrait of the mother and child, as it does the bus driver and the passenger headed to “ZATOS.TRUTH SQUARE.”

All the women, despite their differences, combine to create a whole. Their identities surpass the boundaries of their narratives, forms, and colors to merge into one amalgamated depiction of womanhood. The central focus that Ringgold worked through is that women—mothers, wives, and daughters—do live lives without a male presence and are both shaped and freed by that absence. The all-female dimension of this work is not simply a depiction of possible futures, and it is crucial to depict this world without men so that the women can achieve the US Presidency or be given the liberty to be drummers, doctors, or police officers. The absence of male figures is exacerbated by hints of their existence. Wilt Chamberlain, his relationships with women, and his basketball prowess are muted by the intense expression of the female professional basketball player carrying his name, as well as the artist who painted her. Anansi, the god of knowledge and storytelling, is replaced by Ringgold, who knits the stories in each section of the canvas with both obvious and subtle allusions strategically inserted into the images. The painting was a dedication and a social movement intended to change how the

viewers perceived their world. However, when the audience changed, the heroic role of the socially proactive subjective aesthetics vanished, as the canvas almost did. The dynamics of understanding took a hard turn, which is the subject of the next section of this text. Parsing out the chronology of events, the evolution of geographic locations, spatiality, and the present uncertainty will expose further intrigue and, hopefully, place it as an exemplary and stellar feminist work, to be included in every history book that addresses the 1960s and 70s.

The Canvas Continued

Jennifer Ponce de Leon argues that aesthetics can never be socially neutral—that subjectivity operates on multiple levels. Moreover, she claims, art is a social movement that can change how people perceive the world.

Social movements participate in battles over the collective forging of the perceptual horizons through which people experience reality. Aesthetic practices, including art practices, are capable of participating in this labor because they offer the possibility of reconfiguring the sensory order—in short, of changing how people perceive the world—thereby supporting the constitution of counterhegemonic political imaginaries. Given this capacity, artistic practices can function as a potentially radicalizing force within social and political struggles.³⁵

These observations apply directly to Ringgold's oeuvre, and markedly so to *For the Women's House* (1971). Given the complexities of the journey of this piece of artwork, as well as its past locations, its artist, past political époques, and the present, and its iconography a multifaceted approach is the most appropriate with which to uncover further interpretations of the piece. Thus far, the social, political, and historical circumstances of this painting have been addressed. The rich iconography, clues, and lessons that the artist left for the viewers of her day as well as for posterity was covered extensively. Site specificity, already touched on, holds still more revelations—but before moving on, in consideration of the blatantly feminist stance of the painting and indeed of the painter herself, the time is ripe for an analysis of why this work was not, but should be, included in the canon of 1970s feminist art history.

For the Women's House was hidden from the public at large, in a prison and thus was unknown for many years. As its formal and structural qualities were within the traditional canon

³⁵ Jennifer Ponce de León. "How to see Violence: Artistic Activism and the Radicalization of Human Rights." *ASAP/Journal* 3, no. 2 (2018): 353-376.

of oil paint on canvas, it might not have been seen as a cutting-edge work—as, for example, was Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro’s *Womanhouse* (January 30, 1972–February 28, 1972). Even if the canvas had been open for public viewing, art aficionados might not have embraced its strident feminism and its blaring “counterhegemonic political imaginaries,”³⁶ as Ponce de Leon writes. Ringgold made her work, by choice, for an actual “women’s house” of imprisonment and named it after one as a form of protest. She herself, in interviews, has described herself as a storyteller, a historian who works with art. In this canvas, then, she embraces history while presaging a feminist future for her women viewers. The imprisoned viewers did not have the luxury of pondering the socially accepted role of a woman trapped within the home, as did the viewers of *Womanhouse*. Nevertheless, *For the Women’s House* is a compelling feminist work that bears testimony to a specific place and time in national history with the intent of empowering its audience and advocating for a new vision of social equality. It is thus undeniably a feminist work of art.

In *Racism and Feminism: A Schism in the Sisterhood*, Margaret Simons addresses the topic of racism within 1960s and 1970s feminism. In 2018 I met Michelle Wallace, Ringgold’s daughter, who was present when Ringgold painted *For the Women’s House*. Wallace categorically affirmed that the painting is feminist by any and every definition of the word; what’s more, she emphatically asserted that the feminist movement of the 1970s was indeed racist. Although this painting was spared proof of such polemic owing to its location, the same cannot be said of the artist’s contemporaneous work. Notably, after this canvas Ringgold gave up the traditional medium of oil paint: realizing that she was not getting a return on her investment

³⁶ Jennifer Ponce de León. "How to see Violence: Artistic Activism and the Radicalization of Human Rights." *ASAP/Journal* 3, no. 2 (2018): 353-376.

in oil paint and linen. Equally, she sought to find a way of merging feminine craft and fine art by using quilts as canvases and making rag doll–like sculptures.

For the Women's House was made for women, a specific place, by a woman, an activist who fought for equal rights. As time passed, men came to occupy the space. The women's facility moved to another building on Rikers Island, but the painting remained in place—and male residents moved in. After more than a decade, the “new” inmates, according to Ringgold, complained that they were tired of seeing these “bitches” on the wall.³⁷ Certainly the placement of the painting made it difficult for the men to avoid seeing it. A prisoner offered to paint over it, and it was removed from the wall. The men's ultimate success in removing the piece from the wall demonstrates their exceptional degree of motivation to remove the image from their sight. The subsequent defacing of the painting with white house paint proves that it was considered undesirable decoration.

The viewership had changed, the uplifting activist intent of Ringgold was lost to the image's new beholders. The location and the change of viewership and its variations alter how the piece was perceived and enriches this analysis. As much as the painting was considered worthless by the male prisoners, its and its maker's magnitude had increased with the years, as did the painting's impression on prison staff who saw it on a daily basis. In 1996, prison guard Barbara Drummond contacted Ringgold to inform the artist that her work was defaced white house paint. Drummond was concerned that the people who had made and vetted this decision would do away with the evidence of what they had done. Drummond had faxed Warden Brennan (Image 10)³⁸ but to no avail. Ringgold then followed up with her own letter on December 10,

³⁷ Faith Ringgold, in an interview at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, December 7, 2016, as streamed on YouTube and repeated at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, on September 17, 2018.

³⁸ Faith Ringgold, Personal archive share with the author August 18, 2017

1996, but when the warden remained unresponsive she wrote to Commissioner Michael Jacobson in January 1997 (Images 12 and 13)³⁹. He did answer, and as a result the effort to restore the canvas began (Images 9 and 10)⁴⁰. Asked to verify that the work was indeed hers, Ringgold returned to Rikers to see the canvas for the first time in twenty-five years. A fundraising campaign ultimately brought in the \$25,000 needed to restore the work to its original condition,⁴¹ for Commissioner Jacobson had stated, in a letter dated January 29, 1997, that the work would not be restored owing to the prohibitive cost of doing so relative to the department's budget (Image 14 and 15).

Although an official request made to the City of New York's Department of Corrections seeking documentation of the fundraising revealed no evidence of any such event in its records, the artist's files showed that Farancz Restoration in Manhattan had removed the house paint from the piece (Images 16, 17, and 18). The invoices that the company presented to New York's Department of Design and Construction added up to approximately \$25,000, but the lack of a paper trail for the fundraising in 1999—considering the subsequent fate of Bernard Kerik, then head NYC Corrections Commissioner—leaves much to the imagination.⁴² Time, had given the artist enough clout to demand that the defaced picture be refurbished, definitively positioning the work as a valuable piece of history and art. As a result, either donors or the City of New York paid \$25,000 to restore, transport, and reinstall it.

This restoration was the first foray that *For the Women's House* (1971) had made out of the prison gates since its entry, and it was a painstaking and deliberate task. Restorers, many of

³⁹ Faith Ringgold, Personal archive share with the author August 18, 2017

⁴⁰ Faith Ringgold, Personal archive share with the author August 18, 2017

⁴¹ Faith Ringgold, in an interview at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, December 7, 2016, as streamed on YouTube and printed in her biography, *We Flew Over the Bridge*.

⁴² Kerik is a convicted felon guilty of corruption, tax fraud, and lying to White House officials; see CNN Library, "Bernard Kerik Fast Facts," *CNN*, August 26, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/03/11/us/bernard-kerik-fast-facts/index.html>.

them women, chipped away at the white house paint to discover the painting's original vibrancy, both chromatically and philosophically. In doing so, they restated the message of feminine agency, gender, and racial equality that Ringgold had expressed through her painting. Working on a flat horizontal surface, they poured a solvent on the house paint to make it blister, then scraped it and wiped away the residue.

After its renovation, the painting was transferred to the women's facility on Rikers Island. To protect it from any further damage, it was placed in the gym, some twenty feet above the ground, and covered in Plexiglas. At the celebratory unveiling, the artist fell in love with the work all over again. Again, the function of *For the Women's House* had evolved. The first hanging had spanned floor to ceiling and was seen daily by inmates as they walked by, on a level with it—equal, as it were (Image 19). But in 1999, in deference to the painting's historical significance as a prized artifact of national social and political discourse, its historicity and preciousness created physical distance between it and its audience, preventing it from entirely fulfilling its original intent (Images 20 and 21). The art was now higher than women and protected from them. Depending on sunlight, season, and time of day, it could scarcely be seen—and certainly not pondered—behind reflections. Its location—in a gym, surrounding by basketball courts and physical activity—was not one of contemplation. All this presaged the painting's future—for in a museum, too, the divide is too wide for imprisoned women to ponder the painting's relevance to their lives.

In 2010, Tracy Fitzpatrick, then curator at the Neuberger Museum of Art, began organizing a retrospective of Faith Ringgold's activist 1960s canvases. As Ringgold had spoken to her about the canvas at length, Fitzpatrick viewed *For the Women's House* as the quintessential iconic piece that would conclude this body of work, being Ringgold's last oil-on-

canvas work. Accordingly, she asked permission of the Rikers Island facility to borrow the painting for the exhibition “American People Black Light”. This event marked a turning point: a museum of a modern and contemporary art had recognized the significance of the painting within the artist’s oeuvre and her activism. Aptly, the social and political context of the show was that of the election of the first African American U.S. president—a male, admittedly, but even so his victory threw a new light on the supposed impossibility of an African American’s becoming president, taken as a given when the series was painted during a time of locally, culturally, and legally vetted racial segregation. The exhibition “American People, Black Light” thus brought to the fore the continued battle to uproot cultural bias and elevate the prized U.S. ideal of equality.

Fitzpatrick, with a doggedness that recalled Ringgold herself, reached out repeatedly to the warden at Rikers Island until her request was processed and accepted. Hers was the first such expression of interest in the canvas and negotiating the price and the logistics involved in loaning such a piece of artwork was an unusual task that posed a steep learning curve for the Department of Corrections. The team from the Neuberger Museum of Art came to detach the work for transport to Purchase, New York, *For the Women’s House* (1971) and was exhibited within the confines of a museum of art for the first time since 1971. According to Fitzpatrick, now director of the Neuberger Museum, Ringgold was elated to see the piece again. In the gallery space, it became an evocation of an epoch, of activism for meaningful change, for equality between races and sexes. Its liberated presence in the museum, to be seen by historians, critics, artists, and the public, added to its functions that of a historical document. It was a record of a bygone moment in history, a visible expression of a voice for agency and equality. It is the imprint the hopes and

dreams of the artist channeling those of the imprisoned women. After the exhibition, it was returned to the prison.

In April 2017, the canvas went on tour as part of the exhibition “We Wanted a Revolution: Radical Black Women 1965–85,” which lasted until September 2018. The exhibit, organized by the Brooklyn Museum of Art and curated by Catherine Morris, was self-reflective and critical. Under the hyperconservative Nixon administration of the artist’s day, to be black and female while pursuing art as an honest diagnostic of governing policies was just as radical as doing so during the early months of the Trump presidency. The curation of an exhibition of thirty-five female artists of color was thus a loud political statement that allowed the show to shake the perceptual foundations of an art history rarely told, giving credibility and merit where they had been previously withheld.

In 2018, I myself went to see the show in Buffalo, New York, hoping to observe how it would be shown, where it would be situated in the museum, and who its viewers would be. I paid the entrance fee and walked up the stairs as directed. At the top I found a retrospective of Tony Conrad. I had no choice but to walk through this survey of one white male artist before arriving at “Black Radical Women,” which devoted the same square footage to thirty-five women of color. Within the exhibition, viewers wishing to see *For the Women’s House* had to walk through a white-columned space containing other works before arriving at the canvas, which was placed front and center, surrounded by supporting documents. As I regarded the viewers, I observed that all were white; most were female. The artwork’s ability to shift mediated perceptions of what women can do had lost none of its force, but her astounding visionary ability was lost, as were the political and social iconography. The canvas was installed at eye level, but at ninety-six inches to a side, it seemed larger than life, its mysteries still partly shrouded to me and the other

viewers. Now, at this point in my research, the entire exhibit was encapsulated in the canvas, transporting viewers to the 1960s and 1970s, to the time of the freedom riders, the bloodshed for civil rights, and the end of the draft.

Faith Ringgold's *For the Women's House* was made in the service of the civil rights and feminist movements and can be seen as an expression of marginalized voices, a response to the conservatism of Nixon's America, an act of resistance against contemporary visual culture, and a vector with which to forge a new and empowered cultural identity. Its dispatch has been delivered to a wider audience, who, in *this*, our space and time, and against our national history, can gain much-needed understanding of the past with which we can form our own ideas of what we wish our future to be.

Even so, the canvas is now back on Rikers Island. The artist, for her part, would like the Brooklyn Museum of Art to have it on a long-term paid loan from the NYC Department of Corrections. Catherine Morris, Sackler senior curator for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the BMA, submitted an offer to this effect, but it was declined. As the City of New York has stated that the artist has no legal means of obliging it to accept any such offer, the closing of Rikers Island means that the fate of the canvas is, at the time of this writing, unknown. Given the artist's current renown, age, and historical national and local import—and the fact that this was her last oil-on-canvas painting, the most lucrative option for the City of New York would be to sell it at auction. Such a prospect, however, raises a troubling question: if the work were to leave the New York area in the hands of the highest bidder, would its potency dwindle?

Conclusion

Faith Ringgold's *For the Women's House* challenges longstanding social and economic inequality via its chosen site and its central function of creating feminist empowerment by depicting a then alternate and desired reality. Its uniquely chosen place and people thwarted theoretical inconsistencies with the earliest definitions of site. Its imagery, which questioned—and questions—our meditated cultural limitations, proved eerily visionary.

However, owing to its decades-long time away from the museum going public, this painting remains virtually unknown. That imprisonment, however, shielded the canvas from the overt racism of the 1970s feminist art movement, and today it is unquestionably a feminist work of civil and political protest. The fullness of the iconography merges with its site and viewer specificity. The social and political context marries with its outright feminist subjectivity defending the painting's rightful place in the annals of both feminist and activist art making. Based on my research thus far, the rich account of its making, its formal qualities, its iconography, and its nomadic existence all make *For the Women's House* a work of local and national importance.

The canvas's overlapping temporalities and explicit references to the past, laden with historical significance, weigh heavily on our present distorted national identity and persist in projecting a vision of a feminine equality. The work is also evidence of an American artist merging her scholastic studies with an investigation of African art and of social and institutional critique with site specificity. Ringgold's massive canvas has become an artifact and a historical document and, in the words of Claire Bishop, offers a more "politicized understanding of where

we have been and where we should be heading.”⁴³ The question remains: where it will go after Rikers Island is closed, after Donald Trump leaves office—and what will its next location bring to the fore in its analysis?

⁴³ Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology* (Köln: Walther König, 2014).

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Images



(Image 1) Faith Ringgold, *For the Woman's House* (1971)



(Image 2) Faith Ringgold. *American People Series #18: The Flag is Bleeding*. 1967



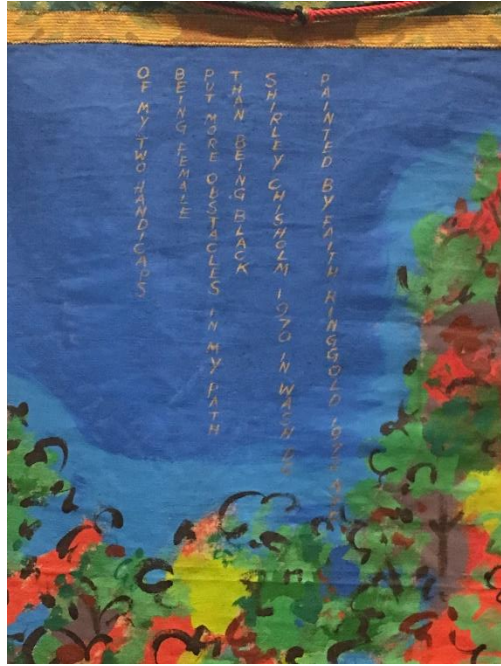
(Image 3) Faith Ringgold. *American People Series #20: Die*. 1967



(Image 4) F. Ringgold, *For the Woman's House* (1971) detail (Image 5) F. Ringgold, *For the Woman's House* (1971) detail



(Image 6) F. Ringgold, *For the Woman's House* (1971) detail



(Image 7) Feminist Series: Of My Two Handicaps #10, 1972 (Image 8) Feminist Series: Of My Two Handicaps #10, 1972



(Image 9) F. Ringgold, *For the Woman's House* (1971) detail

600AR

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION -- INTRADEPARTMENTAL MEMORANDUM

DATE December 8, 1996

To Mr Robert Brennan, Warden, GMDC (Through channels), N.Y.C.C.F.M

From Barbra Drummond, Correction Officer, Shield #1955

Subject **DESTRUCTION OF ART WORK**

On Thursday, November 21, 1996, I, Barbra Drummond, Correction Officer, Shield #1955, was assigned to the Staff Kitchen Post on the 2300 x 0731 tour of duty (overtime).

Upon the completion of general inspections and security checks of area, it was observed by this writer that the canvass painting, titled "The Women's House" by the renown artist Faith Ringold had been totally defaced, destroyed and vandalized with white paint.

As the tears were now formed in my eyes, I became enraged with a feeling of humiliation and pain, devastated that a famous Black Art Work had been destroyed. The painting had been donated to the former Correctional Institution for Women approximately twenty-plus years ago, along with another painting by the great Salvador Dali.

The undersigned awaited the arrival of the Staff Kitchen Captain (0700 x 1500 tour) to said area to inquire about the authorization of this assault on the painting. He stated, "The Kitchen was going to be done over and the canvass was going to be used for another painting." I assumed an inmate painted the picture. I replied, "Why didn't you inquire about the painting prior to destroying it? In addition, who authorized you to proceed with this destruction?"

The Kitchen Officer (0700 x 1500 tour) then arrived, stating, "The Kitchen was going to be remodeled. I replied, "Who gave the authorization for the defacing of the painting? And, who did you ask?" No response. The undersigned then awaited the arrival of the Deputy Warden of Administration to seek information on who gave the authorization. She stated, "I have no knowledge of what happened. I will get back to you." To this day, no response.

My personal feelings about this destruction are best expressed by the quote from Cardinal Gibbons (1893). "Reason and common sense demand the acceptance of one or the other of the alternatives. Compromise is impossible. The issue is not a matter of right nor wrong." But, what I must stand for and honor are truth and commitment toward my People's cultural heritage and contributions to this society that we strive so hard for. It is none of my concern if they assumed an inmate painted the picture, nor at this time if they actually knew of the Artist.

People have a tendency to establish themselves as a separate entity and begin to look with disfavor on anything which would possibly tend to identify them as what they should be. As a result, this type of error occurs. The former painting represented conflict and resolution which was a medium expressed as a product that articulated the whole story of progress of the Modern American Women in the artist's own perspective.

I am requesting the following: 1) The painting be restored, and 2) A letter of apology, and a procedure set in place to care for and protect future donations of paintings/Art.

Respectfully submitted,

Barbra Drummond
Correction Officer, Shield #1955

cc: Susan Schultz, Deputy Warden, Administration
Thomas Burke, Deputy Warden, Program

FAITH RINGGOLD 127 Jones Road Englewood, N.J. 07631 ph 201 816 1374

Mr. Robert Brennan, Warden
George Motchan Detention Center
15-15 Hazen Street
East Elmhurst, New York 11370

December 10, 1996

Dear Warden Brennan;

This letter is to inform you that a permanently installed mural by the artist, Faith Ringgold (see my enclosed bios from Who's Who in America, Who's Who in the World and Who's Who in American Art) has been vandalized-- not by inmates, but by persons of the administrative staff, at the George Motchen Detention Center (Rikers Island) in East Elmhurst, N.Y.

I am outraged to learn of this assault on my art, and I request the return of my mural painting titled: For the Women's House, (see enclosed picture of mural) which I donated to the Women's House of Detention (now a men's facility named George Motchen Detention Center) on January 18, 1972.

I created the mural as an inspiration to the women inmates to reach for and achieve higher goals in life. State and local officials of the Department of Correction planned and attended the public installation (see enclosed pictures of the installation ceremony) which was in the chapel area of the Women's facility. I received a \$3,000.00 commission from the Creative Artists Public Service program (CAPS) to create the mural in 1971. The mural was installed with the agreement that it could remain in the facility for as long as it was on public display.

Counter to the above agreement, not only was the painting removed from the outside chapel wall but covered with white paint eradicating completely the surface imagery of the 8 by 8 foot painting. I understand that the Kitchen Captain, along with others, decided they were "tired of looking at all those women" and further they had "plans to redecorate the kitchen, and the canvas was to be used for another painting." This dastardly act by these males will not permanently reduce the monetary value, and aesthetic and historical importance of this painting, nor does it diminish the role, posture and advancement of women. However, a serious crime has been committed by those who defaced one of my most important art works. It will be expensive to restore this painting, but not impossible. I am calling upon your office as Commissioner of Correction to investigate this matter to ascertain which parties are actually responsible for this mindless assault on art. This mural must not be further mutilated but restored to its former beauty and returned to its owner. Thanks for your attention to this matter. I am eager to hear from you.

My address and phone number are: Faith Ringgold 127 Jones Road Englewood, New Jersey 07631, 201 816 1374.

Sincerely

Faith Ringgold
Doctor of Fine Art at the University of California in San Diego

cc: Ms. Barbara Hoffman, Attorney at Law
Mr. Jeff Bergen ACA Gallery (41 East 57th Street NY 10022)

Image 11

FAITH RINGGOLD 127 Jones Road Englewood, NJ 0763
 ph 201 816 1374 fax 201 816 1573

Michael P. Jacobson
 Commissioner
 60 Hudson Street, 6th Floor
 New York, New York 10013
 T 212 266 1000

Jan 13, 1997

Dear Commissioner Jacobson,

This letter was originally sent to Warden Brennan on December 10, 1996. It is now being sent to you in order to expedite a solution to the following problem: A permanently installed mural by the artist, Faith Ringgold (see enclosed bio from Who's Who in America, Who's Who In The World, and Who's Who in American Art) has been vandalized-- not by inmates but by persons of the administrative staff, at the George Motchen Detention Center (Rickers Island) in East Elmhurst, N. Y.

I am outraged to learn of this assault on my art, and I request the return of my mural painting titled: For the Women's House, (see pictures of my mural sent to Warden Brennan on Dec.10, 1996) which I donated to the Women's House of Detention (now a men's facility) on January 18, 1972.

I created the mural as an inspiration to the women inmates to reach for and achieve higher goals in life. State and local officials of the Department of Correction planned and attended the public installation (see pictures of the formal installation ceremony sent to Warden Brennan on Dec.10, 1996) which took place in the chapel of the Women's facility. I received a \$3000.00 commission from the Creative Artists Service program (CAPS) to create the mural in 1971. The mural was installed with the agreement that it could remain in the facility for as long as it remained on public display.

Image 12

Counter to the above agreement, not only was the painting removed from the outside chapel wall but it was painted over with white paint eradicating completely the surface imagery of the 8 by 8 foot painting. I understand that the Kitchen Captain, along with others, decided they were "tired of looking at all those women" and further they had "plans to redecorate the kitchen, and the canvas was to be reused for another painting." This dastardly act by these males does not permanently reduce the monetary value, and aesthetic and historical importance of this painting, nor does it diminish the role, posture and advancement of women. However, a serious crime has been committed by those who defaced one of my most important works. It will be expensive to restore this painting but not impossible.

Enclosed is a list of names and phone numbers of professional conservators in New York City that was sent to Warden Brennan by my art dealer. Any one of them can be called upon to restore the painting. I am calling upon your office as Commissioner of Corrections to investigate this matter and to ascertain which parties are actually responsible for this mindless assault on women's art.

This mural must not be further destroyed but restored to its former beauty and returned to its owner. Thanks for your attention to this matter. My address and phone number are:

Faith Ringgold 127 Jones Road Englewood, N.J. 07631, 201 816 1374. I am presently in La Jolla, California where I am a professor of art at the University of California in San Diego. During these months I commute regularly to my home in New Jersey. I am requesting the opportunity to see my mural during the time I am in New York. Please let me hear from you at your earliest convenience.


Sincerely,

Faith Ringgold
 Doctor of Fine Art

cc:
 Fred Patrick, Deputy Commissioner Program Service

Image 13

THE CITY OF NEW YORK
 DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION
 60 HUDSON STREET
 NEW YORK, N.Y. 10013-4393



MICHAEL P. JACOBSON
 COMMISSIONER

January 29, 1997

Ms. Faith Ringgold
 127 Jones Road
 Englewood, New Jersey, 00763

Dear Ms. Ringgold:

Upon receipt of your letter about damage to your mural painting at the George Motchan Detention Center, I spoke to the warden, Robert Brennan, to determine how this unfortunate situation occurred.

As you are aware, your painting, which was hung in the staff dining room of the jail, was "painted over" when the dining room was re-painted and remodeled. I understand your displeasure over this occurrence and I apologize that it happened. However, I am assured that the damage to your painting was not done with any malicious intent or ideological considerations. Of course, one would hope that common sense would dictate a better course of action by staff assigned to re-painting the dining room, but in this case, it obviously did not.


Since receiving your letter, the painting has been removed, covered and secured in a locked area of the jail for safe-keeping. Warden Brennan has explored the possibility of having the painting restored by a conservator, but the cost of such services does not allow the Department to proceed at this time. Warden Brennan will continue to pursue this possibility. In particular, he is seeking to identify artistic training schools that might be able to restore the painting at little or no cost. Be assured that Warden Brennan will make every effort to resolve this matter. I have asked him to keep you apprised of his efforts.

(Image 14)

If the painting can be restored, the question of ownership/display will have to be addressed. I note that you referred to an agreement in 1971 between yourself and the Creative Artists Service Program, but there is no record of this agreement on file with the Department. If you have this agreement, I would appreciate your sending me a copy.

Thank you for bringing these matters to my attention and I look forward to their being resolved.

Sincerely,


 Michael P. Jacobson
 Commissioner

c: Robert Brennan, Warden, GMDC

(Image 15)

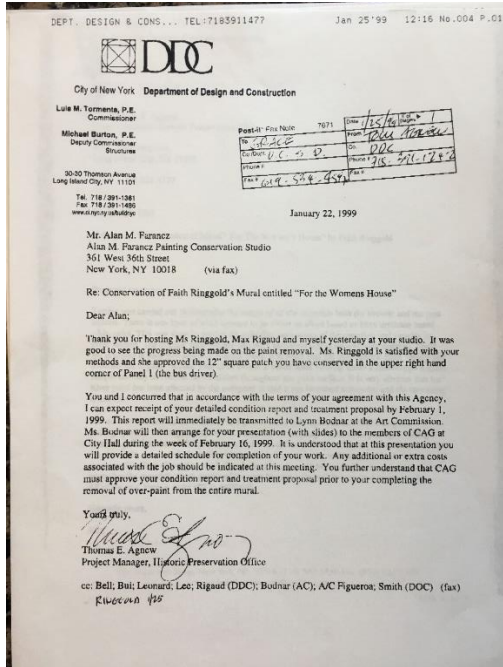
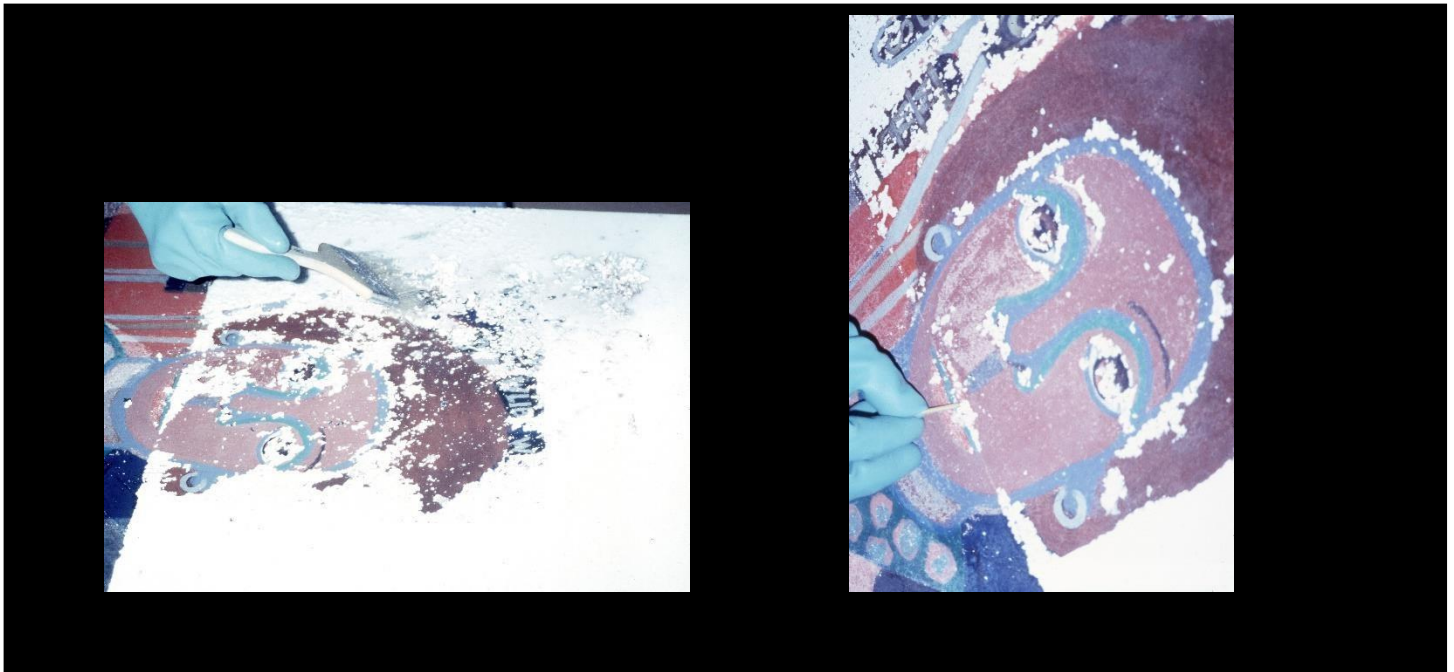


Image 16



(Images 17 and 18) F. Ringgold, *For the Woman's House* (1971) restoration process by Farnacz Restoration



Image 21 Source, the Artist

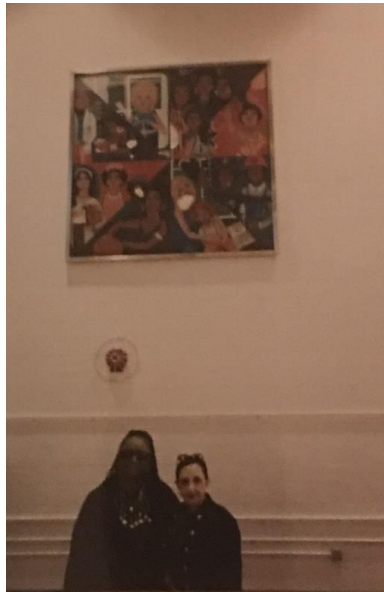


Image 19, Installation “For the Women’s Image 20, Ringgold and unknown person for the House” in the Gym in the women’s facility unveiling of the restored canvas 1999. Note the reflection on Rikers Island after Restoration in 1999 of light on the plexiglass.