"Who Owns Black Art?"

Several weeks ago at Columbia University, I participated in a lively public forum examining the "direction of African-American art and its aesthetic" for the twenty-first century. Chairing the session was prominent black feminist author Michele Wallace, author of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. Other participants included visual artist Danny Simmons, the vice president of Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation, Ramona Austin, the director of the Hampton University Museum, and Emmett Wigglesworth, a brilliant muralist, painter, and sculptor. Our public conversation about the significance of black art was inspired by the new exhibition of contemporary African-American art, called the "New Power Generation,"currently being shown at Hampton University Museum.

The public forum was originally designed to examine such issues as how technology and media are changing the character and direction of black creative expression. But it didn't take long for our conversation to focus on the difficult question of how economic forces are remaking the African-American art scene today.

In his 1924 book, *The Gift of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois argued that "the Negro is primarily an artist." Du Bois explained, "this means that the only race which has held at bay the life destroying forces of the tropics, has gained there from in some slight compensation a sense of beauty, particularly for sound and color, which characterizes the race." The creative genius of black people is well represented, Du Bois documented, in music, painting, sculpture, literature, theatre, and in virtually every dimension of American culture.

How and why did the most oppressed sector of American society produce much of its greatest art? Part of the answer resides in the political dynamics of culture, and how culture is produced. Properly defined, "culture" is an expression of the collective, lived experiences of a people, their sense of beauty or aesthetics, and their consciousness of themselves. A central

dimension of culture, therefore, is collective memory, ritual and tradition—how people over a long period of time reflect about the meaning of what they've experienced. Changing the physical environment and material conditions that a people live under, for example, will inevitably produce new expressions of cultural creativity.

The best illustrations of this are found in the rich history of black music. Enslaved African Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries constructed a new musical form, the spirituals, based in part on their understanding of faith in the context of severe oppression. Through the spirituals, enslaved blacks sought a means to have communion with the divine, and also expressed their determination to be free. The lyrics of the traditional Negro spirituals clearly illustrate this: "Steal Away to Jesus," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?," and "Oh, Freedom!"

The blues and jazz provide excellent examples as well. The blues was originally created in the context of extreme racial oppression in the Deep South during the late 1800s. Hundreds of African Americans were being lynched annually; thousands of black voters were disfranchised; and millions were confined to poverty by sharecropping and convict labor. The music that the sharecroppers, workers, and tenant farmers produced, from the work songs like "Pick a Bale of Cotton" to the blues, spoke the language of both suffering and survival. As the Great Migrations occurred, with millions of African Americans moving from the rural South to the urban Northeast and Midwest, our musical expression shifted once again, into what became known as jazz.

From its beginnings down to the present day, jazz was and remains essentially an urban expressive force. The fast pace and the constant beat of city life are aesthetically captured in the music. It was no accident, therefore, that the turbulent racial politics in Harlem in the late 1930s and 1940s—the "rent strikes," public boycotts and demonstrations calling on Negroes not to "buy where you can't work," the 1943 race riot, and other events—found their creative counterpart with the birth of "bebop." What Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. was in protest politics—bold, uncompromising, and challenging the established white authorities—the

revolutionary music of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, Thelonius Monk, and Kenny Clarke accomplished the same thing artistically.

In parallel fashion, in the visual arts, the paintings of artists like Jacob Lawrence were part of this new aesthetic in the 1940s. Lawrence's politics were uncompromisingly expressed in his celebrated paintings, notably his "Harlem Series," the "Migration Series," and the "South Series," all of which dramatized African-American history and the struggle for freedom. Lawrence's works demonstrate how powerful art can be when it consciously draws upon themes of struggle and resistance that are part of black consciousness.

At the Columbia University forum, Emmett Wigglesworth astutely observed that music and art "are essential humanizing forces in any civilization." The great danger in a market economy dominated by multinational corporations, however, is that art "can be used for the purposes of dehumanization." One example of the destructive power in the market can be seen in hip hop culture. Back in the 1970s, hip hop's graffiti art, music, and dancing were rebellious, underground expressions that were directly challenging the mainstream culture. The original hip hop DJs, such as Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa, weren't in it for the money. Their creativity was driven by the spirit of cultural resistance.

Now, under the corporate regime of globalized capitalism, black art at virtually every prominent level has become commodified, packaged, and marketed. The artists who take the greatest risks, who produce works that draw closely upon militant themes of resistance and black cultural memory, are those who are usually the most marginalized. In the hip hop music industry, the dominant trend toward fashioning the music to fit the tastes of its core consumers, who are now 80 percent white, has become the norm. A radical, underground hip hop still continues to flourish, but few affluent black patrons or corporate investors financially support this cutting edge art.

The essential question that must be posed is whether black people will continue to "own" their own art, or whether the corrosive, destructive forces of the market will so affect artistic production that our principal artistic expressions no longer reflect our core values and traditions.

A parallel question could be raised about art as it relates to the American public in general. Throughout the country, public funding for the arts is being rapidly eliminated. In New Jersey, for instance, several weeks ago, plans were announced that called for eliminating the entire $18 million budget for the state's Council on the Arts, and cancellation of a planned $10 million state endowment to support small arts groups. Arizona's legislature just voted to eliminate the state arts office and it $5.1 million annual budget. In Seattle, the city's highly acclaimed regional theatre company, known as ACT, is bankrupt and may soon shut down.

The struggle to provide alternative sources of financial support for art is especially crucial to the interests of black America. It has been through our art, more than any other expressive force, that we have been most successful in articulating an alternative vision about the nature of this society. If we lose control and ownership of our art, we may lose much more than our cultural imagination.

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