On Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism 1989–1993

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
California College of the Arts
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree

Master of Arts
In
Curatorial Practice

by

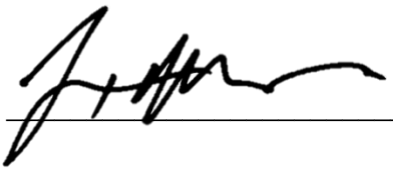
Orly Vermes

San Francisco, CA

May 10, 2020

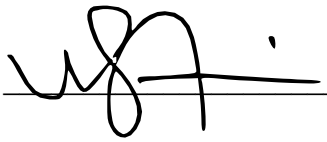
Certification of Approval

We certify that this work meets the criteria for a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree: Master of Arts in Curatorial Practice at the California College of the Arts.



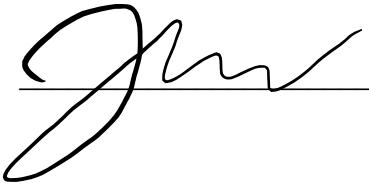
05/10/20

J. Myers-Szupinska
Primary Thesis Advisor



05/07/20

Megan Steinman
Thesis Mentor



05/01/20

James Voorhies
Chair, Curatorial Practice

On Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism 1989–1993

Orly Vermes
California College of the Arts
2020

The Theater of the Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism was exhibited at the Fine Arts Gallery of the University of California, Irvine in April of 1993. Curated by the conceptual artist Charles Gaines, the exhibition showcased the work of African American artists, as well as excerpts of criticism they received from mainstream art critics in publications. The inclusion of this writing displayed how, in the early 1990s, black artists were called to inhabit a mainstream that actively positioned these same artists on the margins.

Theater of Refusal demonstrated how Gaines navigated the changing conditions of institutional visibility that occurred at this moment, where black artists experienced a moment of hypervisibility. The exhibition offered a distinct critique of both mainstream art criticism and the institutional factors used to frame the work of artists that have been positioned on the margins. *Theater of Refusal* is a single and important examination of the marginalization of black artists and their practices within the framework of criticism.

Building from primary research and interviews with two of its central characters, Charles Gaines and Maurice Berger, this thesis provides a historical account of *Theater of Refusal* and examines the contemporary resonance of this exhibition. Ultimately, this thesis points out two forms of refusal in play in this exhibition. First is Gaines' demonstration of how black artists are routinely marked out from the mainstream through implicit bias in the rhetorical structure of criticism; second is his own refusal to allow the works in the exhibition to be framed this way.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my committee members; your feedback, discussions, and guidance have been invaluable. J. Myers-Szupinska, my thesis advisor, thank you for the attention and care you have given my writing and also constant reassurance throughout this process. James Voorhies, I am deeply grateful for your mentorship and your immense support over the last two years. Megan Steinman, my thesis mentor, thank you for your encouragement and reminding me that coming up against the limits of what I know is an opportunity for growth.

I would also like to thank Symmes Gardner, Rita Sobreiro Souther, Christina Linden, Thelma Golden, and Naima Keith. Thank you to Maurice Berger, for telling me this was important to write and participating in this project. Rest in power.

Lastly, thank you to Charles Gaines. Without him none of this would be possible.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	vi
Chapter I: Introduction	1
Chapter II: Origins	3
Chapter III: Multiculturalism and Its Discontents	5
Chapter IV: Artworks	8
Chapter V: Language; The Mainstream Media	11
Chapter VI: Language; The Catalogue Essay	15
Chapter VII: Revisiting *Theater of Refusal*	17
Chapter VIII: Conclusion	23
Bibliography	25
Figures	28

List of Figures

1. *Charles Gaines: Gridwork 1974–1989*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2014, installation views. Artworks from the series "Faces," 1978–1979.
2. *Charles Gaines: Gridwork 1974–1989*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2014, installation view featuring *Numbers and Trees III, Shucks #11*, 1987.
3. *Charles Gaines: Gridwork 1974–1989*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2014, installation view featuring series "Numbers and Trees," 1986–1989.
4. Charles Gaines, *Numbers and Trees Central Park Series IV: Tree #6, Carmichael*, 2019, detail.
5. Charles Gaines, *Incomplete Text* Series, 1978–1979, detail.
6. *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993, installation view.
7. Adrian Piper, *Free #2*, 1989.
8. Gary Simmons, *Us/Them*, 1990.
9. Lorna Simpson, *Lower Region*, 1992.
10. Carrie Mae Weems, *Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil*, 1990.
11. David Hammons, *African American Flag*, 1989.
12. *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993, installation view.
13. *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993, installation view.
14. *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993, installation view.

I—Introduction

The Theater of the Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism was exhibited at the Fine Arts Gallery of the University of California, Irvine in April of 1993.[1] Curated by the conceptual artist Charles Gaines, the exhibition showcased the work of African American artists, as well as excerpts of criticism they received from mainstream art critics in publications such as *The New York Times, Artnews, Art in America,* and *Newsweek*. The inclusion of this writing displayed how black artists were called to inhabit an overwhelmingly white mainstream that actively positioned these same artists on the margins.[2] *Theater of Refusal* thereby demonstrated how Gaines navigated the changing conditions of institutional visibility at this moment when black artists were experiencing a new moment of hypervisibility. The exhibition was, therefore, a critical effort designed to probe how works of art by African American artists are misread by meditating forces. Thus, the exhibition offered a critique of mainstream art criticism and how it actively positions black artists on the margins.

The exhibition included the work of eleven artists: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Renée Green, David Hammons, Ben Patterson, Adrian Piper, Sandra Rowe, Gary Simmons, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, Pat Ward Williams, and Fred Wilson. This selection spanned generations and represented both emerging artists and those well-established within the art world. All eleven

[1] The exhibition was on view between April 8 to May 12, 1993. It traveled to UC Davis, UC Riverside, and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

[2] Gaines defines mainstream as "the general knowledge of what the mainstream institutions are. Museums like the Whitney, the Museum of Modern Art, LACMA, the Chicago Art Institute. Institutions could also include galleries that were dealing with the mainstream art market." (*Interview with Charles Gaines*, 2020). Institutions that produced texts and art criticism were of specific interest. Gaines also views the mainstream to be similar to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's idea of the majoritarian. (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Theory and History of Literature [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986]).

artists were African American, however these artists shared more than race. Each had received attention from a mainstream press that, rather than considering them on equal terms with their artist contemporaries, instead inscribed them in a racialized discourse.

The exhibition was comprised of three sections. The first section presented works of art in two rooms of a university gallery. Next, in an adjoining hallway, large wall panels contained reprinted excerpts of reviews or writing about each artist. Finally, a reading room presented existing books and catalogues about the artists. The exhibition's focus on critical discourse demonstrated how art criticism structures the reception of artwork. This level of critique, produced by critics and art writers, is not the only form of critique the exhibition addresses. Equally, *Theater of Refusal* examines a type of critique not external to works of art but immanent within the works themselves as they refuse marginalization.

In the last several years, Gaines' essay, which shares the same title as the exhibition and is published in the exhibition catalogue, has been circulated among artists, colleagues, and those influenced by Gaines' work. Yet despite this growing familiarity with the essay, the exhibition itself remains somewhat obscure: its historical record remains dispersed and first-hand accounts of the exhibition are rare. I will therefore discuss the continuing importance of the exhibition and produce a reconsideration of *Theater of Refusal* as both an exhibition and essay.

The renewed interest in *Theater of Refusal* signals the contemporary resonance of the exhibition. In the last decade, the art world has been moving toward a heightened moment of visibility for black artists. As institutions scramble to correct the results of decades of entrenched racial biases

and colonial practices, we are now seeing a surge in the market value of artworks by black artists, changes in the acquisition patterns of large mainstream museums, and the diversification of scholarship.[3] A careful engagement with *Theater of Refusal*, however, signals certain limitations to this present moment, and suggests an alternate path forward—one that builds upon Gaines' interrogation of ideological frameworks that uphold marginalization.

To demonstrate how *Theater of Refusal* depicted the fraught relationship between black artists and critical marginalization, we must now turn to the exhibition. Chapter II introduces aspects of Gaines' practice that set the terms for the concerns addressed by the exhibition. Chapter III explores an original, forestalled conceptualized of the exhibition and how that idea was developed for its eventual realization in 1993. Chapters IV–VI account for the exhibition itself, examining the artwork showcased and the role of language in *Theater of Refusal.* Chapters VII–VIII return to the contemporary resonance of this historical exhibition and suggest the value of a renewed engagement with Gaines' ideas. By providing this account of the exhibition and its history, this essay shows how *Theater of Refusal* exposed rhetorical strategies that continue to circumscribe and refuse black artists from the mainstream.

II—Origins

The history of *Theater of Refusal* begins with Charles Gaines, a Los Angeles-based conceptual artist. Gaines' work utilizes formulas and systems to examine the relationship between the signifier and signified. A common technique in his practice has been a deduction of photographic

[3] Charlotte Burns and Julia Halperin, "'From a Dealer's Point of View, There Is a Huge Opportunity,'" *In Other Words*, September 20, 2018, https://www.artagencypartners.com/20-september-2018-market-story/.

images, such as those of palm trees, shadows, and faces, into numbers and grids (Figure 1). Between 1986 and 1989, Gaines began a new series of system-based grids that returned to images of trees—a conventional illustrational case within semiotic discourse. Painting color grids atop black and white photographs (Figures 2 and 3), the artworks result in a vibrant mass whose shape becomes discernable from a distance (Figure 4).

The interrogation of such visual and semiotic systems is present throughout Gaines' career and is not limited to photographic images. His work also demonstrates a commitment to the examination of rhetorical systems. For example, in 1978, Gaines began the *Incomplete Text* series—the first instance where Gaines systematically grappled with language (Figure 5).[4] In this series, Gaines methodically removed letters from an original text in one panel. In the next, Gaines would take the removed letters and place them in a grid. Gaines' deconstruction of texts mirrors his practice of the deconstruction of images: both stem from an interest in the critique of systems of representation and the limitations of such falsely universalist structures.

Curator Naima Keith has emphasized how Gaines' teaching—at California State University of Fresno and, since 1989, at California Institute of the Arts—and his art practice inflect one another; often his practice demonstrated an application of critical theory.[5] In particular, Keith noted how Gaines' interest in language is related to his teaching of structuralism and semiotic

[4] Naima J. Keith, *Charles Gaines: Gridwork 1974-1989* (New York, NY: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2014), 96.
[5] Keith, *Charles Gaines*, 96. From 1968 to 1990, Gaines taught as a professor of art at California State University of Fresno. In 1989, he began to teach as a guest artist at the and soon after accepted a full-time faculty position at CalArts in 1990, where he continues to teach today.

theory. Gaines' concern with systems of representation led him to language; as Gaines' son, the artist Malik Gaines, stated, "Problems of difference and representation are language."[6]

Theater of Refusal, therefore, extended the interests Gaines had addressed in his practice. In Gaines' catalogue essay, discussed further below, he carefully traces the rhetorical strategies utilized by those in the mainstream to maintain power. The exhibition thereby revealed how ideological investment and the policing of racial boundaries can be masked by seemingly neutral language. While *Theater of Refusal* should not be understood as an artwork, it nevertheless focused on concerns salient to his artistic work: systems of representation and their limitations.[7]

III—Multiculturalism and Its Discontents

In 1989, Charles Gaines proposed an exhibition titled *Black Art and Postmodern Aesthetics*—only later renamed *The Theater of Refusal*—to Krygier/Landau Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.[8] The exhibition was to serve as part of their ongoing series of artist-curated exhibitions. The intention of *Black Art and Postmodern Aesthetics* was both to provide exposure to work by contemporary African American artists and to highlight the distance between the experience of

[6] Malik Gaines and Alexandria Symonds, "In Practice: Charles Gaines X Malik Gaines," Interview Magazine, July 31, 2014, https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/in-practice-charles-gaines-x-malik-gaines.
[7] *The Theater of Refusal* is the first of the five exhibitions Gaines has curated in his career. Others include *Nor Here Neither There* at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (1994), *Touring the Frame* at Rosamund Felsen Gallery (1999), *Remembering* at Sweeney Art Gallery (2004), and *Terry Adkins: The Smooth, The Cut, and The Assembled* at Lévy Gorvy Gallery (2018).
[8] Krygier/Landau was located in Santa Monica and was run by Irit Krygier and Susan Landau in the mid 1980s. The gallery represented mostly emerging artists.

black artists and postmodernism.[9] While the gallery accepted the proposed exhibition, Krygier/Landau closed its doors before the exhibition came to fruition.[10]

By 1991, Gaines was in conversation with writer and scholar Catherine Lord at the Fine Arts Gallery at the University of California, Irvine, where she served as the director.[11] Lord agreed to mount the exhibition at UC Irvine. However, she noted that the discourse around artists of color had changed in the short time since Gaines had first conceived his show. As Lord wrote in her introduction of the exhibition catalogue, "Lack had been replaced by excess, silence by chatter."[12] While Gaines initially intended to address the disparity between artists of color and postmodernist discourse, there had been a surge of attention around these same artists.[13]

Multiculturalism, or cultural pluralism—what today we call diversity—was central to the American art discourse in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While this thinking sometimes challenged traditional aesthetic values and promoted certain forms of inclusion, it did so, Gaines thought, merely by revaluing, rather than questioning, existing cultural binaries—that is, by idealizing racial difference.[14] The shift from institutional invisibility in 1989 to hypervisibility in 1993 had therefore not fundamentally altered the terms Gaines had meant to question.

[9] Specifically, Gaines is referring to postmodernism's anti-humanist strains, valorization of difference and the critique of the authorial voice.
[10] The exhibition was then passed to the Security Pacific Gallery in Costa Mesa, which also closed soon after. Security Pacific gallery was first founded in 1989 and closed August of 1992. The gallery reopened in 1993 under a new name and leadership; additionally, the gallery now exclusively showcased works owned by Security Pacific Bank and BankAmerica.
[11] Lord's work as a writer, artist, and scholar addresses feminist, queer, and colonial topics through the medium of language and image. She served as the director at the Fine Arts Gallery from 1991–1996.
[12] Catherine Lord, "Introduction and Acknowledgements," in *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism* (Irvine: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993), 6.
[13] Catherine Lord, "Introduction and Acknowledgements," 6.
[14] Holland Cotter, "ART/ARCHITECTURE; Beyond Multiculturalism, Freedom?" *The New York Times*, July 29, 2001, 1.

Nevertheless, Gaines and Lord decided to shift the focus of the exhibition to examine how black artists' careers and work were mediated by mainstream press, galleries, and institutions.

The resulting exhibition was renamed *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism.* As Gaines wrote in his catalogue essay, "The title suggests that the critical environment surrounding the works of these artists intentionally and unintentionally limits those works, creating a theater of refusal that punishes the work of black artists [by] making it immune to history and by immunizing history against it."[15] The title was a poetic way to talk about how artists of color were historically excluded from mainstream exhibitions, but also how problematic forms of inclusion served to re-inscribe, rather than contest, marginalization itself. The theater was the mainstream, critics were its performers, and criticism was a fabrication; their marking of difference was construed as a "refusal" of equal status to the artists it addressed. By highlighting the false nature of this "theater," Gaines makes clear that this pattern of marginalization can be undone.

Theater of Refusal opened a month after the 1993 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art—an exhibition that has become associated with the vitriolic criticism that its multiculturalist premise had ignited. Lord's essay, "(An) Other Panic: The Mainstream Learns to Bash," discussed how *Theater of Refusal* emerged within a post-1993 Biennial art world.[16] In her essay, Lord examined reviews generated by the Biennial and concluded that the critical response failed the exhibition. The 1993 Biennial brought to surface questions of racial and ethnic essentialism

[15] Charles Gaines, "The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism," in *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism* (Irvine: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993), 13.
[16] Catherine Lord, "(An) Other Panic: The Mainstream Learns to Bash," in *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism* (Irvine: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993), 23.

and reductionism that had been simmering beneath the newfound demand of representation during these years.

While compiling research for *Theater of Refusal*, Lord utilized the critical response to the Biennial as a case study in strategies of rhetorical marginalization. To Lord, criticism served as a window into the apparatuses that the mainstream utilizes to maintain its dominance.[17] Additionally, Lord reiterated how the mainstream is maintained through the creation of a center that is whiteness. In the case of *Theater of Refusal*, that center is upheld through language.

IV—Artworks

How did the shifting conditions of visibility—and their relationship to language—play out in the exhibition itself? The first section of *Theater of Refusal* was housed in the main room of the Fine Arts Gallery (Figure 6); details of this windowless room, with wall-to-wall dark wood flooring and a drop ceiling that delimited the space, are prominent in the documentation of this iteration of the exhibition. Included in the first room were the majority of the artworks in the exhibition, including Adrian Piper's *Free #2* (1989) (Figure 7), Gary Simmons' *Us/Them* (1990) (Figure 8), Lorna Simpson's *Lower Region* (1992) (Figure 9), and Carrie Mae Weems' *Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil* (1990) (Figure 10). The artworks were installed in a precise and spacious manner—two or three pieces occupied each wall of the gallery. Although most of the works were installed on the walls, Renée Green's *Blue Skies* (1990) and Pat Ward Williams' *32 Hours in a Box and Still Counting* (1988) extended into the center of the room (Figure 1). David Hammons'

[17] Ibid.

African American Flag (1989) hung over an entryway (Figures 6 and 11) in order for viewers to walk directly under it as they navigated the exhibition.

There are precise and insightful moments of dialogue and overlap between the artworks in this room. Hammons' *African American Flag*, an altered reproduction of the American flag in the Pan-African colors of black, red, and green, hung adjacent to Piper's *Free #2* (Figure 7). Hammons' flag is an iconic reconstruction, subversive in its gesture of replacing the American flag's traditional red, white, and blue. By bringing together two heavily symbolic objects, Hammons' transmutation references America's conflicted history while looking toward new constructions of the future. That same conflicted history is represented in *Free #2*, which consists of two found photographs depicting occurrences of police brutality and violence, placed side by side. The image on the left is a photograph of a lynched black man with the typescript "Land of the free" over his neck. A second image depicts two white police officers and a dog as they attack and hold down a black man on the ground. The words "Home of the brave" are written across the backside of one of the officers.

Sociopolitical history may have informed how these works were understood at the time—namely, the beating, on March 3, 1991, of Rodney King by four Los Angeles Police Department officers while over a dozen other officers watched. Videotaped from a balcony by witness George Holliday, footage of the beating aired on news stations across the country, raising pressing concerns over police brutality. As a result, the Los Angeles County District Attorney charged four of the officers with assault and excessive force; however, in April of 1992, the jury

acquitted the four officers of assault and acquitted three of using excessive force. These acquittals triggered five days of unrest in Los Angeles.[18]

The 1992 Los Angeles riots brought forth national conversations about racial and economic disparity. Retail shops and grocery stores were set on fire in South Central Los Angeles by residents in protest of the acquittal.[19] Additionally, there had been growing tension between the community in South Los Angeles and the police. The LAPD enforced a type of "paramilitary policing" that was racist and abusive in communities of color.[20]

Theater of Refusal's juxtaposition of Piper and Hammons' work therefore gestured to the historical and ongoing violence that underpins our national image. While Piper's work criticized state-sanctioned violence, Hammons presented an alternative version of the country through his flag—one that united America's flag with the optimistic advocacy of an African political union. Yet by employing the symbolism of the flag, Hammons also references the historical traumas that have been inflicted by this country. In turn, Piper's *Free #2* presents viewers with a visualization of this misuse of power over black citizens. Side by side these artworks represented two critical views of nationalism.

In the opposite corner, Gaines constructed a formal mirroring between artworks (Figure 12). Simpson's photographic triptych *Lower Region* hung near the corner of the gallery (Figure 9).

[18] The same month as Rodney King's beating, a Korean store owner shot and murdered a fifteen-year-old African American girl named, Latasha Harlin, who was wrongly accused of trying to steal orange juice. The store owner received probation and a small fine.
[19] Anjuli Sastry and Karen G. Bates, "When LA Erupted in Anger: A Look Back at The Rodney King Riots," NPR, April 26, 2017, https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots.
[20] Ibid.

Lower Region functions as a narrative; each image is a close-up shot of a woman's pelvic region framed by her hands: first firmly on her waist, then on her thighs, palms down. "During every examination / bracing for the / pain that never / comes" is written in red text across her pelvis. The final image is a similar shot of the woman's dress; now her arms are crossed. Through body language and text, the work manifests a sense of anxiety over an examination.

One can read Simpson's work through the lens of gender politics and trauma, as women's bodies are examined in various ways by men and society at large. Additionally, the artwork interrogates portraiture itself: the viewer cannot distinguish the individual in these photographs—the headless body has "refused" our collective gaze. In context, one might also read Simpson's "examination" as a reference to the exhibition setting as such, and the forms of looking that the work disavows.

On the adjacent wall was Carrie Mae Weems' *Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil* (Figure 10). Another photographic triptych, Weems' three images form a narrative told through the body language of the figure depicted. In the first, the figure covers his eyes with the backs of his hands. In the second, his hands are now moved outwards as they cover his ears. In the third image, one hand grasps the wrist of the other hand that is covering his mouth. In all three, the eyes of the figure remain closed. This work too can be read in terms of the exhibition; Weems' triptych makes reference to misreadings by art critics and the silenced artist themselves. The precise placement of Weems and Simpson's work in the exhibition created a formal and conceptual mirroring effect that served to augment the narrative element of each.

V—Language; The Mainstream Media

Language, in the form of printed word and its role in the maintenance of mainstream power structures, served as the curatorial crux of *Theater of Refusal*. This relationship played out in three distinct forms in the exhibition: criticism from print media reprinted on walls panels, a reading room, and Gaines' catalogue essay. Wall labels and other exhibition didactics were noticeably absent from the exhibition as presented at UC Irvine. The central form of wall text was installed along a narrow hallway that connected the first gallery and the reading room. This second section of the exhibition consisted of panels containing reprinted excerpts of recently published reviews and commentary about each of the artists in the exhibition (Figure 13). The fifteen text panels were large—at times larger than some of the framed works in the exhibition—and hung on the wall at eye level. While these panels were relegated to a hallway, their size and placement afforded them comparable status to the artworks in the show.

Gaines installed the exhibition so that a viewer walked through the main gallery before entering the corridor with the panels. This decision—not to place any of the text in the exhibition near the artwork—is important. The artworks are afforded space to create meaning for the viewer on their own terms, before they encounter the marginalizing discourse in the hallway section of the exhibition. In this sense, Gaines enacted a second, and oppositional, form of theater: an active refusal of the language in the reprinted texts on behalf of the artworks. Through curatorial intervention, the exhibition refused to allow the artwork to be accounted for or mediated by writers that offered a biased critical engagement. At the same time, the excerpts of criticism in the corridor were presented as comprehensively refusing to account for the artworks and artists in the exhibition.

Though these panels were a crucial component of *Theater of Refusal*, they were not part of Gaines' initial conceptualization of the exhibition. It was through conversations with Lord that the curators decided to include quotes by art critics, including those featured in Gaines' essay.[21] Gaines described two types of writing featured on the panels. The first viewed the marginal as positive and praiseworthy; the other was more negative and relied on stereotypes. Both rhetorical strategies, as Gaines saw it, centered marginality and thus further positioned the artist on the margin. This marginalization served to uphold the "center" itself, which cannot exist without margins. In either case, positive or negative, marginal discourse reduced and limited the work and artist in question, whatever the intentions of the writer.[22]

To further demonstrate the incongruous relationship between the works of art on display and mainstream criticism, it is important to unpack specific instances. Gaines and Lord included six excerpts of criticism to accompany *Lower Region*, for example. One review that appeared in *The New York Times* read as follows (bold text as in original):

> It is at once an impressive and derivative show. **Ms. Simpson uses a combination of photographic images and language,** the latter usually engraved on plastic or bronze plaques, **that several generations of Conceptual artists have already made familiar. But she has a distinct and urgent subject**[...][23]

This review emblematized a tendency Gaines described as an "attempt to view marginality as a historical force."[24] This position viewed marginality as an artistic movement—one that can alter the mainstream, but that will ultimately be superseded by successive movements that follow. By

[21] Charles Gaines, Interview with Author, 2020.
[22] Gaines, "The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism," 17.
[23] *The Theater of Refusal*, 46. Emphasis on text is by Gaines and Lord.
[24] Gaines, "The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism," 17.

describing Simpson's subjects, who tend to be black women, as "distinct and urgent" this review emphasized marginality and framed it as an influence and asset. Nevertheless, this rhetorical strategy represented Simpson's work through a lens of difference and ultimately reinforced the binary of center and margin. Similarly, critic Eleanor Heartney described Simpson's work as "drawn from her experiences as a black woman in a white world."[25] In this review, Heartney constructed a marginal/mainstream binary framework by positioning Simpson, as a black woman, on the margins of the center that is whiteness. By valorizing marginality, Heartney upheld power relations inherent in the mainstream.

While the excerpts that accompanied Simpson's work were examples of a positive type of critical writing, several excerpts that addressed Adrian Piper highlighted a negative critical view. In a review featured in *Women Artists News* from 1987, writer Barbara Barr attacked Piper's personhood and identity. Barr wrote as follows (again, bold text as presented on the panel):

> **Piper projects her own obsession with race onto the environment** […] **The people I know**, whatever their other sins, **would be, at worst, enchanted to discover a friend or acquaintance had a little something exotic in her background**.[26]

This comment projected Barr's fetishization of race onto Piper—we find out more about Barr and the people she knows than about Piper, the subject of this review. In this case, the critic attributed to Piper the very thing Piper aims to criticize and undo, namely our larger culture's obsession with race. Additionally, the review disregarded one of the intentions—that of deconstructing and exposing prejudice—behind Piper's work. Reading this review alongside Piper's *Free #2* does little to further a viewer's understanding of the work.

[25] *The Theater of Refusal*, 46.
[26] Ibid., 39.

Another panel included an excerpt from an interview with Piper where Gaines has highlighted her words. The interviewer asks Piper whether the art world's interest in the work of "the 'other'" can be read to be genuine or not.[27] Sections of Piper's response—lines where Piper either positioned herself and artists of color on the margins or discusses an exhibition that exclusively featured black artists—are highlighted in red bold text.

> **It is clear, as has always been true, that the most exciting, most innovative work is made by those on the margins. So it is not surprising that in the search for something new we go to what is now on the margins.**[28]

In this response, Piper maintained the binary between margin/center through her reliance on marginal rhetoric. This reliance may be in part a response to how she been positioned by the mainstream art world. Yet as Gaines writes, "Marginalization is a sword with two edges: as we use it to attack racism, we wound our villain with each downstroke, but each time we wound ourselves."[29] By including these excerpts, Gaines maintained that artists themselves can take part in the perpetuation of marginality through its invocation.

VI—Language; The Catalogue Essay

The third section of the exhibition occupied the back room of the gallery. Here, a final text panel presented a graph tracking the various forms of press coverage that the eleven artists had received throughout their careers. (Figure 14). The main fixture in the room was a wooden table and chairs, atop which were sixty-two books about the artists and their practices borrowed from

[27] Ibid., 40.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Gaines, "The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism," 17.

UC Irvine's library, including *Artists of Conscience: 16 Years of Social and Political Commentary* (1992), *Black Artists on Art* (1976), *Black Arts Annual,* Greg Tate's *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (1992), and *Some American History* (1971), along with exhibition catalogues that featured the eleven artists. The room also included the full essays and sources cited by the hallway panels.[30] This inclusion allowed for a more in-depth contextualization of the works in the exhibition and created agency for both the artist and viewers. The reading room proved that diversified forms of nuanced criticism can productively shape the perception of an artists' practice and work.

Included in the catalogue for *Theater of Refusal,* Gaines' critical essay could be considered a fourth component of the exhibition. The premise of the essay is that binary frameworks of self/other and mainstream/marginal serve to maintain mainstream power structures. The mainstream cannot exist without the marginal, he asserts, while the marginal has no identity other than being what the mainstream is not.[31] As Gaines wrote: "It is virtually impossible to invoke the discourse of marginality without buttressing the implacable edifice of the mainstream."[32] Gaines further addresses how race complicates critical theory, whether modernism's insistence on universality or postmodernism's valorization of difference.[33] Furthermore, he argues that the postmodernist critique of the subject simply reaffirms existing power relations. Gaines wrote,

> It does not seem that the amelioration or the obviation of the subject is in the political best interest of the minority. To do so would leave the minority either outside

[30] Gaines cites *The Theater of Refusal* as one of the earliest exhibitions to utilize the structure of a reading room
[31] Gaines, "The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism," 15.
[32] Ibid., 17.
[33] Ibid., 13.

> representation or continue her subjection. The presence of a subject is essential for the implementation of political power.[34]

One needs subjectivity to act politically, he argues. This is, however, not an uncomplicated corrective; he is not arguing for a return to older models of the subject. Rather, Gaines suggests looking to French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose idea of the deterritorialized subject provides a manner of forgoing identity constructions and moving outside binarism. Furthermore, in his view, Deleuze and Guattari offer a solution to "de-essentialize" the idea of blackness to work toward a less totalizing idealization of race. As Gaines notes, the problem that remains unaddressed is how to deal with oppression; even with the dissolution of binaries, there needs to be a system to dismantle the real effects of dispossession.[35]

VII—Revisiting *Theater of Refusal*

So far, this essay has provided an analysis of *Theater of Refusal*, as well as an accounting of its significance in the period between 1989 and 1993. Today, as we move toward a similar moment of increased visibility for artists of color, the concerns the exhibition addressed are as relevant as ever. The following chapter therefore addresses the historical resonance of the exhibition. In the last decade, shifts in politics, performance, and protest have created ruptures within contemporary American culture.[36] Institutions have begun to reconsider the entrenched biases of their collecting, exhibition, and hiring practices in efforts to correct the historical record. For instance, in 2018, the Baltimore Museum of Art announced its plan to deaccession works of 20th-century white male artists, such as Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, to fund acquisitions

[34] Ibid.
[35] Charles Gaines, Interview with Author, 2020.
[36] Eric Copage, "For Future Generations, It's Time to Reflect on Black Art," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2020, 31.

of contemporary art by women and artists of color.[37] Artist Kerry James Mashall's blockbuster retrospective *Mastry* (2016), which proposed a "counter-archive" to the exclusion of black artists from major art institutions, toured venues across the United States and was critically acclaimed. Black academics and scholars are being appointed to curatorial roles and directorships. Concerning the current moment, Lorna Simpson recently stated in an interview, "We have to also see this not just as a moment of visibility for black artists but also one of historically white institutions finally dragging themselves into the 21st-century."[38]

While many institutions have shifted toward correcting exclusionary practices, it would be nearsighted not to acknowledge the conspicuous nature of these actions and the underlying structures of marginalization that persist. As Gaines wrote in his essay "A Tale of Conflict," "Western liberalism has proven incapable of responding to and ameliorating the privilege that it accorded to white people of European descent over people of color."[39] The legacies of colonialism which Western institutions were founded upon create a paradox that ultimately sustains white privilege. In the last decade, only 2.37% of acquisitions and gifts at thirty prominent American museums were works by black artists.[40] In some ways these shifts in visibility reproduce problems that artists of color faced in the late 1980s and early 1990s. An absence of the kinds of thinking addressed in *Theater of Refusal* threatens to turn this moment of

[37] Julia Halperin, "'It Is an Unusual and Radical Act': Why the Baltimore Museum Is Selling Blue-Chip Art to Buy Work by Underrepresented Artists," *Artnet*, April 30, 2018, https://news.artnet.com/market/baltimore-museum-deaccession-1274996.
[38] Jenna Wortham, "'I Want to Explore the Wonder of What It Is to Be a Black American,'" *The New York Times Magazine*, October 8, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/08/magazine/black-women-artists-conversation.html.
[39] Charles Gaines, "A Tale of Conflict: The Contemporary Museum in the Age of Liberalism," *Open Space*, March 8, 2016, https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2016/03/charles-gaines/.
[40] Julia Halperin and Charlotte Burns, "African American Artists Are More Visible Than Ever. So Why Are Museums Giving Them Short Shrift?" *Artnet News*, September 20, 2018. https://news.artnet.com/the-long-road-for-african-american-artists/african-american-research-museums-1350362.

institutional change into a repetition of, rather than a progression from, the moment of multiculturalism—specifically, a valorization of difference that merely reproduces, rather than problematizes, exclusionary binaries.

Theater of Refusal lays in opposition to the identity politics that permeated the 1980s and early 1990s. As curator John Tain wrote in a reflection on the project published *Artforum* in 2016, "In the years that followed [*Theater of Refusal*], the art world seemed to move in the direction of Gaines' ideas, signaling the apparent demise of identity politics."[41] Around the turn of the century, the post-black movement emerged in response to the height of identity politics in the early 1990s. Curator and director of the Studio Museum in Harlem Thelma Golden wrote, "[Post-black] was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness." [42] The term "post-black" intended to expand the understanding of artistic practice beyond the responsibility of having to perform one's racial identity within a strict set of racialized bounds that were often not defined by the artists themselves. In doing so, Golden's provocation aimed to create a new language to describe artworks that centered blackness.

Through *Theater of Refusal,* Gaines attempted to carve out a more fluid working space—for artists of color, their artwork, and for art critics—that did not fall into essentialism or relativism. Gaines' essay and exhibition together provided a less totalizing theory of identity by illuminating the power dynamics present in marginal discourse. When revisiting the exhibition, Gaines noted

[41]John Tain, "'Theater of Refusal' (1993)," *Artforum*, Summer 2016, https://www.artforum.com/print/201606/the-theater-of-refusal-1993-60086. John Tain currently serves as the Head of Research at Asia Art Archive, previously he worked as a curator of modern and contemporary collections at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles.
[42] Thelma Golden, *Freestyle.* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.

the value of such a fluid space as it related to language and identity. Immediately after the exhibition catalogue was published, he received letters from several people that thanked him for creating an opportunity to discuss issues of identity using critical language.[43] The idea of talking about marginalization with respect to artistic production was relatively new within the exhibition space and Gaines contributed to this dialogue.

Additionally, Gaines stated that the number of artists of color being exhibited now does not mean that the institutional problems that *Theater of Refusal* exposed have been solved. To Gaines, the problem is no longer focused on who is included in an exhibition (although this remains a concern that has not been solved within many institutions and spheres), but how one is included in those exhibitions and under what conditions. When asked about the legacy of his essay, Gaines noted that its importance lies in the fact that many of the topics he addressed are still widespread. Toward the end of our conversation, Gaines stated, "The exhibition reflects a problem that was going on then. I did not know that it would reveal a continuation into the future. I did not know."

Cultural historian and curator Maurice Berger, whose essay "To Meet the White Man's Eyes" was also featured in the exhibition catalogue, discussed the renewed relevance *Theater of Refusal* in an interview conducted earlier this year.[44] Regarding the legacy of the exhibition, Berger noted that *Theater of Refusal* laid the groundwork for other critical projects created within the

[43] Charles Gaines, Interview with the Author, 2020.
[44] Maurice Berger, "To Meet the White Man's Eyes," in *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism* (Irvine: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993), 10. This short text discusses "the blind art critic"—a critic that views work through a distorted lens of racialized mythologies—that is exemplified by the exhibition. Berger also extends these issues past criticism and into critical theory as a whole. He writes how tools from deconstructive theory have been useful in understanding racism, yet issues associated with African American art and mainstream criticism continue to be present within disciplines of critical theory.

context of the art world and academia. According to Berger, the exhibition not only supported black artists but exposed institutional biases that have perpetuated an exclusionary art culture.[45] When asked about the renewed interest in the exhibition, Berger responded,

> This is largely a game of racial opportunism, since many of these people have never made an iota of effort to study, endorse, and advocate for black artists. They are finally acknowledging the art that they have long ignored and the interpretive and scholarly work that many of us have been doing all along. At the time, our work was largely ignored by the art world mainstream, or worse, derided and ridiculed. *The Theater of Refusal* was a pioneering attempt to examine problematic institutional biases and limitations that kept some of the most important artists of that time out of mainstream discourse. Charles was thirty years ahead of the curve. Now, that curve has finally arrived—a half-century too late, but it has nevertheless arrived.[46]

As a historian and curator who devoted his career to studying issues of race and representation, Berger was skeptical of the current hypervisibility that is being afforded to artists of color. It is an open question whether this interest will hold long enough to produce structural change.

Both Gaines and Berger made clear that the exclusionary practices *Theater of Refusal* addressed were not unique to the early 1990s. These practices are embedded in mainstream institutional histories that carry the legacies of colonial practices. While mainstream institutions move to correct their historical records, these histories continue to manifest in structures that maintain power, in this case, language. During another such moment of institutional catch-up, turning to Gaines' exhibition becomes imperative as *Theater of Refusal* draws light to a more insidious condition that has and continues to be perpetuated and upheld through the rhetorical marginalization of artists of color by the white mainstream. Without turning to the types of

[45] Maurice Berger, Interview with the Author, 2020.
[46] Ibid.

thought espoused by *Theater of Refusal*, we risk falling into the pitfalls of both positive and negative forms of idealization.

Last November, *The New York Times* published an article written by co-chief art critic Roberta Smith (whose criticism, it's worth noting, was also featured in the panels of *Theater of Refusal*). Her article was initially titled "Black Art Has Its Moment, Finally." Many curators, artists, and academics responded critically. The problem for those critics was not only with the headline but with the framing of the text, which blatantly ignored entire generations of black artists and their artistic works and contributions to contemporary art movements. Rather than addressing the absence of black artists from mainstream institutions as the result of a history of exclusionary practices, Smith's article, following the rhetoric of mainstream institutions, only now granted validity to artists that have been producing work for decades. After the backlash that ensued, the article was renamed to "A Sea Change in the Art World, Made by Black Creators."[47]

Her gesture nevertheless exposed the ongoing marginalization enacted by mainstream art venues and media outlets, even in a moment of renewed attention to black artists. By insisting on placing mainstream art criticism in the exhibition, *Theater of Refusal* held critics like Smith accountable for this rhetorical marginalization—a small example of how mainstream art criticism continues to value difference while reifying it as different, rather than working on structural change. While the lasting relevance of Gaines' work indicates the glacial speed at which the mainstream art world has progressed in terms of racial politics, *Theater of Refusal* remains a critical landmark in

[47] Roberta Smith, "A Sea Change in the Art World, Made by Black Creators," *The New York Times*, November 24, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/24/arts/design/black-artists.html.

the development of a discourse that addresses the rhetorical marginalization to which artists of color navigating institutional visibility are subjected.

VIII—Conclusion

Theater of Refusal was a singular and important examination of the marginalization of black artists and their practices within the framework of criticism. The form of the exhibition illustrated the complex and overlapping relationship between artworks, criticism, and the institutional positioning of the artworks. Through the exhibition, Gaines demonstrated how mainstream criticism continues to play a role in the upholding of institutional and market-driven power structures and racial oppression. Additionally, the exhibition made clear how the rampant use of flawed binary structures categorizing "white" and "non-white" artists only further marginalize artworks and artists. Through an examination of the artworks and the role of language in the exhibition, this essay has illustrated how *Theater of Refusal* exposed strategies of rhetorical marginalization, while refusing them through curatorial interventions.

While *Theater of Refusal* was produced during a period where marginalized artists of color navigated a shift between a condition of institutional invisibility to one of hypervisibility, the exhibition's resonance extends into the present. The exhibition and essay revealed a condition that has haunted mainstream American institutions as they work to correct historical records that have been marked with exclusionary practices. Rather than turn away from institutions, Gaines' work argued that it is crucial to reckon with their ideological frameworks; only by doing so can we contest them, and thereby achieve a more equitable art world. As Gaines wrote at the end of

his essay, “Marginality is not an essentialist discourse, but a complex co-presence of textual spaces. Critical writing and curatorial practice must address this paradox so that we can all realize that the concerns of the minority artist concern us all.”[48]

[48] Gaines, “The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism,” 20.

Bibliography

Als, Hilton. "Whitney Biennial 1993: You Better Work." *Artforum* 31 (May 1993): 7.

Berger, Maurice. “To Meet the White Man’s Eyes,” In *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism,* edited by Catherine Lord, 8–12. Irvine: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993.

Burns, Charlotte, and Julia Halperin. “‘From a Dealer’s Point of View, There Is a Huge Opportunity.’” *Art Agency, Partners,* September 20, 2018. https://www.artagencypartners.com/20-september-2018-market-story/.

Cooper, Wilbert L. “The Critic and Collector Working Together to Open the Gates for Black Artists.” *i-D Vice*, February 25, 2020. https://id.vice.com/en_uk/article/5dmwdd/antwaun-sargent-bernard-lumpkin-young-gifted-black-davey-adesida.

Copage, Eric. “For Future Generations, It’s Time to Reflect on Black Art.” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2020.

Cotter, Holland. “ART/ARCHITECTURE; Beyond Multiculturalism, Freedom?” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2001.

Curtis, Cathy. “Seeing in Black and White.” *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 1993. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-04-20-ca-25090-story.html

Fisher, Jean. “Some Thoughts on Contaminations.” In *Vampire in the Text: Narratives of Contemporary Art,* 252–57. London: Iniva Press, 2003.

Foster, Hal, Rosalind Krauss, Silvia Kolbowski, Miwon Kwon, and Benjamin Buchloh. “The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial.” *October* 66 (1993): 3–27.

Gaines, Charles. “A Tale of Conflict: The Contemporary Museum in the Age of Liberalism.” *Open Space,* March 8, 2016. https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2016/03/charles-gaines/.

Gaines, Charles “The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism.” In *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism,* edited by Catherine Lord, 12–21. Irvine: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993.

Gaines, Malik. “Remember the Grid.” *Untitled* no. 25 (Summer 2001): 1.

Gaines, Malik, and Alexandria Symonds, “In Practice: Charles Gaines X Malik Gaines,” *Interview Magazine,* July 31, 2014. https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/in-practice-charles-gaines-x-malik-gaines.

Golden, Thelma. “Foreword.” In Golden, ed. *Charles Gaines: Gridwork 1974–1989*. New York, NY: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2014: 6–7.

Golden, Thelma and Hamza Walker. *Freestyle.* New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001.

Gordon, Avery F. “Making Pictures of Ghosts: The Art of Gary Simmons.” *Social Identities* 5.1 (1999): 89–125.

Halperin, Julia. “‘It Is an Unusual and Radical Act’: Why the Baltimore Museum Is Selling Blue-Chip Art to Buy Work by Underrepresented Artists,” *Artnet,* April 30, 2018. https://news.artnet.com/market/baltimore-museum-deaccession-1274996.

Halperin, Julia, and Charlotte Burns. “African American Artists Are More Visible Than Ever. So Why Are Museums Giving Them Short Shrift?” *Artnet*, September 20, 2018. https://news.artnet.com/the-long-road-for-african-american-artists/african-american-research-museums-1350362.

Kazakina, Katya. “Black Art Spurs Gold Rush as Collector Stampede Drives Up Prices.” *Bloomberg*, April 18, 2018. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-18/black-art-spurs-gold-rush-as-collector-stampede-drives-up-prices.

Keith, Naima J., ed. *Charles Gaines: Gridwork 1974-1989*. New York, NY: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2014.

Kimmelman, Michael. “At the Whitney, Sound, Fury, and Little Else,” *New York Times,* April 25, 1993. https://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/25/arts/art-view-at-the-whitney-sound-fury-and-little-else.html.

Lord, Catherine, ed. *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*. Irvine: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993.

———. “(An) Other Panic: The Mainstream Learns to Bash,” In *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism,* edited by Catherine Lord, 22–26. Irvine: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993.

———. Introduction to *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism,* edited by Catherine Lord, 6–7. Irvine: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993.

———. “Roundtable.” In *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism,* edited by Catherine Lord, 56–82. Irvine: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993.

“Lorna Simpson Biography.” Lorna Simpson. November 2019. https://lsimpsonstudio.com/bio.

Moten, Fred. *Black and Blur: Consent Not to be a Single Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Saltz, Jerry. "Jerry Saltz on '93 in Art." *New York Magazine*, February 1, 2013. https://nymag.com/arts/art/features/jerry-saltz-1993-art/.

Saltz, Jerry, and Rachel Corbett. "How Identity Politics Conquered the Art World." *Vulture,* April 2016. https://www.vulture.com/2016/04/identity-politics-that-forever-changed-art.html.

Sastry, Anjuli, and Karen G. Bates. "When LA Erupted in Anger: A Look Back At The Rodney King Riots." *NPR*, April 26, 2017. https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots.

Smith, Roberta. "A Sea Change in the Art World, Made by Black Creators." *The New York Times*, November 24, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/24/arts/design/black-artists.html.

Smith, Roberta. "At the Whitney, A Biennial with a Social Conscience." *The New York Times.* March 4, 1993. https://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/05/arts/at-the-whitney-a-biennial-with-a-social-conscience.html.

Sussman, Elisabeth. "Then and Now: Whitney Biennial 1993." *Art Journal* 64:1 (2005): 74–77.

Tain, John. "'Theater of Refusal' (1993)." *Artforum,* Summer 2016. https://www.artforum.com/print/201606/the-theater-of-refusal-1993-60086.

Wortham, Jenna. "'I Want to Explore the Wonder of What It Is to Be a Black American.'" *The New York Times Magazine,* October 8, 2019: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/08/magazine/black-women-artists-conversation.html.

Figures

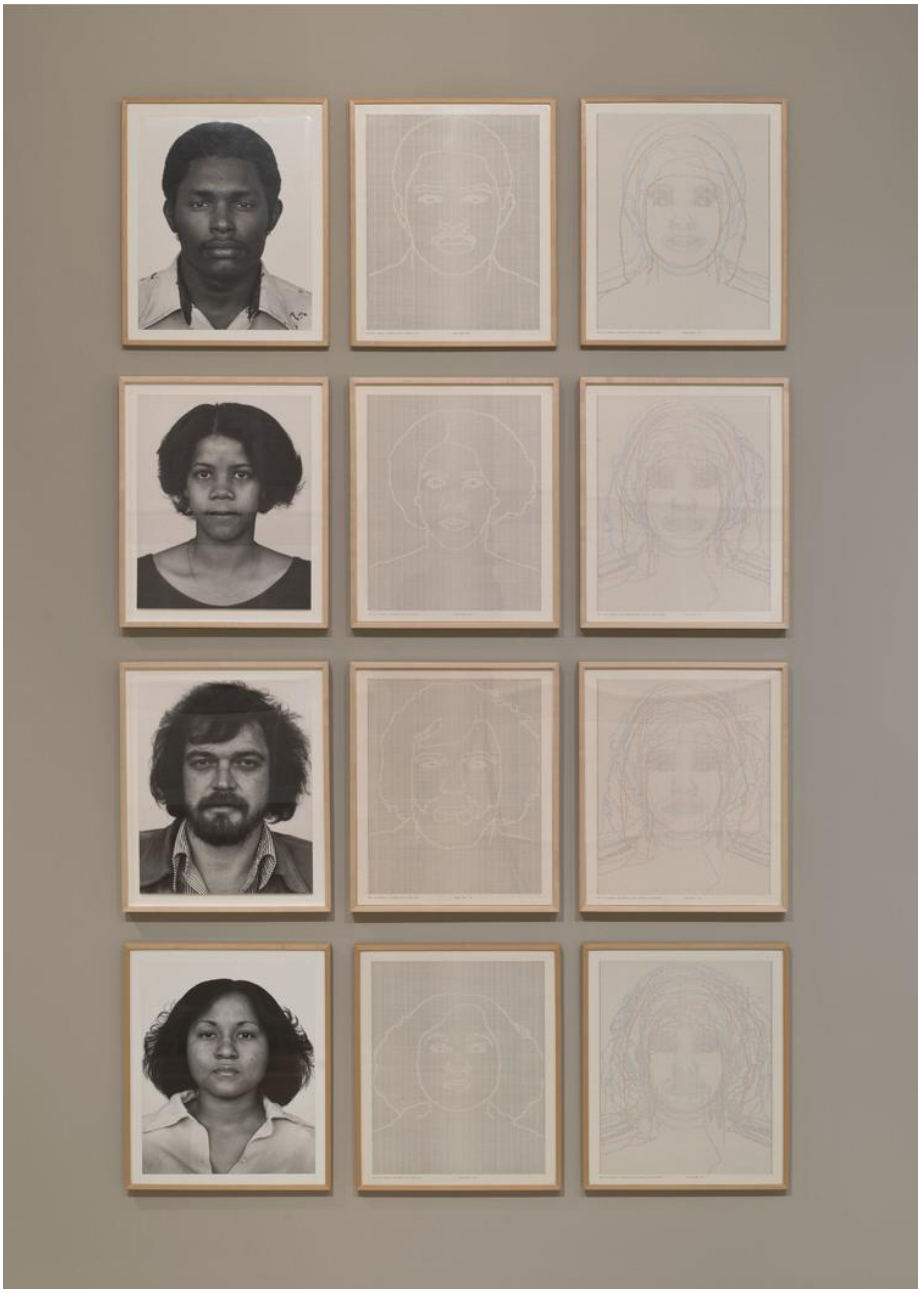


Figure 1: *Charles Gaines: Gridwork 1974–1989,* Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2014, installation views. Artworks from the series “Faces,” 1978–1979.

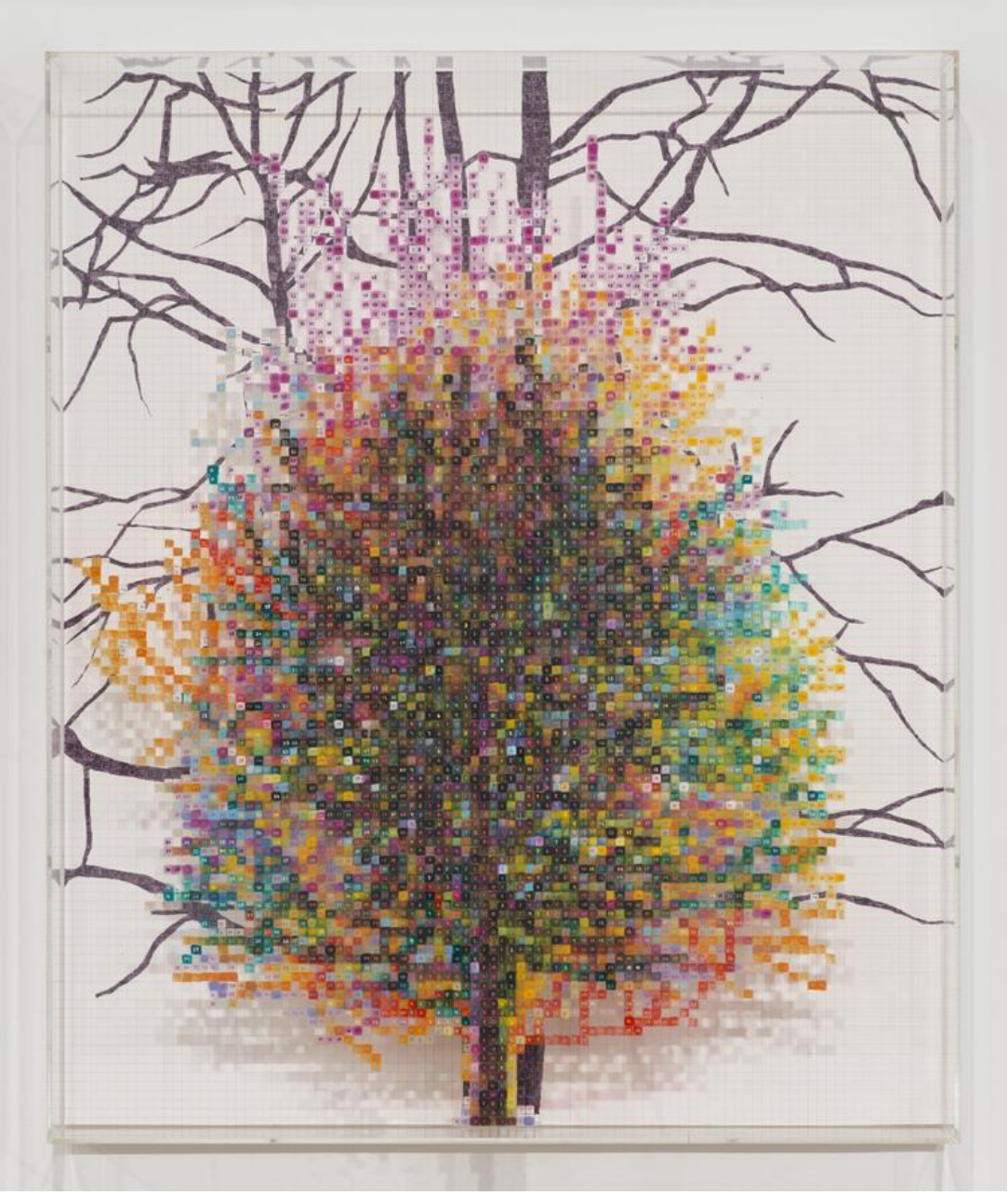


Figure 2: *Charles Gaines: Gridwork 1974–1989*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2014, installation view featuring *Numbers and Trees III, Shucks #11*, 1987.

Figure 3: *Charles Gaines: Gridwork 1974–1989,* Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2014, installation view featuring series “Numbers and Trees,” 1986–1989.

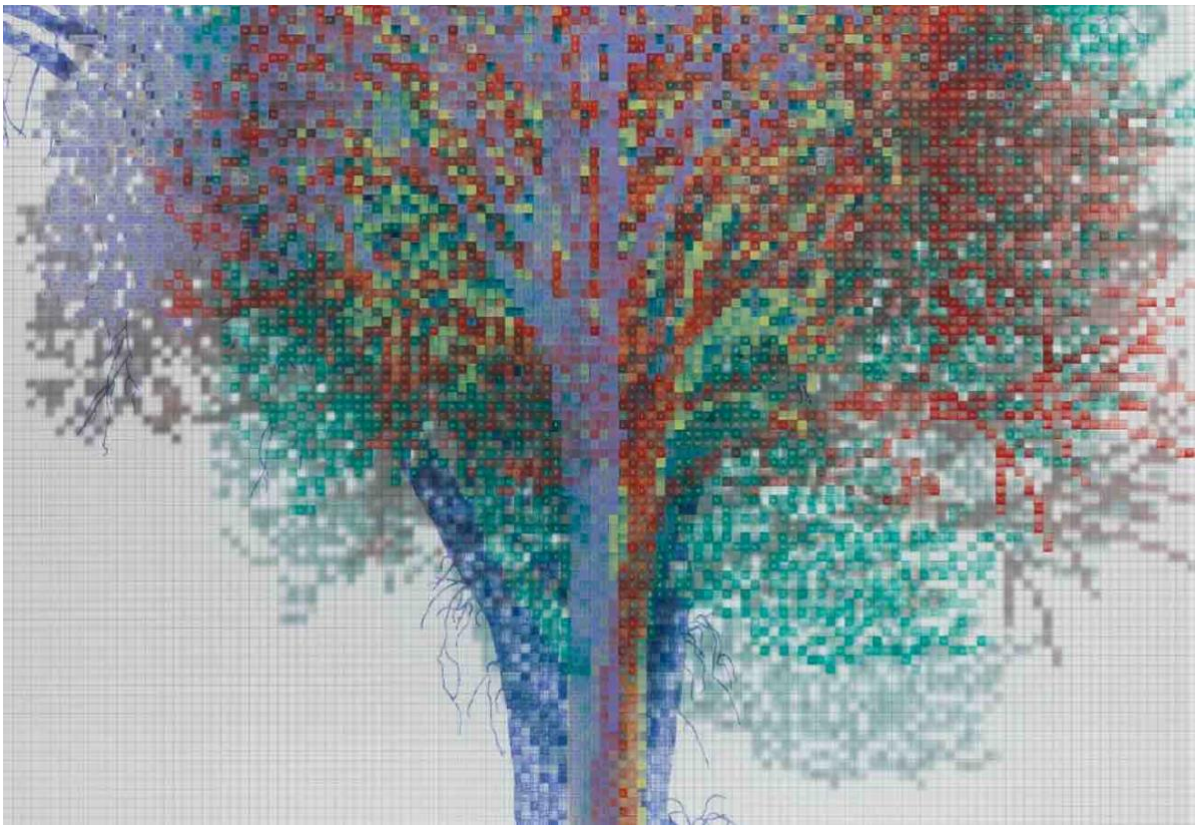


Figure 4: Charles Gaines, *Numbers and Trees Central Park Series IV: Tree #6, Carmichael,* 2019, detail.

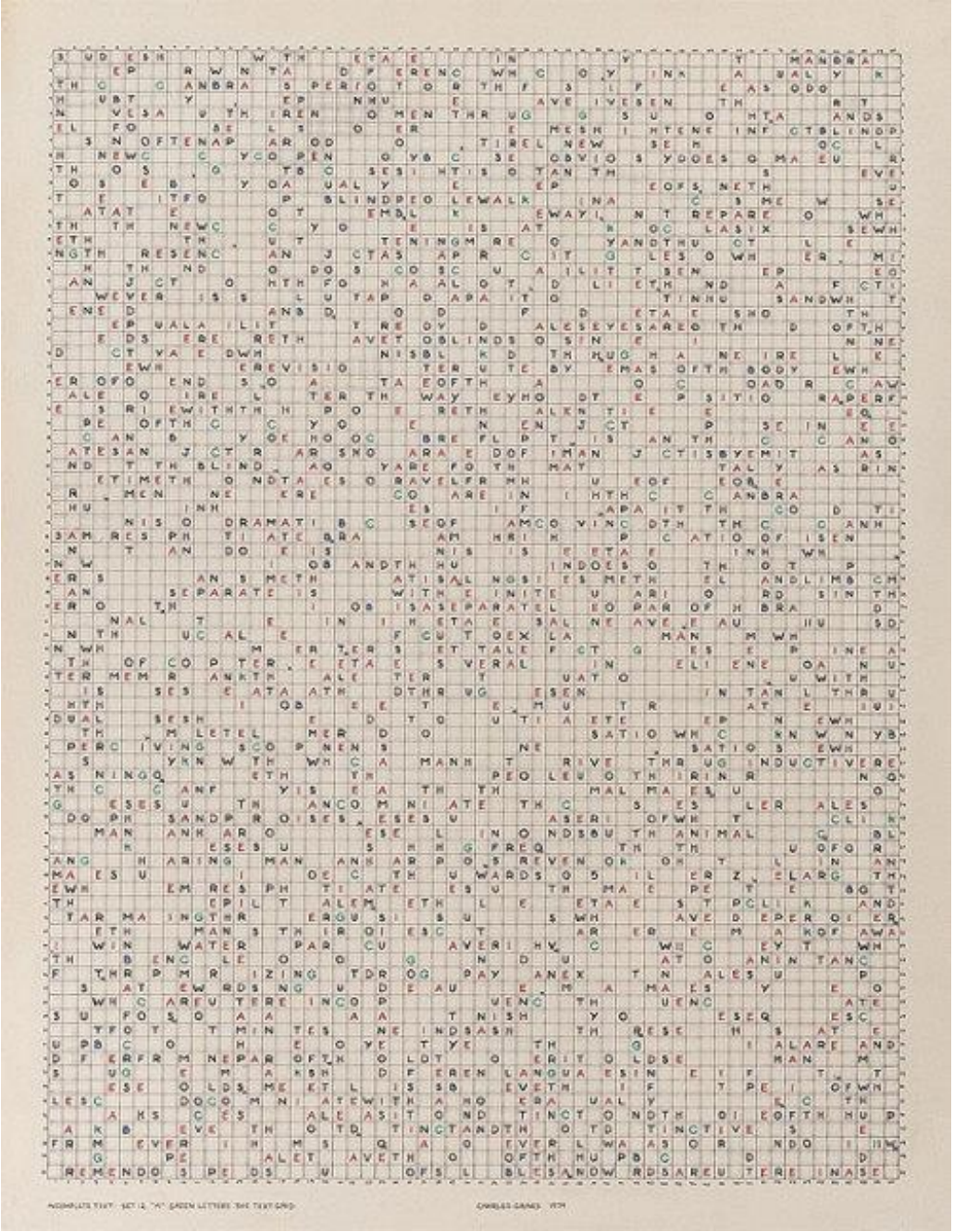


Figure 5: Charles Gaines, *Incomplete Text Series*, 1978–1979, detail.

Figure 6: *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993, installation view.

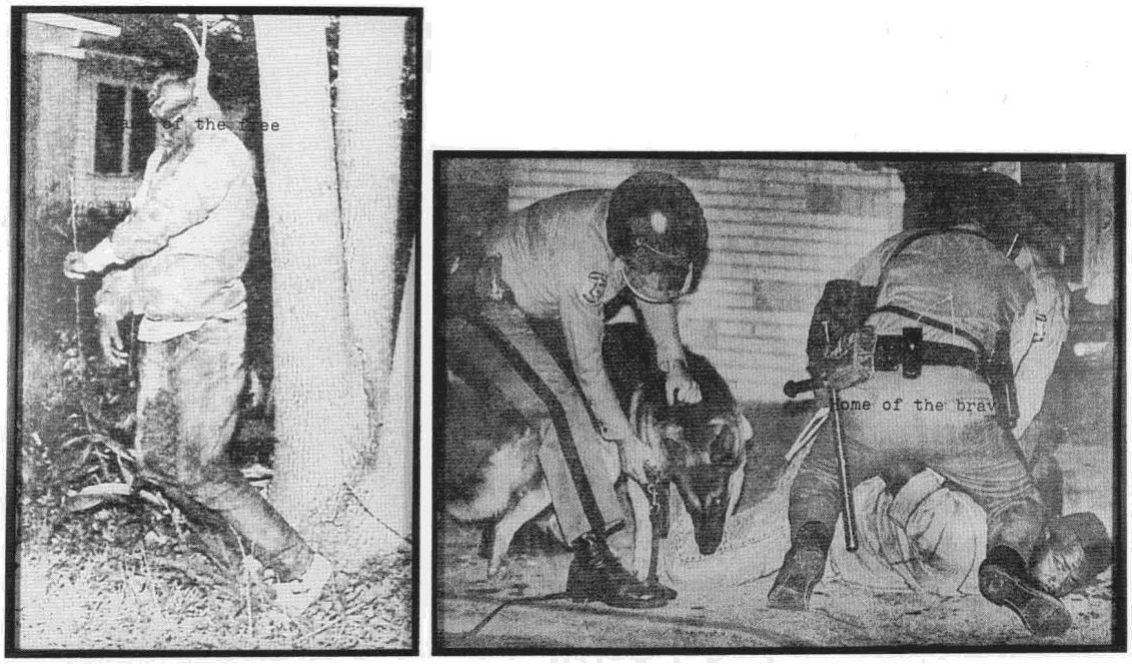


Figure 7: Adrian Piper, *Free #2*, 1989.

Figure 8: Gary Simmons, *Us/Them*, 1990.

Figure 9: Lorna Simpson, *Lower Region*, 1992.

Figure 10: Carrie Mae Weems, *Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil*, 1990.

Figure 11: David Hammons, *African American Flag*, 1989.

Figure 12: *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993, installation view.

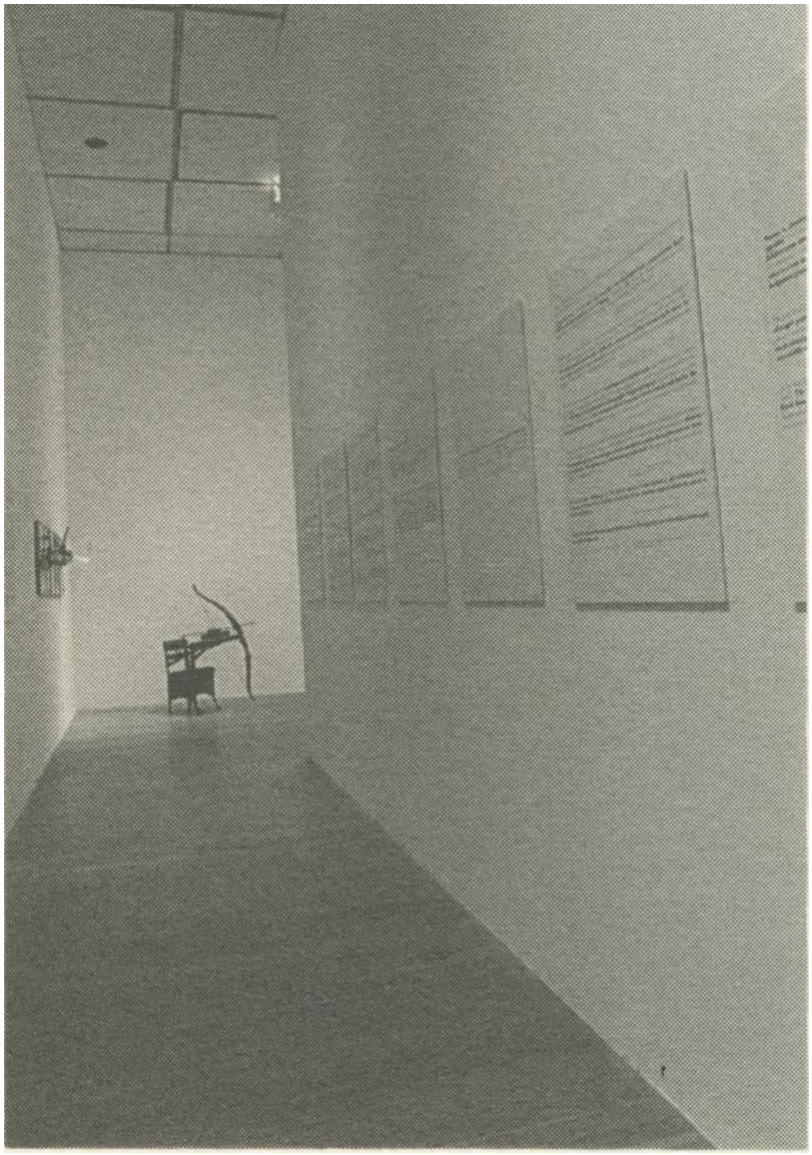


Figure 13: *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993, installation view.

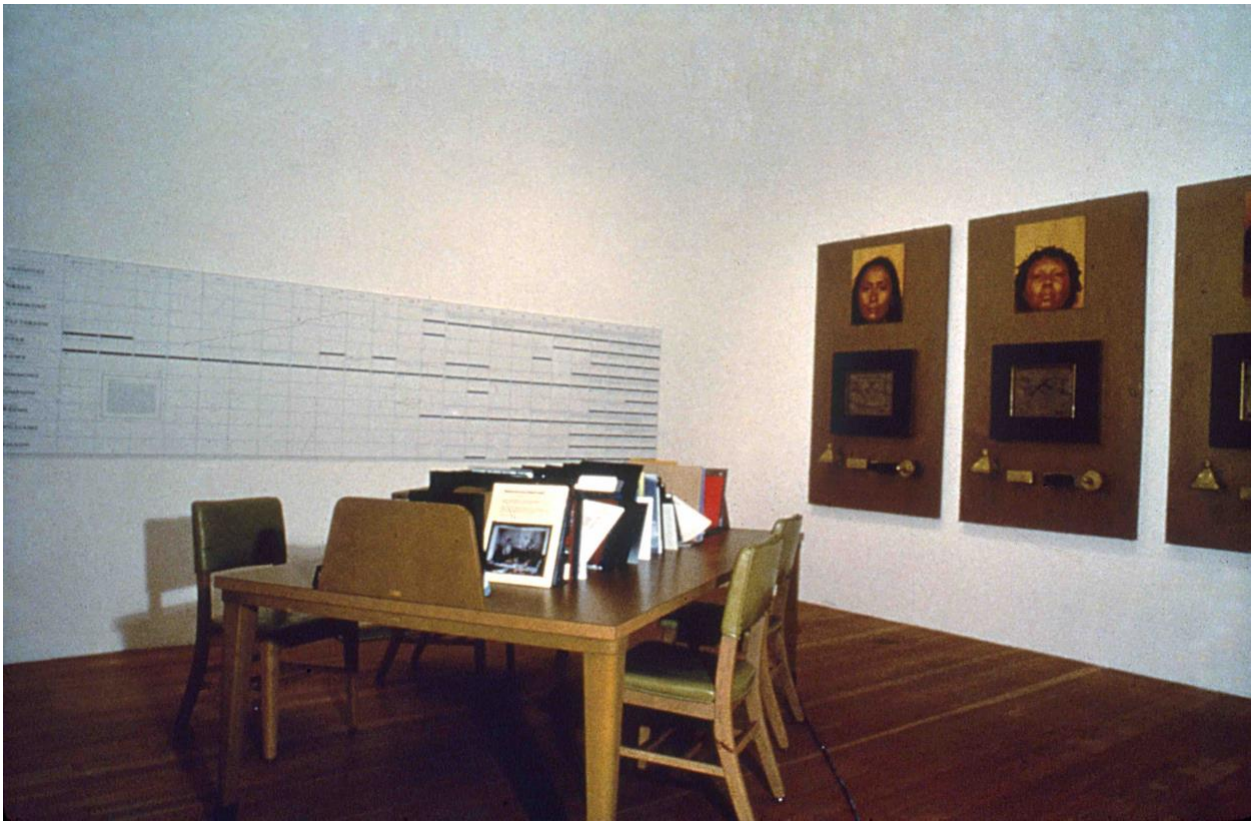


Figure 14: *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993, installation view.