MODERN WOMEN

WOMEN ARTISTS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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with essays by


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Nineteen-ninety was a watershed year for Lorna Simpson. The artist’s trademark photographs of black female figures paired with evocative texts were featured in exhibitions from Long Beach, California, to Venice, Italy. In New York she was simultaneously positioned on the encroaching margins and at the contested center of artistic discourse. Her work was included in The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s, an exhibition, jointly presented by The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and The Studio Museum in Harlem, that became a touchstone of multicultural critique; at the same time her show at The Museum of Modern Art—the twenty-third in the Projects series devoted to living artists—became the first solo exhibition by an African American woman in the institution’s sixty-year history.¹

Blindness in the face of racially and sexually marked subjects is arguably endemic to Western culture. Yet more than a belated victory for colored girls everywhere, Simpson’s MoMA exhibition can be seen as one of the signal moments of black feminine rupture, revelation, and misrecognition which, for good or ill, have shaped the Museum’s accounting of modern art. In this essay, I will examine a few of those moments in order to articulate how “the black woman”—as absence and presence, artist and model, agitator and adherent, fiction and fact—matters to and puts pressure on MoMA’s guiding assumptions and collecting practices, which have become paradigms of hegemonic modernism. In so doing, I conceive of the Museum and other cultural institutions, broadly construed, as contested sites in black women’s struggles to represent themselves and to articulate critical practices that describe modernity’s terrain with an alternative set of aesthetic imperatives and political cartographies.² Taken together, the works by and about black women in the Museum’s holdings constitute a necessarily incomplete archive that allows us to reconsider not only the lives and strategies of individual artists but also the circumstances in which African diasporic female identity, visibility, and history have been produced and transformed.³

Carrie Mae Weems’s landmark series From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried (1995, nos. 1 and 2) offers an incisive meditation on just those circumstances, particularly the ways in which visual technologies have been mobilized to render black subjects transparent to a racializing gaze. This multipart work was commissioned by The J. Paul Getty Museum as a response to Hidden Witness, a 1995 exhibition of mid-nineteenth-century photographs of black men and women.⁴ Weems selected, reproduced, enlarged, and tinted red thirty-two images, each of which she placed under a glass plate etched with affectively charged phrases: “scientific profile,” “mammie, mama, mother,” “playmate to the patriarch.” This far-reaching pictorial inventory is bracketed on either end with an indigo-tinted reproduction of Léon Poirier’s 1925 photograph of Nobosodrou, one of many Mangbetu women whose distinctive busts have been reproduced on everything from Belgian Congo stamps to Central African sculpture. Here, the artist inscribed an image of a singular woman with text that serves to mourn and witness the pernicious economies of classification and exchange that have determined the historicity of blackness in the visual field.⁵

From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried was presented to MoMA in 1997, as a gift on behalf of The Friends of Education, a Museum affiliate group founded, in 1993, by lawyer and banker Akosua Barthishwell Evans to “foster a greater appreciation of art created by African American artists and to encourage African American participation and membership at MoMA.”⁶ Like Simpson’s
and Weems’s work, Evans’s advocacy reflects a remapping of social and sexual privilege in the late 1980s and early 1990s that transformed the cultural landscape as well as the relationship of black women to the Museum. MoMA has historically emphasized the individual author, medium specificity, and a formalist conception of quality, often denuding even the most politically astute art of its social context and downplaying artists’ ambitions for social change in favor of a modernist narrative based on stylistic progression. As a result, it has effectively reiterated the storied disjuncture between dominant teleological constructions of history and the fragmented, horizontal configuration of black memory, which is pieced together at the margins.

For the black feminist artists, scholars, and advocates who emerged in the age of multiculturalism, MoMA’s conceptions of the past and of the art object were inadequate to address the visual position of a Nobosodrou, let alone the historical re-vision of a Weems, whose work signifies on dominant representations of the black, the feminine, the photographic, and the modern all at once. Cultural practitioners such as Freida High Tesfagiorgis, Lorraine O’Grady, Gilane Tawadros, and Michele Wallace have argued that we must reckon with the multiple sites and symbols through which African diasporic women’s history has been routed, not only to reclaim black female subjectivity from the clutches of stereotype but also to comprehend the practices of violence and visualization which, in shaping raced and gendered bodies, have determined the contours of modernist practice.

Western phantasms of difference doubled—blackness and femaleness untethered from the particularity of any given subject—might be said to take their measure from the Nегress, that foundational figure of black femininity first named in seventeenth-century France, who has come to epitomize unalloyed darkness and sexuality. To be...
sure, “Negress” is an absurd and excessive appellation. Yet that is precisely why the term so effectively sums up what literary critic Hortense J. Spillers has called the “signifying property plus” of the black female body, which is everywhere marked by the trauma of colonial enterprise, the dislocations of transatlantic slavery, and the logic of international capital as mere flesh and recalcitrant thing. Whether on the auction block or in the museum, the Negress casts a shadow over the black woman that has consistently overdetermined the conditions of her appearance.

MoMA’s collection tells the tale. Consider Romanian-born sculptor Constantin Brancusi’s _Blond Negress, II_ (1933, no. 3), a bronze, made in Paris, whose interest evolves from the apparent contradiction of an Africanized subject rendered as a golden piscine abstraction, at once primitive and futuristic. Look to one of Doris Ullman’s numerous black-and-white photographs depicting an aged woman pausing in her work (1929–31, no. 4), an image that seems intent on fixing an idealized vision of black labor in the American South before it is lost to modernity. Recall, too, how in Romare Bearden’s 1970 collage _Patchwork Quilt_ (no. 5), an Egyptian goddess turned down-home odalisque precariously perches on a couch that is equally suggestive of African American fabric traditions and the nearly monochromatic canvasses of Agnes Martin. Contemplate the weirdly proportioned creature—half animal, half woman—who stares out from George Overbury (“Pop”) Hart’s _Nude Negress, Souvenir of the Tropics_ (1922, no. 6), a rebarbative little print given to the Museum in 1940 by one of its founders, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. Finally, think back to Pablo Picasso’s _Les Demoiselles d’Avignon_ (1907), that scandalously disjointed conjunction of African-ness and the feminine, which famously served the artist as a talisman of sexual aggressivity and MoMA as an epochal marker of what founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., identified as “a new period in the history of modern art.” Despite the varying racial, national, and sexual identities of their makers and the divergent ontological
assumptions that govern them, all of these works attest to the black woman's historical availability and transnational presence as Negress, an indispensable vehicle that both grounds the Museum's accounting of itself and allows for the grounding of modern artistic practices.

The work of Kara Walker offers the most recent and well-known example of what it might mean for an African American woman to take on and take up that vehicle for her own purposes. It has been reviled for its perceived infliction of further injury to the black female body, as well as for its runaway success among white critics, collectors, and institutions; in fact, her 1994 New York museum debut Cone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart (no. 7) was acquired by MoMA in 2007. In this work, as elsewhere in her oeuvre, the artist uses black construction paper cut into silhouettes and affixed to white walls to outline a panoramic landscape, an "inner plantation," populated by figures that make reference to and quickly depart from those conjured up in classic narratives of the antebellum South, such as Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind (1937).15 Exploiting the medium's defined edges and amorphous centers, Walker carves out grotesque figurations meant to physically and psychically unmoor the viewer's sense of place and racial identity, everywhere confronting audiences with the phantasm of the Negress given precise optical form.16

The logic at work in these tableaux is not merely one of primitivist reversal, carnivalesque refiguration, or subjective exorcism. Rather, in Walker's practice, as in so many others that recruit the Negress, there is the mark of a determinative unconscious rooted in modernity's most extreme modes of symbolic and physical violence, which have taken the black female body as a primary locus. As critic T. Deneen Sharpley-Whiting has written, to be a black woman is to be "a body trapped in an image of itself," to be "imprisoned in an essence . . . created from without."17 Not unlike her precursors, from nineteenth-century sculptor Edmonia Lewis to Jazz Age sensation Josephine Baker, Walker has made her name in reckoning with rather than running from the Negress: the figure that underlines both the recursiveness and ubiquity of Western culture's profoundest misrecognitions of the "other," as well as the expansive capacities of countervailing raced, sexed, and gendered performances of self.18

A figure, a tactic, a subject, a structural position, and a means of mark-making, the Negress stands at the boundary of hegemonic and resistive discourses within and beyond the walls of the Museum. For modern artists, to grasp for the Negress, to conjure her into being, is to collapse a limit, to bring the world unbearably close, to perform an alchemy that transmutes subjects into objects and back again. Such transformations are made possible by the flows of bodies and images that have turned black women into fungible property yet also allow an oppositional approach to the figuration of African diasporic femininity and the aesthetic terms in which it is couched. In light of this economy, it is possible to imagine an alternative history of the Museum and its modernisms that centers on the work of African American women practitioners while also bringing forth the specific forms of affiliation, patterns of subjugation, and corollary modes of image-making that differentially produce black subjects in the wake of the Negress.

The faded career of Thelma Johnson Streit—likely the first black woman to have work collected by the Museum—provides one kind of object lesson. A dancer, folklorist, and painter born in Yakima, Washington, circa 1912, Streit was a woman of African and Native American descent who traveled to and worked in recognized hubs of modern artistic production: Paris, New York, Chicago, San Francisco. Her peripatetic existence can be viewed as a product both of the policing of space that necessarily impinged upon black folks in segregated America and of a desire to engage with alternative cultural formations. Streit spent time in
Hawaii, British Columbia, Haiti, and Ireland, where she made portraits of locals and collected material that would eventually be incorporated into her performances and paintings such as *Rabbit Man* (1941, no. 8), a gouache that suggests the range of influences, from Squamish to Kota, that informed her lushly colored and hieratic work.¹⁹

Streat might be thought of as taking up the same primitivist lexicon used by her white male contemporaries, such as Adolph Gottlieb, but for the cross-purpose of enacting a cultural reparation meant to situate her heritages within their historic and ritual contexts.²⁰ There were, of course, consequences in doing so: the press labeled her the “colored girl” painter, and European audiences feted her as “a charming Negro.” These designations attest to the specters that accrued to the artist’s person and practice, if not to their ambivalent effect.²¹ While she often remains a marginal figure in accounts of black women’s art, Streat’s self-primitivizing self-promotion, so redolent of the Negress, made her work visible, legible, and laudable to modernist luminaries such as Barr, who was responsible for the acquisition of *Rabbit Man* in 1942.²²

MoMA’s investment in Streat and other African American artists was, however, inconsistent, even during the institution’s early, more experimental years. Writer Russell Lynes recounted that in the 1930s and ’40s the Museum “had lived on purposeful improvisation,” exhibiting an incredible range of material, from industrially designed objects to popular film to children’s drawings.²³ The aim of the institution’s founders was to educate the New York public in the aesthetic appraisal of modern production, with a particular view to illuminating the prehistory of European and American pictorial innovation.²⁴ Accordingly, its early exhibitions featuring black art, such as *Ancestral Sources of Modern Painting* of 1941, emphasized African sculpture, highlighted American folk traditions, and occasionally gave pride of place to the work of an African American master such as Jacob Lawrence.²⁵ If these shows often reproduced the kind of primitivist logic that
8. Thelma Johnson Streat
Rabbit Man. 1941. Gouache
on board. 6 5/6 x 4 7/6"
(16.5 x 12 cm). The Museum
of Modern Art, New York.
Purchase
positioned African diasporic art as ancillary to mainstream modernism, then the Museum’s collecting practices came to enshrine that marginalization by focusing on, in Barr’s words, “the best works by the best artists,” “pioneer” objects that occasioned a shift within a narrowly defined aesthetic field.26

By the late 1960s the Museum had become the face of the establishment, its masterpieces increasingly displayed according to white-cube gallery conventions, its linear account of modern art effectively naturalized, its ideal viewer imagined as a universal subject.27 Such tendencies, however, threw the Museum’s ties to the military-industrial complex and its elision of nonwhite, nonmale, living, and American artists into sharp relief.28 As such, MoMA, like other museums across the city, became a key site of ideological conflict in the ensuing decades of social crisis, a time that saw increased attempts to dismantle hegemonic culture and to redefine figures of visible difference, blackness foremost among them.29

Artists inspired by the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements worked to establish alternative museum sites in African American communities, such as The Studio Museum in Harlem, even as they clamored against the treatment of African Americans within mainstream institutions.30 Perhaps the most signal of these came in April 1969: members of the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC) protested the exclusion of black artists from MoMA’s memorial exhibition in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr., occasioning a series of extended dialogues between artists and Museum staff.31 In this brief moment of opening, it appeared that MoMA might be transformed into a space of black radical imagining and connection between diasporic cultures. Numerous ideas were put forward, if only fleetingly entertained: a study center devoted to black and Puerto Rican culture; the decentralization of the collection, which would be placed at the behest of community groups throughout the city; and additional exhibition opportunities for women artists and artists of color.32

Almost from its inception the AWC had lobbied for the inclusion of underrepresented groups in the Museum, but more often than not the demands of each faction were articulated separately. Consequently, the black and women artists’ movements came to parallel rather than inform each other, emphasizing the specificity of their respective identities and the different wells of experience from which they drew.33 In some cases it appeared that these positions could not be occupied at the same time: although the women’s AWC committee, Women Artists in Revolution, advocated for people of color, according to its thinking, the black woman was colored second and female first, “since this involved a more profound discrimination.”34 African American women were thus again produced as the sum of two differences rather than as individuals with their own ends and histories, but artists would soon emerge whose work and activism would challenge both the movements and the Museum.

Few figures reflected these tensions more acutely than Faith Ringgold, who played a central role in the AWC’s negotiations for black representation while also contesting the sexism of the African American artists’ group Spiral and the exclusionary practices of the white-male-dominated group Art Strike Against Racism, War, and Oppression. In 1970 Ringgold’s quest for a space for black feminists led her to organize Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL) with, among others, her daughter, Michele Wallace, and eventually to shift the address, form, and structure of her own work. Trained in figurative and abstract oil painting, Ringgold embarked on the Slave Rape Series in 1973 (no. 9), a group of acrylic works executed on fabric sewn by the artist’s mother, fashion designer Willi Posey. This series marked Ringgold’s turn to a collaborative, textile-based practice that materially and pictorially illustrated the folk traditions and historical experiences of black diasporic women.35

As artist Lorraine O’Grady has observed, the 1970s marked a key stage in black female “auto-expression,” when practitioners of very different aesthetic means and political sensibilities availed themselves of visual terms that moved out of the shadow of the Negress and subverted the biases of the Museum.36 The early work of Adrian
Piper provides a case in point. The artist was represented in *Information*, MoMA’s landmark 1970 exhibition of Conceptual art, by a typewritten page that revealed nothing about her race or gender. In a series of nude and semi-nude photographs taken in a mirror one year later (nos. 10 and 11), Piper faced the visual facts of her difference, which contributed both to her marginalization in the art world and to her increasingly radical stance toward its institutions. The story of Howardena Pindell is equally telling. A curator in MoMA’s Department of Prints and Illustrated Books for twelve years, Pindell grew weary of the “casual racism” and the “double-speak” around quality that alienated her from her own work and precluded black artists from being visible within the Museum. After a personal crisis in 1979 she left her post, began teaching, and began a series of pieces (no. 12) that mobilized her previous abstract visual vocabulary toward autobiographical ends and that eventually explored affinities with African practices of textural adornment.

As artists and activists these women and their cohorts did bring about immediate change. Thanks to the platform laid out by WSABAL and protests organized by Ad Hoc Women Artists’ Committee, for example, black women were included in the 1970 Whitney Biennial. Just as important, their writings created the discursive backdrop against which the work of subsequent practitioners could be seen, while emphasizing those persistent realities that, to paraphrase Piper, triply negate black women artists, that give rise to what Pindell calls “art world racism,” and that continue the career of the Negress. As Wallace has argued, the incomparable status of black women as the other of the other, both invisible and ubiquitous, means that their art has been inexorably linked to the modern yet left out of established art-historical narratives and museum collections.

MoMA is no exception. To search for the black woman within its archives is to encounter a series of traces that conjure up a host of absences. There are no works by Maren Hassinger or Lois Mailou Jones or N’goy Howard Jackson; no signs that Martha Jackson-Jarvi’s or Senga Nengudi or Rose Piper were there; no evidence of Harriet Powers, Renée Stout, Alma Thomas, Pat Ward Williams, or even of Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, whose life and career were “pioneering,” to say the least. Born in 1877 to a middle-class black Philadelphia family and educated at the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Arts, Fuller went to Paris, where she studied until 1902, rubbing shoulders with the likes of W. E. B. Du Bois, and having her work positively appraised by no less than Auguste Rodin. As art historian Judith Wilson has argued, Fuller, in her *Ethiopia Awakening* (c. 1921, no. 13), manifested not only an innovative approach to sculptural form but also...

The next artistic career of note was that of a woman artist and a sculptor. Sculpture has been strangely prominent in the work of Negro artists, for painting usually claims in modern times far the greater share of attention. But sculpture has been unusually popular with Negro artists, in spite of its technical difficulties and expensive processes. Certainly we have to deal with a more direct and vivid sense for form, unless we try to explain it by some doubtful carry-over of the African preference for three-dimensional form. Another odd fact, the majority of the outstanding Negro sculptors have been women.46

Art historian Lowery Stokes Sims has argued that such a preference for the sculptural highlights the significance of “tactility as a transmitter of cultural values” within a variety of black women’s creative practices—hairdressing, weaving, quilting, performing—all of which take their measure from and embrace the sensate body.47

Historically confronted with scopic regimes that denigrate the black female image and received canons that privilege optical perception, African diasporic women have turned to the haptic as a resource for self-fashioning and for the preservation of memories otherwise lost to history. Touch brings the world close without presuming to master it, allowing for a recalibration of the self and the object, the aesthetic and the vernacular, that disarticulates notions of quality, medium, and cultural hierarchy. Pindell’s investment in African textiles, Ringgold’s turn to quilting, even Piper’s lingering photographic contact with herself—these black women’s engagements with the visual constitute manifestations of a modernist sensibility predicated not on the look of racial phantasm but on the feel of the subject’s psychic and corporeal position.48

one of the earliest artistic iterations of a feminist African diasporic consciousness. Executed following the publication of West African writer Joseph Casely-Hayford’s novel *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) and after Emperor Menelik II successfully fended off invading Italian forces in 1896, Fuller’s sculpture became a beacon of new black, transnational potentialities in art and politics.45

Her work has also been seen as indicative of how black women’s art opens onto another order of aesthetic priorities. Here is how scholar Alain Locke began the entry on Fuller in his foundational 1936 survey *Negro Art: Past and Present*:

Simpson's work illustrates how the seemingly antithetical modalities of vision and touch hold each other in productive tension. Her multipart work *Wigs (Portfolio)* (1994, no. 14) is composed of lithographs, printed on felt, that depict hairpieces purchased in Brooklyn set alongside narrative fragments ranging from a psychoanalyst’s interview with the mother of an avowed fetishist to lines lifted from William and Ellen Craft's 1860 slave narrative, which describes how they disguised themselves in order to escape from bondage. Simpson's wigs suggest that the look of black femininity might be altered to preserve the sensate self, a combination of visual ruse and tactile identity hinted at by the richly textured surfaces on which the images are printed. In this work it is as if the conditions affecting black women can only come into view when the body and the presumptions that accompany it are absented from the field of vision.

Much the same might be said of Julie Mehretu’s *Empirical Construction, Istanbul* (2003, no. 15), in which space is both homogenized and hopelessly undone, giving disembodied visual form to the sorts of cultural displacements that took the artist from Ethiopia to the United States and to those historical vectors that have shaped the experience of the modern subject. Both Simpson's and Mehretu's work reveal the range of possibilities available to black women artists in the present; that the pieces are found in MoMA's collection suggests the viability of their practices in the culture at large. Yet the terms of their appearance are still haunted by the specter of the Negress, a figure that makes clear how the production of the aesthetic and of the human within Western institutions remains structured by the desire to locate cultural renovation in bodily difference: whether real or virtual, the black woman in the Museum continues to tell untold stories and to give rise to an uncertain future.


3. For a useful reckoning with the concept of African diaspora—which refers to the forcible dispersal of black peoples from the continent as well as to their efforts to create political and cultural community in the wake of such displacement—see Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," Social Text 10, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 45–77.


8. On this disjuncture, see Michael Hanchard, "Black Memory versus State Memory: Notes toward a Method," Small Axe 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 45–52.


17. Street's flee on Street contains lists of the artist's notices, critics, and collectors that she herself produced and submitted to the Museum. Between 1947 and 1953 Street also wrote several letters to Barr and to curator Dorothy Miller that reveal her consistent desire to show at the Museum.


20. For a working draft of the Museum's exhibition history, see www.moma.org/learn/resources/archives/exhibition_history_list; on Barr's various engagements with black diasporic culture, see Alfred H. Barr Papers, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.


The Heart of the Question: The Writings and Paintings of Howardena Pindell (New York: 
Midtown Arts Press, 1987), pp. 7–47.
40. On autobiography and adornment in Pindell’s practice, 
of Texture in African Adornment," 1984, in The Heart of the Question, pp. 72–73, 64–69, 
84–86.
1988, in Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory (London: Verso, 
1990), p. 196.
42. Piper, "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists," 
1990, in Out of Order, Out of Sight, vol. 2, pp. 161–73; Pindell, 
43. Wallace, "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of 
44. See Renée Ater, "Making History: Meta Warrick Fuller’s 
Ethiopia," American Art 17, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 14.
45. Judith Wilson, "Hagar’s Daughters: Social History, 
Cultural Heritage, and Afro-U.S. Women’s Art," in Bearing 
Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women 
46. Alain Locke, Negro Art: Past and Present (Washington, D.C.: 
47. Lowery Stokes Sims, 
"African American Women Artists: Into the Twenty-First 
Century," in Bearing Witness, p. 95.
48. This paragraph expands my 
thinking on the subject’s visual 
and sensual predication in 
Copeland, "Bye, Bye Black 
Girl," pp. 74–78, in light of 
Tfesfagiorio’s and Sim’s think-
ing about the disruptive and 
healing forces of black women’s 
vernacular traditions. See 
Tfesfagiorio, "In Search of a 
Discourse," p. 232, and Sims, 
"African American Women 
Artists," p. 86.