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also, and perhaps even more significantly, to "its ability to shape our ideas, to influence our behavior and to define our society."¹¹ If racism is to be conquered in the United States, both in its institutional and attitudinal manifestations, then certainly Afro-American photographers must play a special role in the process of redefining the ideologically tainted imagery of their people. This process involves not only their own technical expertise, not only their esthetic and social sensitivity, but also, in a very fundamental sense, the end of their socially imposed invisibility. Referring to a brilliant contemporary photographer, A. D. Coleman wrote:

It is little short of tragic that our prejudices should have deprived Roy DeCarava of the wide audience he deserves, and deprived that audience of an artist with so much to reveal that they desperately need to know."¹²

Roy DeCarava and how many more?

NOTES

- 1 Allon Schoener (ed.), *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968* (New York: Dell, 1979), 11.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 16.
- 4 Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982).
- 5 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1969), 46-7.
- 6 David C. Driskell, *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976), 36.
- 7 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Meridian Books, 1964), 122.
- 8 A. D. Coleman, 17.
- 9 Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (first published in *The Nation*, June 23, 1926), in Williams and Harris (eds), *Amistad I* (New York: Vintage, 1970), 305.
- 10 Ibid., 304-5.
- 11 Gisele Freund, *Photography and Society* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1980), 5.
- 12 Coleman, 28.

18

Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia

Not long ago I attended a performance in San Francisco by women presently or formerly incarcerated in the County Jail, in collaboration with Bay Area women performance artists. After the show, I went backstage to the "green room," where the women inmates, guarded by deputy sheriffs stationed outside the door, were celebrating with their families and friends. Having worked with some of the women at the jail, I wanted to congratulate them on the show. One woman introduced me to her brother, who at first responded to my name with a blank stare. The woman admonished him: "You don't know who Angela Davis is?! You should be ashamed." Suddenly a flicker of recognition flashed across his face. "Oh," he said, "Angela Davis - the Afro."

Such responses I find, are hardly exceptional, and it is both humiliating and humbling to discover that a single generation after the events that constructed me as a public personality, I am remembered as a hairdo. It is humiliating because it reduces a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion; it is humbling because such encounters with the younger generation demonstrate the fragility and mutability of historical images, particularly those associated with African-American history. This encounter with the young man who identified me as "the Afro" reminded me of a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* that listed me as one of the fifty most influential fashion (read: hairstyle) trendsetters over the last century.¹ I continue to find it ironic that the popularity of the "Afro" is attributed to me, when, in actuality, I was emulating a whole host of women, both public figures and women I encountered in my daily life, when I began to wear my hair natural in the late sixties.

But it is not merely the reduction of historical politics to contemporary fashion that infuriates me. Especially disconcerting is the fact that the distinction of being known as "the Afro" is largely a result of a particular economy of journalistic images of black women in which mine is one of the

This essay first appeared in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis (New York: The New Press, 1994). Copyright © 1994 Angela Y. Davis. Reprinted by permission of The New Press.

relatively few that has survived the last two decades. Or perhaps the very segregation of those photographic images caused mine to enter into the then dominant journalistic culture precisely by virtue of my presumed "criminality." In any case, it has survived, disconnected from the historical context in which it arose, as fashion. Most young African Americans who are familiar with my name and twenty-five-year-old image have encountered photographs and film/video clips largely in music videos, and in black history montages in popular books and magazines. Within the interpretive context in which they learn to situate these photographs, the most salient element of the image is the hairstyle, understood less as a political statement than as fashion.

The unprecedented contemporary circulation of photographic and filmic images of African Americans has multiple and contradictory implications. On the one hand, it holds the promise of visual memory of older and departed generations, of both well-known figures and people who may not have achieved public prominence. However, there is also the danger that this historical memory may become ahistorical and apolitical. "Photographs are relics of the past," John Berger has written. They are "traces of what has happened. If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would acquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments."²

In the past, I have been rather reluctant to reflect in more than a casual way on the power of the visual images by which I was represented during the period of my trial. Perhaps this is due to my unwillingness to confront those images as having to some extent structured my experiences during that era. The recent recycling of some of these images in contexts that privilege the "Afro" as fashion – revolutionary glamor – has led me to reconsider them both in the historical context in which they were first produced (and in which I first experienced them) and within the "historical" context in which they often are presented today as "arrested moments."

In September 1969, the University of California Regents fired me from my post in the philosophy department at UCLA because of my membership in the Communist Party. The following summer, charges of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy were brought against me in connection with my activities on behalf of George Jackson and the Soledad Brothers. The circulation of various photographic images of me – taken by journalists, undercover policemen, and movement activists – played a major role in both the mobilization of public opinion against me and the development of the campaign that was ultimately responsible for my acquittal.

Twenty-five years later, many of these photographs are being recycled and recontextualized in ways that are at once exciting and disturbing. With the first public circulation of my photographs, I was intensely aware of the

invasive and transformative power of the camera and of the ideological contextualization of my images, which left me with little or no agency. On the one hand I was portrayed as a conspiratorial and monstrous Communist (i.e., anti-American) whose unruly natural hairdo symbolized black militancy (i.e., anti-whiteness). Some of the first hate mail I received tended to collapse "Russia" and "Africa." I was told to "go back to Russia" and often in the same sentence (in connection with a reference to my hair) to "go back to Africa." On the other hand, sympathetic portrayals tended to interpret the image – almost inevitably one with my mouth wide open – as that of a charismatic and raucous revolutionary ready to lead the masses into battle. Since I considered myself neither monstrous nor charismatic, I felt fundamentally betrayed on both accounts: violated on the first account, and deficient on the second.

When I was fired by the UC Regents in 1969, an assortment of photographs appeared throughout that year in various newspapers and magazines and on television. However, it was not until felony charges were brought against me in connection with the Marin County shootout that the photographs became what Susan Sontag has called a part of "the general furniture of the environment."³ As such, they truly began to frighten me. A cycle of terror was initiated by the decision of the FBI to declare me one of the country's ten most-wanted criminals. Although I had been underground for over a month before I actually saw the photographs the FBI had decided to use on the poster, I had to picture how they might portray me as I attempted to create for myself an appearance that would be markedly different from the one defined as armed and dangerous. The props I used consisted of a wig with straight black hair, long false lashes, and more eyeshadow, liner, and blush than I had ever before imagined wearing in public. Never having seriously attempted to present myself as glamorous, it seemed to me that glamor was the only look that might annul the likelihood of being perceived as a revolutionary. It never could have occurred to me that the same "revolutionary" image I then sought to camouflage with glamor would be turned, a generation later, into glamor and nostalgia.

After the FBI poster was put on display in post offices, other government buildings, and on the television program *The FBI*, *Life* magazine came out with a provocative issue featuring a cover story on me. Illustrated by photographs from my childhood years through the UCLA firing, the article probed the reasons for my supposedly abandoning a sure trajectory toward fulfillment of the middle-class American dream in order to lead the unpredictable life of a "black revolutionary." Considering the vast circulation of this pictorial magazine,⁴ I experienced something akin to what Barthes was referring to when he wrote "I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it according to its caprice (apology of this mortiferous power certain Communards paid with their lives for their willingness or even their

eagerness to pose on the barricades: defeated, they were recognized by Thiers's police and shot, almost every one)."⁵ The life-size headshot on the cover of the magazine would be seen by as many people if not more, than the much smaller portraits on the FBI poster. Having confronted my own image in the store where I purchased the magazine I was convinced that FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover had conspired in the appearance of that cover story. More than anything else it seemed to me to be a magnification and elaboration of the WANTED poster. Moreover the text of the story gave a rather convincing explanation as to why the pictures should be associated with arms and danger.

The photograph on the cover of my autobiography,⁶ published in 1974, was taken by the renowned photographer Phillippe Halsman. When I entered his studio with Toni Morrison, who was my editor, the first question he asked us was whether we had brought the black leather jacket. He assumed, it turned out, that he was to recreate with his camera a symbolic visual representation of black militancy: leather jacket (uniform of the Black Panther Party), Afro hairdo and raised fist. We had to persuade him to photograph me in a less predictable posture. As recently as 1993, the persisting persuasiveness of these visual stereotypes was made clear to me when I had to insist that Anna Deavere Smith rethink her representation of me in her theater piece *Fires in the Mirror*, which initially relied upon a black leather jacket as her main prop.

The most obvious evidence of the power of those photographic images was the part they played in structuring people's opinions about me as a "fugitive" and a political prisoner; their broader and more subtle effect was the way they served as generic images of black women who wore their hair "natural." From the constant stream of stories I have heard over the last twenty-four years (and continue to hear), I infer that hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of Afro-wearing black women were accosted, harassed, and arrested by police, FBI, and immigration agents during the two months I spent underground. One woman who told me that she hoped she could serve as a "decoy" because of her light skin and big natural, was obviously conscious of the way the photographs – circulating within a highly charged racialized context – constructed generic representations of young black women. Consequently, the photographs identified vast numbers of my black female contemporaries who wore naturals (whether light- or dark-skinned) as targets of repression. This is the hidden historical content behind the continued association of my name with the Afro.

A young woman who is a former student of mine has been wearing an Afro during the last few months. Rarely a day passes, she has told me, when she is not greeted with cries of "Angela Davis" from total strangers. Moreover, during the months preceding the writing of this article, I have received an astounding number of requests for interviews from journalists doing

stories on "the resurgence of the Afro." A number of the most recent requests were occasioned by a layout in the fashion section of the March 1994 issue of *Vibe* magazine entitled "Free Angela: Actress Cynda Williams as Angela Davis, a Fashion Revolutionary." The spread consists of eight full-page photos of Cynda Williams (known for her role as the singer in Spike Lee's film *Mo' Better Blues*) in poses that parody photographs taken of me during the early 1970s. The layout, by stylist Patty Wilson, is described as "'docufashion' because it uses modern clothing to mimic Angela Davis's look from the '70s."⁷

Some of the pictures are rather straightforward attempts to recreate press photos taken at my arrest, during the trial, and after my release. Others can be characterized as pastiche,⁸ drawing elements like leather-jacketed black men from contemporary stereotypes of the sixties-seventies era of black militancy. They include an arrest scene with the model situated between two uniformed policemen and wearing an advertised black satin blouse (reminiscent of the top I was wearing on the date of my arrest). As with her hair, the advertised eyewear are remarkably similar to the glasses I wore. There are two courtroom scenes in which Williams wears an enormous Afro wig and advertised see-through minidresses and, in one of them, handcuffs. Yet another revolves around a cigar-smoking, bearded man dressed in fatigues with a gun holster around his waist, obviously meant to evoke Che Guevara. (Even the fatigues can be purchased – from Cheap Jack's!) There is no such thing as subtlety in these photos. Because the point of this fashion spread is to represent the clothing associated with revolutionary movements of the early seventies as revolutionary fashion in the nineties, the sixtieth-anniversary logo of the Communist Party has become altered in one of the photos to read 1919–1971 (instead of 1979). And the advertised dress in the photo for which this logo is a backdrop is adorned with pin-on buttons reading "Free All Political Prisoners."

The photographs I find most unsettling, however, are the two small headshots of Williams wearing a huge Afro wig on a reproduction of the FBI wanted poster that is otherwise unaltered except for the words "FREE ANGELA" in bold red print across the bottom of the document. Despite the fact that the inordinately small photos do not really permit much of a view of the clothing Williams wears, the tops and glasses (again quite similar to the ones I wore in the two imitated photographs) are listed as purchasable items. This is the most blatant example of the way the particular history of my legal case is emptied of all content so that it can serve as a commodified backdrop for advertising. The way in which this document provided a historical pretext for something akin to a reign of terror for countless young black women is effectively erased by its use as a prop for selling clothes and promoting a seventies fashion nostalgia. What is also lost in this nostalgic surrogate for historical memory – in these "arrested

moments," to use John Berger's words – is the activist involvement of vast numbers of black women in movements that are now represented with even greater masculinist contours than they actually exhibited at the time.

Without engaging the numerous debates occasioned by Frederic Jameson's paper "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," I would like to suggest that his analysis of "nostalgia films" and their literary counterparts, which are "historical novels in appearance only," may provide a useful point of departure for an interpretation of this advertising genre called "docufashion," as "[W]e seem condemned to seek the historical past," Jameson writes, "through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach." Perhaps by also taking up John Berger's call for an "alternative photography," we may develop strategies for engaging photographic images like the ones I have evoked, by actively seeking to transform their interpretive contexts in education, popular culture, the media, community organizing, and so on. Particularly in relation to African-American historical images we need to find ways of incorporating them into "social and political memory, instead of using [them] as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of such memory."¹⁰

NOTES

- 1 *New York Times Magazine*, n.d.
- 2 John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 57.
- 3 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 27.
- 4 During the 1960s, *Life* magazine had a circulation of approximately forty million people. (Gisele Freund, *Photography and Society* [Boston: David R. Godine, 1980], 143.)
- 5 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 11.
- 6 Angela Y. Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1974).
- 7 *Vibe*, vol. 2, no. 2 (March 1994), 16.
- 8 I use the term *pastiche* both in the usual sense of a potpourri of disparate ingredients and in the sense in which Frederic Jameson uses it. "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter. . . . Pastiche is black parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor." (Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* [Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983], 114.) Jameson's essay has appeared in several versions. I thank Victoria Smith for suggesting that I reread this essay in connection with the *Vibe* story.
- 9 Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 118.
- 10 Berger, *About Looking*, 58.

19

Meditations on the Legacy of Malcolm X

Malcolm had said to . . . black women earlier in December, 1964 that we were the real educators. We were the setter of fires that would burn until our people let themselves free.

Patricia Robinson

Patricia Robinson's engaging account of Malcolm X's political bequest to and acknowledgment of African-American women has been all but eclipsed by representations in contemporary black popular culture that tend to portray Malcolm as the quintessential "black man," as that historical figure whose style and rhetoric are the measure by which the revolutionary potential of African-American youth in the 1990s should be judged. "On Sunday afternoon, February 21, 1965," Robinson mused, "all of us, who had waited for centuries for that revolutionary son and brother to be reborn, gratefully and humbly accepted the revolutionary responsibility as it passed out of Malcolm's slowly descending body."¹ She contended that after Malcolm's disillusionment with the Nation of Islam, he began to turn toward and to listen to black women in a way that had not been possible as long as he functioned under the ideological tutelage of a man – Elijah Muhammad – whose political/religious vision and whose personal life were thoroughly shaped by male supremacy. Relying on the paradigm of the family, she interpreted his legacy as that of the "black revolutionary son" driven by a new historical impulse to recognize and assist in a process of empowering the "mother" and the "sister." As problematic as this model might be, with its unavoidable masculinist implications, it seems to me that Robinson was calling for a feminist appreciation of Malcolm's political contributions.

In 1992, within a context constructed by ubiquitous images of Malcolm as the *essential black man*, the juxtaposition of the words "Malcolm" and

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NOTES

- 1 Patricia Robinson, "Malcolm X, Our Revolutionary Son and Brother," in John Henrik Clarke (ed.), *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 63.
- 2 Bruce Perry (ed.), *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1989), 25.
- 3 Interview in *Young Socialist* (March–April 1965), excerpted in George Breitman (ed.), *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 212.
- 4 Ibid., 212–13.
- 5 In an interview conducted by Bernice Bass on December 27, 1964, Malcolm made the following comment: "One thing I noticed in both the Middle East and Africa, in every country that was progressive the women were progressive. In every country that was underdeveloped and backward, it was to the same degree that the women were undeveloped or underdeveloped and backward" (Perry, ed., *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, 98). During the same interview, he spoke of his meeting with Shirley Graham Du Bois, who at that time was the national director of television in Ghana: "She's a woman, and she's an Afro-American, and I think that should make Afro-American women mighty proud" (p. 96).
- 6 Nick Charles, "Malcolm X, The Myth and the Man," *Cleveland Plain Dealer Magazine*, February 2, 1992.
- 7 Betty Shabazz (as told to Susan Taylor and Audrey Edwards), "Loving and Losing Malcolm," *Essence*, 22, no. 10 (February 1992), 50.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Three out of five African Americans live in communities with abandoned toxic waste sites. Three of the five largest commercial hazardous waste landfills (that is, 40 percent of the nation's landfill capacity) are located in predominantly African-American communities. In Los Angeles, 71 percent of African Americans and 50 percent of Latinos live in areas with the most polluted air – as compared with 34 percent of white people. See Robert D. Bullard, "Urban Infrastructure: Social, Environmental, and Health Risks to African Americans," in Billy Tidwell (ed.), *The State of Black America, 1992* (Washington, DC: National Urban League, 1992), 185, 190.

20

Black Nationalism: The Sixties and the Nineties

In this discussion of masculinist dimensions of black nationalism and cultural challenges to male supremacy, I reflect on the kindred character of black nationalism(s) and ideologies of male dominance during the sixties. Revisiting my own experiences with the nationalisms of the sixties, I suggest ways in which contemporary black popular culture may have been unduly influenced by some of the more unfortunate ideological convergences of that era.

I begin with some thoughts on the impact of Malcolm X's nationalist oratory on my own political awakening, which I would later think of in terms similar to Frantz Fanon's description of the coming to consciousness of the colonized in *The Wretched of the Earth*.

I remember the moment when I first felt the stirrings of "nationalism" in my – as I might have articulated it then – "Negro Soul." This *prise de conscience* occurred during a lecture delivered by Malcolm X at Brandeis University, where I was one of five or six black undergraduates enrolled. I might have said that I felt "empowered" by Malcolm's words – except that the notion of power had not yet been understood in a way that separated the exercise of power from subjective emotions occasioned by an awareness of the possibility of exercising it. But I recall that I felt extremely good – I could even say I experienced the joy that Cornel West talked about – momentarily surrounded by, feeling nurtured and caressed by black people who, as I recall, seemed to have no particular identity other than that they were black.

This invitation to join an empowering but abstract community of black people – this naive nationalist consciousness – was extended to me in a virtually all-white setting. It was a strange, but quite logical, reversal. Having grown up in one of the most segregated cities in the South, I had never personally known a white person in my hometown. The only one with whom I remember having any contact was the Jewish man who owned the

grocery store in our neighborhood. White people lived across the street from my family's house, but we literally lived on the border separating black from white and could not cross the street on which our house was located. Because of the mandatory character of the black community in which I grew up I came to experience it as somewhat suffocating and desperately sought a way out.

Now finally, on the other side of this feeling evoked in me by the offensive nationalist rhetoric of Malcolm X – offensive, both because he offended the white people in attendance and because he was ideologically on the offensive – I was able to construct a psychological space within which I could “feel good about myself.” I could celebrate my body (especially my nappy hair, which I always attacked with a hot comb in ritualistic seclusion), my musical proclivities, and my suppressed speech patterns, among other things. But I shared these feelings with no one. It was a secret thing – like a collective, fictive playmate. This thing distanced me from the white people around me while simultaneously rendering controllable the distance I had always felt from them. It also meant that I did not have to defer to the mandatoriness of my Negro community back home. As a matter of fact, as a result of this experience into which Malcolm's words launched me, I felt a strengthening of the ties with the community of my birth.

This nationalist appeal of the early Malcolm X, however, did not move me to activism – although I had been something of an activist since the age of thirteen. I didn't particularly feel the need to do anything. It ended for me where it began in changing the structure of my feeling. Don't get me wrong. I really needed that. I needed it at least as much as I would later need the appeal of the image of the leather-jacketed, black-bereted warriors standing with guns at the entrance to the California legislature. (I saw that image in a German newspaper while studying with Theodor Adorno in Frankfurt.) That image, which would eventually become so problematic for me, called me home. And it directed me into an organizing frenzy in the streets of South Central Los Angeles.

In a sense, the feeling that Malcolm had conjured in me could finally acquire a mode of expression – collective, activist, and, I hoped, transformative. Except that once I arrived in Southern California – with contacts I had gotten from Stokely Carmichael, whom I met, along with Michael X, in London at a “Dialectics of Liberation” conference – my inquiries and enthusiasm were interpreted as a desire to infiltrate local Black organizations. After all, I had just gotten off the boat from Europe. I had to be CIA or something. But, eventually, I did embark upon an exploration of some of the nationalisms of the era. I found out, during my initial contacts, that Ron Karenga's group was too misogynist (although I would not have used that word then). Another organization I found too middle class and elitist. Yet another fell apart because we, women, refused to be pushed to the back of

the bus. And even though we may have considered the feminism of that period white, middle class, and utterly irrelevant, we also found compulsory male leadership utterly unacceptable.

Today, I realize that there is no simple or unitary way to look at expressions of black nationalism or essentialism in contemporary cultural forms. As my own political consciousness evolved in the sixties, I found myself in a politically oppositional stance to what some of us then called “narrow nationalism.” As a Marxist, I found issues of class and internationalism as necessary to my philosophical orientation as inclusion in a community of historically oppressed people of African descent. But, at the same time, I needed to say “black is beautiful” as much as any of the intransigent anti-white nationalists. I needed to explore my African ancestry, to don African garb, and to wear my hair natural as much as the blinder-wearing male supremacist cultural nationalists. (And, by the way, I had no idea my own “natural” would achieve its somewhat legendary status; I was simply emulating other sisters.)

My relationship to the particular nationalism I embraced was rooted in political practice. The vortex of my practice was always the progressive, politicized black community – though I frequently questioned my place as a black woman in that community, even in the absence of a vocabulary with which to pose the relevant questions. Within the Communist Party, “black” was my point of reference – which did not prevent me from identifying with the multiracial working class and its historical agency. I am not suggesting that the negotiation of that relationship was not fraught with many difficulties, but I do know that I probably would not have joined the Communist Party at that time if I had not been able to enter the Party through an all-black collective in Los Angeles called the Che-Lumumba Club.

The sisters who were my closest comrades, in SNCC, in the Black Panther Party, in the Communist Party, fought tenaciously – and we sometimes fought tenaciously among ourselves – for our right to fight. And we were sometimes assisted in this by sympathetic men in these organizations. We may not have been able to talk about gendered racism; “sexuality” may have still meant sexiness; homophobia, as a word, may not yet have existed; but our practice, I can say in retrospect, was located on a continuum that groped and zigzagged its way toward this moment of deliberation on the pitfalls of nationalism and essentialism. I revisit my own history here to situate myself, in this current exploration of postnationalism, as a revolutionary activist during an era when nationalist and essentialist ideas about black people and the black struggle in the United States crystallized in such a way as to render them capable of surviving in the historical consciousness of people of African descent throughout the diaspora, but especially in the collective imagination of large numbers of

African-American youth today. Perhaps we might make a similar observation about the Garveyism of the 1920s, but, among other things, the undeveloped state of – and forced exclusion from – both media technology and popular historical consciousness prevented us from later being inspired in the same way as by those slogans and images of the late sixties.

Today, of course, young people are explicitly inspired by what they know about Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party. And I find myself in a somewhat problematic position because my own image appears now and then in visual evocations of this nationalist impulse that fuel the advocacy of revolutionary change in contemporary hip-hop culture. These days, young people who were not even born when I was arrested often approach me with expressions of awe and disbelief. On the one hand, it is inspiring to discover a measure of historical awareness that, in our youth, my generation often lacked. But it is also unsettling, because I know that almost inevitably my image is associated with a certain representation of black nationalism that privileges those particular nationalisms with which some of us were locked in constant battle.

Contemporary representations of nationalism in African-American and diasporic popular culture are far too frequently reifications of a very complex and contradictory project that had emancipatory moments leading beyond itself. For example, my own first major activist effort as a budding “nationalist” was the construction of an alliance with Chicano students and progressive white students in San Diego for the purpose of demanding the creation of a college we called Lumumba-Zapata. It is the only college in the University of California, San Diego system, that is identified today by its number – Third College – rather than by a name.

A further example: Look at the issue of the Black Panther Party newspaper in the spring of 1970 in which Huey Newton wrote an article urging an end to verbal gay bashing, urging an examination of black male sexuality, and calling for an alliance with the developing gay liberation movement. This article was written in the aftermath of Jean Genet’s sojourn with the Black Panther Party, and Genet’s *Un Captif Amoureux* reveals suppressed moments of the history of sixties nationalism.¹

Such moments as these have been all but eradicated in popular representations today of the black movement of the late sixties and early seventies. And I resent that the legacy I consider my own – one I also helped to construct – has been rendered invisible. Young people with “nationalist” proclivities ought, at least, to have the opportunity to choose which tradition of nationalism they will embrace. How will they position themselves en masse in defense of women’s rights and in defense of gay rights if they are not aware of the historical precedents for such positionings?

With respect to the exclusion of such progressive moments in the sixties’ history of black nationalism, the mass media is not the sole culprit. We also

have to look at the institutions that package this history before it is disseminated by the media – including some of the academic sites occupied by obsolete and inveterate nationalists. Furthermore, we need to look at who packages the practice. The only existing mass black organization that can claim the so-called authority of having been there during the formative period of contemporary black nationalism, and therefore, of carrying forth Malcolm X’s legacy, is the Nation of Islam. Who is working with gang members in South Central Los Angeles today? Who is trying, on an ongoing basis, to end the violence and to bring warring gangs together in dialogue? Why is the rap artist Paris, who calls himself the Black Panther of Rap, a member of the Nation of Islam? Why is Ice Cube studying with the Nation? Impulses toward collective political practice are being absorbed, in this instance, by a movement that accords nationalism the status of a religion.

As enthusiastic as we might be about the capacity of hip-hop culture to encourage oppositional consciousness among today’s young people, it sometimes advocates a nationalism with such strong misogynist overtones that it militates against the very revolutionary practice it appears to promote. Where is the door – or even the window – opening onto a conception of political practice?

Where cultural representations do not reach out beyond themselves, there is the danger that they will function as surrogates for activism, that they will constitute both the beginning and end of political practice. I always go back to Marx’s eleventh Feuerbach. This is because, as Cornel would say, it brings me joy: “Philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.”

NOTE

- 1 Jean Genet, *Un Captif Amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986); translated as *Prisoner of Love* (London: Pan Books, 1989).

An Exhibition of Beadwork

By

Lola Fajemirokun

16th July - 21st July 2006

S/N	Title	Price
1	Madam	140,000
2	Blue	120,000
3	Star Flower	60,000
4	Green	200,000
5	Gold	40,000
6	Ruby	50,000
7	Mixed	55,000
8	Metal	70,000
9	Chocolate	55,000
10	Circles	120,000
11	Vines	180,000
12	Yellow	100,000
13	Splash	35,000



"le bouquet romantique", 2006 (The Romantic Bouquet)

80 éléments en porcelaine et fils de broderie sur le sol (80 pieces of porcelain and embroidery thread)

50 cm de diamètre.

price: 2500 euros



Art, Censorship, and the First Amendment: This Is Not a Test

Robert Storr

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Art, Censorship, and the First Amendment

This Is Not a Test

Robert Storr

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It is a right we have every reason to take for granted. Our guarantee of it is plainly stated and categorical: "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech or the press." First in order of the Amendments to the Constitution, that assurance is the cornerstone of the American social contract. Bitter experience tells us, though, that we cannot in fact take such a freedom for granted. Virtually every generation must in some form reexperience the battles first fought to incorporate and preserve this ideal in the daily life of the Republic. These struggles are, to some degree, the predictable by-products of historical change. Inevitably situations have arisen that were unforeseen by the framers of the Constitution, situations in which the specific cost of exercising and protecting free speech suddenly appeared unbearably great to some, even to many, Americans. Testing the conviction of the government and the people, these crises have had only one acceptable resolution: the reaffirmation of everyone's inconvenient but unconditional liberty to say exactly what they think.

As constant as this principle is, however, there have always been those who, having pledged themselves to it, hasten to qualify its practical application. Ignoring the complementary axiom that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion," they cry foul when their religious beliefs are questioned or when the secular icons of the state are subjected to criticism or caricature. And when, in a nation founded in the name of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," dissent is linked to pleasure, these false republicans lash out with the vindictive fury of those who fear their own imagination at least as much as they fear that of strangers.

For a time it seemed safe to believe that such censorious constituencies had been contained once and for all by the broad-based liberalization of the 1960s and 1970s. Mass culture had popularized the indiscretions and skepticism of the old underground. Not long ago Matthew Broderick was telling penis jokes to an entire country on "Saturday Night Live," while uniformed and non-uniformed members of the military industrial complex were routine villains in countless Hollywood thrillers, playing in countless middle-American malls. No rollback to the days of the persecution of Lenny Bruce or to McCarthyism seemed likely or even possible. Nevertheless, ten years into a neoconservative era that has witnessed a steady chipping away at the progressive social and economic programs of preceding decades, we know better. On every front, legal challenges are being made to the freedom of serious artists, clever opportunists, dedicated amateurs, and ordinary people to represent

the world as they see it. Recent court cases involve use of the flag, homosexual imagery, and child nudity, rap music, satellite TV, and the content of live performance art.

Although many who have been affected by it were unready, this backlash was in fact long in preparation. In response they must now relearn the basics. This means that artists must take a crash course in how to talk to those who differ with them over the extent of First Amendment guarantees but who may be open to persuasion, as well as how to talk back effectively to those who aim to restrict their liberty. With that in mind, Kellie Jones and I, as studio co-chairs of the 1990 CAA annual meetings, approached Barbara Hoffman, the CAA's honorary counsel and a First Amendment specialist, to organize a panel titled "The Thought Police Are Out There." Under the pressure of events, what began as a one-session panel became a two-session panel; and what was intended as a one-issue publication of the panel proceedings has mushroomed into a two-issue treatment of the topic.

Even so, this number of *Art Journal* on art and censorship and the one that follows cannot deal definitively with a situation that is still evolving. Combining historical, legal, and philosophical, as well as various artistic and social perspectives, these two issues may therefore best be thought of as offering a "teach-in" by installments. (Accordingly, rather than place writings by artists in a separate section as is customary, we have interspersed them with those by authors from other disciplines.) Respecting the nature of such forums, we, as editors, have avoided imposing our views on the writers, but have at the same time worked hard to create from their different voices a kind of counterpoint. If at any juncture the result sounds dissonant as well as dissenting, we can only say that noise is one proof that the right to free expression is being freely used and that democracy is to that extent in good working order. False harmony in the context of underlying contention is far more worrisome, we believe; just as silence in some circumstances may be a breathless obscenity.

In the final analysis, freedom of speech isn't so much a matter of when one may legally shout "fire!" in a crowded theater but whether or not one may, with the gusto of the mock tyrant Ubu Roi, yell "Shit!" on stage in a publicly funded production—or "fuck!" The greatest threat we face may not be court-enforced censorship but repressive decorum and general self-censorship. How insidiously this habit takes hold, and how far-reaching its effects can be are readily apparent in an article the political corrections officer Hilton Kramer not long ago devoted to the question of government

patronage of the arts, in particular to its sponsorship of work that violates the mores of a hypothetical norm. Like many who seek to curtail the speech or circumscribe the audience of those whose ideas they find subversive, offensive, or merely unsettling, Kramer does not attack the First Amendment outright, but calls instead for a (purportedly) higher standard of civil conduct. "Is Art Above the Laws of Decency?" he asked in the headline of his *New York Times* piece of July 2, 1989. Of course, there are no "laws of decency"; certainly none that have any juridical standing with respect to art. Nevertheless, the dangerous implications of his answer to this rhetorical question are obvious the minute he attempts to examine the very object of his complaint, in this case the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe. "I cannot bring myself to describe these pictures in all their gruesome particularities," he writes, "and it is doubtful that this newspaper would agree to publish such a description even if I could bring myself to write one." (There would be no question either, of course, of illustrating such pictures on this page, which raises an interesting question: Should public funds be used to exhibit pictures which the press even in our liberated era finds too explicit or repulsive to publish?)¹

The vicious circle that Kramer's linked propositions map out is easy to discern. According to his logic there are things too horrible to be seen, too horrible even to be articulated. There are pictures—to revive the odious but once-popular euphemism—that dare not speak their name. In reality, though, it was Kramer, not Mapplethorpe, the transgressive artist, who in this instance refused to rely on the judgment of an independent citizenry. Interposing himself between the public and the work, and hopeful of inhibiting all but the work's most private display by preventing subsidies to public galleries, Kramer has actively sought to render it impossible for members of the public to know the material being discussed, and thus to draw their own conclusions. Kramer and his kind's repeated appeals for "common-sense" shunning of certain unspecified causes of offense barely disguise a deep-seated mistrust of common people, whose tolerance for disquiet, capacity for candor, and—as the jury in the Cincinnati Mapplethorpe trial demonstrated—respect for the spirit as well as letter of the law greatly exceed that of New Right polemicists and provocateurs.

Confronted by such preemptive and accusatory squeamishness, however, one can only conclude that in practical terms defending free speech depends upon a willingness—which is not necessarily the same thing as a personal desire—to break taboos when and wherever they present themselves, confident that people will of

their own accord choose whether to pay attention or walk away, read or turn the page, watch and listen or flick the off switch. When the Mapplethorpe show hit Boston, trailed by the controversy that had broken out in Washington and Cincinnati, that is precisely the course of action adopted by the local PBS station. Alert to the importance of the principle at stake, WGBH broadcast the very images Kramer had refused to detail on paper. Under the present conditions of debate, that courtesy is worth repeating. Instead of isolating those pictures from their context, as was done by the prosecutors in Cincinnati, moreover, it is time that they were restored to their proper context, and so treated as part of the full artistic entity to which they belong. We have therefore decided to reproduce the full *X Portfolio* here. Assuredly, it takes far less nerve to reproduce these images in *Art Journal*, than to show them on the evening news, but our reasons are exactly the same. We have the right to do so; you have the right to look, or look away. As each of us makes up his or her mind about this work, while those who pretend to revere art but in practice seek to bowdlerize it make their arguments, let us consider these words from the Viennese novelist Robert Musil's 1911 essay, "The Obscene and Pathological in Art":

To love something as an artist, therefore, means to be shaken not by its ultimate value or lack of value, but by a side of it that suddenly opens up. Where art has a value it shows things that few have seen. It is conquering, not pacifying. It therefore sees valuable sides and connections in events that horrify others. In most collisions between art and public opinion either these values are not recognized, or (the typical case) even the attempt to recognize them is rejected out of horror at the circumstances in which they have been acquired.

If one has other than artistic desires, one does not gratify them through art; it is much simpler to gratify them without distraction in the real world, and they can be sufficiently gratified only in the real world. To experience the need for (artistic) representation means—even if desires in real life should provide the impulse—not to have a pressing need to gratify them directly. It means to depict something: to represent its connections to a hundred other things; because nothing else is possible, because only in this way can one make something comprehensible and tangible. . . . And even if these hundred other things were to be obscene or pathological: their connections are not, and the tracing of these connections, never."²

Notes

1. *New York Times*, Sunday, July 2, 1988, sect. 2, 1, 7.

2. In Robert Musil, *Precision and Soul: Essays and Appendices*, ed. and trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 7, 6.

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Jessie McBride and Rosie



FIG. 1 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Jessie McBride*, gelatin silver print, 7¼ x 7¼ inches. © 1976, Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe.



FIG. 2 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Rosie*, gelatin silver print, $7\frac{3}{4} \times 7\frac{3}{4}$ inches. © 1976, Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe.

X Portfolio

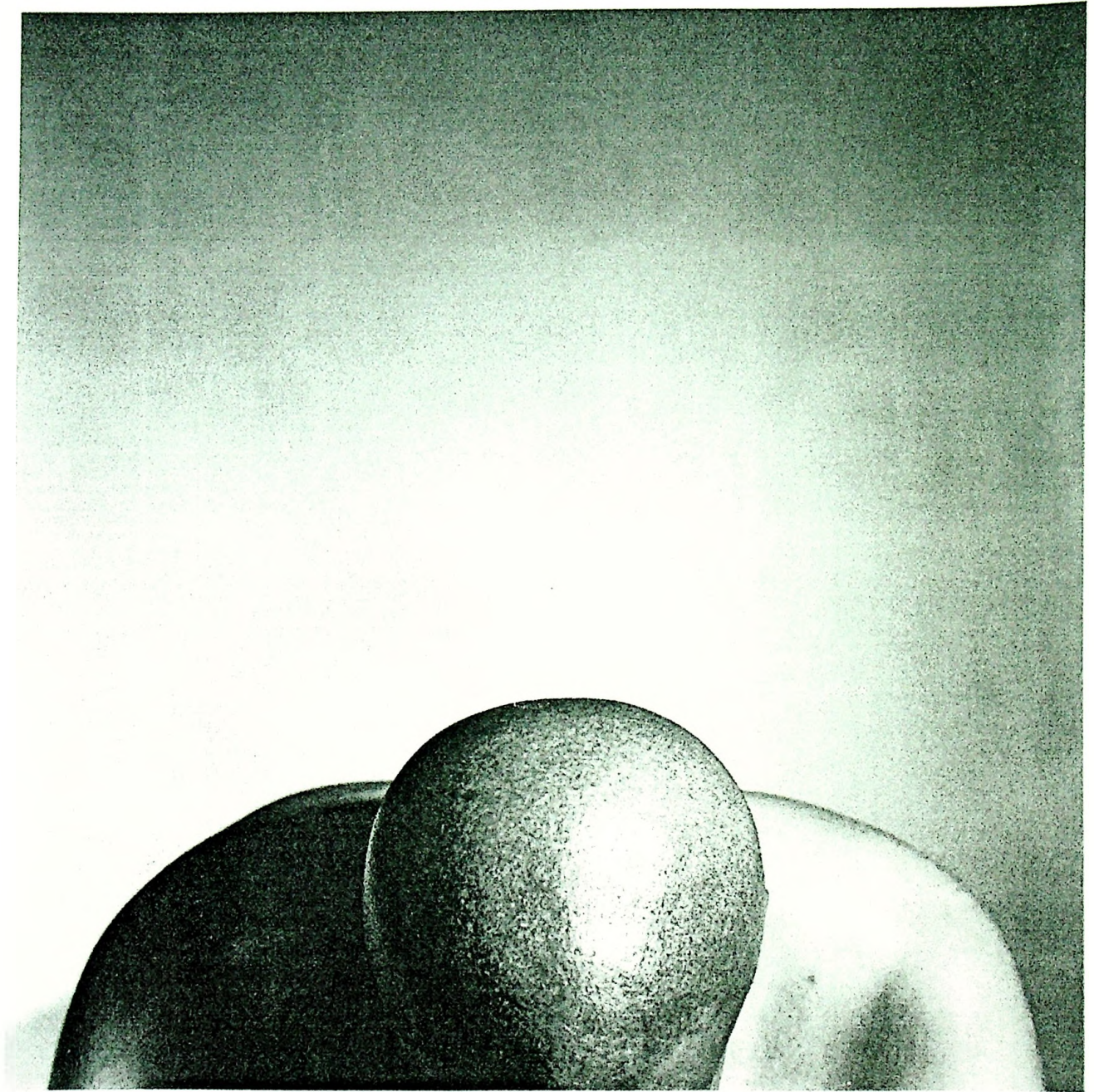


FIG. 3 Robert Mapplethorpe, *X Portfolio*, *Cedric*, gelatin silver print, $7\frac{3}{4} \times 7\frac{3}{4}$ inches. © 1977, Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe.