





***[B.A.R.] written***

## LETTER

Sarah Workneh

It is my pleasure to have spent the last couple of months in correspondence with Romi Crawford, Maren Hassinger, and Eliza Myrie preparing this publication. It is an accounting, a continuation, and a discussion of what transpired over a few days in Chicago at the first convening of [B.A.R.].

It all happened fairly quietly: mysterious invitations in the mail, an assigned reading, a casual evening barbeque to warm everyone up. Yet it developed. Thinking back to the backyard of Theaster Gates' Dorchester Project, I'm reminded of the accumulated energy within the assembled group, the wealth of experience and wisdom, and a sense of reuniting with those both known and unknown felt both exciting and a little anticipatory. The questions that circulated over the course of the weekend both in the larger group setting and in moments between individuals were questions of scale and scope. What were we doing? How do we even begin this conversation?

Here in New York, as I am writing this, the Studio Museum in Harlem—the singular institution that has brought together so many artists of color has just opened the second half of *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*. Adrian Piper has just made a bold public statement in pulling her work from NYU's counterpart exhibition at the Grey Gallery, an action demonstrative of her issue with an exhibition centered on racial categories as a basic framework. I can't begin to know her thoughts, but for me, Piper's actions – the initial agreement and subsequent removal of her work – are symbolic in their confirmation that the space for black artists has been staked out by those invested in black artists themselves, rather than easily being joined into the larger discourse on art making, without the label of black being attached as a quantifier .

I think this exact conflict lies at the crux of an event like [B.A.R.], full as it is of possibilities and complications. And its not just a question of art making. Taken as a category, it is instructive of how many of us live our lives in a greater

public—aware, assertive of and simultaneously hopeful of transcending the labels assigned to us. As you will read in his interview, Hamza Walker asks the right question—when we are alone, when it is just me—am I black? Or does that label, that segregation, happen only when surrounded by, in contrast or in complement to others? When do we claim that space or When do we fight it?

I always want everything to be radicalized—for better or for worse. Oppositional culture is something that is important to me as a motivator of substantive change. Keeping people separated is the oldest trick in the book for thwarting change. [B.A.R.] seemed a celebratory event—one that brought together many generations of artists in a shared space. Though blackness was the organizing principle, it became secondary to the excitement of bringing together a group of people to meet each other for the first time, or just offered the dedicated space for those of us who already know each other to be in conversation. But what seemed most important to me about the weekend was not the awe that we felt towards the other people in the room, but a sense of feeling that the conversation was just the inception. The weekend was a start, and the writing in this publication is the second step in asking the right questions: how do we preserve a space in a playing field that isn't always even (and why not create our own playing field?), how do we promote any voice that is excluded whether intentionally or not, and how do we support our community in finding space not only for viewing the work, but for talking about greater structural problems? At the moment, the question of “what are we doing” still rings true, we don't know where it will go or what the implications may be—but the four voices included in this publication represent the diversity of our concerns, offer a challenge for the next steps, and empower this particular discourse to be determined by all of us together.

**ROCK STEADY BABY**  
Maren Hassinger



*My father was an architect. My mother was a policewoman who worked with juveniles then became a teacher of primary grades and finally a welfare and attendance supervisor. My father's mother had a teaching degree, but never taught. She was a domestic who helped raise others' children. Her mother was the matriarch—mother of 13, born into slavery. Both of my parents moved to Los Angeles in 1930. My mother's father was a chauffeur and her mother was a homemaker who raised four and suffered from a streetcar accident, which left her with chronic kidney disease. She died young when my mother was in middle school. There was a level of dysfunction that my parents denied, fought against. They were to some extent successful with this tactic. Now I look at their problems as illness caused by the history of slavery. What I got was—women are independent, can work, can achieve success in any field AND can be mothers. The last because my grandmother took care of me while my mother worked.*

So, I ask myself, "What's it like being a woman artist?" And the answer is I don't know. It's like asking "What's it like with a right hand?" I have no comparison. The same holds true for being black. How do I know what it's like being black? I am what I am.

So, I guess I can tell you what it has been like being me. I can tell you how others have spoken to me, for example. I can tell you what kind of job offers I have received. Because I am an artist by profession, I can tell you how many shows I've been in. I can tell you about the collections I'm in—both public and private. I can talk about my personal life—giving birth to two children and raising them through college. I can tell you about my marriage of 30 years ending in divorce. Blah, blah, blah...But what I cannot do is compare that experience to being a white man.

*As far as cultural ideas were concerned—we were colored. My parents asked about school friends—"Do they have brown skin?" My grandmother became the leader of a Camp Fire Girls group. This experience is forever with me. There were black girls, white girls, Asian girls, Jewish girls, Christian girls, girls from the Caribbean, etc., etc., etc. This started in first grade, I think, and continued until middle school. The underlying philosophy of the Camp Fire Girls and the basis of projects and multi group meetings was the culture of Native America.*



One thing, I am reasonably happy. Reasonably comfortable, although when I should be considering retirement, I'm working hard to make ends meet. And I'm reasonably satisfied with how things have evolved in a difficult career. I still yearn for fame, fortune and Guggenheim grants, for example, but generally things are good. And, above all, I am independent.

*Bennington College was a wild and crazy place for so many reasons. There were just a handful of black students at Bennington—under 10 out of 350. I went there to major in dance and to not be graded. I was told within the first year that I was better in art. My sculpture teacher (a white, Jewish, South African who had intentionally left that country's apartheid to study art in England), Isaac Witkin, liked my work and was always supportive. Even years later...This was 1965. Being a girl at a girl's school of that caliber was empowering—everlastingly empowering. So, you see, while Watts was burning, I was far away...*

I just came back from the Mike Kelley show at MoMA PS1 (Long Island City, NY). This is a fabulous show for many reasons—it shows Mike's great diversity: his freedom, his demons, his skill, his talent. And I ask myself, "Will this kind of career retrospective ever happen to me?" In Mike's show there is a very large piece devoted to quotes from Plato, a Pope, Satre, etc., etc. In it men through the ages are commenting on violence, the arts and the meaning of life. Throughout the show there are many beautiful drawings of all sizes, subjects, techniques, etc.—often men with erect phalluses are featured prominently. In speaking with a gallery attendant, she told me that Mike was always concerned with issues of power. So, the references to masculinity stem from that concern.

*I applied to graduate school at UCLA in sculpture and WAS NOT accepted. But somehow my name was given to Bernard Kester, head of Fiber Structure (in the design area). He wanted me and ended up granting me his first MFA. So, off I went. I knew museum people-Henry Hopkins, Jane Livingstone, etc. were on my MFA committee. But after graduation when I decided to be an LA artist, I heard from no one even when I chased them. Although eventually, 8 years later, Maurice Tuchman included me in a show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.*



It seems, that even after the women's movement some years ago, there are very few women in Mike's position. Frankly, very few black people AND very few women. In fact, a tiny handful of women have achieved this kind of status. And of the black women who are applauded, all are very clear about their gender and race being used as subject. As for me, I am not always interested in black female issues. Lots of my pieces contain this subject matter and lots of pieces are about what it means to be alive in a time when nature vanishes. Or how our lives are so compartmentalized, controlled by the box and mindless consumption.

*My work was a hybrid of fiber and sculpture made with wire rope. It could be big or small. It was original. In LA, as an adult, I pursued dance in classes. I created performances and movement became a theme in my art. And nature—the difference between the garden of paradise of Genesis (and the 19th century) and our present environmental crisis became themes. These themes often overrode identity issue for me. Maybe this was the result of exposure to so many different cultures and powerful women early on. Even today I am surprised by the racism of my students and the sexism encountered in so many places. So, movement and nature—large universal sorts of themes seemed more pressing than color and gender. I searched high and low for inclusion in galleries and shows in artists' spaces and in 1976 was finally given a lovely two-person show by Betty Gold at Arco Center for Visual Art. Many people in the business came to the opening. There was a condescending review by William Wilson in the LA Times, which remarked that I joined the band even though a woman. Actually, that attitude went on for some time— "You're so small and your work is so large, etc..."*

In short, in terms of power, I have not been toeing the line. I'm uppity enough to see myself as a human being first, then secondly a gendered, racial being. I have not consistently identified myself as a black woman. Sometimes I have seen myself as a citizen of the world whose fondest desire is to live a life of equality and grace where power comes from honesty, love and compassion. So, maybe the world—including the art world—is not ready for this affront to the power, which demands labels for everyone not white or male.

What started as a visual faux pas at the Black Artists' Retreat—the sharing of a mic by the only women in the reading became kind of a metaphor for the marginalization that women have suffered and continue to suffer in the art world.



*I stayed in LA establishing a studio walking distance from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. I made friends with LA artists—black, white, Asian and Latino. We collaborated on performance works. I taught art to kids at LACMA and Barnsdall Junior Art Center and I waited on tables and worked in a flowershop. I got grants from the NEA and a grant to build public sculpture through Brockman Gallery Productions. This professional LA period was 1973-1984. In 1984 the Studio Museum in Harlem accepted me as a resident and off I went. I never lived in LA again.*

So, the thing is, I am always just me. I have done work interrogating race and gender and I have done work about death or joy or love, which did not have particular identity content. This is not to say that I was unaware of prejudice—I was a victim. Most of my breaks came from women who helped with jobs, shows, grants, residencies and writings.

*The thing I still cannot understand is why, with a resume filled with black and women's shows, I was overlooked for the WACK show. Hmm. A true power position has eluded me. Although I've been in many shows, have close to a 30 page resume with a big publications/bibliography section, lifetime achievement award, etc., I've yet to get THERE. Who's in charge?*

I've wanted the same thing for my life and art as any man. At times my work has talked about my position as a woman, but not ALWAYS. During my life there's been the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements. The tenets of these struggles are still being realized.

Images: 1. See *Life*, 2011, **Matriarch** collaboration with Ava Hassinger, Performance at the Museum of Modern Art Education Department as a part of Flux This!, curated by Pope L. 2. *Hanging and Changing Boxes*, 2013, Product boxes, Dimensions vary according to the size of the room. Installation at the University of Delaware Museums' Mechanical Hall Gallery, Newark, DE. 3. *River*, 1970's sculpture recreated in 2011 for *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980* at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA. Rope and chain. Collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem. 4. *Daily Mask*, 1997-2004, 16mm film transferred to video.

Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Maren Hassinger Studio.

*[B.A.R.] co-organizer and artist Eliza Myrie and curator Hamza Walker sat down on a Friday morning, over a bowl of sliced fruit and tea, to chat about the Black Artists Retreat of a few months earlier.*

**ELIZA MYRIE:** We are at a moment where we are trying to imagine [B.A.R.] into the future and understand how we contextualize it historically—we are trying to capture all of this information or make an archive of it. Beginning with this conversation you and I are about to have, along with Maren Hassinger and Romi Crawford's essay's—we are trying to get this fixed into something like a website that can do the work when this group of individuals who gathered at [B.A.R.] can write and correspond and discuss all the things people wanted to talk about at the end of the weekend...But in this moment of capturing, it raises the question of what similar moments have happened in the past, but have not been captured. What happened between 1969 and [B.A.R.] in August? Are there holes in between?

**HAMZA WALKER:** There might be huge holes in terms of a kind of acknowledgement that a convening would bring. Something like the The Black Artist in America symposium and then this retreat.<sup>1</sup> But at the same time, there has been a lot of ground work laid. We look at this group—Carrie [Mae Weems], Dawoud [Bey], Kerry [James Marshall], and Candida [Alvarez], etc.—they all knew each other in the 70s and in the 80s, and they pick up in the wake of convenings like The Black Artist in America, in the sense that there was and still is some sense of community. That, even if it wasn't that we know about it that they would know-- even if there was no panel, there was no symposium, there was no convening...You know, "let's call together the...." That's why the intergenerational overlay of something like [B.A.R.] is important....At least now there is some kind of intergenerational transmission.

**EM:** But they all started in a common place, I mean, how many times was the Studio Museum referenced? Everyone (Carrie, Dawoud, Kerry, Maren, and Candida) talked about the "Studio Museum, Studio

---

<sup>1</sup> Romare Bearden, Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Jacob Lawrence, Tom Lloyd, William Williams, and Hale Woodruff, "The Black Artist in America: A Symposium," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series, Vol. 27, No. 5 (Jan., 1969): 245-261.

Museum...I met them at the Studio Museum 30 years ago.” Generationally, there is a kind of a fracture between their generation and now.

**HW:** Right, but I would say that even if there isn't the same kind of thing happening now—it's nice to look at *Now Dig This!* and to think “well, LA had its own circuit.”<sup>2</sup> The kind of black art, the black artist movement insofar as it was city to city, town to town—its not that the Studio Museum was an exception in that way. It's not a difference in kind—it might just be a difference in degree.

You don't have the kind of cultural wealth that New York City would have had at that time, but Kansas City would have its own thing. Baltimore would have its own thing. But even just having this kind of intergenerational conversation from some kind of imaginary starting point...just pick a point and here we go. Boom! 1969, Let's go forward from there.

We can not just narrate as much as to try and acknowledge or talk about the intergenerational overlap or story--at least for me...Like Dawoud's essay *Disappearing Black Artist*—that's a key.<sup>3</sup>

I really love that essay, one, because its written by an artist and not an art historian—so it's written from a first person account of somebody who would know William T. Williams and who would actually say “No, I was around for the kind of shift from...not shift, but what would happen to a generation of abstractionists at the rise of the paradigm of multiculturalism.”

Just to begin to narrate a story about what- here are some forces, some names of people, folk, you know? From a historic perspective, how do these trends affect where we are now? There is a story. There is a narrative. There is a set of forces. We could talk about changes in styles, socially, like the demand for a black subject when it comes to the issue of race and representation that may have been something of an anathema to William T. Williams or Al Loving.

But nothing would have been anathema to them. I mean, that's the beautiful thing, right? As much as it would have been a change over time that they would have acknowledged-“Ok. You can get with this or you can work with that.” or “When I came up, this was the reigning paradigm. I subscribed to it. It seems like now there's a different paradigm”

But those kinds of paradigms are the products of different kinds of forces in a way. Just to begin to have that kind of conversation amongst artists from a first

---

<sup>2</sup> *Now Dig This! Black Art and Los Angeles 1960-1980*. The Hammer Museum, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Bey, Dawoud, “The Ironies of Diversity, or the Disappearing Black Artist,” *Artnet.com Magazine*, 2004, <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/bey/bey4-8-04.asp>

person account, from one generation to another generation is really amazing.

So, that to me is being mindful of the holes. Maybe these kinds of convenings only happen every half generation or every ten years, but in the meantime, there's still the idea of taking stock.

**EM:** Dawoud's multiculturalism immediately makes me think of "multiracial" artists as a rising paradigm-- that's a big part of it for us younger kids. The idea of separatism is a big part of Tom Lloyd's protest throughout this symposium. On the one hand you have Tom talking about "Let's just go over here by ourselves and be black and be black artists and because I'm black and making it, it's black art."

So, for me in organizing the first event and thinking about it, it was like: "Ok. We're going to invite everyone and just do this thing." When there was a response from the younger generation that they didn't want to be associated with black artists, or attend, I was like: What an interesting kind of separatism to move away from integration of this very particular 'black art'. Is the new 'black art' to just not be black?

Is it similar to how William T. Williams describes these sociological events or exhibitions, at least in the context of Harlem on My Mind? That it is a superficial or ill thought out way to structure a gathering/exhibition? Do you think that the retreat or this sort of convening is a sociological event, even if we understand that term differently now?

**HW:** It is almost the opposite of sociological for me because this invitation arrives in your little inbox. You read it and now it is incumbent on the question: are you black when you are alone? Mm, I'm just me.

Now, the issue is about--"Do I?"...So it is not this question of sociological in terms of the social or the "we" part. I like the "Is this addressed to me? As Black? And do I need to be...I feel like it was a nice provocative funny thing to do without being provocative. Like putting you on the spot.

Is you is or is you ain't? But the issue of saying: "I don't think there's a need for this. I don't want to participate." You're making those decisions alone, In which case, what does it mean to make that decision alone? It's like, OK, that's perfectly fine. But the more meaningful thing is for me personally to actually engage, even if you don't think there's a need.

Who's going to hear your protest? In order to even say that you don't want to be there you have to be there to tell people. I love the idea of saying this won't have meaning if you appear at the "we" in order to say it.

**EM:** Accepting the invitation does not mean you have declared yourself black. It just means you are wanting to be a part of the conversation.

**HW:** It should have had another button underneath. "Remove me from the mailing list."

**EM:** Unsubscribe. From this association.

**HW:** I just like the idea of sitting in that room in a corner and going : "Yes, I think this is wrong." Sitting there just fuming or something!

**EM:** I wish there was dissent.

**HW:** I like the kind of playful antagonism that we have to set up. Like--how am I supposed to respond? If we were to say, "Is there a need for a Black Artists Retreat?" We could sit here and conjecture about that, right? You have to put it out there as a polemical thing.

The main thing was, for me, which is wild, is that it's as close to "we" in the most concrete way. That's very, very nice. It's a "we" even in terms of sharing the experiences of the day.

**EM:** There is a particular presence about it. "And we're all just here today." This isn't under the umbrella of black painters, or black sculptors. It's like, "this is some black people in art."

There is something interesting about William T. Williams' comments from the text about art being aristocratic that we never got to.<sup>4</sup> It's funny that privilege was never acknowledged in us being together. We're not acknowledging that we all are really privileged here. Where Tom is like "I just want to relate it to the black community" We are not really relating to any black communities. We're relating to ourselves in a particular way.

**HW:** That's very interesting as a source of tension and can that tension ever really be resolved? Who is your work for? Is it serving a greater black public who are less fortunate? Is that one of the things that all black artists are going to be saddled with? A sense of obligation to serve the community and what about your less fortunate brethren? Is art a kind of practice that if it isn't at the service of immediate social uplift and those kind of things, then how can it be justified? Or is it a privileged activity?

I would like to think that there are a couple of things that go on in that kind of

---

<sup>4</sup> *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol. 27, No. 5: 259.

argument. The class argument would be one axis, which to me is actually void of race. I point this out only insofar as you could always say, "Art is a privileged activity, how does it serve the masses?" or that kind of thing, that's a classic one.

The other one is a decision to become an artist, to have exposure to art along with exposure to a whole range of activities is what you hope for. Doctor, lawyer, artist, engineer; If the mechanism is incumbent on how kids are to be exposed or the level of identification is one of: "You look like me. Therefore, is that something that I could do?"

The problem isn't necessarily with the elitism of practicing art, as much as what's the distribution for art itself? A painting on the wall in a gallery, this is as far as it can go. Now, do kids have access to that, do they see it? The issue is about distribution or access, which does not involve the artist.

**EM:** How does the exposure to work because of racial integration change?

**HW:** You've talked about multiracialism and the issue of identifying as black... do you have a choice? It's like you find your way whether or not you want to lay claim to a particular...

**EM:** But Hamza you know there is no option.

**HW:** Well you can say "My mother was from France", I have a whole French background and I can go exploit it. Like "I have dual citizenship. OK, I speak French" So, what if black was just an additional language? The option's like "Do you want to open that door, because that door is available for you to go in and explore." You can say this is a whole set of experiences, set of cultural expressions to which I can consider my cultural patrimony if I want, or not.

**EM:** The ability to walk through any door you choose?

**HW:** The ability to walk through any door you choose, but is the French one more valuable than the black one, which is degraded suddenly? So how does this play itself out? Well the example would be, I'm sitting around with mixed company and I say: "I want to talk about Hale Woodruff" and people are like: "I don't know who that is." "Well, he was a black artist. Or I want to talk about Beauford Delaney." "Well I don't know who that is". You can just keep on going down the line and you realize, African American history, insofar as it IS American history is one thing, but this is just a case of ignorance, I am just dealing with people that don't know shit. What value does that knowledge that you have of people that we have never heard of before have? You realize that that just doesn't add up. It has value, increasingly so.

**EM:** Why is it so critical for Tom Lloyd at that point to move away, to have autonomy?

**HW:** What's really interesting is the generational difference between Jacob Lawrence and Tom. The older gentleman, they're a little bit more seasoned in terms of negotiating, so I think their relationship to actual blackness is different. They are not as susceptible to black nationalism as Tom. They've been working for a while and they've achieved a certain level of recognition. They aren't going to suddenly go out and shout : "I've got to relate to the people!"

**EM:** I am not sure who said it, but Tom is a nationalist without a nation. He is peddling for 'black art' so hard. If no one else sees it as black form necessarily, what is this relatability he is demanding? If it is about artists having black people in their mind in order to make black forms, then we come to 2013 and you say, ok, Kelly Walker engaging black figuration, or Cheryl Pope here in Chicago talking about violence and teen deaths on the Southside; they are both white. <sup>5</sup> They have this in their mind--is it black art?

**HW:** I feel that is an issue that's available to everybody. Whoever wants to make a statement about gun violence, go right ahead. A white dude can be as invested in community issues as anybody else. That part I wholly applaud. Now, the relationship between maker and audience, is there an audience that is empowering or investing a maker with the ability to speak on their behalf?

This is where Kerry James Marshall becomes key. He would say : "I wanna be a black artist." Self proclaimed. I think the ability for an audience to say, based on a collective and shared set of experiences, who can speak to them, who can speak for them and that an artist would want to take up that banner, insofar as, well being a BLACK artist, that to me has a connection with an audience in a speaking TO and speaking FOR position. There are lots of artists making in work in their studio that forsake an audience, it's an autonomous work of art, it's just not interested in addressing those kinds of issues. Now, there are folks like Kerry, who say: "I want this responsibility and that is actually a source of strength and power." and that's when people respond to things. There are the formal qualities of Kerry's work but the underlying power is: no, this shit represents.

**EM:** Then how do we get back to Williams' comment about first, being accepted as an intelligent public and second about the types of shows that are representing "black" to the larger art audience/public. There was the drama of the *Black Male* show, and *Now Dig This!* has been traveling, *30 Americans* is in there, and your own *Black Is, Black Aint*, Naomi Beckwith's *30 Seconds*,

---

<sup>5</sup> *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol. 27, No. 5: 250.

and Bennet Simpson's *Blues for Smoke*<sup>6</sup>. Are these shows the accepted face of "black" art in America?

**HW:** Exhibitions that are caught between a mandate for celebration or victimhood, that is a mandate that is clearly stated since the Harlem Renaissance about what black artists should do and by extension what an exhibition would be accountable to in terms of race representation. Now, the shift after Civil rights, especially where certain things like abstraction are trying to transcend race and then critique of an essentialism. This critique happens just at the moment that black nationalism comes in to being. So now you have this kind of combustion engine, in a beautiful way, through the 80's and 90's. On the one hand there's a call for self-determination but how far do you want to go with this when that kind of essentialism is precisely the thing that we were trying to run away from on the other hand. So, where do we stand on that?

**HW:** Let's critique the mandate again. For me, it's more the ability to engage with the question of race for all its paradoxes, it generates the riddle, it is a source of befuddlement. I just can't get to the bottom of this and I don't think you want to!

It's not like what is it, but what do we do with it? That actually frees up exhibitions so they are not weighted down; the idea of older exhibitions of all black artists as a substitute for talking about race, that mandate won't hold anymore. We are moving forward with a critique, so an exhibition like *30 Americans*-- we had a show here at the Renaissance Society, *New Names in American Art*, that was all black artists in 1944.

The idea of the Americanness, that's a loaded gun right there.

**EM:** Isn't that the issue right there-- that this is how you package and present it so that it is put into the system and accepted/recognized by the white institution?

**HW:** Why not call it 30 African Americans? Their American-ness was never in dispute, so it's almost like taking the African part off of it...

**EM:** Is it provocative or is it normalizing?

**HW:** Right, that would be much more a gesture of mainstreaming. Ohh, they're now just Americans, they're not black. You have to wonder if that could

---

<sup>6</sup> *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994. *Now Dig This! Black Art and Los Angeles 1960-1980*, The Hammer Museum, 2011. *30 Americans*, The Rubell Family Collection, 2008. *Black Is, Black Ain't*, The Renaissance Society, 2008. *30 Seconds off an Inch*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2010. *Blues for Smoke*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2012.

be anybody, do they just happen to be black?

**EM:** I just pulled 30 people together and they looked like this.

**HW:** It's coincidence. That needs to be stated more explicitly as a thing. These shows, with something like *Now Dig This!* are doing beautiful historical legwork that has not been done. I want to go back and look at LA, starting with Charles White because that was a scene. But we need to put it in the present. *Now Dig This!* was a historical exercise but I always feel like, how many historical exercises in black art can there really be? It has more to do with the present in a way than it does even with that past.

Hale Woodruff's traveling show that was up at the Chicago Cultural Center, he sort of got his due back then, but we haven't talked about Hale in 30, 40 years.<sup>7</sup> So, the process of canonization and inclusion under the pressures of the present makes the work feel like : "yeah, it's historical" but it's actual acknowledgment and inclusion in the canon is only happening now. They are not strictly an historical exercise.

**EM:** Well, I hope that our continual coming together at [B.A.R.] can be part of the expansion of the knowledge between the younger and the older. So, this is going to be the last thing that I ask you. How would the panel look now, assembling it in 2013. Who would you put on the panel now?

**HW:** All women.

**EM:** Ha! What would it be happening on the occasion of?<sup>8</sup>

**HW:** It's so totalizing. Something you could do back then could you even do it now? Would it have that form? Could it even be *The Black Artist in America*, it's the title, it could only read with a certain hyperbole. "IN" America, the difference now is the idea of the global character. I would do it with all Africans, to say here is the immigrant story another way, an opening up. I would like to try to do it. The all men thing makes it impossible, it was acceptable for when it was done, barely. It has almost dismantled itself. You know what, I would do the panel, but I would call it *The Black Artist in France*.

**EM:** *The Black Artist in France*-And do it here.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Rising Up: Hale Woodruff's Murals at Talladega College*, High Museum of Art Atlanta, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> *The Black Artist in America* panel/symposium was held on the occasion of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts 1969 exhibition: Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968.

**HW:** Here, right. They haven't even begun to have this discussion, and they keep trying to sidestep it all the way. A certain type of militancy or something is required. To point that out would be something of an anathema to the French. But the French people would be the first people to...

**EM:** We don't acknowledge race. It doesn't exist and we don't have riots or problems.

**HW:** Yes! They would all be coming from North African, French colonies. I like the transnational character of it, because it would be like, "Well, yes. These artists in France, because of a certain discrimination that doesn't go addressed, consider themselves black.

**EM:** Any one other than white colonialists: black. You want to say anything else about the Black Artists Retreat?

**HW:** Nope.



## WANT TO BE STARTING SOMETHING

Romi Crawford

Writing about the most contemporary art often involves being present to art works and related events that in time might have some historical significance. This usually entails being in the right place at the right time. August 22nd and 23rd 2013 offered such an occasion. Artists, scholars, and arts professionals, both local and less so, converged for the inaugural “Black Artists Retreat” (B.A.R.), hosted by Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates, at one of his more recent spatial situations, known simply as “the studio.”

This writing is not meant to be a careful reporting back on what happened in those 48 hours on the South Side of Chicago. In brief, there was a formal welcome, visitation time, a performed reading of “The Black Artist in America: A Symposium,” a 1968 conversation between Romare Bearden, Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Jacob Lawrence, Tom Lloyd, William T. Williams, and Hale Woodruff, followed by a discussion.<sup>1</sup> There was a meal or two. There was dancing, catching up, connecting, re-connecting, a group photo. Certainly, aspects of the event planning, including who was there, how those persons came to know about it, and what exactly “went down,” have elicited some general interest.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in addition to a recitation of the happenings, it seems equally pressing to consider what follows from such an instantiation of artists and scholars, who are intermittently interested and disinterested in; enraptured and exhausted by, the obstinate referent that is blackness and all the meanings (historical, thematic, personal, and performed) that follow from it.

As someone who is usually keen to remark upon the socializing forces that coalesce around art making, it is hard to forego an address to this aspect of the B.A.R. Yet, the prompt to think in terms of next steps encourages me to push beyond this aspect Surely, the B.A.R. was an affectionate space. Peace, love, and soul were part of the equation, as were asides to our collective black beauty. While there is no need (or interest) in a prescriptive method for moving B.A.R.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Black Artists in America: A Symposium,” *Metropolitan Museum Bulletin*, XXVII (January 1969): 245-61

<sup>2</sup> This information is available and can be found on the website for the event.

forward, there are perhaps some useful cues for deducing, and also maximizing, the impact of the experience. These cues might be drawn from similarly complex occasions, when people moved their (black, brown, and white) bodies into the same physical space to discuss the work they do--which happens in these cases to do with various types of expertise that circulate around the idea of blackness. One such occasion was the Niagara Movement meeting of 1905. While W.E.B. Du Bois, William Monroe Trotter, Frederick McGhee, the Chicago dentist Charles Edwin Bentley and others were resolutely committed to civil rights reform, and while they evolve out of very different historical and social circumstances, B.A.R. might in time come to register an obdurate historical date /time/ place stamp, not unlike that afforded by Niagara. July 11/12/13 1905, Fort Eerie, Ontario and August 22/23, 2013, Chicago, IL both signal prime (if different) moments for a formal accounting of the work that has been done and the effects of those labors onto the wider scene of American life and culture.

In a sense B.A.R. connects back to race work that has been done for the past 115 years. Of course 'being black' is not the defining attribute of this labor force. While some of the participants self identify as such, this is not the (only) glue. It is predicated upon those who have a formal and/or professional relation to a set of knowledge provinces that connect to black culture and history. The sticking point and what allows for the modicum of legibility and coherence is the matrix of historical, literary, social, and visual information that regularly shows up in the work. The deft use, re-use, and expansion of 'the black referential' (whether if be "the new negro," the middle passage, slavery, "double consciousness," Ellison, Baraka, Sun Ra, etc.) is what foments the rapport between many of the makers and what ultimately helps to bring producers of this ilk together.<sup>3</sup>

It seems then that one of the ways to move B.A.R. forward is to think in terms of what the expanded (those present and those not present) B.A.R. working group has to offer in terms of skills and expertise. Next steps might include a more

---

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that other references are not equally important to the work.

direct consideration of the skill sets that go into and also emerge from doing the work. This entails a different interpretation of what black artists know; an audit, if you will, of what's really on offer in a room full of artists "retreating" under the sign of blackness. It means, in addition to black experiential knowledge, taking stock of the emergent structures, methods, and forms that have altered what art is. That is focusing in on and asserting the innovative and skillful approaches to research, archives, curating, filmmaking, community building, painting, art history, sculpture, architecture that have emerged from this particular cohort of makers and thinkers. If the panic around the moniker "black artist" was (and is) that it might be too stifling; then a close look at the types of expertise that have evolved reveal that the work of black artists and curators has in fact lead to a widening of the structural and methodological frames for art making in general: an example--the "to be or not to be" issue of the all black artist exhibit. While this is a regularly denigrated exhibition context, it might be examined in light of its formal contribution and force as a genre. Doing so may reveal that it does more than enforce racist and segregationist thinking. In fact, a broader interpretation of this, as a genre, would allow for an account of the adept skills and strategies that many black identified and black interested curators and museum professionals have brought to bear in making these exhibits.<sup>4</sup> Constructing esteem for this form would enable it to compete and accrue value similar to that afforded to other types of show making—historical surveys, thematic, disciplinary, etc. All of these are limited in some way by a slippery and highly objective frame.

Perhaps a prompt can be taken from the "Declaration of Principles" sketched out by the Niagara group. It presents a template for being assertive; variously congratulating, complaining, pleading, noting, regretting, urging, demanding, refuting. A few examples include:

The members of the conference, known as the Niagara Movement, assembled in annual meeting at Buffalo, July 11th, 12th and 13th, 1905,

---

<sup>4</sup> Often this is based on the (necessity to exhibit and examine works by artists left out of conventional paradigms and arenas), but being "left out" is not the only occasion for making such shows.

congratulate the Negro-Americans on certain undoubted evidences of progress in the last decade, particularly the increase of intelligence, the buying of property, the checking of crime, the uplift in home life, the advance in literature and art, and the demonstration of constructive and executive ability in the conduct of great religious, economic and educational institutions.

We especially complain against the denial of equal opportunities to us in economic life; in the rural districts of the South this amounts to peonage and virtual slavery;

We plead for health—for an opportunity to live in decent houses and localities, for a chance to rear our children in physical and moral cleanliness.

We refuse to allow the impression to remain that the Negro-American assents to inferiority, is submissive under oppression and apologetic before insults.<sup>5</sup>

The B.A.R. meeting in Chicago, 2013, revealed that congratulations are definitely in order. But perhaps the next order of business should similarly be built on complaints, pleads, and refusals-- paying close attention to the taxonomy of skills and deep expertise that follow suit from the work; and finding ways to expose and assert that expertise as such. Ultimately, this enlarges the province of 'the black referential' to include pioneering forms and methods, many of which have impacted, or will impact, the field. The B.A.R. meeting of August, 2013 has officially adjourned, but it's not too late to be "startin' somethin'."<sup>6</sup>

---

5 W.E.B. (Du Bois), (The Niagara Movement) "Declaration of Principles," 1905. These are examples from a longer litany of assertions. Underlined emphasis in the passages is my own.

6 Phrase from "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'" (*Thriller*, 1983) by Michael Jackson. Written by Jackson and produced by Quincy Jones.

**Romi Crawford Ph.D.** is Associate Professor in Visual and Critical Studies and Liberal Arts at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her research revolves primarily around formations of racial and gendered identity and the relation to American film, visual arts, and popular culture. She was previously the Curator and Director of Education and Public Programs at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Her publications include writings in *Art Journal*; *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Film and Video Artists* (University of Washington, 2008); *Black Light/White Noise: Sound and Light in Contemporary Art* (Contemporary Art Contemporary Art Museum Houston, 2007); *Frequency* (Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006); *Art and Social Justice Education: Culture as Commons* (Routledge, 2011).

**Maren Hassinger** was born Los Angeles in 1947. After studying dance and sculpture at Bennington College, she completed her MFA in Fiber Structure at UCLA. Based in New York City, Hassinger uses disposable materials—plastic bags, paper, cardboard product boxes—to create colorful, large-scale installations that convey a dark message about our consumer culture and the precarious fate of nature in the face of the encroaching urban and industrial landscape. In her videos and performance works, Hassinger engages issues of identity, communication and perception. Hassinger has exhibited widely in the United States and abroad. She is the recipient of many awards and honors including grants from the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Gottlieb Foundation, Anonymous was a Woman and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Women’s Caucus for the Arts. Since 1997 she has been the Director of Rinehart Graduate Sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore.

**Eliza Myrie** was born in Albany, New York, in 1981 and currently lives and works in Chicago. Myrie was an Artist-In-Residence at the University of Chicago in 2012 and a resident at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2010. Myrie received her MFA from Northwestern University and her BA from Williams College. Select group exhibitions include the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago (2012); New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (2011); Zora Space, Brooklyn, New York (2011); Applied Arts, Chicago (2011); Hyde Park Arts Center, Chicago (2010); Davidson Contemporary, New York (2010); and the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Evanston, Illinois (2010). Myrie experiments with multiple forms of popular media, focusing on class, ethnicity, politics, and race. She manipulates images through video, sculpture, and drawing to create new narratives.

**Hamza Walker** was born in 1966 in New York City, and currently lives in Chicago, where he is the Director of Education and Associate Curator for the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. He is also on the faculty of The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. He has written for *New Art Examiner*, *Parkett*, *Art Muscle*, *Dialogue*, and *Artforum*, and penned catalogue essays on Darren Almond, Rebecca Morris, Giovanni Anselmo, Thomas Hirschhorn, Moshekwa Langa, and Katharina Grosse. Curatorial projects at the Renaissance Society include “Suicide Narcissus” (2013); “Rebecca Warren” (2010); “Several Silences” (2009); “Black Is, Black Ain’t” (2008); “Meanwhile, in Baghdad” (2007); “All the Pretty Corpses” (2005). Walker is the recipient of the 1999 Norton Curatorial Grant, the 2005 Walter Hopps Award for Curatorial Achievement, and the 2010 Ordway Prize for recognition of his contribution to contemporary art.

**Sarah Workneh** is a Co-Director at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and works in New York and Maine. Before coming to Skowhegan, Sarah served as Associate Director at at Ox-Bow, school of Art and Artists’ Residency. She has served as a panelist in a wide variety of conferences and symposia, has taught at New York University, and served as the first Guest Editor at *Art Papers* magazine. Sarah has B.A.s in Linguistics and Russian from the University of Maryland and has pursued coursework toward her M.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies at DePaul University.

Published on the occasion of The Black Artists Retreat [B.A.R.]  
August 22nd & 23rd, 2013  
Chicago, IL

