

Letter to the Editor
Art in America
(unpublished)

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Unpublished letter re the omission of Kenkeleba Gallery and O'Grady's *The Black and White Show* from the feature section, "Report from the East Village: Slouching Toward Avenue D," in *Art in America*, Vol 72 No 6 (Summer 1984). Receipt not acknowledged.

October 22, 1984

Elizabeth C. Baker
Editor
ART IN AMERICA
850 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022

Dear Elizabeth Baker:

I would like to set the record straight. "TOXIC JUNKIE," which you use as the lead photo for *Art in America's* "Report on the East Village" (Summer 1984), did not appear miraculously and spontaneously on East 2nd Street between Avenues B and C. It was specifically requested by me from John Fekner for "The Black and White Show," which I curated at Kenkeleba Gallery on that block in April 1983. The mural was created in time for the show's opening, and even its colors were stipulated by me. My intention in commissioning it was to expand the political content of the show (black-and-white work by black and white artists) through connecting the art inside the gallery with what was happening outside on the street—at the time, East 2nd Street between B and C was still the biggest drug block in Lower Manhattan.

I'm not at all implying that "The Black and White Show" should be mentioned whenever "TOXIC JUNKIE" is printed, for the mural now exists independently and powerfully as a piece of John Fekner's. However, I do think your editorial decision not to send a critic to look at "The Black and White Show" raises questions both about your attitude toward black curators and gallery owners, and toward not-for-profit spaces.

By any standard, "The Black and White Show" was a major event—a complex and subtle grouping of such disparate artists as Jack Whitten and Keith Haring, Lauren Ewing and Nancy Spero, Randy Williams and Stephen Lack, Adrian Piper and John Fekner, Gerald Jackson and Judy Blum, and Lynne Augeri and Louis Renzoni. Perhaps I should say, it was a major show by any standard other than that the curator and gallery owners were black. Hung magnificently, it was praised by such non-participants as Leon Golub and Anton van Dalen as "better than the Whitney Biennial" of that year.

But *Art in America* wasn't alone in passing up "The Black and White Show." It was ignored by virtually the entire art press, and noted only briefly by *The East Village Eye*.

You may wonder why I have dredged up what is by now ancient history. History, however, is precisely one of the things at issue here. Within limits, I have always respected *Art in America*, so it was quite shocking to find your magazine actually rewriting history in the service of trendiness. For example, Patti Astor was *not* the first person to open a gallery in the East Village in the past three or four years. What about 301 Houston, and the Second Avenue Photo Gallery, both run by ex-students from SVA?

But the most ahistorical aspect of your "Report 84" was its art-commercial bias. By effectively denying the role of such not-for-profit spaces as ABC No Rio and Kenkeleba, you distorted the nature and history of avant-garde art in the contemporary East Village. I am not writing this to promote either ABC No Rio or Kenkeleba (the latter is a gallery whose curatorial policies for the most part I seriously disagree with), but to point out that by ignoring them, *Art in America* failed in its responsibilities as a

magazine of record, and that in the case of Kenkeleba, the omission contributed a blatant and unnecessary example of racism in the art world.

This is hardly the place for detailing the ways in which not-for-profit spaces like ABC No Rio and Kenkeleba contribute to the East Village art scene. But I must say that I felt both personally and racially affronted on finding in your "Report 84" a picture of "TOXIC JUNKIE," as well as two pictures of work by Louis Renzoni (I gave Renzoni his first show anywhere in New York in "The Black and White Show," where Carlo McCormick, the author of your Report, first saw him), illustrating an article that dismissed Kenkeleba, and thus indirectly my show, as irrelevant.

I've gone on at length here, without proving, perhaps even without stating my point. But as galling as it may be to have to say it, my point is this: Ms Baker, do you think either Sur or Mario would have made it into *Art in America* had they not been partnered by white women?

(signed MBN)
MLLE BOURGEOISE NOIRE
a.k.a. Lorraine O'Grady