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bell hooks

Art on My Mind

Visual Politics



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Art on My Mind

bell hooks (1952–2021) was an influential cultural critic, feminist theorist and writer. Celebrated as one of America's leading public intellectuals, she was a charismatic speaker and writer who taught and lectured around the world. Previously a professor in the English departments at Yale University and Oberlin College, hooks was the author of more than seventeen books, including *The New York Times* bestseller *All About Love: New Visions; Salvation: Black People and Love;* and *Communion: The Female Search for Love*, as well as the landmark memoir *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*.

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until we meet again . . .
'the diasporic is an act of will and memory'

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> Art is a habit of the intellect, developed with practice over time, that empowers the artist to make the work right and protects him . . . from deviating from what is good for the work. It unites what he is with what his material is. It leads him to seek his own depths. Its purpose is not his self-enhancement, his having fun or feeling good about himself. These are byproducts. It aims solely towards bringing a new thing into existence in the truest manner possible. It is about truth and, as such, has to do with ultimates and, as such, posits self-sacrifice and consecration.

This passage by Nell Sonneman specifically addresses the work of the artist Martin Puryear, yet it names a philosophical approach to art making that shapes the way I think, dream, feel, and imagine art.

– b.h.

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Introduction

Art Matters

One of the first paintings I ever made is hidden in my basement. It was not put there for safekeeping. Damp dank spaces are no place for art work one treasures. All the other pictures I painted growing up have been destroyed, thrown away. They were not valued. This one survived because I took it with me when I left home at seventeen. The assignment we had been given in our art class was to choose a style of painting used by an artist whose work we admired. I loved the work of painters using abstract expressionism because it represented a break with rigid notions of abstract painting; it allowed one to be passionate, to use paint in an expressive way while celebrating the abstract. Studying the history of painting by African-Americans, one sees that abstract expressionism influenced the development of many artists precisely because it was a critical intervention, an expansion of a closed turf. It was a site of possibility.

The artist whose work served as a catalyst for my painting was Willem de Kooning. As a young student in the segregated South, where we never talked race, it was not important to situate a painter historically, to contextualize a work. The 'work' was everything. There are times when I hunger for those days: the days when I thought of art only as the expressive creativity of a soul struggling to self-actualize. Art has no race or gender. Art, and most especially painting, was for me a realm where

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every imposed boundary could be transgressed. It was the free world of color where all was possible. When I studied de Kooning's use of paint, those broad brush strokes, the thick layering of color, I was in paradise. To be able to work with paint and create textures, to try and make color convey through density an intensity of feeling – that was the lesson I wanted to learn.

My pleasure in abstract expressionism has not diminished over the years. It has not been changed by critical awareness of race, gender, and class. At times that pleasure is disrupted when I see that individual white men who entered the art world as rebels have been canonized in such a way that their standards and aesthetic visions are used instrumentally to devalue the works of new rebels in the art world, especially artists from marginal groups.

Most black artists I know – myself included – have passionately engaged the work of individual white male artists deemed great by the mainstream art world. That engagement happens because the work of these artists has moved *us* in some way. In our lived experience we have not found it problematic to embrace such work wholeheartedly, and to simultaneously subject to rigorous critique the institutional framework through which work by this group is more valued than that of any other group of people in this society. Sadly, conservative white artists and critics who control the cultural production of writing about art seem to have the greatest difficulty accepting that one can be critically aware of visual politics – the way race, gender, and class shape art practices (who makes art, how it sells, who values it, who writes about it) – without abandoning a fierce commitment to aesthetics. Black artists and critics must continually confront an art world so rooted in a politics of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal exclusion that our relationship to art and aesthetics can be submerged by the effort to challenge and change this existing structure. While there are

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now more working black artists than ever before in the United States, the number of black critics writing about art and aesthetics is only slowly increasing.

More than any other black cultural critic or art historian, Michele Wallace has consistently endeavored to link the dilemmas black artists face with the dearth of critical black voices thinking and writing about art. Her writings on art continually inspire me. In her essay ' "Why Are There No Great Black Artists?" The Problem of Visuality in African-American Culture,' Wallace insists that black folks must engage the work of black visual artists fully, and that includes understanding 'how regimens of visuality enforce racism, how they literally hold it in place.' The system of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is not maintained solely by white folks. It is also maintained by all the rest of us who internalize and enforce the values of this regime. This means that black people must be held accountable when we do not make needed critical interventions that would create the 'revolution in vision' Wallace calls for. Indeed, Wallace's essay, first given as the closing talk at a conference she organized on black popular culture, challenged black intellectuals to place visual arts on the critical agenda and to reconceptualize aesthetic criteria. Contemporary cultural criticism by African-Americans has nicely highlighted the need to uncover subjugated knowledge in black communities that relates to art and aesthetics – all too often it is simply assumed that visual arts are not important. Although individual progressive black females (Sylvia Ardyn Boone, Judith Wilson, Kellie Jones, Coco Fusco, and myself, to name just a few) have been at the forefront of critical writing about art that seeks to address the issues Wallace raises, often our work does not receive attention from the conservative mainstream or from more progressive audiences who purport to be our allies in struggle. When it appears either that there is no audience for one's

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work or that one's work will be appropriated and not directly acknowledged, the will to do more of that work is diminished. Patriarchal politics in the realm of the visual frequently insure that works by powerful men, and that includes men of color, receive more attention and are given greater authority of voice than works by women. While feminist thinkers of all races have made rebellious critical interventions to challenge the art world and art practices, much of their groundbreaking work is used, but not cited, by males.

Concurrently, progressive white critics working from critical standpoints that include race and gender have been persistent in their efforts to produce a body of work focusing on visual politics. Yet this interest often leads such critics to appropriate the discussion in ways that deny the critical contribution of those rare individual black critics who are writing on art. This is especially true with respect to the work of black female critics. For example: Maurice Berger, a white male critic, recently edited an anthology titled *Modern Art and Society*. In the introduction he describes the book: 'More than a primer on modernism's exclusions and biases, this anthology will hopefully be seen as a valuable methodological tool for art historians. Through various theoretical and critical processes, these essays, whether they discuss the work of one artist or many, offer new ways of thinking about the visual arts.' Positioned as a critical intervention, Berger's anthology functions similarly to more conservative texts in the way in which it both appropriates and excludes the voices of black females writing about art. Most of the essays Berger includes make no reference to art by black women or to critical work about art by black women, even though several of the essays build upon a critical foundation laid by black female critics. The anthology opens with Cornel West's insightful essay 'The New Cultural Politics of Difference,' which draws on the themes of invisibility and erasure of black voices on art and

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aesthetics, themes that have been so powerfully highlighted in the work of individual black female critics. West even acknowledges that 'the decisive push of postmodern black intellectuals toward a new cultural politics of difference has been made by the powerful critiques and constructive explorations of black diaspora women.' The work of black female critics informs this essay, yet our names go unmentioned.

In 'Cotton and Iron,' Trinh T. Minh-ha makes this useful point: 'Liberation opens up new relationships of power, which have to be controlled by practices of liberty. Displacement involves the invention of new forms of subjectivities, of pleasures, of intensities, of relations, which also implies the continuous renewal of a critical work that looks carefully and intensively at the very system of values to which one refers in fabricating the tools of resistance.' Progressive men who write about art and visual politics and who highlight difference, especially race and gender, must be vigilant in their critical efforts so that they do not subsume the voices and ideas of women within a critical rubric that reinforces male supremacy. The same may be said about curatorial practices. In both arenas, work by male artists and critical writing by male thinkers tend to receive more serious attention than similar work by female peers. Race does not mediate patriarchal politics in the realm of visual arts.

Art on My Mind: Visual Politics emerged as a response to the dearth of progressive critical writing by African-Americans on art and aesthetics. The book represents my critical response to the ongoing dialogues about art, visual politics, and aesthetics, and it shares many of the ideas that have emerged from discussions I've had with black folks and our allies in the struggle relating to the visual arts. Significantly, conversations with the art historian Sylvia Ardyn Boone and the cultural critic Michele Wallace were a major catalyst compelling me to explore more fully discussions I had begun about art and aesthetics

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in earlier work, particularly around the issue of subjugated knowledge – the attitudes and ways of thinking about art that black folks from different class positionalities hold and that are rarely talked about.

Even though visual arts fascinated me long before feminist thinking informed my critical consciousness, it was not until I fully engaged the politics of feminism in conjunction with liberatory black struggle that emphasized decolonization of our minds and imagination that I began to recognize the importance of taking the time to write a body of work addressing art and aesthetics. One obvious reason there are so few black folks writing about art is that there are so few rewards to be had for such writing. And the reality is that, as black female critics entering this domain, we risk having our ideas appropriated or go unacknowledged by those who enjoy more power, greater authority of voice, within the existing structure. This can lead us to choose silence. Audre Lorde spent a lifetime warning us of the danger in such a choice, reminding us that our silence will not save us. When I first began to search for and read art criticism on the work of artists from marginal groups, particularly the work of African-American artists, I was appalled by the dearth of material, by the lack of serious critical engagement. I felt both a tremendous sadness and an intense rage. Constructively grappling with these feelings by writing about the work of African-American artists, about art in black life, I began this collection. Some of the work is brand new; other essays have been published before but in specific contexts where they could easily go unnoticed or read only by a privileged few.

When I began these essays and conversations with individual artists, I did not plan to focus the majority of my attention on the work of black women artists. The book evolved in this direction only as I began to critically examine spaces of lack. I found that even those black women artists whose work is widely

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acclaimed and receives attention on a number of fronts, both within the mainstream art world and outside, rarely receive serious consideration by art critics. Often critiques of their work are descriptive rather than critically interpretative. Every artist whose work I have chosen to write about makes art that I value. I have had the good fortune to live with pieces by every artist in this book. In some cases their work has sustained me during hard times. Recently, at the end of a lecture on art and aesthetics at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, I was asked whether I thought art mattered, if it really made a difference in our lives. From my own experience, I could testify to the transformative power of art. I asked my audience to consider why in so many instances of global imperialist conquest by the West, art has been either appropriated or destroyed. I shared my amazement at all the African art I first saw years ago in the museums and galleries of Paris. It occurred to me then that if one could make a people lose touch with their capacity to create, lose sight of their will and their power to make art, then the work of subjugation, of colonization, is complete. Such work can be undone only by acts of concrete reclamation.

The works of art I write about here have all had a transformative impact on my life. I first encountered Margo Humphrey's work when I was a graduate student. Lacking the money to buy the real thing, I bought a poster of her print *The Getaway*. During the many years that I remained in a relationship that was heartbreaking, I found hope and renewal for my spirits in this image of union between lovers, of joyous escape. This print was placed so that I would look at it every day when I awakened. It worked magic in my soul. Andres Serrano's photograph *Circle of Blood* was similarly healing to my spirit. In a period of long illness when I was in danger of bleeding my life away, I developed a hatred of blood so intense that it disrupted my capacity to function effectively. Serrano's image restored my appreciation

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for blood as a life-giving force. These are just two examples of the ways in which beautiful works of art have concretely and constructively influenced my thoughts, my habits of being.

Most art critics write about work that engages them deeply. The arbitrary nature of our choices struck me as I chose works to write about for this collection. Two of my favorite works of art are by white male artists, Leon Golub and John Baldessari. I chose not to write about these pieces at this time because the work of these two artists has received so much critical attention. That does not mean that writing about this work from my perspective would not add to the body of critical work that already exists; it just means that the uses of time, the choices we make with respect to what to think and write about, are part of visual politics. It is my hope that the essays included here will, in conjunction with the work of other progressive critics, stand as acts of critical resistance that actively introduce change within existing visual politics. As we critically imagine new ways to think and write about visual art, as we make spaces for dialogue across boundaries, we engage a process of cultural transformation that will ultimately create a revolution in vision.

As *Art on My Mind* progressed, I felt the need to take my first painting out of the shadows of the basement where it had been hidden, to stand it in the light and look at it anew. The outline of two houses, shacks, is visible. It is autumn. The yellow light of early fall emerges in the midst of earthy brown and red shades. There is chaos and turbulence in the image. It is a time of change and transition. Yet nothing can disturb the inner sanctuary – the place where the soul lives. These are the dwelling places of the spirit. Returning to them, I come again to the memory of a free world of color where ultimately only our engagement with the work suffices – makes art matter.

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Art on My Mind

In high school I painted pictures that won prizes. My art teacher, a white man whom we called Mr Harold, always promoted and encouraged my work. I can still remember him praising me in front of my parents. To them art was play. It was not something real – not a way to make a living. To them I was not a talented artist because I could not draw the kind of pictures that I would now call documentary portraits. The images I painted never looked like our familiar world and therefore I could not be an artist. And even though Mr Harold told me I was an artist, I really could not believe him. I had been taught to believe that no white person in this newly desegregated high school knew anything about what black people's real lives were all about. After all, they did not even want to teach us. How, then, could we trust what they taught? It did not matter that Mr Harold was different. It did not matter to grown folks that in his art classes he treated black students like we had a right to be there, deserved his attention and his affirmation. It did not matter to them, but it began to matter to *us:* We ran to his classes. We escaped there. We entered the world of color, the free world of art. And in that world we were, momentarily, whatever we wanted to be. That was my initiation. I longed to be an artist, but whenever I hinted that I might be an artist, grown folks looked at me with contempt. They told me I had to be out of my mind thinking that black folks could be artists – why, you could not eat art.

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Nothing folks said changed my longing to enter the world of art and be free.

Life taught me that being an artist was dangerous. The one grown black person I met who made art lived in a Chicago basement. A distant relative of my father's, cousin Schuyler was talked about as someone who had wasted his life dreaming about art. He was lonely, sad, and broke. At least that was how folks saw him. I do not know how he saw himself, only that he loved art. He loved to talk about it. And there in the dark shadows of his basement world he initiated me into critical thinking about art and culture. Cousin Schuyler talked to me about art in a grown-up way. He said he knew I had 'the feeling' for art. And he chose me to be his witness: to be the one who would always remember the images. He painted pictures of naked black women, with full breasts, red lips, and big hips. Long before Paul Gauguin's images of big-boned naked brown women found a place in my visual universe, I had been taught to hold such images close, to look at art and think about it, to keep art on my mind.

Now when I think about the politics of seeing – how we perceive the visual, how we write and talk about it – I understand that the perspective from which we approach art is overdetermined by location. I tell my sister G., who is married to a man who works in an auto factory in Flint, Michigan, and has three children, that I am thinking about art. I want to know whether she thinks about art, and, more importantly, if she thinks most black folks are thinking about art. She tells me that art is just too far away from our lives, that 'art is something – in order to enjoy and know it, it takes work.' And I say, 'But art is on my mind. It has always been on my mind.' She says, 'Girl, you are different, you always were into this stuff. It's like you just learned it somehow. And if you are not taught how to know art, it's something you learn on your own.'

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We finish our late-night conversation and it's hours later when, staring into the dark, art on my mind, I remember Mr Harold. I close my eyes and see him looking over my work, smell him, see the flakes of dandruff resting on his black shirt. In the dark, I conjure an image of him: always in black, always smiling, willing to touch our black hands while the other white folks hate and fear contact with our bodies. In the dark of memory, I also remember cousin Schuyler, the hours of listening and talking about art in his basement, the paintings of naked brown women. And I think Sister G. is wrong. I did not just learn to think about art on my own – there were always teachers who saw me looking, searching the visual for answers, and who guided my search. The mystery is only why I wanted to look while others around me closed their eyes – that I cannot yet explain.

When I think of the place of the visual in black life, I think most black folks are more influenced by television and movie images than by visual arts like painting, sculpture, and so on. My sister G. told me: 'We can identify with movies and we don't feel we know how to identify with art.' Black folks may not identify with art due to an absence of representation. Many of us do not know that black folks create diverse art, and we may not see them doing it, especially if we live in working-class or underclass households. Or art (both the product and the process of creation) may be so devalued – not just in underclass communities, but in diverse black contexts, and, to some extent, in our society as a whole – that we may deem art irrelevant even if it is abundantly in our midst. That possibility aside, the point is that most black folks do not believe that the presence of art in our lives is essential to our collective well-being. Indeed, with respect to black political life, in black liberation struggles – whether early protests against white supremacy and racism during slavery and Reconstruction, during the civil rights movement, or

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during the more recent black power movements – the production of art and the creation of a politics of the visual that would not only affirm artists but also see the development of an aesthetics of viewing as central to claiming subjectivity have been consistently devalued. Taking our cues from mainstream white culture, black folks have tended to see art as completely unimportant in the struggle for survival. Art as propaganda was and is acceptable, but not art that was concerned with any old subject, content, or form. And black folks who thought there could be some art for art's sake for black people, well, they were seen as being out of the loop, apolitical. Hence, black leaders have rarely included in their visions of black liberation the necessity to affirm in a sustained manner creative expression and freedom in the visual arts. Much of our political focus on the visual has been related to the issue of good and bad images. Indeed, many folks think the problem of black identification with art is simply the problem of underrepresentation, not enough images, not enough visible black artists, not enough prestigious galleries showing their work.

Representation is a crucial location of struggle for any exploited and oppressed people asserting subjectivity and decolonization of the mind. Without a doubt, if all black children were daily growing up in environments where they learned the importance of art and saw artists that were black, our collective black experience of art would be transformed. However, we know that, in the segregated world of recent African-American history, for years black folks created and displayed their art in segregated black communities, and this effort was not enough to make an intervention that revolutionized our collective experience of art. Remembering this fact helps us to understand that the question of identifying with art goes beyond the issue of representation.

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We must look, therefore, at other factors that render art

meaningless in the everyday lives of most black folks. Identification with art is a process, one that involves a number of different factors. Two central factors that help us to understand black folks' collective response to art in the United States are, first, recognition of the familiar – that is, we see in art something that resembles what we know – and, second, that we look with the received understanding that art is necessarily a terrain of defamiliarization: it may take what we see/know and make us look at it in a new way.

In the past, particularly in segregated school settings, the attitude toward art was that it had a primary value only when it documented the world as is. Hence the heavy-handed emphasis on portraiture in black life that continues to the present day, especially evident if we look at the type of art that trickles down to the masses of black folks. Rooted in the African-American historical relation to the visual is a resistance to the idea of art as a space of defamiliarization. Coming to art in search only of exact renderings of reality, many black folks have left art dissatisfied. However, as a process, defamiliarization takes us away from the real only to bring us back to it in a new way. It enables the viewer to experience what the critic Michael Benedikt calls in his manifesto *For an Architecture of Reality* 'direct esthetic experiences of the real.' For more black folks to identify with art, we must shift conventional ways of thinking about the function of art. There must be a revolution in the way we see, the way we look.

Such a revolution would necessarily begin with diverse programs of critical education that would stimulate collective awareness that the creation and public sharing of art is essential to any practice of freedom. If black folks are collectively to affirm our subjectivity in resistance, as we struggle against forces of domination and move toward the invention of the decolonized self, we must set our imaginations free. Acknowledging

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that we have been and are colonized both in our minds and in our imaginations, we begin to understand the need for promoting and celebrating creative expression.

The painter Charles White, commenting on his philosophy of art, acknowledged: 'The substance of man is such that he has to satisfy the needs of life with all his senses. His very being cries out for these senses to appropriate the true riches of life: the beauty of human relationships and dignity, of nature and art, realized in striding towards a bright tomorrow . . . Without culture, without creative art, inspiring to these senses, mankind stumbles in a chasm of despair and pessimism.' While employing sexist language, White was voicing his artistic understanding that aesthetics nurture the spirit and provide ways of rethinking and healing psychic wounds inflicted by assault from the forces of imperialist, racist, and sexist domination.

As black artists have broken free from imperialist white-supremacist notions of the way art should look and function in society, they have approached representation as a location for contestation. In looking back at the lives of Lois Mailou Jones and Romare Bearden, it is significant to note that they both began their painting careers working with standard European notions of content and form. Their attempt to assimilate the prevailing artistic norms of their day was part of the struggle to gain acceptance and recognition. Yet it was when they began to grapple within their work with notions of what is worthy of representation – when they no longer focused exclusively on European traditions and drew upon the cultural legacy of the African-American diasporic experience – that they fully discovered their artistic identity.

Lois Mailou Jones has said that it was an encounter with the critic Alain Locke that motivated her to do work that directly reflected black experience. Locke insisted that black artists had to do more with the black experience and, especially, with their

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heritage. Although Romare Bearden was critical of Locke and felt that it was a mistake for black folks to think that all black art had to be protest art, Bearden was obsessed with his ancestral legacy, with the personal politics of African-American identity and relationships. This subject matter was the groundwork that fueled all his art. He drew on memories of black life – the images, the culture.

For many black folks, seeing Romare Bearden's work redeems images from our lives that many of us have previously responded to only with feelings of shame and embarrassment. When Bearden painted images reflecting aspects of black life that emerged from underclass experience, some black viewers were disturbed. After his work appeared in a 1940s exhibition titled 'Contemporary Negro Art,' Bearden wrote a letter to a friend complaining about the lack of a sophisticated critical approach to art created by black folks. 'To many of my own people, I learn, my work was very disgusting and morbid – and portrayed a type of Negro that they were trying to get away from.' These black audiences were wanting art to be solely a vehicle for displaying the race at its best. It is this notion of the function of art, coupled with the idea that all black art must be protest art, that has served to stifle and repress black artistic expression. Both notions of the function of art rely on the idea that there should be no nonrepresentational black art. Bearden's work challenged the idea that abstraction had no place in the world of black art. He did not accept that there was any tension between the use of black content and the exploration of diverse forms. In 1959 Bearden wrote, 'I am, naturally, very interested in form and structure – in a personal way of expression which can perhaps be called new. I have nothing, of course, against representational images, but the demands, the direction of the sign factors in my painting now completely obliterate any representational image.'

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Although Bearden was a celebrated artist when he died in 1988, his work has reached many more black folks since his death. Those black audiences who have learned to recognize the value of black artistic expression revere Bearden for his having dared to make use of every image of black life available to his creative imagination. As so much traditional black folk experience is lost and forgotten, as we lose sight of the rich experience of working-class black people in our transnational corporate society, many of us are looking to art to recover and claim a relationship to an African-American past in images.

The black playwright August Wilson, extolling the liberatory powers of art in his foreword to the book *Romare Bearden: His Life and Art*, described his first encounter with Bearden's work:

> What I saw was black life presented in its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence. It was the art of a large and generous spirit that defined not only the character of black American life, but also its conscience. I don't recall what I said as I looked at it. My response was visceral. I was looking at myself in ways I hadn't thought of before and have never ceased to think of since.

Wilson's testimony to the power of art, images, the visual as an experience that can convert and serve as a catalyst for transformation is the kind of witnessing that is necessary if we are to change the way masses of black folks think about art. Collectively, black folks must be able to believe fully in the transformative power of art if we are to put art on our mind in a new way.

The writer Ntozake Shange offers testimony similar to Wilson's in *Ridin' the Moon in Texas*. In a 'note to the reader' at the beginning of the book, she shares the place of art in her life. Talking

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first about growing up with a father who painted, who had a darkroom, she continues: 'As I grew I surrounded myself with images, abstractions that drew warmth from me or wrapped me in loveliness . . . Paintings and poems are moments, capturing or seducing us, when we are so vulnerable. These images are metaphors. This is my life, how I see and, therefore, am able to speak. Praise the spirits and the stars that there are others among us who allow us visions that we may converse with one another.'

Revealing to the reader her privileged background in this note, Ntozake evokes a domestic black world in which art had a powerful presence, one that empowered her to expand her consciousness and create. While writing this piece, I have spoken with many black folks from materially privileged backgrounds who learned in their home life to think about art and sometimes to appreciate it. Other black folks I have talked with who have access to money mention seeing black art on the walls while watching 'The Cosby Show' and developing an interest. They speak about wanting to own black art as an investment, but they do not speak of an encounter with the visual that transforms. Though they may appreciate black art as a commodity, they may be as unable to identify with art aesthetically as are those who have no relation at all to art.

I began this essay sharing bits and pieces of a conversation that did not emerge from a bourgeois standpoint. My sister G. considered the role of art in black life by looking critically at the experiences of black working-class, underclass, and lower-middle-class folks in the world she has known most intimately. Looking at black life from that angle, from those class locations that reflect the positionality of most black folks, she made relevant observations. We both agreed that art does not have much of a place in black life, especially the work of black artists.

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Years ago most black people grew up in houses where art,

if it was present at all, took the form of cheap reproductions of work created by white artists featuring white images; some of it was so-called great art. Often these images incorporated religious iconography and symbols. I first saw cheap reproductions of art by Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci in Southern black religious households. We identified with these images. They appealed to us because they conveyed aspects of religious experience that were familiar. The fact of whiteness was subsumed by the spiritual expression in the work.

Contemporary critiques of black engagement with white images that see this engagement solely as an expression of internalized racism have led many folks to remove such images from their walls. Rarely, however, have they been replaced by the work of black artists. Without a radical counterhegemonic politics of the visual that works to validate black folks' ability to appreciate art by white folks or any other group without reproducing racist colonization, black folks are further deprived of access to art, and our experience of the visual in art is deeply diminished. In contemporary times, television and cinema may be fast destroying any faint desire that black folks might have, particularly those of us who are not materially privileged, to identify with art, to nurture and sustain our engagement with it as creators and consumers.

Our capacity to value art is severely corrupted and perverted by a politics of the visual that suggests we must limit our responses to the narrow confines of a debate over good versus bad images. How can we truly see, experience, and appreciate all that may be present in any work of art if our only concern is whether it shows us a positive or negative image? In the valuable essay 'Negative/Positive,' which introduces Michele Wallace's collection *Invisibility Blues*, Wallace cautions us to remember that the binary opposition of negative versus positive images too often sets the limits of African-American cultural criticism.

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I would add that it often sets the limits of African-American creative practice, particularly in the visual arts. Wallace emphasizes that this opposition ties 'Afro-American cultural production to racist ideology in a way that makes the failure to alter it inevitable.' Clearly, it is only as we move away from the tendency to define ourselves in reaction to white racism that we are able to move toward that practice of freedom which requires us first to decolonize our minds. We can liberate ourselves and others only by forging in resistance identities that transcend narrowly defined limits.

Art constitutes one of the rare locations where acts of transcendence can take place and have a wide-ranging transformative impact. Indeed, mainstream white art circles are acted upon in radical ways by the work of black artists. It is part of the contemporary tragedy of racism and white supremacy that white folks often have greater access to the work of black artists and to the critical apparatus that allows for understanding and appreciation of the work. Current commodification of blackness may mean that the white folks who walk through the exhibits of work by such artists as Bettye and Alison Saar are able to be more in touch with this work than most black folks. These circumstances will change only as African-Americans and our allies renew the progressive black liberation struggle – reenvisioning black revolution in such a way that we create collective awareness of the radical place that art occupies within the freedom struggle and of the way in which experiencing art can enhance our understanding of what it means to live as free subjects in an unfree world.

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