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African American Art in a Post-black Era

Post Black: A Definition

In the late 1990's, Studio Museum in Harlem executive director and curator, Thelma Golden and artist, Glenn Ligon, invented the phrase Post-black art.[1] As Golden recently observed, they coined the phrase out of necessity, sensing that terms like globalism and multiculturalism, the then current frames of reference for talking about young black artists, were no longer useful. She and Ligon were responding to an emerging point of view among certain young artists. Many of these artists had trained in the academy and, in increasing numbers, post graduation, were making their way competitively in the art world, winning places at the most prestigious artists' colonies, landing important fellowships for individual artists and successfully entering the marketplace without the intervention of museum directors, curators, scholars and academics. They were competing in the market on their own terms, that is on terms defined by their work. They reveled in that fact that they did not need to be "introduced" or "certified" by an intellectual elite who explained their presence in the art world on the basis of identity.

Many of these successful young artists found the label Black art imprisoning, culturally and esthetically. They expressed the need to participate more expansively in a

world that, in their eyes, had grown more connected, geographically mobile, culturally fluid, and porous. Post-black, as Golden notes, "…was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness."[2] They didn't reject an ethnic designation for themselves; they rejected an ethnic label for their work. Ethnic designations were a limitation on the way others viewed them, -- at best, a form of provincialism, at worst, a way of slapping on a label and shelving the art without giving the work the careful attention it deserved. These artists were defining a new relationship with their audience as well. Engaging the community, i.e. "the people" was not their responsibility. Much like the jazz musicians of the 1940's and 50's the inventors of be-bop who made an effort to distinguish themselves from the big band musicians of the 1920's and 30's whose dance music was conscious of the response of the audience, the conversation among post-black artists was among themselves. And just as Be-bop came to replace big band music as defining the tone and temper of the era, similarly, as Golden observes, "At the end of the 1990's, it seemed that post black had fully entered into the art world's consciousness. Post-black was the new black."[3]

"Freestyle," (April 28-June 24, 2001), a SMH exhibition curated by Golden and SM curator, Christine Y. Kim, was the first convocation of many of the artists who, in the eyes of the curators, represented the idea of "Post Black Art." In an interview with the internet magazine *Bomb,* Golden notes about Post Black," It wasn't a kind of art; it wasn't a particular way of making work, it was a stance, an attitude, a vibe, a feeling…".[4]

Golden offers a more detailed definition of Post-black, in her introductory essay in the "Freestyle catalogue.[5] Speaking of the subject matter, she notes a wide variety of topics:

culture, sexuality, religion, gender, feminism, the body, popular culture, political, social and economic history, transcultural expression, and abstraction…

Golden goes on to note the multiple influences:

… hip hop, alt rock, new media, suburban angst, urban blight, globalism, and the Internet—the felicitous device on international communication and new optimism in the wake of the initial postmodernist urge to define the avant-garde as dead. They live in a world where their particular cultural specificity is marketed to the planet and sold back to them. As a group , they exemplify the presence of art school training in that they create work that refers to multiple histories of contemporary art and culture—both non-Western and that of the Western Modernist tradition. Their influences are rich and varied. They are both post-Basquiat and post-Biggie. They embrace the dichotomies of high and low, inside and outside, tradition and innovation with a great ease and facility. Like the generations before them, they resist narrow definition.

The claims for the influence of post-black are ambitious:

Most importantly, their work, in all of its various forms, speaks to an individual freedom that is a result of this transitional moment in the quest to define ongoing changes in the evolution of African American art and ultimately to an ongoing redefinition of blackness in contemporary culture.

Four years after “Freestyle,” Golden and Kim organized “Frequency” (November 9, 2005-March 12, 2006), with yet another group of young artists whose work continued the dialogue, again, on their terms. Market success was one of the defining attributes of the Post Black artists included in Frequency. As Golden observed, if anything, the commercial competitiveness of the artists had increased between 2001 and 2004. Of the 28 artists who exhibited in “Freeplay” three had galleries at the start of the exhibition. By contrast, of the 35 artists who were exhibited in “Frequency” 28 had galleries. Though she sees little similarity between Post Black Art and hip hop, Golden does liken the commercial strategy of the visual artists to that of hip hop artists, who in the late 70’s and early 80’s managed to get their music out to their audiences, often bypassing big record labels (before the labels co-opted the music). Analogously young African American artists were going straight to the marketplace, bypassing the certifying blessing of the academic or curatorial world.

Needless to say, the new phrase generated a great deal of commentary. On the one hand, many saw a refreshing new approach to art of African Americans. A steady stream of articles and web postings from 2001 to the present heralded the arrival of a new idea. *Time Magazine* described the show as “reinvigorating one of the neighborhood’s most venerable institutions” and at the same time “helping to redefine the image of African Americans in American art.”[6] Greg Tate, cultural critic at the *Village Voice,* granted the idea hipness status, when he dubbed its co-author Golden “A highbrow mack diva of the first magnitude.”[7] Art critic, Roberta Smith, praised the individuality of the work, observing in her *New York Times* review of “Frequency” “*any art of lasting interest is a form of identity art that emanates from and expresses the core of the artist’s personal and*

social being. The ability to get at this core is a necessity for art and a result of being free.[8]

On the other hand, the term Post-black complicated the discourse around black art, disinterring a trove of conflicted emotions, ranging from derision to despair, that go well beyond the relative insularity of the art world.

Los Angeles writer and performer, Malik Gaines, for example, recounts the response of the term Post-black on the occasion of a panel held during the west coast stop of "Freestyle."

For some, the term seemed to denigrate the entire history of civil rights struggles. For others, post-black hystericized a prior generation of politically engaged artists who had been deemed too strident and didactic for the subtler sensibility of the day. For yet others, it was simply a logo , like a Nike swoosh, that helped filter the exhibition into the image commodity world that validates the success of any venture, and therefore was not worth much critical comment. At that panel discussion, I playfully made a case for the term as a useful catch-all describing an elaborate display of signs and counter-signs that had accumulated at the nexus of race and contemporary art. At the turn of the millennium, it seemed important to acknowledge the confounding pastiche that was our generations' inheritance from soulless popular culture and a failed avant-garde. [9]

So, what does this term, Post-black really mean? Questions abound. Is Post-black really a new idea or a re-cycling of old notions of collective identity vs. individual voice, packaged in a provocative way? Is the idea dialectically opposed to the racial consciousness and aspirational idealism of the civil rights era or the cultural assertiveness

of the Black Nationalist or Black arts Movement? Or is Post Black a logical extrapolation of those ideas, the logical extension of the freedom African Americans seek?

If there is a Post-Black is there a Post-White? If Black is imprisoning is White equally a limitation? Is Post Black hopelessly naïve? In the face of continuing evidence of criminal justice inequities, or statistically verifiable deficiencies in housing, health care, and education that disproportionately afflict Black Americans, is it dangerous for artists to free themselves from aspects of American experience or are we asking more of black artists than we ask of other American artists?

In the light of the persistent destructiveness worldwide of assertions of ethnic, national and religious identity dating as far back as two World Wars up to the present and contemporary atrocities in Bosnia, Rwanda, or Iraq, is the idea of Post any type of identity a brilliantly prescient signpost for the future, an ideal utopian state to which an artist in a free and open society can aspire? What are the implications of a term like post-black for cultural policy and practices? In particular what are the implications for black institutions such as the Studio Museum in Harlem, the black institution Golden now heads (and I led from 1977-1987). And beyond the world of art, what does it matter?

Answering each and every one of these questions in depth would exceed the bounds of this paper. I do intend to demonstrate, however, that bits and pieces of the Post-black point of view appear like a leit motif throughout the history of African American art of the 20th century and that this argument is as much about the rights and privileges of citizenship, the structure of American cultural policy and practices as it is about identity and aesthetics.

To understand how we have arrived at this historical moment, when a significant number of successful young black artists argue persuasively for a point of view that casts off an ethnic frame for their work, a historical perspective is necessary. For most of the 20th century, those who made cultural policy and defined the country's cultural practices have literally not been able to see the work not only of black artists but the work of women and artists of color. Their vision has been distorted by culturally derogatory modes of representation in popular media, negligent curatorial practices, dismissive critical assessments, the exclusion from scholarly investigation of black art on the part of museums and universities, until recently, and African Americans' compromised citizenship status during much of the 20th century, which persistently framed any consideration, scholarly or commercial, of the work of black artists. The rebelliousness of a phrase like post-black art, in part, is resistance to habits of mind that inhibit the ability of viewers to have an opportunity to see and experience the work of black artists unmediated by a predisposition of one kind or another.

This paper will take a look at the origins of some of the distorting cultural practices from the first half of the 20th century through the lens of the work of two African American painters—Meta Warrick Fuller and Aaron Douglas. Change, in the late 60's early 70's came in the form of gaining institutional presence that not only literally made the work of Black artists, women and artists of color visible to the American public, to each other and to the art establishment but launched the production of a body of literature that created the documentation for the study of their work and provided the basis for critical discourse. A look at the genesis of one of those institutions, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the path it has taken in response to changes in the citizenship

status of black Americans, changes in cultural policy and practice (often inaugurated by the museum) and changes among artists themselves makes it clear that both "Freestyle" and "Frequency" follow the logic of a particular point of view with a long history in this country.

Black Art: Origins of a Label

Two black artists who developed a body of work with distinctive pictorial styles are Meta Warrick Fuller and Aaron Douglas. Both bear many of the traits of post-black artists. Both were formally trained; both pursued a life in art, both developed a personal visual vocabulary drawn from disparate art historical sources and both were willful highly individualistic artists with big ambitions.[10]

Meta Vaux Warrick began her work as an artist long before there was a Harlem renaissance or a New Negro movement. She studied at the Pennsylvania Museum and School for Industrial Arts and, at the turn of the century, with the French sculptor, Rodin. Her marriage to Dr. Solomon Fuller, a Liberian physician, provided a measure of financial stability and in the quiet of her life in Framingham Massachusetts; she built a studio for herself with her own hands and against the wishes of her husband. There she created works of stunning pictorial inventiveness and political and social sensitivity.

Two examples of her most well known works are *Ethiopia Awakening*, 1914 and the 1919 *Mary Turner: A Silent Protest Against Mob Violence*. *Ethiopia Awakening* formally references Egyptian sculpture. The piece predates by over a decade the call for the celebration of racial heritage and the embrace of formal qualities of African art articulated by the philosopher, Alain Locke in his 1925 introduction to his collection of essays entitled, *The New Negro.* Fuller's sculpture, *Mary Turner* , an overtly political

piece, is based on an account she had read in the *Crisis* magazine of a silent parade down 5th Avenue in New York City on the part of Black people who were protesting lynching in general and in particular the lynching of Mary Turner, a Black woman from Valdosta Georgia. Turner, her husband and two other Black men had been accused of planning to murder a White man. Lynching, sporadic, unpredictable, violence, with the protection of law enforcement was one of the recurrent manifestations of the loss of citizenship rights and the installation of Jim Crow separatist laws which occurred after the failure of reconstruction. Fuller's piece, though small in scale (15" X 5 1/4" X 4 1/2") is powerful. The piece. bears the influence of her teacher and mentor, Rodin, especially in the expressive torque of the torso. Fuller has intensified the expressiveness by making the folds and twists of Turner's voluminous skirts morph into the bodies of corpses.

Aaron Douglas, an artist trained at the University of Nebraska was a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance. His graphic work illustrated Locke's New Negro collection of essays. At a time, when European modernism had scant influence on American art, Douglas enjoyed the privilege of access to the remarkable collection of the Philadelphia collector Albert Barnes. Barnes. who steadfastly and famously refused access to most critics and historians, permitted Douglas to study the work in his collection which included masterpieces by Picasso, Braque, Matisse and others as well as works of African art. The sophistication of multiple art historical influences is evident in Douglas' epic mural, completed in 1934, "Aspects of Negro Life". "Aspects" is comprised of four large canvases, each of which charts the transformations of the diasporic African beginning with the continent of Africa and moving to contemporary

life. During the years of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, Douglas was able to make use of funding from the short-lived Works Project Administration (WPA, 1934-1943) that supported American artists, black and white, to realize an ambitious project with which would also enjoy public access.

Though these two artists demonstrate some affinities with Post-Black artists, they differ from them in many more significant ways. Neither was a full citizen. Both lived and worked in the first half of the twentieth century, with a constitutionally validated separatism, enforced legislatively by Jim Crow laws and an incessant often, legally shielded violence. In spite of their strong sense of self, their self-sufficiency and their pride in their race and African heritage, their citizenship status made them vulnerable to cultural practices which marginalized and trivialized their work. Even so –called benefactors could be toxic. One such example is the Harmon Foundation. Because the foundation's annual exhibition of Negro Art was the source of so much mis-conceived cultural practices, a fuller discussion is warranted.

In 1922 William H. Harmon, a wealthy white real-estate mogul, founded the Harmon Foundation. The foundation's mission was to "assist in the development of a greater economic security for the [Black] race." One of the programs of the foundation was an annual exhibition and achievement award in literature and art. These annual awards and exhibitions lasted from 1926 to 1933 and by its last year were attracting over 400 entries from black artists around the world, Fuller and Douglas among them. In New York City, the work was exhibited at the International House on Riverside Drive, after which it toured to major cities throughout the country. As the first major traveling show

of Black artists, the annual exhibitions were a milestone. As a habit of mind, however, the exhibitions created a culture of low expectations around black artists.

The foundation identified what it called "inherent Negro traits, which played on the worst stereotypes of black people. Attributes like "natural rhythm," "optimism," "humor," and "simplicity" were among those the foundation cited for the artists in their show. Characterizing the work even more harshly, a white reviewer for the *New York American* referred to the artists in the Harmon Foundation exhibitions as so "peculiarly backward, indeed so inept as to suggest that painting and sculpture are to them alien channels of expression." Not all of the critics were white. In a 1934 essay," "the Negro Artist and Modern Art," the black artist Romare Bearden referred to the artists who exhibited with the Harmon Foundation as "hackneyed and uninspired." And why wouldn't critiques be harsh? Amateur artists were thrown in with professional artists, the good mixed in with the awful. Segregated, poorly curated, and undiscriminating, often unattractively presented, the exhibitions robbed the viewer of the ability to see the work of black artists; instead, critics and the general public were encouraged to lump all black artists—good and bad-- together and then, having assembled them, look for defining attributes that made them black artists. Seeing is fundamental in the visual arts and exhibitions like those of the Harmon Foundation rendered it impossible to see the full depth and complexity, for example, of artists like Fuller and Douglas.

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Moreover, popular culture in the pre-television era was filled with images that were the diabolical opposite of the racial pride images created by artists like Fuller

and Douglas. . From the time Africans were forced to come to America commercial images, decorative arts, toys, photographs, and the newly invented moving images visually debased Black Americans. As the scholar, Henry Louis Gates has observed about distorted images of black people.

The large number and variety of inherently racist images in American culture attest to a particularly American preoccupation with marginalizing black Americans by flooding the culture with an-Other Negro, a Negro who conformed to the deepest social fears and fantasies of the larger society.[11]

W.E.B. DuBois famously lamented in his much quoted passage from the *Souls of Black Folk* of a "world which yields him no true self-consciousness" and a kind of "double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others."

But true self-consciousness is exactly what an artist struggles to achieve. Whether she is working alone in a studio she built with her own hands or is part of a group of artists who are working to forge a communion among themselves in the world's first black cultural capital, "true self-consciousness" is the ultimate goal for these artists. And it was the artists themselves who began to construct the circumstances within which that "self-consciousness could be nurtured. Fuller and Douglas and other outstanding Black artists of their time were not exclusively at the mercy of their patrons or of the negative images that prevailed. Black artists developed a set of cultural practices which in the years from the end of World War I to the outset of World War II served them well.

During the Harlem Renaissance, the sculptor, Augusta Savage ran something called the art garage which provided training to young artists; the dancer Ad Bates managed a

space at 401 w. 141st street, where, in fact, Romare Bearden, had his first one person show; YMCA's, libraries, living rooms and parlors served as the spaces where the art work could be displayed; the Harlem artists' guild was a group of artists residing in Harlem who helped find the resources for their members to make and display their work. Arthur Schomburg's vast collection of primary archival material on Black history, which ultimately found a home in the New York Public Library, supported the research efforts of artists and scholars alike. Jacob Lawrence, for example made use of the resources in order to paint his groundbreaking series of historical paintings. Entrepreneurship provided another opportunity to seize control of image making. James VanDerZee and other black photographers opened successful studios in which the product was a carefully constructed version of reality, one which portrayed a successful middle class full of rituals and organizations that bespoke a communal health and vitality that ran counter to prevailing stereotypes. His candid shots of parades, or of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, for example, caught the assertive visual style and self-consciousness that accompanied the sense of striving and aspiration ubiquitous in the nation's Black cultural capital.

If the Depression nearly destroyed the first blossoming of cultural expression, The Works Project Administration, part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policy to get American back to work, rescued it. Public support for all American artists provided egalitarian access to arts training, ongoing support of artists as well as project support, a respite from the demands of private patronage. For the first time in the United States cultural policy had a funding system and an allocation methodology linked to it. During the years of the WPA there was an art center at 125th street. The easel project gave young

artists like Jacob Lawrence a means to make a living as a painter. The mural project provided public spaces in hospitals, post offices, airports, schools, and libraries to artists like Aaron Douglas and others to work at a scale previously not possible and to be assured that the work would have a place where it could be seen. From 1934 to the demise of the WPA in 1943, the country's first foray into public funding created cultural practices that permitted the relatively unfettered development of Black artists. Jacob Lawrence, Roy De Carava, Gordon Parks, Robert Blackburn, Norman Lewis and, though he was not on the WPA rolls, Romare Bearden, were among the artists who were able to establish their artistic careers during this era. For the most part, their work, influenced by the prevailing social realist mode of painting, was defined by subject matter that illustrated Black history and/or experience. The projects of the WPA presented an opportunity for Black and White artists to come together intellectually and for a brief moment, American cultural policy, could take responsibility for the beginning of a multi-racial community of artists and intellectuals. The end of the WPA brought this support system to an abrupt halt. A return to an overwhelmingly private system of support resulted in the virtual re-segregation of the American artistic community.

After the war, New York replaced Paris as the center of the art world. The New York art world became a tightly knit nexus of museums, influential private collectors, curators, galleries, critics and the academy. While a few women or artists of color may have had a tangential relationship to that world, the post world war II art world was overwhelmingly male and white.

In the years following World War II years, as the New York art world established itself, another phenomenon would have profound impact not just on visual arts but on

American culture in general. Thousands of Black men, having served in the armed forces during the war, returned with new perspectives, aspirations and, armed with the G.I. Bill new educational opportunities. They returned home at a time when Black social, civic and religious organizations filled with men and women alike were fueling a burgeoning civil rights movement, in the wake of the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision. Civil Rights would change the terms of citizenship and as the civil rights movement morphed into the Black Nationalist movement, the word, black, and all that it represented, would become highly contested.

Black Art: The Re-birth of an Idea

With the Civil Rights movement, African Americans seized the moral high ground of public discourse. Many—in alliance with idealistic white citizens-- were willing to put their lives on the line for their beliefs in the form of collective action: marches, sit-ins, freedom rides, voter registration movements, and boycotts. Activists and theorists, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. formulated an originalist theoretical frame in which the original constitutional idealism of the country was the basis for action. Visual images played a prominent role in making the case. Visual representations in the mass media—popular magazines, newspapers, and, of course, television in a manner that belied every stereotype American popular culture has accumulated, since the time of the arrival of Africans to the New World. The Montgomery bus boycott, hundreds of thousands of Americans who marched on Washington—black and white-- in support of a constitutional ideal; marching from Selma to Montgomery over the Edmund Pettus bridge and the brutality which greeted the marchers, when they reached Montgomery on "Bloody Sunday" transformed what had been, in the past, local protests, into matters of

national conscience and gave the country a short-lived, yet noble image of itself as a multi-racial culture. At the same time, the Civil Rights movement was a catalyst for a kind of race pride not seen since Aaron Douglas and Meta Warrick Fuller were at work. Ultimately the two visions—race pride and multi-racial harmony—would clash.

What gave institutional weight to both ideas was the resurrection of the idea of public support for the arts. New York State became the first state to establish a state council on the arts. The New York State Council on the Arts established in 1964 preceded by one year the National Endowment for the Arts. Both conceptually came into being as champions of democracy which understood the arts as the part of the open expression necessary in a democracy. By 1967, the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of New York had been established and the tri-partite funding combined with the sweat equity activism of the time to produce a number of cultural institutions. In Harlem alone, Dance Theater of Harlem, Harlem School of the Arts, the now defunct Boys Choir of Harlem, and, of course, the Studio Museum in Harlem emerged during that era and established themselves in the years hence as major international contributors. All over the country culturally specific institutions, funded by an array of public funding agencies designed specifically to serve the arts and sometimes in concert with other federal, state or local agencies, provided the means for support of individual artists, the display of their work and opportunities for documentation, preservation and the creation of critical dialogue around that work.

Black Art as Cultural Policy

In this environment, the Studio Museum was born though, ironically, not as a museum that emerged from the Black Arts movement. Quite the contrary, the museum

emanated from the culturally elite art establishment--the junior council of the MOMA. Their idea for a museum was to locate a museum in a non-traditional setting, involve working artists (hence the name Studio Museum) and open the galleries up to a mix of artistic expression without any consideration of race, ethnicity, or gender. The mission was admirable. Once the founders chose Harlem, however, a site with a storied cultural history and, in the 1960's, the home of the black arts movement, their goals collided with those of the community. Cultural leaders such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, the plays of Ed Bullins, community anger in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. would set the stage for a politically relevant community based museum. Opening night at the Studio Museum symbolized the clash of goals for the new museum. By the time of the opening night exhibition on September 16, 1968, the exhibitions' mix of Black and white artists whose aesthetics mirrored the non-naturalistic, non-figurative modernism of MOMA angered the Harlem community. In the years that followed the opening, whatever the founders' intent, it became clear that public funding came with a politics that could be as coercive as the demands of earlier private patrons like the erstwhile Harmon Foundation.

The Studio Museum spent its first decade mapping not only its esthetic but its political territory. Located in a loft over a liquor store and a Kentucky Fried Chicken, on 5th avenue at 125th Street, the museum had to consider whether it was the uptown extension of museum mile esthetically or a new territory with a unique history, legacy and set of responsibilities that gave its programming and exhibitions (it was not at the outset a collecting institution) a distinctive look and feel. In the first decade of the museum, there emerged a set of cultural practices that located the institution as a Black

fine arts museum whose content served the Harlem community, a primarily black community and whose artists reflected a definable black identity. After the short tenure of a Black urban renewal executive, the museum was led by the filmmaker and activist, Edward Spriggs and under his leadership established its public persona, with exhibitions of works by African and African American artists whose work was "black," i.e. culturally specific and politically relevant, an artist-in-residence program, artists in the schools program and an elaborate Kwanzaa celebration and Book Fair that assembled publications by Black writers from all over the world. With these programs, the Studio Museum defined its connection to its local based community audience and firmly allied itself with the Black Arts movement.

The label Black art was not a hospitable term for some artists, however; Raymond Saunders, for example, protested against the term by publishing a now classic pamphlet, entitled, "Black is a Color" in which he rejected the idea of Black being connected to an aesthetic ideology or activist philosophy.[12] Others like Robert Colescott whose figurative paintings were full of irreverent, satirical representations of notions of black propriety, not to mention gleeful appropriations of art historical sources, seemed to poke fun at the whole notion of black art. Abstract painters and sculptors like Sam Gilliam and William T. Williams, who had been exhibited in one of the museum's earliest exhibitions and many women felt un-welcomed in the museum's pro-black arts movement environment.

Politically, however, the label black art was useful. As the museum's board transformed from its primarily white founding members, who also represented the private philanthropic community in New York City to primarily African American, the shift in dependence on pubic funding sources grew. African American political representatives in

Harlem, from the local city council representatives, to state assemblymen and senators to congressmen and senators embraced the museum as an institutional repository of black culture and thus deserving a piece of the public pie. By the mid 1970's, the museum had become a line item on New York City's budget, occupying one of the dearly coveted spots as one of the 33 members of the Cultural Institutions Group (CIG), Membership in the CIG guaranteed ongoing operating support at a significant level, in those days over a third of the museum's budget. State support from the New York State Council on the Arts provided the second third and the balance came from smaller grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, precious few private foundations and corporations and even fewer private individuals along with some meager earned income. From an almost exclusively privately funded institution, the museum had come to depend overwhelmingly on public support. Its public identity as a black fine arts museum, representing black people in the public sphere, though not the only rationale for funding, was certainly an important part. The rise of public arts agencies in the 1960's at the city, state and federal levels made it possible for the small, culturally specific or alternative museums throughout the country, which, at the outset, resided outside of the mainstream, to gain continuity. From a cultural policy perspective, Post-black would not have been a politically viable option in this environment.

Throughout the 1980's the museum's mandate shifted. The museum broadened both its exhibition perspective and its audience, acquired a 60,000 square foot building, which was able to provide a steady source of earned income, began building a permanent collection, created a literature around the art and, with its new museum building, gained accreditation. Artists, nonetheless, continued to challenge the institution. David

Hammons, for example, adopted a transgressive mode of presentation, becoming a master of the bold, innovative statement that thrusts his work on the viewer without recourse to traditional institutional or financial infrastructures. Hammons, the stealth artist would install monumental, yet transient works of art in the vacant lots, uptown as if to say, institutions are not necessary anyway. One morning, we all came to work to see a brilliantly conceived sculpture made out of the multitude of wine bottles densely littering Harlem sidewalks. The green tinted glass had the look and feel of stained glass in a piece that transformed debris into a work almost sacred in its conception. One of his most famous piece, *Higher Goals*, a biting commentary on the use of basketball as a high goal for young black men, won Hammons more notoriety and notice than he had had with his indoor museum exhibitions. Yet, in addition to the outdoor installations, Hammons continued to exhibit widely in major institutions, including the Studio Museum. His inside out, tradition vs. subversion, mockery versus dead serious, constantly challenging the status quo is core what would become the post-black sensibility.

Also, by the 1990's the Studio Museum's thematically organized shows like Harlem Renaissance,: Art of Black America or the reference back to the heroic imagery from the civil rights movement in shows like Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, may have grown stale to younger artists. [13]Golden, an intern at the museum, at about the time of those shows has observed that the museum at that time felt as though it were her parents' museum.[14] Rebellion against so-called positive ways of presenting blackness were evident everywhere in the culture during the 1990's from Hip Hop to the work of Kara Walker. They challenged notions of positive/negative with images that confronted viewers with harsh realities no matter how unpleasant for black

and white alike. What these dialectics emphatically demonstrate, is that perhaps the most important function of a black fine arts museum has been as a site where contested paradigms of "blackness" can engage. Its vitality derives from the clash and disruption of disparate points of view.

At the end of the Frequency catalogue there is a color phoof all of the exhibiting artists standing in the first floor gallery on the Studio Museum in Harlem. As individual artists, unlike their forebears—Fuller and Douglas—they enjoy full citizenship *de jure* if not *de facto.* What they are claiming as full citizens is a blank canvas with no pre-determined expectations, no constraints, no prohibitions, only the full range of whatever unpredictable inventions the unfettered imagination can produce.

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[1] Author's telephone interview of Thelma Golden on March 13, 2007.
[2] Thelma Golden, "Introduction" catalogue of the exhibition, Freestyle, New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, April 28-June 24, 2001, p. 14.
[3] Ibid.,
[4] Betsy Sussler, "Interview with Thelma Golden," http://www.bombsite.com/golden/golden.html, p. 9.
[5] Golden, Ibid.,p. 15.
[6] Ron Stodghill,, II "A Golden Age for Post-Black Art," Time Magazine, October 15, 2001.
[7] Greg Tate "The Golden Age: An Interview with the Studio Museum's Thelma Golden," The Village Voice, May 16-22, 2001.
[8] Roberta Smith, "where Issues of Black Identity Meet the Concerns of Every Artist," The New York Times, November 18, 2005.
[9]Malik Gaines, "Black Spectacle: An Imitation of Life," catalogue of the exhibition, Frequency, New York: Studio Museum In Harlem, November 9, 2005-March 12, 2006.
[10] The material in the section on origins is taken from Mary Schmidt Campbell, "Introduction," catalogue of the exhibition, Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York: Harry N.Abrams, Inc., 1987 pp. 11-55.
[11] As quoted in Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw's, Seeing the Unspeakable: the Art of Kara Walker, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, from an e-mail interview with Henry Louis Gates, p. 27.
[12] Raymond Saunders "Black is a Color," 1967.
[13] Both of these exhibitions were conceived and curated by the author during her tenure at the Studio Museum in Harlem at about the time Golden was an intern.
[14] In her interview with Sussler and elsewhere, Golden has used this reference to the museum.