Afri-Cobra: a black revolutionary arts movement and arts for people’s sake

Terry Thomas
Clark Atlanta University

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ABSTRACT

AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

THOMAS, TERRY       B.A. MORRIS BROWN COLLEGE, 1981

AFRI-COBRA: A BLACK REVOLUTIONARY ARTS MOVEMENT AND ARTS FOR PEOPLE’S SAKE

Advisor: Josephine Bradley, PhD.

Thesis dated December 2011

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate the role of Afri-COBRA, the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. Afri-Cobra is a professional black artist’s guild founded in the 1960s in Chicago, Illinois who serve now, as well as in the past, as the unacknowledged founders and promoters of the notion of Arts for People’s Sake. Further, Afri-COBRA utilized the black aesthetic as the conceptual framework in its investigation of black art within the revolutionary Black Arts Movement especially in creating the visual arts component of Arts for People’s Sake in the black community.

Narrative Analysis was utilized to undergird the ideology and philosophy of this art entity and its implications of black imagery seen in the exhibit of the artists and their efforts to expand for the people the political/social restructuring of black identity.

The results of this study revealed the leadership and visionary passion envisioned by group founders. Their works create a new black image paradigm that has implications for the lives of oppressed and marginalized groups worldwide.
In conclusion, this research purposely placed Afri-COBRA as a leader in redefining what is necessary for arts and artists. They are pioneers in community based art due to their commitment to include in their creations central components of graphic and colorful protest. Afri-COBRA's vision continues to influence popular culture, both nationally and culturally.
AFRI-COBRA: A BLACK REVOLUTIONARY ARTS MOVEMENT AND ARTS FOR PEOPLE'S SAKE

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

THE DEGREE OF MASTERS OF ARTS

BY

TERRY THOMAS

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN/AFRICANA WOMEN'S STUDIES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS CONTINUED

Sociological ................................................................. 32
Imagery ................................................................. 35
Summary ................................................................. 37
II. CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM ........................................ 38
III. FINDINGS ............................................................ 49
IV. CONCLUSION ......................................................... 89
BIBLIOGRAPHY .......................................................... 99
APPENDIX ............................................................ 101
Definition of Terms

Arts for Arts Sake: European construct of art that stipulates are having no purpose or function other than to exist for beautification or adornment.

Arts for People’s Sake: The African-American beautification concept that stipulates Black art and all art is functional, political, and cultural art that uplifts, educates and inspires Black Liberation and recovery for the black community due to the European oppression.

Afri-COBRA: A professional artist guild founded by Jeff Donaldson in 1968 in Chicago for the upliftment of the black community and defining the Black Aesthetic.

Kool Aid Colors: A central characteristic of Afri-COBRA artists that employ the use of illuminous bright colors in their compositions within an African construct.

Kemet: A term originating with the Egyptians to describe themselves and the land as black. The indigenous term for the Egyptians of Africa.

Trans African Art: Jeff Donaldson’s concept describing art produced by people of African descent outside of continental Africa in the African Diaspora.

Nation of Islam (NOI): Organization founded by Islamic minister Elijah Muhammad in America during the early twentieth century for the restoration of the black man and woman as leaders in the modern world.

Black Aesthetic: Concept ascribing to black art encompassing the role and function of black art in visual, literary and performing arts in the service of the black community. That which is authentically African and an appreciation for universal or abstract art.

Functionalism: An African characteristic in art and ritual inherent in African people worldwide and the utilitarian nature of black art in politics and culture within black society.

Pan-Africanism: The political and cultural ideology of Henry Sylvester Williams, Kwame Nkruma, and Stokely Carmichael that connects Africans in the Diaspora with Africans on the continent under one principle, unity for the purpose of controlling the resources of Africa for Africans everywhere on the globe.

Black Power: The philosophy of Blacks in the U.S. that came after the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. A Militant ideology that calls for the destruction of white supremacy and the supplanting of Black domination of world affairs and a cultural evolution in politics, popular culture and the arts that marks the identity of black people globally.

Mimesis at Mid-Point: Design which marks the spot where the real and unreal, the objective and the non-objective, the plus and the minus meet. A point exactly between absolute abstractions and absolute naturalism.
Definition of Terms Continued

Visibility: Clarity of form and line based on the interesting irregularity one senses in a freely drawn circle or organic object, the feeling for movement, growth, changes and human touch.

Negritude: A mid twentieth century African art movement in literature created to reform and humanize the African image.

Utenawazo: Concept underpinned by Afrocentric psychologist Marimba Ani explaining the subconscious psyche of human beings and their cultural ancestry.

Black Arts Movement (BAM): 1960’s art movement in visual, literary, and performing arts by blacks in the U.S. designed to create a Black Aesthetic.

Africanization of America: Originating with Spanish visual artist Pablo Picasso’s grafting of African art into his paintings and sculpture and continuing with the influence of Hip-Hop on white American society. Black folklore, gospel music, jazz, R and B music and the blues all contribute to the century’s old process of the Africanization of America.

National Endowment for the Arts (NEA): U.S. federal agency designed to support arts and cultural growth and development through grants.

FESTEC: A mid 1970’s gathering of black artists and cultural activities held in African to promote national and international linkage between blacks in the Diaspora and continental Africa. Jeff Donaldson coordinated the U.S. visual artists’ component of the event.

Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS): Dr. Joy Leary’s analysis of the effects of slavery in the U.S., a psychologist, Dr. Leary’s findings assert that blacks are in need of therapy from the residual effects of slavery and segregation.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of African Commune of Bad Relevant Artist or Afri-COBRA, Arts for People’s Sake, and the identity politics of contemporary Black America artists during the 1960s and 1970s and the influence of the Black Power Movement. Historically and sociologically Africans are creative and spiritual people, but due to the advent of slavery in the 1600s, blacks in America have had that creativity stifled or stunted. The late twentieth century brought on a dramatic shift in black identity. The dramatic social change gave rise to Afri-COBRA and others in the movement from servant to equals which changed the meaning of what it is to be black in America forever.

Significance of Research

This study fills the void that exists in the humanities and the discipline of African and African-American Studies related to visual arts. Art education in American public and higher education institutions is skewed toward white validity and Black marginalization. Underscoring the accomplishments of Afri-COBRA diversifies the curriculum and helps to complete the tapestry of arts and culture in America’s education system. Articulation of Afri-COBRA’s efforts as a group of bold innovative leaders of the Black Arts Movement and Black American aesthetics puts them into proper perspective. The literate mode of communication made dominant by the birth of the
archaic “European” Utenawazo, communication was directed by scholarship and research induced by America and Europe.¹ The significance of the study lay in the reality of Black visual artists as primary contributors in the late twentieth century Black Arts Movement which espoused the element of Arts for People’s Sake as one of its characteristics. Western or mainstream aesthetic values in the arts since the late 1960s, when Afri-COBRA was formed have undergone a dramatic change from Eurocentrism to inclusiveness of other cultures in the United States. The Black Arts Movement and Afri-COBRA precipitated this current reality of inclusion in the arts and political circles by incorporating and addressing the social and racial inequities of that era as art began to function as an agent of social and political change. This study of the ideology and aesthetics albeit a black aesthetic, of Afri-COBRA has cultural relevance and revelation in the arts and humanities in America. Pop and political cultural changes can be traced to the will and social movements of black people during the late 1960s. Afri-COBRA is one aspect of those movements. Culturally, this study adds to the validity of black art dating back to Egyptian art. This study leads to Afri-COBRA founder and chief ideologue, Jeff Donaldson, being viewed with the likes of Leonardo da Vinci or Pablo Picasso.

Moreover, the Black Arts Movement is a known cultural transmission of the black lived experience for literary artists like Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez and Toni Morrison. Leading visual artists such as Jeff Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, and Nelson Stevens are not as well known due to the dominance of literary arts as the preeminent conduit for cultural transmission in the modern world. The invention of the printing press precipitated this phenomenon. Prior to this invention, visual artists from cave paintings in

Africa, Europe and the rest of the world, to murals, and hieroglyphics of the African Egyptians were the primary conduit for cultural transmission within various world societies. The study of the professional visual artist guild known as Afri-COBRA attempts to discern the vital influence this group had on national Black aesthetics and identity politics of Black America.

Further, the investigation clarifies the role of African art as a valid humanistic area of study from Africa to the American enslavement of Africans. Enslaved Africans in 15th and 16th century America were negatively stereotyped by Europeans and Americans as heathens or evil people who deserved their treatment as slaves. Most Africans believed in a Creator or an all-powerful God whom one addressed directly through prayers, sacrifices, rituals, songs, and dances. Images of Africans created by the white oppressor, depicted Africans as immoral worshippers of demonic idols. African art and rituals as well as ancestral figurines of the Dogon, Yoruba, and the Ashanti were condemned as evil by the Europeans. The Catholic Church denounced African ritual and ceremonies as barbarism and decided that the African soul was in need of Christian salvation. It sanctioned racism and condemned Africans to one of the worst form of dehumanization known to man, the institution of chattel slavery.

Economics was central to slavery, but Christianity also endorsed that institution by setting forth the agenda of the “civilizing mission” on behalf of the European world. Authentic African art and rituals were condemned and viewed as evil by the church. Afri-COBRA artists had to deal with the widely accepted stereotypes of blacks in the worldwide establishment. David Driskell, a noted contemporary visual artist and

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historian, calls for a review of how the depiction of stereotypes and negative imagery reflecting the Black race in American art, particularly when these images seem to be an acceptable part of the majority of white culture should be addressed.³

However, images created by Black Arts Movement artists were an antidote to the one dimensional artistic imagery of European and American society. Modern art institutions reflect the centuries old norm of white validation of art and culture to ensure the lack of recognition of black visual artists. Afri-COBRA artists challenged this position of marginalization of Black artists with revolutionary, positive, uplifting Black iconography from the 1960s to the present.

Statement of the Problem

Thus, the artist who decided to illustrate the truths of a nation’s people turns paradoxically toward the past and away from actual events.⁴ Alain Locke encouraged black artists during the Harlem Renaissance to look at Africa as a source of direction and inspiration. Blacks in America had been brainwashed to think negatively regarding Africa and needed to be reprogrammed to think positively and constructively about their collective identity. Depictions in art history books by white historians serve to supplant Eurocentric domination. Art images of Blackness in the same texts are regulated to the margins of society. This is also true for the messages and images exhibited by museums, galleries, and arts support agencies such as the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA). The context of the problem is incalculable because of six centuries of inhumanity towards American minorities, in general, at the hands of dominant white mainstream culture.


The 1960s and 1970s were a time of social change and self determination for Black America. African Americans who demanded to be treated as first class citizens on a national scale marched to end Jim Crow laws and discrimination. The Civil Rights Movement exploded into national riots upon the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and gave rise to the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement (BAM). It was amid these events and circumstances that Afri-COBRA was formed. America was in social chaos and Black artists in the visual, literary, and performing arts disciplines responded to a call for a Black aesthetic to better represent the Black condition.

Black Power and Civil Rights movements were not struggles by Blacks just to achieve full citizenship and to have the same social and economic opportunities as white people. Rather, the movements were a fight against white supremacy whose ideological and physical systems of apartheid were ingrained and interwoven into American society. Contorting and distorting the imagery of the African race through the use of religious, economics, literary arts, and national museums are common practice among the various ethnicities of the white world.

Afri-COBRA artists challenged this status quo of white cultural supremacy in the arts with an ideology of uncompromising Black consciousness that embraced their African cultural counterpart holistically. Although separated by continents in the diaspora, the cultural reunification through a common Black Aesthetic is what Afri-COBRA founder Jeff Donaldson called TransAfrican art. The importance of Afri-COBRA's legacy and the lack of knowledge of the group outside the realm of Black cultural nationalists and artists who continue in the Black Arts tradition are paramount. The era that led to the formation of Afri-COBRA was marked by repression, social
change, violence and militant transformation of the black identity. Artists joined the revolution with an ideology of Arts for People’s Sake which addressed the condition black people were experiencing became the cornerstone tenet of Afri-COBRA’s community revitalization using their art and political consciousness as vehicles of social change. White art aesthetics did not address the plight of black people in the 1960s and 1970s.

**Conceptual Framework**

The framework used for this research is found in the history of a Black aesthetic. The conceptual framework is based on the philosophical underpinnings of Black Arts Movement’s theorist, Larry Neal, and Afri-COBRA founder Jeff Donaldson. Neal explains that President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Kerner Commission found that there are two Americas, one white and one black, and that the primary duty of the Black artist is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of people of African descent. Langston Hughes of the Harlem Renaissance in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” offers instruction on being proud of one’s ethnic identity. Larry Neal and Jeff Donaldson’s confrontational approach took it further when they chose to fight oppression with their art. According to Neal, “Therefore, the main thrust of this new breed of contemporary artists/writers is to confront the contradictions arising out of the black man’s experience in the racist West.”

Since the early 1960s, these individuals have been re-evaluating western aesthetics, the traditional role of the artist/writer and the social function of art. Implicit in this reassessment is the need to develop a “Black Aesthetic.” In Larry Neal’s opinion,

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mainstream western aesthetics had run its course and that it was impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structure. However, it was clear to him that the Black Arts Movement posited a cultural revolution in art and ideology.

The Black Arts and the Black Power concepts both relate broadly to the Afro-American’s desire for self determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic.6 The idealism and cultural relevance of Afri-COBRA stems from Larry Neal’s understanding of social and political rights of self determination and the meaning of black nationhood. Nationhood to blacks constitutes a national consciousness that looks after black people in the West and throughout the world diaspora of blacks. Black aesthetics and its formation are augmented by black power, both contributed to the national character of the emerging identity politics that is with us today.

Neal’s vision of a Black aesthetic implied several things. First, he assumed that the basis for such an aesthetic is already in place. Second, it is international. Essentially, it consisted of an African-American cultural tradition. Neal’s idea is broader than that tradition. It encompasses most of the usable elements of Third World culture. The motive behind its aesthetics is the elimination of the influence of the European cosmos.7 Further, national and international affairs demand that Blacks communicate to the world in terms of their own interests.

It is clear that the question of human survival is at the core of all contemporary experience. In a context of world upheaval, ethics and aesthetics must interact positively and be consistent with the demand for a more spiritual world. It is this natural reaction to

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7 Neal, 64.
alien sensibility that informs the cultural attitudes of the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. It is a profound ethical sense that makes a Black artist question a society in which art is one thing and the actions of men another. Neal believes that one’s ethics and aesthetics are singular.

The Wall of Respect

The other half of the theoretical framework harnesses the visual art idiom, concepts, and principles utilized to illustrate its merit. For painter and Afri-COBRA founder Jeff Donaldson, the Black aesthetic can be traced to the painting of a mural in 1967, located at 43rd and Langley streets in Chicago, Illinois, titled the “Wall of Respect.” The selection of national heroes depicted on the wall along with the use of poetic lyrics defined the black national character. This was a militant expression with Malcolm X projected as the most prominent figure represented. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s image was left out of the project. The decision to project Malcolm X so prominently onto the mural reflects radicalism, and the Black Power consciousness that inspired cultural nationalists who agreed with Malcolm’s methods of self defense, self determination and black nationhood. Martin Luther King Jr.’s philosophy of non-violence and intergrationalism was incongruent to the ideology of Black Power and Black Nationalism. To the decision makers of the mural King’s philosophy was unacceptable.

As the leader, Jeff Donaldson’s view of what should be projected in the “Wall of Respect,” did not include the proponent of passive resistance. This militant position was infused into the ideology of Afri-COBRA’s artistic expression. Although he and Afri-COBRA co-founder Wadsworth Jarrell had discussed the idea of a Black aesthetic before the March on Washington in 1962, the visual manifestation did not appear until the
production of the “Wall of Respect.” The Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) visual artists workshop shaped the mural around the following categories: rhythm and blues, jazz, theater, statesmanship, religion, literature, sports, and dance. In each of these categories, the workshop members created a list of black cultural “heroes” who would be represented in the project. The rhythm and blues category included Billie Holiday, Muddy Waters and James Brown. The statesmanship category which included Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s image was rejected. Jeff Donaldson directed the visual arts workshop which had close ties to the organization’s writers workshop and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM).

The Wall was painted in one intense month in the summer of 1967. There were impromptu poetry readings and dance performances as the Wall was being created. During one of the many “dedications” of the grand artwork, Pulitzer Prize winner Gwendolyn Brooks recited poetry. Brooks wrote a poem entitled, “The Wall” in commemoration of this event. In the poem, Brooks celebrates the “Black Power” that the structure embodied. The meaning of Black Power is defined in this poem as “the old decapitations revised the dispossessions bleakness.” These words underscore the revolutionary sensibility of the creators of the “Wall,” and their revisions of the old script of African American dispossession. The “slum” that becomes the site of the mural is simply a sign of the larger dispossession that African Americans suffer. Located in “the

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9 Collins and Crawford, 26.
slum,” the Wall’s artists transformed the site into the primary location of Black cultural nationalism for the artists and audience.

Moreover, Jeff Donaldson’s definition of the Black aesthetic was formed and informed by the visual art that created the Wall. Visual art produced by the group maintained the philosophical concepts of images and commitment to humanism inspired by African people and their experience.10 African Images that function on a cultural and or ritualistic level informs Arts for the People’s Sake. This statement is in direct opposition to the superficial purpose of art, or Art for Art’s Sake which is a European construct which that art has no function. An art for Art’s Sake is represented as a reflection of beauty or adornment, for example the Mona Lisa by Leonardo Da Vinci. An art for People’s Sake is represented by Emery Douglass, artist and cultural minister for the Black Panther Party. Douglass’ images function as a tool for revolution.

For the truly committed Black artist, there is no such thing as “Art for Art’s Sake.” Donaldson goes on to speak of “Arts For People’s Sake” where there is a commitment as a people to the struggles of African people who are waging war for survival and liberation. This is what Black art or the Black Aesthetic must reflect or project because of the oppressed conditions of blacks which is an argument, Maulana Karenga supports. Programmatic art is an instrument which deals with concepts that offer positive and feasible solutions to our individual, local, national, and international units. The immediate problem for Afri-COBRA was the lack of exposure. To solve this problem the group turned to multiple productions of silkscreen originals. By producing limited editions and “poster art,” local, national and international units Art’s for People’s

Sake posits solutions to worldwide suppression of black people. "Poster Art" can be produced in large amounts with high quality. The group was able to disseminate their work to the masses while at the same time exhibiting at elite institutions like the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and Howard University, a Historically Black College and University.

The ideological precepts of the group were written by Jeff Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones Hogu and Nelson Stevens regarding the ideology infused in the works, compositions deal with the expressive awesomeness or that which does not appeal to serenity, but is concerned with the eternally sublime rather than ephemeral beauty. It is art which moves the emotions and appeals to the senses. Abstract and symbolic in rendition are the characteristics of the group's compositional sensibilities. The aesthetic principles included: free symmetry, the use of syncopated rhythmic repetition which constantly changes in color, texture, shapes, form, pattern and movement features.

On the other hand, Mimesis-at-Midpoint, the design which marks the spot where the real and unreal, the objective and the non-objective and the plus and the minus meet is a point exactly between absolute abstractions and absolute naturalism. The aesthetic principle of visibility like all the previous principles guide the visual artist through manipulation of media and format used to create art. Visibility, clarity of form and line based on the interesting irregularity on sense in a freely drawn circle or organic object, the feeling of movement, growth changes and human touch are imperative. Another element in the group aesthetic ideology is luminosity, literal and figurative, as seen in the dress and personal grooming of shoes, hair (process or Afro) laminated furniture, face, knees, or skin color. Also, "Cool-aid" colors, bright hues with sensibility and harmony,
were a key component.\footnote{Donaldson.} With these concepts and principles an integral part of their conceptual framework. Afri-COBRA artists led an all out assault on the white American Art scene while inspiring and uplifting Blacks who embraced their construct of Black visual empowerment in the era of change and transformation.

In addition to that of the Nation of Islam (NOI), other countercultural visions of ahistorical or transhistorical Black societies were presented in miniature form by different groups, communes, and collectives that powerfully affected the development of the ideology and style of the Black Arts Movement.\footnote{James Smethurst, \textit{The Black Arts Movement} (Chapel Hill NC: University of N.C. Press, 2005), 79.} Political, economic, and cultural sensibilities were taken into account as Afri-COBRA formulated its ideology. The emerging Black Arts Movement (BAM) defiantly and definitively set out to change Black identity politics from docile men and women to demanding agents of social change who would permeate the national consciousness of Black America and subsequently, the African Diaspora. “Black is Beautiful” was a slogan that transformed the negative stereotyping manufactured by Europeans and White America since the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The five century old negative depiction of Blacks was beginning to fade away with the advent of positive aesthetic treatment of Blackness by Black artists and activists in the national community. Afri-COBRA artists incorporated uplifting words into their art compositions. They were politically and culturally edifying words that were intended to accentuate the positive and reverse negative stereotyping by society. Words artistically intertwined into their compositions were a unique characteristic of Afri-
COBRA’s defining period. Africans in Ancient Egypt (Kemet) used this art word combination known as hieroglyphics thousands of years ago. This same principle was applied to the Wall of Respect in Chicago with the utilization of iconic African symbols and motif into Afri-COBRA’s compositions.

Although positive Black imagery can be traced back to the “Banjo Lesson” by Henry O’ Tanner and Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglass’s African Egyptian influenced murals, neither of them were as visually sophisticated as the art composed by Afri-COBRA artists in the late 1960s and 1970s. Tanner and Douglass lived in eras when Blacks suffered from the effects of Jim Crow legislation. Afri-COBRA artists lived in the era of social and tremendous identity transformation of black American identity politics.

Afri-COBRA emerged fourteen years after the 1954 United States Supreme Court decision to eliminate segregation in schools. Social change protests, marches, boycotts, and cultural nationalism were factors influencing the social and aesthetics of the era. This revolutionary period in American society can be viewed as a radical change since the institutionalization of white aesthetics in earlier time periods. Alexander Baumgarter offered an ideology of aesthetics in Europe in the 18th century. By the 19th century, it had grown into a full blown movement. By the twentieth century, the origins of a Black aesthetic were evident in the writings of Alain Locke in the New Negro proposition and Africa’s Leopold Senghor’s assertions in Negritude.

The 1960s and 1970s eras of social change and revolution prompted a reexamination of what it meant to be Black worldwide. African scholar Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal published The African Origin of Civilization, a monumental work which

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13 Jeff Donaldson, AFRICOBRA III...
debunked white Egyptologist’s claim that Egypt’s cultural achievements were the result of a race of light skinned Middle Easterners. Diop states: “It is certain that the indigenous native of the country were black.”14 Chancellor Williams’ The Destruction of Black Civilization provides significant steps toward understanding the complex history and sociology of Black people. Both Williams and Diop figured prominently in the working philosophy of the Black Arts movement and Afri-COBRA. Blacks and their arts are primary factors in the liberation and uplifting of their race.

Hence, Jeff Donaldson sought to contribute an authentic Black Aesthetic through the visual arts, an expression that catered toward the people’s upliftment and not for the critic. Maulana Karenga, another revolutionary philosopher, stated that Black art like everything else in the Afrocentric community, must respond positively to the reality of revolution as a part of its reality and meaning. Black artists and those who wish to be artists must accept the fact that what was needed was a Black aesthetic that was a criterion for judging the validity and/or beauty of a work of art by Black artists.

Visual artists, like literary artists, achieved redefinition through focus and approval throughout the turbulent 1960s and 1970s. The Black Arts Movement had grown out of the Black Power Movement literature produced during that period or any period recognized as the primary manifestation of art and culture. Literature in western society, especially since the invention of the printing press, has superseded visual art as the primary conduit for cultural transmission to the elite and masses in society. Literary artists like Amiri Baraka, is the accepted initiator of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Although Jeff Donaldson and Wadsworth Jarrell initiated Afri-COBRA the same year Baraka began his revolutionary poetry, the two visual artists are often never

mentioned with the same respect as the literary artists because books replaced visual art as the emancipator of the individual in society.

Unlike the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement aspired to the Black Aesthetic that proclaimed the need to change. The chief ideologue for the Harlem Renaissance had been Alain Locke. White patronage was fundamental to success. The revolutionary atmosphere of the 1960s was the primary catalyst undergirding the Black Arts Movements. The White art world was and is the ultimate manifestation of white cultural supremacy. Although Black identity in 2009 was still in a state of crisis, acknowledging the roles of Afri-COBRA, the Black Aesthetics and the Black Arts Movement contributed to a healthy adjusted state of social well being in the present as well as in the future. It can be assumed that blacks accept their fine artists through education, the liberation of the race will be eminent.

Subsequently, President Barack Obama, our nation’s first Black president has added a mountaintop experience in America, the African Diaspora and Continental Africa. One of two Blacks in this generation to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, the other, Martin Luther King, Jr., has shifted the argument in race relations in America and the world. While the collective identity crisis of Blacks still exists, some Black Americans defined themselves as Hebrew Israelites while others call themselves, New Africans. Older blacks, as are some present-day blacks, are still comfortable with the name tag Negro while others call themselves Nuwabians. The confusion is very real and can be deduced to the main cause of disunity in Black America. Confusion over religion and spirituality can also be seen as divisive and disruptive.
The 1960s and 1970s eras of the Black Revolution did much to solve the identity crisis but Black identity remains a work in progress. The arts community remains largely a White supremacist domain with little or no inclusion for Black progressive artists. National support agencies such as the National Endowments for the Arts, (NEA) as well as state and local cultural support of agencies are normally indifferent to Black cultural arts aspirations, although progress has been made in recent decades.

Throughout the twentieth century, Blacks and Whites have not, in mass numbers embraced the Black visual and cultural arts world. They presently endear themselves to perform the literary arts of music and books. Whether it is books of jazz, gospel, rhythm and blues, or hip hop, Blacks embrace a Black aesthetic in literature or popular music. The level or progressive consciousness to uplift the Black community is suspect, especially in the Hip Hop world of Gangsta Rap.

The ultimate resistance to a Black Liberation aesthetic is the Black Church and Black religions. Theologians, ministers, Imams, and priests supplant a White aesthetic that perpetuate a white social and religious agenda that impacts every aspect of society. The Nation of Islam ( NOI), the Shrine of the Black Madonna, and a handful of others including the Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s church in Chicago, Illinois espouses a Black liberation theology that embraces a Black aesthetic. Contemporary African identity is encompassed in the philosophy of these Afrocentric churches and institutions. But overall, the Black church and Black religions use Heaven or Paradise rather than Black liberation as their ultimate goal. James Cone’s work along with these institutions and individuals contributed to black consciousness of that era.
The major barrier that excludes Afri-COBRA and artists working in their vain from major museums, galleries, and cultural outlets is abject racism and fear. The practice goes back to Europe’s “civilizing” mission in Africa during the slave trade during which times Blacks were stereotyped as noncontributors to classical art and civilization. Academic theft of African Egyptian achievements from the Black African identity by white Egyptologists in the early 19th century paved the way for white supremacy and black inferiority.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a cultural change for Blacks and whites worldwide. Colonial powers of Europe had to relinquish their hold on African and Third World territories as people of African descent worldwide demanded their human rights. The current move toward Afrocentricism and Black Studies in theology is evidence of the residual effects of the era of social change. Over two hundred Black Studies programs and departments exist in institutions of higher learning. Five states, Florida, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, and Michigan have adopted laws that require or encourage teaching Black History in public education. This present development is a growing movement that owes its legitimacy to the Black Revolutionary mindset of Black in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Black Revolutionary movement in the arts was comprised of the Schomberg, Cleveland, Apex and the Du Sable Museums. Atlanta University under the leadership of Hale Woodruff conducted annual exhibit competitions in the 1940s and 1950s. The art competitions served as a precursor to the current showcase of black artists in Atlanta. Most cities in America and the world support museums, galleries, and cultural outlets that perpetuate White aestheticism. Support for the Black arts and artists who embrace a Black aesthetic has been little or indifferent. The National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta
stands out as the most visible supportive agency for the Black visual literary and performing arts. Established in 1988, the festival annually represents a continuation of the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts Movement. The success of the National Black Arts Festival is due primarily to the pioneering efforts of the Neighborhood Arts Center of 1975 through the 1990s in Atlanta, Georgia. Black visual artists throughout the Black Arts Movement produced thousands of silkscreen originals that were consumed by the Black masses. Civil Rights and Black Power advocates led the way for the newly found identity politics.

Subsequently, Spiral, a Black visual artist collective spearheaded by Romare Bearden, critically acclaimed black artist, in the early 1960s, sought to create art that would complement the Civil Rights Movement.\(^{15}\) The works of Sam Gilliam, a renowned black artist known for his abstract canvasses, is devoid of the Black experience. Like most Afri-COBRA artists, his work is abstract. From art criticism, White art critics appreciate this type of visual expression. Afri-COBRA artists distinguish themselves by using motifs, symbols, and figures from the Black Experience. The art of Jeff Donaldson, Nelson Stevens, Wadsworth Jarrell, and Frank Smith is filled with elements of a Black aesthetic. Art critics could not find favor or merit in their work. The Black masses readily embraced these artists’ Afrocentric compositions but did not embrace Sam Gilliam’s abstract work which was devoid of any trace of Blackness. In the white critics’ mind, Gilliam is more important than Donaldson and the others because Gilliam is less threatening. Blackness makes white art critics uncomfortable. African-American art historian Samella Lewis concludes that Afri-COBRA artists are more

important because unlike artists of the Harlem Renaissance they were empowered by the black community’s condition instead of white patronage.\textsuperscript{16}

Therefore, Afri-COBRA is a visual arts guild that has revolutionized Black art and the Black aesthetic for African-American people during the turbulent decade of the 1960s. An obscure group that sought to uplift Black America, little is known about their activities and philosophy. Due to the lack of study of the visual arts as a topic, their story is largely untold. There are numerous studies of the Black Arts Movement literary, musical, and performing artists. Literature about visual artists, particularly Afri-COBRA is scarce in comparison to their more famous literary and musical brothers and sisters.

Even more obscure than the lack of the group’s history is the role women played in the formation of the group identity politics and the overarching commune element that they became known for. Black women in the arts can be traced back to Edmonia Lewis, who was both Native American and African. She was heralded as someone endowed with great artistic skill and development. Born in slavery, her story is one of the many treasures of African and Native American survival in American history. Other Black women in art include sculptors like Augusta Savage and Elizabeth Catlett.

Methodology

The vehicle used in this study was narrative analysis which included interviews with founding members of the group (Afri-COBRA), and designed to extract essential data. Members will be recorded on tape, and responses to questionnaires will be collected for analysis pertinent to the methodology is the manner that data was collected.

in that vanguard, in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.

Sample

Both founding and current members were asked to participate in this research. Afri-COBRA as an artistic expression of black culture was analyzed by utilizing the words of this select group of artist. There were approximately eight founding members who comprised of six men and two women. Interviews were conducted in Atlanta, Georgia, Washington D.C., and Baltimore, Maryland. Visits to Afri-COBRA members Michael Harris, Kevin Cole, Akili Ron Anderson, James Philips, Frank Smith and Nelson Stevens were conducted in their homes and studios.

Procedure

Members were contacted for the purpose of this research, provided a questionnaire and a secondary interview schedule was utilized to record the responses of willing participants. Interviews averaged approximately three hours per visit. Questionnaires were provided to other members in hopes of securing their voice and vision for the guild. This method was employed for two female members who were no longer active in Afri-COBRA, but were founders of the organization. Both experiences and questionnaires provide the narrative for this thesis.

Additionally, the researcher attended an exhibition of Afri-COBRA in 2007, with all current members of the guild at Hampton University in Virginia. The high intensity of the reception and the art work showcased was stellar in presentation. Both experiences the one on one interviews and formal exhibition provided substance for the research. The
experience with Afri-COBRA was life changing; a true black aesthetic is evident in their forty plus years of existence devoted to that goal. Visual art is primal to cultural ascendency; Afri-COBRA is one of the leaders in that vanguard, in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.

Instrument

The following questionnaire was provided to each member in order to ascertain his/her personal and collective knowledge about Afri-COBRA. The instrument was composed of questions related to the demographics; response to the creation of Afri-COBRA; Afri-COBRA as a revolutionary phenomenon.

The Men of Afri-COBRA

1. What were the social and cultural conditions during the era of the formation of Afri-COBRA?

2. Who was the founder, and where were you located in the formation of this group of artists?

3. In what ways did you consider yourselves revolutionaries?

4. How did you see black art as an agent of change?

5. What assistance did you expect from the mainstream society or from black people?

6. What are the differences between the Harlem Renaissance movement and the Black Arts Movement?

7. Were women and children involved, if so, how?
8. What made Afri-COBRA’s approach to art unique, and how did it differ from arts movements in the past history of other movements, like the Cubists or the Impressionists?

The Women of Afri-COBRA

1. When and why did you become inactive in Afri-COBRA?

2. What ideals did you contribute to the ideology of Afri-COBRA?

3. How did white critics and mainstream art institutions react to art by Afri-COBRA members?

4. Did the women’s liberation movement affect any change in the women of Afri-COBRA? If yes, how?

5. How would you describe your art and how did it compliment the men and their art?

6. Did the emphasis on community or social change and a Black Aesthetic enter into your thought process as you created your art? If yes, in what ways?

7. The Black Arts Movement is known primarily for writers Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez and others while artists like Jeff Donaldson, Nelson Stevens, and you are less known as leaders of the Movement. Can you explain this phenomenon?

8. In retrospect, do you regret leaving Afri-COBRA and do you think the group is still viable as a projection of the Black Aesthetic?

9. Art education in our public schools and universities omit Afri-COBRA and the Black Arts Movement artists. How did/does this affect our cultural aesthetic understanding of Black and White Americans’ shared identity?
10. Now that we have a Black President, do you envision that it will make a
difference in the mores of culture and perception?

11. Will you ever exhibit with Afri-COBRA again?

**Research questions**

1. What were the historical, social, and aesthetic variables present during the
formation of Afri-COBRA?

2. How did Afri-COBRA artists impact Black ideology and identity politics?

3. What were the artistic variables that predicted black arts as the primary mode of
expression for community transformation?

4. How did Afri-COBRA achieve this new paradigm?

**Limitations**

The focus of this research was on the experiences of both founding and current
members of Afri-COBRA. For this reason the number of participants was limited to those
who met very specific qualifications.

**Delimitations**

Due to this type of study, the sample population was limited to members of Afri-
COBRA. No other artist guild was interviewed for this study as the focus was on the
members of Afri-COBRA.
Data analysis

The responses were analyzed for themes and information relevant to answering the research questions. Narrative analysis was employed as method of understanding the experiences of the participants. Code development was an important component of analysis for this study.

Chapter Organization

Chapter I: The introduction provides a statement of significance, methodology, instrument, research question, limitations, and chapter organization.

Chapter II: Literature Review provides an analysis of relevant authors and research around themes related to the Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic.

Chapter III: Historical Overview provides historical background material on BAM and Afri-COBRA.

Chapter IV: Findings and analysis ascertains the effect of research as it relates to the results of the study.

Chapter V: Conclusion indicates the overall value of the topic and the implications for the field and study of Afri-COBRA in the arts, humanities, African-American and Africana Women's Studies.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter explores the themes of art and culture for the sake of the uplifting and reconstructing the image of Black people. Areas of focus range from the psychological to the artistic evolution of black artists in America with emphasis on the impact of artistic expressions from Africa. Thus, Arts for Arts Sake versus Arts for the People’s Sake, in the latter, is the case that black people engage the meaning and significance of Afri-COBRA as an arts movement, and its place in American and especially African-American history.

Historical

Literature regarding African-American involvement in the visual arts of the 1960s and 1970s is scarce primarily because the dominant society’s interpretation of art and the notion of Arts for Arts Sake. Art, especially visual art, is reflective of a people’s sense of culture and identity. Enslavement and the neo-enslavement period of Jim Crow intentionally or unintentionally, impacted the world of blacks in America. Although this was the intent from the time of slavery, Black artists like Joshua Johnston and Scipio Moorehead managed to make a living during that period.
some of his portraiture he emphasized with black artists because of their patronage. Johnston’s and Moorehead’s skills were highly cultivated and conformed to American and European styles of art. It is a tribute to their individualism and the initiation of what would be later recognized as Black Nationalism, that they are heralded by Black art historians as exemplars in their respected art disciplines. White art historians seldom, if ever, mention them in their writing, however, Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson follow the new tradition of Afrocentric art historians who document the existence of Black artists and artisans in America. Art in Africa was based on religious and tribal beliefs. Anthropologists had searched for years without recognizing elements of African art maintained in America despite slavery. Sociologist John M. Vlach collected “Africanism,” that survived in many fields, including architecture and boatbuilding.

Unlike White or Euro-American texts which omit late eighteenth and nineteenth century Black artists, Bearden’s and Henderson’s work emphasize the careers and biographies of Robert S. Duncan (1823-1872), Edward M. Bannister (1828-1901), Grafton T. Brown (1841-1918), Edmonia Lewis (1845-1909), and Henry O’Tanner (1859-1937).2

Moreover, racism is more obvious in the fine arts than any part of the educational curriculum in America and Europe. Since the enslavement of Africans was intended to dehumanize or stereotype the artistic offerings of Africans as evil or heathen, Christians felt justified in capturing and castrating their creative genius while subjecting them to chattel slavery. As an art educator in public education for twenty years, the researcher found that Eurocentric textbooks grossly understate or misinterpret African/Black art as

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2 Ibid, 4.
chattel slavery. As an art educator in public education for twenty years, the researcher found that Eurocentric textbooks grossly understate or misinterpret African/Black art as primitive or less civilized, yet, many Eurocentric textbook authors of art appreciation do not see themselves as racists or cultural imperialists. Examples of primitive art are the pictographs of the Australians, the woven designs of the Peruvians and the abstract sculptures and masks of the African Negroes.

Emphasis on Greek, Roman, and Renaissance artistic development dominates the bulk of art appreciation literature. The Africans in Egypt are treated as Middle Easterners and not as ingenious Black people of Africa. This long standing tradition was successfully debunked by Cheikh Anta Diop with his thesis entitled The African Origin of Civilization. Diop replaced the theory of a Middle Eastern origin, or a white origin of the Egyptian people with a Negro or Black origin of the people of the Nile. These blacks were probably the first to practice agriculture, to irrigate the valley of the Nile, build dams, invent sciences, arts, writing, and the calendar. They created the cosmogony found on murals of pharaohs and priest depicting black gods and goddesses which leave no doubt about the Negroness of the race that conceived the ideas. Certainly the people already knew the principal arts. Traditional Egyptology espoused by the French under Napoleon maintains the notion of a white race of Africans were responsible for its achievements, had to admit that the arts, science, architecture, and writing were indeed created by Black people. The white western orientated theory is perpetuated by modern fiction and is very much alive today. Traditional Egyptologists are the most persistent intellectuals in the world when it comes to maintaining the status quo of the non-Black

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Although it was the Muslims who invaded and conquered Egypt in the 7th century A.D., it was the Greeks who overturned African Egyptian dominance of the civilization we know as Kemet or Egypt. Many conventions and inventions of the modern world such as engineering, physics, religion, and political science are products of African Egyptian culture.

**Black Power**

The need for more research to define and redefine Black identity can be traced to Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton with their declaration of Black Power as an ideology worth pursuing.\(^5\) It is theorized that the Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement complimented each other. Carmichael and Afri-COBRA founder Jeff Donaldson, had a lot in common with each other. Although Donaldson chose Afri-COBRA as the vehicle to drive towards a new consciousness, after careful examination of the tenets of Black Power, both he and Carmichael can be viewed as equals in their efforts to liberate Black America. Malcolm X personified Black Power. The selection of his portrait on the Wall of Respect painted in 1967 instead of Dr. Martin Luther King reflected the militancy of those dissatisfied with the trajectory of traditional Civil Rights advocates. Black Power advocates were Pan-African in their scope and vision. Jeff Donaldson interpreted Pan-Africanism as Trans African Art, which describes the art produced by blacks anywhere on the continent or African diaspora. Stokely Carmichael’s worldview included Malcolm X’s Pan-African approach towards solving the problems that afflicted black people worldwide. Both Donaldson and Carmichael viewed the black

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situation a worldwide phenomenon and incorporated that paradigm into their respected ideologies.

Much of the mass media and educational instruction in American are based on race superiority and inferiority assignment. Social and historical developments that are positive and progressive are assigned to the white race, especially Greeks, Romans, and other Europeans. Negative characteristics are assigned to Africa and its Black Diasporas wherever they are found. Egypt or Kemet had to be theoretically dislodged and stripped of its Black African heritage in order for trickery to work. Design elements balance, symmetry, asymmetry, proportion and perspective are employed in African Egyptian aesthetics. Furthermore, Blacks are subsequently stigmatized as inferior in the scriptures and the pulpit on Sundays through the curse of Ham, and as primitive beings in anthropology. This double curse had to be considered when it came to reconstruction of Black identity by Black Power theorists and Afri-COBRA dialogues. For approximately 500 years, whites have dominated world and artistic affairs. The Black Freedom Movement which began in earnest in 1954 with the overturning of segregation, and Ghana claiming its independence from Colonial rule in 1957, were important time markers in the unfolding reconstruction of black cultural identity.

Psychological

Relevant to transforming Black identity is the question of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome by Joy Degrury Leary. Idiosyncrasies exhibited by Black people after the enslavement experience have yet to receive therapy as a collective. A psychiatrist/psychologist, Leary examines the subconscious conscious working of the

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psychiatrist/psychologist, Leary examines the subconscious conscious working of the Black psyche. The condition of servitude and free labor produced a traumatized human being, one that had to be transformed into a healthy conscious pro-Black personality that has a goal to end racism and perpetuate group equality. White power seen through the minds and aesthetics of Europeans and, subsequently Americans have had approximately two thousand years to insulate their position.

Marimba Ani offers an intense treatment of the European psyche from an Afrocentric perspective. Ani psychologically profiles the domineering conquering nature of Europeans, and contrasts it against the generous sharing characteristics of the collective African personality. Using historical personalities and events, she analyzes the works and words of Plato, Aristotle, and Constantine of the Greco-Roman epochs, and shows the constant need to dominate, conquer, and subjugate non-white cultures especially, the African. Europeans throughout this age to the present, seek to place themselves and their culture at the center of the universe, where everything flows from their origins and worldview. The psyche of the Africans’ who came before the Greeks and Romans, who engineered the greatest feats of civilization of all time, the building of the pyramids, accomplished the unthinkable with skill and vision. These were Black people of Africa’s Nile valley region, who taught the Greeks about religion, the arts, and sciences and most importantly, how to write. Aesthetically, and artistically, cultural preeminence is preceded by political and military dominance. Cultural norms are a reflection of the history and knowledge of civilization from its early beginnings in Kemet or Egypt. Awareness of events and progression of movements and artistical developments

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is useful in the reestablishment of the African centered aesthetic and art manifestation. Further, Ani examines their sharing nature, which ultimately led to their downfall after being the light of the world from at least 4212 B.C., the year they invented the twelve month calendar we live by to this day.

Ani’s intense intricate psychological portrait of the European conscious and subconscious nature underscored the aggressive conquering aspect of treatment of others as inferiors, to their superior status as leaders of the modern world. Bad treatment of the conquered is characteristic of Europeans, especially during the enslavement of Blacks of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade in North, South, and Central Americas.

Addison Gayle’s, The Black Aesthetic is a comprehensive analysis of literature, Black Cultural Nationalism, music, poetry, drama, and fiction. Gayle explains “The proponents of a Black Aesthetic, the idol smashers of America, call for a set of rules by which Black literature and art is to be judged and evaluated. For the historic practice of bowing to other men’s gods and definitions has produced a crisis of the highest magnitude, and brought us, culturally, to the limits of racial Armageddon. The trend must be reversed.” While it omits the voice of Jeff Donaldson and other visual artists, the factors and creative elements explored during that era are relevant and therefore parallel to the formation of Afri-COBRA. Ron (Maulana) Karenga writes, “Black art like everything else in the Black community, must respond positively to the reality of revolution.” Karenga states that what is needed is an aesthetic, an articulated Black aesthetic that posits criteria for judging the validity and/or the beauty of a work of art. So

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9 Ibid, 33.
and support revolution of thought and understanding. Another characteristic of Black art is that it must be for the good of the collective.

Gayle compiles an illustrious list of contributors to his anthology. Among them are Hoyt Fuller, Larry Neal, Alain Locke, LeRoi Jones, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ishmael Reed and many others. Collectively, they agree that the Black must look to his /her own experiences, people and Africa when creating art, and reject the notion to subjugate their vision to others, especially white’s. Black art is universal and spiritual with beauty and purpose in all its forms. Emery Douglass artwork for the Black Panther Party was like the trigger on an automatic machine gun held by freedom fighters in a modern day revolt against oppression and white supremacy.10 His provocative and illuminating work inspired Blacks in the heat of the revolution for social change and equality. His addition to the literature review completes the circle of understanding of how Black art can be used to advance the cause through visual protest that reflects the philosophy of self defense in a violent society.

Sociological

The Black Arts Movement and Black Aesthetic as described to by James Smethurst encompasses the varied assortment of group activity with linkages to sociological developments in America from the alleged influence of the communist party to the socialist workers party.11 Smethurst reveals the undercurrent political and socially transformative movements of the Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movement


transformative movements of the Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movement continuing presence in current expression in politically charged Hip-Hop and national poetry slams throughout the nation. Bound in Smethurst argument regarding the Black Arts Movement is the accompanying Black Power Movement. The two factors are viewed as inseparable because the era forced change in the 1960s and 1970s. Smethurst juxtaposed women’s liberation Chicano/a and Nyorican movements alongside the elements of the Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movement. His efforts are multicultural with an attempt to put into perspective the complex factors associated everything from the communist left to the political right. He describes AfriCOBRA and their counterparts in literature, theater and performance art as a matrix of nationalism defining and redefining black identity, which owed earlier artists of the Harlem Renaissance much of its success.

Ever present in the analysis of fine art and cultural sensibilities is the ideology of Arts for Arts Sake. Albert Guerard’s text entitled *Art for Art’s Sake* explores the doctrine from its earliest beginnings in Platonic philosophy to contemporary proponents of European and American embracing of this concept. Art for Art’s Sake denies that Art should ever be placed at the service of any cause. Art for Art’s Sake affirms that we should make beauty our sole guide. As an ideology, Art for Art’s Sake assesses what is meant by art as adornment to the enjoyment of the viewer versus its function. AfriCOBRA saw the function of art as a liberating force that inspires and promote black unity. The Black American antidote to this particular brand of white supremacy is Arts


for People’s Sake, with an emphasis on recovery and transformation of Black identity politics in theological and educational forums. A Black aesthetic along with Black Studies curriculum adjustments in higher learning and public education augmented by a Black Liberation Theology are all part of this national identity transformation that is taking place today especially in light of the election of our first African-American president. As one Afri-COBRA member commented, “We are witnessing the Africanization of American society. What Afri-COBRA and the Black Aesthetic asserts the whole supremacist cultural imperialistic ideology of Arts For Art’s Sake.”

Globally, the life and philosophical underpinnings of Leopold Senghor with his concept of Negritude provided Blacks from the Continent and world African Diaspora a Trans-African worldview that linked descendants of Africans to an ideology of brotherhood and coexistence. Janet Valliant’s treatise on the Life of Senghor provides important insight to the philosophy of Negritude and its cofounder. AfriCOBRA made the connection to continental Africa, while Negritude was occurring in French and British controlled Africa. Proponents of Negritude were inspired by Harlem Renaissance artists James Weldon Johnson and Claude McKay and Langston Hughes. Negritude is important because it artistically does what the old Pan African movement of W.E.B. Du Bois does, and that is unify to solve the conditions African’s found themselves in after the Berlin Conference of 1895 that partitioned African countries among European interlopers and explorers. Pan Africanism, which officially began in 1900 at the suggestion of Trinidad lawyer Henry Sylvester Williams led the way and was followed by the artistic expression

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London, Negritude writers/artists sought to express themselves in an African vernacular that reflected their aspirations to be African and universal. The Black revolution of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s was a worldwide phenomenon beginning with Martin Luther King and the 1955 black bus boycott and co-existing with the liberation of Ghana under the capable leadership of Kwame Nkrumah.

Pan Africanism had its defining moment in 1945. W.E.B. Du Bois who embraced Pan Africanism and Civil Rights simultaneously led the worldwide struggle against white oppression. At the Pan African Congress of 1945, the call for African continental unity was given. Du Bois, who convened the Congress, supervised the transformative event that spawn the birth of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), a political intercontinental entity dedicated to the perpetuation of African unity and the fight against European colonialism. Negritude as an arts movement was impacted by these geopolitical movements on the African continent and the Civil Rights and Harlem Renaissance movements in the United States. Afri-COBRA founder Jeff Donaldson took into account all these developments when he identified Black art produced in the African Diasporas as Trans African art, the cultural counterpart of the art called Negritude.

Imagery

The Caribbean nations were also included in the monstrous enterprise that saw the loss of 100 million Africans in the transportation during the middle passage. Michael D. Harris’s treatise, Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation, provides in depth

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15 An important publication related to the development of Negritude was the Revue de Monde Noir (The Review of the Black World) The goal was nothing less than the creation of a new worldwide black consciousness.
Harris’s treatise, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*, provides in depth analysis of stereotypical treatment of Blacks during and after slavery. Harris shows how racist ideologies began to be articulated subtly in fine art and more radically in popular media and minstrelsy in the nineteenth century. Overtime, established racial stereotypes became the dominate mode through which African-Americans were represented well in to the second half of the twentieth century. These stereotypical characterizations of blacks formed a substantial part of the foundation of white identity. He also presents image makers from the Black Arts Movement to present Black artists that represent recovery from the onslaught of negativity unleashed by mass media and fine arts institutions in Europe and America. Black artists like Camille Billops, Allison Saar, and Juan Logan treat everything from the minstrelsy to Aunt Jemima with conviction and revelation that unmask the derogatory implications of the culturally demeaning images.

Since 1968, Blacks have presented an avalanche of constructive Black art idioms to counter the centuries old malady of Black retarded images. Beginning with “The Wall of Respect,” mural and continuing with the professional artist guild, Afri-COBRA Blacks continue to shape the worldwide landscape of new trends in imagery. The artist Jeff Donaldson and all the artists of the Black Arts Movement live in a day where the image of Blacks is being permanently, positively altered for the good of the Black race and the human race. When Blacks are uplifted, the rest of the colored world is uplifted.

Michael D. Harris is an esteemed professor of art at Emory University and also a member of Afri-COBRA. The premise of the treatise is bound up in the recovery efforts

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Afrocentricity generates the ultimate level of race consciousness and racial restoration of the Black image. Asante’s philosophy places Africa at the center of the black man and woman’s being. Afri-COBRA’s visual articulation does the exact same thing with art while defining and re-defining black iconography. Black art must function to redeem the whole self.

Summary

Broad and specific items pertaining to art, culture and the transformative nature of evolution and social change permeates this chapter. The impact of Afri-COBRA’s aesthetic established a new paradigm in visual art. Glorification of blackness in the figure is a counter to the negative stereotyping seen in fine art and the mass media. Using colors that are bright and illuminous creates and inspires the viewer to appreciate the subject (black people) in a manner that resonates with all people. Elements regarding the definitions of black art along with its function and viability in the worldwide black community are paramount to understanding the social dynamics of the 1960s. This body of work seeks to address stated concerns.
CHAPTER III

CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM/HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Historically, the 1960s and 1970s were enmeshed in cultural transformation. Even though the Supreme Court had rendered its decision to integrate public education in the early 1950s enforcement of that policy was met with extreme resistance a decade later. The arts fared no better than education; they mirrored the division and racial segregation in society at large. Although blacks had been professional artists since colonial times during the career of black artist Joshua Johnston, only wealthy whites and upper class blacks were privileged to employ his services. This ugly past was brought to a boiling point in the 1960s when Afri-COBRA was formed.

In urban, and more so rural America, blacks were restricted in employment, housing and politics. The arts situation was exacerbated because blacks were stereotyped by whites to have no culture and were a mere fraction of a human being as declared in the Constitution. This view was held in the country dominated by whites and can even be seen in present day society. For example, President Obama’s image has been depicted as a primitive African witch doctor wearing a banana outfit, a reflection of the racial hatred that is still ingrained in white society. This hatred was even more acute in the late 1960s when Afri-COBRA was formed. Major museums and national arts agencies treated black artists like sub humans devoid of creativity worthy of exhibiting in their racially restricted venues.
Visual artists, painters, sculptors and draftsmen who perpetuated uplifting positive images during the 1960’s were just as significant as their literary counterparts. Jeff Donaldson, founder of Afri-COBRA and visual arts coordinator of the “Wall of Respect,” is long overdue for acknowledgement and historical canonization in the arts and humanities of the modern era. His contribution to field of study is significant in light of the continued outpouring of art from the group Afri-COBRA.

Although he made his transition into death with the ancestors, his philosophy of adherence to excellence in composition and ancestral communion in concept, style, and presentation of Black visual art is maintained by remaining members of the collective as they continue the trend initiated by Jeff Donaldson during the transformative decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Donaldson’s ideal of Trans-African Art spoke to the reality of art produced by artists of African descent throughout the African World Diaspora. Wherever Black artists are found, their art is the manifestation of Trans-African Art. Characteristics of this art are evidence of a Black Aesthetic.

Although worldwide focus of this art may not be as political as art coming from Afri-COBRA, the essence of Africanity is consistent throughout the World African Diaspora. For example the art of the ancient Olmec culture which migrated from Africa before Christ, is an example of what Jeff Donaldson would term, Trans-African Art. Ivan Van Sertima, the authority on the African presence in ancient America before Christopher Columbus, documented these Africans and their art as evidence to the claim of African dominance in the area of navigation and high civilization. This underscored the idea that Black art was universal.
The politically charged concept of Art for the People's Sake was instituted as the antithesis to the Eurocentric assertion of Art For Art's Sake. Donaldson embraced the idea of Art for the People's Sake as a necessary philosophy of Afri-COBRA during the 1960s and 1970s. Images of the ancient African Olmecs who stare out across time enabled Donaldson to see the world from an African perspective. The idea that the African world diaspora started long before the slave trade is an idea that Afri-COBRA members propagated to this world long before it became Afrocentricism. Twentieth century Black identity politics took on a new meaning and significance with regard to cultural nationalism projected onto the Black community via the Wall of Respect and the guiding principles of Afri-COBRA.

Donaldson led the group to oppose apartheid in South Africa. Each member was given the theme of the exhibit and asked to create compositions around the concept. The exhibition was presented at the United Nations Building in New York as a show of protest and solidarity with the Blacks in South Africa. This reflected the ideal of identifying support for Black people's struggles for political and social redemption throughout the continent of Africa and the world diaspora. Afri-Cobra's leadership in this area made them one of the most politically viable Black Arts Movement entities in the nation. Donaldson was the most important voice in the world of Black art on the subject of apartheid in South Africa. The system was abolished due to attention brought on by the worldwide pressure to dismantle the oppressive regime that enforced it. Afri-COBRA's more than forty year history recognizes the opposition to apartheid as one of their hallmark endeavors throughout their long and illustrious existence.
The Studio Museum of Harlem began in the late sixties in the Black neighborhood and had similar or parallel objectives to Afri-COBRA. Not since the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s had Black art received such attention. Ed Spriggs, the museum’s first curator and Executive Director, was determined to provide space for what the museum deemed the art of Black America.

The marriage of the ideals of Afri-COBRA and The Studio Museum reflected the national identity politics of that era. Although the artists of Afri-COBRA were abstract; their unique display of bright vibrant Cool-aid colors distinguished the show as illuminating and culturally revolutionary. The joint venture between the Studio Museum and Afri-COBRA established both entities as premier focal points of a Black visual art aesthetic during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Harlem, for that time, was the epicenter of the Black aesthetic and Afri-COBRA led the way in the capitol of the art world, New York City. Although the group hailed from Chicago, it had to go to New York to manifest its identity as a collective.

Included in the collective identity of the guild were three women, Barbara Jones Hogu, Carolyn Lawrence, and Jae Jarrell, wife of Afri-COBRA co-founder Wadsworth Jarrell. Ideologically, brotherhood and sisterhood were evident as an emphasis on family values are expressed throughout the literature in the catalogue while explaining their worldview. Most of the views on family, community and nation-building were written by Ms. Barbara Hogu. Excellence and collective responsibility were principles espoused by Ms. Hogu. Everything from social needs, social services, economics, political needs, development and religious ideas were expounded upon by Ms. Hogu. It was a necessary woman’s touch that distinguished Afri-COBRA, and made it revolutionary in scope.
By the late 1980's, all three women had ceased from participating in group exhibitions and activities. Their impact was indelible. The story of Afri-COBRA would be incomplete if told without their conclusion. They were involved from the late 1960's-1970's. Jae Jarrell explains her works stating,

I produce garments with patterns, textures and colors that duplicate the richness of the patterns, textures and colors of Blackness Preservation of our heritage motivates me to design for my Sisters and Brothers adornment that reflects our beautiful culture.”

“Strongly influencing my work are African sculpture, weavings and jewelry. The lines, seams and decorative work of my garments reflect the rhythms I experience form African art. Photographs of her work reveal African influences that are obvious and recognizable even in a catalogue.

Afri-COBRA exhibits today are without the garments created by Ms. Jarrell. Although one male member explores the usage of African fabric and patterns, it is a far cry from the African influenced dashikis and dresses produced by the female artist of yester year’s Afri-COBRA. Carolyn Lawrence’s image of a mother and son stands out in time. Produced for the 1973 exhibition at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the work speaks to motherhood like a woman inspired by the love for her son, unconditionally.

While attending a 2007 showing of the all male version of Afri-COBRA, at the Hampton University gallery, the researcher noticed that some of the artists’ usage of the female as subject matter or elements in their compositions. Love for the female form is adeptly applied as a facet of their work. Interviews with surviving members of the professional artists’ guild proved to be fruitful and profound. Dialogues were conducted with deceased member Murray Depillars and surviving members Frank Smith, James

Philips, Nelson Stevens, Michael D. Harris, Akili Ron Anderson and Kevin Cole. The six surviving members spoken to were asked questions about their artistic development within and outside of Afri-COBRA. To provide balance, questionnaires were issued to the three women who were involved during the formative period. Two of the women responded by answering the questionnaire. I discussed and interacted with seven men and two women of Afri-COBRA.

The assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Robert F. Kennedy underscore the social unrest and change our nation was undergoing. Civil and Human Rights were fermented and the 400 year old problem of oppression was finally being addressed. Black Power and the Black Studies Movements initiated the beginning of a new Black identity that would have implications and reticence well into the 21st century. The members of Afri-COBRA, along with the researcher, lived through those events and cultural changes. This treatise is designed to give a voice to these visual artists and their mission as a fine arts entity.

The 21st century finds the 1960s revolutionary ground breaking professional artist guild moving forward with the times. Comprised of Black male artists of the highest caliber, their largely abstract body of works set the standard for cutting edge visual explorations into modern art statements. The impact and impressions of their history and collections can be viewed in the nuance of styles and media approach to their individual statements. Be it the monumental powerful environmental sculpture of Akili Ron Anderson, or the mix media of Michael Harris’ explorations with photography, Afri-COBRA has a lot to say to Black viewers as well as multi-ethnic observers of their work.
Even though a few years have passed since the opening reception, the energy created between the artists and audience can still be felt. Innovative, radical and stunning are adjectives applicable to Afri-COBRA. With varying degrees of Africanity in each artist's offering, the thirst for self identity is appeased at a group showing of this collective.

Murray Depillars has made his transition since the 2007 exhibition. He received a B.A. and an M.A. from Roosevelt University. Depillars also earned a Ph.D. from Pennsylvania State University. He retired as Dean and Professor of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University. His historically laden compositions contained within them lessons in history. His guilt, like geometric paintings, leads the viewer on a journey into time. A noted public speaker, he had one of the keenest intellects in American Art Education circles during his lifetime. Depillars exhibited from 1970 to the time of his death. He illustrated Destruction of Black Civilization and several noted publications and covers. Although not a founding member, his spirit marched lockstep with Jeff Donaldson during the formative years of the Black arts revolution that engulfed a nationwide body of artists during the 1960s and 1970s. At the dawn of the second decade in the millennia, Afri-COBRA represents leaders in Black America's continuing task of defining who they were as a people, and who they are as Americans.

In the age of Afri-COBRA, along with the age of President Obama, the image makers in poetics and art are all black. This is what it means to "Africanize" the world. Mass media and critics in the art world will have to acknowledge a Black aesthetic because the leader of the free world is so authentically Black and American. Being Black for the next three or seven years will be in vogue all across America and the world. Although Afri-
COBRA as a collective has not been embraced by institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the researcher is positive that they will before the end of the Obama presidency. At that point, individuals will begin to experience a post-racial and post-Eurocentric dominated society. Visual art lags behind literary arts for a number of reasons. The acceptance of books as a primary mode of cultural transmission has occurred since the invention of the printing press in 15th century. Prior to that invention, art and artists were the chief educators of the masses in society. Today, fine art has been regulated to elite persons. Schoolchildren suffer cuts in arts programming budgets because education leaders view art as “fluff” or unimportant subject matter. By analyzing the movement called Afri-COBRA and the Black Arts Movement, along with its accompanying Black Aesthetic, maybe serious attention will be paid to the arts.

In their own voices, members of Afri-COBRA have collectively expressed their necessity and have always mattered in the grand scheme of culture and Black identity politics in the 21st century and beyond. Fifty years to a century from now when most of the current members of Afri-COBRA are dead and gone, what will historians, particularly art historians, think of Afri-COBRA?

This thesis adds to the discourse on arts and humanities in general, and particularly, Black arts development in America. Because of the research, we now know that two of the women associated with the group in the beginning, want to exhibit again with Afri-COBRA. Carolyn Lawrence and Barbara Hugu both affirmatively responded when asked, would they consider exhibiting with the group in the future. Maybe they will be asked?
The individual successful careers of each exhibiting member of the collective are worth underscoring. Every man in the collective has, or continues to be, a highly sought after artists for collections and commissions in their respective locations throughout the country. Whether supported solely by art or working in education, these artists are among the nation’s elite in their fields. Their works represent the epitome of skill and craftsmanship. They are highly professional as well being technically and conceptually flawless. Young people need to know their names and their works. The Black Aesthetic and today’s version of the Black Arts Movement are alive and well via the professional artist guild called Afri-COBRA.

They are tenaciously holding on to a rich legacy from the 1960s and infusing it with new members and exhibitions without compromising their visual, aesthetic, or social ideologies. Blacks, or any ethnic viewer, will feel the commitment to excellence in their collective and individual works. Although the juxtaposition of lettering and elements of composition are no longer in use by the group, the usage of vibrant, luminous colors is still characteristic of the Kool Aid colors of yester year.

Eight highly proficient artists exhibit with the guild. Although some members, like the three women who were initially with the group, are no longer exhibiting, one gets the impression that the spirit of belonging to Afri-COBRA lingers on well into inactivity. Afri-COBRA is a revolutionary idea whose time and sphere of influence reaches the viewers who are fortunate enough to see their works. For African- American viewers, they are empowered when presented face to face with the art. A viewing of their show will begin to clear up the identity crisis so many African Americans find themselves grappling with. Their unique expression of abstract African centered art with a flair for
modernity separates this guild from other associations. What were the historical social
and aesthetic variables present during the formation of Afri-COBRA and how did they
impact ideology and identity politics? What is the effect of Afri-COBRA today? Having
lasted and thrived for over forty years, the social and aesthetic variables of the latter part
of the twentieth century America have changed, yet remain the same. Racism is still a
problem that needs attending to, but the politics and ground rules have shifted for the
better for African Americans. When President Barack Obama delivered his first state of
the union address it was, a historic event for a country drenched in 400 years of horrific
slavery and segregation.

That political reality contrasted with the assassination of King speaks
immeasurable volumes to the ability of the American people, especially Black people to
overcome. That reality is not lost on members of Afri-COBRA. Each interviewed
member spoke or responded to questions on a questionnaire about their thoughts and
projections about their shared political life with white America through the presidency of
Obama along with his wife and family. One member, James Philips, showcased a visual
tribute in the form of an abstract composition with a human figure in the center of the
work, surrounded by circular bands of color. Frank Smith interpreted the president as the
'Africanization of America and the world.' The women of Afri-COBRA responded by
expressing optimism and hope for the new President, and our people. The image of the
Black man in the world was upgraded with the election of South African President
Nelson Mandela in the 1990s. It was launched even higher with the Presidency of Barack
Obama. There will be other artistical tributes to Obama but the one by James Philips of
Afri-COBRA was produced before the election was won.
Mass media’s response to President Obama is similar to what it expressed with candidate Obama. Endowed with a towering oratory that recalls King’s ability to reach the elites and the un-schooled masses, President Obama is more than a man for all seasons. The mass media cannot cover him enough. Fine art portraiture was always a part of the media mania surrounding the candidate. The fact is that members of Afri-COBRA projects and does tribute art reflective of the political dynamics of the collective. During the late 1960s after the assassination of King, Blacks went into shock and responded with riots and urban destruction. White America responded with the election of Richard Nixon who created the policy of Affirmative Action which is under fire with claims of reverse discrimination by racist conservatives and compromised Black conservatives. Afri-COBRA does not consist of white artists, but the group has open membership to any race. In order for the group to be around another 40 years, they will have to recruit new members. The average member is in his mid to late sixties. Their works are mature and profound and will continue to be a source of aesthetic grounded in Africanity.
CHAPTER IV

Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of Afri-COBRA and its meaning and significance to the Black Arts Movement, the Black Aesthetics, and Arts for People’s Sake in the black community of the 1960s and 1970s, and their contribution to black identity of contemporary black America. According to the founding member Nelson Stevens “Jeff Donaldson is the founder of Afri-COBRA.” Founded in 1968 the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists or Afri-COBRA was conceived by Donaldson to uplift and redefine the image of blacks in America and worldwide. For almost 500 years Europeans and Americans had contorted the image and persona of African people. The Afri-COBRA agenda set out to change that equation.

Generally, art textbooks omit Afri-COBRA and other leading black artists. Afri-COBRA member Frank Smith posits:

We have to write our own books. If you go to Iraq, the art education textbooks won’t list American artists like Winslow Homer they won’t even know his name! Just as Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka or August Wilson, or Walter Mosely are significant writers, nobody is going to write about the value of those writers in the mainstream. We have to (blacks) do it ourselves.21

This rationale is the cornerstone of findings in this research. In order to correct the damage done to black imagery art text books have to be written by Afri-centric scholars bent on promoting black visual artists from ancient Kemet to Afri-COBRA. Group member James Philips echoes this fact finding. This undertaking would usher in a new

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21 Interview with Frank Smith, October 2008.
paradigm in world art education of millions of students young and old. All Afri-COBRA members in the study have reached a consensus regarding this issue. Most of the guild members spent their careers as art educators in America's top universities and public schools.

The women that participated in the study were Barbara Hogu and Carolyn Lawrence. Jae Jarrell, another founding member, declined to participate in this study. All the founding women are inactive members. Their imprints are indelible. Barbara Hogu became inactive when the guild relocated to Washington D.C. and she could not attend the meetings. Carolyn Lawrence became inactive to devote the majority of her time to raise and nurture her family. The compositions and wearable or functional art they created is still an element of their exhibit presentations.

When asked whether the women's liberation movement had an impact on them Barbara Hogu simply responded "no." Carolyn Lawrence had lot more to say with the statement:

I cannot speak for other women in Afri COBRA. Instead of liberation from the restraints of being a woman, I needed liberation from the racism that I experienced my entire life. Racism always has been and continues to be horrible. Whether it is institutionalized or subtle. It has a detrimental impact on our children resulting in a distorted view of themselves and the world. One of the primary reasons that I did not feel restrained as a woman is that African-American women have always worked to provide for their families. Fortunately, I had so many role models.  

Categorically, the women’s liberation movement had no effect on their relations to the male dominated group, as evidenced in the cohesion of, the ideology written in their exhibit catalogues and their responses to the questionnaires, and the six one-on-one interviews with the practicing members. Racism was identified as a factor in the fight to

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22 Response from questionnaire conducted in 2008.
help create a Black Aesthetic and a new progressive black identity. The black rebellions in the streets prompted members to speak about what part they played in the uprising as young men and women in the struggle for equality. Founding member Nelson Stevens spoke of his interaction with Malcolm X, the Black Panthers and the antiwar movement while working on his degree in college. These events and personalities had an indelible effect on the politics of the guild.

As the decades moved on Afri-COBRA championed political causes that effected black people worldwide with exhibits opposing South Africa’s apartheid regime at the United Nations building in New York. The guild also did a collaborative exhibit with Group Fromaje from the Caribbean to demonstrate that black artists like black people worldwide had a common goal to unite black people through a homogenous black aesthetic. Whether using abstract or black figures their art accomplished the goal of a Black Aesthetic and Arts for People’s Sake, in their case black people.

The political, sociological and aesthetic variables in the late 1960s were overcome by a strict adherence to the mission and principles of Afri-COBRA. To this day the guild’s focus has been on African people with an Afrocentric verve. New members Kevin Cole and Michael Harris’ works are in the tradition of founding members. Barbara Hugu and Carolyn Lawrence expressed an interest in reuniting with the men. Founding members Jae and Wadsworth Jarrell are not interested in exhibiting with the guild.

While there have been cultural and aesthetic breakthroughs in society today in the arts, racism remains a barrier in mainstream galleries in cities throughout America and the world. The role of Afri-COBRA was pivotal in the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s. It remains instrumental in the continuance of that movement. The obstacles of
racism, prejudice and bias are ever present, but the will of Afri-COBRA keeps gaining momentum. Arts for the masses although elites control its ebb and flow, Afri-COBRA is still fighting to make art available for black people and all people to enjoy.

Enjoyment is one aspect of art, but functionalism has an even deeper meaning. It is an African characteristic in art and ritual inherent in African people worldwide and the utilitarian nature of black art in politics and culture within black society. This study finds that Afri-COBRA practice this form of functionalism in the formation of their ideology and philosophy. African art from the pyramids to the mask is connected to spiritual meaning in this life and the afterlife, in ritual and function. It educates the people regarding ancestral and political hegemony within black society.

Afri-COBRA embraced functionalism through its creative use of African motif and black subject matter in their compositions. They championed the cause of liberation through visual arts as they sought to overcome the white world’s negative portrayal of black people for the sake of black people in America and worldwide. Sociologically this provided black with a new image of themselves that has reconstructed and repaired black identity while creating a black aesthetic that meets the needs and aspirations of black folk. The Black Arts Movement continues with Afri-COBRA’s will to speak to black society through its compositions, and cultural functionalism. Their significance in the 1960s as well as 2011 is immeasurable.

Black arts impacts mainstream or Eurocentric art values and influence popular music and dress. The abstract stimuli date as far back as Pablo Picasso’s incorporation of African sculptured elements into his paintings and sculpture during the beginning of the twentieth century. African masks are used as facial features in many of his works. The
Black Arts Movement’s visual arts component, Afri-COBRA of the latter part of the twentieth century impacted the white art practitioners also. Although not as pronounced as the influences of African sculpture on Picasso, according to Frank Smith, an Afri-COBRA member since the early 1970s, the effect of Afri-COBRA is undeniable. Smith goes on to say that certain segments of white society are in denial regarding Afri-COBRA influence on mainstream artists.

The Men of Afri-COBRA

Smith’s work, similar to the majority of Afri-COBRA artists, is African influenced and is abstract, both conceptually and symbolically. Unlike music, dance or speech, visual arts’ impact upon the dominant culture is subliminal rather than overt. The Wall of Respect’s bearing can be measured, to a certain degree, by the influx of outdoor murals that sprang up all across America in the decades following its creation. Many ethnic groups try to mimic or copy their approach toward outdoor mural art.

Jazz music, especially Be Bop, figured prominently into the visual psychology of Afri-COBRA members. According to member Nelson Stevens, “our art or my art is augmented or complimented by compositions in music done by Charlie “Bird” Parker, Miles Davis and John Coltrane.” This intimate relationship to jazz or African influenced music can be seen in a composition by Afri-COBRA founder Jeff Donaldson, entitled, Jam Pact Jelli Tite. The influence of jazz pervades the composition, with the depiction of a cubistic jazz musician broken into elemental form with the usage of circles, diagonals and a semi-humanoid centerpiece that moves and orchestrates the feel of a jamming pianist. The viewer cannot concentrate on one part of the canvas. The artist forces you to experience the whole visual experience of jazz being played.
Dynamic colors are true to the visual philosophy of the group, as Donaldson masterfully dispersed blue, purple, yellow and red to induce a visual excitement to the viewer. Although the composition is abstract, it is executed with mathematical precision, which provokes respect for calculations it took to render the geometric influence masterpiece. It makes one think of the free flowing timing in jazz as you observe this painting. It is spiritual and unique to this group of artists. The usage of bright, shining colors that reflect the intensity of the fierce urgency to place Black identity at the pinnacle of greatness on the world stage is something Afri-COBRA member Barbara Hogu wrote about in her nation time ideology for the group, an ideology that matched the raw intensity of the era.

Nelson Stevens, Akili Ron Anderson, James Philips and Frank Smith all expressed how they were involved in the protests of the 1960s at their respected locations. They also reflected how the events such as the anti-war movement, The Black Panther Party the Black Studies Movement influenced their decision to be Black artists rather than artists who happened to be Black. It can be deduced that the founder Jeff Donaldson was of the same mind-set, especially with his denoting of Trans African Art concept, a concept that still has currency within the guild.

Afri-COBRA exhibits usually took place over their forty plus year existence at locations where a member might be teaching or hold a position at the institutions. To date, the guild has exhibited all across America and the Third World. The researcher attended their 2007 exhibit at Hampton University located in Hampton, Virginia as part of his field experience with the group. The Hampton University exhibition marked the first time the collective had offered a showing in more than a decade. Kevin Cole, a new
member acquired in the first decade of the new millennia, marked the first time Afri-COBRA had added to its ranks in over ten years as well. Admission to the guild is a highly selective process. Members and prospective members come from backgrounds steeped in the tradition of academia and community upliftment.

The majority of the artists of Afri-COBRA are heading academic departments at America’s elite schools of higher learning or retired. Founder Jeff Donaldson had an illustrious career at Howard University before his transition. A tribute was given to him at the 2007 Hampton exhibition. His works, like many of the artists of Afri-COBRA, are purchased by major collectors in the mainstream and Black art world. He acquired a B.A. from the University of Arkansas and an M.A. from the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology. He completed his education credentials with a Ph.D. in African and African-American Art History. Donaldson exhibited dozens of solo exhibitions and over 150 Group Exhibitions. The selected private, public and institutional collections include: Lerone Bennett, Jr., Gwendolyn Brooks, Ivan Dixion Senotor and Mrs. Clive DuVal, Ann E. Smith, National Center for African American Artists, Howard University, Studio Museum in Harlem, Muse Nationale, Senegal, Schomberg Collection, Johnson Publishing Company, Arizona State University, University of Arkansas, Cornell University and Fisk University. Lerone Bennett, Senior Editor of Ebony, and Historian wrote of Donaldson stating, “Jeff Donaldson is a seer and an artist. He has reinterpreted the black experience form the inside and his works tell us from the inside, that the darkness is its own light. As an artist, and as a prophet of the New Vision, he as influence
painters, writers and activists.\textsuperscript{23} Donaldson's murals, portraits and illustrations are among his many achievements.

J. Eugene Grigsby, Jr., Ph.D., author of Art and Ethics, wrote:

Jeff Donaldson is a synthesis of three distinct personalities. In him the artist, the educator, the organizer became one. This is an art itself. This is the essence of African Art. An art that is a living, active vital phenomenon, an active part of a community...not passive, remote, isolated, hanging on the walls of a museum. This describes Jeff Donaldson a model, a beacon for those to follow: He is that art.

Nelson Stevens affirms that assessment when he says in the researcher’s interview with him, “Jeff Donaldson is the founder of Afri-COBRA.”\textsuperscript{24} Stevens wanted to be clear and unequivocal about that fact. Stevens work uses portrait art more than any other member of Afri-COBRA. Realism, cubism and psychedelic coloring are elements of his approach toward composition, message and style. The question of Black art, or the authenticity of Black art, was being challenged by the white art establishment. Steven’s answer to this question was an emphatic, “yes, there is a Black art.” “I met with Amira Baraka and Larry Neal, and they cleared up a lot of ideas regarding Black art and the Black Aesthetic\textsuperscript{25}

Presently, the idealism behind Black art is being refuted by curator and director of the Studio Museum in Harlem New York, Thelma Golden. Golden asserts that we are in a post-Black era. In other words, the idea of a Black art is outdated and has run its course. Golden, a younger generation advocate for minority arts, has been denounced by Afri-COBRA member James Philips and Black arts philosopher, Maulana Karenga. Both men

\textsuperscript{23} Lerone Bennett, Afri-COBRA & GROUP Fromaje Exhibition Catalogue, (Howard University, Washington, D.C., 1989).

\textsuperscript{24} Nelson Stevens, interview by author, October 2008.

\textsuperscript{25} Stevens, 2008 interview.
are from the 1960s era of social change and the Black Arts Movement. There is an aesthetic or Black Aesthetic seen through the lens of Black Art that accepts the idealism that is undergirded by the positive response to the negative conditions imposed on Black America by mainstream America. A post-Black art assertion tends to deny social conditions that have traditionally been used to oppress Black people. The same can be said of post-racial American politics in light of the first Black President, Barack Obama. We do not live in a post-racial America because race still matters in politics and art. Subsequently, there is no such thing as post-Black Art. There is Black art, mainstream art and multicultural art which represents a multifaceted world of social development.

The leading proponents of Black art, especially visual art, are Afri-COBRA members Nelson Stevens, Frank Smith, James Philips, Michael Harris, Wadsworth Jarrell, Adger Cowans, Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Akili Ron Anderson and their contemporaries Louis Mailou Jones, Richard Hunt, Betty Supar and Elizabeth Catlett. This collective of Black artists do not cover the entire body of Black artists, but they are representative of a cadre of artists in contemporary Black culture dating back to the 1940s and 1950s as is the case with Mailou Jones and Elizabeth Catlett.

Afri-COBRA artist Frank Smith received a B.F.A from the University of Illinois, and an M.F.A. from Howard University. He taught at Howard University for 31 years and has had an extensive track record exhibiting from 1977 to the present. He is the archivist for the group. His commissions and public works are in Jamaica and throughout America. Essentially, his work embodies the Afri-COBRA sense of Cool-aid colors and shine. Smith once expressed:

I'm sure that my use of color was informed by the group that already exists and likewise the colors I had been using along with the element of shine or using reflected materials
were a part of my work prior to coming to the group. I believe in intensification, that’s using particular colors at their highest level of intensity. Red is different from pink, which is different from maroon but it’s all red. When I use red, I use red at its highest intensity. I like the word intensification. When the white world was talking about minimalist, I was thinking maximizing. In my work I’m seeking the maximum level of intensity throughout the image, not just in a manner of figure and ground. I see this in the work of Nelson Stevens and James Phillips and all the other artists in Afri-COBRA. They have that overall intensification of color and pattern, and that done by many other artists in the mainstream of modern art. Although that’s being acknowledge today, but a hundred years from now when the look back at this culture, that’s what will be the final assessment. The Expressionists, Cubist, Dadaism, or Impressionists were rejected by the people who were writing about art at the time of their actual lives. Let’s also keep in mind that Afri-COBRA has been on the scene for over forty years, the Impressionists and Cubists didn’t last that long, even the Renaissance didn’t last that long. The historical acknowledgement may not occur in our lifetime. 26

In art education textbooks in public and higher education, Afri-COBRA is omitted. This is an overt racist exclusion that the research hopes to overturn. According to Frank Smith, states:

We have to write our own books. If you go to Iraq, the art education textbooks won’t list American artists like Winslow Homer. They won’t even know his name! Just as Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka or August Wilson or Walter Mosely are significant writers, nobody is going to write about the value project to the mainstream. We have to it ourselves. 27

In all societies, be they underdeveloped or modern, the artifacts, i.e. sculpture, pottery or painting and architecture reflect the humanity of that particular group. Since civilization began with the invention of the of the twelve month calendar in 4241 B.C. in African Egyptian society, men and women have ascertained the true value or mores of a particular group by studying their art. 28 Ancient Blacks in Egypt, or Kemet, set the standard for the Greeks, Romans and Muslims who followed them; the art reveals that to us. Egyptian art is African or Black art, and therefore the genesis of a Black Aesthetic,

26 Frank Smith, interview by author, October 2008.

27 Smith, 2008 interview.

that influence succeeding generations of arts throughout the ages. In the 6251 years of human development we have acknowledged that very little is understood about time and its relevance to the constellations that the priests of Africans along the Nile River Valley used to measure and chart the cosmos. African Egyptian art underscores and articulates a relationship between nature and the universe. Art is essentially spirituality in written and pictorial forms.

Art in American society takes its cues from European society historically, which is a derivation of African society, especially Egyptian society. Consequently, Africa shows up as a header in ancient and modern times in art. It is no great wonder that the white founders or conquerors of America chose an African Egyptian obelisk as its most identifiable monument in the capital. Benjamin Banneker, a free Black, was given the task of completing the design of the city of Washington, when the Frenchman commissioned to do the job quit and went back to France. Banneker had been his assistant and redrew the plans from memory because the Frenchman took his plans with him when he quit.

The European Slave trade, and the 400 years of race hatred heaped upon Africans worldwide has been the source of seemingly endless negative stereotyping of the Black image and humanity. Brown vs. the Board of Education in 1954 is the marker for modernity in America. Prior to that decision, America, especially white America, behaved in a barbaric and uncivilized manner toward Blacks in the U.S. The Civil Rights Movement ushered in modern civil humanity as we know it. More and more, Black men and women are being judged by the content of their character add deeds, rather than the color of their skin.
Throughout the oppressive period of subjugation, Black art survived. Henry O Tanner’s composition, “The Banjo Lesson,” nobly speaks to the humanity and authenticity of a Black Aesthetic, with his masterful painting of an old banjo player nurturingly teaching a young boy how to play the banjo. Painted in Romantic style, the technicality is of the highest caliber. Completed during the height of repression towards Blacks in America, Tanner’s, “The Banjo Lesson” and “The Thankful Poor” exude excellence in style and form. If art history textbooks omitted Tanner’s significance as a world class artist, it is due to racism and cultural imperialism of whites towards Blacks and nonwhite cultures rather than equality.

Another artist projected onto historical landscape during slavery was part African/Native American Edmonia Lewis. An expert sculptor and draftsman, Lewis’s busts and free standing compositions earned her a living and a right to be underscored as the first woman of African descent in America with bonafide credentials in the field of art. Tanner and Lewis’s omission from art education texts rob future Black artists of historical role models, an idea not lost on Afri-COBRA founder Jeff Donaldson, who earned a Ph.D. in African and African-American Art. Frank Smith of Afri-COBRA was correct when he stated we must write our own art history textbooks. Although slavery and neo-slavery blinded white America to the efforts of African-American artists through much of the 19th and 20th centuries, artists like Aaron Douglass, Jacob Lawrence, Hale Woodruff, Lois Mailou Jones and Elizabeth Catlett survived and succeeded despite all the odds against them. The Harlem Renaissance and the decades that followed,


30 Bearden and Henderson, 77.
produced a cadre of Black men and women who have greatly added and contributed to the cultural fabric of America.

Mainstream artistic institutions and state and national galleries from New York to California still propagate the arts of white America. State museums like the High Museum in Atlanta, Georgia cater to the dominant society, even though Atlanta is largely demographically Black. What causes this to take place? Does the same phenomenon take place in other predominantly Black cities? The answer is a resounding yes. Blacks do not control the politics of fine art in major art institutions.

Although it is changing for the better thanks to the help of celebrities such as Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey and some professional athletes in the NBA and NFL, Blacks still lag behind whites by a wide margin with respect to patronage of the arts. Years of cultural omission from textbooks, museums and national art institutions that validate artists as cultural icons gravely impacts the circumstances. Arts media and the mass media are also at fault in consideration of the equity of attention focused on the Black arts versus white arts. Although Afri-COBRA began by not adhering to critics, the 21st century version of Afri-COBRA would enjoy a good review commentating on their own works. Additionally, the argument for Art For Art Sake versus Art For People’s Sake is not as pronounced as it was during the origin of the group. As Afri-COBRA member Kevin Cole states, “My work is abstract and speaks to anyone.”

The Women of Afri-COBRA

The women of Afri-COBRA had more in common with the world renowned two dimensional artist, Lois Mailou Jones. Her compositions referenced African ancestry, design, and resistance social politics of Black artists throughout her long and illustrious
career. Afri-COBRA women artists during the formative years between 1968 and 1974 include Barbara Jones Hogu, Carolyn Lawrence, and Jae Jarrell. Each woman brought an aspect of woman sensibility and style to the group. Barbara Jones Hogu is accredited for penning the primary motive for forming the group. In their 1973 exhibit catalogue, she writes

we wanted to speak to them (black people) and for them, by having our common thoughts, feelings, trials, and tribulations express our total experience as a people. We were aware of the negative experiences in our present and past but we wanted to accentuate the positive made of thought and action. Therefore our visual statements were to be Black, positive and direct with identification, purpose and direction.31

When asked in a questionnaire what ideals did you contribute to the ideology of Afri-COBRA. Hogu’s response was, “At the time that we were working on our ideology my contribution had to do with lettering. I was using lettering in my prints.” Creative use of lettering employed positive messages was the signature characteristic of Afri-COBRA during the formative years. Along with bright “Cool-aid” colors the group projected a unique blend of function and Afrocentricism into their imagery and ideology/aesthetic. Hogu writes in 1973 that programmatically, Afri-COBRA’s art deals with concepts that offer positive and feasible solutions to our individual, local, national and international problems.

The problems of Black people in the 1960s to the present were and still are global in scope. In her closing statement, Hogu insists that” Art can be a liberating force ---- a positive approach concerning the plight and the direction of our people. Visual imagery should bring us together and uplift us as a people into a common unit moving toward a common destination, and a common destiny.” Barbara Jones Hogu became inactive in

31 Barbara Jones Hogu, AFRI-COBRA III, (Exhibition Catalogue, University Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, September 7-30, 1973), n. page.
1973 or 1974 according to her response to a 2008 questionnaire; her input into the group dynamic is underscored in the Afri-COBRA II exhibit catalogue. Throughout her statements in 2008, she conveyed the idea that “it is up to us to tell our own stories, to write our own history and to make sure that it is given to future generations.” When asked whether a Black President will make a difference she responded with an emphatic “Yes!” She expounded that our President is from Africa and not African-American and White from Euro-American stock. So you could say that he is truly African and American. He sees our culture from a different viewpoint than most of us because he has traveled another cultural path as well as Black American.” When asked if she will ever exhibit with Afri-COBRA again? She responded, stating “Maybe.” If Afri-COBRA wants to have an exhibit and invites the early members to exhibit with them, I will exhibit.

Another woman that was integral to Afri-COBRA’s early formative years is Carolyn Lawrence. Ms. Lawrence responded to the 2008 questionnaire posed to her by this researcher. When asked, when and why did you become inactive in Afri-COBRA?, this was her response:

Members of the group were relocating from Chicago to other parts of the country which made it difficult to coordinate activities. Chicago members met to discuss activities; however, decisions were made by eastern members before notifying Chicago members by mail. It appeared that the Chicago members’ input was not valued by eastern members because decisions were made by them before notifying us.32

Ms. Lawrence continued by stating, “When I first became active in Afri-COBRA, I was a married mother who had many obligations I deeply desired to work as a full time high school art teacher, have a family life, nurture my son. and be a productive contributing artist to Afri-COBRA. Since it was not possible for me to competently do it all at the same time, I made the decision to leave Afri-COBRA.”

32 Carolyn Lawrence, response to questionnaire, 2008.
Ms. Lawrence goes on to convey how supportive her husband was while she was an active member. In closing she states, “Having grown up in a loving stable home, I soon realized that I could not remain active, maintain a household and give my son the nurturing needed to become a well developed person.”

In response to the question regarding white critics and mainstream institution views of Afri-COBRA, she writes,

Mainstream art institutions and white critics’ mindsets were different from Afri-COBRA. Their thinking was “Art for Art Sake” which had an emphasis on individual artistic development. Although there were some positive responses, many white critics viewed our work as propaganda. They did not understand or feel the weight of racial oppression in this country. This shared oppression made it easy for us to engage in communal thinking.

In response to the question; The Black Arts Movement is known primarily for writers Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez and other while visual artists like Jeff Donaldson, Nelson Stevens, and you are less known to the movement. Can you explain this phenomenon? Lawrence writes,

Artists require enormous dedication to their art. Jeff Donaldson, Nelson Stevens, and other African-American artists of their stature deserve much more recognition than they have received. It was a privilege to work with them and I continue to admire their talent. I do not regret leaving the group. Afri-COBRA not only positively contributes to the African-American community; it is a viable projection of the Black Aesthetic.33

In response to the statement/question, Art education in our public schools and universities omit Afri-COBRA and the Black Arts Movement artists. How did/does this affect our cultural and aesthetic understanding of Black and White Americans’ shared identity? Lawrence: “Afri-COBRA’s omission in art education in our public schools and universities leaves a void. All students need to understand the sequence of events as well.

33 Carolyn Lawrence interview
as the aesthetic and emotional expressions and human struggles in the midst of these events.” On the question of exhibiting with Afri-COBRA again she gladly proclaims:

It would be an honor to be invited to exhibit with Afri-COBRA. The members of the group have spent their lives researching and developing their art. There is no kind of substitute for their kind of diligence and discipline. I would not participate unless I have invested more time to explore my own work. I have never lost my passion for artistic expression so I will continue to pursue my own individual style.34

The third or last woman to contribute to the formative period of Afri-COBRA is Jae Jarrell. Unfortunately, she declined to participate in my questionnaire. Her views about her art are expressed in the Afri-COBRA III exhibit catalogue. A proficient apparel artist, she states;

I produce garments with patterns, textures and colors that duplicate the richness of the patterns, textures, and colors of Blackness. Preservation of our heritage motivates me to design for my Sisters and Brothers adornment that reflect our beautiful culture. Strongly influencing my work are African sculpture, weaving and jewelry. The lines, seams, and decorative work of my apartments reflect the rhythms I experience from African art.35

Barbara Jones Hogu has a B.A. from Howard University in Washington, D.C. and a B.F.A. at the Art Institute of Chicago and M.S. from the Illinois Institute of Technology, in Chicago. She has also shown at “The Wall of Respect” Chicago 1967.

Carolyn Lawrence earned a B.F.A. at the University of Texas, Austin and an M.F.A. at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago. Her work was also shown at “The Wall of Respect” Chicago 1967.

Jae Jarrell studied at Bowling Green State University and the Ohio Art Institute of Chicago. She was also an art instructor at Howard University in Washington, D.C. All three women were accomplished artists, although other women became members

34 Carolyn Lawrence, response to questionnaire, 2008

throughout the forty plus years Afri-COBRA has been in existence, these are the three women founding member Nelson Stevens calls attention to when commenting on the early days of Afri-COBRA’s history. Although men make up the membership presently in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was coexistent with women as strong contributors in ideology, art, and communalism. When asked about the women’s liberation movement’s impact on women in Afri-COBRA Barbara Jones Hogu simply responded by saying no.

Carolyn Lawrence had this to say,

I cannot speak for other women in Afri-COBRA. Instead of liberation, from the restraints of being a woman, I needed liberation from the racism that I experienced my entire life. Racism always has been and continues to be horrible whether it is institutionalized or subtle. It especially has a detrimental impact on our children resulting in a distorted view of themselves and the world. One of the primary reasons that I did not feel restrained as a woman is that African-American women have always worked to provide their families. Fortunately, I had so many role models.36

Many of Lawrence’s role models were accomplished educators and musicians. When asked about the current state of affairs with women and a year of President Obama in the White House, she admitted that there are some significant changes for the better, and that their occupation of the White House signals a sizable shift in race relations in America and the world. This generation of Americans has experienced the end of Jim Crow at the cost of Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Medgar Evers lives.

With regards to the current state of affairs relating to women and Blacks in particular, Ms. Lawrence paints to the increase in political appointments by President Obama, and the uptick in parity in pay on the dollar scale, women have emerged closer to matching the equal pay of men. In some cases, a new dilemma of women making more income than their male counterparts has created a modern social scenario not experienced

36 Carolyn Lawrence, response to questionnaire 2008.
in pre-civil rights America. In conclusion of the women of Afri-COBRA, it is reasonable to assert that their input was invaluable and integral to the group’s philosophical and technical identity, from the use of lettering to the nurturing of family, community, nation, and world their roles are eternally fixated in their history and current sensibilities as an all male entity.

Art for People’s Sake, according to Afri-COBRA member Michael Harris, was one of the outcomes of a four day conference called the Conference of the Functional Aspects of Black Art (CONFABA). Organized by Jeff Donaldson (founder of Afri-COBRA) at Northwestern University (May 6-10, 1970), CONFABA was a working conference of artists, art historians, and educators, art consultants and emerging critics.37

Arts For People’s Sake is the diametrical argument to Arts For Arts Sake. In the volume by Albert Guerard named “Arts For Arts Sake,” Guerard asserts that art has no function, political, social, cultural, or moral, and that this ideal can be traced as far back as the European Middle Ages and beyond, as far back as Plato. This was indeed white man’s conception of the state of art. Jeff Donaldson’s asserted argument was that art was functional and should be utilized as propaganda and every form for practical application to oppression that engulfed Black America and the African Diaspora. Afri-COBRA was and still is about the Black community. They embrace an Arts For People Sake philosophy. According to Guerard, “Art no doubt does blend with history, craftsmanship, physiology, psychology, and even metaphysics. But is not amenable to their laws.”38

37 Tritobia Benjamin, AFRI-COBRA/Group FROMASE (Exhibition catalogue Gallery of Art, College of Fine Arts Blackburn University Center Gallery Howard University Washington, D.C., November 6-December 12 1989), n. page.

38 Albert Guerard, Art For Art’s Sake (Boston, New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1936), xxxiii.
other words, there is no purpose or function of art in these domains. This is antithetical to what Arts For People’s Sake implies. This notion of art for the sake of expressing without meaning or cultural relevance is European (white) and outrageously absurd. Jeff Donaldson and Maulana Karenga got it right in the 1960s, Art should function to educate and serve the Black community in the elevation of progress over stagnation.

Although Guerard’s doctrine of Art For Art’s Sake is shared by practitioners Albert Cassagne, Albert Farmer and Louise Rosenblatt, these Frenchmen gain some currency in Angelica in the mindset of curators, critics, and collectors. This was the mindset against Afri-COBRA when they exhibited their works in the late 60s to the present.

While Arts for People’s Sake is supplanted by a Black aesthetic, it does not mean that the ideology is confined to the Black world. The Black aesthetic and Arts For People’s Sake are universal to all forms of art and can be appreciated by all ethnicities in the nation and world, but primarily it is aimed at Black people’s upliftment in Black America and the diaspora along with continental Africa. Earlier groups like Spiral, headed by Romare Bearden, and like minded artists throughout America and the globe could be included within the perimeter of Arts For People’s Sake. Within the lines of demarcation, it can be asserted that Arts For Arts Sake is a European or Eurocentric worldview, while Arts For People’s Sake is an African or Afro-centric worldview of creativity and art forms. The majority of Black artists tend to imbrue a Black aesthetic, although some reject the notion of a Black art and gravitate towards the so-called universal. White artists that deal with Black subject matter constitute another dimension to the contrasting worldviews of art.
Abstract expressionism which constitute the majority of artwork produced by Afri-COBRA artists, although use of the figure is utilized by Nelson Stevens, Michael Harris, James Phillips, and Murry Depillars in their compositions, most Afri-COBRA artists tend to express themselves abstractly. Even when the figure is used, it is done or rendered expressively or symbolically, especially the use of bright colors.

Interpretation of Findings

Afri-COBRA’s more than forty-year existence has seen a sizeable change in American identity politics and Black American identity politics. The first year of the Obama presidency has come and gone with mixed reviews from Blacks in general, but not all Blacks are happy. TV host Tavis Smiley, who has been critical of the President since candidate Obama skipped his State of the Black Union gathering, has lately ostracized President Obama for not having a specific Black agenda, for Black America.

When Afri-COBRA started, Black identity politics centered on civil rights, Black Power and the Black Arts Movement writers, poets, and performance artists. Beginning with the “Wall of Respect” in 1968 in Chicago, Black visual imagery was in need of a healthy dose of encouragement. Led by Afri-COBRA’s Jeff Donaldson, visual artists authenticated a pantheon of approved heroes that set the standard for content for the emergent mural project throughout America. Poetry was also one of the main ingredients of the “Wall of Respect.” Subsequently, words were married to murals as an integral component of muralists nationwide. Dissecting the dynamics of the content of the “Wall of Respect,” one would have to begin with the origin in African Egyptian society around 4241 B.C. when modern civilization begun with the invention of the calendar. Africans along the Nile River Valley pioneered the art of writing now known as hieroglyphics.
Visual art was an integral part of the formula. The Gods and Goddesses Isis, Nut, Osirius and Horus formed the foundation of the major religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Along with the sacred teaching and principles of Maat, most religious ideals got their start from these African conceptions.

The name “Wall of Respect” made deities of the figures they chose to depict, they lacked supernatural powers but achieve great feats of individual and collective accomplishments. The visual artists who went on to comprise Afri-COBRA after their contributions to the wall maintained a high regard for the literal combination of words and art. The group became famous for that characteristic of the art they produced during the formative years of the 1960s and 70s.

Afri-COBRA’s ideological outlook considered the oppression that Europe, America and the Islamic cultures had impugned Africa, America and the African Diaspora since the conquest of Alexander the Great. Approximately 2,300 years of Caucasoid domination had to be addressed in Afri-COBRA’s theoretical manifesto or mission statement. The enormity of the problem would take decades, perhaps a century to solve. Four decades and a Black President have changed some of the stereotypes but culture and race relations are still a work in progress in America and the World.

The traditional art establishments such as the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York still adhere to artists from the “White World.” Although Afri-COBRA never sought out to be accepted by the critics or the White art establishment, the trend towards a greater degree of equity is promising and undeniable. In public education, five states have adopted Black History as a requirement in their curriculum. Florida, Arkansas, Colorado, Michigan and Illinois have adopted this bold new paradigm in
American education today, maybe Black History is the civil rights issue in contemporary race related issues.

Art education curriculums across America omit or marginalize the contributions of Black artists to American society. This racist practice has gone on for centuries. By underscoring and documenting the story of Afri-COBRA, the research brings justice to an unjust practice of dehumanization via omission. Consequently, the story of Afri-COBRA humanizes a segment of American society, the Black visual arts, which has seldom seen the light of discovery.

Visual arts, especially Black visual arts, are excluded almost entirely from art textbooks in the American education curriculum. Consequently, an incomplete composition of American society is presented to the world. Art defines or reflects the culture of a group, whether highly refined, crude or moderate. The past five hundred years, art by Blacks throughout the world has been contorted, suppressed and demonized by Europeans and their descendents worldwide. Ironically, art in Africa, especially Egyptian art, led the way to man’s spiritual awakening and cultural identity thousands of years before Europe emerged from the cave. Art produced by Afri-COBRA seeks to reconnect with those artisans in a spiritual or cosmic way. Racism employed by the dominant White culture of the past two millennia has misled humanity into believing they shall blot out the true development of mankind and womanhood forever. While the world has felt the effects of a Greco-Roman influence for the past two millennia, Africanization, a process started by Kemetan civilization dated as far back as 10,000 B.C. and beyond, has taken on a vigorous new dimension with the compositions produced by
Afri-COBRA over the last 40 years. This finding uncovers a lost chapter in the story of art in 20th and 21st century America.

The implications of study for current theory suggest that Afri-COBRA, an obscure group of individual artists from the Black community in America led, and continues to lead, the way in modern art for the country and subsequently, the world. Proof of this aesthetic phenomenon can be traced to the longevity of the movement and the creative outpouring over the last forty plus years of their existence. The Afri-COBRA movement is thriving although the White art establishment has yet to recognize its worth and meaning that does not diminish their value as a legitimate movement. This proclamation may sound hyperbolic, but given the on-going practice of marginalizing Black culture by the dominant White aesthetic practitioners, one can ascertain a modicum of truth in the declaration. The implications for further study of this assertion provide further researchers with a new paradigm in the arts and humanities. A paradigm undergirded by the resiliency of oppressed Blacks in America and throughout the African Diaspora.

Limitations of the study lay in the fact that few scholars have written about Black visual artists. The paucity of interested scholars is indicative of the rare yet abundant opportunity to set new horizons in this field of study about the Black arts. A renaissance in the Black aesthetics is possible, especially in the age of President Barack Obama, and the Africanization of America, a process that began with Pablo Picasso and his studies on African sculpture and masks. Picasso, one of the most profound artists in the twentieth century, incorporated elements of African art into some of his paintings, and to a greater
degree his sculpture. The integration was so complete, one would find difficulty distinguishing the African sculpture from Picasso's sculpture.

Aaron Douglass of the Harlem Renaissance visual artists provide us with another example of the Africanization of America. His murals take on the aesthetics of ancient African Egyptian murals. They set the trend for using African Egyptian style in Black art throughout the twentieth century.

The researcher established authentic communications by interviewing six active members of Afri-COBRA. Two women participated by responding to questionnaires designed to extract the history and reasons for their departure from the group. These women were founding members. Their voices were necessary in order to form a composite collective voice for the group.

The artwork seen was of world class caliber, inspiring, and awesome. This research humanizes the plight of Black people through the artists who represent them. To the casual viewer and listener, their story may sound and look ordinary; but to the evolved mind and eye, they are extraordinary and profound. Forty or more years have passed since the inception of Afri-COBRA yet, they are as relevant today as they were in 1968.

This study identifies how the established White art world has yet to anoint them as leaders in the field. Further analyses by researchers of all ethnicities will one day prove that their imprint is indelible and deserving of the highest placement in the realm of the visual arts in America. While symbolic and abstract in style and conceptualization, they remain true to their founding credo of Africanness, bright colors and the human form as a metaphor to communicate visually what we cannot read or hear.
The visual domain of Afri-COBRA harks back as far as cave paintings in ancient times. The evolution of modern society has not eliminated the spiritual essence of painting or sculpture. When one experiences the showing of a collective such as Afri-COBRA, the evolutionary spirit of humanity, in this case, Black humanity, is transported to a higher level of appreciation. It is indeed, universal even though it is all Black.

Optimism and realism were the personality traits that mark the character and persona of each artist spoken to or corresponded within Afri-COBRA. Save Michael Harris and Kevin Cole, all were in the middle or beginning of the turbulent 60s, when they came of age as young adults. As elder spokesmen and women, their testimonies are seasoned with time, and the experience of the forces of social change that engulfed American society during that era. Their art reflected the times. This research reveals the need to include Afri-COBRA as a collective in textbooks of all ages. It deserves recognition of the individual artists that started the group as cultural icons in the American art world. Additionally, Black artists from the colonial period to present times should be included in art textbooks and art appreciation curriculums nationwide. This world constitutes a revamping in arts and humanities. The effort could begin to repair the damage done to Black humanity during slavery and Jim Crow America.

During enslavement, or the process of inducing a slave mentality, the drum maker and the carver of ancestral figures were keenly watched, because they, more than any African, possessed the power to conjure up memories of a free life in Africa. The slave master, in order to make his social engineering work, would severely punish the artisan if he or she was caught making items that would sustain an African identity. It is within this context Black artists were suppressed and authentic African creativity underwent a
transformation change to ‘slave art.’ Utilitarian items such as pottery and an occasional drum survived this period. The chief instrument of suppression was horsewhipping the slaves into fear of any remembrance of a free African. This technique was in practice daily for over two hundred years while slavery was an institution in the United States. Terror and torture are inhumane methods of treatment yet White Americans religiously practice this evil monstrosity of behavior until the Civil War transformed Black and White society. Reconstruction lasted around a decade or so. Jim Crow and segregation accomplished what Whites wanted, a disenfranchised Black devoid of constitutional protection under the law. The unresolved inhumane treatment has led one researcher to regard it as post traumatic slave syndrome. Joy Leary, in her book, asserts that low self esteem, ever present anger and racist socialization are all components of the syndrome. The effects of almost four centuries of legalized abuse programmed enslavement and institutionalized oppression can be seen today. Within the context of the family community. Afri-COBRA’s attention to these factors formed a core value that the group adhered to which remains today. Family values and the reconstruction of Black family are ideals intertwined in the Afri-COBRA manifesto that Joy Leary finds redeeming and useful to the treatment of the Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. One of the three founding women associated with Afri-COBRA, Carolyn Lawrence, stated that she had to choose between her son’s rearing, and Afri-COBRA. She dropped out of Afri-COBRA and chose the latter.

The traumatic experience of Black people immediately after the shock of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination caused African Americans to react violently across America. City after city erupted into violence and riot. Collectively, it was as if

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our national soul spoke in unity. We must strike back, and we did. White America’s
reaction in the 1970s was one of constructive engagement, especially with the
implementation of Affirmative Action policies of the Nixon administration. Afri-
COBRA, on the other hand internalized the conditions following the riots and discord
created an ideology that constructively addressed the problem at hand. The implications
of the study for professional practice or applied setting are enormous.

Euro-American fine arts entities revolved around the Arts for Arts Sake ideology,
while Afri-COBRA’s survival and ability to thrive revolved around the Arts for People’s
Sake philosophy. Professionally, both communities deserve further study. In relationship
to the research question of this study, the external and internal factors happening in
America and the Black community, and how the group responded to them. After listening
to their voices. Afri-COBRA has thrived as a living functioning visual arts entity that has
revolutionized the visual art idiom in the Black world and consequently, the White world.
As with music, White America listens to what Black America produces.

In the visual domain, they see what visual artists in the Black community are
producing and seek to steal the concept and claim it as their own. The same was true with
jazz music and the origins of rock and roll. White America’s encroachment upon these
two authentically Black artistical genres has been so effectively taken over by Whites that
one would be hard pressed to note their Black origins.

The implications of this study point to leadership and direction in the area of
modern art, especially Abstract Expressionism. Afri-COBRA artists approach to
composition as an entity led White artists to attempt to visually conceptualize abstract
interpretation of two and three dimensional expression.
African art is primarily Abstract Expressionism. African carvers, designers and portrait sculpture employ a authentic conceptualization technique that dissolve down to the essential idea of a work of art’s function in the spiritual realm. The use of bright Cool-aid colors and the figure surrounded by elements of design by Afri-COBRA members married them to the innate Africanity in each of the artists. The creative productions from this conscious Abstract Expressionism with African elements have sustained the creative longevity from 1968 to the present.

Alain Locke of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s sought to encourage visual artists of that era to look to African art for inspiration and instruction on how to be authentically Black and African. Afri-COBRA’s conceptualization and ideological underpinnings underscored their movement and impact on the Black aesthetics then and now. Although the Black community in America constitutes approximately 12% of the nation’s population, its impact on arts and entertainment far outweighs the percentage of artists it has compared to mainstream arts.

Hip Hop culture which began as an alternative to the traditional packaged venue for recording artists is the one new art form produced by African Americans that has not been taken over by White businesses or White artists. Like Afri-COBRA, Hip Hop remains true to its philosophical responsiveness to the conditions of the community in search of a voice for the voiceless. In this case, it is the Black community. For over thirty years, the sometimes outrageous genre has transformed and influenced popular culture from speech to clothing, to electronic media, and is utilized in commercial television, movies, magazines and the internet. Millions have been made by a segment of the Black community who often baffles the traditional Black Arts community with their disrespect
of Black and White women and “dumb down” approach toward their audience. Unlike Afri-COBRA which emphasized upliftment of the Black race, artists like Snoop Dogg or Jay-Z only seek to profit for themselves irrespective of their audience.

The White mass media cannot control Hip Hop but it can condone it as acceptable to markets in the U.S. and abroad. Unfortunately, the world sees Black America through the antics of Hip Hop artists who obfuscate Black reality on a daily basis. While it is true Hip Hop, along with Afri-COBRA and the contemporary Black Arts Movement, writers represent the Africanization of America. In Hip Hop’s case, one cannot throw the baby out with the bathwater. We can only hope that this new art form matures and adopts a sense of collective responsibility that inspires humanity to a higher calling of respect and noble intentions for its fellow man and woman.

Afri-COBRA’s future lay in the minds and hands of its surviving members. Its high standards for excellence imply their interest value as a worldwide entity. Generally, value in art in general is attached or assigned by the art critic or institution, be it a museum or commercial gallery. Black art value, as propagated by Afri-COBRA, is not for the critic, but for the people, hence the Art for People’s Sake ideology. Black art is propaganda to be used to politically and culturally uplift the people from oppression in America and the world. Culture is the quality in a person or society that arises from a concern for what is excellence in arts, letters, manners and scholarly pursuits. For Afri-COBRA, Black culture is its primary objective.

One of the primary goals is to produce art for the masses so everybody can own a piece of art. This was accomplished through the use of poster art: produce by silk-screening. Western art is elitist. Mass production of Afri-COBRA poster art contradicted
the classism. Art’s affordability empowers the masses. Afri-COBRA in the 21st century still maintains this principle.

Art’s value in education is incalculable, from its obvious cultural lessons in history, to its spiritual and healing capacities, artists were the first teachers and medicine people on the planet. Commercialization of art has removed some of its esoteric. Afri-COBRA artists seemed to retain most of the virtue of art as a healing force for social change. The prospects for another 40 years look promising for the collective. This study and future studies on Afri-COBRA mark a turning point for Black art because Black historians are illuminating their value in society. Validating Afri-COBRA’s experience as an integral part of Black Studies provides a human face to the field of arts and humanities. Since Black art, especially visual art, was the most suppressed during slavery and segregation, recognition and respect of Afri-COBRA members Jeff Donaldson, founder, and Wadsworth Jarrell co-founder will become cultural arts icons in the Black community and the overall community. The professional artist guild established by them has outlasted cubism and impressionism, says member Frank Smith. According to Smith, neither of those movements lasted 40 years. Art in the western world is defined by movements. The modern art movement defined by Afri-COBRA is vibrant and viable in contemporary times.

Afri-COBRA’s aesthetics is primarily based on the Black aesthetic because they seek to reconstruct the deconstructive results of White oppression onto the Black community and Black humanity. This holds true not only for the elites, but for the masses as well. It exponentially confers value as a movement of art that will change mainstream aesthetics to that of inclusiveness, away from Euro-centrism.
Limited information pertaining to Afri-COBRA was located in the different cities such as Washington, D.C. and Baltimore. Additional research was gathered at the exhibition. The researcher had to travel at his expense to different cities at different times to conduct one-on-one interviews. Additional travel was made to attend an exhibition opening hosted by Hampton University in Virginia. An abundance of material and perspective was shared by active Afri-COBRA members.

A collective view was formed in the process of conducting these interviews. The researcher observed excellent examples of art in the artist’s workplace. The irrepressible will of a collective bent on functioning as the eyes and soul of Black folks well into perpetuity summarizes their motivation. Redeeming Black life and the quality of life in a repressive environment created by the dominant culture is the key to understanding the meaning and significance of Afri-COBRA. Black culture owes Afri-COBRA a debt of gratitude for sustaining their mission for all these years. They changed the paradigm regarding Black visual art.

Visual art, especially art produced by numbers of Afri-COBRA, does not adhere to the strict guidelines and principles of the school of realism. Nelson Stevens uses realism but applies such a dynamic application of color that his compositions cannot be classified as realism. A co-founder of the guild, Stevens breaks with traditional realism through the prism of multi-layered colors and diagonals that challenge the viewer to interpret what he or she is observing. No one produces art using color and form like Stevens. His use of color dazzles the visual senses and mental faculties. An esteemed scholar, he helped shape and mold the art department at the University of Massachusetts.
for more than three decades. An advisor to the student produced the cultural magazine, "The Drum", and his influence gained wider dimension throughout his region.

Conducting or transferring art skills and techniques to young people, adolescent or young adults, is one of the most rewarding educational processes in the curriculum. Teaching how to draw or print a portrait involves skill, patience and determination. Exploring abstract art using African sculpture as the primary source is a liberating experience. It is spiritual essence in its purest form. The Black Experience through visual art takes on a new dimension in the domain of race relations and the arts and humanities. Image is pertinent to the process of educating students about Black art. The ideal of the Egyptian or Kemetan artist is paramount to understanding modern and ancient society. Egyptian art is Black art. Kemet, the name used to refer to the inhabitants of African Egyptian society is taken from their original language. Without research, this fact would remain buried, and covered by modernity. Language is also critical to unlocking the mystery of civilization since the invention of the pyramid and the automation of time as it is presently known. The people of Kemet invented time in 4142 B.C. It took several millennia to evolve to that point. By studying the movement of the constellation, priests were able to ascertain the months in the year, and hours in a day. Society still operates by their invention even though some non African societies have tried their hand at creating a calendar. All attempts failed to meet the accuracy of the Kemetan calendar. The implications of tying the image of societal achievements of Kemet to Black history are monumental.
James Phillips of Afri-COBRA states, “My work is an endless search for discovery, reflective thinking and invention based on my ancestral heritage.” 40 Phillips uses motifs and icons more than most of his comrades in Afri-COBRA. African motifs, be it Kemetan, western, eastern, and southern Africa are largely abstract from concept to execution of the art. A distinction must be made for the North, or Kemetan art’s use of stylized human and environmental forms represented in the hundreds of thousands of hieroglyphics tie a long and celebrated legacy. Phillips makes ample use of Kemetan symbols in his ethereal compositions. Another recognizable icon in his works is sculptural forms of the Dogon people of West Africa. The spiral icon, explains Phillips, represent the Dogons belief in extraterrestrial beings as the origin of their people. Excellence in execution is characteristic of art produced by James Phillips. Hours could be spent ascertaining the African iconography in the works. Phillips’ knowledge of these symbols represents genius.

The implications of Phillips’ work with African motifs are Pan-African and unifying in an aesthetic sense. Displaced people of African descent can identify with the artists’ presentation of a Black aesthetic whose primary function is to educate the viewer. Non African descendants can delight in the sheer beauty of the work of art, if not the African connection. Ever present are bright illuminous Cool-aid colors in his work.

The artwork inspires one to appreciate African heritage and lineage. People of African descent throughout the global African Diaspora can take pride in knowing that reconnecting African culture is a possibility in 2010. James Phillips has been indicating this reality since the late 1960s. Historically, the Pan-African efforts at reconnection date

back to 1900 with W.E.B. DuBois and Henry Sylvester Williams of Trinidad as they organized the first of many Pan-African Congresses on the question of Black self-determination around the globe, and on the continent of Africa. The implications for study and correlation of a Pan-African theme in Afri-COBRA are multifaceted. Further research is needed in this vein. Understandably, Afri-COBRA as a collective, was one of the first to form a protest exhibition against South African apartheid, and in support of Black rule. They practiced what they preached. The exhibit took place at the United Nations, an appropriate venue to make an organizational defining endeavor, which manifested the global African family from a Pan-African perspective. DuBois and Williams’ spirits would have been pleased with this development.

The art of Frank Smith, upon observation, can be described as abstract modernist with an African verve. Smith’s intelligence regarding the movements of art since the African Kemetan or Egyptian epoch allows him to exhibit a high intellect on matters pertaining to cultural influences of Black art on mainstream culture. Noticeable in his work is the use of high intensity colors that have a flow even though the work is abstract. If one carefully observes, there is a method to his seemingly chaotic works.

The implications of Smith’s works and words speak to Euro-American artists’ claim of being the owners of the Abstract Expressionism movement modern art is so noted for in Europe and America. According to Smith, like jazz, R&B, and Hip Hop music, White visual artists copied and mimicked much of what Afri-COBRA artists were doing with Abstract Expressionism. Since abstract art cannot be distinguished by realistic representation like art that bears ethnic imagery, it would be hard to indicate which group started what. White culture, given its propensity to borrow, or as some say, steal, Black
art and entertainment is suspected by their tradition in this arena. White cultural artists have the producing capital to make abstract art by Blacks a part of White culture the same way they make the sounds of Jimi Hendrix's part and parcel to rock and roll music as it is packaged for this generation.

As the implications imply with Abstract Expressionism as a derivative of Afri-COBRA's visual aesthetic, Nelson Stevens' influence can be seen in the psychedelic colors and patterns of the seventies pop art phenomenon. A portrait artist with great skill, he renders the human form as a subject matter in a uniquely breathtaking fashion. Using bright colors that seemed painted at random, Stevens' compositions challenges the viewer to comprehend his complex placement of background and foreground as he narrates his messages of Black humanity's recovery from oppression.

While art from the Black artists' guild known as Afri-COBRA is the focal point of this thesis, the questions: What were the historical, social and aesthetic present during the formation of Afri-COBRA and how did they impact black ideology and identity politics, and what is the affect of Afri-COBRA today? These questions need to be reiterated. Regarding the first compound question, the following can be summarized.

The past five hundred to two thousand years has experienced the imperial domination of power and culture of the white race. Beginning with Alexander the Great and extending to Voltaire, the White race has pilfered, conquered and dehumanized all indigenous people they have encountered. The Black race of Africa has endured the worst form of subjugation. While stealing the merits and achievements of the black race in ancient and modern times, the White race imposed the idea or psychology that Blacks were inferior, and deserved the atrocious mistreatment they were receiving. This was
justified with religion, cultural initiatives and formal education. In 1968 when Afri-COBRA was formed, the White race was at its zenith in power and world domination, but the decades leading up to 1968 experienced an evolutionary process of transition of the Black race to a resistant challenging force that was determined to redefine its role in civilization. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. amid the turbulent era of social change caused a cataclysmic reaction that impacted cultural and race relations in the world and subsequently, America, which has continued to this present day. The two thousand plus years of psychological subjugation seem to have been alleviated in 2008 with the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States. Martin Luther King, Jr. died without seeing this reality yet he knew African Americans would get to the promised land of equality and restoration of the Black race as recognized leaders of civilization.

While individuals still have a long way to go before it is certain that suppressive conditions of the 1960s when Afri-COBRA was formed things will change. Although White critics and institutionalized racism have yet to acknowledge Afri-COBRA as one of the leading vanguards of modern fine art. The social climate in 1968 in America was segregation even though the Supreme Court had changed the law in 1954. It took riots and the assassination of King to usher in social change.

Black Power philosophy and the Black Arts Movement were the factors influencing the ideology of the founder Jeff Donaldson, as he organized the group into a well groomed entity that would create its own identity and influence national Black identity politics with its doctrine of Arts for People’s Sake. Since White culture was saturated with the negative programming of Black America. Afri-COBRA decided to
institute positive programming into their aesthetic. Positive, transformative and uplifting words were incorporated into their ideology and compositions. Critics call this propaganda, but Afri-COBRA did not care what they thought. Words and art had worked during Kemetan/Egyptian times in Africa. They also saw the benefits for Black people in 1968. The kinship of the practice was obvious to scholars, the everyday viewer received an abundant dose with the “Wall of Respect,” whose visual art component was coordinated by Afri-COBRA founder Jeff Donaldson.

Aesthetically, White critics saw no merit in Afri-COBRA’s visual ideology. Mainstream institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art would not present them as valued artists. That has not changed in 2010. In 1968, the atmosphere was worse than it is today, although Afri-COBRA has yet to receive an invitation to exhibit there:

Therefore aesthetically, the situation is still as it was in 1968. Afri-COBRA did not look to white institutions like the critics or the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art to validate their movement as valuable to Black people. They validated their art by exhibiting at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Howard University, and places where their members taught like in Massachusetts where co-founder Nelson Stevens worked as an art professor. Institutions sensitive to the Black aesthetic and experience is where they validated their worth as an entity. It was where their works were, and continue to be exhibited. By exhibiting in this manner, identity politics with Afri-COBRA and Black America reach a positive level of reconstruction of the black identity, nationally and internationally.

When Afri-COBRA exhibited in support of the Black majority rule in South Africa at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, it defined Black Americans as
leaders in the world in the fight to regain positive Black humanity. Their efforts led to the release of Nelson Mandela and his subsequent election as President of South Africa. White critics could have and probably did accuse them of using art for political purposes, but humanity in the event they superseded what any critic had to say about exhibit at the United Nations. The motive to uplift Black humanity was the manifestation of Arts for People’s Sake that was international in scope and function.

Afri-COBRA continues to exhibit for Black humanity at predominantly Black institutions, and integrated venues. With the visual evolution they have kept in step with modern art and lead the way in certain regards. While certain critics in the White and Black mainstream may never come to value their works and ideology as vanguard leaders; in the Black community, they are visionaries and inspirational leaders.

They are the epitome of the Black aesthetic in visual art. Collectively, they cover realism and abstract art. Modern art owes them a debt of gratitude for establishing an authentic visual philosophy and allowing time and evolution to take place so that they remain relevant to Black people and subsequently, all people. Any person who views their art as a collective can see the beautiful array of styles and approaches to producing art.

Although the words, which once were a main characteristic of their compositions, are no longer visible in their works, the spirit of uplifting and redeeming Black humanity is ever present. And there are those bright Cool-aid colors which remain a staple of the guild. As a remnant of the 1960s, Afri-COBRA’s existence and longevity are unparalleled in the national art consciousness. Historically, they are a national treasure that the mainstream has yet to recognize. Their recognition as such is inevitable. The
following chart illustrates the first twenty years of Afri-COBRA's scope and breath as a professional artist guild.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Exhibits</th>
<th>Collections</th>
<th>Murals and Commissions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jeff Donaldson (Founder)</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Phillips</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nelson Stevens</td>
<td>20-yr. span</td>
<td>Numerous</td>
<td>30+ Murals/Illustrations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Smith</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Harris</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Numerous</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murry Depillars</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Numerous</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adger Cowans</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akili Ron Anderson</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Numerous</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Napoleon Jones Henderson</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Numerous</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER V

Conclusions

Afri-COBRA means the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. The word "bad" is interpreted to mean bold or excellent because these artists strive for excellence in every composition they produce. The use of the term bad is a positive use of the term by Rhythm & Blues funk originator James Brown and fellow recording artist Michael Jackson.

Characteristics of the artists of Afri-COBRA and their compositions are the use of bright Cool-aid colors, words of upliftment, and the figure. Their work employs the use of abstract expression and colorful realism that place them on the cutting edge of modern art. They were, and still are, trailblazers in fine art. Unrecognized by mainstream critics, they are validated by Black people, the community they primarily serve.

Founded by artist Jeff Donaldson in 1968, their active lifespan includes the Civil Rights, Black Power, the Black Aesthetic, Anti War, the Black Arts Movement, and most recently the so-called Post Racial America movements. Surviving active members of the guild are Nelson Stevens, Frank Smith, James Phillips, Michael Harris, Akili Ron Anderson, Adger Cowans, Napoleon Jones-Henderson and the newest member, Kevin Cole. Jeff Donaldson and Murry Depillars died during the first decade of the new millennium. Women were active during the formative years. They include Barbara Jones Hogu, Carolyn Lawrence and Jae Jarrell.
Using one-on-one interviews, and questionnaires, the consciousness of the collective propels this study. All active members are successful individual artists in their own careers. They stay in touch with one another via periodic meetings, telephone and the internet. There is an Afri-COBRA website for the world to see and is used when they are inspired to produce formal exhibitions.

The paucity of organizations like theirs makes them a rare commodity in the world of fine arts, Black, or White. Although the membership is all black, that does not preclude other ethnicities from joining. As the preeminent professional artist guild in the nation they deliver in visual art, the same high degree of excellence found in a Toni Morrison or the Alvin Ailey Dance Troup. They are Black America’s best kept secret. Hopefully, this study will inspire more research in this understudied area, the Black visual arts of Afri-COBRA. Although literary arts and performing arts receives the bulk of attention with regards to research, that does not negate the profundity of Afri-COBRA and their visual contemporaries. Visual arts have communicated humanity, development, and civil society throughout the ages, in African and all points on the globe. It was the monstrous period of enslavement and segregation along with colonialism that subverted Black humanity by Whites that gives this research its sense of urgency and potency. Black visual art in Egypt/Kemet supported Black humanity. That fact was true two thousand years later in Chicago where Afri-COBRA founder Jeff Donaldson coordinated the visual art on the “Wall of Respect” in 1968.

The primacy of visual art as a reflection of a group’s humanity cannot be overstated. Afri-COBRA reconstructed and guides Black humanity in the 21st century as it did in the latter part of the 20th century. The significance of this thesis lays in the
discovery, treatment and expansion of the arts and humanities. This field of study maintains the status quo of Euro-centric or White hegemony in the area of the fine arts. By examining the function and role of Afri-COBRA as visionaries with an urgent message of Black humanity and redevelopment, the field of fine art is diversified to include and perpetuate Black humanity.

In the end, respect for Black arts and Black humanity will be the result. “The Dream” of Dr. Martin Luther King will become a reality. Art will be judged by its content, be it from Black artists or non Black artists. The powers that be in the art world, which happens to be White people, will be forced to indulge the Black visual artists, because Black visual artists stimulate Black people. The academy of arts and letters will inevitably embrace this growing reality. Once their consciousness has been raised to see beauty in Black art, abstract or realism; Black art and consequently, Black Studies will be validated, although Black Studies forty plus years in the American academy is validation on its own merit. Black art, especially the art of Afri-COBRA reinforces Black humanity.

Black art is Arts for People’s Sake, an ideology propagated by Jeff Donaldson. It is a Black ideology conceived to function as a bond between the art and Black people to reflect the resiliency and recovery of Black people. Ultimately, it is art designed to serve Black people’s upliftment from the prongs of White oppression worldwide. This socio-political function of Black arts is essentially African art produced by Africans employs a utilitarian factor, be it ritualistic or for practical use in everyday life.

People of African descent throughout the African Diaspora inherited this genius of art acting to function as server to mankind. Arts for People’s Sake is a cultural reflection of international and local Black artists’ desire to create imagery that negated
the flow of stereotypes that undermine or devastate Black humanity in the mass media and fine arts.

To conclude this study, one has to take into account the fact that Afri-COBRA lives as an entity. For more than four decades, the guild has led the arts by their ideology of Arts for People’s Sake and excellence in creative expression of art that serves humanity, especially Black humanity. Their purpose as a collective displays evidence of morality at the highest level known to humanity.

The artist who stands out is the founder and organizer, Jeff Donaldson. His one hundred and fifty-nine solo and group exhibitions exceed his peers by a large margin. Collectively, Afri-COBRA members have exhibited more than 300 times throughout the world, in their first twenty years of existence. The next twenty years can be predicted to be as prolific as the first twenty with the members exhibiting approximately 600 times in their 40 plus years existence. Galleries throughout the world were exposed to these pioneering transformative trailblazers in the arts.

Another milestone endeavor Afri-COBRA members indulged themselves in was the mural. With over eighty produced in the first twenty years, it can be approximated that nearly two hundred murals were produced by members in the first forty years. Inspired by the “Wall of Respect” in 1968, their murals’ production was a precursor to the outdoor mural phenomenon that enveloped America in the seventies, eighties and nineties.

Collectively members have hundreds of commissions throughout the world. Patrons of the arts, both White and Black, own their works. The immeasurable yardstick that is characteristic of Afri-COBRA members’ contribution to humanity is in the field of
art education. Their collective experience as teachers cannot be overstated. Afri-COBRA members were, and still are, an integral factor in transmittal of the Black universal art experience in America today. Although some members are deceased and others retired, the impact they had or have on their students is immense. Throughout the guild’s existence, education has been imprint on the soul of this nation.

If Chicago was the birthplace of Afri-COBRA, then Washington, D.C. is its base of operation. When Jeff Donaldson relocated to Washington, D.C. from Chicago and began teaching at historically black Howard University. As chair of the art department, he hired several members of the group as professors of art. Jae Jarrell, one of the three women that founded the group, taught at Howard. Frank Smith, another member was also a part of the program at Howard. Students during the early seventies at the university were progressive and politically active. Afri-COBRA, with its base of operation at the college was a perfect fit to hegemony of a radical Black thought espoused by Donaldson and faculty members. The art education that students enjoyed at Howard University was second to none in the country. Co-founder Wadsworth Jarrell taught at Howard for six years during the seventies. Akili Ron Anderson was a student at Howard when he became part of Afri-COBRA. Clearly, Howard University was the recognized home of Afri-COBRA.

Afri-COBRA founding member Nelson Stevens taught at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. A predominantly white institution, students were exposed to the same intense Black art experience as they would have been exposed to at a predominantly black school. This was multiculturalism in its infancy. The exchange between student and teacher is as old as the hieroglyphic in the tombs in the pyramids. It
is a sacred interaction that acts as a conduit for cultural transmission that pervades the lives of the young and old alike. Afri-COBRA’s defining characteristic is their members’ devotion to the sacred trust of education in the Black experience.

These Black educators received hundreds of citations of excellence and honor among them, from their peers, and institutions as well as arts advocacy agencies in the arts. Their illustrations and cover designs are in books, magazines and album covers. Forty plus years in the arts has yielded a cornucopia of visual compositions that have withstood the test of time and evolution.

Jeff Donaldson named art from blacks born outside of Africa, Trans-African art. The African Diaspora united when artists gathered together in 1977 in Lagos, Nigeria in what was a world celebration of continental African arts, and Black artists throughout the Diaspora called Festival of World African Art, FESTAC.

This collaborative network continued throughout Afri-COBRA’s existence. In 1989 after two decades of existence, Afri-COBRA exhibited with a group of Black artists from the country of Martinique, called Groupe Fromaje. Both groups of artists’ works expressed abstract and symbolic use of imagery in their compositions. The African essence can be seen in common use of bright colors and the dynamics of the diagonal. Donaldson would find numerous occasions to exhibit with artists from the Caribbean Islands. Slavery and liberation are shared elements of the history and sociology in the world Diaspora. These Trans-African endeavors had a Pan-African political reality. Held at Howard University Gallery of Art, it harnessed an African urge to write with our brothers throughout the world. Even though slavery separated and scattered nations of African people throughout the world, these two nations united to make a statement of
unity and solidarity. It was a beautiful collaboration between African Americans and West Indians. It conforms the existence of a kinship to a universal aesthetic. The exhibit was a defining endeavor in Afri-COBRA’s existence.

Equally as defining was the exhibit in support of the Black South Africans which ended apartheid. No stranger to hot-bed political issues, Afri-COBRA was formed due to the socio-political conditions of oppression in the United States of Black people. Grounded in the Black aesthetic, the group is forever looking over the horizon for a greater unification of the African Diaspora and peace.

In the age of President Obama, Afri-COBRA is as relevant and needed as they were in preceding decades since their inception in the late 1960’s. Arts for People’s Sake is their mantle, and it is needed today in our technology driven global community, more than ever. So much is impersonalized by the computer, yet its potential for organizing is yet to be realized. Fine art, be it abstract or realism is personal. It is a reflection and projection of our humanity and in our case, black humanity. White humanity is generally the norm when it comes to interpreting fine art. That can be understood when we compare and contrast the White art movement of the Abstract Expressionists.

Abstract Expressionists Jackson Pollock, William de Koonig, Joan Mitchell and others worked in the free flowing abandonment of classical convention, similar to Afri-COBRA artists. When their works are seen beside one another there are similarities and distinct differences. The White art movement is insulated by the mainstream critics and art establishment, subsequently their movement is recognized. The U.S. Post Office recently created a series of postal stamps in honor of their movement. Abstract
Expressionists, as a group movement, last two decades and expired. Afri-COBRA has existed and thrived over four decades.

Visually speaking, Abstract Expressionists use no aspect of the human form or any recognizable form. While the same can be said of individual artists in Afri-COBRA, it cannot be said when viewed as a collective. The use of the human form is prominent in several of Afri-COBRA’s members. On an elemental level, an African verve can be seen throughout an exhibition of Afri-COBRA’s works. Afri-COBRA members’ artwork blends well with abstract expressionists’ artwork on one level, but stands in stark contrast on another level. Jeff Donaldson’s sense of Trans African art of Blacks within the African world Diaspora marks the distinction between abstract expressionists and Black art. Musical legacy can be seen in art done by some members of Afri-COBRA. The dynamic of the diagonal reoccurs within artwork by Afri-COBRA members. A characteristic of African art is the use of the diagonal in African sculpture and design motif. The principle is repeatedly used by Afri-COBRA artists.

Abstract expressionist, Robert Mather articulates that in regard to the commemorative stamp series, “the function of the artist is to express reality as felt.” That statement can be interpreted to mean art for art’s sake, in one sense, or art serves no utilitarian function. Africans view art as a function of ritual or spiritual, therefore art has a human function between the users of art, be it political or utilitarian. Abstract art or non objective art produced by some Afri-COBRA members is as American as Euro-Americans within the Abstract Expressionist movement, but one must look within the context of the group as a whole, to measure the full meaning of the two communities of artists.
The African verve is not present in White Abstract Expressionism. Spirituality is lost in the Abstract Expressionists' nonobjective compositions. Although the differences may seem sublime or unnoticeable, if one looks closer, she or he can feel the difference between the two artists' collective work. Most of the artists associated with Abstract Expressionism are dead in that short-lived movement. Afri-COBRA is a vibrant thriving arts entity that has outlasted Andy Warhol and Pop art. Even though the U.S. Postal Service honored Abstract Expressionists with a stamp collection series, the Black art movement of Afri-COBRA rightly deserves mainstream adoption, even on a stamp series from the U.S. Post Office.

Black Studies, over the past 40 years, has gained legitimacy in the field of the Arts and Humanities, with a paucity of research done on the black visual artist in society. This research expands the domain of the Arts and Humanities by introducing Afri-COBRA, its founder Jeff Donaldson and the men and women who were co-founders and participating members of the collective. The experiences of the Black visual artists are important because visual art was once the primary mode of education before the introduction of the printing press. Arts for People's Sake meant art intended to awaken the masses of Black folks in America, and validate their identity as progressive human beings in society.

Intellectually, this research adds to the discourse on fine arts in America, and the world, and fills the void in the humanity of the Black artist. Suppressed by the slave master, the Black artist had to abandon age old ancestral skills of carving and metalwork, and conform to the non threatening arts of song, dance, and pantomime. One would hope that in the age of President Obama, aggressive Black visual artists will be in vogue, rather
than repressed as they were during enslavement and Jim Crow. Modern society, especially in the visual arts is controlled and dominated by Eurocentric values, which makes the existence of Afri-COBRA even more revolutionary and remarkable since they represent a minority within a minority group in America. Black humanity, with their intervention has been upgraded. As the sun sets on the 20th century, and a new dawn arises during the first decade of the 21st century, the professional artists guild leads the way in a Black aesthetic, Arts for People’s Sake and a continuation of the (BAM) that is being applied universally. However, the goal is that the day will come when their place in the art world and the artists themselves will be recognized as leaders in the area of the visual arts. The day will come when their place in the art world and they will be recognized as leaders in the arts.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Smith, Frank, interview with the researcher. October 2008.

APPENDIX

The Appendix provides biographical and artistical representation of members of Africobra, which include examples of their work. Documents taken from Africobra exhibit catalogue, circa 1989 constitute the appendix of this work.

Appendix A  Jeff Donaldson
Appendix B  Nelson Stevens
Appendix C  James Phillips
Appendix D  Frank Smith
Appendix E  Murray N. Depillars
Appendix F  Akili Ron Anderson
Appendix G  Napoleon Jones-Henderson
Appendix H  Wadsworth A. Jarrell
Appendix I  Adger W. Cowans
Appendix J  Michael D. Harris
JEFF DONALDSON


EDUCATION:

University of Arkansas – B.A., (Studio Art) studied with John M. Howard, George G.M. James and Elbert L. Tatum.


Northwestern University – Ph.D. (African and African American Art History) studied with Frank Willett and James D. Breckenridge.

EXPERIENCE:

1985 – present
Associate Dean, College of Fine Arts, Howard University

1982 – 1985
Art Director, JAM Records

1975 – 1982
Vice President, International Black/African Festival Committee

1970 – 1976
Art Department Chairman
Howard University

1970 – 1976
Art Gallery Director
Howard University

1968 – 1970
Visiting Professor
Northwestern University

1965 – 1968
Assistant Professor
Northeastern Illinois University

1960 – 1965
Art Department Chairman
Marshall High School (Chicago)

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS:
Twelve (12) solo exhibitions
(1960–present)

One Hundred Forty-Seven (147)
Group Exhibitions (1960–present)

1988 – 1989 Exhibitions

Allyn Art Museum
New London, CT

Valley Bank Galleria
Phoenix, AZ

Fay Gold Gallery
Atlanta, GA

Howard University
Washington, DC

Cheekwood Fine Arts Center
Nashville, TN

Bernice Steinbaum Gallery
New York City
Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1938, Nelson Stevens began his career as a commercial artist working for such companies as General Electric, Cramwell Printery and the Cleveland Call Post Newspaper. He has taught art in the Cleveland, Ohio public school system, as well as at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland Museum of Art and Northern Illinois University.

Stevens earned the Associate Arts degree in advertising and design from Mohawk Valley Technical Institute in Utica, New York; the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting and art education from Ohio University, Athens; and the Master of Fine Arts degree in studio art and art history from Kent State University (1969).

He is an artist whose professional career spans more than two decades of exhibitions, consultancies/lectures and community murals. A tenured professor at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst since 1972, he is also the publisher of Drum Magazine, an award-winning artistic and literary publication. Professor Stevens holds professional membership in such organizations as Afri-Cobra, National Conference of Artists and College Art Association.
"My work is an endless search of discovery, reflective thinking and invention based upon my ancestral heritage. These motifs, images and icons are copied, reshaped and integrated into a contemporary artistic aesthetic."

EDUCATION:
Fleisher Art Memorial School, Philadelphia, PA.

Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, PA.

Lee Cultural Center, Philadelphia, PA.

Printing Trade School, New York, NY.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS:
Weusi Nyumba Ya Sanaa Gallery
National Conference of Artists
Soho Center for Visual Artists
AFRICOBRA

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS:
One man

1987
Sargent Johnson Gallery, San Francisco, California,

1981
American Center, Tokyo, Japan,

1981
American Center, Kyoto, Japan,

1975
Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
(Questioner) "Why not just let these (negative stereotypical) images die."

(Robert Colescott) "I prefer to kill them" from an exchange at the visions conference of African-American Art, Washington, D.C. 1988

Like AFRICOBRA, I was born and raised in Chicago although we did not meet there, we met in 1970 at the Studio Museum in Harlem. By the time "Cobra" exhibited at Howard University in 1973 I was the new member, and like all converts, fiercely committed to the organization and its philosophy.

"God gave Noah the Rainbow sign, no more water the fire next time" (Old Negro Spiritual).

Since the Urban Rebellions, circa 1964-69 I have been seeking that "Killer Image."

The positive visual ideology of AFRICOBRA coalesced with my prior education in improvisational music and it became the catalyst which gave my work its current direction.

The association among AFRICOBRA members and associates is a professional society that contributes to the artistic growth and development of the individual artist.

Born Chicago, IL. June 15, 1939

EDUCATION:

BFA University of Illinois 1958
MFA Howard University 1972

EXHIBITIONS:

1989
Touchstone Gallery
Washington, DC

1988
Touchstone Gallery
Washington, DC

1987
GRACE Reston, VA

1986
Touchstone Gallery
Washington, DC

1984
Philip Morris Corporation
Richmond, VA

1984
Sun Gallery, Washington, DC
1983
Last Stop Gallery, Richmond, VA

1982
NP Gallery Mt, Ranier, MD

1979
Penn State University, University Park, Pa.
MURRY N. DEPILLARS

Born in Chicago, Illinois

EDUCATION:

CURRENT POSITION:
Dean and Professor of Art Education, School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1976-Present

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS:

1970
Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, IL

1970
Afam Studio and Gallery, Chicago, IL

1971
Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, Memphis, TN

1971-76
Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC

1972
American Greeting Card Gallery, NYC

1973
Virginia State University, Petersburg, VA

1974
Southside Community Art Center, Chicago, IL

1974, South Carolina State College, S.C.,

1974
World Expo
Spokane, WA

1975
Purdue University, Ind

1975
Paul Robeson Cultural Center,
Penn State University

1975-84
The Studio Museum in Harlem,
NYC

1979
Huntsville Museum of Art, AL

1980
Mississippi Museum of Art, MS

1982
Amber Gallery,
Richmond, Virginia

1984
Bayly Art Museum, University of Virginia

1986
Galleries of the Claremont Colleges, CA

1986
Heckscher Museum,
Huntington, NY

1986
The Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Art,
Boston, MA
AKILI RON ANDERSON

EDUCATION:
1961-64
Cardozo High School, Washington, D.C.

1964-65
Corcoran School of Art, Washington, D.C.

1965-69
Howard University, College of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C.

EXPERIENCE:
October 1969-June 1971
Art and Social Studies Instructor
Barry New School, Washington, DC.

1971-72, 1972-73
Artist-in-Residence, D.C.
Commission on the Arts

1971-72
Filmmaking and Photography Instructor
Education Department, Corcoran Gallery of Art

August 1973-1974
Chairman, Visual Arts Department Workshop for Careers in the Arts, George Washington University

September 1974-June 1976
Chairman, Visual Arts Department Duke Ellington School of the Arts

September 1973-Present
Chairman, Board of Directors
Nation House Positive Action Center, Watoto School

1968-Present
Manager and Founding Member of “NATION,” Combined Music, Film, Dance and Poetry Performing Ensemble

1983-Present
President and Founder
Nation Works Art Contracting Inc.

SET DESIGN:
Howard University, Ira Aldridge Theatre

George Washington University

D.C. Black Repertory Theatre

Kennedy Center, Eisenhower Theatre

Morgan State University Theatre

The Ellington Fund, Everyman Street Theater

ONE MAN EXHIBITIONS
Duke University
Howard University
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
NAPOLEON JONES-HENDERSON

My work in its essence is spiritual; meaning — full. This is how I feel while embracing my fibers as they fold into their images. I do not make “Art”, rather I am participating in ritual, a ritual as important to the Afrikan man as it was to his Creator. We must be about the business of expressing what is beautiful; ourselves.

Born Chicago, Illinois

EDUCATION:

1974
Northern Illinois University
Master of Fine Arts in Textile Weaving

1971
The School of the Art Institute of Chicago Bachelor of Fine Arts

1963
The Sorbonne Student Continuum

EXPERIENCE:

1979-Present
Executive Director
Research Institute of African and African Diaspora Arts
Edward Everette Hale House, Roxbury, MA

1982
Consultant
Barbados Government and The Organization of American States, Barbados, WI

1981
Consultant
Haitian Government and Care International, Haiti, WI

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS:

1984
Augusta Savage Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA

Mt. Holyoke College, North Hadley, MA

1983
Boston Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Boston, MA

Carolyn Adams and Associates Gallery, Richmond, VA

Zanjele House Gallery, Chicago

1982
Tennessee State University, Nashville, TN

1981
Ten Year Retrospective, Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston, MA

Zanjele House Gallery, Chicago.

1980
Southside Community Art Center Chicago.
WADSWORTH A. JARRELL
Born Albany, Georgia

EDUCATION:
The Ray Vogue School of Art, Chicago, Illinois
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois – BFA
Howard University, Washington, DC, MFA.

EXPERIENCE:
1978-1988
Professor of Art, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia

1971-1977
Assistant Professor of Art, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

1968
Art Director, Sander Line Graphics, Chicago, Illinois

1968-1971
Gallery Director, WJ Studios and Gallery, Chicago, Illinois

1964-1968
Advertising Artist, Art Director's Service, Chicago, Illinois

1963-1964
Advertising Artist, The Headliners, Chicago, Illinois

1959-1963
Advertising Artist, Lettering, Inc. Chicago, Illinois

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS:
A total of one hundred twenty-five (125) exhibitions.
Seven (7) international
Thirty-Two (32) National
Thirty-Nine (39) Regional
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
FESTAC, Lagos, Nigeria

Dimensions and Directions, Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MI

The Eighth Annual Atlanta Life National Art Competition Exhibitions, Atlanta, GA

2nd African-American and Diaspora Festival for the Arts, Port-au-Prince, Haiti

AFRICOBRA I-II, Studio Museum of Harlem, New York City

Group Exhibition, Main Street Gallery, Chicago, IL

Union League Art Show, Union League, Chicago, IL
ADGER W. COWANS

Born September 19, 1936

EDUCATION:

1965
School of Visual Arts

1961-62
School of Motion Picture Arts, NYC

1954-58
Ohio University – B.F.A. Photography

Institutions:

Brooklyn, NY Thurman Payne
Associates – NYC, IBM Lennox
Hill Hospital
Lincoln Hospital – Rochester, NY
Eastman House

Awards, Honors, Lectures and Commissions

1968
Juror and panelist for photographic competition – Ohio Arts Council, Columbus, OH

Lecturer, Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH

Keynote Speaker, Minority Arts Festival, University of Michigan
East Quad, Deba Fatmaik, Director/Curator

1987-88
Martin Luther King, Jr. – Caesar Chavez-Rosa Parks
Visiting Scholar, Wayne State
University, Detroit, MI

1987
Lecturer and Panelist, African Art

Influences on 20th Century Art,
American Museum of Natural History, NYC

Exhibitor, The Mayor's Office of Film, Theatre and Broadcastings
Movie Week, Gracie Mansion, NYC

1986
Photography Portfolio and Profile, Drum. University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA.

1985
Visiting Artist, Printmaking Workshop, NYC.

1st Prize, So We Too Etching
Atlanta Life International Arts
Competition, Atlanta, GA

1984
Commission, Public Art work
dedicated to Wilfredo Lam.
8x10' arts piece, Soho Kitchen
and Bar, NYC.

1983
Listed in McMillan Encyclopedia
of photographic artists and
innovators, Browne and Parton,
My current work represents a culmination of years of study, criticism, and trial and error. At this point my interest is in an attempt to materialize cultural and spiritual concepts through the use of an iconography and an aesthetic that utilizes a primary reservoir of African and African American ideas, concerns, and motifs. At the same time I hope to echo certain stylistic consistencies and patterns inherent in the cultural expression of African-American people, and one of the most important appears to be the use of music. Therefore, I seek a psychic and symbiotic identification with musical expression in the form and ambience of some of the work.

I recognize that these considerations are not an achievement, but a hazy, incomplete map to an unattainable place, so my efforts and work represent evidence of the process of becoming in which I am engaged.

Born July 14, 1948, Cleveland, Ohio

EDUCATION:
1989-present
PhD Program, History of Art, Yale University
M.A. with Distinction, African and African-American Studies (Art History), Yale University

1979
M.F.A. Painting, Howard University

1971
B.S. in Education, Art Major, Bowling Green State University

EXPERIENCE:
1988-89
Research Assistant/Computer Consultant, Frederick Douglass Papers, Yale University

1981 to Present
Assistant Professor, Morehouse College, Atlanta
Currently on leave for further study. Artist-in-residence, Martin Luther King Jr. Chapel.

Member, Creative Works Committee, Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations, Chicago

1985
Director, UNCF Summer Humanities Faculty Institute, "Africa in Black Americans; Another View of the Humanities", Morehouse

1982 - Present
Curriculum Consultant, Portland, Oregon Public Schools

1984-85
Instructor (part-time), Georgia State University

1983-85
Member, Georgia Council for the Arts & Humanities Visual Arts Advisory Panel

1985
Member, Contemporary Art Gallery Advisement Committee, University of Georgia.