

INTRODUCTION

Tangiers and Paris, Englewood, New Jersey, and Harlem, New York, San Francisco and La Jolla, California, have been sites for my many meetings with Faith Ringgold over the last fifteen years. We met first as artist and critic. Since then we have become close friends, staying frequently in each other's houses; eating and traveling together; confiding and sharing personal stories; discussing our mothers and the process of aging. From our different perspectives — that of a black American-born artist and a white European-born art historian/critic — we have planned actions and compared notes, analyzed and argued over the history of art and politics in this country.

During the time I have known Ringgold I have watched dramatic changes and shifts in her art, life, and status in the art world. The first time I saw a sizable body of her work was in 1983, when we spent several days viewing it together in her rented storage bins on 132nd Street and Broadway. There for the first time I saw her now-legendary powerful 1967 paintings, *The Flag is Bleeding* and *U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power*, and what she described as her “art trunks,” in which her soft paintings and sculptures were neatly rolled up — waiting to be taken on the road, so to speak. In 1983 she was a nationally known artist who, shrewdly and ingeniously but somewhat precariously, supported herself through exhibitions, performances, and lectures around the country on college campuses. She had not exhibited in New York City for many years and it was only a year later, in 1984, when, in the context of her first major retrospective in New York, she boldly showed *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* — the first of the story quilts for which she is now internationally known. This event was followed by more mainstream success. Her work, especially the story quilts, has been purchased by many major museums and collections, and is exhibited all over the world, in Japan and Egypt as well as in Europe. In contemporary American art generally, as well as in African-American and feminist circles, Ringgold is now a major figure recognized and sought out by critics, historians, and audiences alike.

A few years ago, I wrote an article entitled “A Trojan Horse” in which I praised Ringgold as a “terrific and successful troublemaker during the 1960s,” contrasting this time to her later, more covert actions as a troublemaker. Ringgold has always taken great delight in this description of her smuggling subversive material into the citadel of the art world in seemingly benign forms. But, whether one thinks of Ringgold as the young firebrand of the 1960s or the distinguished world-famous older artist of the 1990s, there are constants — her boldness and originality as an artist and human being; her fiery independence, remarkable pragmatic savvy, and strategizing abilities; and her steadfast passionate political and feminist goals. She is also inveterately inventive — in her subjects, approaches, and materials. And increasingly, she has turned to writing: first the texts of her story quilts, then children’s books, and now this autobiography.

In assuming the roles of writer and editor, Ringgold and I added another layer to our relationship. The last year has been an intense year of exchanges while she wrote and I edited *We Flew over the Bridge*. In February 1994, we spent a heady week in a small hotel on the Place du Panthéon in Paris while we participated in a conference at the Palais du Luxembourg (“A Visual Arts Encounter: African Americans in Europe”) and worked late each night on drafts of the first two chapters of the book. More important, we spent time exploring the dynamics and parameters of the editing process. After that, we communicated between East and West Coast by mail, fax, and telephone. Drafts went back and forth: sometimes sporadically, almost languidly, over weeks; at other times frantically over the space of a few hours. Pages covered with handwritten notes and questions, explanations and arguments, poured in on our respective fax machines. We invented “East Command” and “West Command” headquarters and sent imperious orders back and forth in high-spirited faxed notes. In July 1994, Ringgold and her husband, Burdette, went to dinner at the White House, and I waited with impatience for her report on this event. One lovely morning, a drawing of me flying to the post office appeared. Occasionally, we disagreed over ideas and attitudes in terse exchanges and abrupt faxed memos. There were long early-morning telephone conversations, and even longer late-night talks in which we discussed content, style, pacing, and the emotional and political implications of the text — as we moved through her life and art.

This experience with Ringgold has been extraordinary for me. On one level, I found it endlessly demanding, fascinating, and full of surprises; and on another level, intensely difficult, sometimes deeply troubling. It seems to me that at the heart of successful

editing is trust and respect on both sides. But there is also an element of risk — one has to take risks in editing and that is unnerving. Frequently I would ask myself, particularly late at night, was I too intrusive, too demanding or editing from an ignorant vantage point? Was I displaying a Eurocentric attitude in my suggestions? Was I insensitive to the issues of motherhood as I have no children of my own? (In retrospect, one of the funniest editing moments came when I squeamishly and absentmindedly edited out much of the description of pain in a childbirth scene, only to realize what I had done, and shamefacedly restore it.) Sometimes, too, I became enthralled with Ringgold's thoughts and memories and blithely and eagerly read page after page, forgetting that I was supposed to be reading slowly with a diligent critical eye.

I would like to thank Faith Ringgold deeply for inviting me to be the book's editor. It has made me think anew about the nature and importance of autobiographical narratives and of their history, particularly in this country, and of Ringgold's contribution to all this. The experience of reading and editing *We Flew over the Bridge* has moved and inspired me. Clearly, I am only one of the first among thousands of readers whose lives will be positively imprinted by this book, and who will respond strongly — emotionally, intellectually, politically, and psychologically — to the brilliant, tough, and insightful voice of Faith Ringgold, a voice that speaks with equal eloquence on the printed page and on the painted canvas.

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February 5, 1995, Berkeley, California