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INTRODUCTION

The way in which this exhibition came about should be recorded, as it is the only way to express our gratitude to its organizer, Frank Bowling. Frank Bowling was uniquely able to surmount the divisive cultural problems involved. Mr Bowling is a Black artist living in the United States, but not of American birth; the other five artists are American by birth and, like him, now live in New York City. (In this respect all six artists are like most artists in New York, out-of-towners by birth.) Mr Bowling's position as part of the Black community is complemented, as a result of his different background, by the knowledge of detachment as well as of participation. He is the only artist at present in a position to act as a critic, a man able to speak to two different groups — the artists and their audience (an audience that is still mostly White). *

The situation of Black artists is ambiguous: there is considerable use of the idea of art as an instrument to advance Black identity, Black rights; there is, also, clearly and successfully, an impulse towards the making of art as art. In the artists' statements in this catalogue, both possibilities oscillate. One attitude shared by the present artists is worth isolating. Edwards' desire for an art beyond aesthetics, Loving's view of the "artist as part-prophet", Williams' "we are action painters", Bowling's relevant-irrelevant account of the genesis of his present paintings, are pungently mid-century in ideas and style (another name for mid-century is "Art Since 1945").

This is the period of existentialist criticism, of Abstract Expressionist attitudes; thus the language of the present artists is not specifically their own, but a shared language of post-war art. The alienation, the floating revolutionary impulses, the epistemological doubts, are not racial in origin but professional. Viewed in this way, the two themes of aesthetics and protest can be joined. The Black artist has a social framework in which to enact artistic problems; protest serves as a metaphor of the alienation felt by all Abstract Expressionist artists. Hence the fact of making art becomes its social significance.

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*During 1969 Bowling has published criticism in *Arts*, Vol.43, February, March, April, May, Summer.

FRANK BOWLING:

10

NOTES FROM A WORK IN PROGRESS

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In a lecture on *Liberation from the Affluent Society*, Professor Herbert Marcuse names several philosophers, none of whom deal with Black existence. Marcuse, an eminent thinker on the contemporary scene, is often called upon to pronounce on current issues. When he talks about a "society which develops to a great extent the cultural needs of man, a society which delivers the goods to an ever larger part of the population", does he mean to include Blacks? In reference to the title of his lecture: Blacks have always been "liberated" from the affluent society.

From masks to funeral jazz, from politically subversive spirituals to the work of present Black artists and writers, the relationship between aesthetics and reality is binding, deliberate, and harmonious.

Black artistic endeavour has never been accommodated in the dialectic. In fact, one might say that in the socio-cultural contract an "exclusion" clause was written in for Blacks.

Blacks are, with few exceptions, equivalent to the Masses.

It is certain that Black as art is not as readily available as Black as militant. Black, aspirationally, politically, sociologically. Black art demands the same learning, knowledge, in-touch-withness as any art. Black art is not isolated by Africanisation with its implied stagnation.

Two positive virtues of Black art: (i) an awareness of the solid canons of traditional African artistic expression and thought (which have contributed to 20th century western art); and (ii) that powerful, instinctive, and intelligent ability which Blacks have shown time and again, despite inflicted degradations, to rearrange found things, redirecting the "things" of whatever environment in which Blacks are thrown, placed, or trapped.

The late Bob Thompson and his work is an example of great significance. Dead, tragically, before he was thirty, he managed nevertheless to bring an intuitive, sneaky cognizance of European master-works to his own art, very like the edgy and complicated existence of Blacks in the United States. It is an understanding which is not merely instinctive, but rich in the studied variety of a people who live an utterly ambivalent interior life in complete contrast to the smiling and dancing stereotype.

The work of Mel Edwards has Black content: the way chains, barbed wire, trusses, and the like are put together has a kind of high-spirited canter, a humour, the equivalent of which can only be found in all that "rapping" and palm-slapping and carrying-on when Black cats meet.

Frontally, "uptown" William T. Williams' paintings seem dead-pan, unsmiling, and precise. From the side all the "flaws" appear: the dragging of a paint-clogged brush creates a zig-zag pattern like the charting of a breathless pulse-beat. This surface is Black in so far as this seemingly logical concept (I do not mean simply the way the paint is brushed on, but the way the wide bands of color collide and disperse) is achieved by the most irrational of means. Jack Whitten's paintings are the intense end-product of a running, jumping, and standing-still mind not afraid to re-open the argument about, and add a new twist to, gesture as content. Al Loving's intricate and delicately balanced color sense reveals even more than Williams', that rank expressiveness one finds so clearly defined in the dress style of certain uptown types, that preference for gingery and cheekily-designed "ice-cream" suits. The clothes and their demanding subtlety function rather like peacock feathers. Loving's paintings, with their near-sweet color avoid being confected by his thorough understanding and natural use of geometric structures. Dan Johnson's head-on clash with certain linear aspects of traditional African sculpture has enabled him to produce sunny and original work. Avoiding the Minimalist dilemma (from the same pod surely grew this pure shoot, as the other half of a dicotyledon plant), Johnson's work has a distinct Californian flavour.

The structure of Black life has revealed, over centuries, a creative, self-perpetuating process of anarchist, pro-life zeal which a study of the fine arts and history alone, though helpful, can never fully define. That all-embracing and strange power of Black people, their rugged individualism, dignity, and strength: it is with these values that the exquisitely dressed corner boys must identify, if only in terms of Black pride that some of the Brothers are "out there" doing it, rather than with the current abstractions of politics and sociology. (1969)

MELVIN EDWARDS 1937, HOUSTON, TEXAS

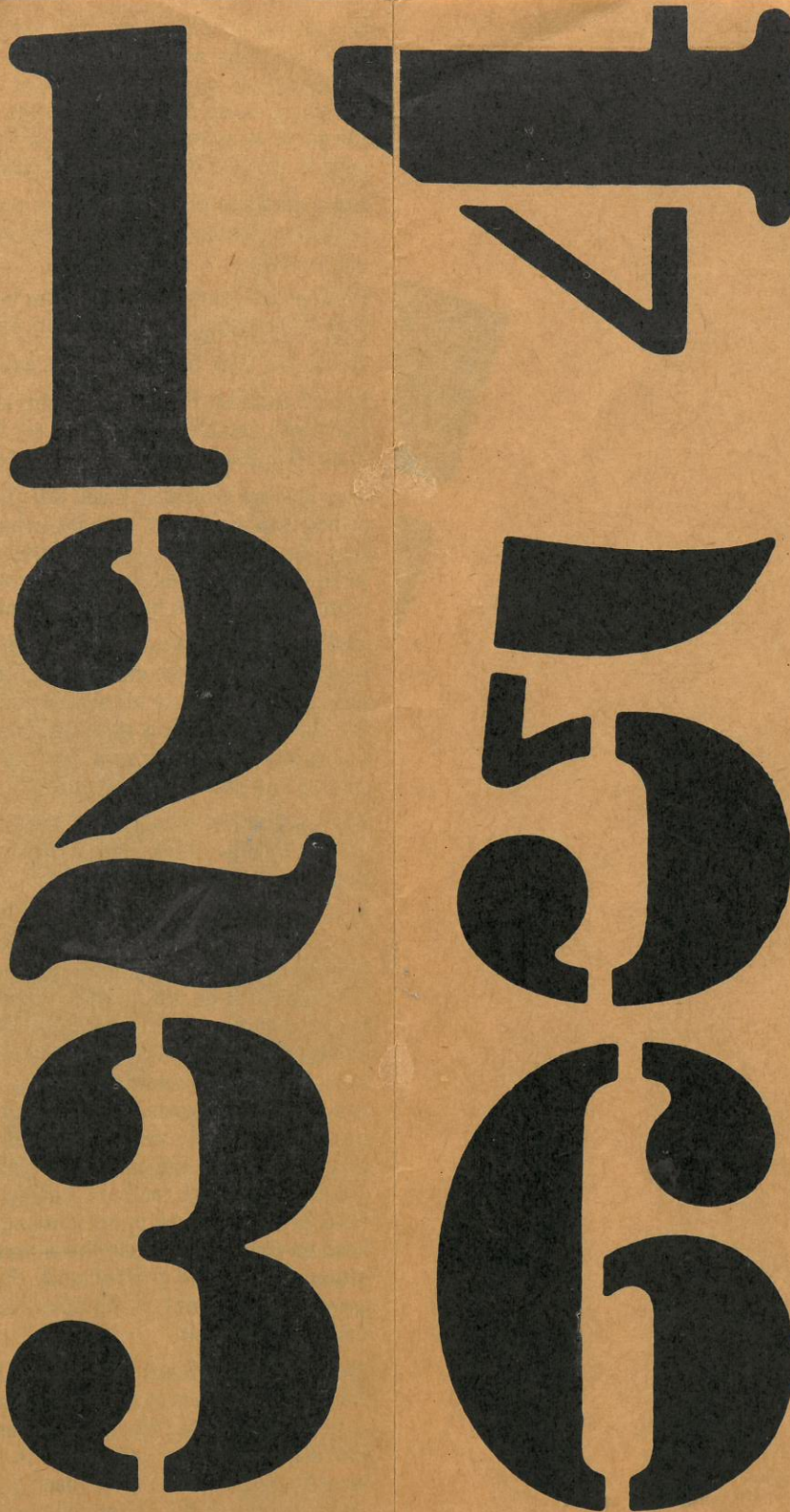
It is necessary to be free enough to create beyond the boundaries of any esthetic and make that freedom plastically manifest. To improvise is the only real and constantly dynamic revolutionary way to be. I have known for thirty years that the color of the first earthman to visit the moon would be "White". I have taken the stand that I can deal with perception from any angle or as directly as I choose. The time is a choice, the place is a choice, and the act or object is a choice in time which I often choose to syncopate. To put some English on the ball is a choice of moves and weapons in the middle of the struggle's circle of stainless steel. Black and white, red, yellow and azul, are necessary angles and rattles modifying the connections of the cosmos. It is murderously masochistic and sadistic to put art before man. All formal values are rhetoric and at this time real beauty is the knowledge that I would burn, slash, trample, and destroy all of the objects in the world in order to create a better time and place. 9/20/69

AL LOVING 1935, DETROIT, MICHIGAN

To me the wall is the painting. I am tired of objects on walls. The wall must be pierced, brought forward, pushed back. The hexagon is capable of expanding, of occupying a given space. I am an universalist. I see the role of the artist as part-prophet, one who creates a visual reaction to possible projected changes. Being black at the expense of all other things is capitulation. Most viewers either like a thing or they don't. Explaining the reasons for their feelings doesn't change their view very much. The social-political perceptions I have which motivated my particular approach I can only speak about personally. I have been asked how my isometric cubic or septeledrons could possibly be of any relevance to present social political ideals. The truth is that there is none. I say "prepare the senses" as opposed to informing the senses, as the media says.

JACK WHITTEN 1939, BESSEMA, ALABAMA

My vision of art is that of Pinkism. Pinkism is the personality of the world expressed in pure plastic symbols. Pinkism combines all the isms of art history, especially those of contemporary times. At present I am the only true believer in Pinkism, but like all isms when introduced to the mass media it establishes instant followers. The creation of a pink world became evident to me when I started seeing pink angels on my canvas, pink horses, pink women with pink *blip*, pink cats that *blip* pink *blip*, and big pink elephants with tiny pink *blip*. I have seen pink mountains where pink stinky goats grazed upon pink grass placed within a pink holy sky. I have seen pink pigs and pink dollars...



DANIEL JOHNSON 1938, LOS ANGELES, CALIF.

I will bless the Lord who hath given me understanding: I set God always in my sight; for He is at my hand that I be not moved.

WILLIAMS T. WILLIAMS 1942, NORTH CAROLINA
Myth of Revolution... this community of culture will not depend upon geographical confines, especially when these confines are destructive to dreams. The dreams of dreamers are directly related to the system which suppresses them... blackness is always the subject matter in the mind of the insane... so complex as to define description. The future of the unreal is the life line of Blackness... do not look for stylistic directions. Blackness itself is a movement. Far greater... more profound, than any neo-plasticism, constructivism, fagism, could ever aspire to be. What movements give, Blackness has taken for granted...

We are surrealists (or we could not have survived).

We are primitives.

We are humanists.

We are hard edge.

We are earth people.

We are action painters.

WE ARE BLACK.

Black artists should sell their egos by the yard, pound, or inch... store them in reachable plastic cocoons to await metamorphosis. Black artists should see space and dreams. Black artists will see love and lust. Field painting is a term used to describe egotistical racist ideas. Earth works were done by slaves who later became Baptists ministers and wrote essays about numerical symmetry.

Winds and rumors destroy work by Black artists...later to be rediscovered by French moralists and homosexual hounds.

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FRANK BOWLING 1936, BARTICAESSEQUIBO, GUYANA

The works in this show are a direct result of a rejected book jacket I did for the English edition of Leroi Jones' *Black Music*. I say "rejected"; it might be more correct to say the publishers and I had a disagreement. As the only Black artist on the English scene, it was natural for my friend Martin Green to offer me the cover. The disagreement was over how much a publisher could expect to get for £25. The result was that my rough was never returned. In many ways the present work has nothing to do with the earlier episode.