



The Public Spaces of Black Women

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Jessica Bell Brown, Kimberly Drew, and Jessica Lynne:
Black Art Incubator*

In New York City, there is a tradition of Black women artists and intellectuals organizing independent spaces, both public and private, in pursuit of an equitable future for Black folk and Black women, in particular. Whether created as political action, performance, educational advocacy, or social recreation, the convening spaces and public institutions established by Black women are structured around providing social services, developing intersectional discourses for political reform and resistance, and the advancement of Black art and cultural production. These spaces are a part of a lexicon of Black urban survival in the United States and have collectively shaped a racialized and gendered architecture of sustainability that has transfigured Black life and livelihood in places like New York City.

This textual mapping of Black women creating public spaces for Black New Yorkers is culled on the occasion of the Recess Session, *Black Art Incubator (BAI)*. BAI is a programming hub for the Black art community, created by Taylor Renee Aldridge, Jessica Bell Brown, Kimberly Drew, and Jessica Lynne. Participatory and accessible in function, the project is a live think tank and resource exchange that posits the subjective needs and gaps facing Black art professionals. Offering a curated series of workshops, crits, and more, BAI's open source workspace is an effective gesture towards the social work of collaboration and skill sharing.

To contextualize the presence of BAI and other artist spaces and programs that are taking shape within the landscape of contemporary American art, a selection of Black women's

leadership in radicalizing public and convening spaces in the spirit of Black communal welfare is presented below.

This text highlights the founding of the White Rose Mission; the artist spaces led by Augusta Savage in Harlem; and the collective activism of Black feminist artists, Faith Ringgold and Michelle Wallace, during the 1970s. These examples represent the continuum of (1) Black women's labor and practice as educators and caretakers within the space of Black art and cultural survival, and (2) Black women's intellectual bodies as strategists, organizers, and transgressors of public space.

The White Rose Mission

The White Rose Mission (WRM) was founded in 1897 as a settlement house addressing the migratory needs of Black women and girls arriving to New York City from the American south and throughout the Black diaspora. Established under the leadership of Victoria E. Matthews (1861-1907) with Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson (1875-1935) and Maritcha Remond Lyons (1848-1929), the organization provided resources and aid in support of the safety, housing, and stability of migrant women. Matthews was staunchly concerned for the well-being and protection of young women who were vulnerable to exploitative employment schemes and sex trafficking in their venture to flee poor living and work conditions in the south and Caribbean. WRM concentrated services on job skill training due to the fragility of the city's labor market towards Black women workers. As Matthews, Dunbar-Nelson and Lyons were also educators and writers, WRM also focused on the cultural and political enrichment of its residents and clients. Bolstered by a prominent rare collection of Negro literature and ephemera, WRM grew to offer history lectures, host social events, and contribute convening space for the intellectual minds and groups of its time.

WRM was a part of a larger network and movement of Black women's clubs organized before the turn of the twentieth century. In the years prior, Matthews and Lyons co-founded the Woman's Loyal Union in 1892 in support of the anti-lynching legislative campaign initiated by Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Outside of New York,

Matthews was also instrumental in the formation of the National Federation of Afro American Women (Boston, est. 1895) and the organizing efforts behind the National Association of Colored Women (Washington D.C., est. 1896). Operating for eighty-seven years, the White Rose Mission closed its doors in 1984.

Augusta Savage and Harlem Art Centers

The art studios of sculptor and teacher Augusta Savage (1892-1962) were a major thread in the fabric of the Harlem arts community on the tail end of the renaissance period and into the pulse of the WPA artist movement during the Depression era. Initially opening a basement studio for small classes, Savage created the Savage School of Arts and Crafts in 1932 and made teaching and community art engagement a major part of her practice. The success of the studio and her work as a principled instructor granted her the appointment as Director of the newly launched Harlem Community Art Center (HCAC) in 1937 through the Federal Art Program. Before HCAC, Savage also supported the development and teaching at other WPA art spaces in Harlem like the Uptown Art Laboratory as well as the Music Art Center. She also ran the Harlem Art Workshop operated through the 135th Street Branch Public Library out of the old home and Dark Tower salon space belonging to A'Lelia Walker. Savage left her position with HCAC as she was commissioned for the New York World's Fair of 1939, and artist Gwendolyn Bennett (1902 - 1981) would take up the order of directing the center from 1938 till its closing. Following her international travel, Savage would invest in creating another public art space in Harlem called the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art. The small gallery operated for a short time at 143 West 125th Street for a year. Augusta's commitment to art education and the transformative role of the artist studio reverberated in the work of many women artists of her time and still today. Gwendolyn Bennett shared the following in a report on the value of the Harlem Community Art Center:

When classes were organized by the WPA/FAP, first in a renovated garage known as the Uptown Art Laboratory, and later in the Music-Art Center, this dream began to take shape. Working closely with Augusta Savage, who was in charge of both of these ventures, I began

to see an ideal acquire bone and sinew. The establishment of the Harlem Community Art Center in a large empty loft at the corner of 125th Street and Lenox Avenue began to symbolize the growth and maturity of this ideal. The coming of eager children to register in the classes, the formation of a sponsoring committee, the long line of visitors from Harlem and from the rest of the country, and the growing enthusiasm among the people who worked in the Center acted like a strong tonic on the entire community.

The public spaces created by Black women artists were plentiful during this time period in New York. 580 Saint Nicholas Avenue was the home of librarian Regina Andrews, Louella Tucker and activist and secretary Ethel Ray Nance, three women who created and hosted one of the most prominent literary salons on the 1920s. Their apartment was more than a gathering space for Black writers, visual artists and intellectuals. The interior space these women hoisted was at the center of the burgeoning cultural movement and funneled much of the period's strategizing, carrying the nickname, "Dream Haven." The space was active for two years before Andrews' marriage and before Nance's move from out of the city. Andrews would go on to co-found the Krigwa Players Little Theatre Group with W.E.B. Du Bois in 1925. A theatre space that began the chain of theatre clubs operated out of the basement of the 135th Street Branch Public Library.

Black Feminist Artists Faith Ringgold and Michelle Wallace

In 1970, Faith Ringgold (b. 1930) and daughter, Michelle Wallace (b. 1952), founded the Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL). WSABAL participated in protest actions against the *Art Strike* which resulted in the inclusion of the women and artists of color in the show. In its second year, WSABAL informed the development of the Ad Hoc Women Artists group and collaborated on confronting the white-male-centricity of the Whitney Museum's biennial. The groups demanded 50% integration of women and artists of color in response to the poor representation of Black and women artists in museums. In reflection of her time witnessing her mother's activism and demonstrating alongside her, Wallace states:

Specifically because of Faith's research and support of Ad Hoc, black women artists Barbara Chase Riboud and Bettye Saar were included in the next Whitney Biennial. Of course, Faith's activism against the museums had not begun in 1970. It really began in 1968 the year of Martin Luther King's assassination, when every black artist and cultural worker in the country was galvanized into action. Only sixteen years old at the time, I accompanied Faith to the first demonstration of black artists against the Whitney Museum and then to a free-for-all (Art Workers' Coalition) demonstrations against the Museum of Modern art.

Ringgold and Wallace would also create the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) with Margaret Sloan-Hunter, Doris Wright, and Florynce Kennedy in 1973. Its Boston chapter broke away the following year and formed the Combahee River Collective, active through 1980, with a focus on Black lesbian feminists. The work of Ringgold and Wallace in the early 1970s laid a foundation for the Black feminist and Womanist movements that echoed through the 1990s. Shaping an intersectional and humanist critique around the lives of Black women and all women of color living, working and creating in the United States. The onset of these two feminist groups, NBFO and Combahee, spearheaded a generation of Black feminist artist writing, performance, organizing and more.

The history of Black women and their public spaces asserts that the Black woman artist at work is often an artist actively engaged in protest. As public engagement is a critical tenet of the intellectual process, today's Black women artists and intellectuals must continue exploring the consequential nature of community-organized spaces in relationship to the Black American city and its viability. Furthering the history of Black cultural criticism through intervention, protest and art is consequential to our very present future.

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