

1000," *Critical Inquiry* 9, Chicago, 1982, pp. 179ff. On the ideological implications of the text, see Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, New York, Hill and Wang, 1972, pp. 109-59.

4. Dershowitz, *Reversal of Fortune*, pp. xxiii-xxiv. Dershowitz has concluded that Claus von Bülow was "probably innocent" (p. xxiv). In contrast, Barbet Schroeder says that this film "will not tell you whether von Bülow is innocent or guilty, but . . . the audience will have all the elements to create their own theories." Schroeder, in "Reversal of Fortune: Production Information," Warner Bros. press release, 1990, p. 4.

5. Derrick A. Bell, Jr., quoted in Ken Emerson, "When Legal Titans Clash" *The New York Times Magazine*, 22 April 1990, p. 63.

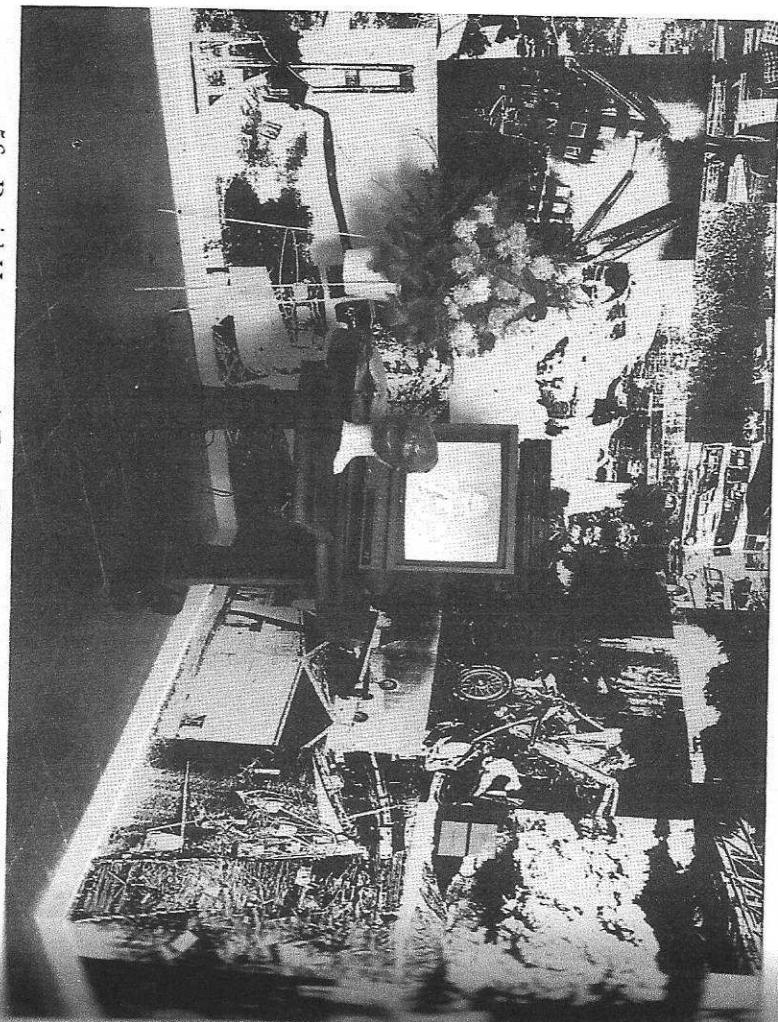
6. Dershowitz, quoted in Alex Beam, "Reversal of Facts," *The Boston Globe*, 23 November 1990, p. 62.

MAURICE BERGER, "ARE ART  
MUSEUMS RACIST?" ART IN AMERICA  
(SEPTEMBER 1990)

RPT. BERGER, "ARE ART MUSEUMS  
RACIST?" IN BERGER, HOW  
ART BECOMES HISTORY (NEW YORK:  
HARPERCOLLINS, 1992)

Are Art Museums Racist?

**W**ALKING THROUGH a group exhibition installed in the fall of 1989 at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, I heard the distinctive, albeit muffled, voice of the late Malcolm X. The sounds emanated from a multimedia installation by the African-American artist David Hammons. The installation itself, titled *A Fan* [56], was almost surreal in its juxtapositions: a funeral bouquet, its flowers dried and decayed, stood next to an antique table on which the head of a white, female mannequin "watched" one of Malcolm X's early television interviews. The work was powerful, challenging, even painful. Rather than advocating conciliation (as he would later), in this video interview Malcolm X spoke of his distrust of white people and of the inherent foolishness of integration. An understandable sense of frustration echoed in his voice when he said, "There is nothing that the white man will do to bring about true, sincere citizenship or civil rights recognition for black people in this country. . . . They will always talk but they won't practice it." These words offered an appropriate postscript to my museum experience. The exhibition in question was "Strange



56. David Hammons, *A Fire*, 1989.

Attractors: Signs of Chaos,” what the curator called an exploration of “some of the most compelling issues raised by the new science of chaos as they relate to recent works of art.” The confluence of Malcolm’s ideas and the show’s theoretical perspective summarized for me the difficult place of African-American artists in museums—even in ones as ostensibly supportive of racial inclusion as the New Museum. The charismatic presence of Malcolm X’s voice in “Strange Attractors” simply underscored how irrelevant both the exhibition and its catalogue were to the issues about which he was speaking—that is, when those words could be heard at all, given the video monitor’s subtitled volume. The catalogue reverberates with the jargon of “the new chaos science”; words like *period doubling*, *bifurcation cascade*, *phase*

*space*, *limit cycle*, *bistability* appear throughout its pages. As one reads through the catalogue, one recognizes the names of white, male academics. And while curator Laura Trippi maintains that “the discourse of postmodernism sets up within the aesthetic (sometimes to the point of shrillness) a situation of extreme urgency and indeterminacy,” nowhere are the systemic, institutionally defined conditions of racism discussed.<sup>1</sup>

Twenty-five years after Malcolm X was assassinated, “his voice is being heard again and his ideology is being reexamined” as many African-Americans search for new social structures for survival and growth in a period of renewed conservatism and indifference.<sup>2</sup> This search contemplates a radical realignment of society that is unthinkable to most white people—a realignment that is not about chaos but about order. Perhaps it is the urgency of this project that made the inclusion of Malcolm X in this art exhibition so striking. Without the Hammons piece the sensibility of “Strange Attractors” would have been very different, more typical of the splashy group shows of contemporary art that simply ignore the issue of race. That one image threw the entire show into question and pointed up the racial bias of its institutional context. Increasingly, across the country, similar catalysts are inserting painful questions into the heretofore complacent space of exhibition as curators with good intentions attempt to “include” the cultural production of people of color.

Having grown up in a predominantly black and Hispanic low-income housing project on Manhattan’s Lower East Side—a place that was presumably also about good intentions—I am used to the experience of witnessing social and cultural indifference to people of color as a white person on the inside. It is startling to me, however, that in a nation that has seen at least some effort made by white people to share mainstream cultural venues (and the concomitant social and economic rewards) with African-Americans and other people of color—most notably in the areas of popular music, dance, literature and theater—the visual arts remain, for the most part, stubbornly resistant. My point in this article, then, is to examine the complex institutional conditions that result in

the exclusion or misrepresentation of major cultural voices in the United States. These muted voices are complex and varied. There are veteran black artists, such as Al Loving, Faith Ringgold and the late Romare Bearden, who have received considerable art-world attention but are prevented from rising to the superstar status available to white artists of equal (or less than equal) talent. There are the younger African-American artists of the so-called MFA generation, such as Maren Hassinger, Pat Ward Williams and David Hammons, who have had considerable difficulty finding gallery representation. And finally, there is a new generation of "outsiders," artists and collectives that function independently of the gallery system in communities across the country.

Viewed in the broader context of social changes in American race relations—from the advances of the civil rights movement in the 1960s to the reversal of many of these advances in the Reagan era—the question of black cultural disenfranchisement seems daunting. Is the art world merely mirroring social changes or can art institutions actually play a role in challenging the conditions of institutional racism in America? Sad to say, with regard to race, art museums have for the most part behaved like many other businesses in this country—they have sought to preserve the narrow interests of their upper-class patrons and clientele. It is this upper-class, mostly white bias that I want to interrogate in order to find out "what's going on with whiteness" (as the writer Bell Hooks might say) at one of America's most racially biased cultural institutions—the art museum.

Despite the recent increase in exhibitions devoted to African-American art in major museums, these shows rarely address the underlying resistance of the art world to people of color. Such exhibitions often fall into what the art historian Judith Wilson has called the syndrome of "separate-but-unequal programming": African-American shows in February, during Black History Month, while shows the rest of the year? A recent study of "art-world racism" in New York from 1980 to 1987 by artist Howandena Pindell seems to

verify that white-identified galleries and museums have little interest in enfranchising African-Americans and other people of color. Based on her statistical overview of the demographics of mainstream art exhibitions, Pindell concludes that "black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American artists are . . . with a few, very few, exceptions systematically excluded."<sup>4</sup> PESTS, an anonymous group of New York-based African, Asian, Latino, and Native American artists organized in 1986 to combat "art-world apartheid," came to a similar conclusion. In 1987, the *PESTS Newsletter* published a roster of 62 top New York galleries whose stables were all or nearly all white.<sup>5</sup> While the situation would appear to be somewhat better outside of New York (a city where, Wilson claims, "the relative economic powerlessness of [the] black population . . . keeps displays of the . . . largest, publicly funded museums less integrated"<sup>6</sup>), African-American and other artists of color remain underrepresented in museums and galleries across the United States.

During the past 25 years a number of institutions devoted to African-American art and culture have opened in the United States, a response to the general problem of institutional racism and the art world's frustrating indifference to people of color.<sup>7</sup> The Studio Museum in Harlem, for example, was founded in 1967 to fill a void left by mainstream institutions; its mission was to support the "study, documentation, collection, preservation and exhibition of art and artifacts of Black America and the African diaspora." The Studio Museum is to the African-American art world as the Museum of Modern Art is to the white art establishment in terms of visibility and prestige. But there are literally hundreds of smaller, lesser-known institutions across the country devoted to the art of African-Americans and other people of color. Such alternative museums raise a number of questions about the relationship between white and black culture in America. Are African-American artists stifled by the segregation by black museums, or do these institutions allow their art to flourish despite the dominant culture's lack of interest? Must African-Americans renounce their own cultural identity in order to be accepted by mainstream institutions? To what extent does the mere existence of African-

American museums unintentionally absolve majority institutions of their social responsibility to black Americans?

Kinshasha Holman Conwill, executive director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, maintains that African-American museums are necessary:

Black artists are segregated by society. If we waited for Romare Bearden, Al Loving or Beye Saar or other black artists to have their retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art or in some of the wonderful contemporary museums around this country, we would be waiting a long, long time. Many people ask me if the [Studio Museum] perpetuates [this problem]. It's as if racism would end tomorrow if we disbanded the Studio Museum in Harlem, and there would be this great opening of doors and black artists would start pouring in to the mainstream of American art. Well, that's not what is happening.<sup>8</sup>

On the whole, the financial situation for African-American and other minority art institutions remains poor. The American Association of Museums (AAM) in Washington, D.C., has begun to address the needs of these institutions, but their own rigorous accreditation standards, including stringent technical and acquisition guidelines, actually discourage validation of younger and economically poorer institutions. The Studio Museum in Harlem, accredited in 1987, is still the only black or Hispanic museum certified by the AAM. Because most corporate and private sponsors insist on proof of accreditation as part of their grant-giving process, lack of accreditation has serious consequences for institutions seeking outside funding. As a result, alternative spaces devoted to African-American art, a relatively recent programming phenomenon, are often dependent on severely limited funding sources. This problem of accreditation is so serious that the Association of African-American Museums was formed recently to help validate institutions overlooked by the AAM. The Ford Foundation, responding to its own study of 29 black and Hispanic art museums, recently instituted a three-year, \$5-million program designed to improve economic conditions in these museums.

Still, few programs are directed toward improving Afri-

can-American representation in white-identified, mainstream art venues. Even fewer programs press the culture industry to examine its own racism and indifference. A rare instance was the program for the 1990 annual conference of the College Art Association in New York, where an unprecedented number of presentations were devoted to issues of cultural disenfranchisement and institutional racism.<sup>9</sup> Mainstream support of the interests of the "Other" (when it does occur) generally takes one of two forms. By far the more prevalent approach depends on a pragmatic, statistically calibrated inclusion of artists of color, either as tokens in mostly white group shows or, more likely, in token exhibitions devoted exclusively to people of color. This statistical approach is one way of correcting years of exclusion from the art world. Other institutions take a second approach. Wishing to go beyond mere quotas, they organize exhibitions concerned with exploring and ultimately embracing cultural and social differences. The Dallas Museum of Art, for example, has instituted progressive programming in order to confront the reality that "our museums are devoted almost exclusively to the representation of 'white' culture, our libraries to the Western tradition of literature, our universities to the history of ancient Mediterranean and modern Europe."<sup>10</sup> Significantly, the 1987 appointment of Alvia Wardlaw as the DMA's adjunct curator of African-American art made her the first holder of such a position at a major museum.

But in an art world that remains what Judith Wilson has called "one of the last bastions of white supremacy-by-exclusion,"<sup>11</sup> most art museums offer little more than lip service to the concept of racial inclusion. Art that demonstrates its "difference" from the mainstream or that challenges dominant values is rarely acceptable to white curators, administrators and patrons. This cultural elite bases its selections on arbitrary, Eurocentric standards of "taste" and "quality"—the code words of racial indifference and exclusion. "Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems which—more often than not—also have fundamentally opposed economic interests," writes Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in an observation that has scaring relevance to the

art world. "Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application."<sup>12</sup>

These tastemakers, in turn, reflect the interests of the ruling caste of cultural institutions. The boards of art museums, publishers of art magazines and books and owners of galleries rarely hire people of color in policy-making positions. Thus, the task of cultural interpretation—even in instances where artists of color are involved—is usually relegated to "people of European descent, as if their perspective was universal."<sup>13</sup> The very ground of art history, in fact, has proven infertile for most African-American students. As Lowery Sims, associate curator of 20th-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, observes:

Art history was not a career that black middle-class children were taught to aspire to. For one, the Eurocentrism of art history often made it irrelevant to black college students who never heard African-American culture discussed in art-history classes. Museums—the major conduit for teaching young people about art—were not always accessible to blacks. African-Americans were socialized into certain careers after Reconstruction; visual art was not one of them. The economic realities made a career in art even less desirable. You didn't see many black visual artists until the 1920s and '30s, when the black colleges started to establish art departments. Black art historians are an even rarer breed.<sup>14</sup>

While majority museums have not totally ignored the interests of people of color, they have had an extremely difficult time approaching cultures outside of the Anglo-European tradition. The 1969 exhibition "Harlem on My Mind" at the Metropolitan Museum in New York remains the classic example of the deep problems between white institutions and people of color [57]. Twenty years later, the issues surrounding "Harlem on My Mind" offer an interesting model for rethinking our own era of cultural indifference to people of color.

Organized by the white art historian Alton Schooner, then visual-arts director of the New York State Council on the Arts, the exhibition represented an unprecedented effort on



57. Installation view of "Harlem on My Mind," Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969

the part of an old-line American art museum to sociologically "interpret" African-American culture. The exhibition was not an art show in the traditional sense but an ambitious historical survey of Harlem from 1900 to 1968. Attempting to celebrate Harlem as the "cultural capital of black America," the show consisted of blown-up photographs, photographs, slide and film projections and audio recordings. As Schoener explained in his introduction to the exhibition's catalogue, the objective of "Harlem on My Mind" was "to demonstrate that the black community in Harlem is a major cultural environment with enormous strength and potential . . . [a] community [that] has made major contributions to the mainstream of American culture in music, theater, and literature."<sup>15</sup> Art was one form of cultural expression not mentioned by Schoener, despite the exhibition's location in a major New York art museum. This omission seemed to reflect Schoener's conviction that "museums should be electronic information centers" and that "paintings have stopped being a vehicle for valid expression in the 20th century." While responding to the ideological inadequacies of elitist art museums, Schoener's view also allowed the Metropolitan to almost completely ignore African-American painting and sculpture.<sup>16</sup> Schoener felt free to construct a sociopolitical profile of Harlem, but he never applied this sociological methodology to his own position or to that of the museum that commissioned him. Rather than engaging Harlem writers, art historians and intellectuals to help interpret the culture of Harlem, a "curious" Schoener felt compelled to conduct his own investigation of the subject because *he* decided "it was time . . . [to find] something out about this other world."<sup>17</sup>

When it opened, the show was widely condemned by African-Americans and others as yet another example of white carpathaging and well-intentioned meddling.<sup>18</sup> In a 1969 *Artforum* critique, historian Eugene Genovese questioned the proliferation of material related to Malcolm X in the exhibition:

There are pictures of Malcolm the Muslim minister and the street-corner speaker and of Malcolm the corpse, to-

gether with indifferent excerpts from his magnificent autobiography. The exhibit immediately involved political decisions: should you emphasize the early or the late Malcolm? Malcolm the uncompromising black nationalist or Malcolm the man who ended his life edging toward a new position? The exhibition settles these questions in a manner that will not be to everyone's taste, but the real problem lies elsewhere: Who is making the decision to interpret Malcolm? Since the show purports to be a cultural history of Harlem, only that community as a whole or, more realistically, one or more of the clearly identified groups recognized as legitimate by the people of Harlem have that right.<sup>19</sup>

Concluding his discussion of Malcolm X, Genovese suggested a compelling metaphor for the problem with "Harlem on My Mind." Trying to listen to Malcolm's speeches in the exhibition galleries, Genovese realized that he could not hear them because "the loudspeaker in one room drown[ed] out the one in the next."<sup>20</sup> As in "Strange Attractors," the voice of one of America's most influential black leaders had been subjugated by the curatorial apparatus of an art exhibition. In each case, the museum's attempt to deal with African-American culture was in the end simply embarrassing. While Malcolm X can be an engaging, even sympathetic figure for white curators, his complex teachings must be understood first of all in relation to the African-American community to whom he was principally speaking. It is not that white people are incapable of analyzing his ideas but rather that cultural interpretations offered in exhibitions like "Harlem on My Mind" and "Strange Attractors" can never stray too far from the interests of their white, upper-class patrons or their principally white audience.

Black cultural separatism (which was usually a matter of necessity during the first half of the 20th century and a matter of preference since the mid-1960s)<sup>21</sup> has only served to reinforce the historical marginalization of African-American artists in art museums. Only rarely do mainstream institutions acknowledge African-American artists who have en-

gaged or modified more traditional European cultural traditions. One need only think of the exclusion of prominent African-American artists who worked in an Abstract Expressionist idiom—Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff and Romare Bearden—from the white-identified art-historical canon of Abstract Expressionism.<sup>22</sup> “The idea that black artists can produce work that is not visibly black offers a great point of resistance for white historians, curators, and critics,” suggests Beryl Wright, curator of “The Appropriate Object,” a traveling exhibition of contemporary abstract art by African-Americans. “This art cannot be easily ghettoized; it’s harder to control work that doesn’t fit white people’s perceptions of who black people are.”<sup>23</sup>

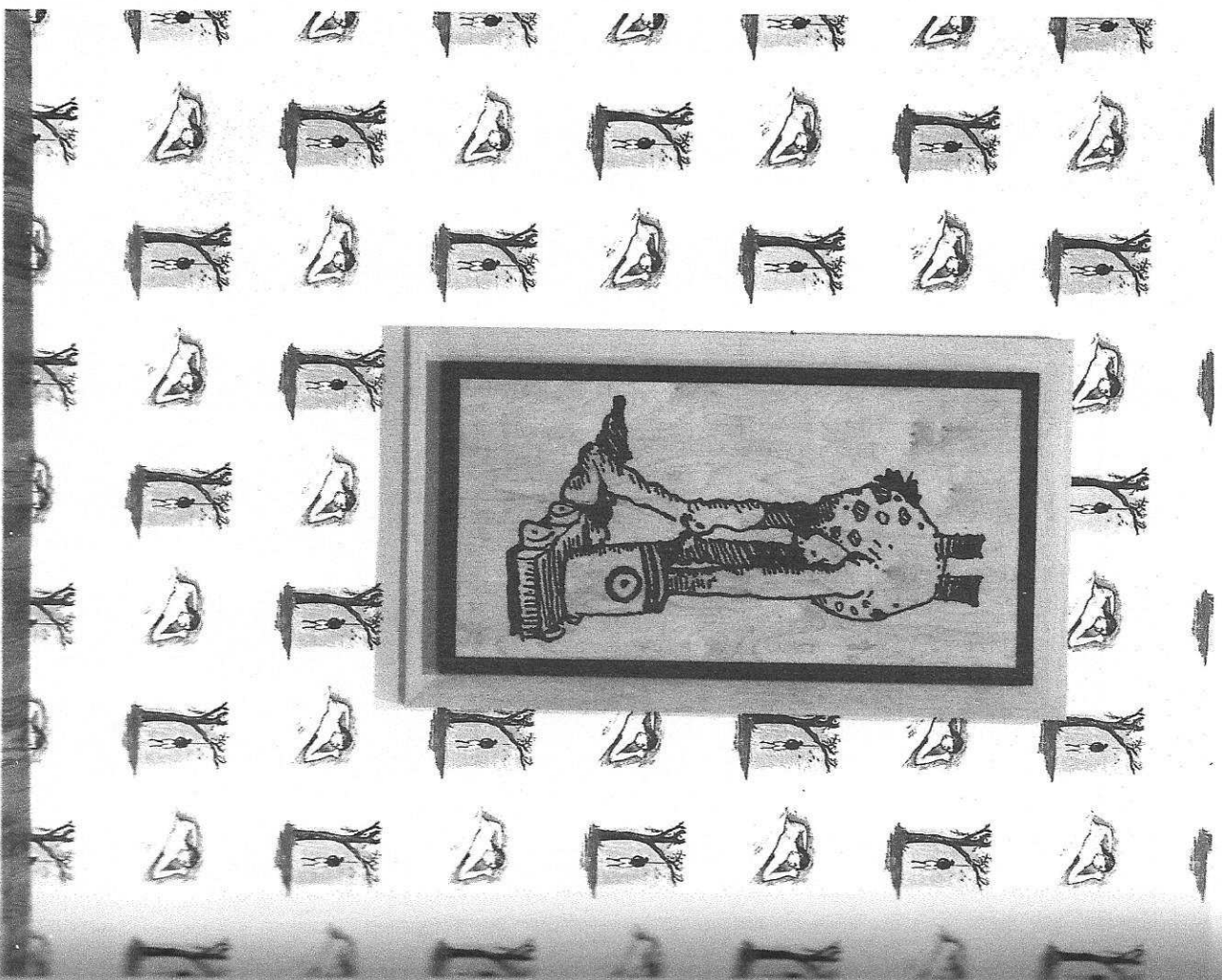
The influence of African-American culture on European and American modernism is also often denied, underestimated, or misunderstood. Art critic Eric Gibson, for example, denigrates the profound influence of black jazz culture on the modernist sensibility in a review of “The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism,” a traveling exhibition recently organized by Richard Powell at the Washington Project for the Arts. Gibson writes, “The reason ‘The Blues Aesthetic’ finally breaks down is that black culture’s influence on modernism was at most one of the spirit, not form. To be sure, there were any number of artists who were deeply taken with jazz . . . but in every case, when it came to making a work of art, it was existing modernist idioms—in particular cubism—to which they turned.”<sup>24</sup> Gibson’s observation is particularly embarrassing given the Cubists’ appropriation of African tribal art—work that helped shape the structural and conceptual dynamic of Cubism itself.

While a number of contemporary art exhibitions over the past decade have sought to highlight the art of African-Americans and other people of color, most of the major group shows have all but excluded artists of color or discussions of racial issues. The Whitney Biennial, a bellwether of recent art trends in the United States, for example, has consistently had notoriously poor representation of artists of color. (Perhaps this is not so surprising since the Biennial closely reflects the New York gallery scene; the show may

simply be an accurate reflection of how underrepresented such artists are in the city’s most profitable galleries.)

Another recent example of the pervasive art-world insensitivity to racial issues was “Culture and Commentary: An Eighties Perspective,” mounted in 1989 at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C.—a city with one of the largest black populations in the country. This group exhibition of black oriented art in the 1980s was almost entirely white; the one exception, Yasumasa Morimura, lives in Osaka, Japan. Guest curator Kathy Halbreich claimed that the purpose of “Culture and Commentary” was to “locate a particular set of intellectual concerns that have informed the cultural dramas of the past ten years.”<sup>25</sup> Various catalogue essays by scholars generally outside of art history attempted to contextualize the exhibition’s cultural artifacts: advanced technology, the politics of gender and AIDS, the new global economy, and genetic engineering were discussed in detail.<sup>26</sup> Apparently for curator Halbreich, the politics of race in America or the issue of black liberation in Southern Africa do not rate among the “cultural dramas” of the 1980s worthy of extended discussion. In fact, the one work that addressed the issue of American race relations—a room-size installation by Sherrie Levine and Robert Gober in which wallpaper designed by Gober juxtaposed drawings of a lynched black man with those of a sleeping white man—offended some of the museum’s African-American security guards [58]. In an attempt to calm tensions, the museum installed an explanatory sign (with an epigraph by the artists) at the room’s entrance. “When we were invited to make this installation in Washington, D.C.,” Gober and Levine are quoted as saying, “we thought about the underside of the American Dream—the alienation, the denial, the violence.”<sup>27</sup> Given that no African-American artists were represented in “Culture and Commentary,” the words “alienation” and “denial” had a sardonic relevance.

On the other hand, several recent projects in major museums suggests that the situation for African-Americans may



58. Sherrie Levine and Robert Gober's installation (detail) for "Culture and Commentary: An Eighties Perspective," The Hirshhorn Museum, 1990

be improving somewhat. An extraordinary pairing of exhibitions at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. early in 1990 represented one of the most interesting and unexpected efforts at cultural enfranchisement for African-Americans.<sup>28</sup> The two exhibitions—"Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710–1940" (organized by the Corcoran) and "Black Photographers Bear Witness: 100 Years of Social Protest" (organized by the Williams College Museum of Art)—were strikingly unusual in their approaches to the issues of race and racism in America. Significantly, both shows were curated by African-American art historians: "Facing History" was developed by the late Guy McElroy, who was at the time of his death a doctoral candidate in art history at the University of Maryland, and "Black Photographers" was organized by Deborah Willis, head of the Prints and Photos Division at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York.

In "Facing History," McElroy documented the variety of ways in which American painters (mostly white) "created a visual record of African-Americans that reinforced a number of largely restrictive stereotypes of black identity."<sup>29</sup> The aim of "Facing History," McElroy stated in the catalogue's introduction, was to illuminate "the shifting, surprisingly cynical nature of the images white men and women created to view their black counterparts."<sup>30</sup> In effect, the show documented the history of representations of blacks in American art, work that was coincidental with the acceleration of racism over the same period. The works in the show—which ranged from acknowledged masterpieces by John Singleton Copley and Thomas Eakins to an unattributed silhouette of a slave that accompanied a bill of sale—suggested that artists were not always in agreement in their attitudes toward slavery or toward African-Americans in general [59, 60]. While many of the images are clearly derogatory, others are sympathetic to or even openly supportive of racial enfranchisement. (The show's impressive educational slant was enhanced by its installation: extended wall labels and an accompanying video program helped to explain racist iconography and offered historical points of reference. Additionally, the Corcoran installed a context room where





59. William Sidney Mount, *The Bone Player*, 1856

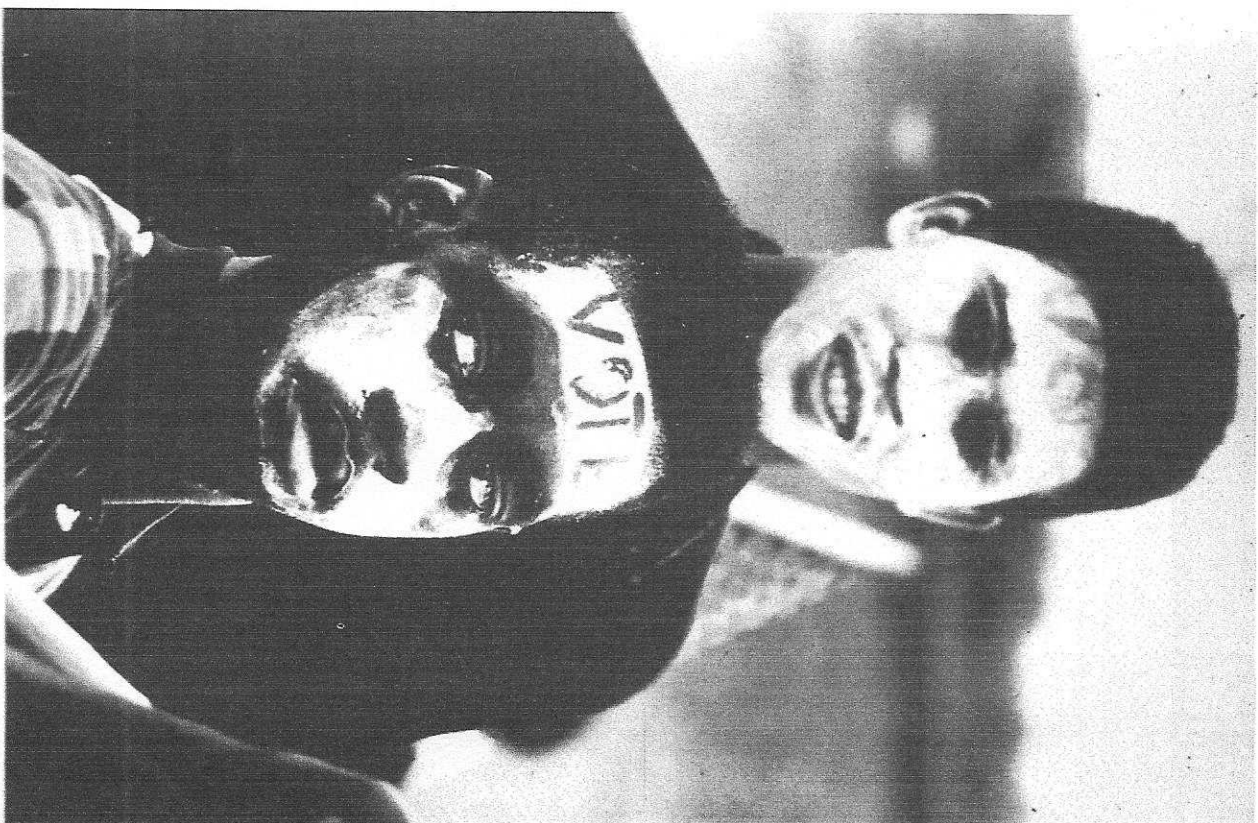


60. John Singleton Copley, *Head of a Negro*, 1777-78

museum-goers could read various books by black writers.) McElroy assumed a role rarely afforded African-Americans in the art world: that of interpreter of culture—both black and white. In so doing, he exposed the underlying racist attitudes of many American artists, including such venerated master figures as Eakins and William Sidney Mount.<sup>31</sup> While McElroy's iconographical approach sidestepped the broader institutional and patronage issues contributing to the formation of racist representations, "Facing History" upset the complacent notion of high culture's immunity from social responsibility.<sup>32</sup>

"Black Photographers Bear Witness" was one of three shows organized by the Williams College Museum of Art to celebrate the centennial of Gaius Charles Bolin's graduation from Williams in 1889—the college's first African-American graduate. "Black Photographers Bear Witness" was also the first exhibition to present photographic documents of the African-American social-protest movement exclusively through the lens of black photographers [61]. What is more, in addition to straight documentary photography, the show included Conceptual art pieces—most notably by Pat Ward Williams and Carrie Mae Weems—that examine some of the theoretical and political issues surrounding the documentary idiom, particularly as it relates to people of color. Finally, the elegant catalogue, with essays by Willis and historian Howard Dodson, represents a paradigm of what museums can be but most often are not: a space where art is placed in the broader social, economic and cultural context of the society that produces it.<sup>33</sup>

Not surprisingly, this confluence of "Facing History" and "Black Photographers Bear Witness" at the Corcoran created a positive and inviting atmosphere for Washington's black community. "We are definitely reaching new people, people who are not regular museum-goers," observed the museum's outgoing director of public affairs. "I would guess that about 60 percent of our audience for these shows is African-American. What's especially rewarding is the broad spectrum of people all coming and looking at the show together."<sup>34</sup>



61. D. Monica Steel, Jr., *School March, Alabama*, 1965

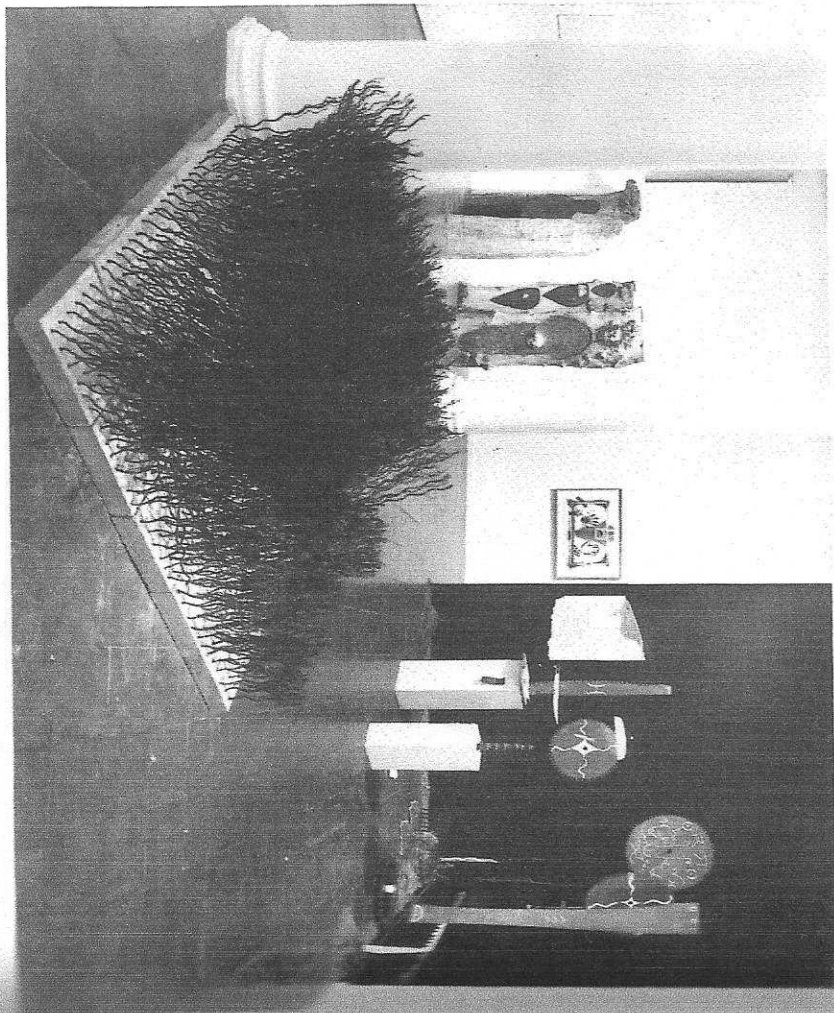
Despite the positive climate engendered at the Corcoran, both exhibitions were organized by outside institutions or curators. Like most exhibitions devoted to African-American culture in major museums, these shows were token gestures. While the Corcoran, like many other majority museums, has instituted a minority internship program to encourage young people of color to enter museum professions, it will take a far broader range of programs and projects to begin to correct the problem of institutional racism in America's majority museums. For a start, more exhibitions like "Facing History" are necessary so that white people can begin to examine their own problematic attitudes toward people of color. Of course, museums must also increase their commitment to showing the art of people of color, and curators—white and black—should be encouraged to pay closer attention to this work. Internship and education programs for minority students could be expanded to include education programs that introduce white people, children and adults, to the cultural production of people of color. Large, economically stable museums might be encouraged to open satellite museums, much like the Whitney's branch museums (located in various corporate centers), in culturally diverse neighborhoods; such spaces could serve as experimental outlets for marginal work, community-based projects and art generally not accepted by mainstream venues. Most important, museums must institute educational programs to examine the institutional hierarchies of museums themselves—programs designed to explore the institutionally validated and encoded racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia of museums.

In June 1990, in Chicago, the American Association of Museum Directors took a step in this direction as it held the first of a two-part conference on multiracial and cultural issues. The conference, called "Different Voices: The American Art Museum and a Social, Cultural, and Historical Framework for Change," dealt with such questions as staff diversification, approaches to multicultural audiences, the politics of display and the new art histories. This conference was important not only for developing a politics of inclusionism, but for suggesting that museum directors can have a

direct impact in the battle against cultural racism. One voice for these new attitudes was Marcia Tucker, the conference's cochair and director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, who insisted that "museum" administrators have to reeducate themselves completely. We must read the new art histories, we must read theory in order to put ourselves in touch with all culture. We must learn to listen, keep our eyes and ears open and stop speaking for others."<sup>35</sup>

As if to embody this new multicultural ethos, Tucker's New Museum in the summer of 1990 participated in an unprecedented collaborative exhibition on the art and issues of the 1980s, "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity"—organized in conjunction with the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art—embraced the esthetic, cultural and intellectual positions of diverse racial and ethnic groups and examined issues of gender and sexual orientation [62]. While the exhibition was commendable in its attempt to bring together a broad range of institutional, racial, ethnic, and sexual perspectives, it nevertheless suggested the ongoing dilemma for artists of color. While "The Decade Show" purported to be about the 1980s, its cultural position could only suggest future possibilities. Nowhere in the cultural scene of the 1980s were artists of color embraced in the ways suggested by "The Decade Show"—not even at the New Museum itself.

The New Museum's hasty attempt to redress past exclusions was underscored by the overstuffed and sloppy installation of the show (a situation less evident at the Studio Museum or MoCHA). Devoid of didactic wall labels to guide viewers through a diversity of cultural and esthetic positions, the installations and performance and video programs afforded only the most cursory glimpse of the work of the 140 or so participating artists. Each visual or performance artist was represented by only one or two works, so complex careers were often reduced to a single statement. Of course, such brevity was less problematic for blue-chip white artists like Cindy Sherman, Bruce Nauman, Eric Fischl, and Jenny Holzer, who already have been enthusiastically embraced and championed by galleries and museums. But this one-shot treatment shortchanged many of the "minority" artists



62. Installation view of "The Decade Show," New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990

(ranging from "established" artists such as Melvin Edwards, Robert Colescott and the late Ana Mendieta<sup>36</sup> to community-oriented and activist art collectives such as the New York-based Epoxy Art Group, an experimental collaborative formed in 1982 by immigrants from Hong Kong), who rarely participate in the "art world." The cramped installation at the New Museum underscored the sense of an institution desperately making up for lost time, hurriedly cramming in a generation of artists ignored and victimized by indifference and racism.<sup>37</sup>

So, for all the signs of change, many of the fundamental structures that keep people of color out of the art world remain in place. For many years alternative spaces devoted to art by people of color have instituted programs and policies that majority institutions are only now beginning to think about. Literally hundreds of such alternative institutions exist in the United States, but few white curators make an effort to come into contact with them. These alternative venues often have organized training and education programs for young people of color; they also generally have racially diverse staffs. Efforts like these have been slow to appear in majority institutions, where even the best intentions often fall short.

Not until the white people who now hold the power in the art world scrutinize their own motives and attitudes toward people of color will it be possible to unlearn racism. This realization raises a number of crucial questions: Who are the patrons of art, the museum board members, the collectors? Who is the audience for high culture? Who is allowed to interpret culture? Who is asked to make fundamental policy decisions? Who sets the priorities?

These questions are part of a broader sociological discourse on white attitudes toward difference, a discourse which must begin with self-examination. As Bell Hooks writes,

If much of the recent work on race grows out of a sincere commitment to cultural transformation, then there is a serious need for immediate and persistent self-critique. Committed cultural critics—whether white or black,

whether scholars, artists, or both—can produce work that opposes structures of domination, that presents possibilities for a transformed future by willingly interrogating their own work on aesthetic or political grounds. This interrogation itself becomes an act of critical intervention, fundamentally fostering an attitude of vigilance rather than denial.<sup>38</sup>

When it comes to the question of why we ignore the art of African-Americans and other people of color, simply learning how to listen to others is not enough. We must first learn how to listen to ourselves, no matter how painful that process might be.

## NOTES

1. See Marcia Tucker, "Preface," and Laura Trippi, "Fractured Fraternity Tales, Chaotic Regimes," in *Strange Attractors: Signs of Chaos*, New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989, n.p. Hammond's installation is neither mentioned nor illustrated in the catalogue.
2. See C. Gerald Fraser, "The Voice of Malcolm X Has an Audience Again," *New York Times*, Feb. 20, 1990, p. B3.
3. Judith Wilson, "Art," in Donald Bogle, ed., *Black Arts Annual, 1987/1988*, New York, Garland, 1989, p. 7.
4. See Howardena Pindell, "Art World Racism: A Documentation," *New Art Examiner*, vol. 16, no. 7 (Mar. 1989), pp. 32–36. In addition to a listing of New York galleries with mostly white stables (and the percentage of artists of color represented by each of these galleries), Pindell supplied a detailed statistical overview of exhibition records for artists of color at the following New York museums: Brooklyn Museum, Guggenheim Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Queens Museum, Song Harbor Cultural Center (Staten Island), and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Statistics were also given for selected group exhibitions and publications.
5. For more on PESTS, see Wilson, "Art," p. 5.
6. Judith Wilson then continues in "Art" (p. 4): "Thus black artists often find it harder to gain exposure in New York than in other parts of the country, because the economic stakes are generally higher in a town that serves as the hub of the international art market."
7. For more on the historical resistance of the "white cultural avant-

- garde" to artists of color, see Michele Wallace, "Reading 1968 and the Great American Whitewash," in Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, eds., *Remaking History*, Seattle, Bay Press, 1989, pp. 106–9.
8. Kinshasha Holman Conwill, audiotape of an interview with Adrian Piper, International Design Conference, Aspen, 1988.
  9. The panels (followed by their chairpersons in parentheses) included: "Exoticism, Orientalism, Primitivism: Modes of 'Other-ness' in Western Art and Architecture" (Frederick Bohrer); "Reflections on Race and Racism in Modern Western Art (1800 to the Present)" (Kathryn Moore Helleniak); "Firing the Canon" (Linda Nochlin); "Ethnicity/Ethnography: The Uses and Misuses of Traditional Aesthetics by Contemporary Artists" (Leslie King Hammond); "Abstract Expressionism's Others" (Ann Gibson); "De-facto Racism in the Visual Arts" (Howardena Pindell); "Vanguard Art of Latin America, 1914–30" (Jacqueline Barnitz); "Institution/Revolution: Postmodern Native-American Art" (W. Jackson Rushing); and "Mainstreaming Independent Film" (Isaac Julien).
  10. This statement was made by Richard R. Brettell, director of the Dallas Museum of Art, in the preface to *Black Art/Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art*, Dallas, Dallas Museum of Art, 1989, p. 7.
  11. Wilson, "Art," p. 3.
  12. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1985), p. 5. For more on the issue of racial difference and culture see Maurice Berger, "Race and Representation: Representing the Normal," and David Goldberg, "Images of the Other: Cinema and Stereotypes," in Maurice Berger and Johnnetta Cole, eds., *Race and Representation*, New York, Hunter College Art Gallery, 1987, pp. 10–15 and 29–37. For an excellent analysis of how racism actually functions in a cultural setting, see Adrian Piper, "High-Order Discrimination," in Owen Flanagan and Amelie Rorty, eds., *Identity, Character and Morality*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, M.I.T. Press, 1990.
  13. Pindell, "Art World Racism," p. 32.
  14. Lowery Sims, in conversation with the author.
  15. Alton Schoener, ed., *Hartem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969.
  16. Alton Schoener, as quoted in Grace Glueck, "Adam C., Mother Brown, Malcolm X," *New York Times*, Jan. 12, 1969, p. 26.
  17. *Ibid.*
  18. Black and white demonstrators picketed the exhibition's press preview, wearing signs that read "Tricky Tom at It Again" and "That's White of Hoiving"—references to Metropolitan Museum president Thomas Hoving, who brought the show to the museum. The demonstration was organized by the "Black Emergency Cultural Government," an activist art group, to express outrage at a show that had been organized by "whites who do not begin to know the black experience." A leaflet handed out by the protesters urged "the entire black community" to boycott the show, called for the appointment of blacks to policy-making and curatorial po-

- sitions and insisted that the museum "seek a viable relationship with the total black community." "They should make a serious statement, or no statement at all," said artist Benny Andrews, one of the protest organizers. "There are artists in the black community and they're not represented." For more on the protest, see "Soul's Been Sold Again," a leaflet of the Black Emergency Cultural Government, quoted in "Museum Pickets Assault Hoving Over Coming Harlem Exhibition," *New York Times*, Jan. 15, 1969, p. 41.
19. Eugene Genovese, "Harlem on His Back," *Artforum*, vol. 7, no. 6 (Feb. 1969), p. 35.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. For more on the general issues involving this exclusion, see Ann Gibson, "Norman Lewis in the Forties," in *Norman Lewis, from the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, New York, Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989, pp. 9–23.
23. Beryl Wright, in a telephone conversation with the author, Feb. 13, 1990. Also see Wright, *The Appropriate Object*, Buffalo, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1989.
24. See Eric Gibson, "The Blues Aesthetic: A Pretty Sad Selection," *Washington Times*, Sept. 14, 1989, p. E2. Also see Richard Powell, *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism*, Washington, D.C., Washington Project for the Arts, 1989. For comprehensive studies of the complex influence of African art on African-American artists in the 20th century, see Alvin Wardlaw, "A Spiritual Libation: Promoting an African Heritage in the Black College," and Robert Farris Thompson, "The Song That Nailed the Land: The Visionary Presence of African-American Art," in *Black Art! Ancestral Heritage*, pp. 53–74 and 97–141.
25. Kathy Halbreich, "Culture and Commentary: An Eighties Perspective," in Halbreich, *Culture and Commentary: An Eighties Perspective*, Washington, D.C., Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1990, p. 16.
26. The catalogue included a general essay by Halbreich as well as essays by London-based AIDS activist Simon Watney; Sherry Turkle, associate professor of sociology in the Program in Science, Technology and Society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; novelist Michael Thomas; and Harvard Medical School professors Vijak Mahdavi and Bernardo Nadal-Ginard. The artists represented were Laurie Anderson, Sih-A-majani, Francesco Clemente, James Coleman, Tony Cragg, Katharina Frisch, Robert Gober, Jenny Holzer, Jeff Koons, Sherry Levine, Yasu-masa Morimura, Reinhard Mucha, Julian Schnabel, Cindy Sherman, and Jeff Wall. Another glaring omission, particularly given Simon Watney's excellent essay on the politics of the body in the realm of AIDS, were the various AIDS-activist artists and art collectives (such as Gran Fury and Testing the Limits). While the inclusion of essays by non-art historians is insightful, the show's roster of mainly blue-chip contemporary artists represents a market-oriented bias that, although commensurate with recent curatorial practice, displays little vision or creativity.
27. After the artists' statement, the museum's text continues, "As with

many provocative works of contemporary art, there is no single interpretation possible for this untitled collaboration. . . . It is clear, however, that one of the work's principal themes is racism, particularly that which has victimized African-Americans historically. By juxtaposing the repeated images of a lynched black man with that of a sleeping white man, the artists suggest that the prevailing response to incidents of brutal racial violence has more frequently been indifference and neglect rather than outrage. Moreover, the reduction of the black and white figures to components of the wallpaper pattern implies in yet another way how sensibilities have been deadened by repetition and how one people's tragedy has been trivialized into nothing more than another's neutral background."

28. Needless to say, viewing an exhibition about cultural exclusionism at the Corcoran Gallery of Art is disturbing given the museum's earlier cancellation of a traveling exhibition of photographs by the late Robert Mapplethorpe (a show booked for the museum by former chief curator and associate director Jane Livingston, who has since resigned her position in protest). "Facing History" in no way challenges the censorial actions of the Corcoran or disguises the fact that the museum caved in to the forces of bigotry and ignorance. Despite the board of directors' decision to oust director Christina Orr-Cahall, the person presumably responsible for the cancellation, the museum has made no substantive gesture to the people most harmed by its actions—gay men and lesbians. Until the Corcoran sponsors positive exhibitions around issues of gay and lesbian identity, it will continue to be identified with the homophobic philistinism that intimidated it in the first place.

29. Guy McElroy, "Race and Representation," in *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710–1940*, San Francisco, Bedford Arts, 1990, p. xi. While *Facing History* is the first deconstruction of the images of blacks in American painting to be done by a black art historian, such projects have been undertaken by white art historians in the past. For example, Sidney Kaplan, professor emeritus of American literature and American art at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and a founder of the W. E. B. DuBois Department of Afro-American Studies there, curated two pioneering exhibitions in the 1960s and '70s: "The Portrait of the Negro in American Painting" (Bowdoin College, 1964) and "The Black Presence in the Era of the Revolution, 1770–1800" (National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C., 1973). For other recent explorations see Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, Cambridge, Mass., 1989, and Peter Wood and Karen Dalton, *Winslow Homer's Images of Blacks: The Civil War and Reconstruction Years*, Austin, Texas, The Menil Collection, 1989.
30. McElroy, "Race and Representation," p. xi.
31. McElroy was recruited for the project by Jane Livingston.
32. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Face and Voice of Blackness," in McElroy, *Facing History*, pp. xxix–xlv. For important discussions on the issue of patronage and African-American art, see Beryl Wright, "The Harmon Foundation in Context," and Clement Alexandre Price, "In Search of a People's Spirit," in Guy Reynolds and Beryl Wright, *Against*

*the Odds: African-American Artists and the Harmon Foundation*, Newark, Newark Museum, 1989, pp. 13–25 and 71–87. Because of limitations of space, *Facing History* does not concern itself with images of African-Americans in popular culture, initially an area that McElroy wanted to cover. The absence of this material tends to strand significant questions about racial stereotyping in a high-art context, thus avoiding the public channels through which most people are conditioned to accept racist imagery. The Brooklyn Museum, the only other venue for “Facing History,” decided to address this problem by rewriting certain wall labels and installing a multimedia slide show at the entrance to the exhibition.

33. See Deborah Willis and Howard Dodson, *Black Photographers Bear Witness: 100 Years of Social Protest*, Williamstown, Mass., Williams College Museum of Art, 1989.

34. Gina Kazimir, in conversation with the author.

35. Marcia Tucker, in conversation with the author. The New Museum, for example, has published a multiracial anthology of essays that address the theme of cultural marginalization, engaging “fundamental issues raised by attempts to define such concepts as mainstream, minority, and ‘other,’ and opening[ing] up new ways of thinking about culture and representation.” See Russell Ferguson, Marsha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West, eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge, Mass., and London, M.I.T. Press, 1990.

36. Coleseout and Mendieta were, in fact, given retrospectives at the New Museum during 1987–88.

37. This rushed quality extends to the catalogue as well. “The Director’s Introduction,” for example, which consists of a transcript of a conversation between Marcia Tucker (New Museum), Nilda Peraza (MOCHA) and Kinshasha Holman Conwill (Studio Museum), begins and ends with Tucker speaking—an insensitive imperative to establish the first and last word that tends to accentuate the hierarchical role played by the New Museum in the organization of the show. This lack of forethought extends to the selected bibliography, which is plagued by glaring omissions, particularly the work of intellectuals involved in analyzing cultural colonialism, sexism, homophobia and racism. The arbitrary, sometimes irrelevant list includes works like T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* and John Graham’s enigmatic *Systems and Dialectics of Art* (1937), while ignoring ground-breaking texts of such authors as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Barbara Ehrenreich, Simon Watney, Bell Hooks, and Cornel West. In addition, while the issue of AIDS is discussed at length in the catalogue, Douglas Crimp’s widely known anthology *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (London and Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press, 1988) is omitted from the bibliography.

38. Bell Hooks, “Exportcase,” *Avforum*, vol. 27, no. 9 (May 1989), p. 20.

## IX

### *Speaking Out: Some Distance to Go*

#### MARY SCHMIDT CAMPBELL

*Mary Schmidt Campbell is dean of New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts. From 1987 to 1991, she was commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs for New York City. Prior to her appointment to that post, Campbell was for 10 years the executive director of the Studio Museum in Harlem. Campbell has written extensively on African-American art and she completed her Ph.D. from Syracuse University with a study of Romare Bearden (forthcoming from Oxford University Press).*

**MAURICE BERGER:** Your appointment as Cultural Affairs Commissioner sent a powerful message to the people of New York City and the nation. An African-American art historian, curator, and museum administrator who has vigorously supported the work of African-American artists, you are now to oversee a cultural community often indifferent to artists of color. How have you worked to change this problematic situation?

**MARY SCHMIDT CAMPBELL:** I can’t honestly say that I set out with that as a goal. I can’t even say this was my goal when