

DISCREPANT
ABSTRACTION

'IT'S NOT ENOUGH
TO SAY "BLACK IS
BEAUTIFUL":
ABSTRACTION
AT THE WHITNEY
1969-1974
KELLIE JONES

The 1960s gave rise to a range of art forms, including pop, minimalism, post-painterly abstraction, conceptualism and process art, but for many American artists who acted as citizens another important factor was protest.

During the beginning of this era, artists' groups such as Artists and Writers' Protest, Kamoinge Workshop and Spiral - all based in New York - and Arts West Associated, which was founded in Los Angeles, became involved with civil rights, disarmament and anti-war issues, participating in letter-writing campaigns, interventions in newspapers, protest marches and pursuing a focus on integration into museums and other mainstream art world settings. At the end of the decade, some of this activism began to bear fruit. In 1968, for instance, The Studio Museum in Harlem was founded as a space to support African American artists who had been largely shut out of exhibition and commercial opportunities since the decline of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) era of the 1930s and 1940s. By the 1960s, however, the decentralisation of culture (bringing art to the people - as community art centres had done during the WPA period), was just one aspect of the equation. Young artists and artists of colour demanded entry into museums and insisted that public institutions supported by taxpayer dollars be more responsive to the diversity of contemporary cultures in the US.

By 1968 a few overtures were being made in New York. The Brooklyn Museum opened its Community Gallery - offering greater local access - within a week of the launch of the Studio Museum in Harlem. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) announced the exhibition *In Honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.* just months after the civil rights leader's death. With Jacqueline Kennedy

as honorary patron, the show was a fundraising benefit for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.¹ In a demonstration of its own growing accessibility, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA) previewed the upcoming exhibition *Harlem on My Mind* before a (select) public audience in June 1968, six months prior to the show's official opening in January 1969.

But these first steps, like a baby's, were quite wobbly and initially unsuccessful. MoMA's exhibition on Martin Luther King Jr did not actually include any black artists until objections were raised, and even then the artists were only exhibited in a small and separate room.² Benny Andrews remembered the preview of the Metropolitan's *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition as a problematic experience: it was clear that no thought had been given to scholarly content or the inclusion of real live African American artists.³ Harlem, the spiritual and psychological metonym for so much modern American culture, had simply become an avatar for all that was black. At a November 1968 press conference, the Harlem Cultural Council publicly withdrew its support for *Harlem On My Mind*, stating: 'We disagree with the lack of Negro scholarly participation and the projected use of photographs in place of original art works in the show.'⁴

By 1969 several pressure groups had formed around New York's key art institutions. The Art Workers Coalition (AWC) focused its energy on promulgating change at the Museum of Modern Art. An integrated group, it insisted on more input into MoMA from living artists, greater access for New York's diverse communities and increased representation of black and Latino artists in the museum's exhibitions and collections.⁵ The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) was formed to take on the

Metropolitan Museum of Art in January 1969, with protests and picket lines in front of the museum directed against *Harlem on My Mind*. Among the protesters were Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis and Roy DeCarava: older artists who knew the history of black artists in the US and were not foreign to activism.⁶

In the spring of 1969, a more formalised BECC turned its attention to the Whitney Museum of American Art. Representatives met with Whitney director, John I.H. Baur, in April and May and put forward a list of demands which included:

- 1) a major group show of black artists organised by a black curator,
- 2) increased representation of black artists in the Whitney Annuals,
- 3) a commitment to hire black curatorial staff,
- 4) to mount a minimum of five solo shows a year for younger artists in the lobby gallery, and
- 5) to purchase more work by black artists.⁷

Negotiations between the Whitney and the BECC seemed amiable and continued into the fall of 1969. The major sticking point, however, seemed to be the insistence on black curatorial input and scholarship; the Whitney appeared to want no part of this, even though it became an increasingly important rallying point for the BECC. As Andrews acknowledged at the time, 'With the great number of black art exhibitions taking place across the country, it is no longer necessary for the BECC to demand that black art work be shown or for black art exhibitions to take place; instead we have moved into the area of the employment of black expertise.'⁸

Across the country museums were indeed beginning to employ black curators in various positions, albeit in miniscule numbers. Samella

Lewis was hired as a consultant in the Education Department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1968 and E.J. Montgomery was brought in as an 'ethnic art consultant' at the Oakland Museum. By 1970 Edmund B. Gaither was the director of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists while also holding the position of adjunct curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In New York, Lowery Stokes Sims began at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the Community Programs Department in 1972 and moved on to a curatorial position in the Twentieth Century Art Department in 1975. Among curators of a similar generation, Kynaston McShine had begun working at MoMA as early as 1959 and was among the first board members of the Studio Museum in Harlem. Perhaps most interestingly, the inaugural curator of the Community Gallery of the Brooklyn Museum when it opened in 1968 was Henri Ghent, who only months later joined up with the BECC, becoming co-director with Ed Taylor and Benny Andrews, standing on picket lines in front of one 'sister' institution and making demands on another.

African American Artists and the Whitney Museum

The BECC's actions resulted in an immediate response from the Whitney. Between 1969 and 1975 the Whitney Museum of American Art presented twelve exhibitions featuring black artists - eleven solo and one group.⁹ Of that total number, six were one-person shows by artists working abstractly. The Whitney's commitment to artists of African descent at this moment is quite stunning because it was historically unprecedented. It was, however, certainly the

result of the climate of black arts activism. As an institution devoted specifically to American art, and one that had itself come into existence to combat the invisibility that such work faced in relation to the European tradition, black artists' quarrel with the Whitney Museum seemed particularly well founded.

The Whitney Museum of American Art opened its doors to the public in 1931. It was the brainchild of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, an heiress, patron and academic artist who began showing the work of other Americans in her studio as early as 1907. Whitney championed new art for a modern city and was particularly supportive of artists connected to Robert Henri and the Ashcan School. In 1918 she formalised her exhibition programme with the Whitney Studio Club, and initiated plans for a museum when the Metropolitan Museum of Art rejected her gift of hundreds of works by American artists in 1929. Although more identified with the modern American realism of the Ashcan School, the Whitney Museum was the first to support American abstract painting with the exhibition *Abstract Painting in America* in 1935; Stuart Davis, a painter thoroughly committed to abstraction, was also very much part of the Whitney profile. In the post World War II period, the Whitney Museum eagerly embraced the abstract expressionists as did the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum of Art, though these latter institutions, also formed in the first part of the 20th century, had always been more specifically identified with non-objective or abstract art.¹⁰

Against this historical backdrop, the Whitney's relationship to African American artists was negligible at worst, strange at best, and ultimately conformed to the way people

were treated in a segregated society. Much that was happening with black artists in New York in the 20th century continued to take place in Harlem. However, a few artists received some support and made it into the Whitney Museum collection, including Richmond Barthe and Nancy Elizabeth Prophet in the 1930s. Beauford Delaney, an artist whose work moved between abstraction and figuration, was shown in an exhibition of naive artists titled *Four Sunday Painters* (1930). It was one of the last to be held at the Whitney Studio Club Galleries before the institution officially became a museum. Although several works of Delaney's were purchased, the artist himself,

was offered a longer-lasting source of income. The museum would need a guard... Besides his salary, he would receive a free studio and living space in the basement. Delaney worked at the Whitney for about three years. Depending on what was required, his duties were those of a guard, gallery attendant, telephone operator, and caretaker.¹¹

By the 1960s, although the majority of black artists had not received much exposure in the mainstream museum context, the Whitney Museum presented the work of black abstractionists of a younger generation. These exhibitions were curated by two in-house curators, Robert Doty and Marcia Tucker (the latter of whom would subsequently leave to start the New Museum of Contemporary Art in 1977). Although most of the artists selected had some experience on the national gallery scene, it is compelling to think about how they were selected given the controversial discussions of

'black art' and 'quality' that were swirling around the New York art world at that moment.

Each exhibition was accompanied by a small four-page brochure. Every one of the six shows garnered at least one review and it is revealing to examine the critical response. How did critics respond to the co-mingling of protest, race and aesthetics in the exhibitions and in the works themselves? How do the positions taken by the critics compare to the dialogue created by the artists and the Whitney within the brochure? What can these exchanges tell us about the changing nature of the art scene at this moment, and the relationship of black artists to the discourse on abstraction and American art? In the generation before these artists came into view discussions surrounding abstraction had moved from Europe to the US with the success of abstract expressionist painting. Championed by critics such as Clement Greenberg, the gestural qualities of painterly abstraction moved toward hard edge, frequently incorporating staining techniques, and by 1964 Greenberg nominated this trend as 'post-painterly abstraction'. During the 1960s Greenberg's formalist ideas were advanced by Michael Fried who wrote about the artists emerging in the moment of post-painterly abstraction, Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella, and Anthony Caro in sculpture, among them. Yet as both Greenberg and Fried noted, something significant had changed in 1960, which they identified as an important shift within modern painting itself.¹²

In 1969 Alvin Loving became the first African American artist to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. This was indeed intriguing since the Museum of Modern Art, some twenty blocks downtown, had presented its first show of a single African

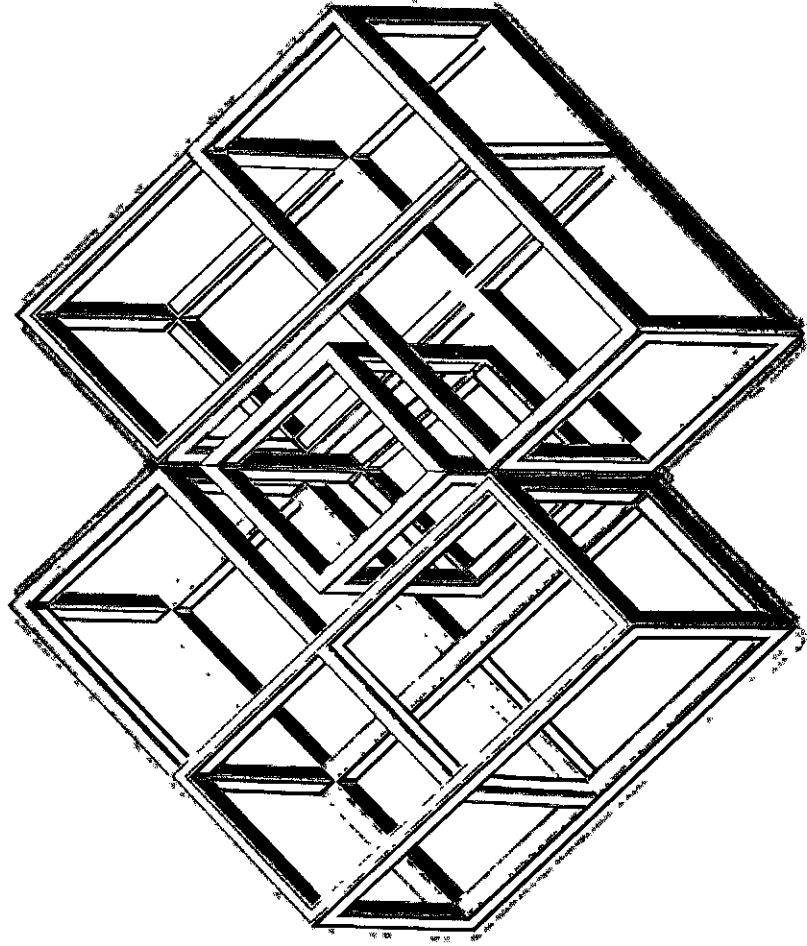
American artist some thirty years prior. The self-taught Tennessee native, William Edmondson, debuted at MoMA in 1937, two years after *African Negro Sculpture* (1935). Edmondson's show can be seen as part of a larger continuum of self-taught and 'primitivist' exhibitions that were counterpoints to the vision of western art as advanced, and yet which were also integral to definitions of the modernist canon.¹³ In 1944, MoMA and the Phillips Gallery in Washington, DC shared the purchase of the entire 'Migration of the Negro' series by painter Jacob Lawrence. However, MoMA's next solo show by a black artist did not take place until 1971, when Romare Bearden and Richard Hunt were both given separate solo exhibitions, and Sam Gilliam received a show in MoMA's 'Project' space, all these unmistakably mounted in response to protests of the period.¹⁴

Alvin Loving: Paintings

19 December 1969 - 25 January 1970

At the time of his Whitney debut, Al Loving was thirty-four, fresh from the mid-west where he obtained his BFA from the University of Illinois and his MFA from the University of Michigan. Working in a hard-edge style, Loving's paintings of shaped canvases in modular and geometric compositions represented his mature art grammar. The canvases were sometimes interchangeable and played with ideas of illusionism.

In the brochure for his show, Loving offers a philosophical commentary that seems to set the bar for the publications in this series. He describes both the formal elements of the work and its place in the contemporary world. For Loving, colour creates a sense of drama. Although he would later define his use of colour



as intuitive, a review of his career reveals that it plays a defining role in much of his compositional structure.¹⁵ The shaping of the canvas grew out of the internal logic of the geometry that he used, with the cube regarded as the building block of the intellect. Time was also built into his paintings in the repetition of form. With his statement, 'Composition = the position of a reality', Loving moves his viewers into another realm where his principles of composition worked in an analogous way to the 'indexical present' that conceptualist Adrian Piper was beginning to articulate during the same late 1960s period. In Loving's discourse, 'reality' was the contemporaneous moment in both art practice and in the social world. 'I'm no longer interested in "new" ideas', he wrote, 'what is relevant to the artist today is what contemporary events will mean to the state of reality twenty-five years from now.'¹⁶ Alluding to how the activism of the time would result in a better future, his words poetically collapse the painterly and social moment.

Loving's painting *Rational Irrationalism* (1969) was subsequently purchased by the Whitney, with resources from the collector Robert Scull, who donated 'funds for artists not in the collection', possibly in response to the BECC demand for more acquisitions of work by black artists.

Of all the Whitney shows of black artists working abstractly, Loving received the most reviews in the mainstream art press: a grand total of three. *Arts Magazine* (February 1970) was the only publication to mention that his was the first in a series of exhibitions by 'fine Negro artists of this country'.¹⁷ The article emphasises that it is the paintings and not 'race' that are important and thus alludes to, but does not directly address, the activism

of African American artists as part of the exhibition context. While the majority of the shows were held in the small lobby gallery, the Loving exhibition, as the *Arts Magazine* review observed, appeared 'in the museum's second floor auditorium', still a relatively marginal space within the Whitney.¹⁸

Writing in *Art International* (April 1970), Carter Ratcliff was impressed by Loving's paintings, even if one senses a hint of disbelief and perhaps bemusement in his writing style. Given ongoing debates, in the press and among the artists themselves, about the nature, goals and quality of 'black art' – and the fact that the majority of professional black artists were almost unknown to this generation of critics – it was perhaps shocking for Ratcliff to discover works this accomplished by an artist of such credentials. Although the critic is relieved to see that Loving's modular paintings are not simply collections of interchangeable polyhedral forms, and that colour is not merely decorative but part of the geometric reasoning of the work, he ultimately opts for a fairly neutral position that finds the predominant metallic hues to be 'very efficient, and the source of precise assured paintings'.¹⁹ In *Studio International* (April 1970), Dore Ashton, an early chronicler of the New York School, actually discusses how Loving engages the history of modernist painting: 'By taking the complex problems of painterly illusion and coming at them from various points of view, Loving subtly controverts the principle of the module.'²⁰ Next to Ratcliff's assessment, Ashton's is a fairly strong endorsement as it positions a black artist inside the tradition of western modernism. While neither Ratcliff nor Ashton mention the race of the artist, *Studio International* manages to ease this information

into its review with an image of Loving standing in front of one of his unfinished paintings.

Melvin Edwards: Works
2-29 March 1970

Coming a mere two months after Al Loving's exhibition, Mel Edwards became the first African American sculptor to have works presented in a solo show at the Whitney. In contrast to the hard-edge precision of Loving's paintings, Edwards' sculpture appeared more fluid and dematerialised. Taking the form of a room-size installation composed of chains and barbed wire, the 'works' that Edwards presented at the Whitney, like many of the artist's pieces generally, incorporated disparate objects that were tied to the history of labour. Mel Edwards' strategies were also connected with the 'industrialism' of minimalism, the re-evaluation of material in action that informed process art, and the 'art as idea' of conceptualism. His work was not illustrated in the accompanying brochure, perhaps due to its site-specific nature. However, most of its constitutive elements had been shown at the Studio Museum in Harlem in *X to the 4th Power* (1969), an exhibition curated by William T. Williams, the creative mind behind the Studio Museum in Harlem's signature artist-in-residence programme. The title of one component of Edwards' Whitney installation, *Curtain for William and Peter* (1969-70), a thirty-foot long sheer drape of barbed wire edged with links of heavy gauge chain, is a dedication to Williams and to Peter Bradley, two African American painters also working abstractly. In the room's corners, Edwards created two pyramids of barbed wire (one of which was inverted) that climbed the walls from floor to ceiling.

In his brochure statement, Edwards, like Loving, speaks elliptically about politics, by creating an ambivalent narrative around the associations of the highly-charged materials in play. He speaks of their brutalist connotations and of 'linear geometry having its purity complicated because one chooses to exploit the flexibility of the wire.' Nevertheless it is easy enough to read between the lines of his fairly poetic statement,

How long is a chain?
How long is a change?
How heavy is a chain?
How heavy is a change?

The artist continues:

B.wire has a long history in war both as obstacle and enclosure. B.wire has a long history in agricultural life both as obstacle and as enclosure. Wire like most linear materials has a history both as obstacle and enclosure but barbwire has the added capacity of painfully dynamic and aggressive resistance if contacted unintelligently.²¹

The works shown at the Whitney were made during the time that Edwards had laid aside his more obviously politically-directed, though still non-objective works, namely the *Lynch Fragment* series. Comprised of welded sculptural abstractions that are forged from items such as tools, knives, hooks and machine parts, elements connoting both labour and violence, the various titles of the Lynch Fragments adopted themes of African diaspora heritage and brutality against the black body,

themes continued, however, in Edwards' Whitney show.

Given the 1970 installation's greater interface with languages of dematerialisation and process art, and Edwards' engagement in a dialogue on changing notions of what sculpture and painting could be, it is perhaps surprising to see that his show garnered only one review. Indeed, it is significant to note that Edwards' involvement with current practices earned him castigation instead. The artist's use of these materials was new, yet for many critics it was not 'new enough'. In *Artforum* (May 1970), Robert Pincus-Witten found the work 'modish' in its rejection of the floor and in its sense of sculpture as the antithesis of the 'vertical monolith'; the barbed wire curtain is just too expressive. While Edwards 'negotiates a supposed gap between geometrical minimalism and antiformal', this had already been achieved by Robert Morris, in Pincus-Witten's view. More damningly, Pincus-Witten criticised the Whitney for even exhibiting Edwards, and 'for obviously sponsoring the career of a young artist over those of the many artists who are responsible for having brought that style into being - Hesse, Andre, Flavin, Rosenquist, to name but a few.'²²

These comments seem to be a way of side-stepping a direct attack on a black artist, while subtly engaging with the racial politics of the Whitney initiative. Couched in Pincus-Witten's review is a deafening alarm against the intersection of 'race', art and the museum, for Edwards was neither all that young (he was thirty-four at the time of the show), nor did his work present an imitation of the white artists cited. Edwards had arrived in New York from southern California in 1967, where his work was highly successful. By the time he reached the

east coast he had already had solo exhibitions at Santa Barbara Museum and at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; he had also been included in group shows at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the La Jolla Museum of Art. Pincus-Witten clearly did not consider Edwards' discussion of his own motivations, which integrated his artistic practice with political thought, and made his sculpture quite different from those of the other practitioners mentioned.

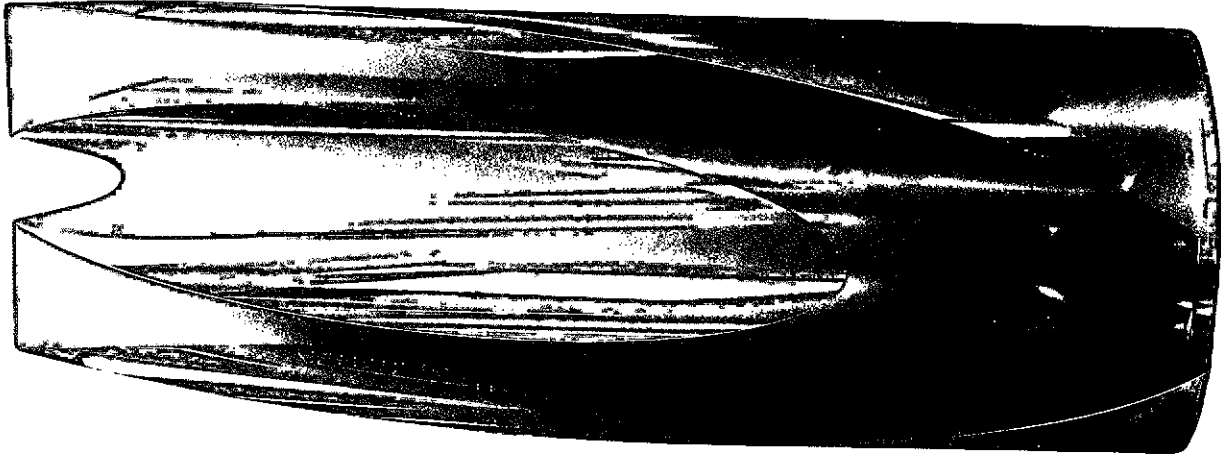
Fred Eversley: Recent Sculpture
18 May - 7 June 1970

Born in Brooklyn, Eversley started his professional life as an engineer. He moved to southern California to take up a position in the aerospace field, living at Venice beach, whose bohemian culture inspired him to become an artist. Unlike the other abstractionists who showed at the Whitney during this period, Eversley had no real formal art training, but his work nevertheless reflected a style that came to be known as the 'LA Look'. A seemingly more decorative approach to minimalism that appeared to take its cues from the surfaces of hot rods and surfboards, the polished formalism of the 'LA Look' was practised by artists like Larry Bell, Craig Kaufman and Judy Chicago.

Eversley's work had appeared in important shows in southern California such as *California Artists* (1971) and *Art and Technology* (1970), both held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and curated by Maurice Tuchman. The latter show grew out of a programme of the same name, which matched artists with corporations that were producing new and specialised materials. Eversley also appeared in numerous group shows featuring the work of black artists,

163

Fred Eversley,
Untitled, 1970



162

as at
rt
bed
rt,
rds
nt
bed

162

including *Dimensions in Black* at the La Jolla Museum of Art and *Two Generations of Black Artists* at the California State College at Los Angeles, both in 1970.

Composed of cast polyester resin in solid and singular geometric shapes, Eversley's early sculptures were concerned with transparency, kineticism, optical properties and mathematical tautology.²³ In his Whitney brochure he describes the creation of his pieces, which were meticulously composed by a method of layering that used only three colours of resin – amber, violet and blue. Depending on the amount of pigment used and density of each progression, every sculpture took on a strikingly distinct appearance. Moving in and among the works one is struck by their kaleidoscopic spectrum of light and colour and their translucent presence and beauty. Unlike Edwards or Loving, Eversley's statement is among the least political of the cohort, perhaps bespeaking his California location. Instead the artist viewed his sculptures as amusing 'toys' which were kinetic without relying on mechanisation; rather the pieces 'constantly change in relationship to ambient light, viewing angle, environment, and the spectator's frame of mind.'²⁴

While Eversley's Whitney show received no coverage in the mainstream art press, it did get reviewed. Writing in *New York Magazine* (June 1970), John Gruen linked the work to 'décor' rather than art, an unfavourable assessment that nevertheless reflected the outlook of numerous east coast critics when faced with much Californian work.²⁵ Eversley's exhibition received another mention, in the calendar section of the *Los Angeles Times* (June 1970), which was informational rather than a critical assessment. The journalist Henry J. Seldis would later pen an

extensive piece, also for the *Los Angeles Times*, on Eversley's 1976 one-man show at the Santa Barbara Museum. It would seem that the context in which Eversley's work became newsworthy – local boy makes good! – may have reinforced the perception that California work was largely anathema to the critical milieu of the east coast.²⁶

Changing Debates on 'Black Art'

Along with protests for access to exhibition opportunities within American art institutions, as well as the fight for alternative exhibition spaces, the period in which the Whitney's initiative took place was marked by critical debates surrounding aesthetics. Artists of African descent all over the world had been producing work throughout the modern era, and even in the US this activity was centuries old, but it was largely unacknowledged and therefore passed under the mainstream art world radar. During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, the notion of black practice had been raised both in the US and worldwide, as the outpouring of newly urban cultures of the African diaspora made themselves known. Harlem, the largest and perhaps most advanced centre of black cultural expression, was nominated the spiritual home of the movement and Africa as its wellspring of creativity. The development and control of aesthetics was seen as a way to gain acceptance, visibility and respect; it held the power to overcome discrimination, racism and perhaps even violence. The Harlem Renaissance was imbricated in the vogue for things Negro, with western artists and audiences captivated by the formal qualities of African art and fascinated by performative traditions throughout the diaspora. It also marked a historic turning point

as black culture was embraced as a way of banishing putrefying western academic thought and the spectre of the world at war. As a result, all things black were 'modern'.

In the second half of the 20th century, however, social changes made the terms of debate quite different and the call for alternative artistic frameworks came from *within* black cultures themselves, which were militant in seeking political freedom all over the world. Art became more closely integrated with this global push for independence and the question of black artistic practices took on a more charged meaning. There was a re-evaluation of culture as a fundamental component of the black quest for self-determination. What should a radical black aesthetic look like, how should it function? Segregation, a liability, a 'Negro problem', became a potent focal point, but how was this difference translated into cultural practice? Was there something called 'black art'?

Early in the 20th century, the term 'black art' had connoted the visual (primarily sculptural) traditions of African art, but increasingly the term became more fluidly attached to the creative practices of the African diaspora as a whole. After the critic and philosopher Alain Locke declared in 1925 that African art held the key to a classic black tradition, what was the next step for African American artists, and how would this manifest itself?²⁷ Against the background of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements throughout the 1960s and 1970s, this question appeared in publication after publication, from *Negro Digest* (later *Black World*) to arts magazines such as *Art in America* and *Art Gallery* to newspapers like the *New York Times*. Artists and critics sought to discover, understand and define something *else* that would distinguish the

forms and practices called 'black art'. Could 'black art' be about colour and form in the way that jazz, in its tonality, timbre and syncopation, signalled something distinctly American and aesthetically enveloped in black culture, style, nuance and meaning?²⁸ Or was 'black art' about a political stance, did it require social realism, with black figures and radical messages? In which case, where or how did abstraction fit in?²⁹

Increasingly, the demands of the BECC and other pressure groups were not just addressed to boosting the number of exhibitions featuring black artists, but for proper scholarship and criticism. The withdrawal or refusal of scholarly engagement, like the void of sustained critical consideration, meant that activists soon realised that poorly-conceived exhibitions were just as bad as not showing at all. Artists' careers foundered and disappeared if they were not written about, discussed and cultivated. Where were the writers, curators, scholars, then, who could do for black artists what Clement Greenberg and others had done for American painters at mid-century?

Into this fray waded Frank Bowling. A painter originally from Guyana, trained and living in London, he had made his way to New York in 1966. His solo exhibition at the Terry Dintenfass Gallery in January of that year won acclaim for pictures of physically exuberant, convulsive figures after the style of Francis Bacon.³⁰ As Bowling himself noted at the time, his confrontation with 'American painting' was instructive, for US abstraction pushed his work in new directions and enabled him to give his painting a different kind of muscle.³¹

Bowling's swift move into the New York scene signalled the internationalism and cosmopolitanism of the city itself, demonstrating

why it had become the blueprint for international blackness in the modern age, from the Harlem Renaissance and even earlier.³² His involvement in the New York art world also indicates why it becomes important to use the broader term 'black' rather than the specificity of 'African American' in the recapitulation of this moment. Furthermore, Bowling was not just an artist but also a critic: such multiple roles were the tradition in a field that had been in the process of inventing itself over decades. Indeed it was a luxury for people to have only one part to play in the unfolding scenario of a developing black art criticism. Seen in this light, I would suggest that equal to his confrontation with 'American painting', it was his critical engagement with debates surrounding black art and culture that shaped Bowling as an intellectual and as an artist.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Bowling was a contributing critic to *Arts Magazine*, where he wrote primarily on painting while also addressing aesthetics more generally. Between 1969 and 1971, however, he penned six articles in which he tried to unpack notions of 'black art'. These articles are compelling: they are not only gauges of the cultural climate but also reveal an artist of colour battling with various definitions, attempting to put his concerns into perspective. Casting a jaundiced eye at 'black art', Bowling sees it as kitsch; he pronounces all-black group shows as 'barrel-scraping' fiascos that privilege quantity over quality; he holds fledgling institutions (like the Studio Museum in Harlem) up for scrutiny, and he even takes on individuals, some of whom were his friends, others of whom had fought hard so that artists such as Bowling could gain greater institutional access and visibility. Bowling's acerbic wit assuredly earned him enemies. On the other hand, however, in his

more expansive moments, Bowling meditated on concepts of black experience; mused on black visual analogues to jazz; focused on patterns of resistance, struggle and what he called black 'anarchism' as one of the defining characteristics of black life; and finally, and most importantly in this context, he considered notions of black life in global terms by highlighting the international aspects of the African diaspora.³³

Bowling was enamoured of Greenberg's criticism which he declaimed in many a review. Greenberg's collection, *Art and Culture*, first published in 1961, became available in paperback in 1965, so there was easy access to his important writings. It was perhaps Greenberg's keen analysis of modern and contemporary art coupled with his socialist political leanings that engaged Bowling's attention and respect as he thought about how to craft a critical voice, one that would do justice to himself as a critic and provide the equal balance with which to speak about black artistic practice. While Bowling's show at the Whitney marked the midway point of the museum's initiative - Alma Thomas and Jack Whitten would follow over the next three years - his role as a vocal commentator on the art of the time also provides a larger context for all of the Whitney shows and the growing debates about 'black art'.

Frank Bowling:

4 November - 6 December 1971

By exhibiting the work of Frank Bowling in 1971, the Whitney Museum made a certain commitment (albeit convenient) to a larger concept of 'American' art that included practitioners from South America such as Bowling. The show itself seems to mark

the completion of the artist's map paintings, which he was engaged with between 1967 and 1971 while living in New York. As Kobena Mercer has outlined, these works signal a transition between figuration and abstraction. More importantly, they evoke a disavowal of the monocular system of vision, which insists that an accomplished artist must work in a singular mode. Mercer and Ann Gibson have both revealed how black artists working with abstraction in the post-1945 period used non-objective and representational mark-making to address emotional and political concerns.³⁴

Somehow Bowling managed to fit six large paintings, each nine feet high and ranging in length from seven to twenty-two feet, into the Whitney's main floor gallery. His brochure text featured an interview between the artist and Robert Doty, the curator of the exhibition *Contemporary Black Artists in America* (1971), which had taken place earlier that year and proved to be highly controversial. Bowling discussed his early years as a painter in the contexts of Guyana and England, his iconography and use of colour as both personal and expressive, and the importance of keeping a sense of ambiguity in his painting. He also confirmed that he did not believe 'in the idea of black art', thereby articulating a position that would seem to put him at odds with the collective protests and sacrifices that had brought him into the space of the museum. He appeared to cast out all those who had made his current success at the Whitney happen, a peculiar position for Bowling to take at that moment. On the other hand, however, when challenged by Doty to see the map, or rather Bowling's particular take on cartography, as a 'microcosm', Bowling replied instead that 'black

experience is universal', an allusion to and acknowledgement of the African diaspora. Indeed, thinking of Bowling as an 'American' in this larger 'hemispheric' sense – having travelled via Guyana and England to New York – jibes with Mercer's reading of the paintings as capturing an 'Atlanticist vision', mapping and re-visioning a post-colonial history by virtue of the ways in which their size, surface and tone evoke, at times, the sorrowful, oceanic expanses of the middle passage.³⁵

Both reviewers of Bowling's solo exhibition were impressed by his technique and commented on the stained, soaked, painted and scumbled 'fields' of his richly mottled and vibrantly hued canvases. But they were equally captivated by his eccentric maps where 'much of the world at large is missing' and is replaced instead by select 'dark, hidden continents', as one writer in *Art News* (December 1971) put it.³⁶ Writing in *Arts Magazine* (December 1971), for which Bowling was also a contributor, Marcia Hafif waxed eloquently about his process and individual paintings, giving over an entire page, which was certainly rare for a review of a black artist at the time. But while Hafif suggested that the maps as shapes 'save the viewer from being overwhelmed by the seductive mass of colour', in the end she regarded them as flawed vehicles, in that they are too descriptive of what she clearly did not want to see. Hafif concludes:

But couldn't unknown shapes of the same intensity carry out that work? And don't the horizontal divisions, as in landscape, and the quality of color, suggest Africa and South America and the rest of the personal view of the world? These would be stronger paintings if they relied solely on the visual

possibilities present within them instead of trying to deal simultaneously with the literary element of the map.³⁷

**Alma W. Thomas:
25 April – 28 May 1972**

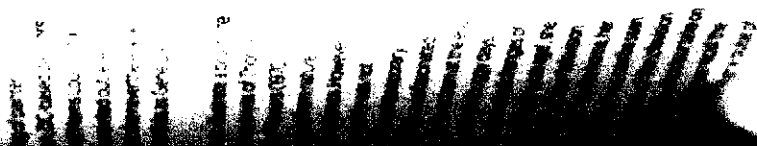
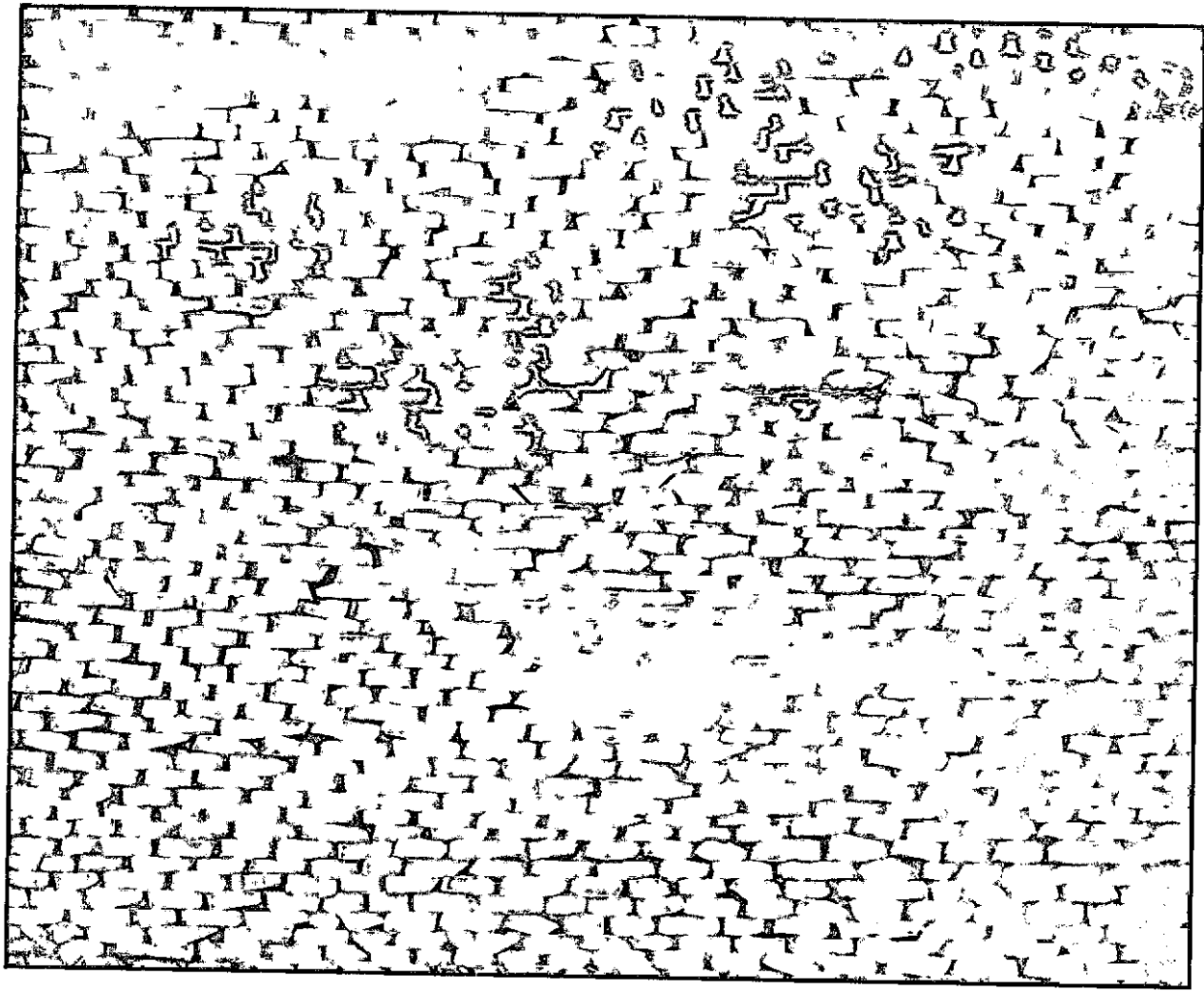
Alma Thomas' work was contemporary with the other abstract artists featured at the Whitney and she shared an interest in similar pictorial issues such as the play of colour, the use of canvas as an all-over field, and the rejection of representational illusionism. However, while most of the other artists were in their thirties, Thomas was seventy-seven at the time of her solo exhibition. She was not, however, a naïve artist. Thomas had received the first ever BS in art from Howard University in 1924, an MA from Columbia University in 1934, and had done postgraduate study in the 1950s at the American University in Washington, DC. She spent much of her adult life as a junior high school art teacher and it was after her retirement in 1960 that her artistic career took off.

Thomas' exhibition was extensive, with nineteen acrylic paintings, six of them on paper, dated from 1966 to 1972. The artist described her primary formal concerns as colour, light, rhythm and pattern, and she placed particular emphasis on how her measured strokes of colour contrasted with the white canvas ground. Thomas' oeuvre has been linked with the Washington Color School – some of the artists first identified with the stylistic trends of post-painterly abstraction – although she came to her artistic voice outside the formation and support network of that group. Additionally, Thomas revelled in the eccentricities of the brush and her excitement at the natural world set her apart

from the colour-field staining of painters associated with Washington, DC-based painters such as Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis. 'I do not use masking tape', she pointed out, even though with that statement she nevertheless put herself on a par with such artists as Gene Davis or Al Loving, who did.³⁸

The only colour image to illustrate a brochure in the series of Whitney shows was of Thomas' *Wind Dancing with Spring Flowers* (1970). Known for her themes drawn from nature, Thomas also favoured the cosmos. However, the artist's view of the heavenly was not metaphysical but based on contemporary space travel. Indeed Thomas was fascinated with modern technology: 'I was born at the end of [the] 19th century, horse and buggy days, and experienced the phenomenal changes of the 20th century machine and space age', she remarked. Considering how colour television brought space exploration into the home, her interest in broken horizontal lines can be seen as reproducing the graininess of the television screen. Even when her daubs of colour take on other patterns, their quirky edges recall the flickering sensation that evokes the pulse of electronic media.³⁹

As the first black woman artist to have a solo show at the Whitney, Thomas was quoted in a *New York Times* article (May 1972), where she marvelled, 'Who would have ever dreamed somebody like me would make it to the Whitney in New York? I'm a 77-year-old Negro woman after all, who was born in Columbus, Georgia.'⁴⁰ Recalling her development as an artist, and her early exposure to great works in museums, Thomas brought her interviewer back to the reality of segregation: 'One of the things we couldn't do was go into museums, let alone think



of hanging our pictures there.⁴¹ Like Beauford Delaney's experience as a janitor in the first days of the Whitney Museum, Thomas also reminds us that most often, 'the only way to get in there as a Negro would be with a mop and bucket to wash and scrub something.'⁴² Given the extraordinary curiosity about her in the general press, it seems significant that the art press was uninterested. The sole review of Thomas' Whitney show, in *Art News* (Summer 1972), is barely three sentences long. Hers are 'vibrant primitivist abstractions [which] pulsate with an air of celebration.'⁴³ Despite the fact that she had a master's degree, and that her works visually held their own with any of the colour-field painters of the day, the mere mention of 'primitivism' reduced her abstractions to simplistic mosaics of colour.

Jack Whitten:

20 August - 22 September 1974

Psychoanalytic paintings of protest with looping surrealist and expressionistic figures defined Jack Whitten's painterly content in the 1960s. By 1970 he had jettisoned this way of working and moved to the purely non-objective. Although an admirer of abstract expressionism, Whitten considered his own works as a further development, producing fields of painted matter that could be related to the 'sheets of sound' created by jazz artists of the time (such as John Coltrane⁴⁴), and the active surfaces of photography in process. Whitten's was the last of the Whitney solo shows by black abstractionists during this period. Excerpts of an earlier interview with David Shapiro served as the brochure's text and offered a space for Whitten to describe his method in detail. By 1974 he was

creating paintings on the floor. He placed the canvas on a wooden platform, poured acrylic paint and gel medium on to it, then pulled a homemade, rake-like, tool over the entire thing in one motion and the painting was finished. Wire and other objects placed directly under the canvas created pulls and slubs, breaking the smooth contours of the rake's lines. The language Whitten uses to describe these paintings is photographic: his tool is a 'developer', and the painted space is a frame that freezes action and traps an image.⁴⁵

Certainly Whitten had been thinking about links between painting and photography since the mid-1960s when he initiated his first series of pieces that were limited to tones of black, white and grey. His growing awareness of photography's intercession in and authority over perception led him to write on his studio wall that, 'The image is photographic; therefore I must photograph my thoughts.'⁴⁶ Eventually disregarding figurative imagery altogether, Whitten moved his notion of a painterly snapshot towards process art, but the link to the photographic, and by extension television and video, remains in the play of his two-dimensional surfaces. The artist extended this line of thinking in further experiments with photostatic processes and photocopier toner, the result of a grant from the Xerox Corporation in the mid-1970s where he was given open access to a flat-plate copier. Such connections to corporate support paralleled the 'Art and Technology' programme at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and were indicative of the associations being forged among artists, corporations and new materials during the 1970s.

What remains fascinating about Whitten's commentary is his clarity about the variegated

sources of his work, spanning the spaces between high and low, avant-garde and kitsch. He relates his floor-based orientation, not particularly to Pollock (although he would certainly acknowledge the precedent), but to the exacting work of tile-setters, skilled artisans in the construction trade in which he worked when he first came to New York in 1960. Whitten's raking process was also an act of drawing: 'The whole painting is line. The whole painting is one line, let's face it', he said.⁴⁷ For Whitten, however, the line-as-form was also the line-as-demarcation, that is, a fixture of geography and class. In one statement he declares, 'Do you know that Crete is the edge of the Western World? That's where we in the West draw the line. Right across those waters is Africa', and in another he states, '... Soho - the whole thing turns into a flea market'.

Whitten's command of process, his lyrical surfaces and his painterly imagination captivated both of his reviewers. In *Art News* (November 1974), Peter Frank noted how Whitten changed the stakes of illusionism; the artist was not interested in creating depth but rather motion through contrasts of 'light and shadow' on the canvas surface.⁴⁸ Like Hafif on Bowling in *Arts Magazine*, Peter Schjeldahl gave over most of an entire page in *Art in America* (November 1974) to a discussion of Whitten's Whitney show. For Schjeldahl, the artist's ambiguous planes create a sense of speed and the insertion of fissures reveal underpainting in the form of layers of colour rather than depth. Whitten's is 'a sophisticated, songful style that brightens the view of abstract painting's immediate future', but *this is because*, 'the critical side-issues of the '60s - and side-issues they nearly always were, finally, when it came to painting - have receded, leaving

the field to the sensibilities and smarts of a gifted, no-nonsense generation of painters ...'⁴⁹ One might argue that for Whitten these so-called 'side-issues' were crucial, they guided his interests and were actively present as part of the experiential context of his paintings. Indeed, Whitten's captivation with photography - widely regarded as the stepchild of the fine arts, a medium that from the outset was linked with practices of enslavement (to the index) and with domination (in the documentation of imperial endeavour) - far from being a side issue, addressed the changed status of painting in the contemporary world of visual communications.⁵⁰

Contemporary Black Artists in America: 6 April - 16 May 1971

All twelve exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art between 1969 and 1975 were groundbreaking. After thirty years without a commitment to exhibiting a substantial body of work by a single African American artist, the Whitney Museum seemed dedicated to changing its dismal record by offering eleven solos and one group show in an extremely condensed period of six years. The fact that more than half of these single-person shows featured the work of abstract artists reflected a key current in American art of the period, but it also suggests a commitment to a broader notion of 'black art' during the 1960s and 1970s.

In a 1984 interview, however, when Benny Andrews recalled his work with the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, and the demands it made upon the Whitney, which resulted in this historical initiative, he stated that:

we had no success. The Whitney Museum of American Art today is pretty much what it was then. If the Whitney wanted to call itself the Museum of American Art, then we felt they were obligated to be much more responsive to the cultural output of black artists in this country. [...] Oh, yes, people like Mel Edwards, Al Loving, Alma Thomas, and Betye Saar had one-person shows there, but they were in the little lobby gallery. But that space is basically for students and people just starting out. When you know that, the concept of a one-person show certainly gets qualified.⁵¹

In Andrews' view, only Jacob Lawrence had received a 'proper' solo exhibition at the Whitney for this was the one show by an African American artist to take place on the upper floors of the museum.

Indeed, such underlying tensions informed the group show of black artists that the Whitney had pledged to hold as part of its original negotiation with the BECC in 1968.

Contemporary Black Artists in America took place in 1971, effectively marking the midway point in the six years of exhibition programming highlighting black artists. Featuring a mix of the representational and non-representational, with approximately eighty-four works by fifty-eight artists, it coincided with a solo show of the figurative painter Malcolm Bailey in the lobby gallery. While the combined effect gave the Whitney the appearance of a substantial commitment to work of black artists, the dissatisfaction of the BECC was manifest when the group began planning its protests a good six months before the opening.⁵²

Unlike the smaller solo brochures, the catalogue for *Contemporary Black Artists in*

America was fairly substantial at approximately sixty pages. Of the six abstractionists discussed above, four were represented in this group show: Loving, Eversley, Bowling and Thomas. In his brief introductory essay, curator Robert Doty draws on impressive sources from Romare Bearden to Richard Wright. He discusses the parameters of art by African Americans by evoking Alain Locke's theories, the Black Panthers' need for didacticism and a nod to abstract modes articulated by the abstract sculptor Barbara Chase Riboud, who stated that 'nobody should attempt to limit artists in their response to the world'.⁵³ Doty concludes that African Americans in the 20th century have relied on figuration to record the exigencies of black peoples' daily lives. While Doty insists that these communities require such visible expressions of blackness, one might add that white institutions also require such evidence as a way to attest to their own humanism and liberal values. Indeed, as social movements became more militant in the mid-1960s, the US witnessed an explosion of 'black art shows' in mainstream as well as alternative venues as a way to demonstrate that white curators and decision-makers were 'down with the program'.⁵⁴

Contemporary Black Artists in America received dismal reviews.⁵⁵ It seemed to fit into a pattern of exhibitions of this kind, later identified by art historian Mary Schmidt Campbell as,

often expeditiously organized, poorly planned, and virtually non-curated. Works of poor quality and artists of questionable merit were often included. Scholarship is minimal. Critical essays in the catalogues are often perfunctory or nonexistent. Political expediency created exhibition

opportunities but also became an excuse for the abrogation of curatorial and scholarly standards.⁵⁶

Such abandonment of critical and intellectual responsibility was very much evident in the mainstream press reaction to 'black art shows' in the late 1960s. Critics had no common language for what they were seeing, scholarship was scarce, and even then seemed to be rarely considered or consulted. Instead audiences and readers were left with assertions about the 'weaknesses of Black art',⁵⁷ with the view that black artists were merely 'decorative ... imitator[s]',⁵⁸ whose approach was *retardaire*,⁵⁹ and with the opinion that such artists were not creating anything 'black' since they possessed no 'backgrounds in tribal art'.⁶⁰ Although chided for a reliance on the figurative, the work of black artists was most often seen as successful where images of black rage abounded.⁶¹

Discussions of the Whitney's 1971 group show conform to this profile: they were almost non-reviews, overshadowed by the constant return to the problematics of the politics that were also seemingly on display.⁶² Sixteen artists ended up withdrawing from the exhibition, including Romare Bearden who pulled his work after the show was already up. After two years of negotiations to bring this exhibition into existence, the BECC spearheaded a boycott on the grounds that the show was not held during the prime of the season, and that black art experts, with knowledge of the work and its history, were being shunned, ill-used and disrespected by the museum. After putting the exhibition into place, the BECC withdrew its support, much to the consternation and disgust of artists who continued to participate.

An alternative show, *Rebuttal to the Whitney Museum*, was held simultaneously at the black-owned Acts of Art Gallery on Charles Street in the West Village.⁶³ Al Loving stayed in the Whitney exhibition but commented to *Time Magazine*,

The black community is completely split up over this ... I'm black, I'm an artist, and I can't deal with all the circumstances of America's illness. I don't want to hide my art. The first mistake was going to a white institution and asking for something.⁶⁴

During the second month that *Contemporary Black Artists in America* was on view, a letter appeared in *Artforum* (May 1971) that offered a severe critique of its premises. The letter was signed by seven artists, all of whom worked non-objectively, and all of whom had withdrawn their work from the exhibition. They included: John Dowell, Melvin Edwards, Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Daniel Johnson, Joe Overstreet and William T. Williams. They alluded to the recent social pressure that brought the show into existence and acknowledged the Whitney's precedent in attempting to redress the problems of art world racism and exclusion. However, they found the exhibition reactionary in many aspects, and described it as an 'anti-curated ... survey' that in its poor, ahistorical approach exemplified 'the worst form of tokenism'. The artists continued, 'We cannot endorse non-creative intentions and procedures; therefore we refuse, withdraw, and withhold our work from the Whitney Museum of American Art's Survey of Black Art.'⁶⁵

Indeed, as Bowling noted in the brochure for his exhibition that took place later in 1971, *withdrawal had become one very visible means*

for black artists to register their disagreement with institutional actions and real world events. Adrian Piper had pulled her piece from a show of conceptual art at the New York Cultural Center in 1970 to protest the invasion of Cambodia; and, at earlier moments, Robert Morris and Marcel Duchamp took similar actions. Of the artists who withdrew from the Whitney's 1971 exhibition, none were subsequently presented in the series of solo exhibitions, for Mel Edwards' exhibition had already taken place a year before the statement was issued.

The same month that *Contemporary Black Artists in America* opened to the public, Frank Bowling published what would be his last article on that troublesome and elusive subject of 'black art'. Entitled 'It's Not Enough to Say "Black is Beautiful"', it appeared as a feature-length article in *Art News*. Over the course of two years, between 1969 and 1971, as he wrestled with this topic, Bowling had often invoked some of his fellow travellers on the road of non-objective language - Mel Edwards, Al Loving, Daniel Johnson, Jack Whitten and William T. Williams - as well as referring to his own prodigious output.⁶⁶ However, what became evident by April 1971 is that Bowling had finally found a language with which to speak about that key phenomenon: the black artist working at the end of the 20th century. In fact, it is significant that he is able to make his strongest arguments on questions of aesthetics, intellect and skill, through reflections on artists working abstractly.

By virtue of his own example as an international citizen, a black artist from South America living in England and then the US, Bowling argued from the very first for a view of 'black experience, which is global'.⁶⁷ In article after article he grapples with the example of

jazz as a distinctly black art form, rejects social realism as the only method of expression viable for black artists and searches for language, a terminology, with which to define himself. Is there a visual manifestation that is comparable to jazz, that expresses an aesthetic that has what he calls that 'niggerish' quality, something brash, strong, visible and unique?⁶⁸ In his 1971 article, Bowling argues that blackness has been shaped as a 'talisman' in western society, but that in the context of the 1960s and 1970s scene of black consciousness, the need for such a figure, which would act as a body to stand up against discrimination, prejudice, violence, has obscured the role of art. For Bowling, such needs for black images are best left to electronic media like television. Rather than providing representations of black experience, black art, in Bowling's view, channels the legacy of a globally diasporic heritage.

By 1971 Bowling finds the words that he is looking for, and finds them through the emergent discipline of Black Studies. In 1969, the volume, *Black Studies in the University*, appeared, a book-length version of a symposium held at Yale University. Among the numerous essays making the case for the scholarly investigation of black cultures as a discipline was Robert Farris Thompson's groundbreaking text, 'African Influence in the Art of the United States'.⁶⁹ Taking his knowledge of West and Central African creative traditions into account, Thompson used them to read black material cultures as semiotic formations and performative gestures in the Americas: he re-framed the discourse not as anthropology but as art and art history.

Bowling is clearly energised by Thompson and quotes him in 'It's Not Enough to Say "Black is Beautiful"', particularly in his references

to traditions in Surinam, a culture similar to Bowling's own Guyana. Moreover, Bowling was aware of Thompson's article almost a year earlier when he used a section as an epigraph for the fourth of his six articles, 'The Rupture: Ancestor Worship, Revival, Confusion, or Disguise' (1970). Through Thompson's vocabulary, Bowling was able to construct a pragmatics of black diasporic art-making that acknowledged its encounter with and history within western traditions, but which also affirmed its ties to traditions, knowledge, understanding and aesthetics from elsewhere. In particular, Bowling places an emphasis on the aspect of disguise, *double entendre*, the ability to repeat with a difference, through which a black aesthetic often reveals itself. In speaking of Mel Edwards' works at the Whitney Museum, he actually uses the term 'signify', when he describes the sculptor's linear geometries in barbed wire and chains as 'signifying' on minimalism and antiform. A generation later, the analysis of such activity was more fully unpacked in the literary theory of Henry Louis Gates Jr, which regarded 'signifying' as a distinctive feature of African American literary expression.⁷⁰

Bowling's commitment to formalist art criticism may have reflected aspects of the artist's training such that he felt a continuing need to define the works of his black contemporaries, as well as his own, as operating inside the western tradition. However, like the standard museological and critical frameworks of the period, there was no real expertise being brought to the table that could provide an avenue to conceptualise how black artists were at once part of, and still working in ways different from, western canonical modes. As Ann Gibson has argued regarding Norman Lewis, artists of

the abstract expressionist generation may have felt comfortable with him as a person but not necessarily as an artist committed to the forms and processes of abstract art-making as they were; many took the view that Lewis should, instead, be 'painting lynchings'.⁷¹ We find a similar conundrum in Clement Greenberg's involvement in an integrated show of abstract artists called *the de luxe show* (1971). Held in an abandoned movie theatre in Houston's black Fifth Ward, the exhibition was organised by Peter Bradley with the support of the powerful de Menil family. Greenberg counted black artists such as Bowling and Bradley among his social circle and yet the framework of his formalist criticism allowed no room for integrating issues of 'race', culture or identity into an intellectually rigorous model of art criticism.⁷² It seems that even by the early 1970s the art world was still not prepared for the sophistication that black abstract artists offered.

As we have seen, the series of shows by abstract artists at the Whitney Museum between 1969 and 1974 presented a generation of black practitioners whose complex approaches to abstraction involved serious and intense formal experimentation. While some works floated between representation and pure non-objectivity (Bowling), others addressed protest (Loving, Edwards), or engaged with the technologies of the time (Thomas, Eversley), and some bodies of work spoke to the global context of the black diaspora (Whitten, Bowling). However, there was little art language at the time that allowed all of this 'other' information to be seamlessly incorporated into the art historical record. By virtue of his status as a non-US artist and as one who knew the diaspora and some of its traditions first hand, Frank Bowling saw and revealed this impasse. Bowling's recurring

invocation of 'experience' within the pages of his own version of formalist criticism articulated the beginnings of a discourse that would challenge the monologic viewpoint of western art history.

Indeed, Bowling's 1971 article, 'It's Not Enough to Say "Black is Beautiful"' marks a turning point precisely because it moves towards an intellectual meeting point between the formalist criticism of Clement Greenberg and the model of visual and semiotic analysis put forward by Robert Farris Thompson. When Bowling wrote that the bold colour and geometries in the paintings of William T. Williams were not so much commenting on Frank Stella and abstract expressionism, but were confrontations with the history of modernism itself – and with the legacies of constructivism and Bauhaus in particular⁷³ – we can see the broad scope of his outlook on art and culture. Bowling's awareness of disguise, *double entendre* and repetition-with-a-critical difference as aspects of black diaspora culture (notions that James Scott would later refer to as 'hidden transcripts'⁷⁴) can also be read into Al Loving's comment that, 'even a box can be a self-portrait'.⁷⁵ On the one hand, this comment relates to 20th-century modernism's history of non-objective practice. But, on the other hand, we can also find allusions in this comment to African American history, especially the story of Henry 'Box' Brown who, in the 1840s, climbed into a box in Virginia and mailed himself to Philadelphia and to freedom via the postal service.⁷⁶ Although Bowling's tone was boisterous, obstreperous, controversial and at times bombastic, perhaps this was the only way out of the impasse. His texts signal an art writing that had come to be sited within a broader understanding of the world.

Ultimately, the concept of 'experience' – a wide-ranging, global, diasporic experience – provided the locus where an active and ever-changing aesthetics could reside.

This essay is dedicated to the artists. Many thanks to Danielle Elliott, Brandi Hughes and Jerlina Love for research assistance. I received support in my writing from the Griswold Fund at Yale University. Much appreciation also goes to the Yale University Art and Architecture Library, the library at the Whitney Museum of American Art and all their librarians.

NOTES

1. 'Mrs. JFK Leads Benefit Art Exhibit Sponsors', *Amsterdam News*, 12 October 1968, 8.
2. Lucy R. Lippard, 'Dreams, Demands, and Desires: The Black, Antiwar, and Women's Movements', in Mary Schmidt Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict*, New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985, 78.
3. Benny Andrews, 'The B.E.C.C. - Black Emergency Cultural Coalition', *Arts Magazine*, 44, Summer, 1970, 18-20.
4. Benny Andrews, 'Benny Andrews Journal: A Black Artist's View of Artistic and Political Activism, 1963-1973', in Mary Schmidt Campbell, op.cit., 69. The show did include the work of black photographers, such as Lloyd Yearwood, Reginald McGhee, Gordon Parks and James Van Der Zee. Ironically, the latter, who was then unknown to art or photo history, received a renaissance and new scholarly interest in his work (Deborah Willis, personal communication, November 2005). See also Deborah Willis, *Van Der Zee, Photographer, 1886-1983*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993.
5. For more on the politicisation of art culture in the US during this period see Beth Ann Handler, 'The art of activism: artists and writers protest, the art workers' coalition, and the New York Art Strike Protest the Vietnam War', Dissertation, Yale University, 2001; and Francis Frascina, *Art, politics, and dissent: aspects of the art left in sixties America*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1999. Among important black leaders and participants in the Art Workers Coalition were Tom Lloyd, a maker of electronic light sculpture, and Faith Ringgold, a painter who had yet to move into her signature work with quilts (see Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge, Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1995).
6. Lewis and Bearden had both been part of the artists' group Spiral at the beginning of the 1960s; DeCarava had figured importantly in the parallel photographic collective Kamoinge Workshop. Benny Andrews, 1970, op.cit., 19; Benny Andrews, 'Benny Andrews Journal: A Black Artist's View of Artistic and Political Activism, 1963-1973', in Mary Schmidt Campbell, op.cit., 70; Courtney Martin, 'Approaching Spiral from the Center: The Spiral Group 1963-1966', unpublished paper, Fall, 2004. See also Lucy R. Lippard, op.cit., 78.
7. Benny Andrews, 1970, op.cit., 19. Benny Andrews, 'Benny Andrews Journal: A Black Artist's View of Artistic and Political Activism, 1963-1973', in Mary Schmidt Campbell, op.cit., 70.
8. Benny Andrews, 1970, op.cit., 20.
9. The exhibitions at the Whitney were as follows: *Alvin Loving: Paintings* - 19 December 1969 - 25 January 1970
Melvin Edwards: Works, 2-29 March 1970
Fred Eversley: Recent Sculpture, 18 May - 7 June 1970
Marvin Harden, 5 January - 4 February 1971
Malcolm Bailey, 16 March - 25 April 1971
Contemporary Black Artists in America, 6 April - 16 May 1971
Frank Bowling, 4 November - 6 December 1971
Alma W. Thomas, 25 April - 28 May 1972
Jacob Lawrence, 16 May - 7 July 1974
Jack Whitten, 20 August - 22 September 1974
Betye Saar, 20 March - 20 April 1975
Minnie Evans, 3 July - 3 August 1975
10. The Guggenheim Museum in particular was begun as an institution championing the abstract over the representational. Inspired by the art and theories of Wassily Kandinsky, the museum's first director Hilla Rebay coined the term 'non-objective' to describe this concept of 'pure' visual creation. The museum began its life in 1939 as the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (see Nathaniel Burt, *Palaces for the People, A Social History of the American Art Museum*, Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1977, 340).
11. Avis Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street*, New York: Atheneum, 1990, 279. Although Delaney was identified in this exhibition (and periodically throughout his career) as a self-taught artist, as Ann Gibson has pointed out, 'Delaney had arrived in New York [in 1929] with more formal training than most would-be artists', having studied in Boston at the Copley Society, the South Boston School of Art and the Lowell Institute. Ann Gibson, 'Gay and Black in Greenwich Village: Beauford Delaney's Idylls of Integration', in Patricia Sue Canterbury, *Beauford Delaney: From New York to Paris*, Minneapolis, MN: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2004, 12.
12. Clement Greenberg, *Post Painterly Abstraction*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1964. Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' (1967), in *Art and Objecthood*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 160.
13. These shows included *American Sources of Modern Art (Aztec, Mayan, Incan)* (1933), *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* (1937), *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America* (1938), *Indian Art of the United States* (1941), and *Religious Folk Art of the Southwest* (1943). See Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern, An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art*, New York: Atheneum, 1973; and Josef Helfenstein, 'From the Sidewalk to the Marketplace: Traylor, Edmondson, and the Modern Impulse', in Josef Helfenstein and Roxanne Stanulis eds, *Bill Traylor, William Edmondson and the Modernist Impulse*, Urbana-Champaign, IL: Krannert Art Museum, 2004, 45-67.

NOTES

14. These shows were *Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual; The Sculpture of Richard Hunt; Projects: Sam Gilliam*, all of which appeared in 1971 (Russell Lynes, *ibid.*, 468-69). Indeed Faith Ringgold recounts meetings she and Tom Lloyd had with MoMA director John Hightower to put Bearden's show in place (see Faith Ringgold, *op.cit.*, 171-72).
15. See Al Loving interviewed in Joseph Jacobs ed., *Since the Harlem Renaissance, 50 Years of Afro-American Art*, Lewisburg, PA: The Center Gallery at Bucknell University, 1984, 30-33.
16. Al Loving, artist statement in *Al Loving: Paintings*, 19 December 1969 - 25 January 1970, Whitney Museum of American Art, unpaginated.
17. George Perret, 'Al Loving', *Arts Magazine*, 44, February 1970, 57.
18. *Ibid.* The lobby gallery still exists in the Whitney Museum today; the second floor auditorium is possibly now the video gallery.
19. Carter Ratcliff, 'New York', *Art International*, 14, April 1970, 71.
20. Dore Ashton, 'New York Commentary', *Studio International*, 179, April 1970, 187.
21. Melvin Edwards, artist statement in *Melvin Edwards: Works*, 2-29 1970, Whitney Museum of American Art, unpaginated.
22. Robert Pincus-Witten, 'Melvin Edwards', *Artforum*, May 1970, 77.
23. Frederick J. Eversley, 'Statement of the Artist', Santa Barbara Museum of Art, *Frederick Eversley*, 1976.
24. Fred Eversley, artist statement in *Fred Eversley: Recent Sculpture*, 18 May - 7 June 1970, Whitney Museum of American Art, unpaginated.
25. John Gruen, 'All That Smoke', *New York Magazine*, 8 June 1970, 59; Carter Ratcliff, 'New York Letter', *Art International*, 20 January 1971, 28-29.
26. Henry J. Seldis, 'Eversley Show in New York', *Los Angeles Times*, Calendar, 8 June 1970, E10; Henry J. Seldis, 'Optical Magic Turns Us Inward As We Look Out', *Los Angeles Times*, Calendar, 23 May 1976, 76.
27. Alain Locke, 'The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts' (1925), in Alain Locke ed., *The New Negro*, New York: Atheneum, 1992, 254-67.
28. Thanks to Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr for our many dialogues on the relationship of music and art. See Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr, *Race Music, Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
29. Among the articles to appear on the topic of black art were: Grace Glueck, 'Negroes' Art is What's In Just Now', *The New York Times*, 27 February 1969, D34; 'Black Art: What Is It?', *The Art Gallery*, April 1970, 32-35; Jeff Donaldson, 'Ten in Search of a Nation', *Black World*, 19, 12, October 1970, 80-89; Barbara Rose, 'Black Art in America', *Art in America*, 58, September 1970, 54-67; Elsa Honig Fine 'Mainstream, Blackstream and the Black Art Movement', *Art Journal*, 30, 4, Summer, 1971, 374-75.
30. Elizabeth Baker, 'Frank Bowling', *Art News*, 64, January 1966, 11.
31. Frank Bowling and Bill Thomson, 'A Conversation Between Two Painters', *Art International*, 20, 10, December 1976, 61-67.
32. On black cultures in New York as early as the seventeenth century see W.T. Lhamon Jr, *Raising Cain: blackface performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998; and the exhibition *Slavery in New York*, New York Historical Society, 7 October 2005 - 6 March 2006, <http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org> (accessed 2 January 2006).
33. The six articles were 'Discussion on Black Art', *Arts Magazine*, 43, April 1969, 16, 18, 20; 'Discussion on Black Art II', *Arts Magazine*, May 1969, 20-23; 'Black Art III', *Arts Magazine*, 44, December 1969/January 1970, 20, 22; 'The Rupture: Ancestor Worship, Revival, Confusion, or Disguise', *Arts Magazine*, 44, Summer, 1970, 31-34; 'Silence: People Die Crying When They Should Love', *Arts Magazine*, 45, September 1970, 31-32; 'It's Not Enough To Say "Black Is Beautiful"', *Art News*, 70, April 1971, 53-55, 82-84.
34. Kobena Mercer, 'Frank Bowling's Map Paintings', in Gilane Tawadros ed., *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes*, London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2003; Ann Gibson, 'Recasting the Canon: Norman Lewis and Jackson Pollock', *Artforum*, 22, May 1984, 64-70.
35. All quotes taken from Frank Bowling interviewed by Robert Doty, in *Frank Bowling*, 4 November - 6 December 1971, Whitney Museum of American Art, unpaginated.
36. Gerrit Henry, 'Frank Bowling', *Art News*, 70, December 1971, 13.
37. Marcia Hafif, 'Frank Bowling', *Arts Magazine*, 46, December 1971, 58.
38. Alma W. Thomas, artist statement in *Alma W. Thomas*, 25 April - 28 May 1972, Whitney Museum of American Art, unpaginated; and Lowery Stokes Sims, 'Stroke, Style, Technique, Culture, and Politics', in *Stroke! - Beauford Delaney, Norman Lewis, and Alma Thomas*, New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2005, 4-11.
39. Thanks to my colleague, Alondra Nelson, for calling my attention to this (personal communication, March 2005). See Alondra Nelson ed., *Afrofuturism Special Issue - Social Text*, 71, Summer, 2002.

40. Alma Thomas quoted in David L. Shirey, 'At 77, She's Made It to the Whitney', *The New York Times*, 4 May 1972, 52.
41. Ibid.
42. Alma Thomas quoted in Eleanor Munro, 'The Late Springtime of Alma Thomas', *The Washington Post Magazine*, 15 April 1979, 23.
43. Phyllis Derfner, 'Alma W. Thomas', *Art News*, 71, Summer, 1972, 59. Reviews in the general press included James R. Mellow, 'Expert Abstractions by Alma Thomas', *The New York Times*, 29 April 1972, 27; and Paul Richards, 'First Solo Show at 77', *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 28 April 1972, B1+B5.
44. See Jack Whitten's statement in Henry Geldzahler, 'Jack Whitten: Ten Years - 1970-1980', in Studio Museum in Harlem, *Jack Whitten: Ten Years - 1970-1980*, 1983, 8. Geldzahler also makes a link between Whitten's ideas and those of Sam Gilliam at around this time. He quotes Mary Schmidt Campbell on the artist, 'Gilliam's cascades of color are not unlike Coltrane's sheets of sound' (see 'Sam Gilliam: Journey Toward Red, Black and D', in Studio Museum in Harlem, *Red & Black To 'D': Paintings By Sam Gilliam*, 1982, 9). Whitten himself played tenor saxophone in college. Jack Whitten interviewed in Joseph Jacobs ed., *Since the Harlem Renaissance, 50 Years of Afro-American Art*, Lewisburg, PA: The Center Gallery at Bucknell University, 1984, 45. The concept of 'sheets of sound' is often used to refer to John Coltrane's sound within the realm of jazz criticism and music history. (See, for instance, Frank Tirro, *Jazz, A History*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977, 352. Thanks to Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr for this reference.)
45. Jack Whitten interviewed by David Shapiro, in *Jack Whitten*, 20 August - 22 September 1974, Whitney Museum of American Art, unpaginated.
46. See Jack Whitten interviewed in Joseph Jacobs, op.cit., 44.
47. Jack Whitten interviewed by David Shapiro, in *Jack Whitten*, 20 August - 22 September 1974, Whitney Museum of American Art, unpaginated.
48. Peter Frank, 'Jack Whitten', *Art News*, 73, November 1974, 114-15.
49. Peter Schjeldahl, 'Jack Whitten at the Whitney', *Art in America*, 62, November 1974, 120.
50. See Alan Trachtenberg ed., *Classic Essays on Photography*, New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1981.
51. See Benny Andrews interviewed in Joseph Jacobs, op.cit., 12.
52. Benny Andrews mentions protest activities began to be planned in October 1970 with actions outside of the Whitney taking place as early as January 1971 (Benny Andrews, 'Benny Andrews Journal: A Black Artist's View of Artistic and Political Activism, 1963-1973', in Mary Schmidt Campbell, op.cit., 72). On 4 January 1971, Charles Alston, another artist who had come of age in the 1930s, and who was one of the first black supervisors of a WPA project, wrote to Robert Doty, the show's curator, offering extensive reasons why he declined to participate in *Contemporary Black Artists in America*. This letter has been published in *Charles Alston, Artist and Teacher*, New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1990, 27. Thanks to my colleague, the wonderful poet Elizabeth Alexander, for pointing this resource out to me.
53. Barbara Chase Riboud quoted in 'People: Barbara Chase Riboud', *Essence*, 1, 2, June 1970, 62 cited in Robert Doty, *Contemporary Black Artists in America*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1971, 11.
54. Benny Andrews remembers that from 1966 onward his work with black figures became hugely popular, see Benny Andrews interviewed in Joseph Jacobs, op.cit., 11; see also Grace Glueck, 'Negroes' Art is What's In Just Now', *The New York Times*, 27 February 1969, D34.
55. John Canaday, 'Black Artists on View in 2 Exhibitions', *The New York Times*, 7 April 1971, 52; Lawrence Alloway, 'Art', *The Nation*, 212, 10 May 1971, 604-05.
56. Mary Schmidt Campbell, op.cit., 56.
57. Lawrence Alloway, op.cit., 604-05.
58. John Canaday, op.cit., 52.
59. Barbara Rose, op.cit., 54-67.
60. John I.H. Baur quoted in Grace Glueck, 'Black Show Under Fire at the Whitney', *The New York Times*, 31 January 1971, D25.
61. John Canaday, op.cit., 52.
62. Grace Glueck, 'Black Show Under Fire at the Whitney', *The New York Times*, 31 January 1971, D25; Grace Glueck, '15 of 75 Black Artists Leave As Whitney Exhibition Opens', *The New York Times*, 6 April 1971, 50; 'In a Black Bind', *Time*, 97, 12 April 1971, 64.
63. Acts of Art Gallery was run by Nigel Jackson. Romare Bearden, Richard Hunt and Sam Gilliam had simultaneous solos at the Museum of Modern Art; William T. Williams was showing at the Reese Paley Gallery at this moment.
64. Al Loving quoted in Grace Glueck, 'In a Black Bind', *Time*, 97, 12 April 1971, 64.
65. 'Politics', *Artforum*, 9, 9, May 1971, 12.
66. See Frank Bowling, 'The Rupture: Ancestor Worship, Revival, Confusion, or Disguise', *Arts Magazine*, 44, Summer, 1970, 31-34. While critical of shows of 'black art', Bowling was also known to participate in them as an artist, thus offering his own work and position as a critic up for analysis. This article includes a review of the exhibition *Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston*, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 19 May - 23 June 1970 in which Bowling took part.

NOTES

67. Frank Bowling, 'Discussion on Black Art', *Arts Magazine*, 43, April 1969, 20.
68. Frank Bowling, 'Discussion on Black Art II', *Arts Magazine*, 43, May 1969, 23.
69. Robert Farris Thompson, 'African Influence in the Art of the United States', in Armstead L. Robinson, Craig G. Foster, Donald H. Ogilvie eds, *Black Studies in the University*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969.
70. Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The Signifying Monkey*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
71. Joan Murray quoted in Ann Gibson, 1984, op.cit., 69.
72. *the de luxe show*, Houston, TX: The Menil Foundation, 15 August - 12 September 1971. Nineteen artists participated in the show including: Peter Bradley, Anthony Caro, Ed Clark, Craig Kauffman, Alvin Loving, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Larry Poons, William T. Williams and James Wolfe. The catalogue included a text by poet Steve Cannon and separate interviews with Bradley and Greenberg. This is a fascinating moment that begs to be unpacked further.
73. An ongoing dialogue with his teacher at Yale University, Josef Albers.
74. James C. Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
75. Al Loving quoted in Frank Bowling, 'It's Not Enough To Say "Black Is Beautiful"', *Art News*, 70, April 1971, 83.
76. Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, who escaped from slavery enclosed in a box 3 feet long and 2 wide*, written from a statement of facts made by himself, with remarks upon the remedy for slavery by Charles Stearns, Boston: Brown & Stearns, 1849. I find a strong parallel here with African American artists who can only enter the 'white box' of a modern art museum in order to clean it.