AFRICOBRA

WADSWORTH A. JARRELL

EXPERIMENTAL ART TOWARD A SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

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OBRA

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With a foreword by Richard Allen May III

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ART HISTORY PUBLICATION INITIATIVE

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To my wife, Jae, and our children, Wadsworth Jr., Jennifer, and Roslyn, who have added extra dimensions to my life.

To the AFRICOBRA artists—a very special innovative collective of righteous revolutionary image makers. And to the memory of visionary founding member Jeff R. Donaldson, 1932–2004, whose revolutionary ideas made this book a possibility.

A special dedication to the memory of my father and mother, Solomon and Tabitha Jarrell, who did not live to see important exhibitions in Chicago early in my career, including a 1961 exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center.

MY PEOPLE

The night is beautiful

So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,

So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun

Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

Langston Hughes

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Jeff R. Donaldson.

Did you hear me? I said, Jeff Richardson Donaldson!

He was a bad boy. Yes he was.

Say, what did he do?

He was awake while others were asleep.

INFLUENCED BY, AND CADENCE AND SOME WORDS BORROWED
FROM, THE POEM "BOOM BOOM," BY THE LATE POET

Gilbert Hines RIP, MY FRIEND

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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BLACK ART AND THE BLACK AESTHETIC is defined as a lexicon of philosophical constructs that emanates from a philosophy consciously subscribing to a non-Western approach to making art. Significantly, it is a precept of art-making principles rooted centrally in African American culture and values and purposefully embedded in heritage—our heritage, African art, culture, and aesthetics, which encapsulates an ideology with new, revolutionary, and inventive methods of expression. **—Wadsworth A. Jarrell**

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AFRICOBRA PRINCIPLES AND PHILOSOPHY

COOL ADE COLOR a variegation of bright, intense colors with sensibility and harmony. This principle is parallel, derivative, and grounded in the name for the bright array of colorful clothes worn by African Americans in the sixties, described as Cool Ade colors. Further, it extends to clothing worn by Black people everywhere: South Side Chicago, Harlem, Philadelphia, Detroit, Los Angeles, Port-au-Prince, Darkar, Lagos—anywhere Black people exist.

FRONTAL IMAGES images inspired by the awesome images of African sculpture, which presents strength, directness, and dignity.

OPEN COLOR integration of subject and background to an extent where, in some instances, both become synonymous and form a synthesis stressing freedom.

POSITIVE IMAGES images committed to humanism inspired by Black people and their experiences; images dedicated to the enlightened dignity of Black people by accentuating the positive; and art that reflects and relates to African people, with which African people can identify.

ARBITRARY USE OF LIGHT AND LINE lost and found line that displays sensitivity regarding weight, broken line, and continuity, implemented to accent and delineate specific areas of finesse; reverse direction of light employed to reject the theory of a single light source from one direction.

WRITTEN STATEMENTS direct, unequivocal statements written on the picture plane and incorporated in the composition to clarify the concept; art that is imbued with a specificity of sophistication that speaks to African people and carries messages with the visual impact of a billboard—poster art.

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

FREE SYMMETRY the syncopated rhythm pertinent to African dance, walk, and song; repetition with change, as in the African American–created blues.

PROGRAMMATIC art that teaches, preaches, and embraces concepts that offer positive and feasible solutions to our collective problems—local, national, and international.

SHINE exhibiting exemplary skills and vision in a profession; performing or executing an extraordinary feat—to shine, turn around, throw down. Also, taken literally, "shine" refers to a luster emblematic of Black lifestyles, as related to spit-shined shoes, shiny cars, glossy hairstyles, and plastic-covered furniture.

EXPRESSIVE AWESOMENESS art that does not appeal to serenity but is primarily concerned with the eternally sublime rather than ephemeral beauty; art that moves the emotions and appeals to the senses—art for the people.

MIMESIS AT MIDPOINT a composition that marks the spot where the real and the unreal, the objective and the nonobjective, the plus and the minus meet. That is a place—a living space, between absolute realism and pure abstraction—where the ambiguity of the art flirts between both genres.

HORROR VACUI a Latin phrase connoting fear of space: filling up the void of negative space by making use of the entire space of the picture plane.

Foreword by Richard Allen May III

movement (1) the act or process of moving; (2) a series of organized activities working toward an objective. —*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus*

In 2002, I met Wadsworth Jarrell for the first time by phone. At a local library, his rendition of Malcolm X, *Black Prince*, graced the cover of an early issue of *American Visions* magazine. Reading about Jarrell inspired me to call him to learn more about his art and about AFRICOBRA. I left a message on his voicemail at his New York studio. To my surprise, he returned the call. Thirteen subsequent years filled with countless conversations, formal introductions to AFRICOBRA founding members and current members, and numerous interviews facilitated by Jarrell resulted in my delivering presentations on AFRICOBRA in college classrooms and at academic conferences. Jarrell is truly a revolutionary. Moreover, he has a visceral story to share about one of the most important events in art history—the AFRICOBRA art movement.

In *AFRICOBRA: Experimental Art toward a School of Thought*, Jarrell poignantly discusses the founding members' transformation from individual visual artists, formally trained at prominent academic institutions, to Black artists intentionally gathering and forming a collective, seeking to make an aesthetic difference within the context of the civil rights and Black power movements. It is similar to the metamorphosis of Malcolm Little to Malcolm X, Cassius Clay

to Muhammad Ali, and Stokely Carmichael to Kwame Ture. Living through such turbulent times inspires change.

In a similar manner, Jarrell's text takes readers directly to the discussions and art critiques that transformed COBRA (Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists) into the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. Thus, the school of AFRICOBRA was born. Most importantly, this collective included three female members, who fully participated as equals in critiques and in art exhibitions. These artists were founding members Jae Jarrell and Barbara Jones-Hogu, as well as Carolyn Lawrence, who joined COBRA in 1969.

Similar to how the blues was about more than just making music, AFRICOBRA was about far more than simply making art. For example, during the civil rights movement, television portrayed the violent and inhumane atrocities perpetrated by European Americans on African Americans peacefully protesting for their human rights as citizens. AFRICOBRA's art powerfully shouted messages of resistance, solutions, and cultural pride that were African inspired and executed with technical excellence. Jarrell's text, like an art gallery tour, brings readers face to face with such works as *Rise and Take Control*, *Unite*, and *Stop Genocide*, by Barbara Jones-Hogu; *Ebony Family*, *Revolutionary Suit, Urban Wall Suit*, and *Brothers Surrounding Sis*, by Jae Jarrell; *Black Prince*, *Revolutionary*, and *Liberation Soldiers*, by Wadsworth Jarrell; *Uphold Your Men* and *Black People, Get Some Land*, by Carolyn Lawrence; *God Bless the Child That's Got His Own* and *Here Comes the Judge*, by Jeff Donaldson; *Egyptian Solar* and *Cool Ade Icicles*, by Napoleon Jones-Henderson; *Towards Identity* and *Uhuru*, by Nelson Stevens; *Wake Up, Say It Loud* and *I Am Somebody*, by Gerald Williams; *Liberation*, by Howard Mallory; and *A Revolution Begins with One Black Family*, by Frank Smith.

Of significance, when Jarrell tells the story of the great *Wall of Respect* mural for the people, he discusses the formation, purpose, and role of OBAC (Organization of Black American Culture), allowing readers to understand how artists are galvanized toward playing an active role in the civil rights and Black power movements. Moreover, being a member of OBAC as well as an artist who participated in creating the mural gives Jarrell impeccable credibility to truly own, discuss, and pass on such history to future generations.

In the chapter titled "Recruitment," Jarrell demonstrates how vital the preservation and dissemination of African American visual art history is. Jeff Donaldson was the architect of CONFABA (Conference on the Functional

Aspects of Black Art), which brought together many Black art historians, important Black artists, and Black history students at Northwestern University in May 1970. Jarrell's description of the conference arguably shows that such a meeting was ahead of its time. It remains the template for future African American art conferences.

AFRICOBRA: *Experimental Art toward a School of Thought* is a remarkable text that in African American vernacular "throws down" and "keeps it real with soul." Ultimately, with his unique griot voice, Jarrell paints a history that is unapologetically Black about an art movement that used the creative tool as a weapon of change.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to a great many people who made this book possible, to whom I would like to express my sincere appreciation. Extremely important to the inception of this book are the AFRICOBRA founding members, Jae Jarrell, Gerald Williams, and Barbara Jones-Hogu, to whom I pitched the idea of an AFRICOBRA member—someone from the inside—writing our story, which they all agreed on, consenting to taped interviews. I am also indebted to the AFRICOBRA members Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Nelson Stevens, Carolyn Lawrence, Sherman Beck, Omar Lama, Howard Mallory, and Frank Smith for consenting to taped interviews, which I relied on heavily. Importantly, I want to express my sincere gratitude posthumously to founding member Jeff Donaldson for his immeasurable and insightful contributions.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most enduring and significant manifestations of the Black Arts Movement of the sixties was the creation of AFRICOBRA with its compelling ideology. —Larry Neal, "AFRICOBRA/FARAFINDUGU"

As a new consciousness, the search during the '60s and '70s was to identify the international dimensions of the rationalization of Africanism in art. Artists began to find aesthetic principles forged from the Black value system and rooted in spiritual ties to Africa. This new ideology became the basis for the Black Arts Movement, and no other group expressed more eloquently the ideas of this new doctrine than AFRICOBRA. —Eddie Granderson, "A Shared Ideology"

This book details a pro-Black revolutionary art movement formed at the pinnacle of the civil rights, Black power, and Black arts movements. This is the first comprehensive report to describe the initial structure, conversations, art, exhibitions, and philosophical constructs of AFRICOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), written by a founding member and archivist for the collective, a painter and photographer, who contributed significant groundbreaking iconography defining an African American aesthetic as well as recording AFRICOBRA's history in photographs. In writing this book, I have a distinct advantage over art historians, whose information is secondary, relying on what has been written by other art historians—which may or may

not be accurate—and with them, imposing their personal views on what the artists' intentions were by interpreting the meaning of shapes and form in the artists' works.

AFRICOBRA: *Experimental Art Toward a School of Thought* chronicles a small collective of African American artists (figure 1.1) striving to create a visual language that represented an African American aesthetic rooted in the culture of the gritty Black neighborhoods of Chicago and, beyond that, is significantly embedded in African aesthetics. In this book, the terms Black and African American are used frequently. The word Black refers only to skin complexion, while African American implies origin. Everyone in the United States of America—and in the world—descended from a country of origin, while Black people in America descended from the continent of Africa. History has attested to our direct and unequivocal origins, because of slave traders plundering African countries and indiscriminately capturing African people to be brought back to the Western world as slaves.

AFRICOBRA: *Experimental Art Toward a School of Thought* has two interlocking components: the story of the creation of a pro-Black artists' movement and an account of the artistic and political ferment that took place in Chicago in the sixties and seventies.

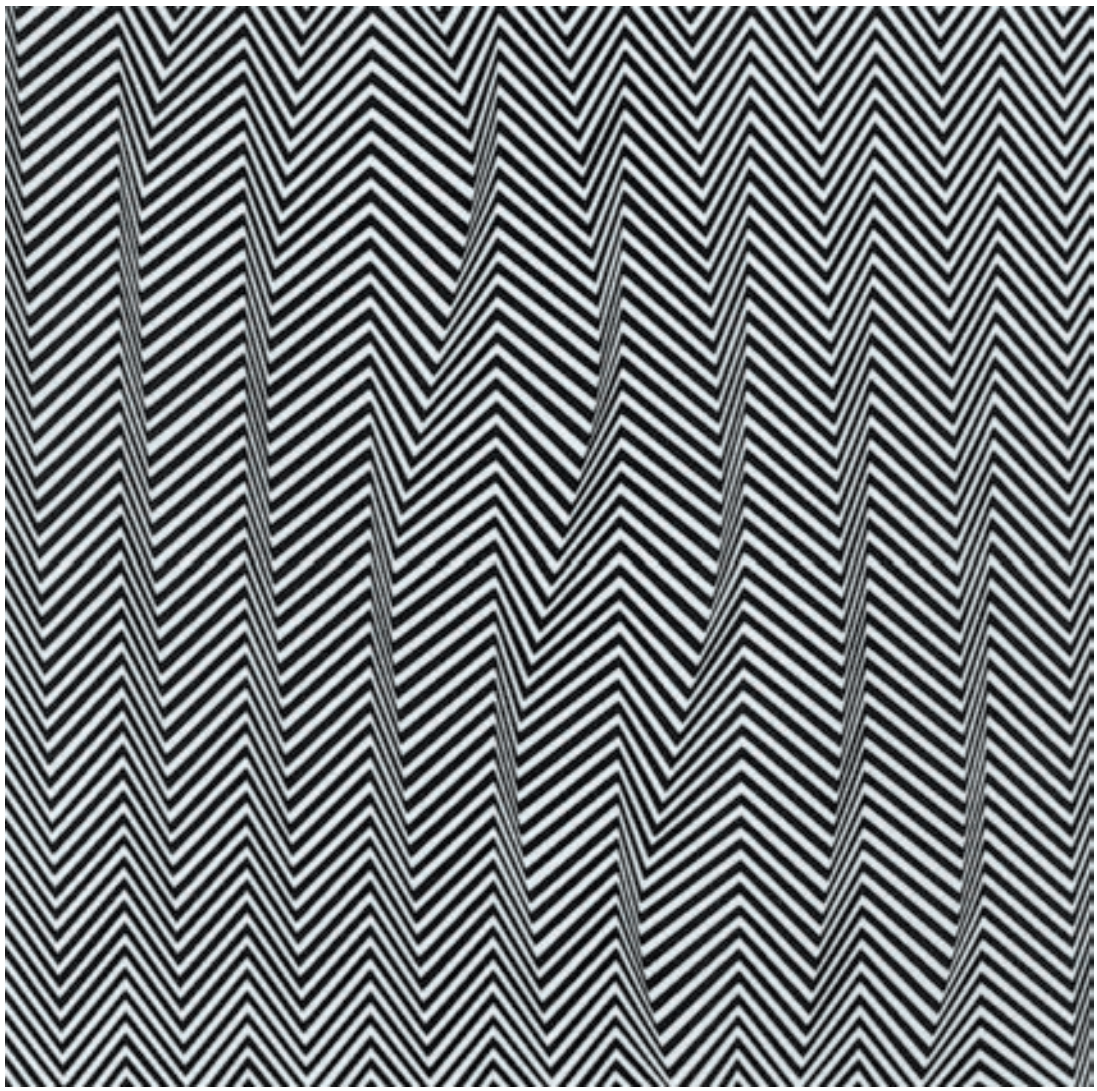
1.1

Photograph by Ann. *AFRICOBRA Group Photo with Neighborhood Children*, 1970.

African American artists making art without concern for the opinions of white institutions and white critics was long overdue. The sixties presented such a time for Black artists to step up and, with experimental art, instigate a rethinking of the canon of art by introducing a new language that addressed African American people and their heritage and culture. It was extremely important to create a visual language that related to and spoke to Black people in the context of significant compact compositions—art responses to horror vacui, similar to congested urban Black neighborhoods imbued with vivid colors and with musical energy embodying familiar rhythms flowing through them.

The importance of creating a new aesthetic lies in its ownership—Black ownership, where in the past only whites, basically white males, claimed ownership of inventive artistic endeavors. Additionally, African Americans create their own artistic language so that generations of young African American artists have a storehouse of knowledge, a library, of new visual information to be proud of and relate to as influential in their progress and growth. It is important to create something that is our own, that hasn't been copied, reinterpreted, and co-opted by mainstream American society.

In 1968 in Chicago at WJ Studios and Gallery, located at 1521 East 61st Street (the home and studios of Wadsworth and Jae Jarrell), COBRA (Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists) was founded. Founding members were Jeff Donaldson, a painter; Jae Jarrell, a fashion designer; Wadsworth Jarrell, a painter and photographer; Barbara Jones, a printmaker; and Gerald Williams, a painter. This small collective of artists formed to address the pressing, significant concerns about a Black aesthetic and ownership of art. WJ Studios was located in the heart of a Black neighborhood, and we wanted our art to reflect that environment, while also moving beyond local environs to national and international arenas. Collectively, COBRA formed to purposely create art that embodied an aesthetic, a substance in terms of meaningful content with a political agenda, rather than creating art that is accidental or an optical trick like trompe l'oeil or optical art (op art), which is grounded in methods of graphic and meticulously rendered dizzying curvilinear lines and morays that fool the eye (see, for example, the fields of vibrating lines in figure 1.2, created by the English-born master perceptual abstractionist and foremost exponent of op art Bridget Riley).



I.2

Bridget Riley, *Descending*, 1966. Emulsion on hard board, 36 × 36 inches. Courtesy of Alan Cristea Gallery, London, UK.

COBRA artists claimed our turf, following the advice of Booker T. Washington to "cast down your bucket where you are."[1] COBRA did just that and aspired to advance our precepts of art beyond what the Harlem Renaissance artists had achieved; we sought to create a mecca—a bastion of fresh creativity that would arguably be the paradigm for a Black aesthetic, similar to what jazz musicians accomplished with their music but independently controlled. We explored ideas of developing an identifiable approach to choice of colors, imaging, and experimental methods of application: the use of collage,

patterns, intuitive space, and form constructed of letters and words. By developing principles as components of a philosophy, such as open color, free symmetry, and writing on the plane, our full-spaced and extended compositions were reminiscent of avant-garde music—particularly an Ornette Coleman solo.

In 1970 in Chicago, a colleague of mine, William Gay, teaching in the Woodlawn Experimental Schools Project, visited my Chicago studio. He was impressed with a large unfinished painting, remarking, "When I look at this painting, it is saying, B-B-B-B; it is constructed basically of the letter B. You guys in COBRA are miles ahead of other artists. You guys' style remind me of music, especially be-bop, the music of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. In New York in 1942, Bird and Diz hit the block with be-bop; other musicians didn't know what they were playing."[2]

Europeans and Euro-Americans created their own definition of what art is by appealing to absurdity with conceptual ideas and creating institutions (museums and galleries) that they protected like fortresses, barricading themselves behind a cadre of intellectual writers. Artists chosen to exhibit in the institutions were their own kind—mostly white men and occasionally a few white women and other ethnic groups, such as African American artists whose works were not seriously grounded in ethnicity unless the art was negatively demeaning their own. But museum directors and art gallery owners and white critics bestowed the highest honors and accolades on white men. It wasn't important whether white male artists' works were skillfully crafted, or whether their ideas were trite or stolen from another culture; they were considered the art gods, the Supermen, Batmen, and Captain Americas of art. White male artists are claimed to be the architects of the breakthrough between European and American aesthetics for having created their own genre, known as abstract expressionism. Since African Americans had harnessed the medium of music, "fine art is the last bastion for Europeans and Euro-Americans."[3]

Although Harlem Renaissance artists made a strong, credible request, with remarkable art in every imaginable style, to be accepted and viewed as American artists, only a few achieved "critical acclaim," and not as mainstream American artists. With the creation of COBRA, we were Black revolutionary artists who rejected the notion of being "sanctioned" by the establishment and exhibiting our art in white-owned museums and galleries. Instead,

we defined and chartered our own direction, and we chose museums and galleries and other venues owned or operated by African Americans.

COBRA's ideology regarding art representing our people was congruent with and advocated what the scholar, poet, author, and politician Aimé Fernand David Césaire said in a 1956 speech in Paris: "We find ourselves today in a cultural chaos. And this is our role: to liberate the forces which, alone, can organize from this chaos a new synthesis which will be the reconciliation—*et depassement*—of the old and the new. We are here to proclaim the right of our people to speak, to let our people—black people, make their entrance on the great stage of history."[4] COBRA set out to present Black people elegantly on the stage of history as described by Césaire. We presented skillfully crafted, beautiful, positive, and compelling images of people who looked like us. To quote the author Nubia Kai's 1979 essay for the catalog *AFRICOBRA: The First Twenty Years*, "To AFRICOBRA members and their African fore-bearers, technique and content are not separate, disparate elements, but mutually symbiotic components of good art. The formula for them was simple: you can't convey a message to your audience if it is not said well."[5] To advance AFRICOBRA history forward, in a 2010 interview in Chicago with TV Land and NOLA Film Production, founding member Barbara Jones-Hogu and Napoleon Jones-Henderson (who joined in 1969) echoed those same sentiments. Barbara said, "We were not concerned whether the critics and art dealers were critiquing us or not. We were really focusing on communicating visually with the viewer, and the viewer we were looking at looked like us."[6] Napoleon added, "We were not concerned about the art world. We were addressing our people." In 2007, in my interview of founding member Jae Jarrell in her New York studio, she said, "We shook a raised clenched fist at mainstream America—like in your face. We were making art of our choice without concern for the powers to be."[7]

Metaphorically speaking, COBRA artists were visual bell ringers announcing that African life did *not* begin with slavery in America. We informed that Black people's existence eclipsed world civilization as the precursor race, as the origin of civilization, an advanced group of people who developed highly sophisticated cultures that were influential and copied worldwide. Such cultures existed in dynasties in Ghana, Mali, Zulu Kingdom in South Africa, Egypt, Benin, and Ife. Other important civilized kingdoms were in the Nubian Dynasty, the Great Zimbabwe empire, the Kingdom of Mapungubwe,

and Timbuktu. In the book *Afrocentricity*, scholar Molefi Kete Asante states, "Among ancient civilizations Africans gave the world Ethiopia, Nubia, Egypt, Cush, Axum, Ghana, Mali and Songhay. These ancient civilizations are responsible for medicine, science, the concept of monarchies and divine-kingships, and Almighty God."[8]

But Black people who were born as slaves invested immeasurably in America. Whether Black people were considered citizens of this country—and a referendum from Congress, even to this day, is required to sustain voting rights—Black people, African American people, are natural-born American citizens and have ownership in America, because it was built on the backs of our free labor. In the book *Nobody Knows My Name*, James Baldwin asserts, "It may have been the popular impulse to keep us at the bottom of the perpetually shifting and bewildered populace; but we were, on the other hand, almost personally indispensable to each of them, simply because, without us, they could never have been certain, in such a confusion, where the bottom was; and nothing, in any case, could take away our title to the land which we, too, had purchased with our blood."[9]

I would argue that reparations are owed all African Americans because of more than three hundred years of forced free labor for companies who profited from our labor. Other ethnic groups whose lives were impeded and whose rights were taken away, and who were forced to live and work for free in deplorable conditions in concentration camps, such as the Japanese in the United States and Jews in Germany, were paid reparations by US and German governments, and by companies, such as Volkswagen, that indulged in forced free labor.

We knew that art alone could not change what had happened, or what was still happening in the lives of Black people, but we could affect, cerebrally, our future journey by informing. COBRA proposed to revolutionize art by presenting compositionally solid, informative, and conceptually revolutionary art that comprised African American communities, with us having ownership of our own ideas. It was important for us to name ourselves and to name our art, "poster art." We named ourselves and named our art so that others would not name us and categorize our art by naming it. For COBRA, it was politically, historically, and spiritually essential to disallow our collective being circumscribed by someone else, namely, art critics (the art police). The day COBRA acquiesced to others' definition of us, to quote an old southern expression, "It would be too wet to plow."

Naming is extremely important. It necessarily provides identity links to one's ancestry—who you are and where you came from. It is no accident that names on products are the guarantee of quality and the primary selling factor. Naming ourselves was unprecedented for artists, whose names were usually someone else's idea, namely, art critics, such as New York's Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Leo Steinberg—the Kings of Cultureburg, as Tom Wolfe called the three critics in his 1975 book *The Painted Word*—and Robert Coats, the critic who coined the term abstract expressionism. Additionally, the name impressionist was affixed to the style of a group of nineteenth-century artists in Paris by art critic Louis Leroy, in an article in the Parisian newspaper *Le Charivari*. English-born art critic Lawrence Alloway coined the name pop art. The name Harlem Renaissance for artists working and living in Harlem between 1920 and 1930 was not the choice of

the artists themselves. The term was later ascribed to the cultural, social, and artistic outburst that took place in Harlem. During the time, it was known as the New Negro movement, named after the anthology by Alain Locke.

The mention of art critics always reminds me of two occurrences. Citing the incidents in reverse order, in 1980, when I was a professor at the University of Georgia in Athens, teaching drawing and painting, I was invited to be on a panel for a doctoral student's dissertation encompassing mural painting. Primarily, I was invited because I was an artist who worked on the *Wall of Respect* and because two students and I had recently completed a huge mural (31 × 61 feet), entitled *Ascension*, on an outside wall of the Athens Community Center. There was a discussion about the mural *Ascension* led by Professor Edmund Feldman, who taught art criticism. He said, "When [an] artist finishes a work of art, it's out of his hands, he has nothing to say about it,

I.3

Multiple artists, *Wall of Respect*, Chicago, 1967. Photograph by Robert Sengstacke.

because it is our baby then. It is then left up to the art critic to articulate what the artist is attempting to say."[10] I perceived his remarks as pompous and condescending. I said, "It seems to me that an art critic's position is questionable and is held in limbo until an artist makes a work of art and exhibits it. If an artist never makes art and exhibits it, art critics are out of a job."[11] In 1956 in a color class at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the instructor, Professor William Cowans, described the art critic as "a one leg person teaching people how to run track."[12] Lisa Farrington notes in her book *African-American Art: A Visual and Cultural History*, "Primary source documents stand in stark contrast to secondary sources, which alter, adulterate, extract from, expand on, or in some way modify the primary source. This gives the visual arts a distinct advantage over the written word, because art, by nature, is almost always a primary source, existing principally in its original form."[13]

In Chicago in the sixties, the phrase "Black is Beautiful" was emblazoned on billboards, train overpasses, walls of buildings, and COBRA's art as a reminder that Black people are beautiful just as they are. The repeated phrase was visceral. As a result, Black people emerged comfortable and proud of beautiful Black-self: with kinky-curly natural hair styled into Afros, full lips (without Botox injections), wide noses, firm protruding buttocks, and speech patterns that were considered by some not to be proper English. English is a second language for African people because our ancestors came unwillingly by force to America, speaking fluently in various African languages: Yoruba, Swahili, Twi, Nubian, Arabic, Hausa, Igbo, Fulani, Berber, Amharic, Somali, and others.

The new arrivals in America from multiple African countries learned English from indentured servants (freed prisoners owing debts) and from poorly educated people who had escaped Europe to settle in America and who were fortunate enough to own or be overseers of Black slaves. Their command of the English language was questionable compared with the better class of properly speaking Europeans who remained in Europe. In other words, the early American settlers spoke in dialects of the uneducated, with Londoners speaking Cockney, the French speaking Gaulish, and the Spanish and Portuguese speaking in various dialects. The English language taught to Africans was also lexically influenced by a Gaelic substratum. With that mix of dialects and broken English being spoken, and with Africans speaking in their own languages and dialects, it is remarkable that the new arrivals from

Africa and their offspring mastered any form of communication, let alone proper English.

Nonetheless, the captured, shackled Africans brought culture to America: visual art (which was primarily suppressed by slave owners), music, dance, song, poetry, blacksmithery, religion, indigenous rituals and customs of kingship practiced in several African countries, and a host of eloquent, inventive expressions embodying theatrical qualities. Today, the dominant expressions heard and seen in American society—in movies, advertisements, bars, sporting and political events, and everyday activities—were created by African people. The expressions are the soul of American culture. Rock 'n' roll is heavily influenced by and "borrows" tenets from African American–created blues, and pop singers—all nationalities—are influenced by Black gospel music. Notably, this cultural influence extends to Black athletes, who were the first to celebrate with high fives; chest, high body, and fist bumping; and spiking the football after scoring.

Nothing has the hidden implications, the liquidity, and the raw poetic theatrical presence as the phrases espoused by Black southern "country-hick bumpkins," barely literate sharecropper farm boys, whom I vividly remember in the 1930s and 1940s coming to town in Athens, Georgia, on Saturdays, some riding in mule-driven wagons, dressed in brand new bib overalls, spit-shined Stacy Adams shoes, and Big Apple caps, with the bills cocked to the side or turned backward (five decades ahead of the hip-hop revolution), vying for casual sexual relationships with women:

"Hey, baby. I'm not the doctor, but I'm the doctor's son.
I'll be your doctor till the doctor comes—what I say? Hey
now, what I say?"

"Hey, Shuga, come heah and let daddy bitecha."

"If that's yo woman, you better pin her to yo side, 'cause,
if she flag my train ums sho-gon let 'er ride."

"Looka heah, baby, two suns can't shine in one world.
Two boys can't go with one girl—well, hush my mouth."

"Say, pretty, I'm not talkin'bout the saw and the saw dust,
I'm talkin'bout baby shon'nuf. Um huh—what you say."

What concluded COBRA's philosophical constructs were the aggressive artistic and explosive political activities occurring in Black Chicago in the sixties. Murry N. DePillars, an artist, scholar, and educator who joined AFRICOBRA in 1980, described in the book *Wadsworth Jarrell: Artist as Revolutionary* the culture and lifestyle that COBRA advocated: "Black, urban Chicago—its emerging traditions, combined with those of southern cities and towns[—] formed the fertile soil for the blossoming of a cultural dynamic. Therefore, art that emerged from Black culture should be based on a syntax that is encoded yet understandable to Black people. Such art becomes—historically and metaphorically speaking—the geographical shadow of Black people."[14]

AFRICOBRA sought entry into the encoded lifestyle of Black folk—the secret area addressed by DePillars. Artist, scholar, historian, and member of AFRICOBRA Michael D. Harris, in an essay for the online catalog *AFRICOBRA Now: An Aesthetic Reflection*, cited Elizabeth Alexander's concept of the Black interior: "Black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination: the Black Interior is a metaphysical space beyond the Black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that Black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of."[15] When DePillars described an art of Black people that should be based on an encoded syntax, he might have been speaking of the composite of inventive and coined expressions and styles created by Black people: the way we dress, sing, and dance, and the way we talk and walk—hip talk and hip walk.

In the 1920s through the 1940s, there was a language in Harlem based on a familiar cultural syntax devised by African American musicians and other "hip" Black folks who spoke in encoded language, a lexicon created to be understood only by Black people. That synthesis included such terms as soul brother and sister, soul music and soul food, coppin' me some pecks, serious boardin', and layin' on a scarf. Additional expressions were layin' in the cut in the crib (or the pad), coppin' some happenin', mackin' the game, jumpin' clean in pressed vines or threads, sharp as a tack, sharp as a mosquito's peter, ready as a radio, pepper head, pepper top, wheelin' around in boss shorts, get down, I'm down with that, funk, pee-funk, and funky music. In addition, in the 1920s through the 1940s, Black folks devised expressions like What's happenin', baby? What's shakin', dude? Hey cheen, what's on the limb for the lizard? Black folks also made use of and coined words to metaphorically mean something other than the original meaning, like hip,

hipster, hip-cat, hip-kitty from Kansas City, square from Delaware, lame from Maine, dig, mellow, rappin', jive, cool, bread, scopin', turn on, and turn me on to some happenings, in phrases like Are you hip to that? Can you dig it? That's cool. He's a cool cat. She's a cool chick. Hand communication consisted of slapping palms—gimme some skin, Jack; gimme some skin, Jim. Current Black athletes along with other hip Black folks have transformed the encoded hand communications into aforementioned celebratory high fives and chest, high body, and fist bumping. As inconsequential as it might sound, Black athletes' and current Black folks' creative transformation of 1920s–1940s encoded hand communication and African American coined expressions have been copied and co-opted into everyday American culture. Those expressions, lifestyles, and attitudes were what AFRICOBRA aspired to capture in our art.

Another area in the lives of Black folks was occultism, or spirituality, which AFRICOBRA was interested in as well. This is an area beyond Christianity that metaphysically addresses the order and balance of circumstances: happiness, misfortune, wealth, health, life, and death. For instance, mythology asserts that a banshee—a female spirit believed to possess prophetic power—wails incessantly outside a home to announce that a death will soon occur in the family. Important in African American folklore and believed as truth is that anyone born with a veil (a caul) covering his or her face is special. It is believed that such a person is vested with the magical power of clairvoyance and can see spirits, predict future occurrences, and communicate with dead ancestors.

Spiritual practices such as these originated in African cultures. The theories and practices have been transformed in Haitian, Trinidadian, Bahamian, and southern American mythology, especially in Black communities in the low country of Georgia (the Gullah Sea Islands), in South Carolina, and in Louisiana (down behind the sun).

It is an accepted reality among many Black folks that magical powers are practiced for trickery—for control, by casting a spell tricking someone. In the song "I Don't Know," by Willie Mabon, that fact is revealed:

> You sprinkle Goofer Dust all around my bed,
> You'll wake up one morning and find your own-self dead.[16]

In "Hoochie Coochie Man," Muddy Waters sang:

I got a black cat bone, I got a mojo too,
I got High John the Conqueror Root,
I'm gonna mess with you.[17]

Trinidadian folklore was revealed in the 1976 art exhibition in Washington, DC, titled *Douens*, by the consummate Trinidadian artist LeRoy Clarke, as well as in David Brizan's text for the exhibition catalog: "Douens are spirits of premature babies who die before religious rites are performed and who linger perennially in a dismal twilight."[18] In a lecture, LeRoy Clarke described douens as the dust of dead babies.

I will not reveal every experience of my upbringing in southern African American culture in the thirties, forties, and fifties. Some things do not need to be said. In a film of Muddy Waters traveling with his band, he advised his musicians: "There are some secrets you need to keep in your pocket."[19]

I grew up in a Black southern culture where conjure men and women's obtrusive presence in communities was respected—mostly out of fear. They proposed to foretell occurrences and cure all kinds of illnesses, especially those directly related to falling victim to somebody's trick (somebody laid down a potion, and the victim walked over it). They advertised themselves by word of mouth as "doctors" who were capable of removing a spell cast by, perhaps, a jealous lover out of anger or revenge. Some of their dwellings were marked with colored bottles and jugs and painted rocks, as well as symbolic items, such as rusty horseshoes, animal bones, dead petrified cocks, and a rabbit's foot. For instance, in April 1982 in Athens, Georgia, attorney Janice Thurman (now Janice Mathews) told me about visiting a potential client, the folk artist Dilmus Hall, whose front yard was inundated with his sculpture and painted artifacts. On a fence hung a single human shoe framed in a wooden box. She said, "When I pulled up in front of his house and saw all of those symbolic things, I was afraid to go inside."[20]

I hope that this book is valuable in teaching African American and American art history. Additionally, my hope is that it reaches an audience of other disciplines and people at large who do not have any knowledge of art. Readers will probably discover that I am not your garden-variety academic writer. I taught photography and drawing and painting at Howard University in Washington, DC, for six years (1971–77), painting for one semester at Spelman College in Atlanta (1985), and drawing and painting for ten years at the

University of Georgia (1978–88). Primarily, I am a painter, sculptor, printmaker, and photographer. I have lived for many years in several major cities, north and south: Chicago, Boston, Washington, DC, Atlanta, and New York City. At present, I live in Cleveland, Ohio. I have also traveled to other countries: Africa, England, Italy, the Caribbean (Martinique and the Bahamas), the Netherlands (Amsterdam and Rotterdam), Japan, Korea, Denmark, and Sweden.

I consider myself to be an aficionado of great Black music: gospel, blues, and jazz. My memory is clear on the history of urban and country Black functions and cultural events in the thirties through the sixties. Those memories include fieldworkers' rhythmic songs, where the lead singer sings the first lines and is answered by a chorus, similar to what Baptist preachers experience from their congregations: "Preach the word, Reverend. Yes, say it—say it. Tell it. Talk about it. Lawd have mercy, and amen amen." Additionally, I retain memories of itinerant harmonica (mouth harp) and guitar players; hog-killing day (when the weather turned cold enough); cotton and pea picking; log-burning fireplaces; shallow-surface well diggers employing the sledgehammer-and-shaker method; blacksmiths; school and church gatherings featuring competitive gospel quartets; plays; recitals; emotionally charged solos sung at funerals; house rent parties; picnics and barbeques; after-hours juke joints; Saturday night fish fries; and other practices and secrets in African American life. Those memories are etched in my brain as if they happened yesterday, which gives me a good sense of African American culture, history, and lifestyles.

Expressions, Methods, and Influence

AFRICOBRA's experimentation encompassed various approaches, methods, and materials. Our methods and influence went beyond our members and was visible in the work of American mainstream and African American artists, as well as in the work of artists in other countries. In addition, AFRICOBRA's influence was circumfluent in the work of Washington, DC, artists, including faculty and students at Howard University. Most notable and readily recognizable AFRICOBRA influences in other artists' work was a confluence of style: African-influenced patterns and motifs; inventive patchwork and appliqué; tie-dye; collaged items such as aluminum foil, rickrack

(zigzagged cloth ribbon), and cowrie shells; and highly intense colors (aka Cool Ade colors), and graffiti-inspired writing on the plane.

In 1979, the scholar Kenneth Rodgers wrote an essay entitled "The AFRICOBRA Collective" for the exhibition catalog *AFRICOBRA/Fromaje*: "Not only did AFRICOBRA pave the way for other Afro-American artists to follow, but they laid the cornerstone for a stylistic expression unparalleled in the annals of American history."[21] Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr., then director of the Evans-Tibbs Collection in Washington, DC, wrote in an essay for the same exhibition:

> I think people in the Washington, DC, area did not take AFRICOBRA very seriously in its beginnings, and that was a mistake. It is an important and original art movement in the black and in the American art community. Its impact on American design was as significant as that of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, which, though little appreciated at that time, has now become a major artistic movement. In time, this too will be the case with AFRICOBRA. AFRICOBRA has affected every facet of design, including textile making, fashion and household design. The aesthetics espoused by AFRICOBRA is now the most popular visual material today. The work of today's Pop Graffittists was done by AFRICOBRA 20 years ago; it had far reaching impact on every element of design. In retrospect, it will be seen as an original American idiom that drew on African tradition, and like jazz, should be recognized as a national treasure.[22]

In 1971, Edward Spriggs, then director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, wrote an essay titled "AFRICOBRA: Intermediarily" for the *AFRICOBRA II* exhibition catalog:

> This is the second year of the AFRICOBRA at the Studio Museum in Harlem. They are here for the second time because we believe that they represent one of the most dynamic combinations of thought, talent, and commitment that we know of in the visual arts during this era of the "*Black Aesthetic*" in America.
>
> AFRICOBRA is a Chicago-based cooperative group that—from their perspective as African Americans—is going about the righteous business of identifying and making use of the style and rhythm qualities, both the apparent and actual, that finds expression in the lives of black

people everywhere. We see in AFRICOBRA's concepts and philosophy the emergence of an honestly real-world and people-oriented body of creations.

For them the Black Aesthetic is not only a possibility, but is in continuous evolution in the lives of people of African ancestry. It functions daily in their every mode of expression. We also believe that they are in the fore of those common characteristics shared by what is generally accepted as Black music and Black poetry.

So whatever you take the AFRICAN COMMUNE OF BAD RELEVANT ARTISTS' work to be, they are not to be considered simply as images of heroes, of sorrow, or anybody's notion of protest. Consider AFRICOBRA's images to be arti/factors of rhythms. Bridges. Progressions across zones of feeling/thot. Yesterday. Tomorrow. Bloods memory. Shines/sounds like our own life/ritual celebration.

They see "art" as a movement in-the-round completing an[d] complementing our bas-relief existence. AFRICOBRA's image/rhythms are about busting open the Moslem–western-art idea that exist in the plastic landscape of our minds. The "zombie" in us they want released. The inner shavings of our lives, AFRICOBRA wants to spread upon earth surface and sky. They want to replenish our mind/soul/vision/generations.

AFRICOBRA, Intermediarily. The African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. We dig their spirit as a family of image-makers making diversity in their unity. And they say, still more is possible. And they want you to have some.[23]

Notes

Introduction

Epigraphs: Larry Neal, "AFRICOBRA/Farafindugu," written for the exhibition catalog for *AFRICOBRA/Farafindugu*, held at the Atlanta Neighborhood Art Center, Atlanta, Georgia, March 7 to March 28, 1981. Eddie Granderson, "A Shared Ideology," in *Wadsworth Jarrell: A Shared Ideology* (Atlanta, GA: Bureau of Cultural Affairs, City Gallery East, 1996), 7.

1 Booker T. Washington, Atlanta Compromise Speech, Cotton States and International Exposition, Atlanta, Georgia, September 18, 1895.

2 William Gay, personal conversation with the author at WJ Studios and Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, May 1970.

3 Vincent Smith, speaking at artist Jacob Lawrence's memorial, September 28, 2001, Riverside Church, New York City.

4 Aime Cesaire, opening speech, "The Relationship between Colonization and Culture," at the Conference of Negro–African Writers and Artists, the Sorbonne Amphitheatre Descartes, Paris, 1956. Cited in James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Dell, 1961), 32.

5 Nubia Kai, "AFRICOBRA Universal Aesthetics," *AFRICOBRA: The First Twenty Years*, exhibition catalog (Atlanta, GA: Nexus Press, 1990), 6–7.

6 Barbara Jones-Hogu and Napoleon Jones-Henderson, video interview, for the film *AFRICOBRA: Art for the People*, produced by TV Land and NOLA Film Production, Chicago, Illinois, January 2010.

7 Jae Jarrell, taped interview with the author, New York, April 2007.

8 Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988), 39.

9 James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 20.

10 Edmund Burke Feldman, in discussion of a student's doctoral dissertation presentation on mural painting, University of Georgia, Athens, spring 1980.

11 Mural painting dissertation discussion, spring 1980.

12 Professor William Cowans, color class, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, fall quarter, 1956.

13 Lisa Farrington, *African-American Art: A Visual and Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

14 Murry N. DePillars, foreword to *Wadsworth Jarrell: The Artist as Revolutionary*, by Robert L. Douglas (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 1996), v.

15 Michael D. Harris is citing Elizabeth Alexander's collection of essays *The Black Interior* (Minneapolis, MN: Greywolf Press, 2004), in AFRICOBRA *Now: An Aesthetic Reflection,* the online catalog for AFRICOBRA *Philosophy*, an exhibition held at the Logan Center, Chicago, Illinois, June 28–September 22, 2013. Harris's essay was contracted by Rebecca Zorach, who curated the exhibition and was then an art history professor at the University of Chicago.

16 Willie Mabon, "I Don't Know" (Chicago: Parrot Records, Blues Label, 1952).

17 Muddy Waters, "Hoochie Coochie Man," written by Willie Dixon (Chicago: Chess Records, 1948).

18 David Brizan, "Douens," in *Douens*, by Le Roy Clarke, exhibition catalog, (Washington, DC: Howard University Gallery of Art, 1976).

19 Muddy Waters, in *American Masters*, directed by Robert Gordon and Morgan Neville (New York: PBS, 2003).

20 Janice Mathews, conversation with the author, in Athens, Georgia, May 1982.

21 Kenneth Rodgers, "The Africobra Collective," in AFRICOBRA/*Fromaje*, exhibition catalog (Washington, DC: Howard University Gallery of Art, 1989), 17.

22 Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr., "A National Treasure," in AFRICOBRA/*Fromaje*, 17–18.

23 Edward Spriggs, "AFRICOBRA: Intermediarily," in AFRICOBRA II, exhibition catalog (Harlem, NY: Studio Museum, 1971), 1.

1. Black in Chicago

1 Leonard F. Johnson, personal conversation with the author in his Washington, DC, studio, April 12, 1976.

2 Quoted in Mike Royko, *The Boss* (New York: Signet Classics, 1971), 134.

3 Jennifer and Roslyn Jarrell, personal conversation with the author, Chicago, November 23, 1992.

4 Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988), 12.

5 Carl Sandburg, *Chicago Poems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1916), 3.

6 Amiri Baraka, *Blues People* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1963), 96.

7 Gerald Williams, personal conversation with the author in New York studio, May 2005.

8 These are Ossie Davis's words but not in the same sequence. Ossie Davis eulogy for Malcolm X, Faith Temple Church of God, New York, February 27, 1965.

9 Royko, *The Boss*, 144.

10 Haki Madhubuti, *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1991), 128–29.

11 Bill Borin, conversation with the author at WJ Studios and Gallery, Chicago, July 1967.