[00:00:00] **PAUL O'NEILL**

Hello. Welcome everybody. For those who've been here before and for those who are first timers, welcome to the Visitor's Talks program at CCS Bard College, which for this semester and last semester is called *Plus One*. Series of lectures, discussions and presentations about being singular plural. That is, we aspire, as Jean-Luc Nancy did, to have insight into the nature of subjectivity as a state of always being with one other. This suggests being singular as akin to a state of always being between one and the other. And we always ask our visitors to speak about a solitary idea, concern, question, person, event, individual that they perhaps have been thinking about, writing about, conceptualizing, producing over the course of their practice, or might be just a recent idea. And we're very honored to have Thelma Golden, who will speak with us on, about, and through concepts of Black space. Before I introduce Thelma, which I'll do, it's a very long CV, so I'm going to just be fairly brief with it. For those who have just joined us and haven't been here before, I tend to just introduce our speaker very briefly. Their bio is available kind of everywhere in digital space, so we can do a little bit of work.

[00:01:38] **PAUL O'NEILL**

And then I will introduce Thelma through a citation or quote from Jean-Luc Nancy's book *Being Singular Plural,* from which and through which this series of presentations, lectures, discussions has emerged. But before I do that, we at CCS have an annual award for Curatorial Excellence, which is a donation by one of our donors, Audrey Irmas, and we are delighted to announce Thelma Golden as our awardee this year. So I really would like you to put your hands together for Thelma.

[00:02:19] **PAUL O'NEILL**

Thelma Golden began her career at the Studio Museum in 1987, prior to joining the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1988. She spent ten years at the Whitney, including the curation of, I think, agenda-setting exhibitions such as the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which has yet to be surpassed in terms of the biennials at the Whitney, in my view, but also in '94 when she organized the renowned exhibition that everybody knows about, of course, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. In her most recent tenure at the Studio Museum, Thelma has served as director and chief curator since 2005, and while at the Museum, she has organized numerous exhibitions, including *Chris Ofili: Afro Muses 1995-2005*, *Black Romantic*: *The Figurative Impulse in Contemporary Art*, *Freestyle*, *Frequency*, *Glenn Ligon: Stranger*, *Harlemworld: Metropolis as Metaphor*, and *Gordon Parks: A Harlem Family 1967*, amongst many, many others. But during her tenure at The Museum, as director, she's invited over 45 outstanding artists to its world renowned Artist-in-Residence Program. Also expanded its collection to nearly 2000 works, and significantly strengthened participation in the education and public programs while increasing their number, raised annual visitorship, and gained a growing representation as a site to be seen in, and a site to be seen.

[00:04:00] **PAUL O'NEILL**

In July of this year, the museum also announced a new building project with David Adjaye, which will take two years I believe, which is amazing. But it goes without saying that Thelma has worked with—I think, and I believe, we all believe—some of the most significant contemporary artists of the last 30 years, from David Hammons to Chris Ofili to Lorna Simpson to Isaac Julien, Renée Green and Glenn Ligon. Together with whom, Thelma coined the term post-blackness—that is with Glenn Ligon—to describe deliberating value in tossing off the immense burden of race-wide representation, the idea that everything they do must speak to or for or about the entire race. Indeed, I think many of Thelma's exhibitions and collaborations and artists have sought, or at least they continue to seek an understanding of Black identity in the 21st century by rejecting attempts at adopting one singular notion of Blackness as an entire or fixed definition.

[00:05:13] **PAUL O'NEILL**

And this evening Thelma will extend these discussions for these spaces of debate by speaking on the notion of Black space, a concept which she proposed and named with the Theaster Gates, the artist, and also the curator Hamza Walker. And, enacted by Thelma, in her curatorial practice and the leadership by the Studio Museum, where the Studio Museum in Harlem is itself a pioneering Black space. At the heart of these discussions around Blackness, multiculturalism, identity politics, cultural specificity, diversity, and communities are always the complex interactions between people—that is, between curators and their communities. Thelma will explore through personal experiences with artists and exhibitions what it means to be involved in the theorization, the production, dissemination and mediation of Black space and its implications in contemporary art and wider in our contemporary culture. So before I hand it over to Thelma, I will just read a very short citation by Jean-Luc Nancy. When he, Jean-Luc Nancy, attempts to define position and he attempts to define position in relation to things, between things, but also people between peoples. Individuals to individuals, singularities to pluralities, multiplicities to multiplicities and so forth, this relationship between the position under this position, so always being in relation to, but always somehow separate from at the same time.

[00:06:53] **PAUL O'NEILL**

And, I feel like Thelma's practice over the last 30 years has been a kind of commitment and a dedication to positioning and repositioning of Black art over the last 30 years, but also as a curator who really defines the institution according to her curatorial endeavors, and vice versa. So one can say that they're completely entangled—the individual and the plural are always completely entangled, with the curator and their communities. So Jean-Luc Nancy says, "the very simplicity or complexity of position implies no more, although no less, than is being discrete in the mathematical sense, or its distinction from, in the sense of with other at least possible positions, or its distinction among, in the sense of between other positions. In other words, every position is also at this position and considering the appearing that takes the place of and takes the place in this position, all appearance is co-appearance. This is why the meaning of being itself is given as existence. Being in oneself, outside oneself, which we make explicit, we humans, but which we make explicit for the totality of beings."

[00:08:38] **THELMA GOLDEN**

Thank you, Paul. Thank you for having me here. Thank you, Tom. I have a long history with the Center for Curatorial Studies, having been a part of the Graduate Committee when this program began. So it is an incredible thrill for me to be here today, to speak here, to be in this physical space, but to be among the space of ideas that this program and the museum have so been about in ways that are incredibly important to me. I also want to say—as a word of say, warning—that I am speaking from a place somewhat unformed, because Paul sort of put this very specific brief to me, and what I realized, it may be known, that as a Museum Director, in many ways, you only talk about one thing, which is your institution, right? That's really what it comes down to most of the time. And so, being sort of pushed towards this idea of thinking about one idea made me, of course, think deeply in some ways about how I would form that. And what I came to, of course, in some ways was my institution, Studio Museum in Harlem. As has been said, I'm the Director and Chief Curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem.

[00:09:55] **THELMA GOLDEN**

But I begin here because in being asked about an idea that has consumed me, that I've been obsessed with thinking about, writing about, working in, around and against, it has been this concept of Black space. What is Black space? Now, as was said, this was an idea that sort of was birthed in some ways, in conversations with the artist, Theaster Gates, and the curator, Hamza Walker, as we tried together to unpack the different ways in which we understood ideas of institutions and the space within, with artists and how they work.

[00:10:32] **THELMA GOLDEN**

For me, this was very specific, because of the fact that I have had the privilege to lead a culturally specific Museum for the last ten years, and I have been there for the last 15. In this role, I have had to answer the question for myself, within our program and to our public, about what it means to be a museum devoted to the work of Black artists. Now, in some ways, that is a question that was really answered in our founding. So, the Studio Museum in Harlem was founded in 1968 to preserve, present, interpret and collect the work of Black artists.

[00:11:14] **THELMA GOLDEN**

It was founded with its name—puts it all there together—to provide a studio program: to have a place that artists could make their work, but also to have that making of work happen in Harlem. Harking back to the days of the Harlem renaissance, when artists were living and working throughout Harlem. But it also was founded as a museum. And that was a way to speak to the very real way that, in 1968, museums excluded the work of Black artists from their collection and their exhibitions. So, it was sort of a radical premise to create a museum and to do it in Harlem, quite literally on 125th Street and Fifth Avenue, about three blocks from where we are now. But, to be a part of what would be the great cultural consciousness that would come from the reinvention of Harlem, that was seen, in that moment, to be Harlem's future. This is a work from our collection called *The Architect* by Jacob Lawrence, one of the founders of the Studio Museum, but who envisions an architect, a Black architect, envisioning space—Black space.

[00:12:18] **THELMA GOLDEN**

For me, this idea of Black space came out of my, sort of, academic life, being an Art History student in the late '80s at Smith College, an amazing Art History department, a fantastic Art History department, and one that was at that time, in no way invested in contemporary art, or in the idea of a kind of cross cultural, multicultural version of parallel art histories. This was happening, of course, for me, as someone who had grown up in New York City, spent my time in museums in New York, and then got to Northampton, really, right at the moment the sort of '80s art world was happening. And very specifically, Jean Michel Basquiat was sort of living in the world, representing art with a big A, but also bringing together ideas of sort of culture, in his work, in the way in which he positioned his work, that were very profound to me.

[00:13:10] **THELMA GOLDEN**

Going back even from that, this idea of who a Black artist was and could be within the context of sort of my growing up world, in the Black community, really, if you ask someone who was a Black artist, they would say J.J. from *Good Times*. Now, you all are too young, I think, to remember the show *Good Times*, but *Good Times*, which was a sitcom, a Norman Lear sitcom, that was about a family that lived in public housing. J.J., the oldest son, had an aspiration to be an artist, and in their public housing apartment made these paintings that were actually the work of an actual artist named Ernie Barnes, who happened to be a retired NFL player. That's a whole other story, right there, but, just leave that to the side. Ernie Barnes's paintings were J.J's paintings on *Good Times*. And for many people, this was a vision of what it meant to be a Black artist. A Black artist was someone who made Black images, for Black people, and that's what J.J. was doing.

[00:14:07] **THELMA GOLDEN**

So, back to 1969, the Studio Museum in Harlem is founded, on 125th Street and Fifth Avenue. This is 2033 5th Avenue, you probably can't see that in the slide, the address, significant in this moment because after being lots of different spaces since we left it in 1979, it is now becoming an art gallery—Elizabeth Dee is moving her gallery into the space, and will open up in May at 2033 5th Avenue. But when we were there, it literally was this, our doorway, which led to a second floor loft space next to a liquor store. But, greeted with a great sense of ambition. A great sense of ambition because of this radical gesture of saying there should be a museum that presents a new art history, an art history that includes the contributions of African-American artists within the dialogue. It was created by a multicultural group of people. Here are our founders, in front of that first space when they inaugurated it, which again opens up the question of validity and cultural specificity—authenticity—when thinking about Black space.

[00:15:14] **THELMA GOLDEN**

This is a work by Romare Bearden. To think about talking about these ideas of conceptual notions of Blackness and modernity, right—really the base from which the Studio Museum was built—one has to engage with the work of the important Mid- Century Modernist Romare Bearden, whose works, on the one hand, sort of took on and look at European Art History to sort of understand and reinvent collage as an art making practice, while at the same time investing the work with the sort of mystery and myth of Black culture and Black life. These are just some images, because this idea of Black spaces, it is mythic space. These are images of Harlem. And, what's interesting about, again, being the director of a Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, is that idea of place becomes so important, right?

[00:16:05] **THELMA GOLDEN**

So when I think about the work that I do as a curator, I have to consider a curatorial act as being one that's about place, and about space, in equal measure. A little more of this sort of classic, fantastic Harlem, the Harlem of the past. But it's also about this space in which Harlem really represents—symbolically and historically—this space of a kind of Black consciousness. These are some images from the '50s and the '60s, of protests that happened in Harlem, symbolic, however, of a long history of Harlem being a space which was thinking and reinventing ideas of what Black resistance is and could mean. This is a line from Amiri Baraka's—then LeRoi Jones’—poem, called “Return of the Native”: "Harlem is vicious modernism. BangClash. Vicious the way its made. Can you stand such beauty? So violent and transforming." Baraka's lines have always spoken to me very directly because they really do speak about this idea of this place, and the space in which the environment that the institution that I run was created.

[00:17:17] **THELMA GOLDEN**

But to talk about Harlem means having to talk about it in the present. And, to talk about in the present is a conversation that gets to a conversation about gentrification and change. And it is also a conversation about what constitutes, in a literal geographic way, Black space. Is it ownership? Is it the creation of the space itself? These are just some images from Harlem as it exists now, but really sort of typifying this idea of the mythology that comes from the reality of being a home of these iconic spaces like the Apollo Theater, but the sort of constant state of change that is happening, due to what is the inevitable move towards the commercial, and the, sort of, economic development ideals that have moved the neighborhood. One of the things, when people talk about the neighborhood, there are many things, often people ask me about the Apollo Theater, rightly so. But, often people ask me about whether or not we see Bill Clinton. And this is what inspired this work by Dave McKenzie, who was an artist in residence in our studio program about ten years ago. Because it was right at the point when former President Clinton moved to Harlem.

[00:18:31] **THELMA GOLDEN**

And that was the question always, right, have you seen President Clinton? This sort of validation of the neighborhood, quite literally, in his choice to move his post-presidential office to Harlem, but also the idea that the physical seeing of him somehow transformed the neighborhood.

[00:18:47] **THELMA GOLDEN**

For one of his year-end Artist-in-Residence projects, Dave got one of these rubber Bill Clinton masks and walked up and down the streets of Harlem. Creating the essential encounter that made real this idea of Clinton in that space. But thinking about this also, for me, has always been about a way in which to think through questions, through curatorial exercises. This is an image from an exhibition that I curated in 2004 called Harlem World. And it was to answer this question, quite literally, of how to understand the community within the shifts of change and gentrification. And this is one of the projects from the show, created as a way to, in real time, create an encounter through the actual opening of the exhibition itself, to really speak to these issues of change. And so, what this project did was envision this space, this building, which is sitting on what actually is the land across from the museum now, where there's a huge office building owned by the State of New York, the State Office Building. And, what was done was that instead of that building taken out in photoshop, this building, which is called the Freedom Tower, and now there is one called a Freedom Tower, but this was before that, in, of course, the form of this clenched fist.

[00:20:08] **THELMA GOLDEN**

And, before the night of the opening—this is back when *The New York Times* real estate section ads existed in physical form in the paper—we placed an ad in *The New York Times* which encouraged people to come to an open house for a new condominium building that was on the Upper, Upper, Upper West Side. And it described the space, of course, with all of the qualities that anyone looking at a luxury condo would be looking at. You know, sort of wolf range, sub-zero refrigerator, and radiant heated bathroom floors, blah, blah, blah, blah. When they called the number, what they got was the museum, and it was the RSVP line for the opening. And many people then, knowing what this was, came, but many did not. They really did think they were coming to an open house.

[00:20:51] **THELMA GOLDEN**

It was in that encounter that we sort of opened up what was an essential conversation at that time, about this idea of how space gets defined, right? And, how space can literally become obliterated, through the actions of both commerce and of the actions of, quite literally, gentrification. Because so much of the anxiety about this was about this demographic, the ending of Harlem as a Black community—a defined Black space—how could we engage that as a museum itself? I often—this is just a page from the introduction for that catalog—speak about what I call the, sort of, prepositional problematic, which is that our name is the Studio Museum in Harlem, but often people say the Studio Museum of Harlem. And I have to balance between those two places, right? The literal sense of us being in Harlem, geographic designation, and being of Harlem—the mistake, then, is also really a mission, right? How are we in and of at the same time? How do we hold those two places together?

[00:22:00] **THELMA GOLDEN**

That really, in a very literal way, is my engagement in this idea of Black space. It is about the literal building of a museum, as it was said, we're in an expansion, but it was really the intellectual frame in which I needed to create in order to begin to understand, very literally, what a museum defined by itself around Black art could be, and how it could continue to be that in ways that were relevant and profound.

[00:22:28] **THELMA GOLDEN**

But this work for me has been ongoing as a curator, because in the many spaces I've worked in, I've tried to figure out how to carve an emotional Black space, a Black space within the context of institutional change. I was a co-curator of the '93 Biennial with Elizabeth Sussman—who directed that Biennial—Lisa Phillips and John Hanhardt. Working on that Biennial with a group of amazing, pioneering artists who all were invested in the idea that was, at core, the idea of that Biennial: could there be a way to understand contemporary art through the multitude of voices making art at that time, 1993, reflecting the two years before that, '91 and '92, as Biennials do, and could that, in some way, fundamentally change not only the definition of what the Whitney Museum of American Art stood for, but could it change in many ways the ideas about the margin and the center as it related to the art world of that moment?

[00:23:30] **THELMA GOLDEN**

That exhibition was filled with any number of pioneering, amazing projects that, for me, changed me very much as a curator. The artists in that exhibition, but none more, perhaps, than Daniel Martinez's admissions buttons, which read, "I can't imagine ever wanting to be white." This project was an intervention, what he liked to say a participatory project with the audience of the Biennial, which involved, of course, in that moment’s Whitney structure, there being a button every day, in a different color, that showed that you paid your admission. And, what Danny did was to create those buttons across the color range that were defined for the space of that Biennial and then broke up the text in ways that randomly, every member of the audience who came in and paid their ticket received a button. So on one level, in the galleries, the entire statement was sort of walking around and finding itself together. But in many ways, each individual statement, as they broke down on these buttons, the “I can't,” the “imagine,” the “ever wanting,” the “to be,” and the “white,” then could live as statements on their own. This was interesting—interesting is an understatement, right—because, in its participatory nature, really what it was getting at was a concept that in that moment was very much the way in which many of us had to enter into this conversation of the multicultural, the multi-voice.

[00:24:59] **THELMA GOLDEN**

And that is through an actual acknowledgment, and creation of space, around whiteness. So that, so much of this, "I can't ever imagine wanting to be white," was about, literally, not just the idea of the sort of racial categories that created margin and center, but also, quite literally, the way in which, in art and in the art world, the universal was white, and everything else that laid around it needed some explanation in relation to that whiteness. What Danny did with this button is sort of bring everyone into that conversation. Now, what I can tell you is that in 1993, many people did not want to be in this conversation, and they certainly didn't think a museum was a place in which they needed to have that confrontation. Interestingly, this button happened in the lobby. And of course, by the time they got through the entire exhibition, they encountered so many different ways in which, as I said, the artists in that exhibition were challenging this notion of how we understood art. For me, this was a creation of a kind of space, curatorially, that was about, "can we exist as curators in museums in a neutral way?" And what I knew because of who I was, and what I believed, and the artists who inspired me and who I was so privileged to work with is that curating would never be a neutral act, and it always would engage on a certain level in an encounter with audience around these essential questions, through the experience of art.

[00:26:35] **THELMA GOLDEN**

This Guerrilla Girls poster from earlier, but for me, I always have to put it up because as much as I read it and I think of it as a figment of my past, something that inspired, you know, my work as a young curator, it still literally resonates today, right? So when I talk about Black space, and again, as coined by Hamza and Theaster and I, it's because we were so invested in this idea of how to make the place for the kind of art that either in Theaster's case he was making, or Hamza and I were curating. But, it also was an acknowledgement about these environments that still have not yielded to an idea of equity.

[00:27:17] **THELMA GOLDEN**

In 1994, I curated an exhibition called *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity* *in Contemporary American Art* at the Whitney. This exhibition looked at the ways in which contemporary artists from the late '60s until 1994 looked at the image of Black men as it was portrayed in the media and in pop culture. So really, it was about the idea of the construction of image-making. Now, at that time, I made the exhibition kind of in the wake of the LA uprisings and the Rodney King incident, and the O.J. trial, and Magic Johnson's, you know, admission that he was HIV positive and had AIDS, and so on, so on. 1994 is the year literally, probably, I would say... The best year in hip hop ever. I had to stop for a second because I was going to maybe have another year. But the best year in hip hop ever, like any major classic hip hop album of any substance, came out in '94. And that's how it felt, like just one after another. And so, in that context, I created this exhibition called *Black Male,* looking at Black masculinity in contemporary art. It was an exhibition that included 28 artists across medium, and of a very racial group.

[00:28:37] **THELMA GOLDEN**

In some ways, this was a curatorial exercise again in an answer—and this is what I understand about myself as a curator, I'm always answering a question—and that is, I was really responding to the idea that while I knew I wanted to make exhibitions that created, literally, in their frame, Black space, I wasn't necessarily committed to exhibitions that only included Black artists around this topic. So that, to create an exhibition about Black masculinity, but not have it be all of Black artists, in and of itself was a curatorial question—and answer—that resulted in the way this exhibition was created.

[00:29:14] **THELMA GOLDEN**

It included a range of artists. This is a detail of Lorna Simpson's *Gestures and Reenactments* that was in the exhibition. So male/female, gay/straight, multicultural, and across generations. Andres Serrano, Jeff Koons, and Adrian Piper. Again, thinking about the ways in which the issues that all of these artists were looking at in their work differently, all of the aesthetic strategies they employed very differently. But how they came together around this reaction, response, to the idea of the Black Male.

[00:29:50] **THELMA GOLDEN**

In thinking about the way in which black space is constructed, for me, I often think of it in relation to audience, right? Because often, what my own curatorial work has always privileged is, yes, my relationship to my peers and to the field, but very deeply my relationship to audience. And, the relationship to audience has always been made clear to me through really what become those real encounters that often, for me, shape my own sense of my own work. So on your left is a work by Robert Colescott, on your right, a work by Leon Golub. This works better when they're not so beautifully captioned by my fabulous curatorial intern. But imagine you didn't see that, who they were by.

[00:30:35] **THELMA GOLDEN**

When the exhibition was on view, it opened up lots of amazing conversations, and I found myself feeling very lucky to be able to be in the world, talking about art, talking about images of Blackness, talking about conceptual practice in all kinds of environments. What that meant—and again, it's hard to imagine this, but this is before the Internet, kind of, I mean, we had chat rooms then, but that was it, okay, so this was before that moment. So I was doing a lot of this on radio, some on television, a lot of it was happening in print. One day, I walked into the galleries, the Whitney, the third floor galleries. The Whitney, its so funny now, because when people say the Met Breuer, I keep saying, "The Met that's now at the Whitney." And I know I have to get over that, but, the Whitney that was, I should say the old Whitney, on the third floor. And a woman came up to me, African-American woman, middle-aged, and she said, "you're Thelma Golden?" And I said, "yes." She said, "you curated this show?" And I said, "yes I did." She pointed to the Robert Colescott work and said to me that what she thought was flawed about this exhibition was the fact that I was doing it at the Whitney, which she referred to, literally, as a "white space," and that I was allowing for works by white artists—so she completely racializes, instantly, pointing to this work—who, she said, for centuries have depicted us in stereotypical, negative, and non-supportive ways.

[00:32:01] **THELMA GOLDEN**

She then, without taking a breath, pointed to this work, which is in the front of the galleries, by Leon Golub, and said that I should have made a show all of Black artists, and I should have made the show in a Black space, which then reinforced, as she said, what we—putting me into this racialized construct she created—what we know about ourselves: the dignity, the pride, the way in which we can exist as human outside of the stereotype. Now, after she said that, I was one, sort of fascinated because, again, she racialized the entire conversation in ways that were really powerful and profound and that I was not unfamiliar with. But also, what she did was create for me the ability to talk to her in a very direct way, but also to begin to rethink the way I think about things. So I said to her, "Ma'am, this work that you pointed to is by Robert Colescott," who at the time—was an African-American artist—but at the time in his 70s, someone who lived through segregation, et cetera. And then, I told her the work on the right was a work by a white artist named Leon Golub.

[00:33:06] **THELMA GOLDEN**

Now, that wasn't really necessary to give her an art history lesson, but, to really open up a space then, where we then could have what, for me, in the space we created standing in the galleries, was a conversation about what it meant, for example, for Robert Colescott to make work that looked at stereotypes, that looked at constructed images, that took art history—because I explained to her the sort of spoof that this was about, but also to look at Leon Golub's work, right? And understand that the space in which, that did not exist within a frame of art for her, of a kind of normalized presentation, could exist kind of across different artists. It was amazing. And, it was also where this idea of reaction from the audience, really for me, defines how I can understand in many ways how works and how artists can live and exist.

[00:34:03] **THELMA GOLDEN**

Really, where I am now is sort of understanding this idea of Black space as a construct from which to really begin to create nuance around the understanding of a multitude of practices. I'm going to go through quickly just a lot of different artists who have been important around this for me. So, is there a way in which we can move away from sort of the narrow confines of the racial designations, and gender, often, that create categories for artists that still render them as other? And can we, moving past the biographical, move into a place where we understand the conceptual import of a kind of Black psyche, a Black consciousness, that then informs a body of work?

[00:34:52] **THELMA GOLDEN**

Now, I've been interested in this, through work, this is Chris Ofili. You can read all this. I'm not going to read them all to you. But, really began to unpack this through a series of exhibitions. There is a seat, I'm sorry, ma'am on the crutches, I have to say, there's a seat right here, and there's one over here. Yeah, she can't stand. Yeah, perfect. Thank you.

[00:35:21] **THELMA GOLDEN**

This really got unpacked through a series of exhibitions that have been referred to as a group called the 'F' shows: *Freestyle* being the first in 2001, *Frequency* in 2004, *Flow,* 2008, and *Four* in 2011, I believe. So, what we call the 'F' shows. *Freestyle* being the first one where, as Paul said, in trying to find a frame to look at Black artists who at that time were emerging, all emerging in their practices? Could there be a way to construct a space in which we could talk about the work, with an idea of multiplicity? Could we acknowledge that there was not one Black practice? Now, this was clear to me because the artists themselves were arguing for that in the work that they made. But it was really in a conversation with Glenn Ligon—Glenn Ligon, an artist who has been singularly important to me in my understanding of how to think about art and how to think about myself as someone in the conversation about art and someone who also has been important to me in helping to develop the space in which I've been working as I've been at the Studio Museum in Harlem. So, when trying to find the way in which to understand what this first 'F' show would be, *Freestyle*, Glenn and I had resorted to looking at this kind of shorthand that we had adopted when talking about an encounter with some of the significant young work that we were seeing.

[00:36:50] **THELMA GOLDEN**

He was seeing it as an artist, doing visiting artists' lectures and crits, I was seeing it doing studio visits. And what we coined it, what we said it was, we said it was post-black art. We were using Black art, in some ways, as a pejorative, right? Because, there was this concept of Black art, from the '60s to present, that in the Black arts movement was defined in complex ways, but then became a very narrowing concept, that was a way to engage and to really, narrow—-it's the only way to say it—a way of understanding a multitude of practices and a whole generations of artists. This is seen probably most profoundly, and most problematically, for me, problematically? That's not a word. But you know what I mean. When I go into museums, for example, that have an American art gallery or a Contemporary art gallery, a 20th Century gallery, and then there's an African-American art gallery, as if African-American art does not exist within the context of those things.

[00:37:50] **THELMA GOLDEN**

So Glenn and I were like, okay, how do we talk about what's post-black art? How do we allow this generation of artists some space? Because Glenn and I talk all the time, I mean, literally, we're on the phone a lot, everything becomes a shorthand, and it became post-black, and that was the frame with which *Freestyle*, and then *Frequency* and *Flow*, were created. It didn't describe a style of work, it didn't describe a particular attitude towards practice, but really a way of being. A way that really was about looking at the sort of narrow ways in which race had been defined around art, and breaking it open, and providing that for artists within the frame of the Studio Museum itself.

[00:38:33] **THELMA GOLDEN**

But this also was sort of counter to another way in which I had to really think about this idea of Black space within the context of Black practice, and that is, literally move myself into real Black spaces. So, if you imagine the space created in shows like *Freestyle*, *Frequency*, *Flow*, and *Four*, are those created by the institution, right? And that's what's sort of what's beautiful about institutional space. But then, there's real space, that exists in the world. And the reason I wanted to go out into that space is because for all these years, 30—that was sort of horrifying when you said that, for 30 years I've been doing this. I was like okay... I mean, it's true, it's just kind of mind blowing to think of it in that way.

[00:39:14] **THELMA GOLDEN**

But, in these 30 years, I have spent, you know, my entire career talking about the power and the possibility and the sort of beauty and the brilliance of Black artists. It is, you know, my one single thought, passion, it's what drives me, it's my mission, it's what I have been about. And, so, when encountering, sometimes, a challenge to that, again, make a show. So, I got a call from a very well known, sort of Hollywood personality, who told me that he had commissioned a Black artist—and that's how I referred to him, without a name in that first conversation—to make a group of works that were going to be, in his mind, the most groundbreaking works that would show the history of Black people. So he described it to me as like a Sistine Chapel for Black culture, okay? He asked me if I would like to come see this work in progress, and offered, of course... This is all leading to the potential of a show, right, of this Sistine Chapel of Black culture that he was offering for the Studio Museum.

[00:40:20] **THELMA GOLDEN**

When I met this artist, I have to say the artist...I had never heard of the artist, and that artist had never heard of me. So, that was interesting on both ends, right? So on the ego side, I'm thinking, okay, this is a Black artist. I've been, I just said, all about, my mission, black artist, all the time, 24/7. He never heard of me, okay? But on the other hand, when I got the package, this artist had 15 years of exhibitions, a long list of collections where his work had been acquired, multiple commissions of the scale and size, and I'd never heard of him. And that made me, on a certain level, sort of say, okay, this issue of Black space gets very literal when I enter into a Black world. And what he was, was an example of a whole group of artists, Black artists, who were living and working completely outside of the art world. And, not outside of the art world because of, say, issues of exclusion, but really out of choice, right? So that their choice was that they wanted to work in worlds in which they were making work that, in their mind, addressed a very singular project.

[00:41:32] **THELMA GOLDEN**

And that is, to counteract the images being created of Black people out in the mainstream world, and that through their art, they would do that. They were, in some ways, incredibly old fashioned in their sense of issues like craft. They were incredibly derogatory about conceptual practice. And, the ones that did know me sort of saw me as sort of evil incarnate, right? Because I, in their mind, was out in the world promoting this idea of an art that they felt did not represent, in any way, the values of Black people.

[00:42:05] **THELMA GOLDEN**

So, I did an open call. Now, part of why I did this as well is because my mother, my late mother, was the proudest mother on the planet. She loved everything I did. She kept clippings of every little mention of anything I ever did. She had a little scrapbook. It was, like, awful, when at the end of her life, she was in a nursing home, god forbid the person who came to do her blood pressure, they were subjected to the scrapbook, and what should have been five minutes, she made them go through, and she started at the '93 Biennial. And I'd be like, mom, that you can't start that far back. But she was just incredibly, incredibly proud. But, she absolutely hated all the art I ever showed. And not like in a visceral, Jesse Helms way. She just, for her very sort of race woman, middle-class black woman, it was just too many naked people, it was too much about things that she just felt, "I don't really need to encounter that, I know that's in the world, but I don't need that." So she'd come, like she was at the Whitney every day during *Black Male*, she just was downstairs, in the lobby greeting all of the guests she invited to see my great show that her daughter did at the Whitney, but she was not up there.

[00:43:10] **THELMA GOLDEN**

So this issue was also one that I grew up with, and my mother kind of said, can't you ever do a show of some positive art? So, that was my open call to all these artists. I went and looked at all the ways they described themselves as Black figurative, Romanticism, Realism, Social Realism. Did this open call, got like, 200 submissions, and then picked this whole group of artists making works that were about this kind of really, really authentic idea of the sort of beautiful, you know, positive Black experience. No show I've ever done has changed me more than doing *Black Romantic*, that was the name of it, in 2004. Because, it really put into question the fact that I sit deeply in my belief that as a curator, I can exist in a theoretical space. As a museum director, I also believe deeply that I exist in a physical space. But this was the exhibition that made me understand, in some ways, the sort of spiritual component, if I can say it that way, right, of art.

[00:44:15] **THELMA GOLDEN**

So that these artists really were operating from a place that our ability to move forward as a race was really dependent on them, and this work that they made, it being in the world, and it promoting this idea of a positive image of Black people. This artist, Kadir Nelson, I have to say, we've become friends through this. Disagree about art, completely and totally, but have found this space in which we can have a conversation about it in ways—as I've watched his career, he's done stamps for the US. Postal Service, you know, he really has become a primary documenter, I have to say, of Black culture through his work. But this exhibition, putting these works on the wall, and really, more than anything, it was an exhibition which really talked about taste. Because, what I was saying is that even though, to the art world, I exist as a Black museum with a big B and in some idea, the validity of what that is, is what we show, I was really opening up that there's a whole other conversation about this that's not in the art world, right? And what happens if I turn, turn my back to the art world, and turn my front to this world, and say, "what does it mean to create space for this dialogue?"

[00:45:33] **THELMA GOLDEN**

But, you know, as I said, that group of artists stay with me. Like they, you know, when I think about this idea of Black space, I think about those artists who were in *Black Romantic*. But, I also continue to think about the space that is created in the practices of artists like Mark Bradford or Kara Walker. Detail of Kara's work. Or, Theaster Gates, who, again, this is, very literally, have worked this out with. Or, Glenn Ligon, who, as I said, not only in this kind of intellectual exchange that we have, but through his works, has charted a course around these ideas of race and identity in politics, through the practice of painting. This is Glenn's *Negro Sunshine*.

[00:46:18] **THELMA GOLDEN**

I'm thinking about it in the works of artists like Lorna Simpson, but as a way to also say that in thinking about this idea of Black space, I am also, of course, thinking across the idea of black as the holding place, but for this sort of wider idea of diversity. So, what is the space that diversity can create? Or, Rodney McMillan, who we just opened a show last week, LA artist, and we just opened a show at the Studio Museum, a survey of his work, which I hope you all will see. This is Rodney's piece from the Sharjah Biennial and again, in the way in which Rodney is working with installation, again, is there a way that the literal and the conceptual sort of come together?

[00:47:01] **THELMA GOLDEN**

Mickalene Thomas, the female gaze. People often ask me, did you ever think about doing a show called “Black Female”? One, I'm not good at the sequel, but two, in so many ways, if I had thought of it, I realized it was a show that unpacked so much more. It was less about this gaze that came from the mainstream to the Black male—that's what *Black Male* was about—if I did a show that was “Black Female,” it would have been the work created by the Black female, to redefine the space of the Black female folk.

[00:47:34] **THELMA GOLDEN**

This is a work by Nona Faustine that we just acquired for our collection: a set of photographs documenting these performances that she did, downtown Manhattan, in the sites of the slave commerce and burial grounds, sort of putting her body, literally, in the space, Black space. Or, Carrie Mae Weems' Roaming series. This is out of that series, but where she's photographing herself encountering the great museums of the world, right, standing in front of them as a Black woman, a Black artist, and what that encounter means and symbolizes around this ideal, in some ways, of where and how the space gets defined.

[00:48:14] **THELMA GOLDEN**

This is Kerry James Marshall's painting, this masterwork, *The Studio*, which was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum, and I think, is a central work that's in his retrospective, which is opening up at the MCA Chicago. But, these works in which he continues to make works about the artists, the space not just the artist creates, but who the artist themselves is. Kerry has actually argued for an even more radical premise than, say, my construction of Black space might be, and that is for a full Black aesthetic, that takes all of its values from inside the community, as opposed to always seeing them in reaction to art history. It's been very provocative in talking to Kerry about it, and you see this somewhat in his work, right, which he can very elegantly and simply describe as repopulating the space of art history with these Black figures and these Black images, but has implications, when one thinks about it, that are incredibly, incredibly profound.

[00:49:12] **THELMA GOLDEN**

Tony Lewis, again, another emerging artist that recently acquired work in the collection, working with language, but really the erasure of language. So, again, where do these ideas go without the language, the namings, that create the constructs that bind. Or, William Pope.L.

[00:49:32] **THELMA GOLDEN**

So, on this issue of Black... When I was working on *Black Male* in '93, there, in the catalog for *Black Male*, there's a disclaimer. I don't remember if it's in the front or the back. But, in 1993, this issue of what Black people call themselves was a big issue, because Black people had been many things: colored, to Black, to African-American. So, we were at African-American, and then African-American in that moment acquired both its hyphen and its capital letters, and that was the sort of times say styleguide of that moment, moving to African-American with a hyphen and two capital A's. But, there was a lot of conversation in the community about naming, right, and that using Black was moving backwards to a derogatory place. And so, in thinking about both this idea, that Paul has asked me to talk about, but quite literally how it's playing out in my work.

[00:50:28] **THELMA GOLDEN**

I have taken on, since 2000, being at the Studio Museum, the idea that we can use "Black" in a way that is both full, but also neutral. So when I say Black, I'm really encompassing all of the experiences of people of African descent, without having to say Caribbean-American, African-American, Afro-British, Afro-Canadian—you know, all the ways in which we understand the experience to be. Now, part of that is because when I got to this video museum, our mission said that we were a museum that collected, preserved, and interpreted work by African-American artists and artifacts of the African Diaspora. Okay? African-American with two big A's and a hyphen. That was in 2000, that mission has been in place for about ten years.

[00:51:15] **THELMA GOLDEN**

We changed that mission to say that we were a museum that collected, presented, preserved, and interpreted work by artists of African descent, locally, nationally, internationally. Now, that was a profound shift in some ways because, one, it took away this idea that African-American was sort of the central black narrative, then responding to sort of artefacts of Africa—that is, Africa being the past. So meaning that's a very United States-centric idea of the passage of Africa, slavery to the US. It didn't include all the other black experiences. And it also was important because it quite literally opened us, the Studio Museum in 2000, beginning of the 21st century, to being an international and global institution. The museum had shown artists from abroad before, but this was like literally a mission way to really make that clear. So, with that very well, beautifully word-smithed mission, it also meant that I adopted using the term Black again, which has a sort of radical import because generationally, conceptually, it still, for some, speaks to something that perhaps we haven't yet reconciled. It's why I love William Pope.L's work, and we've acquired many of them, because in these sort of amazing concrete poems that he makes that are drawings, this one, Black people are *The Window and the Breaking of the Window*. It really does speak to this idea, and this ideal, of Black.

[00:52:43] **THELMA GOLDEN**

This is an image of the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, which is currently being built on the Mall at the Smithsonian. This detail, designed by David Adjaye. This detail, of course, shows its important location as it sits there by the Washington Monument in the view of the White House, et cetera, and a museum devoted to this idea, as I said, the name of, African-American culture and history.

[00:53:10] **THELMA GOLDEN**

About two years into my tenure at the Studio Museum, the artist Isaac Julien—someone who had an amazing show here, at this museum—came to see me. And, he did what a lot of people do, which is he made the mistake of taking the number 1 train instead of the 2/3. Now, downtown, they run altogether on 7th Avenue, but at 96th Street, they split apart. And the 2/3 comes to Lennox Avenue and 125th, which is just a half block away. The 1 goes to Broadway and 125th Street, which is very far away. It's like Columbia, which we don't really even call Harlem, at that end. So, Isaac got off in the wrong place. He was totally discombobulated, and he asked a couple of people if they knew where the Studio Museum was, they did not know. And finally he asked a third man and he said, "I'm sorry, I know I'm supposed to be on 125th Street, but I'm looking for the Studio Museum, do you know where it is?" And the man began to say, "no, I don't" and then he looked at him and said, "oh, you mean the Black Museum?" And Isaac said, "yes." And he told him exactly where we were.

[00:54:08] **THELMA GOLDEN**

When Isaac came and told me that story, I sort of owned that. I said, "yeah, the Black Museum." That is what we are. And, the Black Museum, as creator of Black space. This is Gary Simmons' work. Again, looking at the ways in which a Black museum—or, the Black Museum, as that man referred to us to Isaac—can create what is the space for the different ways in which practice are actually doing the work, for me, of understanding how this aesthetic will play out. This is the entrance of the Central Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, this last Venice Biennale. It was curated by Okwui Enwezor. This on the top, you're seeing a neon work by Glenn Ligon. And, in front of the door is a piece by Oscar Murillo, an Afro-Colombian artist from London, Glenn Ligon from the US. Black space, creating it. And Chris Ofili's sort of room, octagon-shaped room in the spaces of the Arsenale that were designed by David Adjaye, but in this space, literally designed for Chris' paintings. Again, this sort of engagement.

[00:55:24] **THELMA GOLDEN**

You know, on this issue of Black or Afro, you know, Chris Ofili is also someone who's constructed an idea of a kind of black sensibility that he coined as Afro, an Afro-sensibility. To him, that encompasses the African, the American and the kind of hybrid space between. And he uses that space quite literally, it shows up, in his drawing works where you see the men with the afros. But, it also comes out, quite literally, in his titling, right? Where he creates a kind of cosmological worldview in which "Afro" sort of defines whatever comes after.

[00:56:00] **THELMA GOLDEN**

This is the work by Xaviera Simmons, a former artist-in-residence who has a fantastic piece right up now in the windows at the Museum of Modern Art. And Alma Thomas, I'm going backwards also as just a preview to our summer, backwards in time, this is a work from the late '60s by the abstract painter Alma Thomas. We are thrilled to have organized a retrospective of Alma Thomas's work that's now at the Tang Museum at Skidmore and will come to the Studio Museum this July. Thomas is someone who was the first graduate in the art department at Howard University, which is a historically black college in Washington D.C.. She graduated from that program in the teens, the 19-teens, and then went on to be a public school art teacher in the District of Columbia for her entire career. When she retired at 65, she began painting in her home in the late sixties and her paintings immediately resonated with the larger kind of ideals of the Washington Color Field Painting School, and she received a lot of attention late in her life, which culminated in a retrospective at the Corcoran Museum and at the Whitney Museum between '74 and '75.

[00:57:08] **THELMA GOLDEN**

She died shortly thereafter and there have been a few exhibitions since, but nothing that has really looked at her work in a comprehensive way as this pioneering abstract painter. So, we are thrilled to be having this show this summer.

[00:57:22] **THELMA GOLDEN**

And then also moving to another recent exhibition but also a recent acquisition. Lorraine O'Grady's 1983 work *Art Is*, created when told in the '80s by an African-American social worker that art had no relevance to the Black community. And Lorraine, in answering that, created this performance piece where with these gold frames, she went to what is our yearly parade in Harlem, which is called the African-American Day Parade, which parades up 7th Avenue in Harlem with floats that are created and sponsored by everything from our lodges and the churches and the Girl Scout troops to the local radio stations.

[00:58:02] **THELMA GOLDEN**

And she, along this parade line with a float, sort of put these frames to the audience and the visitors to the parade, and photographed them—in this kind of literal representation of this engagement through performance art—in the act of art and the act of being art, to answer that question about what art is, but more importantly, what it could be. Thrilled to have acquired this work for our collection because I think it brings some of these questions, and again, these are questions for me, into a full circle.

[00:58:34] **THELMA GOLDEN**

This is from my Instagram, and again, ending with Glenn Ligon's MeWe, which is a neon that's in our lobby, a commissioned work. This, of course, is a morning when I came in and this group of students from the Thurgood Marshall Academy, a Charter school in Harlem, were coming in, getting ready for their tour. Their teacher was trying to settle them, and I knew the way to settle them was to say, I want to take a picture, which brought out great excitement among these third graders to take a picture with Glenn's neon. But the neon, the "Me" and the "We" come from a poem that was recited by Muhammad Ali when he was Cassius Clay. This was at the height of the early part of his boxing career as Cassius Clay, went to Harvard, known for, of course, his use of language, and after a lecture, he was asked by the students to give them a poem. One of them said, "Cassius give us a poem." And he got up, dramatically, and just said, "me, we." And, Glenn, as the great capturer of words that speak to these larger concepts and ideals, created this work for the Museum to be in our atrium.

[00:59:44] **THELMA GOLDEN**

Living inside the space, our space, but really projecting out onto the street this sort of sentiment by Ali of thinking of the individual and the collective—oneself, one's community, the singular and the plural—in ways that, I think, sort of define any understanding I can have, or that I'm working towards, around this ideal of Black space. This is a literal rendering of our new space, the Studio Museum in Harlem that David Adjaye is designing. And, while I'm more often than not talking about this as a physical space and that's what it is, we are in a converted bank building that was built in 1914 as a bank, so this will be our first custom built museum in the life of the Studio Museum. It will double our gallery space, triple our public program space, create really amazing studios for our residency program which can expand. But really, more than all of those things—which are amazing and important and I'm so thrilled at the idea of—it's also about literalizing what has been the engagement, by this museum, a culturally specific museum, a Black museum, a Black space, in defining what that means, as it has for our last 48 years, and as it will for the next 50 and beyond.

[01:01:02] **THELMA GOLDEN**

Thank you.