

THE QUIET YEARS

BY Hamza Walker, Coco Fusco November 16, 2020 11:53am



View of the exhibition "Black Is, Black Ain't," 2008, showing Glenn Ligon's neon sculpture *Warm Broad Glow*, 2008, at the Renaissance Society, Chicago.

PHOTO TOM VAN EYNDE/COURTESY RENAISSANCE SOCIETY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

When Black Lives Matter and kindred movements like Decolonize This Place brought conversations about racism and exclusion to the center of the art world's attention in the middle of the last decade, one would often hear veteran artists and critics remark, "It's like the '90s all over again!" or "Identity politics are back." In the conversation below, artist and educator Coco Fusco and curator Hamza Walker debunk the notion that identity politics belong to a trend cycle. How were artists' challenges to the racism of institutions and audiences suppressed in the early 2000s? Why did they return with renewed vigor in the 2010s? Fusco and Walker address these questions with close attention to structural conditions and the political climate of the '90s and '00s.

COCO FUSCO In the 1980s, the catch-all phrase for describing challenges to Eurocentric cultural and educational institutions was multiculturalism. By the early 1990s, that had become a bad word for the art world. Particularly strident artists were blacklisted. I'm not going to complain because I'm alive. I have a job. I'm not another sixty-year-old woman artist with cancer and no health insurance. But several artists included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, like Daniel Joseph Martinez, were just taken off the chart. No one would talk about them anymore. It took a really long time for them to work their way back in. And not all of them could.

We have to take the bigger political picture into account to understand what happened in the last thirty years. The National Endowment for the Arts was a Cold War product, developed in the early 1960s by members of Congress as a response to the propagandistic use of culture by the Soviet Union, to demonstrate that the US supported artistic freedom, that we treat art-making as a laboratory of ideas. By 1989, when the dissolution of the Soviet Union was imminent, the political rationale for having the NEA started to crumble. Meanwhile, a lot of politically driven art efforts emerged in the '80s: Group Material, the Guerrilla Girls, REPOhistory, PESTS, the performance work of Karen Finley, Tim Miller, and Annie Sprinkle. It was easy for Jesse Helms to find examples of shocking art to use to start a conversation in Congress about shutting down funding for the NEA. That ushered in an era when private money became central to contemporary art exhibitions, because public funding for contemporary art pretty much disappeared.

In addition to that, in the early '90s we reached a turning point in the AIDS crisis. The very intense politicization of the art world around AIDS diminished. The shift away from political discourse was a by-product of these larger trends. But it was also pushed by people inside the art world who were fed up. The 1993 Whitney Biennial was the first biennial with a selection of artists that had not been brokered in the back room by a bunch of blue-chip galleries and collectors. And the reaction from that part of the art world against the choices made by Elisabeth Sussman and Thelma Golden was very forceful.

HAMZA WALKER You and I crossed paths in 1992, when "Year of the White Bear," your project with Guillermo Gómez-Peña about the persistence of colonialism in the white gaze, traveled to Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago, where I was on the board. Randolph Street was founded in 1977. It belonged to the first generation of alternative spaces. In the early '90s, you could say "alternative" and it was clear what you meant. The outcome of the picture that you painted was that the differences between alternative and commercial spaces were erased. Today, it's a difference of degree rather than a difference of kind. Alternative spaces used to be different animals. Now they just don't have money.

FUSCO What made the late '90s and early '00s so different from prior eras was not only that collectors were buying a lot of contemporary art, which in itself was relatively new. They were buying student work. When I was in school, nobody told you to think about selling anything. My teachers were Conceptualists who disdained the market. I started teaching at Columbia in 2001, and at that time the head of the program would tell prospective students, "Don't worry about tuition. You will pay it off before you leave because you will be selling here." There were dealers and collectors snooping around top-tier art schools looking for work to buy cheaply, and flip. Art schools acquiesced to their presence, because by being a pipeline to Chelsea they could convince students to pay obscene sums for a degree. I remember when Jerry Saltz tried to put himself on the admissions committee for painting at Columbia so he could identify up-and-coming art stars. That would have been unthinkable in the '70s or '80s.

As a young person I was told by older artists that the market is a very fickle thing. My mentors would say that even if you manage to insert yourself into it, you'll probably only have three to five years of strong sales, so you should never define yourself by the market because the market is always going to fuck you over no matter what.

WALKER That's true!



Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña: *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit Madrid, 1992*, performance.

COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK. PHOTO
NANCY LYTTLE

FUSCO In the art world of the late '90s and early '00s there was a shift away from the moral argument about empowerment and civil rights, which was widespread in the 1980s and early '90s, to an emphasis on visual talent and success. Critiquing the system as unjust was not cool. Artists were supposed to shut up, make their work, get themselves into a top-tier MFA program, then go to Skowhegan or an equally prestigious post-grad program to make sure curators and collectors came through their studio so they could get into the market. Spend \$150,000 on an art degree and make it back quickly: that was the model,

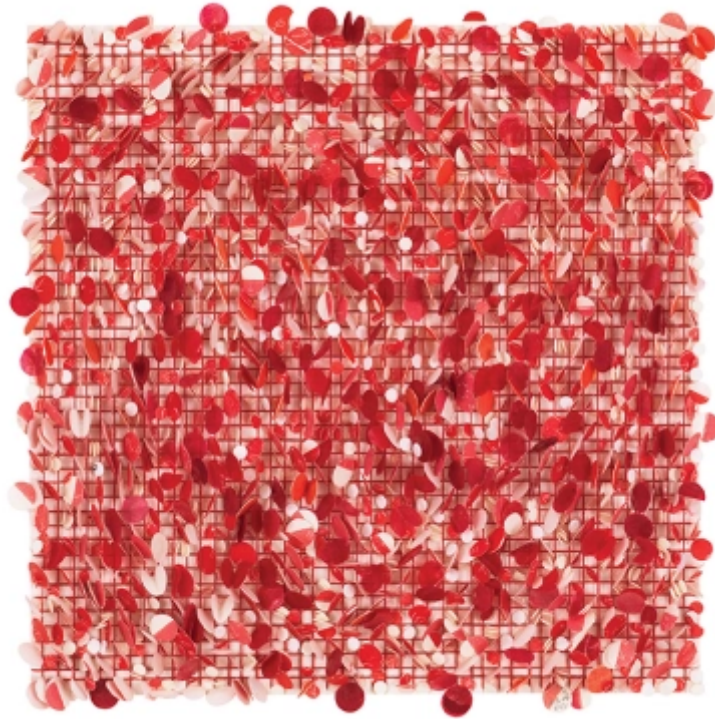
even though most did not succeed. I saw this approach being promoted at Yale, Columbia, RISD, even at UCLA. When you're a young artist seeking that kind of career trajectory you're not going to rock the boat because you need to have people in power on your side.

WALKER Sometimes the rhetoric of diversity and race can crash a career. At other times a career can absorb it, instrumentalize it, and monetize it.

FUSCO When I graduated from college in the early '80s, most museums would just show "positive images" of Black people during Black History Month. I was part of a generation of artists that critiqued that mode of representation as problematic, monolithic, homophobic, and sexist. We wanted to shatter the expectation that Black artists should "uplift the race" so that we could address topics such as colonial legacies, archives of racial representation, gender, sexuality, and power within Black communities, and so on. This stance caused a lot of intergenerational conflict and institutional anxiety.

In the late 1990s, I was working on an exhibition for the International Center of Photography, and I remember they turned down "Without Sanctuary," which showcased postcards of lynchings. The ICP staff thought it would be too controversial. The show was first presented at a small private gallery but the response was so overwhelming—there were lines around the block waiting to get in—that it was moved to the New-York Historical Society in 2000. But mainstream institutions were afraid of challenging the conventional paradigms of acceptable Black imagery.

Howardena Pindell talks about the history of fear among mainstream art curators of showing any artwork that was potentially controversial in "Breaking the Silence: The Second in a Two-Part Series on Art World Racism." She quoted Leslie King-Hammond's text in the catalogue for the 1988 exhibition "Art as a Verb" in which she explained that New York exhibitors were reluctant to show work by artists of color that was social or politically charged. It's not just that galleries didn't want to represent Black artists, there was also a pervasive reluctance to engage with issue-driven art. The critical response to big touring exhibitions that foregrounded artists of color and initiatives like "The Decade Show" [1990], which the New Museum organized with the Studio Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, was largely negative.



Howardena Pindell: *Untitled #42*, 2004–05, mixed mediums on board, 9¾ inches square.
COURTESY GARTH GREENAN, NEW YORK

WALKER I've been thinking about Kerry James Marshall's work as a critique of artistic autonomy and abstraction. The pact of the avant-garde says that you are free to do whatever you want, but you won't have an audience for it. The cost of freedom is the bond between the artist and the audience. Race has been a steadfast form of critique or resistance to that notion. In 2002 Thelma Golden organized "Black Romantic" at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which was so different from their programming because it didn't feature the avant-garde. It featured artists, primarily figurative painters, who were popular among Black audiences. The relationship between that work and Marshall's is one-to-one. It is through the eye of that needle that Marshall emerges.

FUSCO Artists of my generation were reacting against the Black Arts movement's demand that you speak as a representative of a group. But we were acting out of a politics of hybridity and diversity within, not from a desire to satisfy the demands of the market. In the late '90s, the privatization of culture and the new centrality of the contemporary art market reinforced the backlash against identity politics and put another kind of pressure on Black artists.

The essays in Dave Hickey's 1993 book, *The Invisible Dragon*, called for a return to focus on pleasure and beauty and a rejection of politicized and conceptually oriented art. His ideas were popular well into the 2000s. In private conversations, Black artists were told by those in power: "If you want to be seen, you had better stay away from identity politics." As

Kalup Linzy once told me at a dinner gathering of artists: “My dealer said my collectors don’t want to know about my problems.” I remember a Black student I had in the early ’00s who had a studio visit with a prominent white painter. The student showed him work that incorporated African textiles and Black dolls, and the painter told him to watch out, because people might come in and tell him he was making the work because he’s Black. That sort of encounter was common: white arts professionals talking to young Black students at the beginning of their artistic lives and telling them that identity politics was over, that they needed to move on and advance their medium. Young artists and students are vulnerable. I saw the student who had the visit with the painter the next day and he started screaming at me: “You want me to be a Black artist! I don’t want to be a Black artist! I’m an artist!”

That kind of discouragement from powerful professionals is very damaging, and it was typical of what happened in the ’90s and ’00s. White artists and curators did and said things in private that were never made public, but functioned as coercion for a younger generation of artists.

WALKER There was a generation of Black artists who adopted abstraction precisely because of the promise that it would transcend racial and ethnic specificity. As the Civil Rights movement heated up in the ’60s, there was Black Nationalism, so you had these two competing poles. I remember a panel where Kerry James Marshall said: “I want to be a Black artist. What is wrong with that?” He was rejecting the idea that being a Black artist was somehow limiting. For him to say “I want to be a Black artist” means “I want to represent.” Why disavow or abandon the possibility of having a relationship with an audience? That’s a very powerful thing!

FUSCO African American artists who worked with abstraction in the ’60s and ’70s were also politically involved. This didn’t become a divide until the ’90s, when the market refused to handle the political work.

WALKER Right, and I’m thinking specifically of the 1969 symposium “The Black Artist in America” as an example of this discussion. Black Nationalism wasn’t mentioned as much as art world representation, and the question of how a Black audience would receive the work. There was a big spread among the speakers, from Richard Hunt to Jacob Lawrence. But the younger generation picked up that language of “I don’t want to be a Black artist, I just want to be an artist,” as that was being seen as a limitation—

FUSCO It was a market limitation! It was a marketing ploy to say that this work isn’t about blackness. I don’t want to go after any individual young artist, but this was happening on the institutional level, with shows such as “Freestyle” [2001] at the Studio Museum, which introduced the term “post-Black” that set **Black art** apart from social engagement. That was the exhibition with Susan Smith-Pinelo’s video of her cleavage

bouncing up and down to the rhythm of a Michael Jackson song. A video by Rico Gatson with burning crosses. Another piece with sci-fi scenarios involving Aunt Jemima. All the young artists in these shows that were labeled “post-Black” were making work about Black popular culture! Were they trying to “kill the man”? Did they say “fuck the pigs”? No. But I think it is illogical to suggest that these works did not embrace and explore aspects of Blackness. The label “post-Black” promoted work to interested parties who didn’t want to be dragged into a political conversation.

WALKER When I was curating “Black Is, Black Ain’t” at the Renaissance Society in 2008, both “Freestyle” and “Black Romantic” were key to my research and the framing of that exhibition. What do we mean by post-Black? “Post” as a temporal designation is misleading. You can’t read it as “after” in the strict sense, though with “post-Black” I was looking at it in terms of “post-Black Nationalist.” But the negotiation with that mandate to represent, to speak for a group, has been going on since the Harlem Renaissance. “Freestyle” presented a generation of artists who no longer felt obligated to address the issue of race. Elvis has left the building. But the building is still there.



View of the exhibition “Black Is, Black Ain’t,” 2008, at the Renaissance Society, Chicago.

PHOTO TOM VAN EYNDE/COURTESY RENAISSANCE SOCIETY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

FUSCO Even if they don’t address it, it’s going to be there anyway!

WALKER Right! You’re free to go in and out of the building. But the building is still there. What is your relationship to that building? The post-Black discourse proposes that Black artists are no longer “obligated” to address the issue of race, while retaining the possibility of organizing a show of all Black artists. I turned that around and said, you can no longer have a show about race that has all Black artists.

FUSCO What does “about race” mean? This is a shorthand that people use in the art world without asking what it means for art not to be about race. We could talk about any work in relationship to race and not necessarily in relationship to Blackness but to processes and dynamics of racialization that operate in the US and elsewhere. My curatorial project “Only Skin Deep” [2003] was about identifying racial taxonomies in American photography over a century and a half, to show how modes of representation create certain understandings of racial identity. I started from the position that race is a fiction but at the same time a social fact, and how photography was enlisted to promote the idea that it was true. I ran into a tremendous amount of resistance. My inclusion of Cindy Sherman’s early photographs of herself in blackface generated a good deal of chagrin, as did the photograph by Vanessa Beecroft featuring a group of white people standing in militaristic formation. I argue that this work is about whiteness and power. Many came to her defense, protesting, “That’s not what she’s trying to say!” The issue for me is not one of artistic intention. It’s about racial rhetoric.

WALKER We say “about race” all the time but what would it mean for a work to really be about race? I want to talk about the process of identity being imposed from without. What is the history of that imposition? That is race.

FUSCO The scholar Manning Marable said that race is something imposed from without, while ethnicity is how identity is defined within the group. Because of the history of slavery and forced migration to the United States, there’s a particular kind of Black ethnicity that formed here. That history of racialization, subjection, and resistance was repressed during the ’90s as the art world became globalized and more privatized. The mainstream art publications were not paying attention, and museums were not paying attention. Most curators wanted to work with artists from Lebanon or Beijing or Eastern Europe as contemporary art collecting became a global endeavor. In 2008 the rug got pulled out from under this new economic order. During the recession, we began to see a lot of discontent and frustration directed at student debt and the limitations of the art world, around the polarization of wealth in the arts. I am referring to the chasm between museum director salaries which can be as high as \$1 million a year and their staff making under \$40,000, and between the handful of millionaire artists and the thousands of other artists who barely get by. Borrowing \$100,000 for an art degree started to seem more and more obscene as the market possibilities for young artists dried up. The incentives to stay quiet dried up too. That’s how we got to where we are now.

—Moderated by Brian Droiticour

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