Remembering the Black Arts Movement

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The Black Art Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.

—Larry Neal, 1968

In theory and practice, artists of the Black Arts movement have been a major driving force in the growth of a remarkable, rich, and diverse array of aesthetics and styles, driven by a concern of uniting people of African descent all over the world. They have produced a range of voices and a rich body of artwork that is truly trans-African, but also transnational. These special issues (numbers 29 and 30) do not claim to be comprehensive or representative of all the groups, movements, and artists who worked in different cities across North America and other parts of the African Diaspora. Rather, they focus selectively on works by artists who formed or joined in forming collectives such as AfriCOBRA, “Where We At” Black Women Artists, Spiral, and Weusi, as well as others who operated independently within the same aesthetic impulses and ideological framework. Some of the contributions to these special issues highlight pioneers, independent masters whose impressive body of work exerted a tremendous influence on the Black Arts movement, in addition to others who have shared similar concerns without belonging to a specific group or collective. Some of the essays engage the thematic, aesthetic, and ideological concerns that dominated the works of these artists. These have ranged from responding to the visual tropes of racist and stereotypical representation, to confronting the legacy of absence in the work of artists associated with the Black Arts movement, as well as the neglected legacy of Black Abstraction. All have shared the concern of a creation of a new art and aesthetics that are modernist in essence but rooted in the black experience. They also include essays by younger artists whose works are concerned with the representations of blackness as it is informed by emerging discourses in the fields of black art and visual culture from gender, sexuality, and feminist perspectives. They also provide insights into how such discourses are evoked in mapping absence and presence within postmodernist and conceptualist frameworks.

The Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s grew out of the achievements of artists of the Harlem Renaissance. These artists found a new source of inspiration in their African ancestral heritage and imbued their work with their experience as blacks in America. The works of pioneers like Aaron Douglas, Hale Woodruff, and Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller formed the genesis of a modernist style and aesthetic that influenced the development of African American art throughout the twentieth century. By the 1950s and early 1960s, masters such as John Biggers, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Loïs Mailou Jones, Elizabeth Catlett, and Charles White were fully exploring the African American experience and its rich African heritage, ultimately impacting the Black Arts movement profoundly.

Newly independent African countries in the late 1950s and early 1960s and the global decolonization movement inspired a tremendous solidarity among artists of African descent in the United States and other parts of the African Diaspora. The rise of a modern postcolonial African art, which encompasses a new visual vocabulary and symbols rooted in the African experience, has its cross-influences among artists of the Black Arts movement. The African continent became a home and a place of pilgrimage to which several African American artists embarked on a journey to study and reclaim their rich African heritage. Participation in major pan-African forums such as First World Art Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar 1966 and FESTAC ’77 in Lagos, Nigeria, exposed African American artists to African masters such as Skunder Boghossian, Malangatana, Papa Ibra Tall, Ibrahim El-Salahi, and Bruce Onobrakpeya. Another influential artist of the time was the Cuban Wifredo Lam, whose work
creatively synthesizes African and Western imagery within a modernist and Caribbean perspective. All of these pan-African artists have impacted the style and aesthetic of the Black Arts movement.

For the benefit of our readers who are less familiar with the visual manifestations of the Black Arts movement, it would be worthwhile to further elaborate on some of the collectives and groups of artists that have formed such a vibrant movement. Foremost among these groups has been AfriCOBRA, which was founded in the late 1960s by Jeff Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones Hogu, and others. AfriCOBRA is an acronym for African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, originally derived by combining “Afri” (Africa) with “Cobra” (Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists). In AfriCOBRA’s 1970 manifesto, written by Donaldson and his cohorts, the group’s objectives were to develop a new African American aesthetic and commit themselves to the principles of social responsibility, local artistic involvement, and promotion of pride in black self-identity. To fulfill those principles, certain aesthetic qualities were emphasized: the sublime image, innovative approaches to rhythm, and the use of high-energy colors. In addition, the fusion of pan-African elements in the works parallels the improvisational and stylistic innovations found in contemporary African and African American music. Another such artists’ collective, founded in Harlem in 1965, adopted the name Weusi (which means “blackness” in Swahili) and declared its objectives “to preserve, develop, and promote African and African American culture through the visual arts.” Weusi evolved out of the Twentieth Century Creators, a coalition of African American artists also based in Harlem, who called for the creation of positive “Black art for Black people.” To reach out to the community, in the mid-1960s the group established the Annual Harlem Outdoor Art Festival, held successfully for fourteen years. Weusi was credited with the creation of the annual Harlem-based Black Ball, a fund-raising event that included dance, music, poetry readings, and a fashion show. The ball was originally developed as an alternative to Christmas, which had become a commerce-oriented celebration. To create independent spaces and institutions for African American art, Weusi established the Nyumba Ya Sanaa (House of Art) Gallery in 1967, and the Nyumba Ya Sanaa Academy of Fine Arts in 1969. In addition to curating and hosting exhibitions of African and African American artists, Nyumba gallery served as a meeting place for black artists to exchange ideas on issues ranging from African culture and aesthetics to artistic techniques. Weusi as a group valued individual creativity within an African-centered perspective and sought to promote cultural pride and self-reliance while protesting injustice. Weusi has developed a new iconography and visual vocabulary, which, like those of AfriCOBRA, have become expressive of black aesthetics.

While never associated publicly with the Black Arts movement, Spiral, another short-lived and loosely associated group, nevertheless shared some of the ethos of the Black Arts movement in search of a black aesthetic and the concern with representation of blackness. Spiral was formed on July 5, 1963, as a result of that meeting. The group’s name is based on the Archimedean spiral that “moves outward embracing all directions, yet constantly upward.” Spiral brought together a dynamic group of artists divergent in terms of age, background, interests, and style of work, which ranged from abstractionist to realist. Their biweekly meetings became forums for debate and an exchange of ideas on aesthetics, artistic standards, and the question of social responsibility vis-à-vis artistic freedom. A concern for achieving racial equality and affirming black identity in a white-dominated art world unified the group. Their goal was to search for points of intersection that allowed them to work together while preserving their individuality as artists. After two years the group had an exhibition in which all members showcased works executed only in black and white. Despite the show’s success, Spiral ceased to exist after two years, because the artists believed that they had outgrown the aesthetic limitations and urgent concerns of the period.
attention by the late 1950s and early 1960s, black female artists were underrepresented at the onset of the Black Arts movement. In the spring of 1971 fourteen African American women organized a landmark exhibition at the Acts of Art Gallery in Greenwich Village, “Where We At” Black Women Artists, the first of its kind. Inspired by the popularity and success of the earthy, grassroots show, the group, which included artists such as Dindga McCannon, Kay Brown, Faith Ringgold, Jerri Crooks, Charlotte Kâ (Richardson), and Vivian E. Browne, formed an artists’ collective, retaining the exhibition title as its name. The history and mission of the organization was published in the catalogue “Where We At”: Black Women Artists; A Tapestry of Many Fine Threads. Themes such as the unity of the black family, black male-female relationships, contemporary social conditions, and African traditions have been central to their artistic explorations. The group served as a source of empowerment for African American female artists as they controlled their representation and foregrounded issues concerning black women’s sensibility and aesthetics. Like Afri-COBRA, the group was active in bringing art to the community and using it as a tool of awareness and liberation. The group organized workshops in schools, hospitals, and cultural centers, and art classes for youth in their communities.

While many African American artists in the 1960s and 1970s joined in forming groups and movements, many others worked independently within a similar aesthetic and ideological framework. The works of David Hammons, Melvin Edwards, Elizabeth Catlett, Dana Chandler, and others exemplify the richness and diversity of the Black Arts movement during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s. Historically, many African American artists have deliberately worked within the conventions of abstraction in general and abstract expressionism in particular. Artists of the Black Arts movement often regarded these modes of expression as mainstream during the 1960s and 1970s. Viewed as less African-centered at a time when positive figurative images served the need for expressing pride in race and cultural heritage, the work of African American abstractionists was often excluded from major surveys of the Black Arts movement. Ironically, mainstream museums and art galleries also excluded such artists from their surveys of abstract expressionism, while white art critics and historians in America glossed over their distinct contribution to this movement. It is only recently that Black Abstraction has gained some official recognition, with Kellie Jones’s groundbreaking exhibition Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction, 1964–1980, held at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2006. A closer look at the work of these artists reveals their distinct style, color, and aesthetic
perspectives, which often overlap and intersect with the artistic vision and ideological concerns of the Black Arts movement. The works of artists such as Ellsworth Ausby, Norman Lewis, Charles Searles, and Al Loving, among others included in this historic exhibition, are examples of this neglected tradition.

The last two decades witnessed the publication of several scholarly texts that have critically revisited the Black Arts movement from a multidisciplinary perspective and in the process have shed new light on its different manifestations in literary, visual, and performance arts. Leaders among these publications are Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford’s edited volume *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (2008); Amy Ongiri’s *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for Black Aesthetics* (2010); and Daniel Widener’s *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (2010). In these issues we hope to follow in the footsteps of these seminal authors and shed more light on the complexity and nuances of the Black Arts movement by focusing solely on the visual arts through three sets of contributions. The first set comprises issue 29 and is dedicated to a number of critical essays written by scholars, curators, and artists as well. We are fortunate to count among the contributors to this section three of the authors of above-mentioned texts: Crawford, Ongiri, and Widener. Among the other contributors are several artists, literary figures, scholars, and curators such as Amiri Baraka, Kay Brown, and Edward S. Spriggs who were central to the Black Arts movement and to the shaping of its ethos and aesthetics as it metamorphosed into one of most significant black intellectual and artistic traditions since the Harlem Renaissance. The second and third sets of contributions comprise issue 30. The second set provides a collection of short essays, in addition to manifestos, archival documents, and recollections by artists and other figures within the Black Arts movement and, as much as possible, representatives of the groups and collectives that shaped the movement. The third set of contributions brings together conversations and an intergenerational dialogue with some of the major artists who have been part of the Black Arts movement. They offer a fascinating glimpse into the social, political, and aesthetic concerns of the movement as it was experienced and as it was taking shape. Taken as a whole, these three sets of contributions highlight the concerns and the impetus behind the Black Arts movement in the visual and literary domains.

**Note**

1. From the brochure *First Group Showing: Works in Black and White*, which accompanied the Spiral show held May 14–June 5, 1965.