

Letter from London Caro at the Hayward

Going back to London fills me with such dread that I have to plan my stay nowadays. At first I used to think it was that long nerve-racking air journey, then I found that London itself—the people, the Art scene—puts the cold hand of fear on my heart.

I have to confess that this time I got a shock. My moment was the Anthony Caro show at the Hayward galleries on the South Bank. This was the real event for me in London. As a student, one didn't think of Anthony Caro as a major artist, and indeed he wasn't in the sense of stature alongside other young artists. (Somebody like Elizabeth Frink whose recent drawing show at the Waddington Galleries was one of the high water marks of my recent three week visit. The show was a complete success.) Nor did the fuss they were making at St. Martin's School of Art make much sense to me (perhaps that is saying more about me than about what actually was happening) because the Caro works I admired, if at all, were those compact lumpy and largely witty sculptures like *Man Smoking* or *Smoking Heads*. They were light-hearted and English in the same proportion that Giacometti's work seemed profound and universal. But this exhibition was something of a revelation. Caro's work has been bracketed with the work of people like David Smith and Kenneth Noland in painting. It is my contention that Caro is a "gent" alongside these people. The persistent feeling one got from the Hayward Gallery show was one of frolic and gaiety. Here was a man who enjoyed what he was doing in a different sense and is presumably doing it for different reasons. Now this is a very special quality, very English.

I remember sitting on a jury with Frank Auerbach—a comprehensive showing of whose work, it is rumoured, is due fairly soon at the Marlborough Fine Arts—at about the hottest moment of the Pop Art thing. He rather passionately rejected the work of a friend I had encouraged to submit. The work got past the jury. It in fact fitted amply with the show and the mood of the London scene at the time. But perhaps knowingly, what Frank was attacking was my friend's attitude which came out blatantly in the work. It wasn't so much that he was an old Etonian dabbler but that art for him was something one enjoyed doing and with whatever one pleased. John has since written a long, loving, and complicated treatise on flying saucers having given up painting and the Mosley fascist party as uninteresting.

This quality of inordinate fun pervades some of the best English artists. Be it Roger Hilton's having no reverence for his major prize winning painting at the John Moore Exhibition a few years ago or the major part of Caro's work at the Hayward. I can't imagine Caro working through a tough self conscious autobiographical phase like David Smith: as discussed by Lawrence Alloway in

the last issue of the magazine. This is a joy exhibition in the real sense. Caro is no amateur. In fact he must be a strict professional to do quite as much work and teach. I would say that with William Turnbull and a very few others in London, he really is committed. However the element of the fanciful is so strong, it is impossible to remove the game/fantasy aspect of the works and take them seriously. Caro breaks all the rules, I suspect, without taking any of them into consideration. I mean much as he must know what a rectangle is all about, it doesn't bother him, he just uses it and be damned. So with color, so with ready made material, R.S.J. tubular stuff, etc. Anthony Caro's work is not difficult and demanding as say Turnbull's. On first confrontation this work looked (perhaps I mean to the uneducated eye) like a lot of metal of the "found" type, bars, plates, nuts, and bolts, and so on, carefully but rather haphazardly put together and carefully painted bright colours. The opportunity provided by the Hayward Gallery on the South Bank to see this work at its most advantageous is truly commendable. The show takes up all the space there is and rather splashes and lavishes its way into the open air sculpture courts.

The Caro breakthrough or "revolution" which completely passed me by as a student was suddenly revealed. For one thing that uncomfortable feeling one gets of objects (especially those cumbersome freestanding sculptures in gallery rooms) competing with one for space (making one immediately take up a rather aggressive, superior, and rigidly critical stance—you go up and touch it as though fondling, abstractedly, a girl or give it the once over to see what the possibilities are) is almost totally missing in this exhibition. The galleries are filled with works but "look" remarkably open and unrestricting. Quite the contrary one felt one could approach the whole thing unimpeded the way one would pass other such structures in the real world. Added to this is the complete extraction of the menace (that lamppost which looms as you sit in the passenger seat of a motor car, the sudden realization with its attendant vertigo, that that massive bridge is only supported by the seemingly flimsiest of structures) from my identifications with the modern industrial landscape by the actual choice of painting in sweet or candy colours and the free associations of "inside" the studio and outside in this world. The gestures of these sculptures are distinctly accommodating. One walks along or past these works almost saying to oneself "well, it's a bit of all right isn't it" suppressing a chuckle. One would like to get acquainted. Suddenly Caro's work has that universal touch.

After this, I had to admit that London was different. The place is changing or do I mean it has changed. For instance Norman Stevens had a successful show at the Hanover Gallery. Norman is an exact contemporary of David Hockney. They are the same age and started Art School in Bradford at the same time. It is my opinion that Norman is a very good painter and there is a real respect and admiration for what he does in that underground esoteric sense for which art scenes are notorious, whereas David is a star. Norman's work is not characteristically English in that it is not involved with grey and understated. It is bold, precise, matter of fact—painted in bright, crisp colours. In a sense, his is a very private surrealist world whose only connection with the English thing is

that spiky (prickly?) uncomfortable feeling one has come to expect from Graham Sutherland. However, in Norman Stevens' paintings, one feels it is not forced and aggressive but rather delicately balanced and poetic with more than a touch of sly humour.

Critique – Discussion on Black Art

The art scene is full of things that everyone knows about; grapevine truths that people carry around (rather in the manner of beasts of burden) like guilty secrets. "Guilty" because, although everyone is free to air these general truths, they are only tempted to do so under duress or in instances of extreme passion—offensively or defensively. One of these guilty secrets is the neglect of the black artist. By a rare piece of luck (perhaps it's an historical imperative) we have had a spate of black shows: individual, collective, old, new. But it is neither possible nor desirable to separate this sudden appearance of black shows from the extant political mood. And since art and politics are, in this case, inseparable, there is no better time than now to create standards.

In this connection, one detects a number of things flashing about like quick-silver. For instance, there is the intense conflict going on between the older black artists and the younger ones. It is fugitive and unexplained, funny and sad; in short, like life itself. The survival of the older artists, which was in a large part dependent on their "keeping their place," is a demonstration of the stigma that affects everyone. But that code for survival has not deterred the young black artist. One would think that the "achievements" of the older artists would have been enough testimony to discourage the young ones. But no; the young ones do make the sort of demands for showing, criticism, and so on, that the older ones didn't. The present attitude reflects "a wind of change." Frequently these young black artists insist that they are not "painting black." In a sense, this is an escape from reality. Any black artist who does not want to be identified by the color of his skin could be indulging in a subtle new form of "passing." There is a paradox here and the inconsistency is partly the reason why certain questions must be asked: why have black artists, given their historical role in art, contributed so little to the great body of modern works? Is black art simply an eruption of passion (black) or a subtle turn-off (white)? One starts to mention a few names but one is stopped by another question: "Well! Who are these artists? Are they any good? Where do they show?" What one is really concerned with, when posing those latter questions, is not the relative merit of these people as artists (their work), but the curious fact that black artists exist—either isolated in pockets or in groups.

To forestall potential detractors who might throw up their hands I want, at this point, to state that unless this publication gets bored with the idea, I am going to weave a broadly based explanation of why the black artist has contributed so little to the mainstream, or to the most relevant aspects of contemporary art. Let me say at once that a recognition of just how loaded the subject of black art is has got to be faced. Otherwise we are wasting time. I have questioned black Brazilians, black Africans, black West Indians, recording their answers on tape. I always

end up in a rage, frustrated by a general inability to separate the meanings or explanations from the fact. Even the most cantankerous black blowhard in the art bars will shift ground in the manner of an "uncle" on the topic of black art. I lay myself open to criticism writing about it, since such matters as accuracy of dates and the like are of cardinal importance. Such an undertaking takes time and I could be asked why am I rushing into print. In answer, I point to the urgency of the situation: it can't wait. Furthermore, there are ideas in print worth discussing.

First I would like to cite *Encounter*, an entire issue of which was devoted to Latin America (September, 1965). It contains a moving piece called "The International Style," by Lawrence Alloway, who states: "When a block of artists from an area regarded as artistically underprivileged moves into wider recognition, a general problem is precipitated for both the movers and the witnesses." This is unlike the Negro Renaissance of the twenties in which there were problems for the "movers" but not for the "witnesses." Now there is a genuine black revolution which affects everyone. In this same issue of *Encounter*, Emanuel de Kadt writes: "The impasse in which Brazil is caught has its roots deep in structural and mental rigidities formed during a long experience of slavery and economic marginality...." It would be interesting to hear what Laurence Alloway would say in the face of the observations of Abdias de Nascimento, a black Brazilian painter, writer and theater man with whom I have been having long talks. We noted that none of the artists Alloway mentions has, or claims to have, a black heritage or influence. There is no use denying that Abdias de Nascimento is right when he argues that much of the work done by black people (in Brazil) cannot be completely understood in critical terms without careful attention being paid to the attitude which produced it. There can be no doubt that this is exactly what people like Frank O'Hara did for a master like Jackson Pollock. And say what one likes about the recent book, *David Smith on David Smith*, it seeks to define Smith's art as coming out of a deliberate, intelligent mind, conscious of socio-cultural philosophy. It is not just an autobiography.

There are moments in history when the time seems ripe for an attempt at defining terms. One such moment is now. The weight of exposure being given black people in all walks of life is second to none in Western history of which they are now firmly a part, the Third World notwithstanding. We recall James Baldwin's remark about being "born about the time of the so-called Negro Renaissance." Despite this kind of observation, we are witnessing a revolution, a black revolution of unmanageable scale and what is imperative is that out of it, some standards must emerge. Otherwise, we will find ourselves in a situation similar to that which Mr. Baldwin describes. The one area being significantly ignored in discussions is art. So the question comes up again. "Is there a separate black art, as opposed to white art?" The fact that the question is asked puts in doubt the existence of black art. Yet, on a universal level the answer has got to be yes. If Leroi Jones can claim in his book, *Black Music*, that white jazz is different from black jazz and if one can make a distinction between black and white writing on the basis of the completely different, yet related, experiences of these two sets of people, then the claim can certainly

be extended to art by stating the simple fact: what distinguishes or creates the uniqueness of the black artist is not only the color of his skin, but the experiences he brings to his art that forge, inform, and feed it and link him essentially to the rest of the black people. It is astonishing, ironic, but, on reflection, very predictable that black artists everywhere are making the same observations about their relationship to the world. Say what one likes about Leroi Jones, he talks quite clearly about the socio-cultural philosophy of the Negro.

Let me clarify this by an example: Bob Thompson's work.

I had been waiting for his exhibition for some time, I had heard rumours—was told it was on, I called the sort of people whom I thought would know only to find that they didn't. I rang the New School and was told by the switchboard that there was no such exhibition. Finally I went to the Martha Jackson Gallery. The girl at the front desk had never heard of Bob Thompson. She referred me to someone in the back—another girl. We joked about it: was it or wasn't it there? I left. The whole thing was inconclusive and disturbing. A short time after I came back from England, I ran into Jack Whitten who asked: "Are you going to the Bob Thompson show?"

When I saw the exhibition I was overwhelmed, I desperately wanted to write about this artist. I was given the go ahead to review the show. It occurred to me that objectivity was imperative. Toward that end I took the people I teach at Columbia to see the exhibition and afterwards assigned them a paper. My class at Columbia consists of about 25 people, only one of whom could answer to the current description of Black. Now the point I'm trying to make is that even considering that Thompson was born a year or so after I was, as a figure he was a legend—a hero, a tragedy, an artist by the standards of the people I admire. It quickly became evident that the assignment I made to the students was not going to help. One had to be initiated in order to understand this work. A confrontation on purely aesthetic terms could not be avoided.

The Jewishness of a Jewish novel can be controversial, polemical, attractive, and embraced. However, it remains valid and establishes itself as such. So with Chinese-ness or Japanese-ness. In art, this is not so. In the hierarchy we are led by, art doesn't allow the color or ethnic lines—except at its peril. This is clearly a questionable position in the changing, fermenting world in which we live.

Black art is done by black people and Thompson's work is not only idiosyncratic and personal, but black. The structures in Bob Thompson's work are explainable within the framework of an historical context which includes a psychological release which is traceable to Eastern Europe before Hitler's war in much the same way as the complete shift in Modernism. (The New American Painting: Pollock, Motherwell, Kline, de Kooning et al can be traced via André Masson and the Surrealists to what, for want of a more precise description, I must term Western Europe.) Thompson's work comes out of influences from German Romanticism (David Casper Friedrich), Die Bruecke and painters, writers, and intellectuals who gathered in art colonies (Worpswede) and cities (Berlin and Munich) and

was a slavish harking back, or seeking of the past (white). This left only cul-de-sacs. For fuller discussion of this see Cedric Dover's largely stodgily put together but otherwise excellent book, *Negro Art*. My esteemed friend and co-worker William Williams notwithstanding, the explanation can only marginally, if at all, be blamed on "... no visual tradition ...". Almost without exception the black middle class, now vocal and militant, is profoundly uneducated and (in many instances) "... can't spare the time ..." for high art and plastic values. Bob Thompson's "instinctive" reaching for total expression in this area is rather like those throw-ups who underline a rule.

Reading and looking at a lot of what was, and is, popular Negro art prompted me to go back to Clement Greenberg's essay "Avant Garde and Kitsch." Negro art up until recently was a perverse kind of Kitsch, rather in the order of slavery. Greenberg has a lot to say about Kitsch which applies to Negro art and now to Black art. (I suggest the term is interchangeable.) We know from the middle class bit that Jazz wasn't music, nor dancing, nor for that matter singing. By the same token Picasso's use of Negro sculpture (Primitive Sculpture and the like ...) was not painting and the lesson of him and his cronies in the Bohemian coteries was not to be tolerated. I find a real equivalence in all that Greenberg talks about when quoting Dwight McDonald on Russian films and his subsequent discourse and see no point in either quoting or stating bits. I refer the reader to this essay in toto. Incidentally there is a recent piece by Harold Rosenberg in the *New Yorker* which is a journal Greenberg cites. Doesn't McDonald write for this—I recommend it to my readers—there's not a single nigger mentioned.

The bombing-out of the black middle class and the subsequent challenging of all old and largely outmoded concepts being harassed by the young give a great deal of moment to the multilayered, fraught, and essentially self-defeating attitudes the young are involved with. It's not a question of who admires who and hence gives underlying force to who, but of standards in terms of that wonderful phrase Life-Style. I hope I have given at least an indication as to why Black artists have contributed so little to the Mainstream. My next point is that now they definitely are, which is inherently part of why they have not before.

The new middle class black product is as alienated from society as the white: the American dream has failed and all these badly misled people are not so much wrecking as getting together: hence questioning and feeding off each other. It's a great revolutionary moment but it still has its roots in what feeds it. Black art is still being done by black people only now it isn't Kitsch; it's the real thing. Take an artist like William Williams. It has been said that Williams's work is rather like Noland's (that school) but these paintings, although painted in that no nonsense flat masking tape and all process are so "irrational." One thinks of multiple swing rest points ... One thinks of single swing rest points/ stable, rigid (dead) as, say, in the construction of a quadrant arch with a brittle instrument. Or multiple swing rest points as say when describing a circle by the "primitive" method of string and any kind of mark-making tool (brush, pencil, charcoal) and the maximum of one's natural reach: regular and irregular heart-beats. But nothing holds; these paintings are articulated

in such an anxious "slipping-n'-sliding" fashion as to be eminently "niggerish" in content and it's no use confusing this work with some sort of influence by Frank Stella. The off-hand nature in the order of a Stella is very much a shrug. In Williams it's a "holer."

Again an artist like Mel Edwards could be superficially confused with David Smith except that Edwards produces a kind of ambivalence unknown in Smith. The calibration of weights is a basic generation (rather like "red" in the spectrum of theoretical "white" light). Since the weight of an object is determined from the sum of the masses of small weights which just balance the object, it is essential in exact work that the masses of the individual weights be accurately known: impossible! Those Mel Edwards works posed alongside architecture are not a challenge or an education—it's very much a love thing. I suspect Edwards is much closer to Caro than Smith, in that what furnishes the passion and informs the forms is a love—a nigger love—where humor is something like flying in the face of death.

Walking into Danny Johnson's studio was like walking into a death house, not, mind you, a morgue, but a mausoleum; but gay, man, gay. The light. The color. Those beautiful, decorated coffins were so sunny, pretentious, and healthy in a completely unhealthy way. It dawned on me that Johnson's recent discovery of African sculpture has engendered an uncanny expression of the Californian death thing now common currency via Waugh books and films: those streamlined funeral parlors and arty graveyards. Johnson's work is black in the same proportion (expressing a similar complementary, perhaps, but never identical aesthetic) as an artist such as Kienholz. Johnson's earlier work used to involve smashed dolls painted black and other kinds of urban ghetto debris rather in the manner of the so called "Funk" school but he was never in anybody's book on Pop Art or group show involving that. Johnson's instinctive understanding of the linear aspects of certain African sculptures locked in an intense marriage with current "striped paintings" a rebirth completely fresh and triumphant. Yet on a knife edge and troubled with questioning. What was once an almost academic tyranny is now a flowering of possibilities. With all the attendant risk. The irony is what came out is not African but "Black" Californian. Johnson's use of this source material is like and at the same time totally unlike Picasso's whose work from an authority like Rosenblum to *Life* magazine sets up only generalizations, or better still confusion. The sculptures that were supposed to have influenced *Demiselles d'Avignon* are so different and from tribes (African tribes) so far apart as to annul or frustrate checking. Picasso's use of this material is completely original and remains mysterious (perhaps even ironic, frustrating and amusing) in much the same way, in this area as Johnson. And there is an irony in that from "Nothing" we went straight into Kitsch and from Kitsch to this splendid flowering; one wonders if it is going to happen now so suddenly: Integration. It would be awful, wouldn't it. I hope that I may discuss why it isn't desirable or possible in the Arts next time.

Critique - Discussion on Black Art III

Current art criticism is developing an attitude which threatens to consign the idea and fact of Black art to the periphery of artistic events. This establishment criticism hides behind useful political terms like "revolution," "pragmatism," "Marxism," and sociology. It is a form of cultural myopia, malignant in its approach to Black art; for Black art, like any art, is art. The difference is that it is done by a special kind of people.

Threatening though "anarchism," which someone defined as "permanent revolution," may sound it defines Black existence—not Black struggles, but Black existence itself. Black life has had the spirit of anarchism as its content for centuries. Our history (this "historylessness") within a framework of degradation and oppression is a creative self-perpetuating process of anarchist, pro-life zeal. This perennially underground concept is in peril of being destroyed by assimilation, fragmenting, and watering down. The total thrust of the establishment is toward annihilation by ignoring contemporary Black existence in the light of history.

Earlier criticism, in every book and article, confirmed a deeply held opinion that, in the plastic arts, Black endeavor didn't exist or, when it did, was "lesser." At present there is no support for any such prejudice, suggested or real, for no contemporary art criticism deals with Black history or experience with the indelible anarchist content. Of the new criticism, Gregory Battock in *The New Art* says, "If our response to the present is inadequate and outmoded what of the future and the 'new' awareness of the non-white peoples? ... the new criticism presents not only a direct confrontation with the new art in question, but also a 'confrontation' with its cultural, moral and social logic." Those were the dark romantic days of 1966 for subsequently, Mr. Battock has, in this journal, evoked that well-known, itinerant Marxist-humanist-theorist Professor Marcuse, so often called upon to diagnose society's ills. But even with Professor Marcuse's aid, Mr. Battock was not able to increase our understanding.

Miss Barbara Rose, with a nod or two in the past at individual artists who happen to be Black, sets out in the new criticism (*Art Forum*, last season) and delivers a labyrinth of learned name dropping, concluding with a totally White, controlled, pragmatic plug for her favorite young White exponents of the American dream. Miss Rose contends that "younger artists are responding to a new world view which holds far more in common with pragmatism than idealism...." This observation may be the case in the narrow White American sense but it is too late to disguise the fact that what may have started out as pioneering and pragmatic has revealed itself as arrogant, colonialist and greedy, with an idealist zeal somewhat unprecedented in history. Pragma might be Greek for action, only when this turns out to be brutal and domineering it

leaves open for question whether Miss Rose's suggested distillation, via her learned peers of the "... function for art, placing us back again on a favorite terrain of American artists, who have felt so often that art must transcend the 'merely' aesthetic to inform experience more directly ..." isn't essentially a plea to perpetuate a rather abnormal and now notorious situation where a people have to let themselves be hypnotized into believing a huge section of their population were not simply irrelevant but virtually didn't exist. If one can have "world view" without local perspective it is plain we are dealing with the cyclops, regardless of John Dewey, Morse Peckham et al....

Of the "sociologists" writing in the *New York Times*, Peter Schjeldahl, on August 31, 1969, praised two recent art shows of low calibre—both organized by Black people. Of *Afro-American Artists* at Brooklyn College, he observed it was a painstaking selection of the best available recent work by Black Americans, but wondered whether "Black viewers were universally pleased with its fastidious elegance...." Of the *Harlem Artists 69* exhibition, he says, "The Studio Museum evidently opted to survey the actual state of art in its community. The decision was not to educate the taste of the community (though the Museum is heavily funded from outside) but convey to the people of Harlem that Black Art is worthy of their pride. Harlem Artists 69 obviously did apply minimum standards...." Whose minimum standards? Part of the function of any Museum in any community is to educate by survey. If Mr. Schjeldahl's conviction is that this is what the Studio Museum in Harlem could not do then the clear implication is that this must be the freak Museum in the history of Museums: its function being only to instill pride. Again, much as one can come to art through sensitivity and intelligence; which, one must assume, is what "the guy off the street" brings with his "natural gifts" as a maker of art works; art cannot sustain itself without "education" (this much maligned activity)—the swap, exchange, cross-splicing, this necessary growth-process of ideas—which is true of all people in the history of the world, whether the means is the apprentice system, art schools, or enclosed societies of long ago where there was "appreciation of its own art by a people for whom it is not a luxury but an integral part of life...." These words by William Fagg, in a symposium on "Tribality" at the First World Festival of Negro Art, refer, as he said, to "the ideal relationship between art and society ... enjoyed for some centuries in Christian Europe before the Renaissance." But we are not pre-Christian Renaissance Europeans. We are Black people in the Western world. To lower standards for our benefit is condescending and insulting to art.

Mr. Schjeldahl's patronizing progress report finds artists influenced by the look of 50s Abstract Expressionism and even 30s and 40s realism. "Black artists who are automatically participants in the turmoil of current history would not seem quite ready to submit to the cool reductionisms and aesthetic ploys of fashion...." Were Black artists left out of history's turmoil before? This patently contradictory nonsense is anti-life and uninformed. Let it suffice to say if Mr. Schjeldahl found no connection between the contemporary life-style of the people uptown—which is the hippest and most modishly influential there is—and their art (which he documents and dates by identifying it with the 30s and 50s) then the educative

function of the Museum has capitulated to something of which neither it or he approves: insidious racism.

It is hardly surprising then that museum people of various persuasions have been revealed as not believing their own publicity. Two prime examples are *Harlem On My Mind* and the *X to the 4th Power* exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The fact that the former exhibition was a disaster and the latter praised does not disguise the flaw in both; neither believed in Black artistic effort; both merely "tried it on." If he really believed that museums had a function outside the limits of their constitution, Mr. Hoving would have let the Blacks turn the place on its head; he had nothing of the sort on his mind. He would have had nothing to fear for Blacks have always "re-routed" without destroying. Good as the *X to the 4th* exhibition was, it contained a similar lack of conviction—the inclusion of a White artist being a fruitless gesture of politicizing by pointing up how equal, or as-good-as-White the Black majority was. In whose opinion?

The net result of the publicity for the Black Revolution spilling over into art is the fact that in all of the more unfortunate displays it hasn't mattered whether the art was good or not—a testimony to the sadly overwhelming and burdening concentration on politics and sociology. There are good works, as demonstrated by the *X to the 4th* show, but mediocre, ethnic, amateurish, irrelevant stuff is also being touted in the name of Black endeavor. As long ago as 1934, Romy Bearden was protesting against an "attitude ... of a coddling and patronizing nature." Have things really changed? Except for the greater viciousness of the surrounding misunderstandings?

A Shift in Perspective

While participating recently on two separate panel discussions, it struck me that a recurrent theme was the relative absence of a style, mode, or fashion. An absence of tyranny. You know, like Abstract Expressionist, or Pop; that kind of thing. One was either doing it like all the other fellow travellers, or was ostracized. Of course there was always a "leader" whose edicts one ignored on pain or isolation—and indeed the loneliness was painful and baffling. Such tyranny inevitably set up the kind of confusion and resentment which often leads to tragedy. I don't know if the other artists on the panel, artists who also write and are historians, were feeling close to celebration at this freedom, and were conscious (here in New York) of just how much a sense of purpose the open-ended situation gave one—or whether they were casually observing the fact. I like to think that it was not the latter. It didn't take long to understand that what we were really remarking on and pointing up was New York. After a brief sense of unbelievable disappointment, I began asking myself questions. Is it a fact that everyone wants to come to New York? That one I found I couldn't answer. What, however, is true is that it is important, for specific aesthetic reasons, to exhibit here. The influence of American art and artists has so dominated, changed, and vitalized art concepts, that it is imperative that an artist measure his stature against what's going on here. The polemics are nothing, if not active and productive.

I began to wonder, at this point, if this isn't really another kind of tyranny. Granted one couldn't label it so, but whatever the blanket term happened to be, if this was the case, no matter how one spelled it, tyranny was tyranny. With this in mind, I reflected, with a certain skepticism, that there are artists working in parts of Germany, Worpswede, Düsseldorf, say, or England, London, St. Ives, whose work we never see here. This season, however we have had a good look at three artists of stature (in their own countries if not here) who are in their early thirties. Of the ones we saw, Konrad Klapheck and David Hockney could be cast in starring roles. Then there was John Hoyland, whose show just closed at RobertsElkon.

The Klapheck exhibition was a great success early in the season, and Hockney's at the André Emmerich is presently enjoying the same aura. I think what distinguishes these two artists, one working in Germany, the other mainly in England, is the almost total lack of influence American painting has on their work (unlike John Hoyland). Let me say at once that the Hockney exhibition is a beautiful and successful show. The paintings, however, as individual objects, do not measure up to this abstract, general, kaleidoscopic impression. It is one of the biting, scratching dilemmas of our time that if one does "know" an artist and his world, it compounds the problems when discussing his work. David Hockney is a good artist who successfully inhabits and articulates the world he has

The Rupture: Ancestor Worship, Revival, Confusion, or Disguise

"... I want to make the black people remember they're black, to define their heritage...." (Dana Chandler, "Art in the Ghetto," Harvard Art Review, Winter 1968-69.)

"The assumption ... that slavery in the United States destroyed the creative memories of newly arrived Africans ... holds that no form of African influence remains." (Robert Farris Thompson, Black Studies in the University, Yale University Press, 1969.)

"... basically we come from a non-visual culture or people" (William Williams, "The Black Artist in America," Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, vol. 27, No. 5; January 1969.)

When I complained of negative comparisons in art criticism and comments in diverse publications which at the time seemed disposed to ridiculing black people's endeavor in the areas of painting, graphics and sculpture, I rather adopted the attitude that among institutions, museums were just as guilty of that hidden but quite positive decline of standards which must have started with the most serious attitudes and highest motives. It occurred to me that everybody has been complaining. For the most part, though, what is obvious in the marked asides, when not direct statements of anger, is who has been left out (or left themselves out) and why. As I sat down to write I asked myself if I was not slowly slipping into the same groove of negative comparisons and uncritical complaints. For instance, is there any real point, when discussing the present Boston Museum show "Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston" in reflecting upon the work of diverse talents like Zell Ingram, Emma Amos, Thomas Sills or Richard Mayhew in dissent with Matisse or, perhaps closer to home, Milton Avery (Matisse happens to be in the news) when it may result in the conceivable detriment of these serious, concerned painters? Or to talk about that world of private configuration verging on the most dynamic aspects of Surrealism as exemplified by Albert Pinkham Ryder when confronted with the less successful attempts of Luther Van or Vincent Smith? And if what we are troubled by in this particular pictorial neighborhood is skill, how well would Cliff Joseph and at least one of Lois Jones' attempts fare? After the recent Realist show at the Whitney, how does one assess (re-assess?) the works of Ernie Critchlow, or, for that matter, Reginald Gammon or Richard Waters? How useful is it also to bemoan the absence of artists of stouter mettle and greater stature in the "Establishment Art World?" (Mistake me not; the two, that is recognition in the Establishment Art World and strength or stature, do not necessarily go together.) These are all questions that need answering and

fairly soon, but I fear that the contentions that will ensue from any attempt to do justice by answers will at the moment degenerate into that confused sphere: is black as good as white? Is black different from white? How? Why? Does proof justify either neglect, dominance, etc.? Perhaps what I am saying is that I am not prepared, or that I am ill-equipped to deal with those pertinent issues which I contend, uphold, assert, that though slightly inside, are paradoxically almost totally outside any positive assessment of art content. Quality is the only criterion from which to judge: in individual works as in the case of a mixed showing or achievement in that direction—and quality in the case of a body of work by an individual. And of this fact everyone is aware.

The question, the only question, that remains is the one that publicly at least no one seems to ask. It is possible to put on yet another black show? (Call it Afro-American if you want.) Now when I complained of comparison, did I not fall into that same trap? After all, I was thinking of California, the Waddington Galleries, Kasmin, Emmerich, the Lawrence Rubin Galleries, modernism, American-European style, all the lush emporiums downtown, the entrepreneurs and the heated gossip. There seemed to be a movement. There was even a show called "5 + 1" under the, I thought, healthy protection of Lawrence Alloway and Sam Hunter at Stony Brook.

In another recent museum exhibition (about which it was widely remarked but again hardly ever publicly asserted) black artists were not included. And perhaps why? But then to ask that may have been going a little too far. In the catalog to the exhibition, Harold Rosenberg claimed, "What makes any definition of a movement ... dubious is that it never fits the deepest artists in the movement. ..." Because he was talking about art, it is one of the times when I profoundly agreed with Mr. Rosenberg. Movements are fugitive and at best a just tolerable, irritating burden. After endless discussion, most of the people who used to meet and discuss came to recognize that there was no movement and like every other artist gathering, met through common need, like all the other gatherings, to make a dent in the situation, to draw blood from those hardened arteries.

"5 + 1" had the avowed intention to once and for all put a stop to all those rotten ethnic shows—throwing caution to the wind and declaring that the idea that there was "quality" was not some romantic notion about black bravery of the sort people readily identify with Black Panther sacrifice. It was not even meant to attract a wide audience. In the sense that the exhibition was deliberately university based, the attempt was to garner a corner in the heated discussion of essence and worth. It was not so much black pride but thoughtful speculation addressing itself to aesthetic realizations. The young people clamoring for more and better Black Studies seemed a natural audience to which one could address one's own discoveries. (Perhaps it would be better to say the trails left behind in one's searches, for there was certainly a lot of talk about letting those young people into one's studio and passing around in written form everything, including extremely adverse criticism of art.) If white artists' work, over the last twenty years, amounts to thumbing noses at bourgeois society, and a conspiratorial coalition between the artist and the only people

who could wear their intellectual mantle with ease—the rich—it constitutes little less than a Babylonian raid of gigantic scale on the jaded appetites of the inheritors of the "dream." The black artist was confronted with a put on-or-shut-up situation of awesome proportions. There was to be no flunking direct engagements, yet there was the inherited dilemma of art, like all the other dilemmas black people inherited. It was at this point that no meaningful separation could be made; for art had become, because of the breakdown, the crisis, call it what you will, of bourgeois society, the property of *all* with its accompaniment of existentialist man and alienation as a reality and a dilemma. However, separation was in the works as a political and social reality, dragging art, which had, in fact, been left to its own devices, with no obviously and readily definable function. In the scramble for works that were in fact made by black people, the barrel-scraping process began and goes on today.

The European/African confrontation and splitting apart have produced, in music, jazz with its distinct stamp of blackness, African utilities and motifs have sustained artists like Joe Overstreet, his friends, and a host of designers where black rhetoric had recently failed. One wonders, therefore, if outside the theatre and music, one can answer that real question of whether one can legitimately put on another Black Art Show, with its direct implications about the nature of black art—for with what else do you fill a Black Art Show?

The opportunity presents itself with a vengeance. Coming together, almost on the same day, are the openings to the public of "African Art" (Brooklyn Museum) and "Afro-American Art: New York and Boston" (Boston Museum of Fine Arts). It gives us an opportunity to do some comparing. An opportunity not just to do another kind of comparing but the only real kind of comparing one can legitimately do at the moment. How does Black Art here and now in the United States fare alongside old Black Art, i.e., traditional African works? On these showings, so close in time and place, the answer is an unqualified: *badly*. Clearly missing from the reams of garbage (as I view it from where I stand, that is, as an avid consumer of what the people are given to read about the situation and a participating contributor to the on-going polemic), is that expected run on research, its dependence on continuous argument; the discoveries and therein the suggestive teasing between concerned minds accepting and rejecting from concrete evidence advanced. In fact, the great sifting process from which *only* will we get the truth is, for the most part (there are the rare exceptions), sadly missing. One explanation could be that the numbers, the profusion and trite non-observations, like the exhibitions themselves, are without art purpose.

"Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston" fares very badly indeed for all kinds of reasons alongside what we have very justly claimed with pride as inherited contributions from the ancestors. But mostly by the flimsy and ever so transparent, in a literal sense, flirtation, almost embarrassed, in some sense of the most worthwhile and strongest works here. Dan Johnson's tulip trip through chrome-plated graveyards of California vulgarity has left the work wanting from any understanding. It is no surprise, therefore, to find that from his earlier interest in the linear scarifications of traditional African masks—the

tightly symmetrical abstract deductions, evident in flat reliquary guardians, in fact, the inability to encompass the breath of these well-honed functionary pieces—the funerary aspect seems to have overwhelmed at best a rather indifferent joiner. Wakes and jazz (out of funeral marches) celebrate pro-life, whereas hawking elegant boxes for the already dead is an undertaker's shot, despite the elegance. Minimal Art, with its direct criticism, arrived at something. But these obelisks, when denied their purity, are blunt. Here is a grassland marauder straying into the desert, eyes stinging from the debris of a vast wind-blown arid waste, stabbing in the dark which is supposed to be light.

Of the older artists in the Boston show, there can be no doubt that Bill Rivers survives the Western cliché of seniority; a camp disguise as prima donna for the sake of balance. (*"Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston"* is on view at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, May 19 – June 23; *"African Sculpture"* is showing at the Brooklyn Museum, May 20 – June 21.)

Silence: People Die Crying When They Should Love

The past season has seen a spate of correspondence surrounding the nature of Black Art. The definition seems to have gained little clarity but the issues still rage: thus, the spoken utterances of artists (painters and sculptors) perpetually left a certain non-plussing, discouraging confusion often full of "... I was aiming at" "I could have done" etc. Perhaps it's a defense mechanism, in defense of this non-realized—but is it realizable?—figment of "might have been." Be this as it may, the discouragement does appear to reside in a retrospective, if inscrutable potential; not just during the experiencing of the utterances, but in one's own reverie of that *past of potential*—a sort of recapitulation in strictly elusive, non-definable terms: shapeless, formless. The chilling notion dawned on me on rereading specific utterances by black artists and writers on art, particularly those who relate themselves to "the street," sitting on the coffin of *unspent possibilities*. It's not just given to blacks: this is what I'm dealing with. It has been remarked that these artists are unwilling, unable, even afraid to deal with "dwellings," floors, walls, etc., but this is not our discussion. The algid, sad, resentful: "it's-like-this," "look-here" hairies who deal in "I could haves" yards and yards from the possible; with much *navel directed* encouragement given to these shadow chasing, shadow boxing activities. The popular press has caught and frozen this. Though no mean thing, and unprecedented in itself. Its significance, surely, lies in terms of sheer journalistic weight; period pride can be the only explanation for the cautious but quite heady claims of a significant *first*.¹ Black Art, as an idea, is very much with us. Any age alert to evolutionary, revolutionary forces stretching its possibilities, brings with it painful scholarship: bracing in a "wind of change" challenge; it is articulated in the undertones of delivered, evocative speech ... but alas, irritatingly dry, nail-bleeding and uncomfortable in its typing and scratching.

It is of signal importance to emphasize that the only positive thing to come out of the recent situation has been the loudly bellowed demand and published assertions for a criticism to accommodate, nay (for won't I be accused of condescension?) explicate, veritably the Black experience: it needs new structures of criticism. The demand? Indeed a *new* criticism! That the polemicists, artists and others want to be praised for their labors, has, I'm sure, not escaped these protagonists. If the revolution is right, praise I'm sure is forthcoming where praise is due. Meanwhile, it is quite clear that the concept of Black Art has to be dealt with through criticism. So far there has been little evidence, "off the street," in the museum and gallery system, in fact revealing "... through careful study ..." of styles and salient points of contrast and similarity ..." anything significant. Between the eye, the wall and the floor there

was little which was new. There was nothing signally original or surprising, as there are plenty of precedents for "the social artist ... radically committed and involved with the living world ...": all those artists in the history of awkward genre and realistic allegorical painting in this country. It is in fact a home-grown phenomenon, the genius of which must reside in the American psyche itself. There was little that would support a rectifier, except quantity, numbers. For that matter, since we are on the subject, anything Black! Except the social phenomena. Essentially what was revealed was a certain conservative clinging to well tried, now creaking, now worn out (but by implication not necessarily "no longer valid") pictorial devices. That most of the figuration of these social artists could be put to better use in say graphic design is signalled by the fact that most of the works appear evidently better, more explicit, more accomplished in reproduction. This is because the qualities of paint, of collage etc., do not engage one—as here they are not meant to. The reproductive process's ability to neutralize things reduces everything to a bald graphic message totally devoid of material nuance. That this stuff is more about information is underlined by the comparative distinction afforded through catalogue, magazine and newspaper reproduction. For the "Black Experience" puts it all out of focus and into question (as for instance is this the right medium for X?). Extremely literal in the worst sense these works seem designed to deny the subtlety of black experience, indeed experience of any sort: and black experience, at any rate the experience as given, is "subtle." The temptation to label this work "bad," to use the derogatory term "Bad Art" as an appellation for the products of these art endeavors, has to be resisted. (But it may well be to come, Bad Art, for who is the final arbitrator!) The question is: bad as compared to what? Alas! We still haven't come up with any secret cache of instructions which the African ancestors provided in their distinctive "written" style. Since this is not, I suggest, the case, we can't really disprove "Racist Lies" about Black impotence. Since on the evidence the summoning of art, i.e. painting and sculpture, to extirpate Black Art does prove recalcitrant and awfully tricky on the one hand by present claims for much of which goes under this banner, is criticism then powerless? The answer here is an unqualified No! For what we can do and it's already happening (otherwise now the ongoing dialogue) is question "The Assumptions" from the positive deductions of our experience. Since the problem of eliciting from painting and sculpture an adjudication redefining art (with the express intention of *defining* Black Art) proves rather like pulling strong teeth without anaesthetic, I would suggest two ways. One, as I said, through our experience: concrete equivalents which extend themselves through determinants, measurements, yardsticks. Or, total rejection of the immediate experience which will involve a boat back trip on the Garveyan precedent; that might, that does imply all kinds of potential discovery. The treasure hunt! Home!

In trying to make sense of the former, my endeavors led me far afield (more about this) to talking and reading finally several books where I lingered: one might say I put out to sea with some books! In the summer 1964 issue of *Art and Literature* I found Richard Wollheim's essay "On Expression and Expressionism" a discussion of Marion Milner's book *On Not Being Able to Paint*. Page 178, "At one point Wittgenstein asks us if we can imagine ourselves using one phrase and meaning another by it (e.g., saying

'It's cold here' meaning 'It's warm here')... our explanation would probably take the form of alleging that we say a word cold out loud, we say warm to ourselves: [not even that I venture!] or that we treat our utterances as though it were a slip of the tongue...." My travels lead me to believe that every dweller in the black ghetto (community?) from Junkie to Jack-of-all-trades *knows* about those changes. *Thaat!* *that* is their life style. Yes! I am suggesting that the people on the streets (the oft re-flashed "guy off the street") is tuned-in-to Wittgenstein through Wollheim as revealed in *Art and Literature* or (more pertinently) the other way round.

Addressing oneself, upfront or otherwise, through the auspices of an art magazine, is not necessarily dealing with and reflecting the literal situation in the ghetto or community. My point, however, is that the energy is located somewhere in the subtlety of "experience," shared experience. And this is why literalness, though precisely such in every measurable dimension, fails to express: fails, that is, at "expression," Wollheim further (same page) says "... we might find here a suggestion as to how the present question about the limits of expression is to be answered. For it might seem that a man can express y-ness by x-ing, only if x-ing stands to y-ness in a relation which is, or analogous to, that of meaning...." Experience has no literal meaning, only "subtle" meaning (idiosyncratic, personal, etc.). Though it accommodates literalness, this is only part of the whole story. Literal shape for instance has no meaning, it's just shape, but it can in one sense stand (has stood, does stand) for painting through being "depicted" (painted). I-was-aiming at often turns out not to be I-did, after literal action, except in the limited sense. Blackness is therefore no more expressed in the literal sense by painting a black face than by a black line, for it is the depiction of a face or a line that we are witnessing; hence, the experience a painting "carries" through literal and depicted shape is generally a painting experience (time, color surface/area, parametric demarcation points etc.).

The black experience must therefore be operating on a different, more subtle, level, or not at all. But there is a missing link. If we may turn again to Wollheim's essay, on page 190: "... I now want to suggest an association between ... two aspects of expression in art: the existence of a physiognomic link between emotion that is expressed and the expression of it, and the privileged character of the spectator's verdict. *Now on the face of it* ... the spectator will be expected to recognize this link, but his verdict has no special authority to it: for his opinion is relevant only in so far as it is true of the link."

All the works discussed (perhaps not discussed but mentioned in this respect videlicet Black Art) last season had their merits and usefulness, but as painting and sculpture few if any could or did carry those disciplines and the black experience.

Benny Andrews in a very long letter included this²: "... the gallery tour came to a halt ..." (the scene was the exhibition *Afro-American Artists, New York and Boston*, mounted at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts) "... in front of my painting titled *The Champion* and a black person asked me to comment. ... I wanted to show the strength of the black man ..." Mr. Andrews says, "... the ability to

persevere in the face of overwhelming odds, and I have used the symbol of the prize fighter ... I *cannot fail* to relate my sense of indignation over the fate that has befallen the black man's Thors and in this sense of indignation I tried to paint my heart out in *The Champion*. ... I finished talking about *my feelings* and my reason for painting. I looked into the crowd, and as I looked from one black face to another, I knew that they felt in their way the way I felt in mine and it was no longer a question, ... I had those beautiful and soulful faces nodding and silently saying, 'Yes, yes, indeed we understand.' It occurred to me that the "silence" was due to some museum bylaw about noise, but never mind, I could be wrong. The above quoted not the half of it, it's very strong stuff, very heady and moving, reminding me considerably of going to church on a Sunday morning in Alabama. I wish I had been there. However, I strongly recommend to my readers Wollheim's essay when next confronted with this work *The Champion*.

Finally, could it be that on this evidence we must assume that the "Black Experience," since neither painting nor sculpture is mentioned (or rather when referred to, totally without the context of the disciplines as such; nor could they be mentioned, I dare say, for from that sermon, apparently they would only get actually in the way!) leaves no room for either; or, put another way, leaves painting and sculpture free and intact? Wollheim says, page 191 "... Given a man cannot express his feelings in a painting simply by standing in front of the canvas with these feelings and then trying to put them into the painting, what is the difference between the man who is in this position and the man who has rules to aid him." Wollheim splits this question in two parts but for our purpose let us skip to the observation "... whether there is any specific kind of painting that unmistakably shows signs of having been painted to a rule: or whether since any kind of painting can be brought under a rule, we must always take the painter's word for the fact that he was following a rule. In which case what is left of 'spectator supremacy?' ..." Concluding, with Wollheim, in a mutual admitting of the difficulty, I nevertheless cannot accept the inconclusive saying "This one wasn't rule directed, therefore it isn't supposed to be." For quality is discernible and therefore success, rule-directed or otherwise. The trouble with rules are that in a situation like trying to define Black Art the confusion is deepened by the polarized stands taken about which are the rules to follow. That "experience" forges the content of works is an assertion, one I intend to deal with more thoroughly next time.

1. *TIME* magazine, April 6, 1970.
(Although the Black Art color section was considerably reduced for *TIME* international!)
— *Art Gallery*, April 1970.
2. — *The New York Times*, June 21, 1970.

Another Map Problem

The aim of criticism, it has always seemed to me, is to unearth through understanding the most direct possible interpretation of the achievements of painters, as with the specialists in any field. This does not mean that the critic should tell the painter how to be a good painter. It is even a liberty to assert, as it has been reported one well-known critic has, in response to a painter's accusation of bullying, "I don't tell you how to paint! Only how to proceed." It is also presumptuous to draw larger conclusions from the isolation of noninvolvement with the activity, and inform the painter that a particular view about the nature of space or matter, i.e., paint or canvas, cannot be correct because it has awkward metaphysical implications.

If, therefore, as Barbara Rose has said, criticism has run out of superlatives, this does not mean that quality hasn't been discernible. On the contrary, there is a consistent nodding agreement among peer practitioners about what is good painting. They are the ones who are acting it out and criticizing by doing, by declaring; as witness the recent Larry Poons exhibition at the Lawrence Rubin galleries.

It is perhaps too early to access the true essence, implications, and likely value of Poons's latest attempts, but one thing is certain: a short comparison with the exhibition of John Hoyland's recent work, shown at about the same time at the Emmerich galleries, reveals some of the differences being talked about and dealt with. Related to this, there prevails a general lack of understanding of Hans Hofmann, of what Hofmann achieved in one rectangle reaching across (sometimes several) others and echoing the extent to which the actual image carries vibrancy in terms of sheer color: The whole resounds in a sort of concertinaed burst, holding the surface so taut visually that one doesn't question its shallowness, hence its flatness. This idea does not work in any of Hoyland—the paint oozing all over, devoid of any structure or tension, bellied and sagged visually in a sort of messy collapse. Poons, on the other hand, is not playing at plastic surgery but, one suspects, seeking in the doing and seeing the expressive possibilities of the paint itself as it is related to the art of painting. The basic character of his pictures lies in the figurative event of paint moved—paint moving, having moved.

There has been a lot of talk about thick paint, but this is not really a new issue. It was going on in 19th century Germany, and London had its so-called Bomberg School, dominated by Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. (We saw examples of Auerbach's works here at the Marlborough Gallery in September–October 1969.) In Sweden there is Evert Lundquist and his followers; in Paris there was de Staël, etc. The originality of Poons, however, is in his dealing with paint as visible paint possibilities—expressive, openly articulate as color and as force—and not with paint as building material—skin and/

or bone equivalents, etc. He uses a process of not quite scooping or bailing out the water that separates from the heavy pigment settling; letting it drift, he oversees the internal volition rather like a hawk.

From what we have seen, Poons's handling is both subtle and delicately balanced. His sense of color braces this capacity so finely that it often strays over into slickness; however, the successful pictures are images of great power resulting almost entirely, one guesses, from his disciplined response to paint. The ability of paint to fluctuate and deal with fluid structures by piling up, drifting, etc., appears to be not a question of sculpture, bas relief, and so on, nor of space (flatness, concave, convex, etc.), but an inherent character of the nature of paint as experienced by the painter.

References to science, philosophical description or other closed definitions of "paint" and "color" thus seem completely disconnected from the reality of paint as illustrated by Larry Poons. Walter Darby Bannard has written several essays on the problems that contemporary abstract color painters are confronting. In the March 1970 issue of *Artforum* ("Color Painting and the Map Problem") he contends that for some geometrical reason one cannot, in the making of a map or a painting, place more than four different color areas adjacent to one another.

In trying his best to isolate one aspect, or unit, from the pictorial fullness of painting for our understanding, he ends up rendering it brittle and negative. The aspect or element I'm particularly referring to is structure. "All painting is relational" is one of those happy kinds of observations. Editors have a habit of discomfiting one with questions like "relational to what?" But never mind, perhaps explanation is not quite so steadfastly needed, after all that idea has been talked about. Bannard goes on to state, "But they [the pictorial units] may not interact ... they either stand alone or exhaust themselves on their immediate neighbor ... The wholeness of the picture is [thus] fractured and the structure gives in ...". This is stating the obvious. Extended substances, like particular bodies, don't move. By emphasizing the mathematics of the surface, Bannard dismisses the fact that the almost casual efficacy of a particular good painting implies, indeed constitutes, a certain kind of action.

Since Bannard claims that the "mutual isolation" of picture units weakens a painting, we are forced to assume in terms of absolute abstract relatedness that all nonrelational paintings—made and not—fall into the same bag. Yet "painting a canvas all one color, or ... leaving it [the canvas] blank" are surely two different things, for painting is painting and the proof of quality is in painting. "Leaving it [the canvas] blank" is decidedly not painting.

Bannard's essay seems to block the appearance of two equivalents. The first being the natural connection between the two-dimensional structure of the stretched canvas, and the "orderly system of parallels and meridians" and the grid systems of most comprehensive maps. Second, the organic nature of shapes which masses take on—water, land, soft, hard, and so on—is very much like the fluid nature of paint itself as it forms up and delivers. Given that these are equivalents through the actual formal existences inherent in both things, however superficial,

the fact of various differences through action could be taken as understood from the existing evidence. There is all the difference of action, as it pertains to painting, on an actual woven, absorbent-like canvas, in that on this molecular, or porous surface, if we block the pores we get opacity; if not, we get something which, if not quite opposite, is pretty near to it. Whereas the degree of subservience of an actual map's (the sort readily at hand) ability to go through the same process proves an insoluble barrier.

The point that "pictorial units have an automatic or forced relationship," though correct, limits the consideration to a space problem and puts a halter around the vulnerable fact that what is being discussed is rigid as opposed to fluid structures. Emphasis is on limitation, not on freedom of paint ability.

Rand McNally World Atlas, 1967, states, "... a map is merely an orderly system of parallels and meridians on which a flat map can be drawn ... Most projections are disguised to preserve on the flat map some particular property of the sphere. By varying the systematic arrangement of the latitude or longitude lines a projection can be made either equal area or conformal. Although most projections are derived from mathematical formulas some are easier to 'visualize' if thought of as projected upon a plane, or upon a cone or a cylinder which is then unrolled into a plane surface, and thus are classified plane (Azimuthal), conic or cylindrical ...". Much of this is closer to the fact of painting as process, with its constant drive to reiterate and assert flatness, as opposed to the serial implication of topology, which would accept flatness as a given needing no assertion. Carrying this further, a more precise rendering of near-equivalents with painting as we know it through Cézanne and Mondrian would be difficult to equal. Bannard himself tells us that Jackson Pollock's work, blossoming from Cubism "... took the line and threw out the form it enclosed."

There is a continued, deepening threat of negative importance essential to Bannard's position. "Recently ... the best paintings have been in terms of color rather than space ... Artists often reduce space variety or the importance of space variety ..." could be taken as an observation from a sensibility with "a highly developed sense of fact," in Clement Greenberg's words. The trouble is that what follows (i.e., "... painting in terms of color brings up special problems of isolation and interaction ... Many colors spread at random on ... a flat surface become mutually isolated because each color can interact only with those colors sharing its borders") is not good enough because of the self-evident a priori limitation; also the language implies once again that what is being touched on is space. Coming as Bannard does out of that era when "hard-edge" painting was the dominant issue, it is not, perhaps, surprising to find that these utterances turn out to be a rather academic view of color; but there are other points about color besides these comparatively well-known abstract ones.

A lot of color painting going back to the mid-1960's with Jules Olitski, which seemed to refer to Monet's work as the particular location which springboarded the present dialogue, is really more properly located in the discoveries of Cézanne and the Cubists; a sort of re-connecting to the object world to leave the painting free to define itself

as painting. I think that William Rubin is right in suggesting, rather stating, that the earliest fully realized paintings of Frank Stella (the "black paintings"), which seemed for a long time to refer to Jackson Pollock, were much closer in time and directly connected to what Jasper Johns was doing. Seen now with the perspective of hindsight to be a contention of objectness and Cézanne's *junction*, operating not as separating lines but as guides to the next open space, the oft-repeated assertion that the space in Cézanne "looks" as if one could walk into it is really about a kind of "blindness." There is an anxious, groping certainty/uncertainty as the marks stutter across the surface until they are built up in an increasingly sure but always perplexed march to the edge, which nevertheless has an uncanny magnet of drawing one back into the midst of the image. This is what grips one in an incredible tension very unlike Old Master painting, where one tends to forget what one is looking at. It is quite unlike Monet's Impressionism, which attempts to catch the "fugitive effects" of nature.

In the hands of Cézanne, the color structure discoveries of the Impressionists became a mark-making guide to the next space, rather like a seeing-eye dog. In this sense it could be said that Frank Stella took up one of the things, more accurately one of the aspects, the Cubists discarded. This could be read several ways. I think the proper one is, simply, that it didn't apply because it was too difficult. It came too close to decoration, and Matisse was the only person able to cope with decoration, but then Matisse was never a Cubist. It is interesting that Matisse, who used to map out his work in the sense that his cut-outs were constantly being re-arranged in a kind of charting in search of balance, is never mentioned in connection with any of the known users of maps such as Johns and Rivers.

In Sam Hunter's recent book on Larry Rivers, for example, no mention is made of the almost compulsive attachment of this artist to *specifying*, much as this penchant is turned loose by the artist to the point of being vague. Rivers' use of map can only be said to be vague in the sense that the use to which the appearance of a map is put is indicative only of something else; not painting but something in or about a work. Like his use of Abstract Expressionist painting attitudes, vacillating between "plain" figuration and fragmentary allusions to figuration, Rivers' use of maps suffers from a lack of worry. Though employed literally (Africa, Boston Massacre, Russian Revolution), they serve to depict some thing or place outside the work itself.

Max Kozloff in his book on Jasper Johns spends much greater energy in discussing where the paintings don't fit into a concept of Apollonian aspirations through structure, rather than on the structures themselves. Of the map done in 1961 and now in the Museum of Modern Art, Kozloff says Johns "... betrays such an indifference to geography that the United States are swamped in shrill yellows and reds and light blues, without any compensating adjustment of stroke to image. It is an unravelled, acrimonious picture." The wholly literary and emotional connotations around the three map paintings are, one suspects, hardly Jasper Johns. What one sees after, and in, connection with *False Start* (1959) is the demand of mobile paint structures. Linear space or plane structures, which lend to a one-to-one color articulation, become considerably un-

determined when color is busier, more natural, more *fluid*. If the control of *False Start* is direct and intuitive, the maps with their "stepped" but natural up-and-down, left-and-right, right-and-left, stuttered diagonal drifts, looping bellying lines, demand (within the rectangle) a certain kind of order that Johns seems unwilling to pursue.

Kozloff is right that the map done in 1963 is the better of the three paintings, but the most successful work using "map" as a springboard into the making of an image is the print of *Two Maps*. The reason for this is that the one-to-one demand is being satisfied by linear space repetition. Whereas in every painting Johns seems incapable of dealing with the left-hand corner, where *California juts out into the ocean*, and the curved drift implied by that shape, finds no echo anywhere else. In fact it is badly disrupted by a completely different set of curves *around Florida*. The lack of natural rhythm at the borders, both left and lower right, of these pictures makes the comparative order and seductive colorism in the middle appear overdone and confused. The "stamped" stencil supports, but only to emphasize device. Missing is the understanding found in Cézanne and Mondrian, and suggested by Rand McNally.

Because painting can be so decorative in the worst sense, a quality inherent in the works of artists like Johns and Rivers, there is a kind of existential touch that makes the liberties they take with objects sustain themselves in the facture of that tension, that plight of risk. Color painting, or more properly abstract color painting, is only the most recent example of that which gambles with the absolute hazards of collapsing through being decorative.

It's Not Enough to Say "Black Is Beautiful"

Author: Frank Bowling teaches art history at the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston; he will be included among the Whitney Museum's forthcoming "Black Artists in America" exhibition.

The problems of how to judge black art by black artists are not made easier by simply installing it; here a painter examines the works of Williams, Loving, Edwards, Johnson and Whitten as both esthetic objects and as symbols expressing a unique heritage and state of mind.

Recent New York art has brought about curious and often bewildering confrontations which tend to stress the political over the esthetic. A considerable amount of writing, geared away from history, taste and questions of quality in traditional esthetic terms, drifts towards "relevance," arbitrating social balance and even quotas. For such writing to be serious, it must consider the artists' intent. Intentions, however, cannot be kept within formalist or literalist confines, even when the works display strong formalist or minimalist aspects. That the answers to questions of intent seem to match demonstrations of formalist or literal content, thus freezing the whole dialogue, leaves a highly complex, often fugitive and hence largely ignored area still to be investigated.

Much of the discussion surrounding painting and sculpture by blacks seems completely concerned with notions about Black Art, not with the works themselves or their delivery. Not with a positively articulated object or set of objects. It is as though what is being said is that whatever black people do in the various areas labeled art is Art—hence Black Art. And various spokesmen make rules to govern this supposed new form of expression. Unless we accept the absurdity of such stereotypes as "they've all got rhythm..." and even if we do, can we stretch a little further to say they've all got painting? Whichever way this question is answered there are others of more immediate importance, such as: What precisely is the nature of black art? If we reply, however, tongue-in-cheek, that the precise nature of black art is that which forces itself upon our attention as a distinguishing mark of the black experience (a sort of thing, perhaps, only recognizable by black people) we are still left in the bind of trying to explain its vagaries and to make generalizations. For indeed we have not been able to detect in any kind of universal sense The Black Experience wedged-up in the flat bed between red and green: between say a red stripe and a green stripe.

If formalism drove painting out of the arena of Action, and painting got to be more about itself as "process" and "thing" (we are not likely to forget the late Ad Reinhardt), painting didn't just isolate itself from questioning; it drove itself and the artists to declaring not just simply the works,

but themselves, in a talismanic role. The art may be a simple box, but the artist remains a magician.

The painters I am about to discuss all work in New York. Although they all are black, they have been grouped together almost entirely in relation to their role as artists. They first came together with the curatorial assistance of Lawrence Alloway and Sam Hunter in an exhibition called "5-plus-1" at Stony Brook University in 1969. Of the artists, Mel Edwards and Dan Johnson are sculptors, Al Loving, Jack Whitten, William Williams and myself are painters. It must however be understood that there are many other comparable artists, not necessarily connected with my main thesis but who must be included for reasons which will become clear both in this essay and in the future. These artists are the natural inheritors of modernism through the contributions of their ancestors in traditional African and modern art.

The arguments for an African legacy are often overstressed and at times aggressively asserted. However there's no denying its emotional and political significance. It is clear that modernism came into being with the contribution provided by European artists' discovery of and involvement with African works, and their development of an esthetic and a mythic subject from it. But the point I am trying to make concerns the total "inheritance" which constitutes the American experience and that aspect of it with which black people can now (perhaps they always have) fully identify, due to the politization of blackness. It would be foolish to assume, as some do, that the development of modern art through the contributions of African ancestors is solely the property of blacks, for it is evident that the filtering process must include white consciousness.

I readily admit that this is partly a question of historical placement and time; it nevertheless remains a complex and pressing issue; to wit, a situation which does not shift objective facts, the works or the artists, into areas more readily meaningful. For there is a body of work and there are figures on the scene we simply have to deal with, no matter what the political climate is. At the same time parallel to the question of "intent" there is still the question of standards. How do we judge and salute works by black artists?

I believe that standards exist and complexity of "intent" can be judged by the ability of the individual artist: his ability to fulfil a meaningful talismanic role. But the meaningfulness of the artist's role in many areas of black life is similar to that of such popular figures as Imamu Amiri Baraka, Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver and the late Malcolm X. It is interesting to note how the magic of the talismanic figure has been usurped by establishment art for its heroes at large, where we are led to believe that the most "relevant" artists are those who display the greatest "curatorial sensitivity." The trouble is that in an open-ended situation like ours, the establishment-hero functions more like an earnest modern Sunday school teacher—that is, hip.

Consequently, the artist-hero becomes a power behind the throne (a Western tradition which goes back to the Renaissance), or, worse, a priest saying the last rites. He is not at all the same thing as a caster-out of spirits, who,

it was held traditionally, combined his panache as a showman with the ability to receive, set up and articulate universal vibrations within the confines of a particular community and discipline. My point here is that black anything—energy, life-style, myth, traditions, even music—is now public property to be used by anyone who cares to, but often this use or rerouting is heavily laced with misinterpretation and bad vibes, producing a kind of hysteria only explainable in terms of politics and suppression.

The problems containing if not yet strangling an assertion that "experience" forges the *content* of art are such that a general statement in today's open-ended situation is available to any interpretation. The central principle that everything which exists can be analyzed into substance and essence, forces one to shift ground over whether works touted under the black label are consistent and positive examples of Black Art.

This is a complicated business, but if we examine some of the works themselves, certain distinctions emerge. There are the political-realist works of certain New York, Boston and Chicago artists, still committed to a mode with a long tradition in American genre and also in 1930s painting. Such Social Realism, used to create an irrational hyper-reality, permits the play of feelings without necessarily either including or considering the limitations of reality itself. None of it measures up to the impact or immediacy of a television newscast.

Unlike, say, the Surrealist painters, who chose an illusionist style to articulate a heightened sense of the reality of their erotic and dream world, they direct their attempts at captivating a local audience and finding a way out of a cultural dilemma. An example of this is the much reproduced and talked about *Champion* by Benny Andrews. Both the work, which is an ungainly papier-maché, collage and rope job, and the sermon the artist apparently preached (parts of which were duly published in *The New York Sunday Times*) at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (where the work was shown) for the benefit of a gathering of the brothers and sisters, stress the emptiness of a "magic event" at an exhibition of painting and sculpture which was not successfully turned into theater. (The establishment press and the exhibition itself jeopardized any possible future effort in this area by the inclusion of works which could not be considered even theatrical props, much less art. Press emphasis on this aspect simply turned Andrews' lecture/happening into the empty gesture of tokenism the museum intended the show to be.)

The inherent problems are not resolved because, like so much bad Surrealist painting, this kind of art is a denial of both form, i.e. painting or sculpture, and that which truly exists in its own right, such as a tree, a table, a box, a man; as against a color or a relationship, in the disciplines of painting and sculpture which are a union of form with matter.

The true reality of particular entities is the embodiment in them of distinct form/matter as a species expressing itself in the spirit of the species, lending itself to being distinguished by such tried and proven (however arbitrary) substantives as, say, language-based systems (there is such a thing as black language in the U.S., as there is

such a thing as *Neger Engel* in Surinam, a well-known source for the continuation of certain African forms in the New World). And people may agree to observe certain rules only, perhaps, because of man's inherent drive towards order. Then knowledge of that reality consists in the apprehension of the *specific* (unmistakable!) in an expression of the group mind of that species. It is in this sense that one cannot deny the claims made for such artists as Dana Chandler, Gary Rickson and Benny Andrews, who probably rightly deserve their reputations as having produced Black Art. But the divorce between art (painting) and life (politics) fractures or blocks the suggestive or evocative intention to call up the spirit of the situation or event; what remains are particularities, in a journalistic sense, of an event. What is missing is the feeling, the complicated response, not as history, even instant history, not now as television or radio, but as direct "inherited" experience.

A work of art with the power of making actual or implicit the nature of the species immediately apprehensible to sense perception and *more*, must also stand up to a rigorous analysis consistent with that which is "inside" the given discipline. The essence of the articulated experience may belong solely to the species; it constitutes its essence, and not what was contrived by politics, fashion or mannerisms. Thus it might be discovered that the species Black may have a *face* as part of its essence, whereas its *color* is merely an accident. Color does not in any way define *black*. It is not enough to say "black is beautiful."

The traditional esthetic of black art, often considered pragmatic, uncluttered and direct, really hinges on secrecy and disguise. The understanding is there, but the overwhelming drive is to make it complicated, hidden, acute. Being *up front* is so often given a double edge, often turning such things as language inside out. What was overlooked in Mel Edwards' barbed wire and chains show at the Whitney was his wit, in the tradition of Duchamp, kept afloat by Robert Morris and Les Levine. The elegance and deliberately loose-hanging serial geometry were a sure cover for painful implications. The fact that so many critics missed the point is a lesson in the separation of white from black. Inherent in this delivery is the bondage neurosis in top hat and kid gloves. This particular museum exhibition was not a game, but controlled criticism gone beyond anything Minimal or anti-form art had achieved. In terms consistent with the convention of dropping hints, Edwards "drew" a linear pyramid directly in a material whose identification is with agony; it is not the same activity as Morris or Olitski invoking the state of Fallen-on-the-floor. And Edwards' enforced delivery is the opposite of political-realist art. He reroutes fashion and current art convention to "signify" something different to someone who grew up in Watts rather than to "signify" only in the meaning of Jack Burnham and his colleagues. Never mind the implication of the "free *drawing*" of a pyramid as opposed to *building* one. This work was like taking the Classical tradition and Humanism by the ear and making them face reality from the inside. The trouble is if your gaze is elsewhere, only an act of violence will redirect you, and, as I've pointed out elsewhere, *don't burn the museum down*; this will only bar you from the art experience. Watching the museum burn is a *spectator sport*. Tangling with barbed wire hurts.

William Williams' work is like Frank Stella's in not being about memory. It's about discovery. There is almost no apparent residue, only amazed recognition as these bright abstractions register their charge to the eye and brain. The flow of energy is astonishing. But before I discuss Williams' work specifically, I want to establish a clear and to me obvious distinction between what Williams does and what Stella has done. Criticism, none the less influential for being word-of-mouth, seems to want to penalize the former. But I contend that this is what we are about: Self-evident change!

Stella and Williams don't share an educational background. One went to Abstract-Expressionist Princeton, the other to Bauhaus Yale. This simple fact is not only important, it's explicit. The influence on Williams' work, for very special reasons (social reasons, if you like, but it is self-evident from the nature of the background of white American art, that he, like so many others before him who also happened to be black, couldn't identify with it) was *not* Abstract-Expressionism. Instead it appears to have been European abstraction of the hard-won sort, represented by people like Albers, or even Johannes Itten. There is something (an attitude, a drive in so much of this energy) recalling the force of the Bauhaus, the inconsistencies of proletarian ambition; the implied, if not actual *kitsch*, of knowing too much and understanding too little, except in the larger societal sense. It is a kind of style and energy which glitters like a newly manufactured brass button.

Much of Williams' earlier work was close in spirit and execution to Lissitzky. The posture and the placing of forms recalled Russian Suprematism and re-enacted in an uptown situation things one had read about that kind of revolutionary drive. More important however, compare Williams' jazzy, jagged 1968-69 works (when they settle into the format of the dominant rectangle, after the confused burst of first encounter) with Lissitzky or Malevich and one gets a near equivalent of that circle-and-square tyranny dominating the intentful works of the Russians. One begins to appreciate that the content of this work is not about abstract decorative high art, but aggressive hammer blows in the uptight geometry of color and line. Everything in those paintings—color as line, lines in between the colors—clashes wherever the elements meet in a confused surge of passion. The work is virtually irresistible, hallucinatingly original when it should be pathetic and disastrous.

In the end there is a reason for this attraction toward European abstract revolutionary art, not unlike the late Bob Thompson's absorption in European old masters. Over and above Williams' Yale schooling—in the sense of a talisman—this brother is standing on the corner winning a round of "the dozens," hands down, against all odds.

The mood has begun to change in his recent work. In a four-piece picture like *Overkill*, 28 feet long, what seem like leftovers of Cubist faceting have crept in, creating concave and convex drives, flattening and asserting equivalents or challenges to the surface geometry; but they seem on closer scrutiny more a flirtation with what has come down to us from the flattening of certain spherical forms in the sculptures of Baluba art (with its distinctly spaced out and incisive hemispheric curves) than with

any of Cézanne's discoveries. The picture switches from positive to negative, which intellectually implies cancellation. This is not such a new idea, in fact it is common currency. The astonishing thing is that just the opposite of the expected response is received, Looking at the painting top to bottom, left to right, the forced diagonal drifts both ways from the pink to the white panel through to the black and the off-blue into green at the end. You begin to want to hold on to something.

What is delivered through this hectic drive—a kind of circus go-cart sensation—is the idea that these pockets of space begin to exhaust one (they "giddy" the blood or whatever it is) because the exposed channels of the raw duck support, left like trails of tortured passage, have little to do with flatness, but build almost to relief. Kinesthetically the works begin to collapse in a confusion between painting and such sculptural objects as pyramids—pyramids which keep appearing in a tactile way, more sneaking up than appearing. It's as if a confusion of forms that once had to do with face masks and the psychological implications of the pyramid have come together to produce something completely original. Most of Williams' work is like this. I have difficulty convincing myself that they are paintings, even though painted. *Doctor Buzzard Meets Saddle Head* is almost completely red and green painting. The saturated green field seems to accommodate the busy lines and swirls on the left panel allowing an illusory pyramid of green on the right to assert itself with a kind of no-nonsense dignity.

In a sense (not our sense, but painting and sculpture), the subtlety of black experience, as articulated by behavior, is amply demonstrated in several examples from the recent heated past. What however is never fully taken into account, hardly ever acknowledged, is the pressured and sustained denial of the natural curiosity of blacks born in the new world. Since time immemorial blacks have had to content themselves with the "sneaky" approach. It is a tradition of subtle, driven awkwardness, now stretched to the breaking point, now suddenly a moment not of release, but of explosion of voluptuous, cynical amusement, Irony and sudden change, complete many-leveled contradiction are stock-in-trade and automatic. This is part genesis of the species and the finely wrought articulation of the sensitive. Most completely successful works by black artists can be viewed as direct, arrogant spoofs generated from a complete understanding of the issues involved in the disciplines. The game of white-face is not the same as black-face. Desperation takes on the image of survival and makes for grim touching irony in the face of extinction.

Robert Farris Thompson in an essay in *Black Studies in the University* points out that Anglo-Saxon America missed "an entire dimension of New World Creativity" and suggests that Afro-Carolinian potters made vessels "as a deliberate gallery of tormented faces in order to vent response to a slave environment." Further in the same essay he quotes a South Carolinian "Strut Gal" (accomplished dancer) of the 1840s: "Us slaves watched the white folks' parties where guests danced a minuet and then paraded in a Grand March. Then we'd do it too. But we used to mock 'em, every step. Sometimes the white folks noticed it but they seemed to like it. I guess they thought we couldn't dance any better."

Several black artists work in certain genres which I take to be pretty awful attempts at this spirit of "jive" (a word black people rarely use to mean dancing).

The work of Al Loving is a different story. Loving's educational background consists of undergraduate work at the University of Illinois and graduate work in Michigan. He also taught for five years in the Middle West. In fact Loving is very much a Mid-West middle-class or professional-class entity. Loving began as an Expressionist, and he still regards himself as one. However much of his early work (portraits of his first wife konking her hair, putting on make-up, etc., in front of a mirror) also implied the geometry it *grew out of*. Rectangular windows, mirrors, etc., echo the fact of the framing edge in a way that convinces through its consistency and persistence. Objectifying impressed itself on Loving through this earlier work into geometry to the discovery that "even a box can be a self-portrait." The emphasis in Loving's earlier boxes, apart from self-discovery, is on composition. Then he moved to change the shape of the supports of his canvases from the rectangular to other "viable structures." It was as though such perspectives could clear the confused or confusing Surreal imagery of the work of such an artist as M.C. Escher (whom Loving admires) and declare painting's distinct expressive content through structuring.

This observing through discovery of rules and insistent drive towards order, evident in Loving, is consistent with his background; it cannot carefully be explained without a long dissertation on this gifted artist's development. His "activated banding," "small fine lines," which seemed so imperative in the segments, the individual hexagonal pieces recently dominant in Loving's work (like being boxed-in, incarcerated) have now given way to color mixing. In this sense one can say that Loving's earlier Expressionist color is changing: "I'm thinking about color as viable structure." Instead of "not being conscious [of color] except whether I like it or not." The interesting thing here is, much as Loving is convinced by his "natural" colorist sensibility, as one follows the progress of his work, the lines keep creeping back. That I could be fooled by an apparent elimination of lines in these big pieces is heartening. But the lines are still there as function in the pure sense. Loving says: "If I could get color that's strong enough, the lines would go... but anyway I like what the lines do."

For lots of rarely mentioned reasons, Loving's work denies sedate enjoyment, if less so than Williams'. It is discomfiting like any new kind of art, however much it may operate within the context of the already accepted, and hence be flippily *understood*. And it demands maximum attention if the black shared experience and heritage are not to go wasted.

Loving's *Timetrip One*, 25 by 12 1/4 feet, consists of 11 hexagonal pieces, painted on primed or in some instances unprimed cotton duck, in totally artificial colors, held together by cunning as well as by experiments with chemical formulas. It is an important work. Even the dense brushing and priming do not let the colors operate as anything more than tints. The opacity pushes the artificial light (under which most of this work is seen) back into one's eyes, to the extent that one can't see the color. It's ever too bright and dazzling, like bad, bad neon glitter.

A weakness in Loving's work, and it is reflected in his attitude, is rather like what went wrong with Neo-Impressionist painting. He seems to neglect the fact that color actants are not color expressions. His response, both intellectual and physical, is not essentially expressive (as was so much of what was done by the Pollock, Kline, de Kooning generation), but an ego trip into ways of excess or extravagance. Enormous paintings are more literal signifiers to a better way of life than those which illustrate freedom in realist or Expressionist styles.

Loving's painting intelligence is beyond question. After his early pictures, he decided that "just to go to other imagery made little sense... I could repeat any imagery and still come up with the same... I chose the cube or the box simply because it was a foundation to intellectualism... a sort of mundane form that could be very very dull unless a great deal was done with it." He was impressed by "Frank Stella's first pieces where he had dropped the Expressionist vocabulary about composition."

Even though painting is still dealing with the wall and the floor, its expressive content relates to how one responds to the object as a specific. Painting is so complicated that it really doesn't bear explaining except as to what it decidedly is not—i.e., not architecture or sculpture. In this sense, Jack Whitten's work gives off a sunny, glowing, natural response from somewhere in the spots of paint pushed up from orange to that kind of rich grey one only gets from an instinctive and natural response to color. The color is not greyed-out. On first confrontation one may be confused until one realizes that this grey has a richness which must have something to do with weathered Southern sensibility exactly in tune with itself. Whitten makes "fine" paintings which his new technique of pushing the randomly selected color through a fabric screen of various dots on already wet and receptive *other* fabric (in this case cotton duck) makes for a kind of tough choosing that only such a sensibility can pull off. The pictures are so new and mysterious that only intuition tells me this *down home brother* has it in his hands, his mind, his psyche. His mind reading back to me is laughter. His very body action makes every mark without a mistake, even though painting is full of mistakes.

Dan Johnson's work is, he says, in transition. He is under no illusion as to what it is he is doing. His sculpture may be a spectator sport, but his commitment is without question. His position in the community is easily consistent with his status as a kind of *Ebony* magazine STAR, emerging into a larger society. It's more than Bill Bojangles Robinson tapping out and shuffling the *Star Spangled Banner* at a party for President Nixon... or Larry Rivers' arrogant remark about "a better life for black people with the emergence of people like William Williams..." If Rivers' remark has any truth or meaning, it is only true in my opinion for Dan Johnson, who is a magic man and should be Mayor of Soho, at least.

Revisions: Color and Recent Painting

The most exciting and perhaps the most important art works being made in this last quarter of the 20th century are paintings: paintings which convey the universal structure and feelings therein almost entirely in terms of color. To assume, as some do, or even to assert, as has been asserted recently, that painting has always been involved with color, is to miss the point that paint color has little to do with color outside painting, such as color in nature. With the advent of the Impressionists, but especially with the advent of Cézanne as a major figure, painting began to drift purposefully into a phase of criticism, a phase of contraction and isolation. Looking back on those times represents the kind of terror which most people who can do it—who can paint and paint well—can't handle. But, while painting continues to develop—to quote John Elderfield—"too frequently it is assumed that the causes that prosper at any given moment are the only ones from which further progress will come." There is a resistance to the idea of revision. Revisions are necessary. However, painting remains clearly the most important movement in the direction of a first-order activity since the 17th century Dutch Schools. There is a real difference between what Breitner, say, produced through the ideas of the Dutch Schools and what Van Gogh did with impressionist ideas. Van Gogh, like Cézanne and the Impressionists, believed that the correct way to proceed had to be detailed analysis through the various kinds of marks one can make with paint color on canvas to realize, to stabilize, one's sensations through impressions. Whereas, the 17th century Dutch via an artist like Elsheimer, the German, who so influenced Rembrandt through Renaissance ideas, believed very general powers of analysis; that is, generalizations about pictorial facts controlled by limitations, the limitation of the picture as framed, or picturing constituted understanding, or a real grasp of that which is seen. But since pictures must register or read, in order to convey the sensations that paint color demands of the eye and hence the emotions, the elements had to be separated.

Ever since Young, in a most casual aside, declared in 1807 at a lecture given at the Royal Society that "... it is almost impossible to conceive of each sensitive point of the retina ... contain(ing) an infinite number of particles, each capable of vibrating in perfect unison with every possible undulation, it becomes necessary to suppose the number limited, for instance, to the three principal colors red, yellow and blue ...". The theory, if not the actuality of limitation by rote, has stuck. There is no evidence that Young made any experiments to support this trichromatic theory of color vision. In fact, no important work seems to have been done for fifty years or so until Clerk-Maxwell made his brilliant analysis. Clerk-Maxwell actually chose red, green and blue as a color triangle to

demonstrate that every color can be matched by suitable mixtures of fixed primaries irrespective of which color was taken as primary, providing when mixed, in whatever proportion, they form white. This extension of thought, for better or worse, is with us as fact. However, one thing is certain; the eye is able to discern boundaries. To use pure color in lambent intensity—to articulate pure paint color toward maximum emotional intensity, in its different combinations, harmonies etc., and not to use them to define objects—is quite simply a different business from aping nature color. A real problem this is; this business of making a dash or splash, a spot, a square, a rectangle of paint; pushed, dragged, flung or brushed to define concept after all become object. As Marcia Tucker implies in the opening lines of a rather rich catalogue essay for the exhibition *Structure Of Color*, "Color affects the eye and heart, physically and metaphorically, more directly than any other single element in painting," paint color is not just simply different from nature color, it also does different things to the head and body. Through the act of seeing, which it shares with that out there (nature), light in light is a distinction locked in permanent decoration which yields a special kind of pleasure which, at the best moments, edits greed: "That pure white (color as total canvas) crossed by violent harmonies which are transcended tenderly into 'lilac, rose ibis, Veronese green, angelic blue—incorporal colors,' vistas which give us that inexplicable sensation of freshness lavished by this choreography of fiery embers" is, in effect, totally beside the point when it comes to the moment that the feelings registered by looking at color are articulated.

Of the artists who seem, most positively, to have taken the position firmly in hand, evidenced by the marks they have made, one must of necessity pass on from Hans Hofmann, Matisse, Mondrian, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, etc. and circumvent the Ken Noland, Jules Olitski position which is untenable. Color in painting promises new life. One of the most heartening things about Ken Noland's work, of course, is this promise. After a number of years there remains this stubborn promise, frail and wilder besides the point with every exhibition, emphasized, underlined even, with every distinguished picture. This work is stamped with paint color promise, hinting, but only, at this deep-rooted and everfresh vigour, even so. But at the heart of all this there lies a most terrible trap. The unity of Noland's painted surface possesses a spirit that taints its serenity; it relaxes, stabilizes itself as the eye wanders from juncture to juncture; it's a moment edging toward painful disappointment, even discomfort (if it's one shot and fleeting, it's not there) in works like *Aries Solo*, *Spring Sensation*, *Blues Intentions*; tall, skinny, elegant pictures, quite the opposite of "masses of limpid conflagrations ..." but they do drive one to the abyss. *Spring Sensation* demonstrates that dilution of solution bleeds to create new situations, dynamic situations perhaps, but not polemical. This yellow, nudging, nudging, green; line by line (like a page, like a scroll) is separated tall but not strong, Edgewise, is it blue? When it stops is it a firm picture of painted yellow?

Beyond this aforementioned trap, of course, is the loss of many stout young talents working with color in painting. This is a threat. Of the number we have seen this season, the positive growth of Gary Hudson stands out. Hudson's work seen this season at the Reese Palley Gallery tries on

something which is a very marked quality in Cézanne. Hudson betrays Cézannesque ambitions with the use of volume as the keystone in a search for living color through spatial organization. It is not just the build up of the taped-in firmly placed rectangles off the mottled and seemingly less controlled surface ground that gives rise to this near muscular low relief quality, but a matter of open relationships within that which is recognizable as objects. The illogical proportions of the internal and positively painted rectangles, in color and size, sitting cheek by jowl alongside and in front of the blobs and skims of mixtures of green paint, serve, at the same time, to define where a picture like *Wall Green* starts and stops. In a work like *Wall Green*, the point about all those dotty rectangles squashed, concertinaed within this tiny painting compared with the others, (60" x 72") is that it is all about revision. The quotes, and there are many, only go together to sew firmly the fabric of what we are doing which is making traditional painting. Not the last art works ever made, but the first paintings in a traditional mode; pictures about paint, through paint color. *Wall Green* delivers more than a work like *Red Siding* which, it could be argued, gets the edge in attractiveness, because it takes on more, *Upside Brown* thins out, for all the Ad Reinhardt quotes are anything but subtle. In a picture this size the strip of yellow on the right and the paler, longer one on the left fail to hold the image together. If the eye picks up and registers color the residue must be around in the head somewhere. The point though is to criticize and revise.

Revision, it has been said, nevertheless, is opposed to the tradition of the new. The academic alternative, which the new has become, is not relational in the sense that the agitation one feels from a recognition of toe jam or down home cooking is not the same as seeing a smart great coat shrouding toe jam in a New York subway or eating greens in a place on 2nd Avenue in the upper 80's. What happens on the one hand is a spasm of identification which takes one over omnipotently, claims one in the same way which says "there but for the grace of God go I," and on the other, a sense of culinary pride. This restoration through excitement takes place in paint color, a recognition lucidly giving within conventional means. But the difference is—the interaction of paint color holds one in thrall guilt free.

A certain pervasive concern with paint possibilities, as opposed to design inventiveness, or a drive toward architectonic planar discoveries, is abroad (widespread) and it would be impossible to name but a few. The point though is not necessarily to name names but to elucidate characteristics. My random subjectively arbitrary selection only goes to demonstrate the enormity of the capacity of paint to engage, demonstrate and distribute major weights like imagination, articulation, understanding and delivery. If Hudson uses certain skimpy planimetric devices to "pull the push," it (the work) does not deny that the whole business is really like gambling—what you toss is what you've got. It's a system, but it's a question of what number you like. One follows the (it) that's paint with everything that's paint.

John Torreano's earlier work, vigorous and colorful, confused me because it seemed to want to accommodate so much (there were dots, gashes, bleeds, swages and overlap; all hectic color—blue, red—you name it, it was

there) at a time when the situation those canvases implied was all bailing out, scooping out, emptying. For instance the picture he had in David Bourdon's *Erasable Structures* show at the School of Visual Art, I found difficult to see. It was difficult to tell where the picture began and ended. The most recent works, however, possess a tension which must be the result of pulling all that exuberant love of paint color tighter in an effort to make a coherent painted image. By attempting to anchor the spaces created by those forms he's so fond of (the dots etc.) to the gaps left behind and in between the forms and which implied no touch, Torreano seems headed for a period of making near one color pictures. Of the four recent works I've seen, a blue picture some six feet by five has the kind of grace only color paint can achieve. I suspect this blue was arrived at by a challenge to the color itself, as if, following the concept blue arrived carrying an urgency to be dealt with; this blue has red in it and green. Where the picture begins and ends is defined by simple accidents of the process used. Having been on the floor for a while, a certain upright looking, face to face, eye to color, becomes necessary. Midway down the right perpendicular extreme edge of the painting, a spot of sharp red pulls the eye back into the picture. There's nowhere to go except the wall, which is not interesting, for the blue is engaging one. The red is so sudden, it can't be anything but accident. Hauling a hard, timber-backed squeegee full of paint (perhaps blue, perhaps green) toward the edge of a being worked surface, the thing bumps on the stretcher bar and a bit of the color underneath peeps out. The problem now is deciding one to one whether to paint this bit out or whether to push it over the edge. It stays because it looks right. There is ever such a splendid anti-cropping justification here which is unimaginable without a deliberate decision to step off one of the present picture making crutches. These are difficult pictures containing shapes that appear like foot marks and hand prints; broad through lines, lines reminiscent of the earlier works, but it's the near satisfactory realisations of color which command presence.

Eleven years ago, whilst I was still a student, Richard Smith gave me the names of several N. Y. painters to visit among whom were Frank Stella, Ray Parker and Edward Avedisian. I don't know whether they knew each other for I never visited any of those people. I tended to wait for the work. The more I saw of Avedisian's work the more I figured this one for an iconoclast—like it was more debunking non-figurative expressionism than criticizing, rerouting, revising. I've changed my mind. The evidence betrayed by the surfaces of Avedisian's most recent pictures indicates the sensibility of a real gambler. Much as one could quarrel with the editorial process, perhaps in this particular part of the business it's every man for himself and, as has been pointed out, it's a matter of taste, not the devil takes the hindmost. A picture begins and ends with a concept. You can kiss the dice goodbye but you're hoping it's not going to lie, for within this deliberate risk which all the more enterprising painters are aware of, the physical campaigns following, nay leading the armies of now old represented objects, objects like those following from lines, circles, squares, rectangles; shape and contour unlimited, in Avedisian's work is absolutely dispersed, set free within an intensity, a life force of qualifying relationships. These are the pictures of a dandy. *Radio Love*, a picture seven feet high by eight feet wide, is

decked out like an exotic carpet. The bottom of the picture consists of flecks, spatters and stains directly into the weave of the cotton duck in more or less straight lines which move all the way across the width of the picture's constantly changing color, now blue, now red, now green. Moving from left to right the positive rivelets and bleeds that make up the lines change, almost dead centre, from three into five because the spatters which cover the ground color, deep umber, a greyish green, become more dense. The color mixed with medium glares back and the open rectangle sitting above this area, though loosely painted, is sharply defined. The red/green contrast, which would make up the third and fourth lines reading left to right on the bottom of the picture, is echoed in the top left two smaller rectangles contained in a third of jagged, unevenly distributed and handled acrylic white paint. The picture reads as a set of spatters, blobs and wayward streaks contained in loosely drawn and randomly proportioned rectangles: contained more by size of whim than any recognizable measuring device and sitting on these elegantly colored and wobbly lines, which somehow stay straight. They stay straight because of the firm perimetrical edge of the supports. The picture is a fun picture. The variety of surface and color seems uncomplicated. However, I have no doubt that what appears as throw-away swank is calculated risk behind a very sharp sense of design, if not of measuring, and a strong rationale about and response to color which in the best work is neither lush nor self indulgent because tempered by discipline; the kind that's very rare with a certain hit and miss color painting which leans heavily on cropping to bring the image off. Avedisian is perpetually taking-a-line-for-a-walk.

The flood up against that art-deco street-lamp bleeds into a pool of rich color paint. It's not nature you see; it's just that this manufactured object was standing there after all. It wasn't as if it were a tree, it was just decorative alloy, manufactured and painted green. If it is the case that in the human eye there are two kinds of photoreceptor cells—rods and cones—and that the rods are responsible for scotopic or twilight vision, that flood up against the art-deco street-lamp, which isn't lit because it is being replaced by a more modern one further up the street, does not bleed into a pool of rich color, for the flood is being received on a rod because the only light source is the moonlight which is achromatic. Lots of people like to take one by the hand and say "See that color out there? That's fantastic, that's what I'm trying to get in my painting. ..." I'm particularly thinking about Dan Johnson who is making paintings again. I suspect, but I'm not sure, that Jack Whitten, like myself, would prefer that ready made color, the shop color, instead of the mirage. Whitten's recent work is finding its way back on stretchers after a period of being tacked directly on the wall. *Colored Hornet* which is the best of a series and a really outstanding picture, is like a piece of search and destroy through the reality of paint. That this picture is difficult to describe is obvious from my last phrase. Essentially it's quite simply a very rich grey painting on what appears like a copper-green ground on which a combination of red and yellow is pushed into blue. It's such a zany idea, it's such an ordinary idea. That it comes out looking extraordinary is a genius trip. As a painter Whitten has a lot of class; the kind of touch only people like David Diao and one or two others possess. Of course, to get this picture was a gamble. Pushing all that paint, all that creamy paint across a sur-

face and watching it churn up without really knowing what you're going to get would drive most people crazy. Anyway, they wouldn't risk it, but Whitten does with whatever tools are at hand—a saw, a broom. Some of the pictures remind me very much of those lush chiaroscuro passages in Goya, but *Colored Hornet* buzzes, as it were, across the surface in delicate lines. The paint stutters as it reaches a climax of image; one, two, three—deliver. The traces left behind are fresh and vigorous, but the language has become so mundane and universal revisions are the only thing painters can use. By steering clear of Diao and giving body to Kenneth Noland, Whitten is really revising an aspect of Pollock no one has bothered with recently; the use of line to get in touch with and hence articulate a surface all over. The difference of course is that we've learnt a lot since Pollock so Whitten's work has a different kind of coherence. It stops and starts at precisely the point that he wants it by tacking down and masking out his territory, left and right, up and down, which disguises its genesis. Line for line the hand action of the artist doesn't stray into shape until the perimeter or demarcation point. It's as anti-cubist as you can get.

Linear velocity which sometimes gets muddled up with paint possibilities through illusion, optical illusion, after image and all that stuff, is one-dimensional. It is fleeting; now you see it, now you don't kind of idea. It has no shape until one pins it down. Velocity in plane, which is polarized light, creates two-dimensional space. Two younger artists, Mark Alsop and Roger Kizik, are trying to revise and straighten out the muddle. Alsop has worked technically with paint color. He has been working very closely with the people who invented liquitex modular colors, which perhaps explains the difference between these two. My response to Kizik's work is very physical. Some I like, some I don't, but what I know forces a rationale to Alsop. Alsop for some time worked at sculpture and does some of the most super embossings. The problem is that I accept paint as organic matter, pliable and beautiful. What one looks at has substance and moves one. Alsop's work is not grey, it's not rich. The kind of long, skinny, precise lines of color on a ground misses. The vincture of positive/negative is a hassle. What occurs is cancellation. Michael Johnson, whose last exhibition was at the Max Hutchinson Gallery, proposes a more viable solution; velocity in a field or a three-dimensional space. No! Not sculpture. I mean, isn't it true that anyone can chop wood even in the dark and that if you bump into things you can hurt yourself? Johnson talks about planks but these are long tapers, fingers of evenly stained color physically put together, stretched and physically placed—architectonically organized. If Peter Bradley, whose exhibition at the Emerich Gallery in June I'm eagerly awaiting, is right, color and field is the issue, not velocity in a field which mathematically means—frequencies multiplied by speed in space radiate concentrically outward. "Hold it!" In terms of available knowledge Johnson's new flat, openly rectangular pictures are his most successful. A recent window picture that isn't built turns geometry and hard edges through violet back to blue black into a coherent statement of paint color image.

Don Lewallen's work is altogether a different kettle of fish. As the person that whispers to the person that shouts, one has to listen carefully to get their meaning. If Monet is about paint, Cézanne is about articulate paint. The

counter action; the chance one takes pushing, brushing paint within preconceived boundaries is subject, surely, to personal will wrapped around by precedent. As against grinding one's teeth in voluntary opposition to a foreign language, paint engages one in its flow, in its natural flow. Lewallen works with what amounts to square grids in rectilinear formats. The plane strut of these pictures, though in color, is plane tints of varying tones of color like a swift mix change. For instance, is it possible that what Cézanne couldn't do in that picture of peaches in a dish on a white tablecloth, presently at the Guggenheim Museum, was surrender his middleclassness to the flow of paint. Between 1879-82 this picture was being cajoled into life. All that super grey paint, which could be a number of mixtures, is electrified by a wobbly line, once white, darting toward the top left hand of the image. The table leg on the bottom left of the work, touches but doesn't reach the edge: and then the two shapes in all that grey at the top on the right; are they images, oval after images of the peaches, or are they 'slipper-type' shapes? While color is a more public front, the outward dramatization of the internal mark making conflicts or, as John Tancock would have it, one's "esoteric ponderings ...", is more sturdily realized when color subjected through that circle or square tyranny uses up the organic and geometric to force open mark making meaning upon, between and within the limits of the surface spread. Of Lewallen's work, *Sierra*—a square work 6' x 6', *Byzantium*, *Horizon*, *Opel* and *Culver City*, *Culver City*, in terms of rectilinear proportion and paint articulation, comes off best.

Talking about my own work is really like pulling strong healthy teeth and I am reminded of Diderot who has been described as "... one of those unfortunates who trail round exhibitions and then endeavour to embroider on their emotions ... (who) tried to get as quickly as possible off the subject" but who, in getting off the subject, could wax over the loss of an old dressing-gown thus: "My old dressing-gown went with the other rags round it. A straw chair, a wooden table, a Bergamo tapestry, a plank of pinewood, which supported a few books, a few smoky prints without borders nailed at each corner to the tapestry. Between these prints a few plaster casts were hung which formed with my dressing-gown an indigence full of harmony."

Two hundred years later I can't afford the luxury of getting off the subject but I'm attracted by the idea of "an indigence full of harmony." In my case, it might be my old pyjamas and a few travel torn Rembrandt prints but I wonder whether it is Rembrandt or the tear which is important and to whom? What best accommodates paint and frees it toward all its potential life is cloth and cloth does tear. Paint accommodates, articulates and freezes that concept. In painting tearing or mapping, as acts, do not act out those concepts; as painting does not act out walking, rushing or brushing (all that happens at the movies or in the theatre) which is perhaps the misconception behind all those arguments about the action and the stroke. What paint does is realize or form up and deliver through clear, undisputed paint articulation. One can force paint to do all kinds of things, or try, but in the end the color says; the color looks. What we have in the end is not gesture or walking, but the concept. The concept is there. It may be true that I think the greatest tension, hence the maximum

emotional force through looking, can be attained by inserting an organic within a geometric shape and that supporting devices to achieve my avowed intention consist of approachable ideas like spread, bleed, gathering in pools; ideas which liquid, hard and soft can accommodate which only add to the face—what you see is what you see. What it is about is paint; that's how it carries, that's its structure, that's what it's made of.

Painters have a way of making pictures with paint. It is often impossible to tell whether they practice what they preach. Proselytizing about certain constants—good, evil, love, hate, revenge, death—may be a completely private affair and not meant to be conveyed within the context of working most positively, even, at a first-order activity. One's conative powers, one's ability to articulate the longing if not the power to steer a neat course (having recognized love, hate, tragedy) remain locked in the idea which is this color paint. If titles were meant to convey another path to the picture they obviously don't do a very good job, for none of the story matters in the light that titling is legitimized by convenience. It was very convenient for me to solicit Pat Simms' assistance over the telephone, when trying to straighten out a problem which arose over Don Lewallen's picture, by simply saying *Culver City*. Edward Avedisian's *Radio Love* and *Into the Misty*, though roughly the same size, stay in the mind as two quite different images. As *Untitled I* and *Untitled II* they would be more elusive. Though this is all true, it remains difficult to tell why a certain part of painting stays inaccessible even to the people most directly involved. The secret could be that because paint continues to be so open, so accessible and direct, the volition existing for the communication of so singular an idea remains suspect. The immediate pleasurable response to a successfully painted picture forces most people to bristle and not because they don't know where it's actually coming from.

* Georges Duthuit

Revisions Part 2: Color and Recent Painting

A century ago the momentum which changed the course of that aspect of our awareness through culture called painting, declared itself within the confines of the art movement known as Impressionism. The story of Impressionism is often a dismal tale of fatigue to mind and muscle. The Franco-Prussian war exiled people from France, and all over Europe economic and religious revolutionary turmoil created havoc with human lives. Yet despite exile from France and being driven crazy in Holland, these people painted pictures which continue even now to reflect pure paint possibilities.

Exiled in London, Monet and Pissarro were reduced by indignities, whose effect could prompt Pissarro to write "I shan't stay here and it is only abroad that one feels how beautiful, great and hospitable France is. What a difference here. One gathers only contempt, indifference, even rudeness. Among colleagues there is the most egotistical jealousy and resentment. Here there is no art—everything is a question of business."¹

The artist as heroic individual may or may not be a 19th century European idea, but the artist as star is of our time, and for this reason, among others, here in New York where the energy is now situated, the important business of painting pictures was overshadowed.

The Café Guerbois in mid 19th century Paris was, evidently, hot with feuding, maybe even fisticuffs, but what we see now are splendid pictures. So it's not that naïve to assume that painting, after all, is not fighting—nor anything else for that matter.

A hundred years after the inception of Impressionism painters still walk around carrying painting like a guilty secret. For a while, to discuss pictures in any terms but their essential barter content was anathema. The situation hasn't changed radically, but there are signs which indicate the exposure of cynicism is upon us. *In painting every effort at product should be concerted evidence.* Questions are posed and answers are made. An essential difference, one of the aspects or qualities which distinguishes it (painting) from most other kinds of making, is inasmuch as it is being made, paint is culled to the surface, to life, through, by, with color to deliver articulate paint on one's canvas.

An artist like Joan Snyder poses a problem about touch through visual attraction, and her pictures come over to me as rather splendid touch. Snyder seems set on demonstrating the fundamentally simple principle of ordered relationships in space; in her case flat pictorial space, so that virtually anyone can understand by responding to the spaces through color; gaps like breathing

or hand-arm span, scribble, dribble, notation; secrets that can't be told, only shown.

The picture by this artist in the present Whitney Annual (*Smashed Strokes Hope*, 72" x 120") is one of the more interesting works in the annual within the context of color painting. The way the marks are put on this regular, rectangularly proportioned canvas creates a vague but infusing triangle which dominates the picture. Beginning about a third of the way down the middle of the surface, a rather muddy patch, though open area, connects to a mauve line, runny and slightly fragmented going diagonally across the surface from the center to the left. Patches which are literally "smashed strokes" of green, red and blue, going right diagonally across the surface, serve as another of the triarchial visual drifts. These ideas never actually reach the bottom perimeter of the work but visually head there because of the way the surface area commands attention. The open area to the left of the work is so stepped up by exquisite color mixtures—blue, red to mauve, yellow to green—the surface is delicately balanced forward. The other side which would again be the plane above the stuttered outer edge of the triangle is visually less clear and not because it is more densely painted. (Cézanne painted his picture of a plate of peaches densely but it doesn't come out this way.) The work all over is done in that thick/thin manner which is a marked contemporary trait. I don't know what adjective, in terms of a verdict, to use about this picture but I'm very attracted indeed by it, at the same time as being aware that it groans with overload.

To attack the Whitney is not my purpose: That old football which one couldn't shy, never mind carry, is worse than indulging all other criticisms of establishment institutions. If the Whitney is to be blamed at all, it is to be blamed for going on trying, which is absurd. But it's a visual obvious fact that most of the marks made on the overtly figurative works are banal, empty and unevocative to an extraordinary degree except for a very distinguished work by Alex Katz, Raymond Saunders' memorable *Jack Johnson*, and two or three others. From Malcom Morley's *New York* it looks as though he is going back and trying to refine John Bratby by the way of Oscar Kokoschka. Paint color has more life.

This Whitney Annual is lively in a different sense with Ken Noland showing a *Benjamin's Mess* which if one has to deal with this kind of concrete quality, Dan Christenson's *Yellow Loom* is of-the-school-of. Jules Olitski's picture is outstanding because Larry Poons and various fellow travellers feed the mind with opulent confusion; thick paint was never an issue. Robert Melville recently had this to say about Leon Kossoff: "... there are artists whose handling performs a sort of burial service over the subject whilst proclaiming its resurrection. ..." Kossoff's work began thicker, and at times continues to be thicker, than Frank Auerbach's, whose exhibition here at the Marlborough galleries we saw during the Fall of 1969 and which was less than warmly received. Kossoff had his retrospective exhibition at the Whitechapel gallery in London.

Here in New York there is Poons *et al. Shivering Night!* I ask you ... *Shivering Night* where? Off Broadway or on the moon? Pictures have more visual substance through

paint than this performance. Cy Twombly, whose exhibition at Castelli downtown is the major showing of pictures that building has housed thus far, has a work which in the hodge-podge looks regular, so has Jasper Johns. Both possess a certain quiet distinction which has to be seen. That we must, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, "disenthrall ourselves" from big names and a certain life style is the meaning of this visual parable. The Whitney after all, being a strictly American institution, is often brought to near compromise over issues which have very little to do with quality in art. It might be a great day when art history is not written from the point of view of wars and revolutionary social upheavals. But it appears, contrary to certain privately aired opinions, that this continues or will continue to be the case. The history of this period's art, if it is ever to be written, will have to include Women's Lib., the Black Panther Party and Gay Liberation. There is irony here, for by popular consensus it must be possible to judge a picture by the color of its skin or what sex it is.

A work by Murray Reich is in the Whitney Annual; also, he and Garry Rich are sharing the space at Max Hutchinson's gallery. At first glance both artists seem to be reworking areas which Piero Dorazio and Edward Avedisian have touched on and hastily moved on. Rich rolls his color on either raw duck or a ground as neutral and unmodulated as the duck. That he lets the device have its head is interesting—avoiding the geometry of the supports the rolling takes place the way rolling would, in a multitude of organic stops and starts. That there is very little clarity in these pictures at the moment does not deny an implied quality but there are question marks (the image itself gives up, literally, a set of question marks). A picture stops and starts not necessarily by cropping at the perimeter of the supports but by pictorial statements about vision.

In reworking some areas Avedisian touched on, Reich recently produced a three panel work which is rhythmized to green, what green can take without collapsing. Where the panels meet the color is red and a shade of red, a kind of maroon; an oval which looks like a long coffin shape rounded at the corners. This dapple or variegation of organic matter is held by a thinner stripe of blue at the outer edge, then green in to paler green. The outside edge is broken evenly on both sides by a pink slither ending in the green which, by here, has become a long thin strip half-way up the picture surface. The curving no edge, then edge, then not so much edge as a thin separating line arresting the eye because of the raw canvas like a freely hanging thread, opens up the picture surface like the pages of a book seen flat. The curve goes in and up causing the green to billow, just perceptibly, in and out. The effect of these pictures is color almost like breathing.

In speaking about or trying to articulate self evident truth one can miss the point about relative truth. Since no artist as painter is going to make the ultimate statement about paint-color-action-reaction 'one shot' there is a lot to be accepted about cropping. But a picture is a whole picture and as Einstein said on the formulation of the "Rules of The Game," "The danger ... lies in the fact that in searching for a system one can lose all contact with the world of experience. It seems impossible ... not to waver between the two extremes." A good picture must visually impart the kind of truth implied in what Buckminster Fuller has to

say: "It seems that truth is progressive approximation in which the relative fraction of our spontaneously tolerated residual error constantly diminishes."

Joe Fisher and Frances Barth are two young artists. Barth is included in the Whitney Annual but Fisher is not. Barth's work in the Whitney is rather large, 73¼" x 145½", a green picture called *Boudou Saved From Drowning*. In a very physical sort of way the literary title of this work hits one after experiencing this rather splendid effort. It is a picture of green with reds, very mysterious and dynamic in a way only color can serve up. This large work consists of two rectangles within the larger rectangles but the right hand one is physically painted out so as to leave a right angled triangle with the hypotenuse, rather jagged and freely painted, forcing the interest back into the picture. Some palimpsestic tension is set up between this triangle and the paler rectangle, that is just off square, with its right hand corner blunted or rounded, and which shows traces of the reds which have now become a delicately balanced grey pink.

Fisher and a host of younger artists who have been spotted and encouraged by perceptive teachers at place like Pratt, Cooper and various out of town schools, are often amazed at their transition, through paint color, to Pollock, Rothko—the first generation of New York painters—with a positive pro-life articulation of that paint color. As Fisher himself says, "Baronik had the most influence on my work in that he was able to recognize and trace my influences which were at the time Francis Bacon and Gorky ... Magritte".

They are actually tackling pictorial problems of such magnitude that one wonders who it was or how it presumably came to have been that very concerned and respectable people could announce the death of a highly complex activity which is so vigorous. It is true that someone like Fisher, who vacillates between tinting and shading, betrays some of the current indecisions but the evocation of common pictorial ideas challenged is of such potentially high quality from the visible marks made that, as opposed to hope (since the thing exists), one must express total concern at the fact that the people are afraid of well painted pictures, if not of the people who make them, to the extent that they won't look at them.

1 Basil Taylor

New York Classicism

The best art writing today reveals a curious but significant preoccupation with the dead and dying. The most influential contemporary criticism is based on hollow interpretation (reportage) of a modernist/formalist sort, and avant-garde oriented spoofs where the encyclopedic knowledge required to meet the work is daunting. The reading of this last is rather like trying to do an esoteric crossword puzzle in a foreign language. The trouble, consequently, remains precisely where it has always been; that is, at the heart of the matter, i.e. this writing.

The coign of vantage position which Gregory Battcock heralded in the mid sixties—"Today's critic is beginning to seem ... as essential to the development—in indeed, the identification of art as the artist himself ..."—¹ was not only prophetic but was its own undoing. That position of an abstract relation based on personal judgements of quality has been undermined, as it grew out of all proportion, by creeping doubts about motive: the motives that is, of the critics who, it began to appear, were more concerned with self aggrandizement and theatrics than on gazing at and being engaged by works. When these critics translated their experiences and private information into common English their answers to ordinary questions like: what is it? or, what is it about? (the sort of questions which innocent people ask—people who are indeed prepared to "... obtain only such rewards as they are prepared to work for or for which they have *love* to spare ...")² either misled or confused the issues to the extent where the entire discipline of criticism found itself back in the company of the man-in-the-street with more cultural problems to deal with than it knew quite how to solve.

For instance, there was, in response to the burden of the confusion, the business of professional critics (people whose training was, for the most part, in philosophy and history) not only talking about doing so but making art in retort to artists writing about their art—an activity which was not, as most critics thought, a rejoinder to criticism; but on the contrary, through a lack of this criticism, artists tried to reach a public by assuming a kind of makeshift self-sufficiency.

Most critics, except for the highly perceptive and outstanding few, were not aware that by not heeding criticism's strict demands for separating subjective value judgements from their factual assertions that the confusion, set up as it was, had become far too often drowned out by arguments originating in and addressed to political emotions.

The following reflections are embryo stirrings, so to speak, which were brought about by those pressing considerations with which we are all very familiar and which we might call classical: classical in as much as all the elements (positive, negative and peripheral) having found a sort of free increase, seem to be forming or organizing themselves in the cultural energy center situated in New

York. It is not happening anywhere else. The present circumstances, I want to stress, are classical. The term classical has been used in criticism, since the emergence of the New York School, before but, using the term as I do now, I am using it to describe the situation. Classicism, or the classical one might say, is that which the French and Paris lost. To paraphrase Gide: Classicism would seem to me so completely of the New World, America, or New York, that I would make the two synonymous—Classical and America—for it is. That the first could lay claim to exhausting American genius in its cultural search and had romantic expressionism not succeeded in making its home also America, at least it would be in its classical art that the American genius has been most fully manifested. In Hofmann it is there, and in the works of Kenneth Noland we get distinct Apollonian stirrings. We get the same in de Kooning where the objective function (looking and painting, painting and looking—and then looking: for de Kooning's work is so rich in visual incident) turns out *not* to be something which one can observe directly, but rather an abstract entity whose essential existence one can ascertain only through cerebration and indirect inference: that area of unbiased intellection. In American art and American art alone intelligence tends always to win over feelings and instinct.

Loneliness, alienation and stomach curdling anxiety overflows in Francis Bacon: is it any less so, less powerful because it is inward, within the frame, within the intervals of the paint marks of a de Kooning? Most of the active people on the New York scene, to listen to them talk, seem to believe in the existence of the same old mystery; whether it is genius or inspiration. Only now they tend to rationalize the confusion as though it has become a frozen set of political ramifications. There is, for instance, the ambiguity of the relationship of the critic (or critics) to the individual artist or group of artists. So constrained, as a political consideration, has the artist-critic relationship become that in the eyes of most people the mutual protection traditionally afforded in this relationship is suspected. The sensitive awareness and recognition that the one must have for the other in a situation defined, essentially, by chance is seriously threatened. So often does one hear that such and such a critic is wrong and blind to one or the other area of contemporary work. The evidence of course is her or his published opinions. One is aware, consequently, of cynical indifference; following which one can expect the imminent breakdown of the philosophic and aesthetic concerns of one's time. Again and again it is said that these critics are bound by obligations of friendship and politico-economic interests and that, due to a lack of the necessary distance and perspective, by which *only* they can judge this work, these critics end up defining a conspiracy.

What is not recognized here is that contrary to being trapped in a conspiracy the definition of which is a *personal* crisis for critics and artists, there is a real crisis: the crisis of that discipline which is called criticism. A discipline, which it now appears, is incapable of dealing with the old mystery.

This is a fact of the situation. A question which it is reasonable to ask, therefore, is whether the crisis does explain why so many of us hide behind the quasi-discipline of history? And further, is the crisis the reason why so

many of our most active, acute and creative writers prefer to discuss works by artists long dead, just dead or dying? The answer is that it does. The astute critic must base his generalizations on precedent. Established masterworks back up his taste and are used as a given yardstick. Consequently, much of what is written seems to miss or beg the questions proposed: at the very least they do *not* explain the mystery; for, in asking or asserting the important questions, what happens is the answers fragment but never destroy or replace (with total irrefutable fact) and certainly never solve the total question. As soon as an answer appears it *lines-up* and stands behind (becomes criteria from which the relative accuracy of investigative process will be ascertained) the question; which then seems either more cloudy or clear *in proportion* to an ideal.

Normally, when one hears a tirade against art writing or curatorial business one is made aware, first of all, of that which is only reflecting a kind of righteous cant. But increasingly there is a second factor: a disenchantment essentially signaling the growing awareness that the goal to which we aspire is a broad catholic one. Only now this elusive goal, appearing as it does, comes fluffed out with that which, it is claimed, it has in the past suspected in its narrowness. This attribute is none other than the richness, the depth and variety of the involvement. It is from this standpoint that the art world seems riven from internecine turmoil; making, at a quick glance, the art scene appear as a battlefield. The unflattering (at times surrealist) picture of torment, when not a journalistic ploy, remains shallow for the apparent garroting is more like taking care of business. There are still excellent pictures being painted.

Recent painting seems to be asking once again: What are the specific limiting conditions which the activity (painting) allows? What does the painter take into account when making decisions on and through a particular course or series of actions? Does the painter and painting seek a specific end product or limitation, for instance, or a certain rate of growth within a given limitation? And just what are the risks, as work, which painting will accept to gain, either an end product as a limitation, or a growth rate as pleasure within a limitation, or both? Are the answers those eye and brain disrupting configurations of the early and mid sixties called op-art, or the more liberating athletic and intellectual freshnesses and vigor of first generation New York painting?

Seen from this vantage point, much of the above is possessed of hardly any clues at all. The generic works of Jackson Pollock with their sweeping and revolutionary pictorial drive remain a vital life line for New York painting. So too the best of Rothko and Newman, but the richest vein surely is the art of Clyfford Still which, like that of Monet, possesses an awkwardness and an ability to disturb or intrigue even when it begins to appear sweet and look pretty. The rest, apart from what one has seen of recent Motherwell, has arrived at a cul-desac and seems destined to remain there.

Taken separately, the member joints of what constitutes the plight of pure painting, though complex and elusive, can be perceived as a whole if one can grasp that painting being limited is constantly being threatened by limits.

This is not some word game. The vitality of painting does exist within limits and this is precisely what makes painting appear easy and difficult to do. Good (never mind original) painting—which is probably the same thing, is difficult to attain—difficult to make and difficult to see. What definitely goes to helping establish standards, by which to judge works, is the individual or personal methodology of the artist. This is best gauged if the investigative process is allowed to function. Year by year or biseasonal exhibitions facilitate the passage or freedom of this aspect of assessment and criticism. These shows are then co-opted as a model device by which one can measure in a holistic sense the works' behavior in presence. Each one of those unit decisions as interpreted (painted!) represents a predictable result of purposeful rational choice.³

Basically, exhibitions facilitate a quantity relation. These exhibitions have almost nothing to do with quality although they are used to help establish this. Only from within the oeuvre of the artist as it relates to all that has ever been done or is going on, is there the *given* as potential. The advantage of the art gallery is obvious and needs no explanation or emphasis. But the writing of a certain kind of critic polarizes and alienates what is a fairly normal, and, once upon a time easily understood function. Journalistic interference, of a high level of competence though it may be, arouses unnecessary suspicion. Those of us who take this kind of thing lightly and are amused by it are still faced with "... This week in the galleries there is an opportunity to compare the *polarities* involved in the most informed and sophisticated contemporary abstract art ... *shape* and *surface*."⁴

In her book *American Art Since 1900*, Barbara Rose tells us that, according to what Clement Greenberg has defined as modernism; for painting it was "... the elimination of all elements that were not in keeping with its (painting) essential nature ... painting will reject all that is not pictorial ..." and that "... This view of modernism has brought about the emergence of a reductive, minimal art, which stresses the literal qualities of painting—that it is two-dimensional and of a specific shape ...". At a time when one thought that Mr. Greenberg had already cleared up this bit of the confusion, it was chilling to be riveted by the blindly rebarbative facility which continued to confront us.

Mr. Greenberg has written "... The shaped canvas school has used the third dimension in order to hold on to light-and-dark or 'profiled' drawing ... straddling the line between painting and sculpture ..."⁵ That is: neither one thing nor t'other. Mr. Greenberg goes on to say a great deal more. But, taking this as the line of reasoning, when Ms. Rose wrote "... what Youngerman is doing in his latest series of elegantly, brilliantly high-colored paintings ..."⁶ it turns out to be that she was describing colored-in drawings; that side of painting and this side of sculpture; which the works did indeed make plain in that, albeit glamorous, no-man's land of decoration. Mr. Greenberg further says "... There is hardly any surprise in Minimal Art, only a phenomenal one of the same order as in Novelty Art, which is a one time surprise. Aesthetic surprise hangs on forever—it is still there in Raphael as it is in Pollock—and ideas alone cannot achieve it. Aesthetic surprise comes from inspiration and sensibility *as well as being abreast of the artistic times*. Behind the self-canceling emblems of the farthest-out, almost every work of Minimal Art I have seen

reveals in experience a more or less conventional sensibility ..."⁷ Hardly more can be said, yet for Ms. Rose "The 'shaped canvas' was a salient development of the sixties. Basically it arose from a dissatisfaction with conventional figure-ground relationships ..."⁸ but even though it is "... More simply said ..."⁹ to confuse "... conventional figure-ground relationships ..." (indeed, a very important idea, *still* for painting) with "... silhouette shapes against a background" is, to put it mildly, to confuse painting after the early nineteenth century with the total realization in the twentieth through the investigations of this self same painting of the real potential and correct place of drawing; never mind muddling the more complex philosophical implications. Both the impressionists' optical color sensation emphasis and cubist fragmentation left behind this 'profiled' drawing. Another attribute useless for painting and without which painting did survive, in fact emerged stronger. As a conceptual scheme shaped canvas has demonstrated that it lacks the necessary volition to carry it over into art. Even in the sensitive hands of a Jack Youngerman, shaped canvas is, for the most part, still like Novelty Art.

Few artists will deny that this past exhibition of Larry Poons was an excellent one. An excellent one by standards set by Poons (and his supporters) himself and, for this reason, only marginally related to the enormity of the central issue. To make the kinds of claims which Barbara Rose did was far-fetched toward the nonsense area still occupied by some minds. Outside the news, which may be important to the artist involved, his friends and his audience, that to this particular critic there is evidence, in the exhibition of works she discussed, that "... Youngerman joins the group led by Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella, who cut out their clear, hard-edge shapes, bringing painting to the brink of relief ..."¹⁰ there is little of value in such writing.

Like that other brand of thesis art, Op-art, most of the intricate formal solutions to the, then, more and more subtly, verbally declared structural problems which were being sought after in the shaped canvas (in itself the result of one of the dried up tributaries of Pop which was being fought out the last year or so of the fifties and continued for most of the sixties) turned out to be rather hollow. Those maximum structural renditions which, the best of them from Stella, Hinman and Richard Smith, did go towards asserting, defining and placing the *edge* or frame limits of that work were a real demonstration of more being less. The arguments were, like the works themselves, coming from arid top soil. Those arguments have been milked of all content by the sheer force of their insistence. There is a deadening lack of variety through repetition. In her book published all of five years ago, Ms. Rose put her stamp on this utterly wrong headed view and interpretations of what Clement Greenberg had been saying about modernism. For Ms. Rose to go on repeating these assumptions bringing with them all their lack of real guidance is to trade with counterfeit currency. Most, but not all, of Minimal Art and the New Art is run through with these tired and irrelevant arguments, of which we can expect more, that leave the plight of pure painting intact in its own self-critical intransigence as though the only really adequate critical stratagem for painting is painting itself.

R. D. Laing has written: "... I cannot avoid trying to understand your experience, because although I do not experience your experience, which is invisible to me (and non-tasteable, non-touchable, non-smellable, and inaudible) yet I experience you as experiencing ..." and further "... Since your and their experience is invisible to me as mine is to you and them, I seek to make evident to the others, through my experience of my behaviour, what I infer of your experience, through my experience of your behaviour ..."¹¹ It occurs to me that, as Laing continues in the very next line of his text, "This is the crux of ... phenomenology." There is nothing to distinguish between an area of yellow and an area of blue or green: nothing, that is, on which one could speculate and explain ordinary or pure phenomena, i.e. flatness, which is a distinction away from the organic properties of those colors.

Yet, in reality, in painting, it is that said flatness which distinguishes them and which gives rise to ineluctably unprejudiced reasoning. It is the approximation: the state and position of those colors which explain flatness; or that space which this concept occupies. This is the given, this flatness, which is that inherent potential of the properties of those colors and which we, each of us, share: more or less. "... There is no developed method of understanding its nature ..." this flatness away from touching (non-tasteable, non-touchable, nonsmellable, and inaudible) which yet I experience you as experiencing, except painting. It is a *form of knowledge adequate to its own subject*: like loving. You get it in a de Kooning but it is missing in Youngerman; it is canceled out. It is all right to say that the readers of *New York* and *Vogue* magazines are not interested in the high-brow considerations of art and philosophy but the last thing these readers can be tolerant of is the kind of unexciting assertions which makes a mockery of language. As a device within a discipline (criticism), language, which lends itself towards communication, is hardly expected to bring clarity to that which is a failure of intellect; a failure to span the difference between *emblem* and *icon*.

We know what happens when that which can be shared goes begging, when it does not avail of itself so that it can justify itself; does not use itself to establish its own conceptual efficacy. By renouncing the habits of the avant-garde and all that stuff which used to pass for originality, the artists who began dealing with the limits of coloristic possibilities such as maximizing contrast of hue in density, spread and expressiveness were, working as they did, attempting to reassert and underline that singular attribute of painting: flatness. This was their task. This was their goal, their justification. Painting, however, hasn't proved to be flat. It is only asserted, so to speak, that this flatness is an inherent: a given attribute of the art; therefore making what has been proved only proof to the extent to which these works have asserted the idea by approaching the idea.

The staining methods of a Morris Louis, the staining and soaking of a Frankenthaler, the drenching and spraying of an Olitski, the effortlessly pristine areas of color then lines of color of a Kenneth Noland, all at one time seemed and were a remedy to the anfractuous crimping, buckling, convoluted and structureless excesses of abstract expressionism and after. But it remains that much of what

has been produced has contributed only just so much, or so little, which amounts to being really exhaustive. Exhaustive, this is, in a concrete, factually visible and unchallengeable sense. Or further, factual explanations (paintings) of a very specific set of interpretations and/or restorations which are of our own or any other aesthetic standard or quality as, say, French or English.¹²

- 1 Gregory Battcock, *The New Art*, p. 13.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 In "Revisions," *Arts Magazine* Feb. '72, I limited the choice to dash, splash, spot, square, rectangle without at the time really meaning to define limits. It is not my intention to do so now either. What I aim at instead is an emphasis on the predictability of a pushed splash or a sprayed dot. This, after all is a purposeful rational choice. That a predictable result can still catch one off guard is, more than anything else, proof that painting does turn limits to its own best advantage.
- 4 Barbara Rose, "The Polarities of Painting," *N.Y. Magazine*, Oct. 16, 1972.
- 5 Clement Greenberg, "The Recentness Of Sculpture," *Minimal Art* ed. by Gregory Battcock, pp. 180-186.
- 6 B. Rose, op. cit.
- 7 Greenberg, op. cit.
- 8 Rose, op. cit.
- 9 Rose, op. cit.
- 10 Rose, op. cit.
- 11 R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience & The Bird of Paradise*, Penguin Books, pp. 15-17.
- 12 What I am saying really is: is there in a Kenneth Noland picture a statement as to the nature of flatness which cannot be countered, replied to, undermined or made to seem false by a Dan Johnson picture if such a one existed. Or a picture by Olitski so put into question, (by the same token) by a Peter Bradley, a Dan Christiansen or David Diao?

The Search for Freedom: African American Abstract Painting 1945 - 1975

Some Notes Towards an Exhibition of African American Abstract Art

It's doubtful whether by declaring that the discussion 'Black Art' is moribund will make it go away. Vanish! And so lighten a burden which often seems, in its onerousness, well nigh unbearable to those of us as artists, who also happen to be ethnically African in origin. Yet the ramifications of Black art appear to me somewhat as institutionalized civil war. It's an enduring irony that in a democratic republic such as is the current United States of America this aberrant, racist, rubbish continues to gain legality. Black art is about repression. Great, even good art is ever about distinction and quality inspired by and wrought through the strict confines of a given discipline. Quality from Black people: made by the hands and from the minds of able, stirring, revolutionary African Americans exists, in this land of dreams and continuing promise. Of this fact there can be little doubt, and searching for Black art will have contributed to the discovery of some of these treasures.

However, obvious instability, irresolution and weakness visits all discussion on Black art, a slip, a conceptual fault in all talk about art in general as it concerns and involves Blacks, and also discourse about Blacks doing art in particular, a particular kind of visual art, such as painting or sculpture. Following from culpable reporting of what these Black people are actually doing has come an, inevitably, unsteady grasp of an at once bold, changing and fragile Black temperament. This much is revealed in an overall reservation to African American abstract art. An art, which even in the variety of skills involved, is never looking, through its productions, for reminders of life; its practitioners tend more to responding inside pulsating living forces through each individual medium. As though egressing like the Cimmerian veins and tributaries of a very great river, flowing every which way into histories and pasts spread wide; African American abstract art is hybridization on the very outer reaches—constituted, as it must be, from a bewildering range of original human types—locked into a world where gender multiplied by tincture and grace addresses the order of living day.

Trouble arises along these varied lines, these compelling if dizzying directions, where real endeavor abuts historical territory and zones that remain open and free for all to enjoy, to exploit and to use, including whites, in America. Suffice it to say that in this fraught maze any argument is bound to be obscured when given in a series of pictures transformed by a narrative carrying other burdens be-

sides predication. For Black art also impairs the traditional soothing which art and culture administers in the name of consensus, by too manifest a political message stressing fundamental differences in ethnic outlook.

Tearing asunder, the scene is further compounded by the recent violent political upsurge of feminism. A special intimacy, one we might say very close to the art making activity, has been undermined. And my understanding is this exhibition is meant for the first time to locate that landscape, accurately described, of Black temperament to a real firmament in its attempt to establish quality from existing art productions by Black people across age and gender divides in America.

It's elementary to perceive how past conditions in America made it impossible to combine for political action. Although African American culture cannot be thought entirely independent of those general and economic influences. But the old Black art notion is not really graspable except in its own terms; it has autonomy represented by its radical venerable assumptions and exercised by the brute fact that it is not white. Hurt feelings never made art which is about celebration, and at this point we were left with nothing so much as spectacle; much entertainment, little joy, no satisfaction.

American Black people never had the political clout to impose their vision on American culture, yet ineluctably, this same vision has pawkily done so in music and style. Whereas the ideology of utilitarianism is the origin of American states' relations and dealings with Blacks, randomly if not calculatedly seeing in Black life only obedience to necessity and the satisfaction of elementary vital needs. Original and creative Blacks have resisted the imposition, finding it senile and spiritually corrosive.

In my time the "Harlem on My Mind" exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in 1968 opened a can of worms into the smooth running of culture in New York City; though essentially it was a media event and obviously it was not an art exhibition. Newspaper reports commented harshly that the show stressed information and communication over art and culture. This resulted in cunning, neurotic interference in Black and Jewish community bonding where a showing of painting and sculpture would not have, and would have served merely to add ginger to an already pretty hot discussion on the subject of Black artists and their position in American mainstream society. And in my mind served to agitate two peoples who for decades had had something of an alliance. Even if it remains true that Black people continue to believe themselves mortgaged, as being in hock to the system.

That same year, 1968, the African American curator and historian Henri Ghent, who was then the director of the Brooklyn Museum's Community Gallery, organized a show uptown at the newly created Studio Museum on 125th Street and 5th Avenue in Harlem. The exhibition "Invisible Black Artists of the Thirties," was intended as a counter show to the Whitney Museum's "The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America," also of the same time frame. Mr. Ghent was later to put together an exhibition "Eight Afro-American Artists" for Switzerland in 1971.

As the politics of protest dominated the thinking of the early sixties official establishment, the young and forward-looking Kennedys had died and it was Lyndon Johnson's, Texas, White House that prevailed. Political survival addressed the conditions of the day, not ideals, not any theory. After all LBJ had bested the allegedly racist South West, but he was no less a racist himself.

When word filtered down with concerns for the given culture and its art world, things took a different shape. Museum people, collectors, salesroom bods and educators were more familiar and therefore more receptive to ideas. Militant art workers like Benny Andrews came to prominence and were celebrated; and Mr. Andrews' art was lauded by critics in the August *New York Times* as well as other publications.

The situation forced certain art making acts for African American artists that smacked of expedience under the banner of Black art. My own work which had not yet developed into abstraction, could be said to fall into this trap. My pictures were concerned with map making and an attempt, by me, to understand my personal and historical journey across the Middle Passage. Black artists were not to be outdone in the mainstream of art trends which most Black artists then felt they were not a part of. William T. Williams made a trough for Larry Rivers, a hog trough, welded steel minimal art which it was hoped they could both puke in. Peter Bradley's *Marcus Garvey* was tampered with by, it is claimed, Larry Rivers and or his assistants, who placed glossy, grainy advertising photographs on an original piece of Bradley's sculpture; newspaper snaps of the fiery West Indian leader in his many costumes. And a growing number of African American or Black art shows, up and down the country, catered to this; and even worse perpetuated the consistent lowering of artistic standards. A move clearly assumed by some museums in attempting to accommodate works by Blacks. In fact, those Black artists and their sponsors did more to help themselves individually than their less politico-system oriented brothers who were making works that appeared to lack ethnic commitment; even if socially their behavior did. From then popular current talk, Peter Bradley and Joe Overstreet were pariahs; regarded as bad boys, "niggers" in the manner of the late great Bob Thompson. And as a result more acceptable to hip whites, part of the white/Negro syndrome. A right double bind.

Yet, all the discerning in the African American community knew this said social, rather anti-social posturing was consistent with a clear history of anarchism given to Black radical behavior, American radical behavior in the Western tradition. Overstreet was seen as from the rough mean streets of New York City's Lower East Side; but Peter Bradley, a Yale graduate with something of an education in classical African art, and who at the time worked in an esteemed Madison Avenue gallery dealing blue chip early 20th century European expressionist art, like Chaim Soutine, Bradley appeared as something of a nine day wonder.

At the same time there could be no doubt of the quality of the art productions from these two artists. Overstreet more consistently, but Bradley whenever he did his pictures they looked good. And Bradley possessed, more-

over, a youthful cunning professional sense that often seemed theatrical. More, perhaps, in tune with what passed in the white world; Norman Mailer's ever so notorious *Advertisement for Myself*.

Neither Bradley's nor Overstreet's work was included in "5+1" at Stony Brook in 1969, a first attempt by me in the struggle, and which was helped by the good offices of Lawrence Alloway and Sam Hunter. Bradley and Overstreet may have scorned us. No. Me, the English nigger. "5+1" consisted of antagonist pairs. Hot/cold, moist/dry. Bill Williams, Mel Edwards; Al Loving, Jack Whitten. A convenient grouping of your all male club. Drawing attention, now in retrospect that show clearly reveals our, then, innocence.

What all are now aware of is that making essential and significant art in any culture is an urgent political business; at least it is of intense moment to our controllers, leaders and masters. Even if sadly, these people are not our betters; people who alas must fly the flag. And the thing was out about quality in Black artists' work.

Come the seventies exhibitions such as "Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston" at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston curated by Barry Gaither, heralded a decline. Black curators like Henri Ghent and Barry Gaither minding solely for an all Black viewing public, appeared to be mistaking the productions of vernacular culture for high art. Where in a museum setting (any museum, ethnographic or other) the works they tended to show could not compare with classical African art or contemporary works of an advanced order made across the board by Blacks as well as whites.

The most courageous if not, as it turned out, the most sensitive attempt to put flesh on the bare bones of the controversy about the position of Black artists (painters and sculptors) on the American scene was, of course by a white artist, Larry Rivers. It's well to remind ourselves what brought to a head the simmering and unchecked resentments below what in the end was an exhibition titled, "Some American History."

Bill Williams' cousin Walter Jones published an article in *Arts* magazine titled "Larry Ocean Swims the Nile." Cousin Walter set about Rivers with vitriol and what was considered an "undiscerning and narrow" aspect. And this even before the show was complete and mounted at Rice University in Texas under the auspices of the De Menil Foundation in February, 1971.

But the whole attempt turned to disaster through the fact that Rivers, who was commissioned by the De Menils to do an exhibition, took upon himself, rightly, to make most of the pieces. Of course, some of it was about money. The Black artists involved grumbled about being used by Rivers, and about how much more he, Rivers, got than they did. The real tragedy remains two fold. First, attitudes soured art performance; and the show ended up looking like inside the most awful musty ethnographic museum display which had since post-colonial late 1950s never seen the light of day. And second, some of the artists in trying to undermine and to upstage Rivers and his white studio assistants' work, fell short of their best.

An exception was Joe Overstreet's stark *New Lemima* depicting a Black woman, her tommy gun ablaze in vivid popular image style. Coupled with this, Rivers, whose intention appeared to be to assemble a comprehensive overview of most of the talented younger Black artists around, found that several artists refused his invitation. He thus in a passionate overkill ended up rather manic in his attempt to do justice to the subject matter. The Black artists he invited were not into narrative vernacular but formalist abstract artists by intent and determination, as well as militant Afrocentric Black activists. This combination overbalanced the entire project and led Rivers to compensate by taking up the challenge he himself threw down. Besides which Rivers' American history is rather different from the American history of the gifted Black artists he tried to employ.

By the early seventies, now open-minded curatorial staff at the most forward-looking museums were looking too at quality from African American artists. Offering firm commitment to redress the balance in favor of works by those coming forward. The then newly built Whitney Museum of American Art was an obvious target. The first artist mentioned by Robert M. Doty in his catalogue essay for his 1971 "Contemporary Black Artists in America" exhibition is Joe Overstreet. Mr. Doty, an early admirer of Mr. Overstreet's work, chose the pieces. But in this show, as hung, there was not a single piece by J. Overstreet. And Bradley's work was not seen in any of the Whitney Annuals and subsequent Biennials, until 1973. And then only through the lobbying and good offices of Mr. Kenneth Moffett, who by this time was curator of modern and contemporary works at the Boston Museum of Fine Art. In those days Mr. Moffett was considered a Greenberger, but he also happens to be an authority on the 19th century German art historian Julius Meier-Graefe. Mr. Moffett is also a champion of the radical abstract art of Jackson Pollock through to David Smith, Jules Olitski and Kenneth Noland.

As the situation began to change there appeared beginning with Mr. Doty's show of 1971, at the Whitney Museum, outstanding women artists like Howardena Pindell. With the advent of Mr. Doty's show, the dominant male preserve seemed broken. It was a false dawn. Marcia Tucker, easily the most acute and willing curator around then, was sacked. Mainstream artistic activity co-opted a large following from Blacks and it did seem for a brief moment that the day of the Black artist and Black art had come. What began as an issue oriented quarrel settled into a fierce and continuing debate about quality.

The courage of the women artists in this present exhibition of African American abstraction cannot be exaggerated, and as artists all seem to share certain characteristics. In choosing to make abstract or semi-abstract art works, they declared their allegiance to the avant-garde, responding organically to the "Harvest of the Heritage." What indeed looked to some eyes, and will, as the new and experimental, to Alma Thomas came unattended by Zeal. Together with Vivian Browne, Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Betty Blayton, Howardena Pindell and Mildred Thompson they represent something of a Black constellation of model artists displaying, in their fashion, testimony to quite the opposite of a recurring theme that Blacks are pathologically married to a past of oppression.

Sprouting like a Gorgon's head willful Medea is paint material in Mary O'Neal's work. Spreading spatters, and drips of color suggesting landscape and figure embracing, clinging to, the picture surface as one. Reminding the eye, but yet not quite, of early German Expressionist work: Munch, Nolde, Schmidt-Rottluff, etc. But more recently to be glimpsed in much weakened and watered down state in the productions by Rainer Fetting, the fashionable young German artist presently living in New York City. Ms. O'Neal is very likely far more influenced by examples closer by in Hale Woodruff, De Kooning and Diebenkorn.

Vivian Browne is an improviser, capable, according to circumstance, of being able to articulate with almost oriental clarity. Her ideation of "African sounds to which we respond so completely and directly" is a sort of breathtaking grasp of the resulting space-force on which line, in art (in painting) functions, the variety on display indicating the direction of color and also in defining shape, links her pictures to the great Russians, Kandinsky and his circle.

From the African American scene what emerges, principally, is diversity. Some have gone far down the road to separating; others are struggling with pre-New World histories in Africa, which was also pre-national or tribal in Africa. What can be retrieved from the chaos: intense discourse, individual accents, auricular confessions. The pushing and pulling, of structures collapsing into new colors; new directions seeking simultaneously to enforce their own rule, must weaken the central political axis and dominate their works.

The Dub Factor

From cradle to grave the diaspora black artist is haunted by originality informed by an historical memory of the Middle Passage and slavery mostly in the New World. Torn by reminders of the need for revenge and a driven desperate love of the enemy. In hot embrace through which all instincts towards revenge are consumed, some human secreted chemistry turns innocent anger to confusion equally innocent. Only to be replaced by a sometimes difficult and dangerous search for truth; truth to oneself. Picking out the brighter selves from the tangle of mundane everyday, the works made under this pressure often return to a childhood that persists like a memory of the intolerable wise wound from which it sprang. One aspect of this originality is its capacity to assimilate and to challenge the romantic.

Twenty years ago Clement Greenberg said to me that it takes three generations of middle class breeding for a people to produce individuals with the ability to make good art; or words to that effect. In our line of work these things count but they don't always pan out the way the pundits claim, besides which Greenberg is not the only one to hold such opinions. These sentiments are more given to the way English society ineluctably conducts itself. And anyway artists are notorious mould breakers.

It has also been suggested that the language of art, today, appears totally inadequate for conveying the experience of horrors such as the Holocaust and white man's enslavement of black people in the New World. And to which only silence can be a fitting tribute. But herein is a perceived misunderstanding of the traditions of painting and sculpture where the language of these disciplines either lost, disclaimed or simply abandoned to photography and the cinema any claim to convey the utterly base nature of such man made, human engineered and deliberately induced disasters and destruction. Quite simply as painters and sculptors we are into art's power to redeem and transform this burden which is a much more modest task, yet paradoxically is an additional and greater challenge.

Given the current funereal atmosphere in Britain, with the deadly lawlessness in the City of London during recent time: Barlow Clowes, BCCI, Guinness, Lloyds and currently Robert Maxwell, younger black artists and art workers like Eddie Chambers and his friends must, to my mind, be saluted. You can't make art without money and the prevailing odium generated by the deservedly bad publicity attendant on the rotten state of affairs in London, tends to affect adversely the market place machinations of all but a very few artists' livelihoods; if you're dead and famous the market for your production is a good deal more secure. Last on the list of purchases for the consumer society are fine art pictures and sculptures, and during difficult times such like "luxury" items are not on the list at all.

Difficulties for me arise when works of art however intensely marked by the creative intelligence and private obsessions of individuals become the products of collective negotiation and exchange. Even before the Hayward Gallery exhibition entitled "The Other Story" had closed here in London over two and a half years ago, one of the organisers was overheard declaring that, after this show, Black Art which the exhibition was partly intending to help establish, was finished. To my ears this was shocking. Although never an advocate, believer or supporter of this loudly proclaimed and aggressively debated new kind of art heard of throughout the Western Hemisphere, the United States, Europe and perhaps even in Africa, the way in which it came across to me sounded as though the intention was to marginalise the efforts of artists who happened to be black. Or to put it another way, works made by African-somethings: African Americans, African-Brits (Irish, Scots, Welsh), indeed West Indians of African descent. Diaspora blacks. How wrong can one be. My listening must have been informed by the paranoia about which my friends are endlessly tolerant.

It transpires the younger artists themselves were already in possession of the awareness that Black Art as a notion was historically insupportable; or at least that a certain kind of illustrative figuration learned in the Illustration and Graphic Design departments of U.K. art schools, featuring fashionable black history and its gallery of heroes and heroines, hardly stood out as arresting images alongside Classical African Art, nineteenth and early twentieth century Oceanic Art, the pictures of Delacroix, Gericault, Goya and even Daumier. That all the black art to be seen consisted of badly drawn black people type faces and slogans derived from unquestioned generalisation given to the world of advertising, commercial promotion and minstrelsy, seemed not to have occurred to their makers. And within a few years of "The Other Story" a change. Yet artists trying to make pictures of a personal and specific nature must always have been there in the existing art circles around the U.K. Image makers in the visual fine arts who hopelessly embraced the rod delivering indiscriminately that deeply emotionally wounding lash that said they were slavishly succumbing to formalist modernism, a white man's notion if there ever was one.

To my certain knowledge Anthony Daley has been trying to create original work, and now, though new to me, Eddie Chambers has introduced me to the things of two painters who also happen to be of African West Indian descent. It is clear that Tony Daley, Sylbert Bolton and David Sommerville (and perhaps many others yet to come forward) are wrestling with the continually elusive notion of a specific location between motif, theme and archetype within the activity of painting itself. It is as if, on the wing, the artworks we expect them to produce must be touched by an impulse to serve a new order of cultural coherence. That they fail, in the eyes of the antipathetic undiscerning other, may not be cause for celebration; but is hardly cause for regret. This is a testing time; time when such artists, and the ones to come, must test their efforts alongside the great works in the museums; to self-sustaining and lofty traditions and not be afraid of such like confrontations but respond with critical perception; with the will, the willingness to create as good when not better. And to turn away from fashion and flavour of the month type local success, where claims for universal validity

deny to others first order products of the human intellect while falling themselves by the very criteria they invoke. Where, in other words, the yardstick by which achievement is measured is no longer about excellence but whether it's British.

Recently it was put to me much more clearly than my own fumbblings in this direction have done, that comparisons between black musicians and painters or sculptors tend to be pernicious. Stanley Whitney the African-American painter and printmaker from Philadelphia, who begins teaching at the American School in Rome this autumn, talks about life-style. Mr. Whitney admits parallels in drive, humour, innovation and acute technical grasp of the essential disciplines. But insists that the material and physical apparatus which painting and sculpture traditionally entail, separates us for better or for worse from musicians. Despite the known fact that African-American artists aspire through their exertions to create works of equal power to their brothers and sisters in jazz.