

Email Q & A w Artforum Editor*

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O'Grady used the margin comments of her Artforum editor on "The Black and White Show" in part as an opportunity for background clarification on the situation of race in the 1980s art world.

PART 1

TEXT REFERENCE: "'Mlle Bourgeoise Noire' event"

ES: when did you come up with the concept for *The Black and White Show*, and do you remember what the specific impetus was, if there was one? Or was it a more generalized response, as you suggest below, to the virtually segregated art world?

LOG: It was part of an invasive strategy I'd employed from the beginning. All black artists probably thought about this "virtual segregation" all the time. But I may have responded more aggressively.

I sometimes joke that I was "post-racial" BEFORE I was "racial." I'd graduated from Wellesley in the mid 50s, way before the civil rights battles, landed one of the most prestigious entry-level jobs in the federal government based squarely on merit, had married interracially, and in general avoided the most egregious forms of discrimination—perhaps due to how I looked (I was fair-skinned and still straightened my hair). The art world was the first place I'd felt "cornered" that way.

* O'Grady's unpublished responses to draft editorial comments by the *Artforum Magazine* editor on her artist portfolio, "The Black and White Show," published May, 2009.

The segregation wasn't absolute but the occasional exception, such as an incidental solo at the Whitney in a ground floor gallery off to the side, felt meaningless. *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* began shouting in 1980. Then in 1985, the Guerrilla Girls put up posters counting the numbers of women in commercial art galleries. But to have counted the numbers of blacks and other non-whites in those same galleries would have been an ironic gesture.

The Black and White Show was in 1983. In 1988, Lowery Stokes Sims and Leslie King-Hammond curated *Art As A Verb*, featuring 13 black avant-garde artists, to show that side of black art making. The exhibit at the Studio Museum and the Met Life Gallery got a review in the New York Times, but didn't make a strong dent. *The Decade Show* of 1990 was more impactful. It was co-produced by three institutions—the Studio Museum in Harlem, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art—and featured 200 works by 94 artists of Hispanic, Asian, African-American, Native American, and European heritage. But even this show seemed safely "bracketed," as would be evident in the response to the 1993 Whitney Biennial [more later]. However, *The Decade Show* benefited from its institutional backing, sheer size, and a more welcoming media environment following the David Hammons show in 1989.

It may be a function of how the art world is structured that the breakthrough shows for black art were of *individual* artists: Adrian Piper's retrospective at the Alternative Museum in 1987 and especially Hammons' 1989 show at Exit Art. Both exhibits were in not-for-profit artist spaces but the political and theoretical requirements of the moment—and in David's case, the creation of a context for his work—catapulted the two artists into the mainstream art world, making a space for others to follow.

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TEXT REFERENCE: "A sudden opening meant only three weeks to do it."

ES: How did it come about that you only had three weeks to put it together?

LOG: Kenkeleba, like Just Above Midtown, Artists Space, the Alternative Museum, etc., was part of a network of not-for-profits in the 70s and 80s funded by entities like the New York State Council for the Arts and others. (Kenkeleba probably received less funding than JAM as it wasn't as prominent) Contractually, any hole in the schedule would have to be filled. The opportunity fell to me.

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TEXT REFERENCE: "Note on ANECDOTAL CAPTIONS: Without answering the analytic and theoretical questions myself, I tried to enable readers to begin the process of answering them for themselves."

ES: I can't help but wonder. . . *was* race on the wall? What kind of dialogue or kinds of dialogues did you see amongst the works?

LOG: It's difficult to remember how I responded at the time. But in assembling the portfolio, essentially a new piece, I was struck by both the differences and similarities. In some cases, the conceptual vocabularies obviously differed—with black artists, jazz was more operative, with white artists, the languages of film and dream—while literature and theory were more evenly divided. But I was surprised to see how many artists shared an underlying anxiety, even a dread. The Nancy Spero sketch was untitled at the time, but it's appropriate that it later became "El Salvador." These were Reagan years, and alienating. . . imagine sending Marines in to an island with less than 100,000 people. New York may have been easier for artists to survive in then than now, but it was a poorer and more unpleasant place to live.

TEXT REFERENCE: "Note on THE LAYOUT: The design attempts to maximize formal comparisons but not necessarily on a racial basis."

LOG: One place where many of the questions come into focus is the duo Randy Williams–Jean Dupuy. Employing uncannily similar

formal means, the two artists deliver radically differing content, marked on the one hand by political and philosophical urgency, and on the other by disinterested playfulness. Will readers automatically make judgments on which is the more "important" piece and which the more important attitude? If so, on what factors will those judgments be based? (For me, the Williams is the more successful and compelling piece, but I know that for some readers "compelling" will be beside the point. I find a comparison of the two pieces more interesting than contemplating either individually. Hopefully, others will also).

Another duo, John Fekner–Adrian Piper, might raise the question of the links between intellectual and financial investment. Though by some standards not a financially "successful" artist, Piper has been recuperated art historically, whereas Fekner, a public artist whose most important pieces were in the 1980s Bronx and East Village, has been less so. As a result, though Fekner's piece could be the richer, more complete of the two, Adrian's may hold more meaning for today's viewer due to the critical space made for it.

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PART 2

TEXT REFERENCE: "Doing the portfolio raised questions for me about, not just the fate of many black and women artists of the period, but also about East Village art and its historical and market assessment"

ES: Do you think it would be different now? That is, do you think that reception conditions have changed meaningfully, or only superficially?

LOG: Before answering, I should say something I forgot to mention. I tried hard in the portfolio not to argue for The Black and White Show's importance. But I did want to make it as interesting as I thought it had been. That the 1990 Decade Show [see above] made an institutional presentation of similar ideas and produced a major splash didn't make my 1983 show less interesting or less prescient. The fact is, artist-curated shows,

even in strong institutional settings (and Kenkeleba was not that), can be "raw." They can have a handmade quality—sort of like the difference between an "Art Is. . ." float and other, commercially-produced floats in the African American Day parade. I do feel The Black and White Show had more intellectual density and quirkiness than the later show. And because it was a conceptual art work using curating as a medium, it could raise more complex questions.

But to get back to your question, the "reception conditions" you refer to changed in several waves. The Decade Show made a PR splash, but due to the nature of the sponsoring institutions, i.e. the Studio Museum, MOCHA, the New Museum, the show remained safely "bracketed." Three years later, in 1993, nearly the same proportion of "others" would be repeated (I don't have exact figures)—this time inside a powerful institution, in the Whitney Biennial. The numbers were stunning compared to the biennial of 1983, coincidentally the year of The Black and White Show, when the only African American besides Basquiat that I can remember was the painter Oliver Jackson from Oakland (I did a Google search but couldn't find a participant list online), and none of the Just Above Midtown artists had visits to their studio. The 1993 edition of the Biennial would help make several careers, but it became pejoratively labeled as "the multicultural Biennial," and two of its curators, Elizabeth Sussman and Thelma Golden, left the Whitney shortly after. Biennials have not gone that way again.

Beyond the simplistic measure of the Biennials, even determining what the other measures should be is difficult. And for the individual minority artist earning a comfortable living, perhaps a fortune, it may be irrelevant. But thinking culturally, as I always try to. . .

Well, to be honest, it's hard for me to think along those lines now. . . not just because I'm tired (I am), but because this is such a culturally confusing moment. I'm not being disingenuous if I say that I am more interested in your answers to your questions than in my own.

Although I may believe that an ongoing, actively dialogical

engagement on the wall between minority and majority art of the sort attempted in The Black and White Show is a long way off, a combination of the recession and the electorate's response to the Obama administration could bring unforeseeable change.

To give just two examples: I'm leery of the kind of discourse I recently read on David Hammons that foregrounds terms like "magical" and "reclusive" -- rather than, say, making an analytical comparison to Damien Hirst's stage-managing of his career (many may not be aware that if a Hammons piece is at Phillips de Pury, chances are it came from David's studio and has for the last eight years). . . . I also feel that even a positive collection like the Rubell's "30 Artists" remains a form of bracketing. . . . But I recognize that there have been changes—even in my own career—in the last two or three years that can't be parsed so easily.

I'm having to face new questions:

What does it mean to discover a small yet growing audience among artists, across the racial spectrum, who are mostly under 30 years of age?

What mixture of romanticism and dispassionate perception may be involved here?