



# PANORAMA

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**Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties**

Teresa A. Carbone and Kellie Jones, with Connie H. Choi, Dalila Scruggs, and Cynthia A. Young

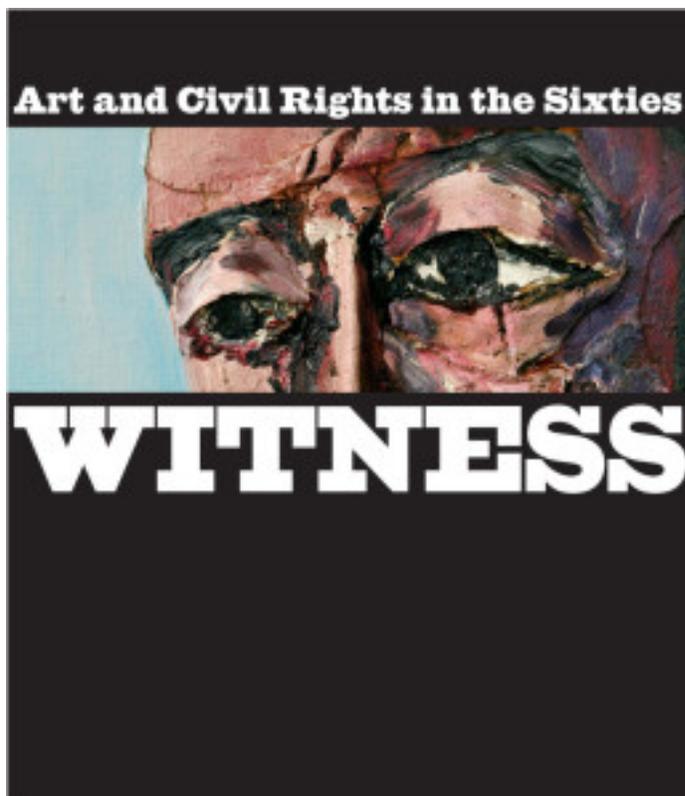
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This past July marked the half-centennial anniversary of Freedom Summer and the passage of The Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Act – amended a decade after *Brown v. Board of Education* – banned discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, and demanded that all peoples have equal access to voter registration, employment, and public facilities. Many folks observed the anniversary by organizing programs, giving speeches, and writing op-eds that celebrated Lyndon B. Johnson’s signature

legislation and the equality it supposedly mandated. Critical commentators soberly noted the renewed Republican assault on voting rights, and pointed out that segregation remains a defining feature of the criminal justice system, schools, and workplaces across the nation.

An exhibition at The Brooklyn Museum entitled *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* takes a markedly different approach to the anniversary. Co-curated by Teresa A. Carbone, Andrew W. Mellon Curator of American Art at the Brooklyn Museum, and Kellie Jones, Associate Professor of Art and Archaeology at Columbia University, the show focuses on the intersection of art and activism to deliver a complex portrait of the Civil Rights Movement as a movement of millions rather than the work of a few highly visible leaders. By bringing together works in a diverse range of media, styles, and genres, *Witness* fashions a polyvalent narrative that problematizes the historicist circumscription of the Civil Rights Movement to an easily delimited period. Rather than glorify big names winning big gains on the progressive political front of a racial equality we can call our own, the show reveals a critical focus on the Movement as many interconnected movements informed by an insurgent aesthetic vision whose urgent call for justice must still be met. *Witness* narrates the Civil Rights Movement from the perspective of the artists and image-makers who were called to participate in it, and reveals a stunningly capacious aesthetic battleground whose relationship to 1960s freedom struggles has been persistently downplayed by art historians.

At the Brooklyn Museum, viewers were greeted by two paintings upon entering the exhibition space: May Stevens's *Honor Roll* (1963) and Benny Andrews's *Witness* (1968). Both paintings speak to the grassroots core of the Movement. Stevens' subjects are the student activists who put their bodies on the line to integrate education; *Honor Roll* displays their rough-hewn names as if the students had themselves scrawled them upon a collective scroll before dipping off into the uncertain morass of southern life and an incomparable education in their country's political chicanery. Andrews's *Witness*, meanwhile, affirms the stolid grace of the sharecroppers of the Black Belt – in this case, southwest Georgia – who lived under the oppressive thumbs of debt, hunger, and state-supported violence and who greeted the formidable call of freedom with knowing resolve and an open spirit. This focus on a multitudinous grassroots continued throughout the exhibit, with artworks arranged thematically rather than chronologically under the banners “Black Is Beautiful,” “Politicizing Pop,” “Presenting Evidence,” “Integrate/Educate,” “American Nightmare,” “Sisterhood,” “Global Liberation,” and “Beloved Community.” This curatorial decision allowed pieces as stylistically diverse as Yoko Ono's *Voice Piece for Soprano* (1961) and Edward Kienholz's *It Takes Two to Integrate (Cha Cha Cha)* (1961) to occupy the same space in a dissonant resonance that recasts many major international artworks of the mid-century within a civil rights framework.

The curators' decision to emphasize the grassroots core of 1960s freedom struggles while elucidating the revolutionary currents within that period's visual culture takes center stage in the exhibition catalogue. *Witness* is comprised of essays written by the exhibition's curators, along with pieces by Connie H. Choi and Cynthia A. Young and a thorough chronology of the Civil Rights Movement composed by Dalila Scruggs. The essays, entitled “CIVIL/RIGHTS/ACT,” “Documentary Activism: Photography and the Civil Rights Movement,” “Exhibit A: Evidence and the Art Object,” and “Civil Rights and the Rise of a New Cultural Imagination” give critical heft to the exhibition's focus on the artist as activist. They also provide a revisionary portrait of aesthetic modernism from an Afrocentric perspective that defies the modernist adage that artists in the mid twentieth century

were primarily concerned with medium specificity and material expression (44). Andrews's *Witness* names the show and adorns the cover of the exhibition catalogue to remind us of the central importance that bearing witness had in shaping the political events of the 1960s – of the principal influence of representation on black peoples' material and spiritual well-being, and of the massive role that visual culture played in the buildup of Civil Rights struggles.

In the volume's keynote essay, "CIVIL/RIGHTS/ACT," Jones uses the concept of "total well-being" – as cited in the constitution of the World Health Organization and adopted by the Black Panther Party as a right to which African Americans had been historically barred – as the defining intersection between art and civil rights. Highlighting art's capacity to generate collective action, her essay begins with a discussion of the ways that artists like Noah Purifoy and Lygia Clark engaged members of their communities in the quest for creative agency. Their makeshift exhibition settings, Jones points out, were spaces in which civic engagement could be radically redefined. Jones borrows Leigh Raiford's phrase "insurgent visibility" to describe the ways that artists and documentary photographers made visible black social and political power and identity apart from the hegemonic terms laid out by white supremacist visual culture (43). Virginia Jaramillo, Leon Polk Smith, and Charles Alston, for example, pushed abstraction to fresh political heights by working in a black and white palette that signaled the hard-edged battle to end segregation. Representational works, such as Elizabeth Catlett's *Home to My Young Black Sisters* (1968), Charles W. White's *Birmingham Totem* (1964), and Ben Shahn's *Human Relations Portfolio: Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner* (1965) directly reference pivotal moments and figures from the period. Other artists, like Barkley L. Hendricks and Emma Amos, operationalize the conceits of color field and pop art to confront the power and beauty of self-representation alongside the aching scrape of integration. Jae Jarrell's *Urban Wall Suit* (c. 1969) combines painting, graffiti, and mural aesthetics into a textile wonder. Other artists like Emory Douglas, Robert Indiana, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Rupert Garcia are highlighted for their work in poster graphics and printmaking. Jones also notes the radically performative futurity inherent in geometric abstraction paintings by William T. Williams and Joe Overstreet, as well as in Tom Lloyd's electronic light sculpture, *Narakon* (1965). Overall, these artists' holistic concern with the health of the community situates the aesthetic mandate of the Civil Rights Movement within the Africanist representational politics of the New Negro movement, with Romare Bearden's collages as the most striking example. As Jones writes: "Activities in art and elsewhere insisted on the multiple viewpoint, and a world where life, art, aesthetics, and culture were not contained by the singularity of a Western modernist point of view" (44).

The other essays delve more deeply into the ways that documentary photography, color field, and collage were adopted as aesthetic strategies for combatting the abstract violence so often committed in popular visual depictions of African Americans and Civil Rights activists. White corporate media publications such as *Look*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* craved sensational images of violence and poverty. In "Documentary Activism: Photography and the Civil Rights Movement," Choi invokes Martin Berger's argument that these sensational images framed African Americans as passive victims and allowed whites to distance themselves from their complicity in structural forms of privilege and violence. Her essay focuses on the ways that documentary photographers dedicated themselves to the movement, working for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to bear witness to the tedium, sweat, and violence that activists faced as they registered voters, occupied lunch counters, and marched in

defiance of white supremacist law in the South. In addition to capturing the violence that activists faced (SNCC's Photo Agency was tasked with keeping an eye on police), documentary photographers sought to control the image of the movement as grassroots and youth-led. In its inclusion of lesser-seen Civil Rights photographs such as Charles Moore's *Voter registration, 1963-64* and Roy DeCarava's muted, close-up portraits of activists, *Witness* shows movement participants as individuals rather than as "symbolic components of a nameless multitude" (62). Choi offers a deft portrait of the Civil Rights photographer as activist and historian, writing: "In turning their lenses to the crowd to document the whole of the movement, photographers reinforced their own sense of belonging to that company of supporters" (58).

In "Exhibit A: Evidence and the Art Object," Carbone examines how artists worked with the idea of visual evidence quite differently than did the documentary photographers who struggled alongside them. Reared in the age of abstraction and trained to look down on social realist art and photography of the 1930s, young artists in the 1960s were challenged to "testify to the facts" of racial and economic injustice differently – as producers rather than mere recorders of reality (81). After forming in the late summer of 1963 at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the art collective Spiral turned to abstraction in order to interrogate the relationship between race and the visual in their show "Black & White." In addition to employing black paint in abstract compositions that highlighted blackness's symbolic resonance, Spiral members like Romare Bearden and Merton D. Simpson turned to collage as a way to mobilize imagery from the popular press within a polyvalent aesthetic field that problematized the reductive portrayal of blacks in the white media. Carbone celebrates Bearden's collages for their ability to manipulate "photography's raw facts into a truer form of evidence" by overlaying appropriated photographic images of blacks on top of each other to compose saturated, animated, and contradictory scenes (84). Betye Saar also took up the language of collage in assemblage works that infect the visual language of photographic proof with the ambiguous power of illustration, painting, found imagery, and sculpture. Works like Saar's *Is Jim Crow Really Dead?* (1972) combine photography with coins and other objects into a coffin-like altar to address the artist's personal experience of being excluded from white galleries. Other assemblage works testify non-representationally to the turbulence of the time through a tactile immediacy; Robert Rauschenberg's *Coexistence* (1961) combines the damaged remnants of a police barricade with wire and oil paint, while Noah Purifoy's *Watt's Riot* (1966) and John T. Riddle Jr.'s *Untitled (Fist)* (1965) fashion the traumatic refuse left behind in the wake of the Watts Rebellion into loving testimonies to black power.

In "Civil Rights and the Rise of a New Cultural Imagination," Young highlights the influence of African American women's activism in the South and anti-imperialist movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America on the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. In addition to discussing the role of the Women's Political Caucus in spearheading the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, Young underscores the extent to which Civil Rights heavyweights like Dr. King, Maya Angelou, Nina Simone, Richard Wright, and LeRoy Jones were shaped by Third World Decolonization movements, particularly in Ghana, Cuba, and China. Cuban film and literary collectives, writes Young, sparked "a Pan-American revolution in the Arts, one that shifted the cultural center of gravity for 1960s radicals from the United States to Cuba" (113). Young's transnational narrative of the Civil Rights Movement is accompanied by illustrations of art works like LeRoy Clarke's *Now* (1970), Jae Jarrell's *Ebony Family* (c. 1968), and Barbara Jones-Hogu's *Nation Time* (1970), which were influenced by the

radical graphics and mural art of Latin America, as well as by an Afrocentric celebration of black beauty and nationhood.

Throughout the exhibition catalogue, the authors highlight the participatory practices, alternative spaces, and democratic display methods – posters, murals, sidewalk exhibitions, and fashion shows – that artists employed to protest major museums' exclusionary practices (43). Scrogg's Civil Rights chronology, though beginning in familiar territory with the Supreme Court ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*, fashions a clever critique of an art world that was riven in the 1960s by racism. Her unconventional genealogy focuses on the intersection of the arts and struggles for civil rights in the U.S. with the Vietnam War, the escalating violence of apartheid South Africa, the Cold War, the Stonewall Rebellion, and the escalation of the American Indian Movement. Scrogg's chronology is particularly important in that it is the only piece in the catalogue that demonstrates the impact of Civil Rights organizing on feminist consciousness in its inclusion of major dates in the second wave of the U.S. Women's Liberation Movement: the foundation of the National Organization for Women in 1966, and an action by New York Radical Women against the Miss America contest in Atlantic City in 1968.

As an exhibit, *Witness* enacts a reverent space for an aesthetic contemplation of the historicity, complexity, and continuity of civil rights struggles. The exhibit's accompanying catalogue highlights the inextricable relationship between art and politics by providing a complex portrait of artists' aesthetic strategies for combatting racial and economic injustice throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century. *Witness* expands our definitions of the Civil Rights Movement, Modernism, and Black Arts by centering the visual as a key battleground for liberation and by highlighting an Afrocentric and internationalist modernism that is too often ignored by art historians.

Exhibition schedule: Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, March 7-July 6, 2014; Hood Museum at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H., Fall 2014; Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin, Spring 2015.