

The *Wall of Respect* and the Black Arts Movement

Generally regarded as the artistic counterpart to the militant Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement (BAM) was a cultural flourishing involving a loose association of African American visual artists, writers, poets, playwrights, and musicians. Seen by some historians as the successor to the Harlem Renaissance (or New Negro) movement of the 1920s, BAM took definite shape around 1965 and lasted until the mid- to late-1970s. The movement's artists were united by a desire to cultivate a vital black aesthetic--separate and distinct from the standards of the white middle-class mainstream--that reflected and addressed the particular experiences and sensibilities of black Americans. Likewise, the movement set out to re-affirm the intrinsic beauty of blackness, an explicit challenge to centuries of racism. In short, as writer Larry Neal articulated in his seminal 1968 essay "The Black Arts Movement," BAM "envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America." Other artists who made significant contributions to the Black Arts Movement include poets Gwendolyn Brooks, Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti), Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez, playwrights LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Ed Bullins, and Adrienne Kennedy, visual artists Jeff Donaldson, Vincent Smith, Faith Ringgold, and Betye Saar, and jazz musicians Archie Shepp, Sun Ra, and Richard Muhal Abrams.

One of the earliest manifestations of this new creative impulse was the establishment of the Black Arts Repertoire Theatre/School (BART/S) in Harlem, New York. Founded by LeRoi Jones and a number of other black artists and activists, this organization used theater as a means of presenting radical cultural ideas to the people of Harlem. Jones, who is considered one of the foremost figures of the Black Arts

Movement, touted the notion of a “Revolutionary Theatre” that “should force change.” This call represented an outright rejection of the notion of art for art’s sake. Before its funding was cut, BART/S brought plays, concerts, and poetry readings to the streets of Harlem. More importantly, the spirit of community activism that lay at the heart of BART/S quickly spread to other cities around the nation, which established their own organizations dedicated to the production and dissemination of politically engaged black art.

One such group was Chicago’s Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), founded in the spring of 1967 by Jeff Donaldson, Gerald McWorter, and Hoyt Fuller. Conceived as a collective of workshops devoted to the visual, literary, and performing arts, OBAC (pronounced “obasi”) was designed “to provide a new context for the Black Artist in which he can work out his problems and pursue his aims unhampered and uninhibited by the prejudices and dictates of the ‘mainstream.’” The group’s aims were thus entirely consistent with BAM’s focus on separatism and self-determination. In 1968, these same goals served as the impetus for the formation of Afri-Cobra (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), one of the best known arts organizations to espouse a black nationalist aesthetic.

To be sure, the *Wall of Respect* itself--a product of the visual art division of OBAC--exemplified some of the most fundamental principles of the Black Arts Movement. Not only did the mural project place art literally on the level of the street, but its exhibition of black heroes constituted a decisive affirmation of a rich African American cultural, intellectual, and political heritage. In this latter respect, the *Wall*’s creators seemed to anticipate writer Addison Gayle’s 1971 declaration that the role of the

black artist was to "provide us with images based on our own lives." Crucially, the public mural also directly united artists with the local black community, for OBAC members turned to South Side residents for inspiration and input on which heroes they wished to see represented on the outdoor mural. Local youth in particular took a strong interest in the project, keeping close tabs on the *Wall* during its construction phase and becoming authorities on its featured subjects. With the formation of Kuumba Theatre in 1968, the *Wall* also served as the site of theatrical street performances, thereby deepening the link between the arts and the surrounding community.

While the Black Arts Movement has no precise end date, its momentum had begun to dwindle by the mid-1970s. Its lasting influence, however, can be seen not only in the work of subsequent black artists, but also in the proliferation of black art galleries, theatres, and publishing houses, as well as in the establishment of African American studies departments in universities nationwide.

Bibliography

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caption for photo:

LeRoi Jones leads the Black Arts parade down 125th Street toward the Black Arts Theater Repertory/School on 130th Street, New York City.

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