

# ARTFORUM

SUMMER 2016

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Cover: Barbara Kruger, special project  
for *Artforum*, 2016.

From top: Artist installing work for Chlm!Pom's  
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*Roberta Construction Chart #2 (detail)*, 1975,  
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"Roberta Breitmeyer," 1972–79. Kan Xuan,  
*Objects*, 2003, video, black-and-white, sound,  
6 minutes 25 seconds.

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# NO TIME TO WAIT

## Julia Bryan-Wilson on *Mounting Frustration*

*Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, by Susan E. Cahan. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. 360 pages.

WHEN THE EXHIBITION “Art AIDS America” was on view last winter at the Tacoma Art Museum in Washington, black activists decried the paltry number of black artists in the show: five out of 107, a low percentage that registered as wildly incommensurate to the disproportionately high rate of HIV infection and AIDS-related deaths among African Americans. On December 17, the Tacoma Action Collective staged a die-in: Protesters lay down on the ground in the museum, red signs affixed to their chests that read STOP ERASING BLACK PEOPLE. The die-in as a strategy was widely mobilized by AIDS activists in the 1980s and ’90s and has been used in recent #BlackLivesMatter demonstrations. At the Tacoma museum, the die-in created a dialogue between histories of past demonstrations and the urgencies of present concerns, with bodies—most of them black—on the museum floor, defiantly horizontal against the backdrop of a flowery Jim Hodges curtain.

The Tacoma Action Collective wanted not only to call attention to the lack of African American artists in the Tacoma incarnation of “Art AIDS America” but also to pressure cocurators Jonathan David Katz and Rock Hushka to expand the checklist to include more black artists when the show traveled. The collective also issued a series of demands to counteract structural exclusions in the art world. They called for increased hiring of black staff at all levels of the museum hierarchy and demanded that current employees undergo training in undoing institutional racism. During an interview with organizers and artists Charhys Bailey and Christopher Paul Jordan, in which they declared their concern that the show was “thirty years behind” and wondered when they might see an exhibition “exploring the story of the prevalence of HIV in black America,” Hushka responded: “You’ll have to wait for the next one.” This line, so redolent of patronizing pacification and broken promises, became the title of Bailey and Jordan’s published text on the website Post Defiance.

More art by black artists on the museum walls, more black staff, more black curators, more black trustees—though these calls have been persistently sounded, sometimes quite loudly, for decades, art institutions seem to turn their collective attention to questions of racial injustice only intermittently and reactively rather than systematically. Isaac Julien’s tour-de-force film *Looking for Langston*, 1989, includes a reflection on the efflorescence and crushing demise of the Harlem Renaissance, glossing words by the titular poet Langston Hughes: “By



Tacoma Action Collective die-in at the exhibition “Art AIDS America,” Tacoma Art Museum, WA, December 17, 2015. Photo: Salyare Rafael.

the end of the ’20s, Negroes were no longer in vogue. Patrons found other uses for their money. Sophisticated New Yorkers turned to Noël Coward and colored artists and writers began to go hungry. History: the smiler with the knife under the cloak.” This last line, repurposed from Chaucer and spoken in the voice-over by cultural-studies pioneer Stuart Hall, acknowledges the lacerating edge of accommodation and deferral: You’ll have to wait for the next one.

“Throughout the twentieth century there have been waves of abundant interest in African American art interposed with periods of dormancy,” asserts Susan E. Cahan in her meticulously researched book *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*. If these moments of renewed interest have not led to widespread change, Cahan writes, it is because “the art world has been particularly resistant to racial equality.” Cahan grounds her arguments in several case studies of contested moments in which race and racism within New York art institutions were brought to the fore, including the opening of the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1968 (which some perceived to be a “colonialist” cultural incursion into Harlem); the exhibition “Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969 (which failed to include the work of African American artists); and the “Contemporary Black Artists in

America” show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971 (which was undertaken without significant consultation with any African American curator or art historian and was understood by many black artists to be a wrongheaded, and marginalizing, exercise in essentialism and tokenism). Her detailed account of the Museum of Modern Art’s unwitting role as lightning rod for debates about racial exclusion includes analyses of the cross-racial organizing efforts of black and Puerto Rican artists (especially Tom Lloyd, Faith Ringgold, and Raphael Montañez Ortiz), an examination of MOMA’s installations of the works of Romare Bearden and Richard Hunt, and a cogent take on its infamous “Primitivism” show of 1984–85. Building on previous scholarship such as art historian Bridget R. Cooks’s *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (2011), Cahan’s study focuses on New York, for, as she writes, it is a site “dense with culturally, financially, and politically powerful individuals, and these individuals exercised disproportionate influence within the museum world.”

*Mounting Frustration* also examines some of the probing debates undertaken by black artists in the 1960s and ’70s about the coherence (both political and aesthetic) of the rubric of “black art” given that artists worked across so many different styles and had divergent relationships to their own identifications around



blackness. Indeed, the interrogation of this terminology continues to be relevant today: The fact that the biracial artist Nayland Blake was initially neglected in the count of black artists in “Art AIDS America” (several early objections do not list him alongside Derek Jackson, Kia Labeija, Glenn Ligon, and Kalup Linzy) demonstrates some of the faultiness of a demographic approach and raises questions about misrecognitions and illegibilities.

Though retrospective in nature, *Mounting Frustrations* implicitly—and crucially—asks, How will these categories, and these histories, continue to be rewritten, elaborated, and revisited? The structural realities of inequality and the dynamic nature of identity construction set the stage for a condition of perpetual contestation, one that will be especially trackable through several upcoming projects. An exhibition opening at Tate Modern next year, titled “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,” will explore “how the category ‘Black Art’ was defined, rejected, and redefined” in the US between 1963 and 1983, through the work of such artists as Norman Lewis, Lorraine O’Grady, and Betye Saar. (I quote from the press release, with its suggestion of both stabilization and destabilization.) The subtitles of both Cahan’s book and the Tate show, curated by Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley, invoke the “age of Black Power,” placing African American cultural production in direct dialogue with political efforts to challenge racism in a country where the face of power was distinctly and undeniably white. Even as increasing numbers of smart, committed curators of color (Rocío Aranda-Alvarado, Thelma Golden, Christine Y. Kim, Thomas Lax, Yasmin Ramírez, Franklin Sirmans, Yesomi Umolu, and many others) have risen to prominent positions in art institutions across the US, museums continue to be shaped by a mostly white elite.

Recognizing that the names on the walls, no less than the art on display, might have an impact on who felt invited to visit the museum, some members of the Art Workers’ Coalition and the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition in the late 1960s and early ’70s unsuccessfully advocated for a special wing of MOMA to be named after Martin Luther King Jr. The MLK wing was ideally envisioned as a space reserved for art by black and Puerto Rican artists, and the invocation of a crusader for social justice in its very architecture was meant to signal an institutional welcome to many audiences. Though the proposed cordoning-off of this art from the rest of the collection struck some as a kind of ghettoization, others embraced it as a necessary recentering. “If our art is not to be mixed with the art of whites, well, so be it! Give us our own wing,” exhorted Ringgold in 1969. This April, the museum did announce plans for a new wing: It will be named for patron David Geffen, a condition of his \$100 million gift.

What are the productive tensions inherent in exhibitions that use classifications such as “black art” as their



Protest against “Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, January 16, 1969. Photo: Jack Manning/New York Times/Redux.

### As Cahan persuasively establishes, major museums in the US have done a deplorable job of representing black artists, other artists of color, and women artists.

primary framing device or as central to their organizational logic? Do they offer up an assertive and needed model by placing constellations of subjects of color in relation to one another, refusing to have white artists act as comparators or standard-bearers? Or do they flatten artists’ own multiple axes of identification and elide important distinctions in modes of artistic production? Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, for one, reportedly chafed at having his work billed as “Latin American.” And despite the objections of some female artists who argue that the all-woman show reduces their contributions to products of their gender—and despite the intensifying erosion of collective confidence about the stability of the categories of “man” and “woman”—the format is seeing a resurgence that rivals that of 2007 (the year of shows such as “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution” and “Global Feminisms”) with

major projects such as Hauser Wirth & Schimmel’s “Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016” (curated by Paul Schimmel and Jenni Sorkin), on view at the Los Angeles gallery through September 4, and “Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985” (curated by Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta), opening in 2017 at UCLA’s Hammer Museum as part of the Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative.

Important work on the consolidation of—and resistance to—the label “black art,” in particular, is on the horizon, including a book by consulting MOMA curator Darby English, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press), which discusses abstraction by black artists in shows launched at the Whitney and at lesser-known venues such as a theater in the Fifth Ward district of Houston. Art historian Krista Thompson is working on a monograph on Tom Lloyd’s electric-light sculptures, and emerging scholar J. V. Decemvirale is pursuing advanced research into the Black Culture Festival, an event organized in 1968 by African American museum guards at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art that included an after-hours counter-exhibition of African art.

As *Mounting Frustration* persuasively establishes, major museums in the US have historically done a deplorable job of representing black artists, other artists of color, and women artists, who are tokenized by ever-churning cycles of celebration and dismissal—what Cahan calls “waves”—in part because large art institutions are not only dependent on but impregnated with the ideology of the ruling class that funds them. The material and economic basis of these structural problems around race, gender, and representation cannot be ignored. Just as a wave can buoy you up, it can also suck you out to sea; maybe it’s best to get out of the water altogether. Is it possible that museums will become increasingly irrelevant as spaces for critical art? Many artists are turning to other avenues to circulate their work, including alternative or independent spaces and, increasingly, online. Queer black artist Ajuan M. Mance, for example, in her project *1001 Black Men: An Online Sketchbook*, 2010–, uses social media as the primary outlet for her vivid, expert portraits of African American men; although she has shown in galleries and art institutions (and welcomes such attentions), she is not reliant on a museum to show her work.

What will the checklist look like for the next iteration of “Art AIDS America”? I’d like to suggest one work for inclusion. It is an image that speaks volumes about the relevance of AIDS for contemporary art and about the museum as a fraught space for public dialogue about racism: a photograph of the Tacoma Action Collective die-in. □

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