

SPIRAL AND THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

Active between 1963 and 1965, Spiral was a New York-based collective of black artists who came together as a creative and professional support network. Sharing a desire to participate in the fight for civil rights, they simultaneously debated the role of art as a significant catalyst for social change.

Led by the influential artists Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Charles Alston, and Hale Woodruff, the all-male Spiral group invited Emma Amos, then in her early twenties, to join as the only woman. As Amos later recalled, they “weren’t comfortable with women artists as colleagues.” She thought they likely saw her as less threatening than the “more established (and outspoken) women artists in the community, such as Camille Billops, Vivian Browne, and Faith Ringgold.”

By the mid-1960s, as the Civil Rights Movement gave way to the Black Power Movement, new political strategies and cultural agendas developed. A loose confederation of artists, writers, musicians, and dancers who celebrated black history and culture became known as the Black Arts Movement. Members focused on developing a more popular audience for their work, rather than seeking to influence elite cultural communities as had some earlier generations of black artists.

Emerging in New York, the Black Arts Movement quickly spread to other urban centers, putting down roots in Chicago as well as Boston, which nurtured related groups, including AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) and the Boston Negro Artist Association, respectively. Committed to a socially responsible and community-oriented art, they promoted black pride by developing an identifiable aesthetic inspired by African cultures.

PRINTS AND POSTERS

As an efficient and inexpensive method for widely disseminating information, printmaking has long been associated with protest and freedom of expression. Many artists in the 1960s explored printmaking as a primary means for making art, prioritizing utility and accessibility over preciousness or market value. Their posters, prints, announcements, and other forms of printed ephemera were relatively easy to produce in bulk and distribute, allowing artists to circumvent and undermine an increasingly commercialized art world.

For artists of the Black Arts Movement, screenprints and posters became a primary medium for creative experimentation and sharing political ideas. Displaying a diverse aesthetic vocabulary, this wall of prints and posters samples the activist history of printmaking in this period—a rich and complex collection of creative voices.

“WHERE WE AT” BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS

In early 1971, Kay Brown, Dindga McCannon, and Faith Ringgold gathered a group of black women at McCannon’s Brooklyn home to discuss their common frustrations in trying to build their careers as artists. Excluded from the largely white downtown art world and the male-dominated black art world, the women found that juggling their creative ambitions with their roles as mothers and working heads of households left little time to make and promote their art.

Out of this initial gathering came one of the first exhibitions of professional black women artists. *“Where We At”—Black Women Artists, 1971*, opened at Acts of Art Gallery in New York’s West Village that June. Adopting the show’s title as their name, the collective began meeting at members’ homes and studios, building support systems for making their work, while assisting each other with personal matters such as childcare.

Influenced by the Black Arts Movement, members worked largely in figurative styles, emphasizing black subjects. While the group engaged politically with racism, their work also spoke to personal experiences of sexism, and members contributed to publications including the *Feminist Art Journal* and *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*. Though the group’s mission was not explicitly feminist, Where We At recognized the power of collectivity—empowering black women by creating a network to help attain their professional goals as artists.

BLACK FEMINISM

From the 1960s to the 1980s, black women were at the forefront of Civil Rights struggles in the United States. However, in the fight against racism, their efforts to address the concerns and oppressions specific to black women were frequently dismissed by their male counterparts as divisive and secondary to the larger struggle. Simultaneously, they were often suspicious of the mainstream Feminist Movement, since its primarily white, middle-class membership was largely blind to its own racial biases and class privilege. Queer, transgender, and disabled women were even further sidelined.

In response, black women developed their own ways of fighting gender inequity and racism, creating organizations like the Combahee River Collective based in Boston, the National Alliance of Black Feminists, the National Black Feminist Organization, and the Third World Women's Alliance. Additionally, they differentiated themselves from the mainstream Feminist Movement through language, with some black women identifying as *womanists*. Coined by writer and activist Alice Walker in 1983—and defined as “a black feminist or feminist of color . . . committed to [the] survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female”—the term allowed black women to underscore their own unique priorities for a new social order.

ART WORLD ACTIVISM

The political and social upheavals of the 1960s included the Civil Rights, Ecology, Gay Rights, and Women's Movements as well as international struggles to end colonialism and the Vietnam War. These movements for equity and progressive change prompted artists to organize, agitating for broader, more inclusive representation in museums, galleries, and alternative spaces. Multiple ad hoc arts groups formed to address specific issues via protests, guerrilla actions, mail art, and group exhibitions. One of the earliest such groups was the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, organized by artists outraged by the 1969 exhibition *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968*, which opened at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Presenting documentary photography of Harlem's daily life in displays resembling those of a science museum, the exhibition was devoid of contemporary art by African Americans.

Emerging concurrently, the Art Workers' Coalition sought to pressure museums to instigate progressive reforms. The demands made of art institutions included respect for artists' intellectual property rights, divestment from funders who profited from the Vietnam War, free admission for artists and students, and greater equity in exhibitions across lines of class, gender, and race. Important splinter groups of the Coalition included Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation, Women Artists in Revolution, and Artists Against Racism in the Arts, all of which were committed to more forceful, nimble, and creative actions to combat racism and sexism in the mainstream art world.

DIALECTICS OF ISOLATION

In 1980, artists Ana Mendieta, Kazuko Miyamoto, and Zarina Hashmi curated *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States* at New York's A.I.R. Gallery. Featuring eight women artists who identified with the historically marginalized subjects of Third World countries—Judith Baca, Beverly Buchanan, Janet Henry, Senga Nengudi, Lydia Okumura, Howardena Pindell, Selena Whitefeather, and Zarina—the exhibition was conceived as a conversation, or “dialectic,” between the artists and the primarily white, middle-class female members of the gallery. As a space for truth-seeking through critical dialogue, *Dialectics of Isolation* stressed the need to confront the dominant culture with the existence and value of nonwhite experiences, in and out of the art world.

A.I.R. Gallery, the first all-women artists' cooperative gallery in the United States, was founded in 1972 by second-wave feminist artists who, like other groups including “Where We At” Black Women Artists, believed that female-only spaces were necessary to build a culture of support. While the core membership of A.I.R. lacked racial and economic diversity, limiting its ability to be truly representative, the Cuban American Mendieta became an active member in 1979. She withdrew in 1982, however, concluding that the mainstream Feminist Movement had again “failed to remember” its nonwhite counterparts and their struggle with issues of race, gender, and class.

HERESIES

Founded in 1976, the Heresies Collective set out to write and document a politicized history of female artists to encourage creative collaborations among women. Its most significant project was producing *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* from 1977 to 1993, with each issue focused on a single theme related to feminism and the art world. The journal was organized through a unique, nonhierarchical structure in which a group of women composed of Heresies members and interested outsiders would come together to collectively edit each issue.

Charges of racism and exclusion were raised in 1977 after the publication of the third issue, *Lesbian Art and Artists*. Responding to the complete absence of lesbian artists of color in the issue, the Combahee River Collective, a black feminist organization founded in Boston by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Demita Frazier and other black feminists, took the all-white editorial group to task, demanding that the oversight be addressed. In a gesture of reconciliation and openness, the Heresies Collective published Combahee's letter in their next issue, noting that future issues, intended to right the imbalance, were already in the works. Charges of tokenism and privilege persisted, and two subsequent volumes devoted to women of color were published: *Third World Women—The Politics of Being Other* (1979) and *Racism Is the Issue* (1982).

JUST ABOVE MIDTOWN GALLERY

In 1974, Linda Goode Bryant, an arts professional who had worked at both The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem, founded Just Above Midtown Gallery (JAM) in what was then the heart of New York's commercial art world on West 57th Street. JAM's mission was to provide a platform for the exhibition and sale of work by black artists equal to the venues available to their white counterparts. The gallery focused on artists working in noncommercial, nonrepresentational styles, including Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, Lorraine O'Grady, and Howardena Pindell.

In 1977, JAM moved to Tribeca, a neighborhood in Lower Manhattan. While the relocation was forced by rent increases, it was also motivated by a desire to join a more like-minded part of the art world. On 57th Street, the goal had been to cultivate a black collector base to create financial sustainability for the gallery and its artists, as well as to empower black participation in the mainstream art world. Downtown, JAM continued to operate as a commercial space, but Bryant and her cohorts prioritized live events, including performances, group meals, readings, and lectures, eventually making the transition to a nonprofit gallery.

As part of the downtown alternative space movement until its closing in 1986, JAM championed "new concepts and materials," eventually showing the work of artists of all races and collaborating with other downtown spaces. Bryant described JAM as a "laboratory" and provided her artists with a monthly stipend to free them from both the financial concerns and constraints of the market.

THE 1980S

While many of the artist-led protests of the 1960s and 1970s unfolded as internal art world matters, these efforts were later drawn into a broad cultural backlash against the progressive gains of the Black Power, Civil Rights, Ecology, Gay Rights, and Women's Movements. During the 1980s, artists and activists fought on multiple fronts against growing conservatism in what became known as the "culture wars." Black women led their fellow artists in protest, questioning conservative viewpoints while continuing to struggle against gender- and race-based discrimination.

Living through the cultural shifts of that decade, these artists were increasingly skeptical of power structures and authority. They examined how images and language, whether in art, media, or advertising, shape and often distort the representation of identity. Using their own subjectivity and personal experience, they deconstructed how dominant political and cultural narratives can undermine and misrepresent women and communities of color.

Often combining photography and text, Lorraine O'Grady, Lorna Simpson, and Carrie Mae Weems were active participants in this critical discourse, part of what became known across multiple disciplines as postmodernism. Photographers Coreen Simpson and Ming Smith documented the African diaspora, from Harlem to Côte d'Ivoire. Dancers, filmmakers, and theater and performance artists—including Ayoka Chenzira, Blondell Cummings, Julie Dash, and the Rodeo Caldonia High-Fidelity Performance Theater collective—pushed these critiques in new directions.

While the artists of the 1980s used different strategies than some of their predecessors, they were united in their commitment to self-determination for black women and an end to oppression on all fronts.

“We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression. In the case of black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is [considered] more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.”

— Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement” (excerpt), April 1977