

Susan Amador
MFA Art History Research
AR 592
Professor Chris Nelson
Spring, 1998

Defining Others: Racism in the Visual Art Establishment

The European world view has imposed its parameters for art on all cultures since its push to colonize the world. These parameters include rules that claim educated males of European descent are more knowledgeable than all others, are of superior judgment innately, and so *must* replace the knowledge systems of the areas they colonize. This hierarchy of value is the basis for racism in the visual arts and, within the focus of this paper, some of the major museums in the United States. The proportions of non-white to white exhibits at the major museums do not reflect actual community demographic composites. Art galleries, where museums choose material for exhibits, representation of artists are upwards of 90% European descent. This paper will explore statistics on major museums and galleries, comparing them to the percentage of people of color in the communities where they are located. Terms like "artistic choice" and "quality" are the instruments of justified exclusion in an unregulated industry and this paper reveals the self-serving arbitrary principles that continue racism in the visual arts.

The predominantly white male art establishment applies its understanding of history and aesthetics to other cultures by requiring art fit the paradigms of painting and sculpture devoid of its original context or function according to the critical theory of the day. Sally Price, in Primitive Art in Civilized Places, discusses how Eurocentric definitions play out stating, "...Westerners have assumed responsibility for the definition, conservation, interpretation, marketing, and future existence of the world's

arts (69)." Anne Wilson Schaef describes the myopia of the dominant culture in her treatise on social systems theory, Women's Reality. The dominant group achieves an intrinsic god-likeness that elevates itself above other societal systems. This implies an order of systems where the dominant system is conformed to for survival by the other groups and all other groups are defined by the dominant one, however erroneously. The knowledge base is controlled and dictated by the dominant culture and non-conformity threatens the power structure (8-15). Maintaining the status quo is vital for the existence of such constructs and any changes are usually superficial.

While headway has been made with the passing of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and Affirmative Action policies in hiring practices, strangely, the art establishment has remained a donjon of racism. The civil rights movements included their own art developments that evolved with the need to express the emotions of repression. First, African Americans and then Chicanos became involved in civil rights movements. Their art's intention was " ...to teach the Chicano community about itself, to strengthen it, to nurture it... (Quirarte 192)." While the aesthetics of civil liberties art was community based and didactically oriented, it was integrally connected to each culture's art history and iconography, providing a jumping off point for many of today's preeminent artists.

But these artists are not in the modern art history books, at least not Jonathan Fineberg's Art Since 1940, published in 1995. Why? Because Western aesthetic tradition and theory cannot consider their work art. Clive Bell, the precursor to Greenbergian theory, would call the Chicano, African American and Asian art of the 1960's "Descriptive painting'...portraits of psychological and historical value... pictures that tell stories and suggest situations, illustrations of all sorts, belong to this class... but as a work of art worthless...(Ross, 190)." Clement Greenberg, a powerful, overtly racist and sexist critic whose influence permeated modern art in the 1950's and 1960's, and

whose ideas continues to stagnate change today, would have dismissed the art of the civil rights movements offhand just on his distinctions between "high" and "low" art and his imperatives to the avant garde to purify art through abstraction. Any work available to the public he labeled kitsch or "low" art and condemned it. Art that was figurative, narrative or representational at all was renegade to "high" art for Greenberg.

Greenberg was the one who established the critic in his/her present position of making or breaking movements and careers (Fineburg 154-155). To this day, the critical field is mainly reserved for European descent connoisseurs, supporting European descent art and artists.

Museum collections of non-Western ancient art predating the first World War, are valued in the dominant culture, but only when removed from their original function and purpose. Aesthetically, Western art has no context for other cultures' art, except as a collectible curiosity and investment. In Primitive Art in Civilized Places, Sally Price expresses this cogently while discussing the polarized approaches to art work with social significance:

...Joseph Alsop's stance [is] that other people simply do not have a concept in any sense equivalent to the one that defines and vertebrates our own art world. What this implies is that objects can be presented either in terms of that concept (in which case they are "art", and best appreciated on the basis of an immediate visual experience, and have no need of further explanation) or in terms of their place within a sociocultural context (in which case someone viewing them as art would be guilty of "ethnocentrism"). If one subscribes to this division, the question then becomes...whether we respond to a particular set of objects as Art or merely from a sense of "social curiosity". It may be, however, that a merger of "art" and the "anthropology" of non-Western cultural expression would require little more on our part than a less proprietorial attitude towards the idea of

aesthetic sensitivity. (123)

The Western art establishment's refusal to research the art history of colonized cultures certainly fits well with Schaefer's social systems theory. This asserts that cultures outside the dominant one are well-versed for survival within it, while the dominant system defines or remains ignorant of the cultures surrounding it, all the while maintaining a position of superior knowledge and judgment. From within the paradigms of "Primitive" art, seen as work from outside the United States and Europe, Price writes about what she calls a "Twentieth century brand of cultural Imperialism" that has "discovered, seized, commoditized, stripped of their social ties, defined in new settings, and reconceptualized [other culture art] to fit into the economic, cultural, political, and ideological needs of people from distant societies (5)." The ideological correlations to other culture work excluded and redefined from *within* a dominant culture are clear; especially concerning ancient and antique exhibitions, these constructs serve to dehumanize the people who are the source of the work and those generations that continue after. Juan Sanchez, an artist teaching at Hunter College states succinctly:

Cultural imperialism is another level of colonialism...Artists of color cannot even participate in the dialogue pertaining to their own sense of ethnic and racial culture, history and aesthetics. The cultural imperialist appropriates, reinterprets, edits, and exploits the very elements that belong to the colonized (Pindell 34).

The art establishment is comfortable presenting non-Western art predating the turn of the century because it doesn't challenge the ego-centric formation of theory and dehumanizing attitudes that support its present paradigms of operation. Pre-Colombian and African art are prime examples of Western redefinition of other cultures. The insistence on anonymity for "Primitive" artists, their supposed inability to

participate in the same innate perceptions of "quality" art, and the lack of investigation into other cultures aesthetics are dinosaurs of thought originating at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century that perpetuate still at its close. Widely accepted racism from darker times spawned these attitudes, and pervasive racism in the art establishment utilizes the same constructs today. The exhibition of ancient and antique art from non-Western sources sanctions the illusion of diversity without its empirical reality and quiets the guilt of major institutions, while direct discourse remains static. The focus on antique "other" art disassociates artists of color from a more contemporary historical development of their own and further encourages a hierarchal attitude from the establishment.

The imperatives that control, isolate and separate non-Western from Western art prevent contemporary artists of color from serious consideration, except in rare cases, and keep them from participation in the larger art market. Gallery and museum personnel, in their attitudes and policies of exclusion, have forced the division of the market into smaller slices representing individual ethnicities. So often the non-Western art world is blamed for isolating and insulating themselves from inclusion in the Western art institutions, when in actuality, community demographics and exhibition schedules show a protracted, poor record of representation. At Colorado State University, a university gallery curator and art history professor maintained that particular mediums sometimes classified as "craft" by the Western system are responsible for excluding themselves because of the specialized marketing network formulated outside of the art establishment. This is especially consequential considering the university system is usually more up to date and open-minded about issues of exclusion. She states the break from the art mainstream preceded any perceived exclusion. In fact, issues of racial, sexual and medium biases existed long before it became necessary for artists to form survival networks of their own. Maurice

Berger, in "Are Art Museums Racist?," quotes Kinshasha Holman Conwill, then executive director of the Studio Museum in Harlem:

Black artists are segregated by society...Many people ask me if the [Studio Museum] perpetuates [this problem]. It's as if racism would end tomorrow if we disbanded the Studio Museum in Harlem, and there would be this great opening of doors and black artists would start pouring in to the mainstream of American art. Well, that's not what is happening. (148)

Evidence for this elitist approach by major museums was circumstantiated by the research by Howardena Pindell, in "Art World Racism: a Documentation" (8-15). Pindell's inquiry spans 1980-1987 and mainly concerns museums in New York City and the immediate area. This research reveals the inadequacies in the system used by museums to obtain work they consider worthy of exhibitions and the calculated, but arbitrary nature of "artistic choice." Exhibitions containing the work of Asians, African Americans, Central and Latin American Indians, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Hispanics and Middle Eastern peoples were canvassed from the overall schedules of the museums. Recent exhibition schedules for some of the major museums around the United States are included, with comparisons to their community demographics from the 1990 census. The census numbers are a point of hot debate among some, who usually argue that the response of people of color is low. For the purpose of this paper, the census numbers are not considered to be beyond reproach, but simply data for the comparison. The term "people of color" refers to a conglomerate of groups that includes African Americans, American Indian, Eskimo or Aleut, Asian or Pacific Islander, "Other Race" (other than white) and Persons of Hispanic Origins. The correlation between the amount of exhibits that represent community demographics is an issue whose characteristics reflect the investment the museum has in providing an inviting and comfortable viewing environment for people of non-Western cultures.

The following examples from important urban areas around the country reveal the relationship between the amount of non-Western peoples in the communities surrounding major art museums and the lack of investment and commitment in the art establishment to present a more complete representation of art in the United States and outsider cultures from around the world.

New York City and its surrounding urban areas are 39% people of color, according to the 1990 Census. The major museums in this area reflect a substantial deficit in representation of the community and its resources, the highest being 17.78% representation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art there were 208 exhibitions between 1980 and 1988 and thirty-seven were non-Western art, representing 17.78% of the total program. Out of forty-nine one-person shows, there was one by an artist of color. The program available at the Metropolitan's Web site for 1997-98 contains eleven exhibits, three of which are non-Western (27%), and two of those are ancient or antique in nature, or 90%.

At the Brooklyn Museum the total exhibition program for 1980-1988 is 87.75% focused on the art or artists of European descent. Out of fifty-one one-person exhibits, two were artists of color, or 3.92%, that is 1.8% of the total exhibition schedule. Seventy-two percent of the non-Western exhibits were ancient or antique work. The Guggenheim didn't supply adequate information to Pindell and her article shows that for 1980-1988, zero exhibits were of artists of color, the total exhibition program was devoted to art from Europe or artists of European descent. The Museum of Modern Art had seven exhibits of art by non-Westerners, out of 242 or 2% of the total program from 1980-88.

Of the 156 exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1980-1987, eleven were non-Western and those were contemporary in nature. There were ninety-one one-person shows, eight of which were artists of color, or 8.79%. The Whitney has not

presented a one-person show of a Black, Hispanic or Native American since 1980. The Whitney Museum of American Art schedules, available at their web site, for 1995-1998, show that out of 28 exhibitions, three were of non-Western content, or 10%, and all were contemporary in nature.

The Guerrilla Girls', a watch-dog group that gathers numbers on racist and sexist behavior in the art world, statistics show the combined numbers for 1973-1987 on the Whitney Biennial are 4.10% male artists of color and a miserable .30% women artists of color. The Whitney Biennial is a respected event show-casing important developments in American art. The Guerrilla Girls' web site reports that, "The 1993 Whitney Biennial was the first ever to have a minority of white male artists. It was also the most reviled and criticized Biennial in recent history. In 1995 the museum returned to previous minuscule percentages of artists of color..."

In the nation's capital, problems of exclusion exist. Washington, DC.'s residents are 38% people of color, and at the Corcoran Museum, the exhibition schedule for October 1997-January 1998 is 22% art or artists of color, or two exhibits out of nine. Both exhibits were contemporary.

Looking to the Southwest, in Houston, Texas, 43 % of the population are people of color, but the Contemporary Art Museum-Houston's schedule for 1996 contains one out of five exhibitions include non-Western art, or 20%. The program for December 1997-June 1998 lists seven shows, one of which is work by artists of color, or 14%. The above shows consisted of contemporary materials. Obviously, neither year came close to inviting the community to be comfortable in the museum.

The 39 % people of color who reside in the Northwest's San Francisco, California may not feel especially welcome to the DeYoung and Legion of Honor Museums. In the period between November 1995 and May 1999, out of fifty exhibits, nine were non-European descent art, or 18 %. Further south, the Los Angeles area's population is

51% people of color. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art's exhibition schedule from November 1997-March 1999 lists eighteen exhibitions, eight of which are non-Western in orientation, or 44%.

In the Midwest, Chicago, Illinois, the population is composed of 35% people of color. The Art Institute of Chicago's exhibition program for the years 1995-1997 included 140 shows, twenty-three of whom were non-European descent, or 16%. Fourteen of those were contemporary in nature at 60%. It would seem to be a worthy goal to attempt a closer approximation between the community's percentage of population ratios and the number of non-Western art exhibits at AIC.

Museums receive their information on what art is worthy from the gallery system. In Pindell's "Commentary and Update of Gallery and Museum Statistics, 1986-1997," she finds "The artists selected for one-person shows in the major museums are artists most likely to be represented by... galleries that represent the apex of the commercial system... the ones that are the most likely to be 100% white (20)." Her research is confined to the New York area and in the period from 1996-1997 the 100% white galleries were Blum Helman, Diane Brown, Leo Castelli, Andre Emmerich, Fishbach, Gasgolian, Gimpel and Weitzenhoffer, Marian Goodman, Jay Gorney, M. Knoedler and Co., Curt Marcus, Matthew Marks, Pace/MacGill/Wildenstein, Pace Prints, Tibor de Nagy, Edward Thorpe, and Althea Viafore, most of which are recognizably influential art establishments. Eleven galleries that represented a small percentage of artists of color in 1986-87, recently increased the amount of white artists they represent. In 1996-1997, Charles Cowles went from 95% to 96% white artists, Ronald Felman, from 94% to 97.5%, Sperone Westwater, from 94% to 97%, John Weber, from 94% to 97%, Holly Solomon, 93% to 95%, Barbara Gladstone, 92% to 94%, David McKee, 91% to 92%, Anita Shapolsky, 91% to 100%, Sidney Janis, 84% to 96% and Nancy Hoffman, 75% to 91% (24-25).

In addition to an already inflamed situation for artists of color, in 1996 the National Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) role in support of individual artists changed from direct funding to a Congress-designated fiat that funnels subsidies only through museum programs. The move was spearheaded by Senator Jesse Helms, an outspoken, right-wing, extremely conservative Christian Republican. The trustees, administrators and curators of American museums are mostly of European descent, procuring art for exhibitions from a pool of galleries and institutions that represent upwards of 90% white artists. Thirty-four percent of the one-person shows funded through the NEA museum program were for artists of color. White artists were given \$544,500 for one-person shows, while \$127,500 was ear-marked for artists of color. In effect, only 18% of the total funds were appropriated to the 34% of one-person shows of artists of color, while 81% of the funding was allocated to the 66% white one-person shows. In 1996, no Native American artists were funded. The ramifications of the switch from directly funding artists to funding museums are that NEA tax dollars have become an adjunct to the commercial art establishment, supporting almost entirely artists with profitable alliances with galleries representing largely European-descent artists and aesthetics (Pindell 27).

Racism in art institutions is propagated by the nature of Eurocentric aesthetic ideologies that promote values based on an elite few, "connoisseurs", whose innate abilities to sense "quality" art are dictated to the rest of the population. Their self-justifying pronouncements of "tasteful" work that fits within Western paradigms usually redefine, ignore, and denigrate outsider artwork. In Peter Plagens' Sunshine Muse, he states that, "Regions usually coddle ethnic art that hasn't been bulldozed...a Modern American artist cannot produce significant art out of a latter-day sentimental appreciation of dolls, beads and ceremonial masks. When a primitive art is synthesized, it must be within a vigorous modern movement (eg., Black African Art in

Cubism) or within the talent of a great anomaly (eg., Gauguin) (11).” To Plagens the only significant ethnic art is work that has been filtered and edited by dominant culture artists and movements. Plagens currently serves as art critic for Newsweek magazine.

In “Art World Racism: a documentation,” Pindell discusses the attitudes of critics, a type of connoisseur. In a conversation with a student researching bias in the art world, she discovers:

that a major New York art critic... stated that he was not interested in “minority structures... and that non-white artists had their own institutions that were set up to “take care of them.” Additionally, he said he was only interested in “quality.” This critic has a record of curating exhibitions that include only white artists. His attitude is common to most art critics of European descent who review and curate exhibitions (7).

Sally Price, in Primitive Art in Civilized Places, reveals that discourse and vocabulary are on the front lines of institutional exclusion. The definitions and linguistics of racism are self-serving contradictions that are over-looked by the Western art system. The words quality, taste and artistic choice are assigned properties that elevate them as esoteric concepts removed from the fluctuations of education, class and fashion, but are defined by the Western educated, often privileged art connoisseurs themselves. This arbitrary rationalization and justification of a dominant few regulating the visuals and aesthetics of the rest is presented through Price by Kenneth Clark, one of the world’s most trusted art experts:

I never doubted the infallibility of my judgments. At the age of 9 or 10 I said with perfect confidence “This is a good picture, that is a bad one.” When I was moved by a work of art it never occurred to me that someone else, with more mature judgment, might feel differently. This almost insane self-confidence lasted until a few years ago, and the odd thing is how many people have

accepted my judgments. My whole life might be described as one long, harmless, confidence trick. (15)

It is significant that Clark should say "harmless," because the non-Western art world would probably not make that ascertainment. His ceaseless promotion of Eurocentric aesthetics, to the exclusion of outside cultures, in the mass media has done much to maintain the status quo of exclusion. Mark Crispin Miller speaks on the topic of the elite control of commodity through visual images:

"That which sells" has become accepted as the truth in the domain of the news and advertising and what "they" choose to "sell" is projected in the artworld as representing the truth. Therefore, a minute fraction of the world's population orchestrates form and content in much of our personal, inner and outer, emotional, cultural, and political lives (Pindell 36).

In a personal context, the term "quality" was used to quiet me in a discussion with an art history professor, when I questioned the exclusion of certain materials from a Modern Art class. I left feeling frustrated, wondering what exactly "quality" meant. Berger elaborates on this when he points out that the "cultural elite"... "white curators, administrators and patrons" of museums "bases its selections on arbitrary, Eurocentric standards of "taste" and "quality"— the code words of racial indifference and exclusion (149)." In the art establishment, "quality" often means shut up and go away, we are exercising our "artistic choice". Art education is where change can take place, but unfortunately, higher education mostly regurgitates the mind set of Eurocentric exclusion. Many Art history programs contain required survey classes still devoid of people of color, women and their aesthetic systems. The key word here is *required*; classes more diverse in nature are usually elective, while Western and European standards are required for studio art and art history degrees. In this manner, higher education creates an environment hostile to outsider art and can be daunting to even

the strongest artist or student of color. In education, the dominant culture controls the attitudes of exclusion and perpetuates the system that proceeds to the professional level.

Education Reflects Society

Education reflects a society where money and power dictate who gets taught, what gets taught, what kind of environment one is taught in, and how an individual is taught. Value judgments about individuals play as great a role in education, unfortunately, as genuine ability. And it is blacks and other minorities who have suffered the most.

Anthony A. Parker, Sojourners, May 1990 (Dudley 60).

Using the terms "artistic choice" and "quality art" are effective deterrents to open dialogue, especially when discussing aesthetic paradigms outside one's expertise. The Western art establishment continues to do just that, and believes "the task of cultural interpretation is...relegated to people of European descent, as if their perspective was universal (Berger 150)." In art education, a field where there is a unique freedom to address issues unsuited to other professions, open-mindedness and tolerance would seem an asset. Exclusion of any kind only restricts resources and limits the evolution and advances in art by presenting a static, narrow mind set.

Exclusion and Art History Education

Art History was not a career that black middle-class children were taught to aspire to. For one, the Eurocentrism of art history often made it irrelevant to black college students who never heard African-American culture discussed in art history classes. Museums – the major conduit for teaching young people about art – were not always accessible to blacks. African-Americans were socialized into certain careers after Reconstruction; visual art was not one of them. The economic realities made a career in art even less desirable. You

didn't see many black visual artists until the 1920's and 30's, when the black colleges started to establish art departments. Black art historians are an even rarer breed.

Lowery Sims, curator of Twentieth Century Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Berger 150).

Policy making positions at the major museums are largely filled by European descent candidates and because of the unfriendly atmosphere towards them in higher education and throughout the system, there are less candidates of color than whites that pursue careers in the curatorial and critical professions. The employment of candidates of color is hindered by the gallery and museum system that excludes by proxy. Critic Ruth Bass states:

For art faculty who are currently seeking appointment at or promotion to the professional level, the dearth of showing opportunities is catastrophic. Since there is no such thing as Ph.D for creative artists, art faculty must be granted a "Ph.D equivalency" or a "waiver" to attain professional rank. At CUNY this seems to be determined by a record of gallery and museum shows. But as you know, these are determined mainly by the marketplace. Galleries can only show work that will sell, and museum curators, for the most part, learn about contemporary artists by visiting galleries. (Pindell 3)

With their usual wit and forthrightness, the Guerrilla Girls responded to Pindell's request for an update with the following:

\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$mile\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$
 DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANT: Person of color needed to intimidate foundations, corporations, and collectors into giving large amounts of money. Successful candidate must relish being only minority staff member. High visibility in public, silence at staff meetings required. Photogenic a plus.

The survival network of galleries and museums that promotes art outside of the mainstream has become a vital resource for the continuation of non-Western art. Alternative galleries are the "fertile training grounds for future curators and arts administrators" Pindell says, and students serving internships learn about work outside the mainstream. In her "Commentary and Update of Gallery and Museum Statistics," she reports that twenty new appointments of curators of color were made at significant and major museums since her original findings in 1988. While some improvements have been made, Catherine Powell, assistant counsel for the Black Women's Employment Project of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund warns that too quickly, "...white Americans are willing to believe that discrimination doesn't exist anymore (Pindell 19)." Museum exhibition schedules continue to reveal under-represented art and artists of color, when compared to community demographics. Curators, administrators, critics, art historians, art educators, collectors, publishers, authors and board members, all of European descent, continue to exclude on the basis of self-justifying and rationalizing language, using the terms "quality" and "artistic choice" as camouflage to hide their biases and are unwilling to do the homework necessary to learn about their communities. At this juncture, it seems best to proceed with a caution from artist Arturo Lindsay:

Frankly, we are at a very dangerous intersection where the progress that has been made is now used by some as evidence of the end to racism and sexism in the arts. The truth is that we are barely past tokenism. What exists today is a holographic image; virtual reality at best. (Pindell 6)

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