

# How African-American Artists Fought to Diversify Museums



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In 1969, a white curator named Allon Schoener mounted an exhibition titled “Harlem on My Mind” at the Museum of Metropolitan Art. Despite being the first-ever exhibition of African-American art at the museum, however, it included only archival material and the work of photographers (then considered to be beneath the status of fine art), and failed to include a single non-photographic work created by a black artist. The exhibition immediately provoked an outcry from the very people it aimed to represent. African-American artists picketed the museum, furious with Schoener’s oversight. Though the exhibition was radical in one way—showcasing a medium that deserved serious attention—it ultimately represented one of many missteps from the curator, demonstrating the lack of diversity within the institution.

The exhibition is one of three addressed in Susan Cahan’s new book *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, which looks at how major New York museums marginalized African-American artists in the late 20th century, and how those artists responded



20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern” in 1984, the major institutions of the New York art world attempted to exhibit African-American artists while refusing to put them on an equal footing with the white canon or to commit to structural changes by hiring curators of color.

Now Associate Dean and Dean of the Arts at Yale College, Cahan has drawn from her background working in museums like the New Museum and MoMA to craft a book that powerfully demonstrates the way in which broader social and political forces are felt inside museum walls. And though the art world is different today, “the most significant change since the 1970s has not been full integration or equality, but the development of a two-tiered system of cultural institutions, one ‘mainstream’ and the other ‘culturally specific,’” Cahan writes.

*Mounting Frustration* is a crucial read for anyone who is interested in understanding why the New York art world looks the way it does. The book also furthers an understanding of how activism and negotiation can be used to change institutions going forward. I sat down with Cahan to discuss the ways in which museums respond to political demands, the relationship between artists and institutions, and how the history of the 1970s and 1980s can help us imagine a different art world in the future.

**Isaac Kaplan:** Looking at the Whitney’s “Contemporary Black Artists in America” in 1971, that show was, perhaps, well-intentioned but ultimately proved very problematic, with African-American artists withdrawing from the exhibition and picketing it. What went wrong?

**Susan Cahan:** In early 1969, an artist-activist group called the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) approached the Whitney to advocate for the museum being more inclusive. One of the group’s requests was that the museum mount an exhibition of work by African-American artists. And BECC asked that that show be curated or co-curated by someone who identified with the experience of African Americans. The museum refused. Instead, they put the show in the hands of an in-house curator who was out of his depth. And despite his seeking external advice and doing a fair amount of research, it was unrealistic to expect that someone with no previous involvement with this material could become an instant expert.

**IK:** Did the Whitney ever do this with other exhibitions—assign a curator to a subject they had little experience with? Or does this suggest that they thought, “Well, anyone can curate a show of black art”?

**SC:** I don’t know for sure. But I do know that the museum told the artists that it was institutional policy not to use guest curators. And then the very same year, the museum did an exhibition of Native American art that was organized by a guest curator. So the museum wasn’t always forthcoming. The history is interesting, but the more important point for us today is to understand what kinds of mechanisms are used to define identities and cultures. The mechanism in this case was an administrative ploy, the Whitney’s misleading declaration that the museum



One of the things that drove me to write this book, and that underlies my thinking, is a desire to understand the ways in which art institutions perpetuate cultural hierarchies and certain concepts of race—even the existence of the concept of race. The planning for the “Contemporary Black Artists in America” show involved sifting through artists and identifying the racial identity of each before then deciding whether or not to include him or her in the exhibition. This was an operation that ultimately served neither the artists nor the institution. This was segregation in the guise of integration.

**IK:** What were the protests in response to these exhibitions able to achieve? And how do we look back at history and see protest movements as models for present and future activism in the art world?

**SC:** In every case study presented in the book, the artists began with an openhearted invitation to help the museums grow. And only after being either ignored or misapprehended did the artists begin to resort to more confrontational methods. And in some cases the confrontational methods (protests, for example,) were designed to leverage media coverage and bring public attention to the museums’ biases. So this was a dynamic system and, in each instance, the relationship between the artists and the museums were complicated and nuanced.

The artists who led these efforts toward change loved the museums. Benny Andrews, for example, said that protesting outside the Met was like protesting your grandmother. Faith Ringgold loved, *loved* the Museum of Modern Art. A piece of hers that MoMA recently acquired—the first painting that MoMA has ever acquired by her, one of the greatest artists of the 20th century—was *American People Series #20: Die*, painted in 1967 and purchased in 2016. And it was influenced by Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), a work that she saw hanging on the walls of the museum in the 1960s. So these artists were not simply protesting against institutions; they were trying to help the culture advance.

**IK:** There were broader goals beyond just these individual exhibitions.

**SC:** Yes. And, these protests were acts of generosity for those who were willing to listen.

**IK:** But the museums framed them as confrontations.

**SC:** The picture that I try to portray is one of tensions between groups that were all invested in the vitality of museums as institutions but had different notions of what that meant. Institutions, as they grow and mature, begin to consolidate their identities. And the people who work in those institutions and run those institutions are active agents in that process. But so are those who visit those institutions and have their work collected by those institutions—all these groups participate in the construction of an institution’s identity. And so the artists who were working to broaden the range of art shown in those museums were trying to help those museums evolve.



curators or black staff members. Looking at “Harlem on My Mind” as an example, Met curator Allon Schoener makes some really jaw-dropping decisions with the show, especially the controversial catalogue. Can we talk about that?

**SC:** He made a decision not to have an established author write the introduction to the catalog. Instead, he adapted a term paper that had been written by a high school student. And when he edited the paper, one of the things he did was remove all of the citations and redraft the paper as if she had written it without the use of scholarly sources, as if it was a personal testimony. He also made another alteration, which I note in the book, which is that he changed the word “negro” to “black.” I guess that was more in sync with his vision of the exhibition as being aligned with the agenda of racial progress, but at the same time he was literally putting words in the author’s mouth.

An important point to keep in mind is that what Schoener did was no different than what many still do today; he had a preconceived idea of what it meant to be African-American, and he reworked the expressions of this young woman to coincide with his notion of that identity. That operation of mapping our own internalized notions of racialized identity onto the world around us is something that I document in the book time and again. It is something that we still live with today and are struggling with now to an intense degree.

**IK:** You’re a white author dealing with the history of primarily African-American artists. How did you think about your position while writing this book?

**SC:** I thought about it quite a bit. My greatest fear was that I would be accused of doing the exact same things that I’m critiquing in others. Because I am a student of the sensitivities that surround intercultural conversations, I was equipped to work very hard to try and avoid making the same mistakes that I was describing. So for example, I use a lot of quotations in the book. I was very conscious of wanting readers to hear what artists and activists—and trustees, curators, and directors—had to say in their own words.

Of course, putting them in context affects how they’ll be read and how their meanings will be gleaned but I approached this with a knowledge base built on decades of experience, research, and contemplation. Also, this is a book about the history of museums. And I’ve spent the majority of my life working in museums. These are museums that I have been a part of. So this history is my own history, too.

**IK:** Is the goal of the book to help make structural change?

**SC:** Yes, but it is not prescriptive. What I’m often asked when I give readings or lectures about the book is: What should museums be doing now? What should museums be doing in 2016? I don’t think there is a single prescription. It’s important for museums to be cognizant of their own



and failures that I offer can help people who work in our field avoid certain kinds of common mistakes. It's a very modest agenda. [Laughs].

**IK:** One question I have is whether the culturally grounded institutions that came out of the movements you write about are a gradual step towards a racially diverse, egalitarian art history and art world. Or if in creating culturally grounded institutions, you actually alleviate the pressure MoMA, the Met, the Whitney, etc., might feel to be more diverse?

**SC:** I think we need to look at the art world as a dynamic system. And I think that there is a very close and important and strong relationship between many culturally grounded institutions and what we think of as the major institutions. And at this point I think the Studio Museum, in particular, and other culturally grounded museums in general are at the forefront of research and innovation in bringing to light and creating knowledge about work by artists of color. The Studio Museum in Harlem's Artist in Residence program is of inestimable importance for all of us. And so I think that I would reframe the dynamic and I would reframe the question to focus on culturally grounded institutions as really being leaders and at the forefront at this point in time.

**IK:** Right, and you begin the book with the Studio Museum, which has also made training curators a major part of its mission.

**SC:** Yes. The Studio Museum has been indispensable in being a training ground for people of color—and also for white people. The world is changing, and places like the Studio Museum are at the cutting edge. And now, if I may interview you: how did you get interested in this book?

**IK:** I was at a talk about diversifying museums, and New York Cultural Commissioner Tom Finkelpearl was speaking, and he described reading this book, *Mounting Frustration*. He talked about how institutions are dealing today with some of the exact same problems, and deploying similar mitigation strategies, to those of the '60s and '70s. And what struck me was that the solutions, while obviously changing somewhat during that time, aren't very different.

We need to transfer institutional power to create a more egalitarian framework. And while parts of the art world have changed, this transfer hasn't happened to a degree where anyone can say the problem has been solved. There is a lack of historical reflection. I read a great *Hyperallergic* article about this. When the Guggenheim did a Carrie Mae Weems show, they sort of trumpeted the show by saying "Oh, this is the first solo show by a black woman at this institution ever."

**SC:** Right. To celebrate this history of neglect is odd. People ask me, "Well, are things better now?" Well, actually, the Kerry James Marshall exhibition at the Met Breuer now, "Mastry," that is a killer show. In addition to the exhibition itself, the Met asked Kerry to do an installation of work from the collection that he felt influenced or has a relation to his own work. It's one of the smartest "educational" projects that I've ever seen. And of course the collections at the Met are so amazing that it's an incredible exhibition in its own right. But it really shows you in a nonverbal,



**IK:** You write that museums channel their “egalitarian impulses” into the area of education. Why do you think that is, and what impact have educational departments made on these institutions?

**SC:** I think that at a certain point in time after artists had been protesting for inclusion that museums, generally speaking, became more comfortable with people of color as consumers of art rather than producers. And so education programs became a means of diversifying audiences by reaching out to “underserved” communities. And that to a certain extent perhaps immunized the museums against criticism. And so I critique the growth of community outreach and the proliferation of education programs even though I believe that they’re good things. But this isn’t a simple story; this is a very complicated story.

I think that one very positive outcome that resulted from the creation of educational programs for underserved communities in the late ’60s and ’70s was that these departments were very often the gateways for people of color to be hired by museums. They provided the first professional opportunities, and then from there many important figures went on to work in the field more broadly.

**IK:** Lowery Sims is an example.

**SC:** Lowery Sims would be an example. She started in the Community Programs Department at the Metropolitan Museum. Claudine Brown started as an educator at the Brooklyn Museum. And so these became conduits through which people who were not given opportunities in the power centers of the museum could enter through education departments and then move on from there.

**IK:** I think a lot of people are thinking about the degree to which progress in the world is hard-won and constantly susceptible to being rolled back. And your book provides an example of that in the arts—John Hightower’s radical and brief tenure as director of MoMA in the early 1970s, which was followed by decades of more conservative leadership after Hightower’s ouster. I do find that in the arts there is this undiscussed and wrong assumption that efforts toward change will keep happening—as though we’ve crossed some sort of fundamental threshold, that somehow we actually are not able to return back to the eras and decades you write about—

**SC:** —but history doesn’t move in a straight line.

—Isaac Kaplan