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Self-Criticality

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This spring, law enforcement’s ongoing anti-Black violence ignited the international reckoning with systemic racism that motivates this Colloquium: since March, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, then Rayshard Brooks, Jacob Blake, and Daniel Prude, and now Walter Wallace Jr. have joined the toll of Black people murdered or grievously injured by police who seldom face appropriate, if any, criminal penalties. As those conversations have expanded well beyond justice reform, we have been called, individually and collectively, to recognize and redress deficits that limit our ability to see ourselves and each other fully—deficits that likewise condition and constrain our work in the academy and the museum. How might assumptions embedded in our research, writing, and the shape of our field perpetuate, however inadvertently, biases and stereotypes we mean to dismantle?

We conceived this Colloquium to manifest diverse models of the productive, sometimes uncomfortable self-examination in and well beyond art history for which our moment calls—an ambition not too far from the one that moved Lucy Lippard, Robert Storr, and John Yau, among others, to “reflect on their own mistakes, whatever they might be” in a recent edition of *Hyperallergic*.¹ Nizan Shaked follows their lead by examining her experience of call-out culture, and Eddie Chambers draws on his experience in the academy to call out an underacknowledged dimension of white privilege in faculty representation. Rafael Cardoso and Susette Min turn their attention to restrictive constructions of their respective research fields, Latin American art and Asian American art, vis-à-vis larger art-historical frames. Annie Ronan narrows her gaze to interpret a single painting, Henry Ossawa Tanner’s *Pomp at the Zoo* (1880), while Ann Reynolds broadens hers to consider the temporal limitations conditioning art-historical practice and thus the retrospective critique this Colloquium promotes.

We have been inspired in this effort by a pair of prizewinning articles from 2017 that offer fresh perspectives on historical instances of Black agency. Jennifer Van Horn’s “The Dark Iconoclast’: African Americans’ Artistic Resistance in the Civil War South,” published in *The Art Bulletin*, won the National Portrait Gallery Director’s Prize in 2019.² Peter Betjemann’s “The Ends of Time: Abolition, Apocalypse, and Narrativity in Robert S. Duncanson’s Literary Paintings,” published in *American Art*, won the Patricia and Phillip Frost Essay Prize in 2017.³ Each attends to the construction and expression of Black subjectivity, and their awards, which elevate them as exemplars, qualify them as ideal candidates for this exercise in collective introspection. What can they teach us about writing a more expansive

art history? And, given the increasing impact of articles like these, how can we accord them the kind of thoughtful, public critique, now reserved for books, that is the ultimate goal of scholarly publication?

Both authors, who like us are white, redefine Black resistance in the mid-nineteenth century in ways that include those rarely associated with such behavior. Van Horn trains her art historian’s eye on a subject traditionally claimed by anthropologists: the visual and material culture of bondpeople, who have historically been stereotyped as indifferent or insensitive to aesthetic experience. Betjemann brings a literary studies perspective to ongoing debates regarding the possibility of “veiled” racial themes in the work of Robert S. Duncanson (1821–1872), a Black artist who wrote that “my heart has always been with the down-trodden race . . . [yet] I have no color on the brain[;] all I have on the brain is paint.”⁴

To make their cases, each author applies a concept of Black resistance indebted to twentieth- and twenty-first-century theory and practice. For Van Horn, it entails an imaginative engagement with what she classifies as an ideologically motivated “iconoclasm” in which enslaved and newly free individuals—about whom little is known—destroyed, defaced, or repurposed artworks owned by white elites (i.e., enslavers, until bondage became illegal). For Betjemann, the concept of Black resistance entails his sense of Duncanson as a de facto activist, namely, a “literary radical ever engaged in revising the narratives supplied by white authors” to introduce “the incendiary subjects of black slavery—and a vision of its coming demise—into decorous [landscape] paintings.”⁵

As white critic George Scialabba recently summarized, “in the last generation, historians have imposed on themselves an obligation, partly methodological and partly moral, to acknowledge the agency of the subaltern.”⁶ That work is easier said than done thanks to the inertia of conventional wisdom and the often hidden or limited evidence to bolster new interpretations. Van Horn and Betjemann have been justly commended for seeing their subjects in a new light and their commitment to help us do likewise. Yet that light can illuminate some aspects of an issue so brightly that others recede into shadow.

The tenebrism plays out here in a couple ways. In sympathy with the ongoing, multidisciplinary effort “to find a form to bear this story which can’t be told, which must be told,” to borrow poet M. NourbeSe Philip’s phrase, the articles each take lacunae in the archive as an opening to subsume under the heading “resistance” actions whose motivations are opaque to us now and may not have been congruent then.⁷ The observation should be unsurprising, because informed speculation necessarily rests on assumption and projection—conjecture that can flatten intraracial difference (e.g., regional, generational, educational, gender, class, and so forth) and shore up a monolithic model of Black subjectivity.⁸ Similarly, an emphasis on “veiled” racial content can abet the critical conflation or confusion of agency and subjectivity that Romare Bearden identified in his 1946 essay “The Negro Artist’s Dilemma” and Lowry Stokes Sims and Margaret Rose Vendryes have traced in Black artists’ reception.⁹ The durability of these tropes, independent of the authors’ intentions, reminds us that the histories we write reflect our own moment as well as those we study.

Perhaps counterintuitively, self-critique is often a collaborative practice, because we cannot discern our own perceptual deficits without help. We quickly became an object lesson in that regard when Ellen Tani, whose [book review](#) appears in this issue, alerted us to the ableist connotations of our chosen title, “Blind Spots.”¹⁰ In settling on its replacement, “Self-

Criticality," we aimed to shift our analytical register from a metaphor of enduring incapacity to a generative process of agency and opportunity. In closing, we share an object lesson in that process from poet Michael Brown:

[In] the work of Horace Pippin and his simple-seeming paintings of very mundane rural scenes, Charles White's comic-book-like early paintings of black workers and his later colorful and realistic paintings of historical and "regular" black people lifted into the realm of mythology, and the collages of Romare Bearden around day-to-day urban black life—among many others!—I was able to see not just art that [I am able] to enjoy but the various ways that black people have been interrogating and confronting this question of WHAT black art looks like. . . . I realized that the question does not have to be a burden [to the artist] but [is] an invitation to explore and create in a way that acknowledges differences and variety in a directly analogous way to how black people live their lives in the United States and around the world. . . . It's NOT a question that requires a single answer, but demands multiple and various answers because our lives are multiple and various.¹¹

Notes

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- ¹ Hrag Vartanian, "Editor's Note for Sunday Edition, Mistakes: From Oversights to Missteps," *Hyperallergic*, August 30, 2020, <https://www.getrevue.co/profile/sunday/issues/sunday-edition-mistakes-from-oversights-to-missteps-258593>.
- ² Jennifer Van Horn, "'The Dark Iconoclast': African Americans' Artistic Resistance in the Civil War South," *The Art Bulletin* 99, no. 4 (December 2017): 133–67.
- ³ Peter Betjemann, "The Ends of Time: Abolition, Apocalypse, and Narrativity in Robert S. Duncanson's Literary Paintings," *American Art* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 80–109.
- ⁴ For the veil's DuBoisian associations, see Margaret Rose Vendryes, "Race Identity/Identifying Race: Robert S. Duncanson and Nineteenth Century American Painting," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 86. Robert S. Duncanson, letter to Reuben Duncanson, Cincinnati, June 28, 1871, as published in Wendy J. Katz, "Robert S. Duncanson, Race, and Auguste Comte's Positivism in Cincinnati," *American Studies* 53, no. 1 (2014), 97n1.
- ⁵ Betjemann, "The Ends of Time," 82, 86.
- ⁶ George Scialabba, "Affirming America," *Raritan* 39, no. 3 (Winter 2020), 18.
- ⁷ Patricia J. Sanders, "Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 72.
- ⁸ For example, Van Horn relies on enslavers' letters, diaries, and family lore from across the US South and Caribbean—paradigmatic examples of unreliable narration regarding those they held in bondage.
- ⁹ Romare Bearden, "The Negro Artist's Dilemma," *Critique: A Review of Contemporary Art* 1, no. 2 (November 1946): 20, faults the expectation that "The Negro artist should attempt a unique, nationalistic, social expression . . . [and that his] art should be a visual and trenchant reflection of his political and social aspirations, especially as it would focus attention on the exigency of his existence." Lowery Stokes Sims, "Subject/Subjectivity and Agency in the Art of African Americans," *Art Bulletin* 76, no. 4 (December 1994): 587–90; Vendryes, "Race Identity/Identifying Race," 82–99, 103–4.

¹⁰ For more, see Ellen Y. Tani, *Second Sight: The Paradox of Vision in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Brunswick, ME: Bowdoin College Museum of Art in association with Scala Arts, 2018).

¹¹ Michael Brown, email to Anne Monahan, August 22, 2020.