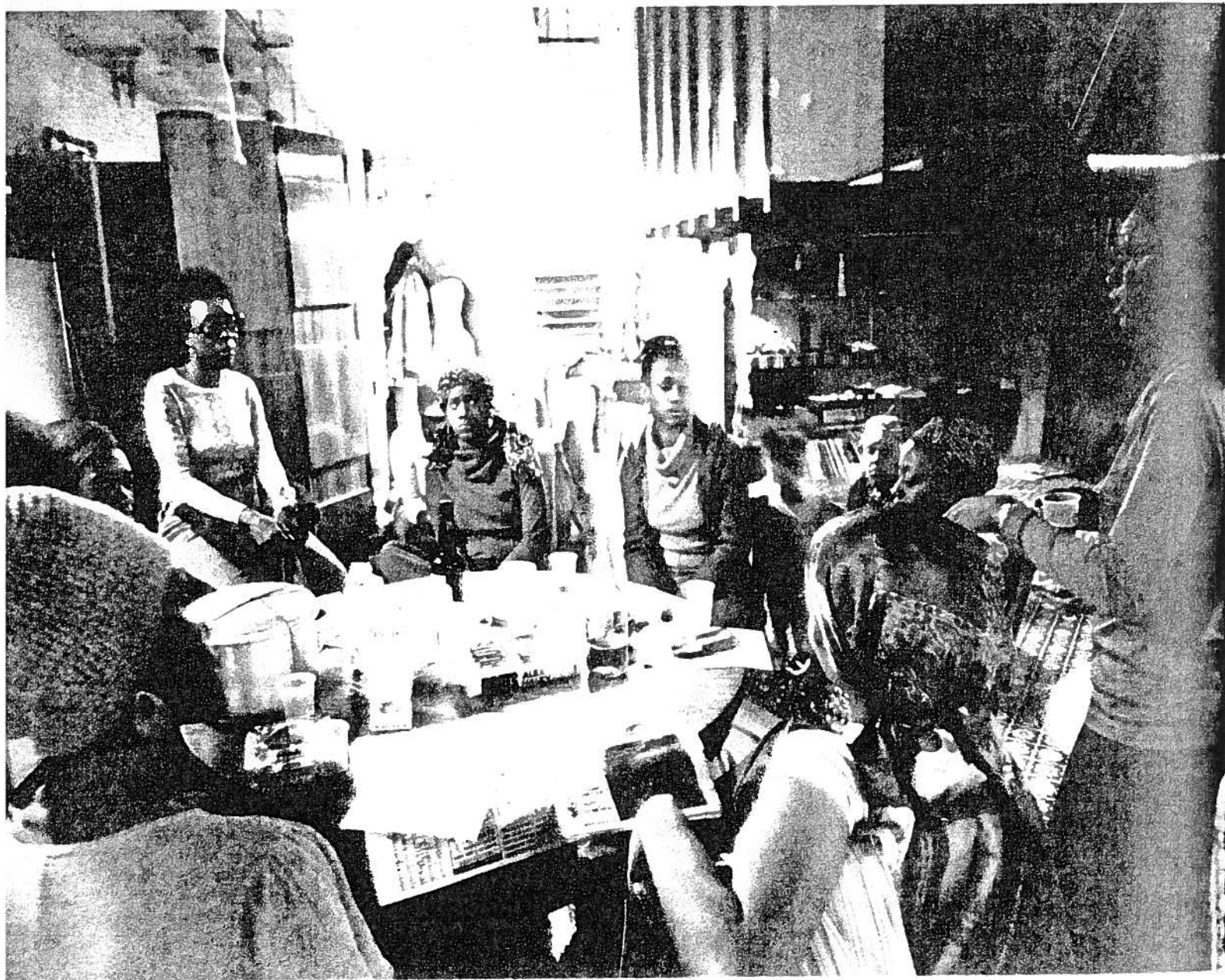


**ABUNDANT EVIDENCE:
BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS OF THE 1960s AND 70s**



Kay Brown (far right) and members of "Where We At" Black Women Artists meet to discuss "Festivals for the South: Where Black and African Artists Gather" at the same festival in 1977. Photo by [illegible]

The 1960s and 70s saw dramatic changes not only in American social and political culture, but in the art world as well. As racial and gender relations were transfigured in the public sphere, increasing numbers of artists from communities that had historically been underrepresented in galleries and museums began to emerge. The heightened visibility of white women artists and artists of color during this period led to new strategies for reaching mass audiences, challenges to conventional distinctions between high and low art, and critiques of traditional exclusionary practices of exhibition.

Valerie Smith

Numerous artists, writers, activists, and scholars have noted that on both the political and artistic scenes, black women found themselves in a problematic ideological position.¹ On the political front, black women held positions of prominence and responsibility in the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements. In the Civil Rights movement, for example, women such as Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, Diane Nash, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, and Jo Ann Gibson Robinson did the essential but often unacknowledged work of training and organizing activists and creating and maintaining networks of communication. Yet for the most part, their male counterparts prioritized the eradication of racial inequalities and failed to acknowledge either sexist practices within their ranks or the inextricable relationship between patriarchy and racism.

Likewise, figures such as Elaine Brown, Kathleen Cleaver, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur led Black Nationalist organizations; nevertheless, numerous accounts indicate that in this movement as well, black women in general were relegated to the roles of childbearing and nation-building. Both the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements privileged the powerful presence and voices of charismatic male leaders. Even as black women in both movements proved their commitment to the struggle against white supremacy and for social justice, they were expected to capitulate to male authority, ignore misogyny within the organizations, and defer their concern with "women's issues."

Black feminists had long been among the first theorists and activists to recognize that gender and race are mutually constitutive and interlocking modes of experience and social construction. Thus they rejected the notion that a concern for gender discrimination would detract from the anti-racism struggle. While some continued to work within the Black Nationalist movement in the hopes that a true revolution would radically alter relations of class, race, and gender, others affiliated themselves with the women's movement, hoping to find common cause with white feminists. Their accounts regularly reflect their sense of marginalization in the feminist organizations as well, however, as they confronted white feminist claims that issues of race were diversions from the goals of the women's movement. Black feminists in the women's movement were expected to ignore white feminists' racism and assertions of class privilege and countenance an agenda that ignored the connections between gender, class, and racial oppression. Not surprisingly, in response some black feminists formed their own organizations or, as Kimberly Springer has observed, "found their activism institutionalized in social services, governmental bodies, higher education

1. For early black feminist critiques of anti-racism and women's movements, cultural representations, and public policy, see *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade (New York: New American Library, 1970); *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York:

The Feminist Press, 1982); and Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table—Women of Color Press, 1983). For a detailed discussion of black women in the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements and a history of black feminist organizations of the 1960s and 70s, see Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations*

1968–1980 (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005).

institutions, and other organizations they could attempt to influence with antiracist and anti-sexist ideology.”²

Black feminist analyses and the black feminist movement emerged as a way of theorizing the inextricability of various modalities of experience, such as race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic status. While considerable attention has been focused on black women writers who came to prominence during this period, such as Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, and Michele Wallace (to name only a few), comparatively less attention has been given to their visual-art counterparts.³ During the 1960s and 70s, black feminist visual artists working in a range of media and styles—film, performance art, collage, installation, painting, and photography—also broke into a world that historically had been dominated by white men.

Organized in 1971, “Where We At” Black Women Artists (WWA) provided an opportunity for black women, marginalized by both the predominantly male Black Arts Movement (the cultural and aesthetic counterpart of the Black Power Movement) and the largely white feminist (and feminist art) organizations, to share concerns and resources. Although they made art, many of WWA’s members did not consider themselves professional artists. As Kay Brown, a painter, printmaker, and collagist, explained in a 1984 panel discussion held at the Hatch-Billops Collection in New York City: “They were conditioned to think that they could not really achieve the status of a professional artist.”⁴ By providing these women with a space in which they could engage in meaningful substantive conversation and exchange work and ideas, WWA helped them gain confidence and inspired them to continue.

Early in the history of WWA, the artists in the organization focused on the difficulties they faced in trying to exhibit their work. Most gallery owners doubted that either blacks or women could

From left to right: Ellsworth Osby, Jean Taylor, Carol Blank, Akweke Singho, and Kay Brown at a “Where We At” Black Women Artists exhibition, New York, c. 1970s



² Springer, *Living for the Revolution*, 9–10.

³ Many important studies of black women artists do exist, however, and include two valuable books: Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002); and Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African American Women Artists* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴ Dindga McCannon, in “When That Time Came Rolling Down: Panel II,” *Artist and Influence* (1985): 194.

legitimately claim to be artists, so black women artists were doubly challenged. Moreover, few of the WWA artists had sufficiently large bodies of work to warrant solo exhibitions. Through the efforts of Dindga McCannon—a painter, printmaker, and muralist who had been exhibiting her work at Pat and Nigel Jackson's Acts of Art Gallery in New York—Brown and others arranged the group show "Where We At: Black Women Artists 1971," which led to the organization of the WWA. McCannon's description captures the excitement of that first exhibition:

We produced our own catalogue. We had pictures [of the artists], because this was the first time in history that black women had come together and had an exhibition. So we produced a flyer, which had everybody's picture and a statement by each woman about her art. We had a unique opening—we introduced [serving] food—and it became a media event. The press came; everybody wanted to interview us. All of a sudden, the [black] women artists were discovered!⁵

While the original group comprised painters and photographers who worked in a figurative style that romanticized black subjects, over time it expanded to include a wider range of artists and genres. As McCannon observed: "Now, we have a cross-section of everything from minimalism to realism, we have craftspeople, we have a musician, a writer, poets, sculptors."⁶ Moreover, the group shifted its focus from seeking opportunities to exhibit in galleries to finding ways to show the work to wider communities. For instance, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts allowed several of the artists to show their work in hospitals. An America the Beautiful grant enabled them to work with the elderly at Cumberland Hospital in Brooklyn and inmates in the prison ward at Bellevue Hospital, New York. WWA also organized traveling exhibitions and workshops for children in Brooklyn and for prisoners at locations in New York State such as the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women and the Arthur Kill Correctional Facility for Men. By 1984, the group was large enough to consider purchasing a building where its members could have housing, exhibition and studio space, and a school, but regrettably, the idea never came to fruition.⁷

In a 1998 article, Brown described the range of ideological perspectives that black feminist artists brought to the group:

The women's liberation movement, generally headed by liberal white women, also emerged during the 1970s. Some people link the gains made by black women artists to the influence of the feminist artists. I don't believe this is an accurate assessment. Although WWA members and other black women artists agreed that women should empower themselves to gain economic and artistic equity, we generally viewed ourselves as integral to the black arts movement. Our struggle was primarily against racial discrimination—not singularly against sexism. We were not prepared to alienate ourselves from our artist brothers. Nonetheless, it is important to note that some of the artists (a few quite well established ones) chose to align themselves with the militant feminists.⁸

⁵
Ibid., 190.

⁶
Ibid., 191.

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Ibid., 195.

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Brown, "The Emergence of Black Women Artists: The 1970s, New York," *The International Review of African American Art* 15, no. 1 (1998): 47.

In her recollections of this period in the history of the organization, Brown described two collaborative exhibitions that dramatized the complicated position of black feminism from the 1960s onwards. In the first, held in 1972, WWA artists exhibited with the feminist organization National Conference of Women in Visual Arts at a range of venues in Greenwich Village, SoHo, the East Village, and midtown Manhattan. Brown noted that the two groups displayed strikingly different work. While the white feminist artists addressed issues of sexism directly, the black women artists "explored the unity of the black family, the ideal of the black male-female relation, and other themes relating to social conditions and African traditions."⁹

In 1986, WWA artists collaborated on an exhibition at the Muse Community Museum in Brooklyn with selected black male artists. For "Joining Forces: 1+1=3," WWA invited men and women artists to work in pairs in order to display in a visual medium "the means through which male/female had come together to create something that 'went beyond the normal vocabulary to make an entity of a third thing.'" As Brown described it, this exhibition was "one of the crowning achievements in WWA's history."¹⁰

One of the co-founders of WWA, Faith Ringgold has long been recognized as one of the leading black feminist artists. The media in which she works, her subject matter, her collaborations, and her political activism on behalf of women artists and artists of color all bespeak her commitment to an ethics and a practice of empowerment for the disenfranchised. Perhaps her best known work, Ringgold's story quilts confound distinctions between fine and folk art, focusing viewers' attention on the artistic potential of a medium so fully associated with women's work. For decades she has been drawn to women as subjects and made numerous projects with her mother, the Harlem fashion designer Willi Posey, and her daughter, the feminist writer and critic Michele Wallace. During the 1960s and 70s, whether independently or in her capacity as a founding member of such organizations as the United Black Artists' Committee; WWA; Women, Students, and Artists for Black Art Liberation; and the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Group, she denounced the exclusionary curatorial and exhibition practices of major New York museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Guggenheim Museum.

Born in 1930, Ringgold was raised in a lower-middle-class Harlem family. Her mother cultivated her interest in art during her childhood. Although she studied art as an undergraduate at City College in New York, she was only able to pursue a degree in art through the School of Education, as university regulations prevented women from declaring a major in the School of Liberal Arts. After graduating in 1955 with degrees in fine art and education, she taught art in New York City public schools for many years. From 1970 until 1985, she also taught at various colleges and universities in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Staten Island. In 1985, she was appointed a full professor in the visual arts department at the University of California, San Diego.



Faith Ringgold
The American Dream, 1964,
 #9 from the American
 People series, 1963–67
 Oil on canvas
 36 x 26 inches
 Private collection

Ringgold began her American People Series—what she described as her earliest mature body of work—with *Between Friends* in the summer of 1963. She completed the series in 1967 with the three largest works: *The Flag Is Bleeding*, *U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power*, and *Die*. Painted in what was for her a new style she called “super realism,” these works responded to the political climate of the Civil Rights movement and expressed the ambivalence she and many of her contemporaries felt during this period of dramatic social upheaval.

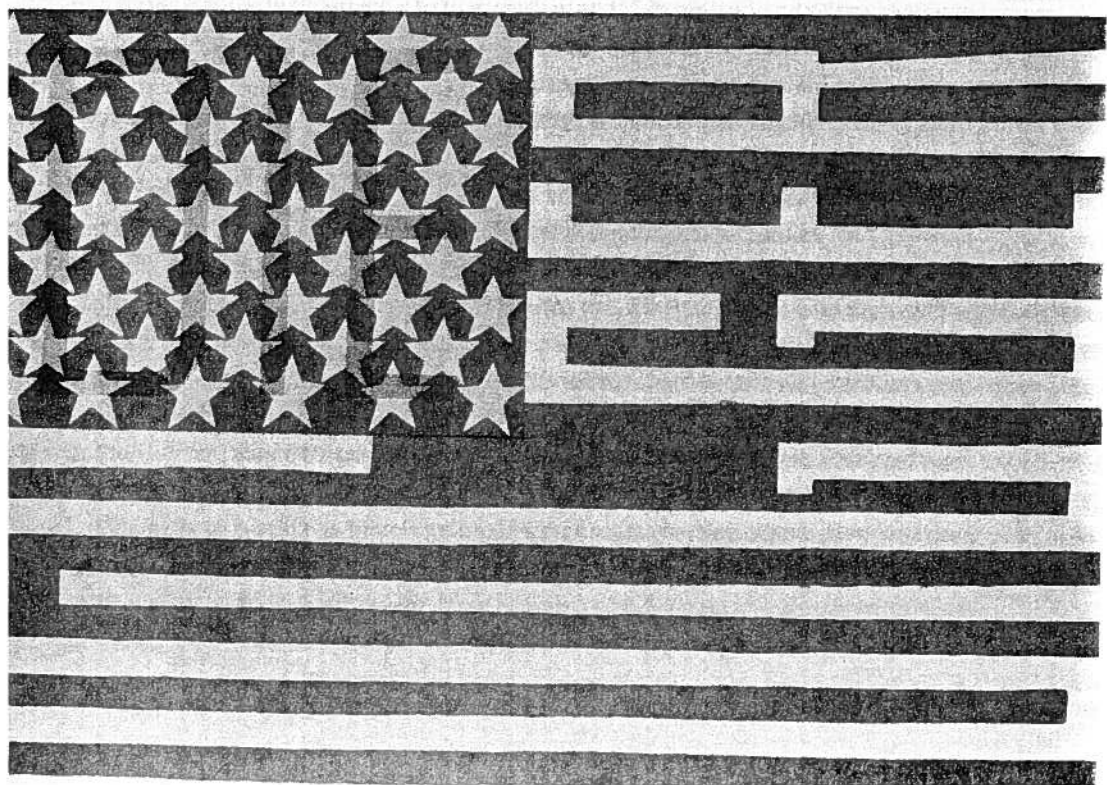
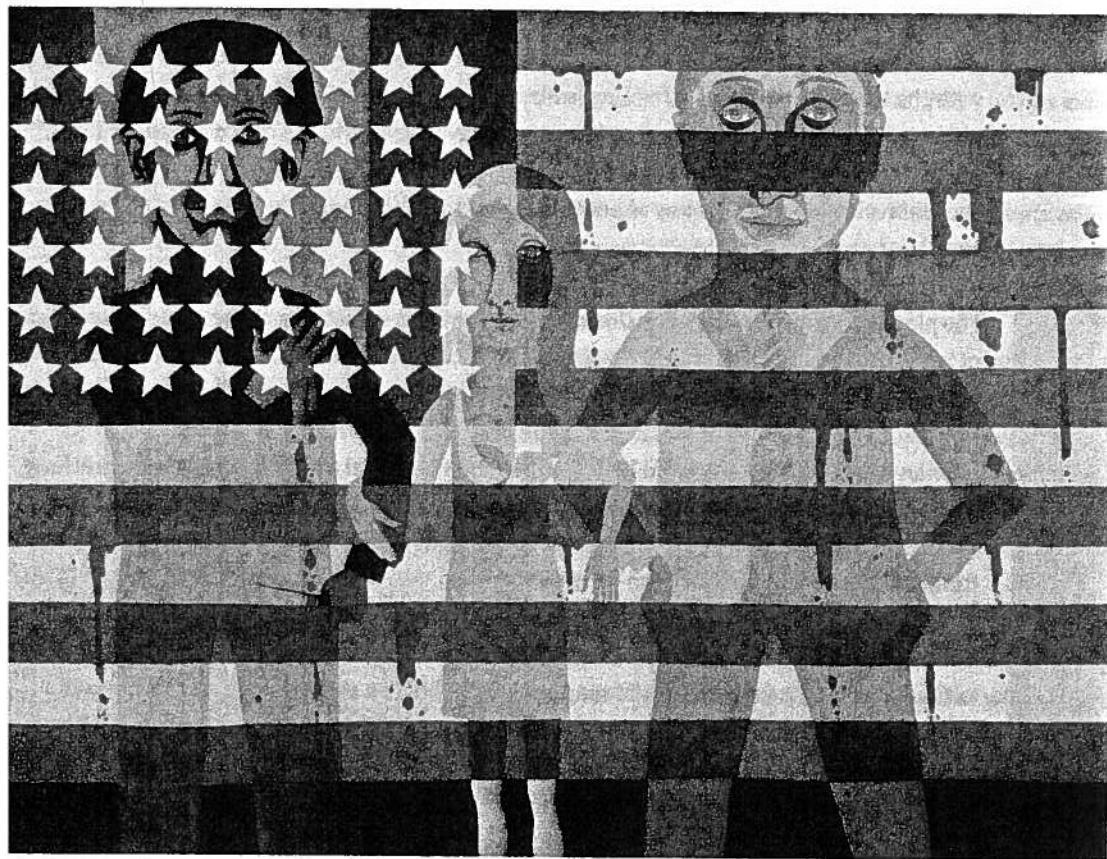
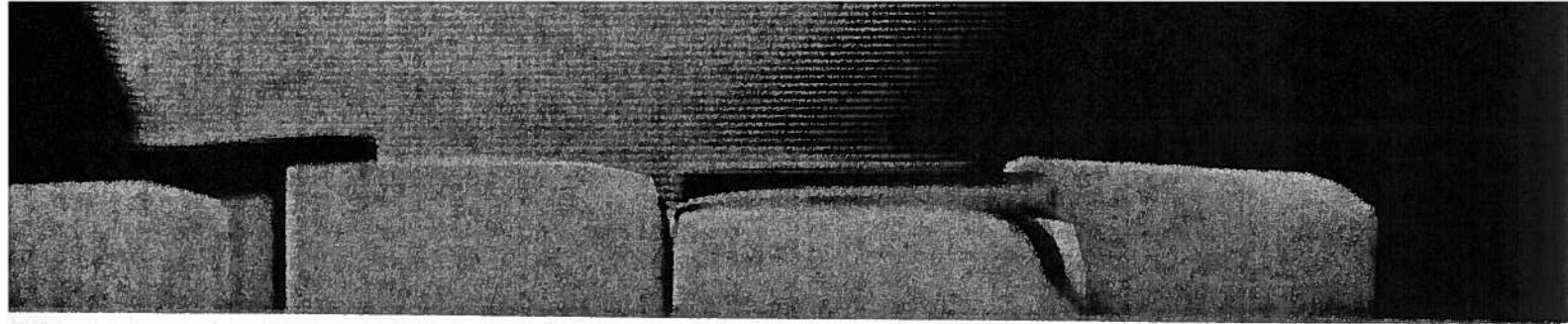
The ninth painting, *The American Dream* (1964), captures something of the complicated legacy of integration in the depiction of an ostensibly wealthy woman whose body is half dark and half white.¹¹ On the side of the face that is white, shadows are conveyed in blue, a technique that highlights the paleness of the face, the neck, and the breast. On the dark side, the woman has raised her hand and bent it at the wrist to reveal a large diamond ring and long, manicured red nails. Forming a downward arch from left to right over the woman’s head is a blood-red arrow that matches her nail color; the right hand is positioned almost as if the color from the nails is dripping into the tip of the arrow.

An expensively dressed woman who is both black and white appearing in a painting suffused with red, white, and blue might be read as a symbol of the achievement of the dream of integration and equality of access to opportunity. Both races seem to co-exist in a figure bearing symbols of wealth and the colors of the flag. But the prominence of red, the downward pointing arrow, and the garish conspicuousness of the ring provide a less sanguine interpretation of the promise of integration. The painting thus evokes a fear that integration may lead to the fortification of capitalism instead of a means to profound social and political transformation.

Like many artists and activists of the 1960s and 70s, Ringgold protested against racism, sexism, militarism, and other forms of oppression by confronting the iconic image of the American flag. The use of red, white, and blue in *The American Dream* manifests more explicitly in works such as *The Flag Is Bleeding*. In this painting, three figures stand behind a semi-transparent American flag, its red stripes seeming to drip with blood. A black man stands on the left, a white man stands on the right, and a white woman stands in the middle, a link between the two men. The placement of the figures correlates to the social and political power they possess: the white man is the tallest and most visible; the white woman is the most diminutive; and the black man fades into the background, his face partly obscured by the blue area on which forty-eight stars were placed.¹² While the white man’s hands rest authoritatively on his hips, the black man holds a knife in his left hand while his right hand is placed ambiguously over his heart, simultaneously stanching a bleeding wound and pledging allegiance. The images suggest the incommensurate access to civil rights and socio-economic privilege enjoyed by whites and blacks—and men and women—within American society. Smaller than the white man but more visible than the black, the white woman occupies an intermediate status, privileged on the basis of race but disenfranchised because of her gender. The black

¹¹ Although Faith Ringgold described this figure as “half white, half black,” Farrington read her as a white woman. See Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), 148; and Farrington, *Art on Fire: The Politics of Race and Sex in the Paintings of Faith Ringgold* (New York: Millennium Fine Arts Publishing, 1995), 27–28.

¹² Ringgold wrote that although the flag actually had fifty stars in 1967, she chose to paint only forty-eight because she “liked the regularity of the position of the forty-eight stars.” Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 15.



Faith Ringgold
The Flag Is Bleeding, 1967, #18
 from the *American People*
 series, 1963–67
 Oil on canvas
 72 x 96 inches
 Courtesy of the artist

Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger,
 1969, #10 from the *Black Light*
 series, 1967–69
 Oil on canvas
 36 x 50 inches
 Courtesy of the artist

man, gripping a knife and holding back his own blood even as he pledges allegiance, has had to risk his life to claim his identity as an American.¹³

In the American People series, Ringgold's works comment on contemporary race politics in American culture. Beginning in the late 1960s, she began to seek a visual language that would express on canvas an emergent, more radical political agenda. She began the Black Light series, a group of twelve paintings she produced from 1967 until 1969, that work with a darker palette as "experiments in toning the light to the blacks, browns, and grays that cover my skin and hair; and the shades of blues, greens, and reds that create my forms and textures."¹⁴

The tenth painting in the Black Light series, *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (1969), responds to the famous image of the Apollo 11 moon landing on 20 July 1969, when Neil Armstrong planted an American flag on the surface of the moon. In this painting of the flag, the word "die," in black letters, is barely visible in the blue area containing the stars. The word "nigger," printed in horizontally elongated gray-brown letters against a red background, is almost illegible, occupying the place where one would ordinarily expect to see white stripes. Through her use of color and form, Ringgold deliberately manipulated positive and negative space, the visible and the invisible, to allegorize the role of race hatred and violence in the construction and assertion of American identity and to call attention to the fact that "too many American people go to bed hungry, while the government spent billions to place their flag on the moon."¹⁵

One of Ringgold's earliest, most explicit pieces of black feminist art is her poster *Woman Freedom Now* (1971). During this period of heightened radical activity, many artists and activists used posters to convey information and disseminate art to the wider public. On red, black, and green interlocking triangles, the words "woman," "freedom," and "now" appear backward, forward, and upside down. *Woman Freedom Now* unites a feminist message with the colors of black liberation and Kuba design, creating a dialogue between feminist and black liberation politics.

Ringgold often uses Kuba design techniques to organize space and "combine several ideas in one composition."¹⁶ As she described it, the design, which works with configurations of eight triangular spaces, is "an ancient one often seen on African textiles and attributed to the Kuba tribe of the Congo region of Central Africa. At this time I was trying to use these Kuba triangular spaces and words to form a kind of rhythmic repetition similar to the polyrhythms used in African drumming."¹⁷ Kuba design is evident in other posters she produced during this period, including *The People's Flag Show* (1970) and those for Angela Davis: *Angela Free Women Free Angela* and *America Free Angela Free America* (both 1971).

In 1971, Ringgold received a grant from the Creative Arts Public Service Program, which enabled her to produce a mural titled *For the Women's House* for the Women's House of Detention on Riker's Island in New York. Before she began the piece, she met with some of the inmates to learn what sorts of images they would like to see in the mural. She was

13. Of the absence of a black woman, Ringgold wrote: "Let us just say that in 1967 she was reluctantly standing behind her man. The white woman was too, but somebody had to get between these two men, and since she was the daughter of the white power structure she had inherited the role of peace-maker." Ibid.

14. Ibid., 162.

15. Ibid., 187.

16. Ibid., 190.

17. Ibid., 18.



Faith Ringgold

For the Women's House, 1971

Oil on canvas

96 x 96 inches

Women's House of Detention,
Riker's Island, New York

inspired by suggestions such as “a long road leading out of there” and “women of all races holding hands and having a better life.”¹⁸ Also incorporating Kuba design, *For the Women's House* (permanently installed in 1972) depicts women in a range of roles, each of its panels representing a politically emancipatory position.

Just as Ringgold's palette and choice of media is inextricably linked to the message of the art she produces, Betye Saar's selection of found materials taps into the historical memories and narratives embedded within objects. As Peter Clothier has written, “Things have a curious life of their own. They come to us and leave us in mysterious ways, somewhere between chance and destiny. A part of Saar's art has been to arrest them in these paths and attract them into an orbit in her own intuited constellation, while yet allowing them their curious independent life.”¹⁹

Born in Los Angeles in 1926, Saar grew up in a middle-class family in Pasadena, California, and often spent time with her grandmother in Watts. She attended Pasadena City College and the University of California, Los Angeles, where she studied design. After graduating in 1949, she worked as a social worker and made enamel jewelry and home accessories for a business she shared with the artist and fabric designer Curtis Tann. In the mid-1950s, after she had married and begun to have children, she enrolled at Long Beach State (now California State University, Long Beach) to pursue her teaching credentials and to study printmaking and

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Ibid., 190.

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Peter Clothier, “The Other Side of the Past,” in
Betye Saar, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: The
Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 16.

etching, earning a master's degree in graphic design and etching in 1960. At the age of thirty-four, realizing that she was an artist, not a designer, she began to make images using occult symbols. This shift gave way in the 1960s to an abiding interest in the representation of African-Americans:

After the black movement began I found my work changing because of my strong feelings. I started collecting my derogatory black images. By that I mean Aunt Jemima, pickaninnies and Black Sambos—and by using that black imagery my work changed and became a revolutionary art. For example in *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, I take the figure that classifies all black women and make her into one of the leaders of the revolution—although she is a pretty strong character anyway. But there was a time, even during the revolution, when blacks put other blacks down as “Uncle Toms” and “Aunt Jemimas.” It is only recently that we realize that we are here because of the particular role that they played—the subservient role that protected the youth so that they could grow up and get an education.²⁰

Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) is one of a number of works produced during the 1960s and 70s that takes on the persistent stereotype of the abject and loyal black domestic servant.²¹ *Liberation* is a mixed-media assemblage in a shadow-box format. Michael D. Harris has observed that this format recalls Joseph Cornell's allegorical medicine cabinets of the



Betye Saar

Victory of Gentleness (For Rosa Parks), 1975

Mixed-media assemblage

13 3/4 x 11 1/2 x 1 3/4 inches

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery,
LLC, New York

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Saar, in Cindy Nemser, “Conversation with Betye Saar,” *The Feminist Art Journal* 4, no. 4 (winter 1975–76): 20.

21

For a discussion of other works of the period by African-American artists such as Murry DePillars, Jeff Donaldson, Jon Lockard, and Joe Overstreet that take on this figure, see Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press,

2003). See also Bridget R. Cooks’s insightful analysis of *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* in relation to other examples of contemporary artwork that confront racist and misogynist images in “See Me Now,” *Camera Obscura*, no. 36 (September 1995): 67–83.

1940s and 50s: "Here in Saar's cabinet we find powerful antidotes and remedies for the mammy headache."²² The box contains three versions of Aunt Jemima—reproductions from Aunt Jemima pancake boxes and syrup bottles, a kitchen memo-pad holder in the form of an Aunt Jemima figure, and a small painting—superimposed on one another. The multiplicity of these figures reminds us of their ubiquity and persistence. Confined within the small box, they would seem to underscore the ways in which the lives, experiences, and representations of black women have been constrained in aesthetic discourses as well as in social and political space. But these images are disrupted in a variety of ways. For example, the memo-pad figure holds a broom and a pistol in her right hand and a rifle in her left, while the figure in the painting wears a knowing grin instead of a vacuous smile. Although she stands behind a white picket fence, this Jemima is anything but a comforting domesticated servant—the white baby she holds on her left hip is crying and looks terrified. Emerging from the bottom of the frame in front of her (from the mist-like cotton at the bottom of the box) is a dark brown raised fist, the familiar symbol of black power. Visually echoing the rifle to the right, the fist announces the power of black aesthetic and political power to put an end to racial and gender oppression. *Liberation* thus represents the ability of black power to emancipate black people from the tyranny of a repressive history.

While Saar's representational constructions may appear more content-driven to some, Howardena Pindell's work reveals that the form-content dichotomy is inherently problematic. In the 1998 documentary *Howardena Pindell: Atomizing Art*, Lowery Stokes Sims observed that critics typically separate artists into those concerned with formalist issues and those concerned with content; however, Pindell confounds that distinction. Whether exploring the nuances of color in early work such as *Untitled #6* (1975), *Untitled #43* (1974), and *Untitled #73* (1975); conveying the incalculable impact of the slave trade; satirizing racist attitudes through grainy video; or detailing the "demographics of exhibitions at New York museums and commercial galleries"²³ in essay form, she is interested in what is revealed when forms and experiences are broken down into their constituent components.

Pindell was born in 1943 and raised in Philadelphia, the only child of middle-class parents. She began to take art lessons in the third grade, studying ceramics, drawing, fashion design, and advertising. She encountered overt racism at the girls' high school she attended and later at Boston University, where she received a bachelor's degree in fine arts in 1965. In 1967, she graduated from the School of Art and Architecture at Yale University with a master's of fine arts and, after a few months, was hired by what was then the international and national circulating exhibitions department at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. She spent twelve years there, first as a curatorial assistant and then as associate curator in the department of prints and illustrated books, before becoming a professor in the art department at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Early in her career, Pindell produced figurative work, but by the late 1960s her fascination with color had drawn her to more abstract projects. She produced a series of untitled works by

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Harris, *Colored Pictures*, 17.

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Howardena Pindell, "Art World Racism: A Documentation, 1980-1985" in *The 1980s: A Decade of the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, ed. Howardena Pindell, 114-115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 527, 528, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547, 548, 549, 550, 551, 552, 553, 554, 555, 556, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 571, 572, 573, 574, 575, 576, 577, 578, 579, 580, 581, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 594, 595, 596, 597, 598, 599, 600, 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 615, 616, 617, 618, 619, 620, 621, 622, 623, 624, 625, 626, 627, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634, 635, 636, 637, 638, 639, 640, 641, 642, 643, 644, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 658, 659, 660, 661, 662, 663, 664, 665, 666, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 672, 673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 688, 689, 690, 691, 692, 693, 694, 695, 696, 697, 698, 699, 700, 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 716, 717, 718, 719, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 735, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 751, 752, 753, 754, 755, 756, 757, 758, 759, 760, 761, 762, 763, 764, 765, 766, 767, 768, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 779, 780, 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 796, 797, 798, 799, 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818, 819, 820, 821, 822, 823, 824, 825, 826, 827, 828, 829, 830, 831, 832, 833, 834, 835, 836, 837, 838, 839, 840, 841, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847, 848, 849, 850, 851, 852, 853, 854, 855, 856, 857, 858, 859, 860, 861, 862, 863, 864, 865, 866, 867, 868, 869, 870, 871, 872, 873, 874, 875, 876, 877, 878, 879, 880, 881, 882, 883, 884, 885, 886, 887, 888, 889, 890, 891, 892, 893, 894, 895, 896, 897, 898, 899, 900, 901, 902, 903, 904, 905, 906, 907, 908, 909, 910, 911, 912, 913, 914, 915, 916, 917, 918, 919, 920, 921, 922, 923, 924, 925, 926, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 932, 933, 934, 935, 936, 937, 938, 939, 940, 941, 942, 943, 944, 945, 946, 947, 948, 949, 950, 951, 952, 953, 954, 955, 956, 957, 958, 959, 960, 961, 962, 963, 964, 965, 966, 967, 968, 969, 970, 971, 972, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 978, 979, 980, 981, 982, 983, 984, 985, 986, 987, 988, 989, 990, 991, 992, 993, 994, 995, 996, 997, 998, 999, 1000.

cutting strips of canvas or oak tag, or using a hole-puncher to make innumerable paper circles, then arranging and gluing the strips or paper dots on board. The works shimmer with a brilliant palette, their composition organized around the opposing forces of positive and negative space; they are a testament to the meditative power of repetition.²⁴ At the time they were produced, however, they met with some disapprobation. In an interview with Kellie Jones, Pindell described the way in which the Studio Museum in Harlem responded to her early abstract work:

I didn't really get involved in the women's movement until the early seventies.

That was really a direct response to taking my work to the Studio Museum. I was told by the director at the time (late sixties) that I was not doing black art because I was not using didactic images. I was not dealing with information that would be helpful to the black community. I also felt that there was bad feeling because I was a woman. I wasn't one of the boys.²⁵

This rejection led her to become active in the feminist art movement, but there she found that racism was treated as an afterthought and women of color were marginalized. Her 1980 video *Free, White and 21* provided her with the opportunity both to speak out about her own experiences of racism in schools, places of employment, and social settings and to satirize the condescension and hostility she encountered from many white women in the feminist movement. Indeed, the video begins with an account of a racist episode her mother endured as a child.

Pindell plays two roles in *Free, White and 21*. While wrapping and then unwrapping her head in a gauze bandage, she recounts stories of racist abuse both she and her mother experienced. She also performs the role of a white feminist who denies the veracity of the stories Pindell tells, referring to her as ungrateful and paranoid. For this role, she donned a blond wig, white stage makeup, lipstick, and dark glasses. At the end of the piece, this character pulls a white stocking over her head to draw a visual comparison between the feminist's dismissiveness and a robbery:

I did that because...you know, in bank robberies people who want to disguise and hide themselves do that. In a way I think I was trying to make a political statement about how in this culture, a dominant culture which represents a tiny percent of the globe, is in a sense robbing us blind. As she is pulling this thing over her head she says, "You really must be paranoid but after all I am free, white and 21."²⁶

Like Pindell, Lorraine O'Grady has used performance art to make powerful interventions. In *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (1980–82), her earliest piece, she invaded select New York art openings as the eponymous invented character. Wearing a rhinestone-and-seed-pearl tiara and a sash celebrating the Silver Jubilee of her coronation as "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (Internationale) 1955," she disrupted the events with a performance of polemical poems about art and race. Flagellating herself with a whip, she castigated black artists for failing to assert themselves politically and for capitulating to the conservative standards of the art establishment: "That's enough! No more boot-licking.... No more ass-kissing.... No more buttering-up.... No more posturing of super ass-imilates.... Black art must take more risks!"²⁷

24

See observations by Corinne Jennings, Lowery Stokes Sims, and Farrington in *Howardena Pindell: Atomizing Art* (dir. David Irving, 1998).

25

Pindell, interview with Kellie Jones, 2 April 1989, *Artist and Influence* 9 (1990): 118.

26

Ibid., 121.

27

Lines quoted from *Creating Their Own Time*, 20.



O'Grady
Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, 1981
 at New Museum
 of Contemporary Art, New York

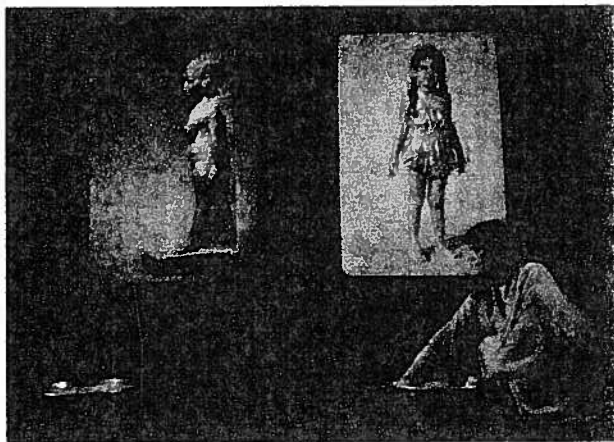
As *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, O'Grady spoke to complex issues of race, gender, and class. She wore a gown and cape made of 180 pairs of previously worn white gloves that she had stitched together—an outfit that, as Andrea Miller-Keller has remarked, “carried the unknown histories of the women who had worn them,” histories of both propriety and repression.²⁸ The tension produced between this costume and her performance of aggressive and confrontational poems spoke to the complicated position of African-Americans who, she felt, simultaneously resisted the hegemony of white power while being complicit in their own victimization.

The daughter of Jamaican immigrants who came to the United States in the 1920s and settled in Boston, O'Grady as a young woman found herself negotiating diverse pressures: her family's “tropical middle- and upper-class British colonial values...the cooler style to which they vainly aspired of Boston's black Brahmins...the odd marriage of Yankee and Irish ethics taught at the girls' prep school...and the vital urgency of the neighboring black working-class culture.”²⁹ These formative experiences of hybridity and diaspora have been central to her life and work. She received a bachelor's degree in economics from Wellesley College in 1961 and a master's degree in fiction from the University of Iowa in 1967. In 1970, she moved to New York, where she worked as a journalist for *Rolling Stone* and *The Village Voice*. By 1980, she had begun her career as a Conceptual artist, using photography, drawings, text, and sound to address the complexity of cultural politics and black female subjectivity. In one of her best-known performances, *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* (1980), she combined a one-woman play with projected photographs in order to memorialize the ancient Egyptian queen and her sister, who died unexpectedly at the age of thirty-eight.

Ringgold, Saar, Pindell, and O'Grady have all produced work in a variety of styles and genres for close to forty years; they represent a range of political perspectives and have found diverse ways to express their feminist and anti-racist convictions. They, along with contemporaries

²⁸ Andrea Miller-Keller, “Lorraine O'Grady: The Space between,” in *Lorraine O'Grady: MATR1X* 127, exh. brochure (Hartford, Connecticut: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1995), 3.

²⁹ O'Grady, “The Space between,” in *Lorraine O'Grady: MATR1X* 127, exh. brochure (Hartford, Connecticut: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1995), 3.



Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline, 1988
Performance at Just Above
Midtown Gallery, New York

such as Camille Billops, Adrian Piper, and the women in *Where We At*, either emerged or achieved greater visibility during the 1970s. But of course African-American women's visual culture did not originate with them; since the nineteenth century, black women sculptors and painters had been producing images in opposition to demeaning representations of black female bodies. Indeed, by the 1960s and 70s, artists including Elizabeth Catlett and Emma Amos had developed national and international reputations. Moreover, by the late 1970s black women artists such as Varnette Honeywood, Synthia Saint James, and Brenda Joysmith had begun to lay the groundwork for the popular acclaim they and other "Black Romantic" artists have received for figurative work that represents and celebrates the rituals of everyday African-American life.³⁰ The successes of a younger generation of artists including Renee Cox, Ellen Gallagher, Renée Green, Alison Saar, Kara Walker, and Carrie Mae Weems—as well as filmmakers Julie Dash, Zeinabu Davis, Cheryl Dunye, Kasi Lemmons, Michelle Parkerson, and Yvonne Welbon—provide abundant evidence of the enduring and variegated legacy of black feminists in visual culture.

³⁰
See *Black Romantic: The Figurative Impulse in Contemporary African-American Art*, exhibition cat. (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2002).