

GROUP RATE

Exhibiting Modern and Contemporary Black Artists & Art

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Introduction:

The art museum has been a problematic sight for displaying the work of African American/Black artists for quite some time. From its inception, the museum has been a site of displaying history, but what is often reflected is a history that struggles to account for diversity, especially in relation to displaying the works of Black artists¹. Besides this, what makes up a large part of certain distinct institutions such as a survey museum, are artifacts from around the world that tell a supporting story to the earlier dominant narrative. Institutionally speaking, Museums pose many problems for collecting and understanding the work of Black/African-American artists. Typically, institutions will ignore the impact of non-white artists on the canon, unless there is some direct connection to art by white artists (see African Art and its connection to Cubism/Early experiments in Modernism in Europe)². It has therefore fallen to the public to protest, to organize demonstrations and meetings with institutions, in order to make sizeable changes at these institutions that refuse to look past the canon's biased views. However, the demands of the public have more than often fallen on deaf ears, with change coming in minute waves or short stretches of time before fading out as institutional make-ups change. It would seem that this problem is not unique to one type of institution either. Survey museums, such as the Brooklyn Museum of Art and more narrowly focused museums such as the Whitney Museum of American Art both face these issues. Yet the way such problems are acknowledged and addressed is very different depending on the institution.

¹ Bridget R. Cooks. *Negro Art in the Modern Art Museum*. Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum. 2011. Pg. 17-18.

² Hal Foster. *The "Primitive" Unconscious of Modern Art*. *October*, Vol. 34 (Autumn, 1985).

The Brooklyn Museum can trace its roots to originally being an institutional library containing historical knowledge which broadened to objects as the institution developed. Its mission was to civilize or correct the imbecile behavior at the time Brooklyn's white and upper-class community's wayward upper crust young men, who needed activities to do on a Sunday afternoon. This was in the goal of creating a community of upstanding citizens in Brooklyn. In 1823, the Brooklyn Museum was called the Brooklyn Lyceum, a functional library that would eventually become co-ed in the late 1830's³. It was not until sometime later that Lyceum became Institute, with the name expanding into The Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences in 1890⁴. In 1897, the beginnings of a museum materialized as part of this institution, followed by a name change in 1899 to "The Brooklyn Museum." It was at this stage that the Brooklyn Museum, seeing a need to permanently house its collection of objects and books, changed locations and plans of the building turning into a functional museum materialized. The new museum required a change in location to near Prospect Park onto a 10 acres plot. At this time the museum required funding in order to build the new footprint of the museum, for the new space was to be devised into three separate floors containing: art galleries, lecture halls, ballrooms, art schools, a restaurant, and the curatorial departments. Construction began in the 1890's with the City of Brooklyn funding the project exclusively up until 1898, when the City of New York took over funding. Construction continued through several starts and stops over the next two decades, as funding flowed through the museum.

When the Museum first began, the collection consisted of taxidermy animals, plants, casts, a few artworks, and as one source says, "anything dredged from the East River⁵."

³ Brooklyn Museum. *The Brooklyn Museum Handbook*. 1967

⁴ Brooklyn Museum. *The Brooklyn Museum Handbook*. 1967

⁵ Brooklyn Museum. *The Brooklyn Museum Handbook*. 1967

However, along with the rapid urbanization of Brooklyn in the early 20th century, a declining interest in non-real or “artificial” artifacts forced the museum to radically rethink its collection. In the 1910’s funds raised chiefly for the galleries of European Painting and Sculpture, American Painting and Sculpture, and Contemporary Art were a gift of the previous president of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, A. Augustus Healy. It was also during this time that an increased focus was put on the surrounding community’s art, with an influx of exhibitions covering local community organizations such as The Brooklyn Society of Miniature Painters and the Brooklyn Society of Artists. Finally, in the 1930s the Brooklyn Museum changed from an institution of “giving out information, to demonstrating quality”⁶. This meant that the collections educational focus, by way of displaying casts and reproductions of European sculptures, would change towards acquiring actual artworks such as paintings, drawings, prints, and actual sculptures. The collection changed to include borrowed and bought artworks from around the world, primarily from Europe and Egypt⁷. Then in 1933, the museum began its special exhibition program, which allowed for the museum to showcase art recently acquired, with its own educational spin. Then in 1946, the Brooklyn Museum had what is arguably its first exhibition on Black artists, entitled, *The Negro Artist Comes of Age*. It would be a long time before the Brooklyn Museum exhibited another large-scale show of African American artists again. For during the 1960s a decade of increasing societal upheaval in regards to race, the Brooklyn Museum would open up a community gallery for contemporary African American artists, as well as hosting the large scale travelling exhibition surveying contemporary black art, *New Black Artists*. Although this was the museum’s first foray into displaying Black art, the incorporation of

⁶ *Guide to the Records Departments of European, American, and Contemporary Art*. 2018

⁷ Multiple Authors. *The Brooklyn Museum: Collections Report, Part 1*. 1969

Black artists came at a steady increase from this point on. This culminated in the 1960's, when the Brooklyn Museum created a segregated gallery for communities of color, primarily black, to display their art.

The Whitney Museum of American Art has a very different history when compared to the Brooklyn Museum. First founded in 1914 by Gertrude Whitney, its original function was not as a museum, but as a private club in which Whitney would host small exhibitions of her famous friends' work. From 1929-1931, the Whitney functioned as a commercial gallery, designed to buy and sell these same artist's works in order to make them more well known. In 1931, the Whitney became officially recognized as a museum. However, this preceded almost three decades of institutional issues for the Whitney. In 1942, Gertrude Whitney passed away, an event that caused a brief bit of chaos within the museum, for so much of its history had been built upon the taste and opinions of one woman⁸. What was the Whitney's identity without its founder? How would it manage its finances without its primary benefactor? With its future and more importantly its funding uncertain, the Whitney took a serious look at its collection and decided to move to a new location uptown, sharing the same land as the Museum of Modern Art. Various funding endeavors were created in order to keep the Whitney afloat while it decided on a more permanent location, as well as what to do with its collection. Friends of the Whitney was established in 1956 with membership priced at \$250. For a time, the Whitney even considered donating most of its collection to the MoMA, who refused to take the works.⁹

⁸ Susan E. Cahan. *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*. February 2016. Pg. 121-122

⁹ Susan E. Cahan. *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*. February 2016.

The 1960s were a much more stable time for the Whitney. In 1961, the Board of the Whitney changed from being predominantly composed of family members to non-family members, which also included known art collector Roy R. Neuberger. Then in 1963, The Whitney settled on a permanent location, 75th and Madison. The new location which would remain this location from 1967-2014, was the first location the Whitney was housed in that was completely designed for the Museum, a design by the architect Marcel Breuer. Finally, in 1966, the Whitney was declared an educational institution by the IRS, which allowed the museum to acquire more funds from the government¹⁰.

The collecting history of the Whitney Museum of American art, is also of note when compared to the Brooklyn Museum of Art. While the Brooklyn Museum began as an institute that was not primarily concerned with art, the Whitney's main mission was to survey the developments in American Art, beginning in the 20th century. In 1931, the Whitney collected its first artwork by a Black artist, which was Ethiopian (1912), by artist Arthur Lee. This was followed by a few years of randomly collecting one or two works from artists such as Jacob Lawrence and Richmond Barthé, from 1932-1966¹¹. However, throughout the early history of the Whitney, from 1914-1970, no significant survey of Black art/artists can be found. Even in its large-scale exhibitions billed as total surveys of American art, there were noticeable absences from African Americans. This came to a head with the Whitney's 1968 exhibition *1930's: Painting & Sculpture*, which only included two works by Black Artists. When the museum was criticized by Black artists for the lack of their inclusion, the museum's response was an argument

¹⁰ Susan E. Cahan. *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*. February 2016. Pg. 125

¹¹ Susan E. Cahan. *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*. February 2016. Pg. 127

based on “quality.” It would appear that what the museum was implying, was that the work of Black artists was not of the same caliber as their white counterparts; that their work did not meet the criteria dictated by the institution in order to be included in its exhibitions. However, a few years later, the Whitney attempted to correct this mistake with their 1971 exhibit, *Contemporary Black Artists*. The show however, was ultimately unsuccessful in its mission of portraying “Black Art,” because it struggled to define exactly what that category entailed. This was on the part of its head curator, Robert Doty, then associate curator at the Whitney Museum, who had a cursory understanding of Blackness and assumed it was a medium. It was also met with criticism from the Black art collectives who had begun as advisors to the exhibit only to have their input silenced.

Both institutions have a history of difficulty with trying to acknowledge the work of Black artists. However, it would seem that given the exhibition history, and the institutional changes put in place after the advising of community-based organizations, the Brooklyn Museum does a better job at displaying the works of Black artists than that of the Whitney. The Whitney waited a long time to host a solo exhibition of a Black artist (their first being Melvin Edwards in 1970, which was met with mixed criticism), but the Brooklyn Museum, recognizing its changing audience and thus feeling a need to adapt, begins in 1945 with *The Negro Artist comes of age*, followed by individual small shows of artists in the African Diaspora before having successive shows of African American art beginning in 1969.

Black art, is a problematic term, because it attempts to situate the work of Black artists into a universal understanding: That art by Black artists is about a universal black experience and that it overtly deals with race. In order to understand how the term Black art works in each institution, it is important to begin by looking at the titles of these shows, for the Brooklyn

Museum of Art is not thinking of Blackness as one monolithic experience. To the Brooklyn Museum, blackness is both global and domestic, and the broad range of experiences can be understood through various mediums and genres. This is most evident in the community gallery shows, which includes the 1976 exhibition of West-Indian American artists, 1978's retrospective on James Van Der Zee, and 1979's *Blacks in the Arts: Photographs by Careen Simpson*. Where the Whitney was concerned with satiating the desires of the Black Emergency Cultural Council in those pivotal late 60's years, The Brooklyn Museum was already decades ahead when it came to their thinking of Black art.

From here, one enters the problematic territory that is defining "Black Art": Is it tied together through a universal understanding of aesthetic values? Has it something to do with content where symbolism evokes notions of racial differences? What about the work that Black artists produce is deserving of the label "Black Art?" For the purpose of this essay, Black Art is a political label, a label that is not fixed but rather always in a state of transition, dependent upon such factors as time, geography, and context. It is used at different moments to do different things. All of this will be examined through the lens of group exhibitions, exhibitions which either attempt to display "black art and their respective artists," or features prominently the work of well-known Black artists in proposing a thesis about? identity. Each chapter is divided into a time span of roughly 5-10 years.

For the first chapter, the focus will be 1967-1975. Titled "Problematics of a Black Aesthetic," the chapter will cover two exhibitions whose goal is to show Black Art, albeit in two very distinct manners. In the aftermath of the explosion of Black power/Civil rights movements in New York City and the broader U.S, and government changes to arts funding, specifically the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts, The Whitney Museum of American Art, and

The Brooklyn Museum faced widespread criticism for their institutional policies/makeup and their exhibition history. In particular, the Black Emergency Cultural Council headed by artist Benny Andrews, will meet with the Whitney in 1969, in order to not only diversify their collection, but their curatorial staff as well. It is also in this time period that the Brooklyn Museum, after facing similar criticism will host a travelling exhibition that surveys recent works by Black Artists within the last two decades. This section will primarily compare the Whitney's failed attempt at diversity in the form of *Contemporary Black Artists (1971)* to The Brooklyn's 1969 exhibit, *New Black Artists*. It will look at the head curators of each exhibition and their respective goals with what they believed the shows would accomplish in the surrounding communities, as well as what it would represent for Black artists/people.

The second chapter will focus on the time period of 1989-1997. It's subtitled "Access Granted/Denied," which reflects the fickle nature of identity minded exhibitions and their habit of universally attempting to appeal to a large audience, while restricting works to the identity of their respective owners. It will begin with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and how the 1990's was a time of immense conversations on global identity politics. It will link this to the changing art market, and mediums such as installation and performance that begin to proliferate the museum complex such as in the work of Fred Wilson. Focus will be given to the controversial *1993 Whitney Biennial*, as well as the identity minded community exhibitions hosted at the Brooklyn Museum. While each exhibition used the identity of artists, be it in terms of race or gender, but primarily race, to initiate a conversation on what art, especially new mediums could represent, one museum? did a better job at displaying a unity between the two. Additionally, this tangent will continue through the tenure of the radical director of the Whitney Biennial who was

responsible for the controversial show lauded by critics, as well as an increase in the Whitney's diversity.

The third chapter will cover the years 2008-2017. In particular, this section is extended to include the 2017 Whitney Biennial and its controversial inclusion of the painting, *Open Casket* (2017), by artist Dana Schultz. It begins during the first term of Barack Obama's presidency and looks at how delusions of a "post-racial" America changed institutions and their curatorial decisions. Focus is also given to specific Brooklyn Museum shows such as *Go: a community-curated open studio project* (2012), *Connecting Cultures: A World in Brooklyn* (2012), and *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* (2014). These will be compared to the 2014 Whitney Biennial, which incited a small amount of controversy after a small Black Queer art collective of video artist pulled out abruptly. It will focus on *Signs of the Time* (2008-2009), *Signs & Symbols* (2012), and *American Legends: From Calder to O'Keefe* (2014).

To conclude, these various exhibitions and time periods will be synthesized and summarized as examples of the working thesis that The Whitney Museum of American Art, while ambitious in its notions of surveying the advancements made in American art from the early 20th century to present, has created large gaps that need to be filled. These gaps are the exclusion of African American artists within the canon of Modern and Contemporary Art History. This paper makes no move towards rectifying these gaps, but rather attempts to thoroughly diagnosis their occurrences and document how they came to be. At the same time, it is this paper's argument that The Brooklyn Museum of Art is an institution that, due to its founding as a community of distinct but equal and interconnected parts, has become an institution that attempts to rectify this history when it does make these mistakes, and looks

outside of blackness as regionally linked to America, and instead to the global diaspora as a route to understanding the total Black Experience.

Problematics of a Black Aesthetic (1969-1971)

New York City in the late 1960s was a time when the political landscape was beginning to shift. After a decade of Black artists and activists putting pressure onto museums to diversify, it would seem that real change was commencing¹². Museums saw the growing African American rights movement as an opportune time of diversifying collections, creating public programs to renew interest in art within predominantly black communities, and mount large scale survey exhibits of black art over the twentieth century. At the Brooklyn Museum, the then Director, Thomas Buechner (1960-1971), expressed his concerns that museums were no longer useful, as they did not represent the public's interest anymore, stating emphatically that not only was there still a need for exhibits, but that the Brooklyn Museum's role was as a community center first, mentioning such functions as a University, Theatre, Town Hall, Ballroom, and Laboratory¹³. To this end, Buechner made sure to include in his annual report a host of projects that the museum had mounted in the past year, including an exhibit entitled *New Black Artists (1969)*.

New Black Artists (1969) was not a revolutionary exhibition, nor was it the first Black Arts focused exhibit the museum had mounted. Rather it came from a history of an institution devoted to the art of Black Artists. In 1960, the Brooklyn Museum exhibited a survey of the

¹² Brooklyn Museum. *The Brooklyn Museum Annual, Part I: Reports and Records*. Volume XI. 1971.

¹³ Buechner. *The Brooklyn Museum Annual, Volume XI: Part 1: Reports and Records*. Volume XI. 1971.

work of Jacob Lawrence. In 1963, the Brooklyn Museum hosted the Art Festival for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. In 1967, the Museum highlighted young African painters in a special exhibit. Finally, in 1968, a year before *New Black Artists, (NBA)*, after facing criticism from local Black Artists, the Museum opened up a community gallery with a show of Contemporary African American artists as its inaugural exhibition¹⁴. Leading up to the time *New Black Artists* was exhibited, with tensions between institutions and the public growing the wake of the debacle at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with *Harlem on my Mind*, the museum met with the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), an organization that had been very vocal in their distrust of institutions of art to properly display the work of Black Artists. It would seem that the museum had every intention of vaccinating itself from a scandal such as the one faced by the Metropolitan.

New Black Artists (1969) focused on highlighting emerging Black Artists. A prominent feature of the show was the diverse background from which its' artists came. Some were educated in fine arts while others were self-taught. The show featured works by Erik A. Stephenson, Ellsworth Ausby, Hugh Harrell, William L. Howell, Tonnie Jones, Daniel Pressley, and a few others. Of the total 8 artists, none were Women. The show covered works in a range of media from painting, to sculpture, to drawing, to prints. The catalogue begins with a forward by Edward K. Taylor where he addresses the increasingly frustrating position of being a Black Artist and their feeling the need to "Define Blackness" within their work, as well as the problems of addressing some abstract universal "Black Aesthetic." The rest of the catalogue contains artist photos and statements accompanied by photographic reprints of their works in black and white. For many of the artists, their brief artist statements address these same anxieties. For some, they

¹⁴ Teresa A. Carbone and Kellie Jones. *"Witness": Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*. 2014

explore their own inner process on their work, and what their work means to them. It would seem after looking over the catalogue that while the main point of the exhibition is to display the works of recent up and coming Black Artists, a second point would be to discuss the fallacy in trying to find a universal black aesthetic. It also states as a critical point of departure, that there is no aesthetic or fundamental difference in quality between the work of trained and untrained artists, and universally positions them under the same categories of art¹⁵.

Although on the face what may have seemed like a decent exhibition was not met with unanimous praise. In a letter written to the then director of the Brooklyn Museum while the exhibition was in production, the artist Henri Ghent expressed his concern that a similar controversy would occur due to the curators of the exhibit namely, Luck and Taylor¹⁶. Ghent was particularly vexed at the thought of Edward K. Taylor being involved in the exhibition. He had been one of the curators on the team of *Harlem on My Mind*, an exhibition which had taken place only two years prior. It had been met with an onslaught of criticism over the show's handling of the community of Harlem, situating it as an "Urban Ghetto," at the same time a cultural capital of black creativity. It also included no paintings, drawings, or things that would have been considered "fine art" in its exhibition plan, instead relying on photography, audio, and wall text to document a brief history of the community becoming a predominantly black neighborhood. Edward K. Taylor along with the shows chief curator, Allan Schoener, were seen as the main culprits to blame for the exhibitions failure at faithfully portraying Harlem, and as a result, Taylor had lost any credibility with most New York City Black artists¹⁷. Therefore, his

¹⁵ Edward K. Taylor. *New Black Artists Exhibition Book*. The Brooklyn Museum. 1969.

¹⁶ Henri Ghent. Memorandum. The Brooklyn Museum Archives. Folder; Exhibitions (New Black Artists).

¹⁷ Henri Ghent. Memorandum. The Brooklyn Museum Archives. Folder; Exhibitions (New Black Artists).

appointment as curator at the Brooklyn Museum was seen as a way to soothe relations with the Black Community. This prompted the museum and Taylor to hastily put together an exhibit dedicated to Black artists. Despite the backlash, however, *New Black Artists* was met with praise from critics, who hailed it as an exhibit that focused on a “Universal Black Spirit” in particular highlighting the sculptural works of the show¹⁸.

As opposed to this model of curating, one where the curators played a less crucial role in the organization of the works and instead allowed the artists to speak for themselves, the similarly planned exhibition, *Contemporary Black Artists in America (1971)* took a different approach. Held at the Whitney Museum, the exhibition was an attempt at diversifying the exhibition programming at the museum. In the year 1969, after successfully moving to the permanent space of where the MET Breuer stands today, the Whitney held a survey exhibition of art history in America, spanning from the 18th century to present (at that time: 1969). However, at most two artworks featured in the show were by Black/African American artists. This led to public outrage and calls for the Museum to address its history with exclusion. Some of the same voices, such as Henri Ghent with the BECC) expressed concerns for the exhibitions lack in accounting for the various abstract black artists of the late 40s, 50s, and 60s. After several conversations with the curators on staff at the time, The BECC drew up a list of demands that the museum would need to satisfy. These included, but were not limited to: A Black curator, Black monographic shows, and Black Group exhibitions of contemporary art. While the museum conceded to two of these points, the first (hiring a Black curator), was refused on the grounds that the “Whitney would choose the best person for the job¹⁹.” Further strains in the relationship

¹⁸ John Canady. *The New York Times*. October 8th, 1969.

¹⁹ Director of the Whitney, John I.H Baur. *Darby English. 1971: A Year in the Life of Color*. 2014. Pg. 144

between the museum and the BECC are evidenced by a series of letters to and from the institution, in which Henri Ghent and Romare Bearden expressed their concern over the selection process of works of black contemporary artists. Ultimately, after having grown tired in attempting to communicate effectively with the museum, the BECC decided not to be affiliated with the museum altogether²⁰.

Contemporary Black Artists in America (1971) looked on the surface like any other exhibition of abstract works of art. The project began in 1968, when after facing criticism over the museum's lack of diversity, the then director tasked Robert Doty with creating a black focused art exhibit. Doty began by researching across the country black artists and arts collectives, sending letters to Historically Black Colleges & University museums, as well as travelling across the country to find American black artists for the show. Doty seemed to not have a clear understanding of what made work by Black Artists, "Black," stating in one letter to a director, whether or not the medium of the work was Black or its content black. He was also expecting the works to dictate the shape of the exhibition stating in a letter to Booker, that the exhibit would be finalized by, "the nature of the work itself."²¹ In various other correspondences, Doty's plan was to have a completed collection of works by late January 1971, with the show scheduled to open on April 6th, 1971. Although tensions were rising between the BECC and the Whitney Museum, many of the Black focused cultural producers and Black artists whose assistance with the project had been requested by Doty, were supportive of the efforts of the Whitney.

²⁰ English. *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*. 2014. Pg. 147

²¹ Robert Doty. Letter to Booker. Whitney Museum Archives; Box 52, Folder 25 "Correspondence Artists & Lenders."

The works were displayed roughly in alphabetical order and under no special arrangement in order to support an overall theme or narrative. A range of up and coming to established artists including such artists as Frank Bowling, Fred Eversley, and Tom Lloyd, comprised the show, with a total of 67 artists displaying 99 works²². In a statement made by head curator Robert Doty, the goal of the exhibit was to, "...survey creative individuals with widely disparate intentions, ideas, and goals; artists whose work is categorized as 'Black Art' or Afro-American despite the fact that diversity is the universal trait."²³ Doty believed in some way that these works of abstract contemporary art, despite their formal diversity all shared in some characteristic owing to their being something "Black" about the artist. This understanding of the work is what probably led to the negative press it received and why it was considerably a less successful show than *New Black Artists*. One critic writing in the New York Magazine felt that the portrayal of the work under the heading as "Black art" was limiting, citing that the works' blackness was only incidental²⁴.

When one attempts to understand the formal tenets of a "Black Aesthetic," one becomes increasingly frustrated with the lack of depth involved with said endeavor. It is because a black aesthetic is not a real thing, rather it is a comfortable position for which one can view the work of black artists and not do any of the fundamental readings that one is accustomed to when it comes to art. At best, it is a lazy reading of abstraction. At worst, it is a racist manner of erasing the nuance in the work of contemporary black artists. Of course, black artists may sprinkle aspects of oppression and or race related topics into their work. This becomes quite hard when the work is

²² Press Release, The Whitney Museum of American Art. March 19th, 1971.

²³ Press Release, The Whitney Museum of American Art. March 19th, 1971.

²⁴ Gruen. The New York Magazine. April 19th, 1971. The Whitney Museum Archives. Box 52, Folder 42; Press Release & Reviews.

completely abstract, and the reader has been trained to view work on race in a purely formal way.

In comparing the two exhibits, the issue of a uniform black aesthetic reveals itself. In *Contemporary Black Artists in America (1971)*, the unifying thesis seems to be the fact that all of the artists are black. Their work however, while sharing the title of “abstract” is otherwise unrelated not only to their respective artists “blackness” but to each other. Take the work of Tom Lloyd for example. In his sculpture featured in CBAA, *Moussakoo (1967)*, a series of multicolored lights form diamond shapes and hang on a wall in the exhibition. The rainbow array of lights blinks on and off, configured at the whim of the curator. Of course, in English’s own thoughts, color is the ultimate signifier in the cultural landscape of the ‘60s/’70s, a profound and nuanced symbol of both race and tension. Yet what of Lloyd’s piece? Obviously, color is at the forefront, blinking on and off in no particular configuration but at random intervals. It would appear to the viewer as a form of abstract signaling. However, what about the work explicitly has to deal with race? It could be said that the works use of color, specifically a varied gradient of blues, yellows, reds, and their secondary colors, could be a thesis on the gradient that makes up racial categories. However, that is never made clear to be the interpretation of the work, not by Doty, nor English. Therefore, the work’s “blackness” or its “Black aesthetic” is by and large imaginary – imaginary in the sense that while Lloyd identifies as Black, a work of art cannot in the same way enact that action. Rather it can allude to it through visual cues that connote a specific shared experience of Black people, but then it is work on a black subject matter, not Blackness itself. If one compares Lloyd’s *Mousakkou* to the work of artists in *New Black Artists*, they would be faced with a similar dilemma. At least in *NBA*, the artist’s testimonials are present to guide visual analyses towards spirituality and an abstract sense of the subconscious thought.

In the space, they are works that have been collapsed into an easy place holder, a symbol that the museum is finally beginning to diversify. On the other hand, it's *New Black Artists* (1969), which from its thesis dictated by its curator, Edward K. Taylor, and its artist's own personal statements, makes it clear that a universal black aesthetic is nothing more than a fantasy, used to pigeon hole Black artists into a corner.

Between *Contemporary Black Artists in America* (1971) and *New Black Artists* (1969), what curators seemed to be dealing with at this moment in the early '70s is the anxiety around how to formally read the work of black artists. Since the inclusion of black artists within the formal and rigidly defined spaces of art museums, a Black aesthetic has been something of a hot topic for curators. It was most apparent that someone like Robert Doty, who was searching to find a unifying thesis for his show, had no real understanding of the work of black artists beyond a shallow interpretation that their work was in some way informed by their own racial identities. This was most apparent by his above quote where he asks if the work or the artist itself is "Black." What he meant by the medium being black is unclear and raises a host of questions. What could a "Black Medium" possibly be? On the other hand, Taylor's confrontation of the divisive topic is one example of how to confront the problem head on but does not lead to an all-around solution. Instead, the works in the space of *New Black Artists* are allowed to make their own statements about themselves, free of any association to a unifying black aesthetic.

What is witnessed at this moment in this divisive era of art, where black artists are first beginning to receive the equal and just treatment they deserve by institutions of art? It is a moment when the language around black art is beginning to be processed and created to formally fix these artists within the canon. Since the act of creating language is fickle, predicated on the identities of its creators and their ideas, what becomes the "Black Aesthetic" is by and large an

imaginary title, an imagined place of convenience for curators and art critics, that allows them to discuss identity politics without the subject; because when the black aesthetic is in focus, the individual disappears, instead represented by someone else's idea about what it means, the artworks stripped of its own voice. Black artists' products are allowed to enter the museum but not their ideas, or their thoughts/voices. The product remains but not in the words of some of the artists from the *New Black Artists* show, the soul.

These problems certainly did not end in the 1970's, they instead evolved into larger questions about identity, questions of what happens when individual identities become a heavy-handed label for a work of contemporary art. In particular, in the 1990's when the culture wars raged, and identity became more nuanced and multivalent, these questions of black aesthetics seemed to fade out in favor of questions around the efficacy of labels.

Access Granted/Denied (1990-1993)

The 1990s in art was a time when the word "Identity" became an important player in the understanding of visual mediums. With the rise in postmodernism from the late '60s onwards, coupled with a renewed interest in identity with the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis and the fight for black equity still not over, artists were responding to these issues in new and nuanced ways. The work these artists produced took on new forms such as installations and media projects. On the surface, these works occupied the space of museums in what seemed like radical interventions into institutions that had up until recently remained resolute in their ideas on the work of marginalized artists. However, some artists work on these radical topics was condensed to conversations around the limiting nature of their work. With both the *Whitney Biennial* in 1993

as well as a large survey on Caribbean culture at the Brooklyn Museum, it would seem that institutions were beginning to break down their barriers in favor of a more diverse array of artists. However critics and artists alike began to question whether these experiments were a mere misguided attempt to produce art that represented convenient labels, whether this art was a place holder for “Queer,” or “Black,” or “Woman²⁵.” Could this art actually do real work or was it simply another heavy handed attempt at forcing diversity into an unchanged institutional framework? This was a question that was explored through some shows, but not all.

As part of its biennial series, the Whitney Museum mounted in 1993 a large scale exhibit dedicated to showing the cutting edge in contemporary art. Organized by Elisabeth Sussman and Thelma Golden, the exhibit included an array of multimedia pieces, photography, installation, sculpture, and performance, all of which on some level were critiquing identity and what it meant to “belong.” Golden’s essay featured in the accompanying catalogue points to a rather interesting solution for this problem by subjecting the issue of whiteness and blackness to a critical lens. She posits that while Blackness has been developed into its own unique style, language, and culture, whiteness has never been defined, and thus is the unstated “norm,” a faux litmus test of who gets power and access and who does not²⁶. Much like this test, it seems that is how the artists for the show were defined; their proximity to an ingroup (in this case Black) is what defines their subject matter in their art. It would seem that the artists featured were only included because of their belonging to some marginalized identity

In a roundtable discussion published in the art journal *October*, a number of curators attack the racial politics of the show. However, their understanding of the work coupled with the

²⁵ Foster, Krauss, Kolbowski, Kwon, Buchloh. *The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial*. *October*, Vol 66 (Autumn, 1993).

²⁶ Thelma Golden. *What’s White?* Whitney Biennial Exhibition Catalogue. 1993. Pg. 28

fact that for many at the table, this is the first time dealing with race in relation to aesthetics, caused almost all to misread much of the work, and assume it is relying on low hanging fruit, that being identity. For example, in one section, Rosalind Krauss is critical of the work of Lorna Simpson. Simpson's piece, titled *Hypothetical?* (1992), featured in one of the galleries, is comprised of a series of mouth pieces belonging to various wind instruments which have been affixed to one side of the gallery. The opposite wall features a photograph of a Black person mouthing several words. The video mouths several different incidences that recently happened to African Americans in the late 90s. Krauss's reading of the piece is decidedly simple; to her it's about black rage, about "... the Wall of Jericho; black rage is going to well up, and the wall will be shattered²⁷." This is also after reading Golden's essay which further solidifies for her the claim that she believes Golden is trying to push the work into one racial lens. Although Krauss focuses on this point, she still acknowledges the works other formal characteristics. For one, the arrangement of the mouth pieces is within a grid, pointing to a more structural component to the piece, which plays upon a taxonomic history of exhibiting objects. Second, the various mouth pieces could also be an allusion to lip shapes and sizes that vary not only among African Americans, but among people in general. Third, the acoustics and the play of sound coupled with the symbolic mouth pieces which are meant to produce sound through physical contact, bring the piece into an audio sensory instillation, rather than just a piece on "Black Rage."

Alongside Simpson's work is the work of Glenn Ligon, which was prominently featured in the show. Titled, *On The Margins of the Black Book* (1992), the work is composed of a line of photographs, detailing African American/Black men in various forms of undress, from a figure

²⁷ Krauss. *The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial*. October, Vol. 66 (Autumn 1993). Pg. 6

dressed in a suit, but with his genitals exposed, to completely nude figures who contort and twist their bodies into acrobatic shapes. Below and above each photograph is a short quote from an voices, voices of historical figures such as Baldwin and Douglas, others from unknown sources, that reacts to the particular photograph it is near. Some are highly praiseworthy of the depiction of queer black men, seeing themselves reflected in the photos, while others object to the fetishistic lens that has captured only a glimpse of their own image. What Ligon achieves through this work is both a negation and praise of Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*, a book dedicated to nude photography of the black male subject. The piece acts as visual margins, which bring to focus the hidden nuances in the book, and for the first time enact a voice to each figure, so that the images are not just images, but active testimonials towards how black subjects may view themselves in the work. It is also done at a time when Mapplethorpe's work is under constant scrutiny by a conservative eye, and yet is still being established as part of the canon of photography. So Ligon's practice of using these distinct voices coupled with the photographs is at once a recitation on identity, yet it does not stop there. It is also a critique of the way in which text and image play a vital role in creating a narrative.

The moral of this is that not everything in the Whitney Biennial is designed to merely critique identity and stop there. It goes further and creates distinct narratives to the canon of art history, through taking on new and unique forms such as the combination of media and sculpture (Simpson), or text and image (Ligon). In other works, such as Fred Wilson's *Re Claiming Egypt* (1992), and Gary Simmons *Line-Up* (1992-1993), color is heavily emphasized in order to bring to focus the varied experiences of Black people in America, as well as a unique portrayal of the mediums the respective artists work in (Wilson & textiles & Simmons & sculpture). To say the Whitney Biennial in 1993 is explicitly about race is true and false. Certainly much of it is framed

as Black artists reacting to and responding to blackness in a contemporary moment. However the problem is that that frame unfortunately allows the viewer to think of the work as cheap identity politics, instead of its more experimental and structural forms. One begins to see a metaphorical box form around the work that cuts off thoughtful critique. This is still a moment where Black Artists are being tasked with creating and displaying works that deal overtly with blackness. However, what separates this show from its negative detractors is that that is not the only narrative that exists. It is one of the many varied experiences that the viewer is witnessing within the show. Here, Blackness works as an easy signifier of the works content. One is to view the work, through a lens of a Black voice and a Black subject matter. However, through the analysis of the above works, one can see that this is not all that is apparent. Through structure, form, and function, the works visually display the ways in which Black artists in the Biennial subvert traditional methods of art to create new narratives. To just read the works through a black lens is to limit and dissect their formal qualities from each other, thus ignoring how they play together.

For the Brooklyn Museum, the 1990's was a time when the institution was thinking about identity in a varied and multivalent way. Many of the shows mounted by the museum explored the cross cultural borders of identity, from a community organized series of shows that explored working in Brooklyn, to large scale exhibitions of Spanish and Latinx artists, to survey exhibits of the works of African Americans in the earlier 20th century. In 1990, the museum focused on displaying the works of various artists and artisans in a large exhibition on Caribbean Heritage and celebrations, including Carnival, Hosay, and Jonkonnu. The exhibit, titled *Caribbean Festival Arts (1990)*, included photo installations and murals, costumes and textiles, and a

ceremonial tadjah, which is tomblike in structure and required as part of the Hosay festival²⁸.

Covering a large part of Caribbean culture in scope, the exhibit makes apparent the unique differences between each festival, and while a celebration in a distinct culture, seems educational in its focus.

In the press release for the exhibition²⁹, the museum mentions all of this however what is missing are any names of artists/artisans who have crafted these pieces. From the installation pictures, there are multiple didactics which tell the story of the exhibition's organization, and a few placards next to specific costumes. This is not the museum's first foray into translating the story of Caribbean heritage to its audience. However, the programming surrounding the exhibition proved to be of an ambitious nature, with several key Caribbean historians hosting talks and workshops surrounding the history of the exhibits contents. Programming for the exhibition also included a series of informative workshops that took on various formats: there was a costume making workshop open to the public where participants were allowed access to the traditional ways of creating the elaborate costumes for each festival, musical demonstrations where through rhythmic drum sessions, the story of each festival and its themes were communicated, live storytelling where myths and moralizing fables were recited for an audience, as well as screenings of movies/films about Caribbean heritage. These were all organized in conjunction with the museum, and the exhibit had future plans to travel to other institutions. Much of the funding came from New York state councils particularly the Council on the Arts,

²⁸ Press Release for Caribbean Festival Arts. The Brooklyn Museum Digital Exhibitions Archives.

²⁹ The Brooklyn Museum Digital Exhibition Archives.

<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/1160>

and the New York State Legislature. All of the outside programming for the exhibition was free and open to the public.

What *Caribbean Festival Arts (1990)* became was a thoughtful telling of Caribbean heritage through various languages of art appropriate to the museum framework. One avenue, performance, was utilized as demonstrating the way in which stories, myths, fables, and personal histories, which are key to the fashioning of culture, are told through expressive movements and a cast of well-versed figures. Gallery talks were used to employ the knowledge of Caribbean specialists who pull focus towards one of the three festivals in the exhibition, through a lens of diasporic experience (one of the themes of a talk was African and European Origins of Caribbean Festivals) or a particular theme on what makes that festival distinct. Overall the message of the exhibition and its' educationally minded program is not to dictate what being Caribbean means, through a series of showcasing festivals important to that heritage, but rather bringing into focus the nuanced experiences of its shared cultural orators, as well as explaining and making apparent, how complex and varied being Caribbean can be. It also explains how Caribbean heritage is both historical and contemporary.

Between these two exhibitions there is a clear message that the museum wants the viewer to take away. From the Whitney, one is coming away with an aesthetic message as well as one on the nature of identity in the 1990s. Identity is something that is under a specific form of attack, be it from outside forces, the other, the white man, the institution itself, or from the self, who is constantly trying to undo the idea of what identity means. Whereas Blackness is concerned, in the structure of each exhibit, Blackness is the identity that must be defined in different terms. From the Brooklyn Museum, within Blackness, Caribbean heritage is something of a shared language between members of a cultural history, but which is multiple, something

that can be explained and taught through not only admiration of its cultural objects, but through a host of programs. Yet it is even more than that.

What the Whitney did was include members of marginalized groups into its 1993 biennial in order to make a statement on the current political landscape of Contemporary Art. Since Contemporary Art is often a fraught category, and detailing/benchmarking it can prove to be something of a problem, the museum's main goal was not to make this the focus, but instead shift it towards artists reacting to current political and social issues of the time. That is evident by its insistence on art that not only shocks the viewer, but forces one to critically engage with the subject matter in perhaps a relatively new way to their own experience. That is how you get Simpson's sculptural symbolism of African American lips and their relative silencing in regards to issues on race, and Ligon's marginal notations of the *Black Book* (undoing and reifying the objectification in Mapplethorpe). Yet the takeaway is still the racialized component of the work which overshadows its other parts. That is due to those who critiqued the show focusing on the ideas the art invoked, rather than its formal qualities, the art itself. In the words of Krauss,

“You make a work, just as any one of us writes a text: you present it, you publish it, it's out there, and its meaning is at work in a public space. And if we believe in a public space, which is the space of the political, then I don't think we should privilege the artist of the curator saying that this is strictly one thing.....That work on the material level of the piece is what constitutes the signifier.”³⁰

Krauss might have a hard time reading the work in the Caribbean Arts Festival, due to her insistence that the way the work of artists of color is framed in this show, particularly via its curators, is always through a lens of race. This may lead her to the same conclusions as she had for the Whitney Biennial. What is wholly different about the two is that Caribbean Festival Arts,

³⁰ Rosalind Krauss. *The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial*. October, Vol. 66 (Autumn, 1993). Pg. 6.

is situating a culture of long historical roots into a contemporary position, which brings forward the problem of contemporary art and the reading of artists of color within contemporary frames. Is it that the work has its place in one time period and never can be transposed into another? Is it that the work emphatically states one thing about itself and can never be something else? Both of these suppositions are wrong for the fact that they ignore how context can change through time. If as Krauss says, work exists for a public audience in a public space, then it is not merely a matter of what the material says, but how it configures within that space.

With both of these exhibitions, one is looking at a moment in the 90's when race plays a factor in who gets to be included into the museum, why, and for what purpose. The label minded biennial and the heritage centered festival arts are quite different in scope and scale, but they are symptomatic to one particular problem with the reception of black artists: mainly how does the black artist stand by themselves? In these shared contexts, it is hard to picture the artist as an individual maker of work, but rather someone who figures into a larger cultural practice, or heritage, which is very obvious in the Caribbean Festival Arts exhibit, and perhaps more discreet in the Whitney Biennial.

What is also apparent about both black artists/artisans who appear in each exhibition is an insistence upon using materials that have always been available in a contemporary fashion. Within the Biennial, multiple artists use books, language, and in the words of Golden, “totemic Items,³¹” to call forward issues pertinent to race related themes. Caribbean Festival arts is a contemporary view and practice, using as its material the shared traditions and heritage of a specific peoples.

³¹ Thelma Golden. *What's White....?* The Whitney Biennial. 1993

In both exhibitions is a sense of belonging, a sense of community that can be engaged by the viewer based off of one's own proximity to the subject. It is this unique relationship that creates discord within the likes of those who feature in the roundtable, and those who detract from the political and divisive subject matter in order to label it as "identity art." It is also what creates the bonds that allows these artists to exist in the same space under the same or similar labels, and within the same exhibitions. These labels are what become the defining thesis for each exhibition. In the next section, the legacy of Black artists will be explored in depth in exhibitions that take place in the early 2010's under the shifting political climate towards a "post-racial" America, and the unique problems of that notion.

Post Racial Fantasy/Reality (2012-2014)

In the early 2010's, the landscape of politics had evolved from what they were in the 90s. Identity and labels still played an important role to art, however questions of what it meant to exist in a post racial society were becoming more legible. These question were foregrounded in the fact that the current climate was questioning post raciality; and what that meant to the modern day art institution. These questions had several impacts on both the Brooklyn Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art, resulting in each institution having a unique outlook on the term, "diversity." Additionally, both institutions made it apparent that the term black aesthetic still mattered to the work of Black artists. The ways in which these conversations happened however were within idiosyncratic frames for each institution.

In 2014, the Brooklyn Museum mounted the exhibition, *Witness: Art in the Age of Civil Rights*. The exhibition coincided with the 50th anniversary of the landmark Civil Rights Act of

1964. It was curated by Teresa A. Carbone and Kellie Jones. The exhibition was composed of a survey of work by civil rights artists from 1960-1969. Civil Rights artists was a large and encompassing term that meant predominantly black artists, however the exhibition included Latinx artists as well. No two works were alike in form or in subject matter. The exhibition contained photography, sculpture, painting (both figurative and abstract), combined works, collage, and panel paintings. The point of the show, was to discuss not only the experiences of Black Artists living in the 60s, but how varied the practice towards art was at the time. The show was split into two parts; A thematically organized first section of fine art, and a photography filled section titled, “Document.”

In an opening statement by then director of the museum, Arnold L. Lehman, Lehman makes it known that the exhibitions concerns are for the community of Brooklyn, reiterating a point discussed before by the likes of earlier directors such as Buechner, and that it was to faithfully portray this story in art history. He also reaffirms that it is in a long tradition of exhibitions done by the museum on the works of Black Artists³².

Many themes help to situate the works in context with the larger theme of racial parity and advancement in society. Themes such as *Civil*, *A True Likeness*, *Bodies in Motion*, and *Radical Graphics* are informative not only of approaches to medium, but of the way the art in the show in some way depicts real life conflict. Particularly, in the section, *Bodies in Motion*, is the work of Tom Lloyd under an entirely new context. Lloyd’s work, *Narokan (1965)*, is part of a larger series with which *Moussakkoo (1968)* also belongs to. Here it would seem that the incessant flashing of lights which earlier denoted abstract signaling, can be seen as abstract bodies in constant states of motion. Lloyd’s work performs two actions here: it is the work of an

³² Arnold L. Lehman. Foreword. *Witness: Art in the Age of Civil Rights*. 2014. Pg. 7

artist utilizing sculptural and electronic elements to create abstract visions, while it is also a document of the work produced at a time of great social unrest. That is both the framing and a visual analysis of the work.

Although a second section contains photography that documents the Civil Rights movement, it appears that that is not the only documentary focused section. The “fine Art” section, which contains sculpture, painting, and prints, is also itself a document. However what exactly does this work document? In Lawrence’s *Ordeal of Alice (1963)*, a central figure clad in a white dress, white stockings, and black Mary jane shoes, carries three books as she is shot by several arrows. Her face expresses her pained state while other abstract figures crowd her like phantoms. One side is composed primarily of red, within which one can discern abject faces in white paint. A third of the painting is blue, where a forlorn face can be seen while another looks on almost gleeful at witnessing the pain of the figure. Lawrence makes every detail of the painting by breaking down the forms into shapes; an oval here creates the upper half of a head, boxy strokes of paint create dimension and surface details. In the exhibit the work is discussed thusly,

“Changes in politics, in representation, and in notions of access to rights and citizenship, as well as possibilities of belonging and more expansive and profound imaging of the black self and America, are invested in all the objects in Witness... .. They are works that once make visible and honor how human beings vanquished calcified boundaries, going from purportedly accepting to actively rejecting their place at the bottom of the polis.”³³

What one can infer from the above quote and of Lawrence’s work is that the work featured in Witness documents how artists not only dismantle prevalent stereotypes, but carve a unique

³³ Owen J. Dwyer. *Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement: Contradiction, Confirmation, and the Cultural Landscape*, in Romano and Raiford, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, 6.

niche for themselves by resisting their placement in the hierarchy of art. This is evidenced through their abstract ways of portraying trauma. Lawrence's work may be highly figurative, but it metaphorically references a universal pain that Black artists feel at this time. The same could be said for later sections of the exhibit such as *Exhibit A: Evidence and the Art Object*, where black artists works are compared to that of contemporary white artists, whose different approaches to the same medium and style closely mirror each other.

In this section, work like Jim Dine's *Black Bathroom #2 (1962,)* evokes the work of Duchamp's ready-mades particularly the fountain urinal. However here the appearance of black oil paint on the wall behind the china made wash basin, denotes the disparities between segregated bathrooms in the American south during Jim crow era segregation. So, as Dine's work functions as a work which aims to make clear that reality, it also functions as an Art Object, an art piece, and an object that is a reclamation of an older artwork in a subverted form.

In Elizabeth Catlett's *Homage to My Young Black Sisters (1968)*, a wooden figure of a woman stands proudly, one foot forward as she reach towards the sky, her hand ending in a fist. The work at once immediately calls back comparisons to Matisse and Brancusi, using smooth and modular human forms to create a modernist take on the human figure. Yet here it is not about color or exploring proportions of the body; the work is a proud reclamation of an African American spirit, one that remains indomitable even through the thicket of civil unrest.

Much of *Witness* functions as a place of portraying as faithfully and as accurately as possible, how Black artists respond to trauma, and how that shapes the theme of their work. It is also a place where the word "document," is not strictly speaking, a text or an image, but sometimes a combination of both, other times a sculptural work, that detail how this period in art history reflects the traumas and historical moments in the 60s. It is also a place where a universal

aesthetic cannot be argued for, because every artist approaches their respective medium, based off of a unique combination of lived experience and historical imagery available to them at this time. Here, Blackness is defined as reactive to the racism of the time; the ways in which Black artists create works that mirror the social realities of this decade.

At the Whitney Museum, an exhibit in 2012, titled, *American Legends: From Calder to O'Keefe*, demonstrated that one artists could satisfy all African American experiences. The exhibit surveyed what the museum thought of as prominent art historical figures in the 20th century. Out of the 13 artists surveyed in the entire exhibition, only one was African American: Jacob Lawrence. In the exhibition booklet, while each artist for the most part received a biographical text that situates them in the canon of art history, Lawrence is briefly mentioned, next to a couple of images of his work and his connection to the Black Arts Movement of the 20th century. It however does not mention reference the Black Arts Movement, instead generalizing an all-encompassing practice of Black artists belonging to one group movement over the course of the 20th century.

Lawrence's *Tombstones* (1942), is featured in the exhibition as an example of how the American painter pioneered not only a unique style but a sizable contribution to the African American art world. The work features several figures on a stoop in an undisclosed part of a city; at the top is a woman, followed by a man dressed in all black, followed by a young woman who sits on the steps, followed by a man in suspenders at the bottom of the stoop. In the front part of the painting are a baby in a stroller, a graveyard filled with crosses and tombstones with a sign stating "Tomb Stones," and a woman holding a baby whilst sitting on a stoop next to the graveyard. Elements of life and death, alluded to by the two babies and the graveyard, abound in the work. Lawrence's figures are also not distinct; except for the occasional dots of white paint

to denote eyes, their identity remains relatively anonymous. Thematically, the work is a portrayal of life, whether it is every day or a specific occasion is not known, but it seems banal in the arrangement of figures. It is also a work that demonstrates the specific style with which Lawrence paints figures, approaching theme in a graphic manor, and creating sharp outlines and filling those in with only one or two colors.

Another work by Lawrence, *Shipping Out* (1947), part of his *War Series*, features a processional of figures moving vertically up the painting. Utilizing greens, browns, blacks, and tan browns, army colors. Lawrence composes the figures in profile, with some facing each other while others face away in opposite directions. Each figure in fact, is lying down in a barrack style boarding situation, with personal effects such as bags placed around them, as well as hanging at the foot of each bed. Here one can see Lawrence's particular approaches to bodies. The bodies curve, as if in motion, in odd ways that seem juxtaposed to other body parts; a torso on one soldier is turned away from his legs. The work also loosely alludes to imagery of slave cabins, in which figures are closely cropped together.

The opening catalogue makes it apparent that there are only two styles of art being practiced in this period: Realist and Modernist³⁴. Besides being a limited way of viewing the work, it creates problems within work such as Lawrence, because it is hard to place him in one school. Is he Realist because what his works present are everyday scenes of life, or is he Modernist because his style is non-realistic, and borders on less figurative and slightly more amorphous abstract figures? These two readings are too narrow for the work of Lawrence and much of the work in the show. Thus how does one define the work of Lawrence? Is the show

³⁴ Barbara Hasku. Catalogue Essay. American Legends from Calder to O'Keefe catalogue. 2012. Pg., 3

attempting to connect the fact that his work speaks to a Black audience and the fact that his work is realism as a way of saying that Black artists work in a realist style in order to portray the message of race through their work? Or is it the Modernist approach where the work of Lawrence is being labelled as Modernist for its abstract take on Black themes?

The other glaring fact is that Lawrence's purpose in the show is only in respect to his race. Lawrence portrays black figures, partaking in black life. So his work satisfies on one hand a need to see race in the work of artists of color, particularly black artists. On the other, this reading is too simple minded, since there is also the argument of where to place Lawrence within the show's historical split in approaches to medium.

It is important to make one thing clear about this comparison; while *American Legends* does not feature exclusively black artists, it does diminish the work of Lawrence to an artist who served a significant placement in art history, only by way of his advancements within a separate Black art history canon. Here it makes it clear that Lawrence can be considered a legend, but that there is something uniquely different about his particular legend status. While artists like Ellsworth Kelly and Jasper Johns are allowed to be regarded as cultural art figures, Lawrence must serve the purpose of "Black," cultural legend, instead of someone who is universally applicable.

Conversely, *Witness*'s focus on a particular decade in American history, allows for the show to acknowledge a broad stretch of works in ways that walk the fine line of black art. It is true that most of these artists identify as black, and make works that deal overtly with race, yet that is not the case for every artist, nor is that the frame for the show. Nor is it the only thing to witness in the work. *Witness* performs the action of defining how Black artists view themselves in relation to growing outside threats. It does not attempt to define what Blackness is, but rather

to historicize a moment when Black artists react to trauma via work that represents racially charged subjects. This is largely omitted from *American Legends*, in favor of centering the canon on specific figures. Yet this centering is predicated on erasing the work and legacy of other African American artists.

Lawrence's work appears in both exhibits where the context of it dramatically changes. In *Witness*, it serves the purpose of allowing the viewer to see a unique style from the artist, one that is more graphic, more explicit in its meaning, more gruesome in intention. From works like the *Ordeal of Alice*, to *American Revolution* (1963), the works are blatant symbols of the chaotic time of the '60s. Of the work by the artist that appears in *American Legends*, one can witness a more subdued take on similar themes of black life, opting out of more graphic scenes and instead for something that resembles quiet city life and army scenes. Of course, this is not to say that this is purely on Lawrence. Rather it is to say that the way the Whitney frames their respective show, is around centering specific "heroes" of art history. So if there are multiple heroes, then what of the other Black artists who produced work in the time of the 20th century? How does one exactly measure who gets to count as an American Legend?

It would seem after looking and comparing these two exhibitions to each other that they have the effect of showcasing a fact about the way institutions may think about the importance of race in the twenty-first century. On the one hand in a post-racial fantasy, it would not matter to have the work of one Black artist (Lawrence) in the space of an exhibit surrounded by white artists because Lawrence is doing the diverse work for the institution. His work is explicitly about Black life and he is a Black artist; therefore, by all accounts the exhibit is diverse in nature and in scope. This is further emphasized by the Whitney's incessant use of the terms African American heritage and African American contribution, as if no one else is available, and

Lawrence himself can summarize the total Black American experience. On the other hand, The Brooklyn Museum supposes a world where racism persists, where the work of artists of color, particularly Black artists still needs a spotlight in the space of an institution to account for centuries of exclusion. Here that is the work that *Witness* performs, because it not only compares and contrasts the work of White artists to Black artists, but it is refined in its survey, mining one particular decade, and thematically explaining the art of that time.

Here the use of “Blackness” as a container for inclusion becomes quite clear. The Whitney again emphasizes that Black Artists produce Black art, here also adding the function of serving a Black viewer exclusively. A clear box or container is formed around Lawrence’s work, cutting it from any type of unique critique. On the other hand, the Brooklyn Museum deploys a weak or porous container. Though all of the artists point to racial conflicts within their work, it is not a show of “Blackness,”: but a show of struggle, of the tumultuous 1960s, and of photography and fine art, situated as living documents of history.

Conclusion:

In tracing the history of displaying the work of Black artists at the Whitney Museum and the Brooklyn Museum, one begins to discern significant differences between the two institutions. At the Whitney, Black artist’s work is viewed through a racial lens, stripping any nuance or other structural characteristics. This is due in part to the Whitney boxing the work of Black artists into a container which one can label “Black Art,” a poorly defined box that forces Black artists work to communicate an idea about a Black experience. Meanwhile at the Brooklyn Museum, the

work of Black artists may signify race, but it is not tasked with performing the same thing. Instead, artists may be grouped into one box based off of race, yet their work can be seen in many different contexts. At both institutions are two models of displaying the works of Black Artists; one at the Whitney is defined as using Black artists works to discuss race, pigeonholing them into a box, while at the Brooklyn museum, the works of Black artists are held in a weaker container, allowed to define what they are about and who they are for. It is what one would expect of art, to allow for a site of conversation not limited to an identity minded message or communicating a certain view on race or of the artists as strictly identifying within the categories of a certain race (here blackness). The lines of this container model can be followed throughout all of the exhibits given as examples of these museums approaching the work of Black artists.

Each institution's creation has led to shifts in the values placed on their collections of art. Whitney, beginning as a studio club of few artists who were the founder's favorites, allowed for nepotism and favoritism to define what the museum thought of as American Art. In the wake of her passing, a shift was needed to determine the future of the institution as a place for displaying art. Yet the question of what is American Art became a resounding call for the museum to attempt to define that category. It also allowed for the museum to limit itself in the artists it presented, relying on American born/based artists and not acknowledging the global currents in art history. Comparing this to the Brooklyn Museum, which from inception has been about supporting the community's needs, whether that be to civilize the immediate public, or provide a space for artists working in the area. The Brooklyn Museum in order to function must put the public's needs first, and consider how the environment around them has changed. These two different models are what have led to the following exhibitions.

In the earlier exhibitions at the turn of the 1970s, what was witnessed in the conversation surrounding Black artists were competing narratives; That Black artists made work that exclusively or in some part spoke on race, and that Black artists were a diverse group, creating works whose meanings could be decentered from race. These competing ideologies were at odds with each other simply because they were contradictory. One cannot have an artist both working on racial topics, while decentering them. At least in this specific time period. It was also attempting to draw from a history of Abstraction, which up until this time had by and large ignored the contributions of Black artists, because they did not reflect the overall reception of Abstract work. In the works of Lloyd and many of the artists who appeared in *Contemporary Black Artists in America (1971)* at the Whitney, color became a poetic example to how Black artists worked within the medium to create new and impressive worlds, signaling through ephemeral means (in Lloyd). Yet an organizing principle thesis of “diversity,” and “Black Aesthetics” cheapened the work to something that does not make sense to the viewer. It is nonsensical to force a racial reading on to work that clearly is resistant of that status.

In Brooklyn, the artists who represent *New Black Artists (1969)* are resistant to that same status. Here, the work is explicitly putting forward Black subjects, or Black subject matters. It is figurative; one can discern the race of figures present, and there is a racial reading that can be forced out of these works. The artists and curator however resist the notion that their work is Black art, instead favoring an idiosyncratic approach to each artists work. It is this that separates the two shows, one where the Black voices are relatively silent in the show, and another where they are loud and heard.

Brooklyn exemplifies the weak container method because the convenient label of Blackness cannot function in the same way that it does at the Whitney. It is not Blackness that is

the determining factor for inclusion, but the work itself and the artists who happen to be Black. The Whitney on the other hand is the strong container model. It pigeon holes the artists together under a false sense of diversity. It does this due to the Whitney's history of exclusion, of not acknowledging the work that Black Artists put forth in art.

In the 1990's, with identity politics on the rise over the past two decades reaching a critical point. Black artists work was being discussed in many a similar way it had been discussed as early as the late 60s. Again the need to put Black artists into a specific box cropped up in the two exhibitions at the Whitney and Brooklyn Museum. Here the container model is still carried through and each museum reaffirms its specific stance. At Whitney, artists who appear in the Biennial due so not only because their work is on the vanguard of contemporary practice, but because the work reflects something about the artists own identity, in this case, the artist's blackness. Here the works and artists again satisfy the diversity quota of the institution. Why this is a problem is because although the work is representative of a Black experience, it is one that is not the artists own. Ligon does not personally appear in any of the images featured in Mapplethorpe's Black Book, nor does he appear in the dialogue which he features in his installation. Rather his critique is enmeshed between text and image, between objectification and praise. It is in the liminal space between two opposing modes of being and feeling. In a different way, Simpson is not purely the subject of her piece just because she is Black and the work reflects on Black life. Through structure, form, order, and the juxtaposition of opposing forms (static and motion) Simpson offers a critique of each category, a place to contemplate their motives, and a place where the clashing of the two reflect the experience of silencing oneself. Neither of these artists are focusing on themselves, their work reflecting so many different takes and meanings, and yet in the biennial, they are Black artists with Black subject matters.

In Brooklyn, *Caribbean Festival Arts (1990)*, which situates Caribbean heritage within a contemporary frame via the appropriating of unique programming, is less explicit in calling Black artists Black arts producers. For one, the concept of Black is not one thing. In the previous instances that it has cropped up, it has denoted African Americans. Here, Brooklyn Museum is looking at a more global strain of arts and textiles producers, and in doing so is contemplating on how blackness is not a monolith. Through this diasporic lens, one sees the notion of Black as universal unravel, because although blackness can be found in many instances, it is not the same wherever one goes. Here group access is used, but only in service of making sure that those who are included in the exhibit are the cultural arbiters of Caribbean history.

Demonstrated in the 90s is both the limiting box model, in the Whitney, and the weaker container model at the Brooklyn. By limiting the contextual frame for which one is to view the work in the biennial, the artwork becomes about race and nothing more. By allowing for a more nuanced take on traditional heritage, and conveying through educational outlets something about that heritage, the work in the other show resists this limiting critique.

In the early 2010's the work of Black artists is being boxed in both exhibitions, in service of different goals. In the Whitney, Lawrence figures as an American legend, yet a legend that can only discuss a black experience. While other figures get to be universal American legends, Lawrence is a Black American legend, Black almost used as a limiting adjective. To say that his work only speaks to a black audience further condenses his canon, here only exemplified by two contributions, to that of a brief period in art history. It does not necessarily tie into the rest of the show, nor is it shown how it figures into the greater canon of art history, besides being one of many examples of the work Black artists produced in the early 20th century. Lawrence's work is there for abridged, into work that ignores many of its subtle formal qualities, or how this may

have influenced his later peers or other artists. Instead it is a show that shakily attempts to uplift certain American artists for the sake of defining America as a place of legendary talent, yet on no formal basis does it ever define the criteria for their inclusion, except in the case of Lawrence who is there for diversity.

At Brooklyn, the stage has been set for works that portray the history of the 60s. Linking a distinct timeline to the work, plus emphasizing the shows points through thematically hanging the work, helps to visualize the overall goal of the exhibit. While the work is merely racial in nature and some of it is figurative, leaving open the possibility for a formal Black reading, it is doubly about art as a reactive force, a force that reacts to racism within America. Through this thematic display, different modes of reading the work occur, such as situating Black artists who call forth new ways of approaching the same medium such as the comparison to Duchamp one can see in the work of Jim Dine. Also, the fact that Lloyds pieces end up in *Witness* under an entirely different context, here how the abstract signaling of *Narokan (1965)*, which resembles other light projections for advertisement, is some form of signaling to someone, communicating a message out to the world. Many of these artists should be considered American legends, because of their contributions to the canon, and because of the subject matter that their work covers.

One comes to this realization that the container model has stayed pretty static at the Whitney. Having not changed in over 40 years, the museum has developed this model due to its history filled with a lack of early inclusion. The Whitney only started creating exhibits dedicated to the work of Black artists in the early 70s, this cause being lead primarily by outside forces such as the BECC. Without their pressure, the museum may have stayed stagnant until outside politics forced a change within this system (hence the label minded 90s). Further down this

timeline it is clear that although the work of diversity within the Whitney is done here and there, real inclusion has not been a concept that has fully been embraced. Since it is limiting to say Black artists make Black art or that Black art has some universal easily recognizable aesthetic, there is an anxiety that Black artists have no place within the museum. That is why it has been the goal of the Whitney to showcase the work of Black artists. However, this does not mean that Black artists have no place in the museum other than in this respect. Rather this system is flawed to begin with because if that were the case, than almost anyone one non-black would indeed need to produce work that reflected something unique about their own group identifying experience. Yet it would be absurd to call work produced by the types of figures who appear in American Legends as White Art. Therefor Golden's influential essay on dismantling the notion of whiteness allows us to look at this problem head on and realize this; one can display the work of Black artists without commenting on their work being Black art and still have a need to include them because they are Black artists. Both of those things can exist within the same space.

The Brooklyn Museum on the other hand has never had to struggle with such a problem. For one, *New Black Artists (1969)* comes at almost two decades worth of Black art exhibitions at the museum, and the thesis of the show is framed in favor of dismantling this strongly held belief of a Black aesthetic. The late 60s, is a time when the museum does not have to worry about incorporating diversity into its programming, instead creating a space for unknown Black artists which harkens back to its earliest exhibition, *The Negro Artist Comes of Age (1941)*, and continues a tradition of the museum attempting to discover and display the works of up and coming Black artists. From there, one sees how Brooklyn demonstrates that Blackness is not a monolithic identity leading up to the 1990 show *Caribbean Festival Arts*, that features an exploration of cultural heritage to a universal audience. Finally, the 2010s bring the museum into

the practice of viewing artwork as documents, documents that can inform the viewer on the history of a specific time, a specific movement, and how artists identities are affected and shaped by that movement. A strict container model has therefor never been needed by the Brooklyn Museum, because diversity is at its core.

Problems around diversity, within an institutional art framework certainly do not stop here. They are exemplified in recent events such as the *Whitney Museum's 2017 Biennial*, in which the work of a non-black artists depicting a Black subject matter incited controversy over who is in control of specific narratives. It is also at the heart of movements like Decolonize this Place, which are attempting to hold the Brooklyn Museum accountable for not only a lack of diversity, but also being a museum that contains looted items. Additionally, while Black art is always needed in the museum, and conversations around it constantly under scrutiny, it should be noted that the museum must diversify its curatorial staff in order to progress forward and begin to actually change these dilemmas it has with displaying and discussing Black art.

The Brooklyn Museum has also not shied away from potential detractors of its lack of diversity and inclusion. In a recent report done by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, key areas that were focused on were the museums contemporary approach to its collections, providing thoughtful and engaging feminist and race theory critiques of its current collection, as well as a design to the museum that allows for greater accessibility. It also mentions the programming, Saturday night parties, which introduce a wider more localized audience to the museum's new exhibitions³⁵. The case study also covers the entire history of the Museum, with a focus on

³⁵ Sweeney & Schonfeld. *I Recommend Dancing: Brooklyn Museum's History of Inclusion and Moment of Transition*. January 23rd, 2018.

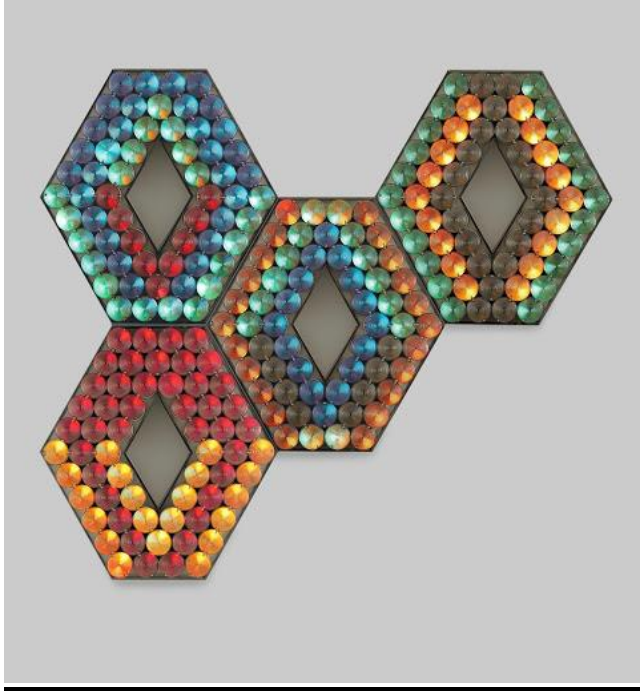
inclusion and diversity amongst cultural staff. This is needed in order to ensure that going forward, the museum can look at itself and see the community of Brooklyn reflected.

Meanwhile the Whitney still struggles to fully integrate its collection. Part of this could be the idea of what is American, limiting the need for a more global perspective. While Brooklyn is viewing Blackness through a myriad of experiences, the Whitney, may only think of blackness in regards to an African American experience. Additionally, in creating these ideas of “American Art,” the Whitney has done the disservice of boxing its art into convenient labels.

What one has witnessed over the course of these 40 years of art are the shifts surrounding the conversation of abstraction, from dealing overtly with race, to becoming fragmented comments where race is undiscernible in the work. Conversely work of figuration containing a black subject is not always strictly dealing with race, but is more poetic in nature, dealing with subconscious thought and process. Moving towards the 90s when culture, heritage, and identity play an important part of formally reading the works, while still making up only half the conversation. One witnesses how critics and institutions fail to do the work of unpacking these pieces such as in the work of Simpson and Wilson, opting instead to point to the most visual information in the piece; the blackness of the work. Finally, in the last two shows what is observed is a historical look at the legacy of Black artists, and how much of the way their work is discussed has not changed a great deal within each institutions framework. That works for the Brooklyn Museum, which has always documented the lives and work of Black artists with a nuanced approach and only further reaffirms their commitment to Black artists. That does not work at the Whitney, where essentially they have done the work of reaffirming their stance of Black artists making Black art.

In conclusion, while it is important to include Black artists in the museum, it should also be equally important that their work is not only accessed through its proximity to the identity of the artist. There needs to be a reading of the work that does not heavily pivot towards an abstract idea of Blackness. Instead visual cues can and sometimes do signal one experience under the many of blackness, but it is not a totality, meaning that it cannot summarize all of Blackness. It is therefore the responsibility of the Whitney to perhaps take a page from the Brooklyn Museums book and approach Black art with a new manor, that decenters the conversation of Black aesthetics.

Images:



Moussakkoo (1965)

Tom Lloyd



Meditations (1969)

William L. Howell



Hypothetical? (1992)

Lorna Simpson



Notes on the Margins of the Black Book (1993)

Glenn Ligon



Narokan (1965)

Tom Lloyd



Ordeal of Alice (1963)

Jacob Lawrence



black bathroom #2

Black Bathroom #2 (1962)

Jim Dine



Homage to My Young Black Sisters (1968)

Elizabeth Catlett



Tombstones (1942)

Jacob Lawrence



Shipping Out (1947)

Jacob Lawrence

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