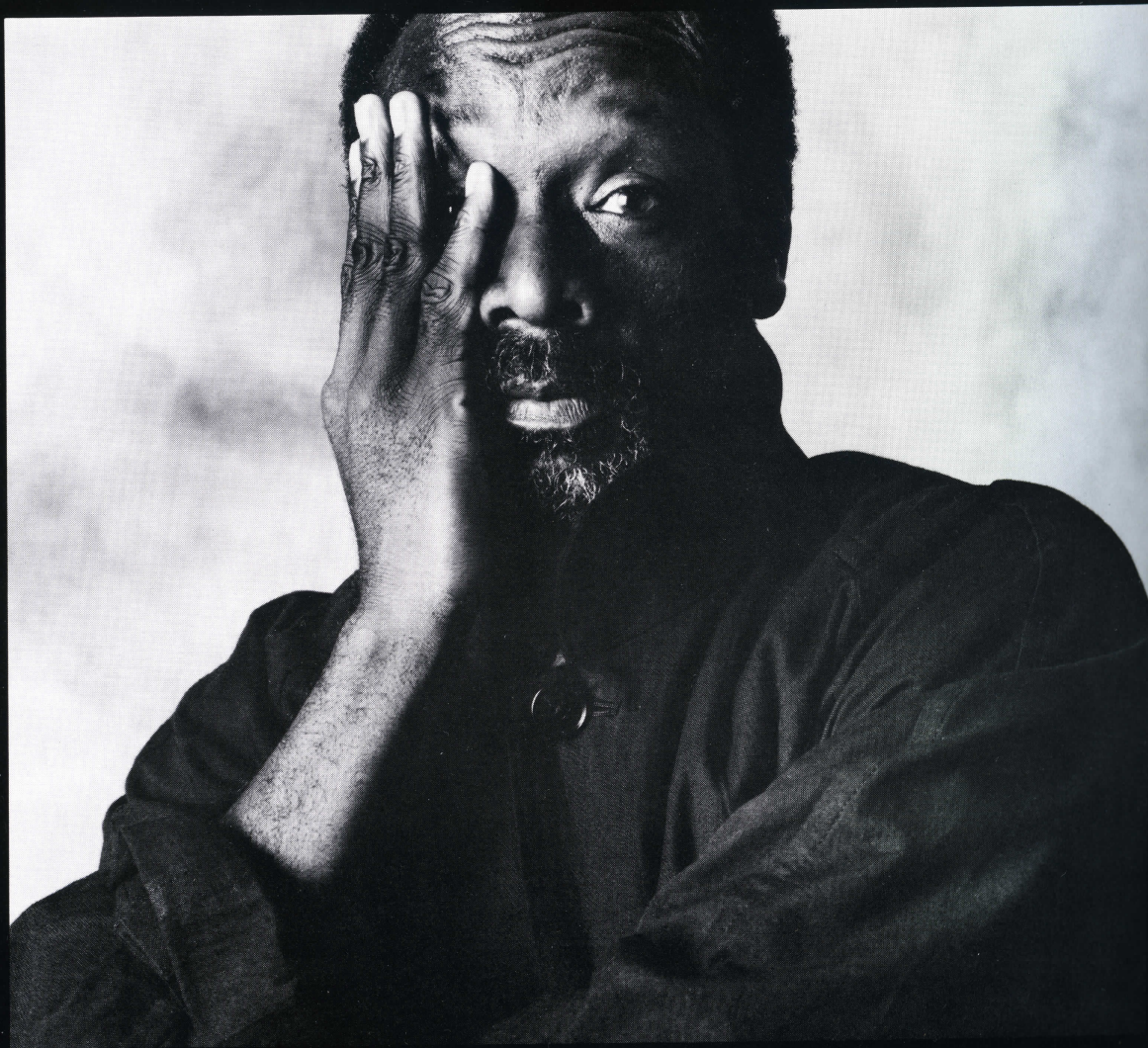


BLACK IS A COLOR

I AM COLOR BLIND



Nancy Moran

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BLACK IS A COLOR

Arts magazine published an article (May, 1967) in which it claims that poet-novelist Ishmael Reed has "documented" the "explosive black arts movement." Mr. Reed himself, if the title he chose denotes his aim, assumed the heroic role of black artist's champion, hiping it through the musty debris of hypocrisy and lies, into the clear light of newly-daring truth, where a spade can at last be called a spade.

Yet, after this one man takes it upon himself to call it a shovel, we know nothing more about the spade at the end of his tirade than we did at the outset.

What's he trying to prove? All he says has been said before, with the same pitiful and dangerous inadequacy. On the one hand, he seems to be trying to support the black artist's cause, while on the other he lumps black artists, of which he names a mere handful, into one bag and throttles them with a string of almost incoherent hippishness.

More flip than hip, his diatribe may have been meant to give the black artist a lift, but glib and shallow as it is, the net result is far more degrading to the black man and artist than any mute rejection by a museum selection board (one of Mr. Reed's bones of contention).

Using hip-talk as a kind of tribal mumbo-jumbo, he sets the black arts outside the current of art as whole, and in so doing he does the black artist a grave injustice.

Hip-talk is a language, effective when it illustrates something of human substance, but where is the substance of this subjective, emotional outburst, it all seems as futile and paradoxical as the demonstrations of those "half-way" young hippies who advance on their opponents shouting: "Love, love, love!" while pelting them with rotten eggs.

Who's supposed to be saving whom? Mr. Reed appears to propose that the black

arts should save America, as though the act of salvation were a function of some rarefied preservation hall, and the black artist a species of New Orleans entertainer, who can "make America swing again." But let's face it—when has America ever swung? And why should it be the black man's responsibility?

This is a pseudo-messianic concept that Mr. Reed is free to subscribe to, but what makes him think he qualifies as a spokesman for black artists? Is it because he's black—or because he's an artist? He doesn't seem at all sure in what measure the two are one, and the ambivalence of his approach renders his spade-calling curiously unconvincing.

Apart from a disproportionate quotation from Leroi Jones, Mr. Reed's "documentation" of black arts is famishingly sparse. Black music is harnessed to Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler and Sun Ra, latching on to examples of a certain discernible success, but what of the countless unsung but brilliant black musicians whom Mr. Reed blithely ignores? And, though he uses an interesting photograph of Sun Ra to illustrate his article, Mr. Reed gives mere caption-mention to the photographer himself, and focuses no attention whatever on the growing band of vital black photographic artists in America, of whom Charles Shabacon is just one member, albeit a highly creative one.

In approaching so vast a subject as the black arts, whose scope far outreaches the limits imposed upon him by the editorial requirements of arts magazine, it would appear that Mr. Reed bit off more than he could chew. But this is no excuse for launching into so sadly haphazard and scrappy an exposition, while still retaining an ambitious title-promise beyond his capacity to fulfill.

What is more disturbing, however, is Mr. Reed's assumption that success must be equated with material gain; that uptown and money spell success for all. Uptown is no "open-sesame" to artistic fulfillment, nor is money, as Mr. Reed appears to believe. Uptown is the art marketplace, but who says it's the art scene? What are we dealing with here, anyway—art or a popularity contest?

Material success is extremely desirable, but it's a dangerous criterion by which to measure artistic achievement. Mr. Reed seems to have fallen into the trap, adding insult to injury by dragging art through the mud of socio-political antagonism. The 'we is all'mericans bit, to which he so strongly objects, is beside the point. 'We is all artists' seems more akin to the subject.

I am the artist; examples of my work can be seen in American museums; I have been the recipient of national awards; I have just enjoyed the 'privilege' of my fourth one-man show at an uptown gallery (reviewed p.60 of Arts Magazine, May, 1967); and I also happen to be black. I fail to see any profound significance in the mere conjunction of these circumstances. Yet, if one is to take Mr. Reed's sweeping statement as criteria, it must be assumed that I am a phenomenal success. Bullshit!

What are the true criteria for success, in terms of the individual artist's aspirations? Is he committed merely to the realization of a stereotyped image of the artist "who's arrived," crowned with the laurels of popular acclaim; assured of a constantly re-plumped bankroll and entree into the inner sanctums of Madison Avenue (which seems to be Mr. Reed's contention), or is it rather that the artist is committed to respond to the unending challenge of his very nature as a creative person, and to discover the depth, width, range of his own unique vision as an artist, and hopefully, as a human being?

I'm not here to play to the gallery. I am not responsible for anyone's entertainment. I am responsible for being as fully myself, as man and artist, as I possibly can be, while allowing myself to hope that in the effort some light, some love, some beauty may be shed upon the world, and perhaps some inequities put right.

Every creative person is subject to periods of profound discouragement when denied recognition of the vision he embodies in his work. The denial seems to constitute a rejection not only of his work but of all he is striving to be. In his angry rebellion,

he may well lash out at the first apparent obstacle—which can easily take the form of some highly publicized social or political defect in his environment. It's a plausible explanation for some deadlock in his progress. It can be a very real one too, in which case his anger is perfectly valid. But when anger, a human reaction, gets siphoned off into serving merely as a political expedient, it is robbed of genuine humanity, and is useless as inspiration to the artist as a man.

Some angry artists are using their arts as political tools, instead of vehicles of free expression. Using his art and his anger in such a way, the artist makes himself a mere peddler, when he might be a prophet.

Every artist, regardless of his skin color, may suffer from the vagaries of museum selection boards. Confusing this age-old problem with questions of race is just casting about for a scapegoat, when the real culprit—the dragging, grinding mechanism of American social and cultural awareness gets clean away. Unchallenged, all Americans are culturally deprived, not just black Americans.

The prevailing system repeats its sterile terms of reference for success (to which Mr. Reed himself, oddly enough, seems to subscribe). The image that fits into those terms may not easily be stretched to include the black artist, particularly if he claims his blackness as the reason for his achievement. But the basic question is, does the black artist, or any other artist for that matter, want to mold himself to this prescribed, but worn and shabby image in any case?

The image itself is the result of distortions in human society, stemming from deprivation, but this is the plight of every man. The underdog, the law man on the totem pole in this society, will continue to suffer because of the blindness and selfishness of society's leaders. This is nothing new, and what has this got to do with art itself, or the real quality of the artist?

Art projects beyond race and color; beyond America. It is universal, and

Americans—black, white or whatever—have no exclusive rights on it.

When are Americans going to wake up to the fact that America is not the world, nor the cultural center of it. There's a big, big world out there, where people of all colors are living; yearning, competing, suffering, reaching out (and some succeeding) with every turn of the earth.

No one can honestly deny the existence of discrimination and oppression against black people (and black artist, by extension) in America, but the black man is not the only human being ever to have suffered these ills. Counter-racism, hyper-awareness of difference or separateness arising within the black artist himself, is just as destructive to his work—and his life—as the threat of white prejudice coming at him from outside.

Pessimism is fatal to artistic development. Perpetual anger deprives it of movement. An artist who is always harping upon resistance, discrimination, opposition, besides being a drag, eventually plays right into the hands of the politicians he claims to despise—and is held there, unwittingly (and witlessly) reviving slavery in another form. For the artist this is aesthetic atrophy.

Certainly the American black artist is in a unique position to express certain aspects of the current American scene, both negative and positive, but if he restricts himself to these alone, he may risk becoming a mere cypher, a walking protest, a politically prescribed stereotype, negating his own mystery, and allowing himself to be shuffled off into an arid overall mystique. The indiscriminate association of race with art, on any level—social or imaginative—is destructive.

Isolationism: Us-against-the-world, is stultifying. It undermines the very emancipation the black man so deeply desires, and to which he is entitled. Us-coming-out-into and becoming-a-part-of a wider reality—becoming what we really are—is what will truly free us.

In America, black is bound to black not so much by color or racial characteristics, as by shared experience, social and cultural. This is the same in any rarefied social (or racial) enclave, but "no man is an island, entire of itself." The artist deals with the human condition. He is "involved in mankind." This is as valid for the black artist as any other. He uses his heart, his eyes, his mind as interpreters of his own deep vision of himself, and the world as it is reflected in those depths.

If he wants to get out there; if he really wants to know, there is nothing that can stop him. A hell of a lot depends upon his curiosity and his own determination. The artist can only realize himself through active effort to be what he really is.

Both as artist and as human being he can learn to channel his energy, rather than expend it in futile protest. He has to learn the lie of the land around him, and where he can cut through. He has to send his mind, his emotions, his eyes ranging across the whole field of vision open to him, probing its boundaries to find where he can push them further and further out.

The creative imagination is his channel, but it has to be dug (painfully slowly sometimes, as it has been throughout history) through the resisting barriers of established convention; then it can bring its new, irrigating force to the parched and thirsting desert of cultural and spiritual backwardness.

But the artist doesn't exist for the sole purpose of changing the world. Each artist has to do for himself what is necessary for his own development, fulfilling himself as an individual, not as one of a herd. He has to enter into the total experience of himself and his vision, which transcends the cramped boundaries of any stereotype—angry or otherwise. It is a risk, but life is full of risks, if you're going to live at all. Living is being hurt, happy, sad.

Humility is frowned upon these days, yet the very immensity, complexity and universality of art should be a reminder to the artist that he cannot be the be-all-and-

end-all. The pressures and oppressions the black man has so triumphantly endured could be translated into positive strength that will persist in the teeth of rejection, refusing to be eliminated. This goes for the black artist too.

In order to be recognized and accepted, does the black artist have to depend upon the uptown critic or the politico-sociologist to define the meaning of his own experience? It is high time that the black artist make his own rejection of misguided, inadequate—if not out-and-out dishonest—interpreters of his condition. From the depths of his own integrity he has to believe in his capacity to distinguish the real from the false—and to recognize manipulators when they try to use him.

Racial hand-ups are extraneous to art. No artist can afford to let them obscure what runs through all art—the living root and the ever-growing aesthetic record of human spiritual and intellectual experience. Can't we get clear of these degrading limitations, and recognize the wider reality of art, where color is the means and not the end?

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I AM COLOR BLIND

It all started last year, when a young Long Beach attorney walked into my office asking about our plans for the month of February—Black History Month. I replied that I did not want my children to love me only on Mother's Day, and that my African-American artist friends were usually swamped with requests for their work during February, and were increasingly irritated by this seasonal wooing. I also told him that the exhibitions I organize have routinely included artists from assorted ethnic groups—as long as the work was appropriate to the particular presentation.

For more than two decades now we've witnessed a profusion of exhibitions aimed at integrating minority artists into the mainstream, ironically, by segregating them according to gender or ethnic origin. It started with the best of intentions. In the seventies we were earnestly trying to demonstrate that women could produce art worth exhibiting, rather than just keep house and raise kids; that African-Americans and Hispanics could be fine artists, not only tap dance or harvest crops. And so we gathered their art into bouquets meant as offerings to atone for previous sins of omission. Often the works in these shows had little in common other than the ethnic origins or gender of their makers. Quality became a secondary consideration, since the main thrust was to make a socially correct statement. The fortress of the art establishment was being besieged, and rightly so, by those who felt excluded.

Yet there have always been extraordinary men and women of talent and tenacious dedication whose excellent works, imbued with integrity and power, attained visibility in spite of less than enlightened prevailing attitudes.

Georgia O'Keeffe, Romare Bearden and Isamu Noguchi were bright stars in the firmament of their generations, despite a lack of broad-based acceptance for their

vanguard ideas. During their early years, they shared neglect and misunderstanding—the lot of all contemporary artists—and I doubt very much that they felt a special dose of prejudice accorded them because of their gender or ethnic origin.

Let us, for the moment, accept the premise that each and every artist's work is informed by his or her personal history. Further, let us assume that their ideas are formed within the context of a particular culture, and that their aesthetic language is subject to a certain set of conventions. These can be traditional, tribal or arbitrarily defined by the taste makers of the art establishment; they are then adhered to by individual consent. Let us examine the ingredients which determine the aesthetic language of any artist.

If the three main forces which come to bear on the formulation of an expressive/aesthetic language are (1) personal history, (2) the cultural context and (3) the prevailing critical standards adhered to by individual consent, we then realize that what we face is an infinite variation of possible combinations resulting from an infinite number of givens, particularly in the area of personal experience, and secondarily in the area of cultural context.

Women artists who may share cultural context and similar attitudes vis a vis prevailing critical standards will end up with a great variety of attitudes and perceptions due to diverse personal histories.

The same applies to all other "groups" of artists sharing common gender or ethnic affiliation. And if any of these groups have banded together to protest (in true democratic tradition) discriminatory practices by the art establishment, then such banding together should clearly be defined as a politically motivated move, to gain entry into the hallowed halls of the "in group." This then creates a situation where the fortress of an elitist group sharing certain aesthetic agreements is exposed to the battering ram of politically aligned outsider groups whose common denominator is not neces-

sarily a commonly held aesthetic point of view. So, on one hand, it stands to reason that forced entry does not allow for selective admission. On the other hand, Art is—whether we like to admit it or not—a highly selective engagement where thousands reach for the brass ring and few have what it takes to catch it. What then surfaces is this conflict between the selectivity needed to maintain standards of excellence and the essential injustice that all are not equally endowed. Where therefore does democracy come into the equation?

I think that the only democracy which must prevail is a democracy of access, the right of everyone to be considered, no matter what the artists' gender or ethnic origin happens to be. And the need to question the credentials of those who determine who gets in and who is excluded, based on whose set of standards is employed to make judgments. While aesthetic excellence remains of paramount importance, the question of decision-making powers must, I believe, remain flexible and open to alternative ways of making aesthetic determinations. Henry Hopkins, former director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, once stated that having grown up in the Midwest, his knowledge of contemporary art was based on decisions made at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. That goes for most of us art professionals. For too long has aesthetic merit been determined only by critics and curators.

That is why I asked my friend Raymond Saunders to be guest curator for this exhibition. I did so because I wanted him to choose the artists—I wanted him to determine the nature of this exhibition in response to the young attorney's request. Briefly, the idea of an exhibition limited to works by African-American artists was raised. The idea went up in smoke. "Can't we be about change?" he said. "Need we start all over again with what's been done before? Let's move on! Surely we can reach beyond the notion that access to visibility should be based on gender or color. Why politicize the selection process? Why punish others by exclusion? What does that have to do with

art anyway? I just want to choose some people whose works I like and that's all!" I asked my friend Raymond Saunders to be guest curator for this exhibition because I respect and admire his work enormously; his credentials as an artist and a teacher are impeccable and his selections are not unlike his art, fresh, surprising, irreverent and unprejudiced.

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