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Howard McCALEBB

BLACK FACES MATTER. TRIBALISM IN A POST-ENLIGHTENMENT WORLD

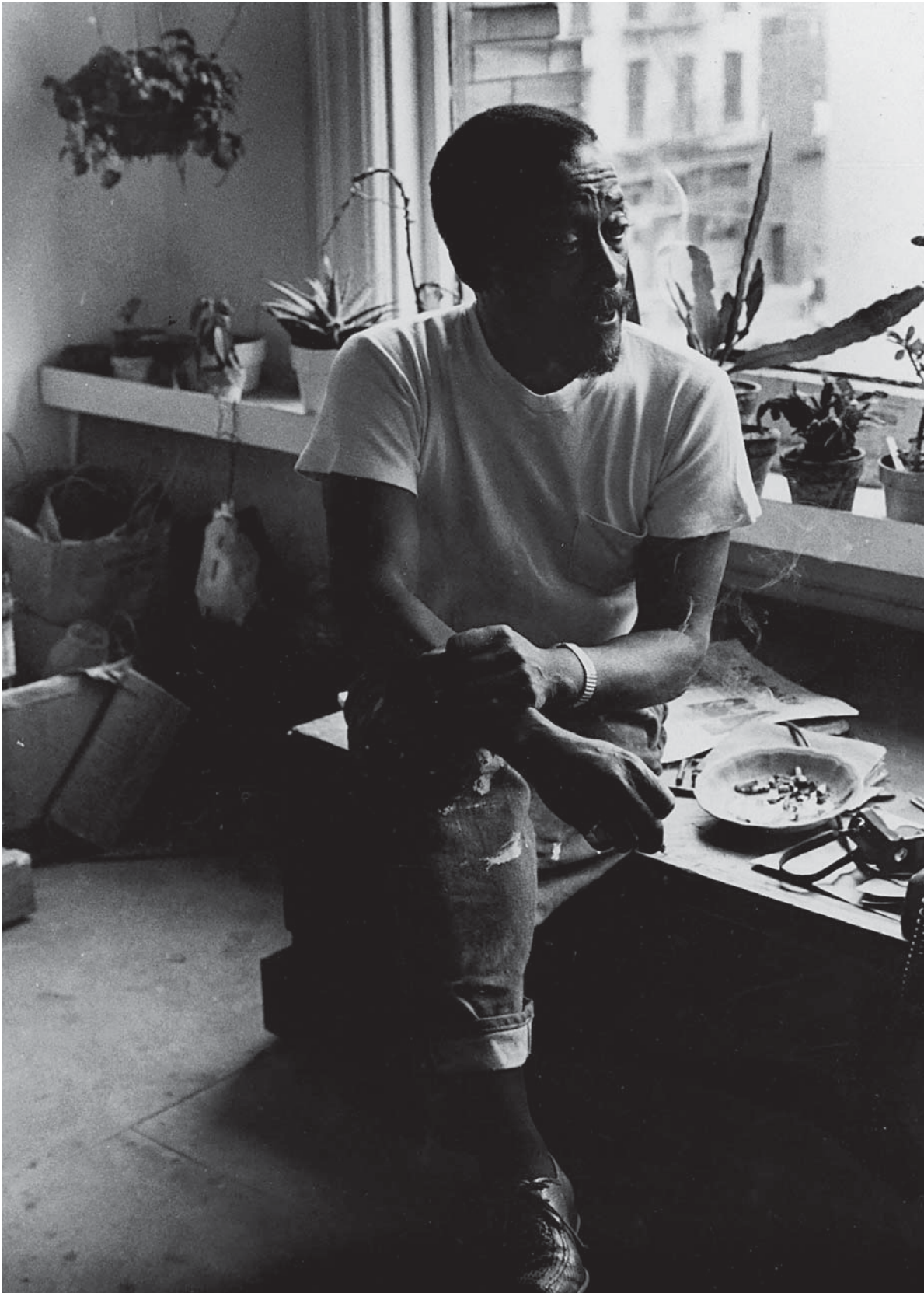
The relationship between the art world and democracy is a ridiculous situation in which everything goes wrong and egalitarianism becomes a sham. The term 'utopia' was coined Sir Thomas More in 1516 for his idealized fictional society. Eutopia, derived from the Greek ('good' or 'well') and ('place'), means 'good place'. As a pun - the almost identical Greek word 'ou-topos' meaning 'no place' or 'nowhere' is sometimes substituted for 'eu-topos', which means 'good place'. In regard to the Western art world, 'ou-topos' seems most apt!

The Western art world, which enjoys a bogus reputation, as a bastion of liberalism, is an organism poised in self-defense, to protect white privilege and its assimilation models. It is perhaps the most racist and conflict ridden institution in Western society.

Democracy tenets are based on three Republican virtues – *Liberte, Egalite, and Fraternite*. This Republicanism is not to be confused with the Republican political party, the GOP (Grand Old Party), in the United States. Republican virtues are ideas that are designed to help citizens shape and maintain a society that works for the common people and for the common good of people. Unfortunately, the term 'democracy' in its contemporary usage has about as much semantic clarity as the word 'modern'.

A virulent Tribalism has overtaken the utopian project. Tribes are like huge families with traditions, language, religion and other binding ties. It is an evolutionary adaptation that gave groups the social cohesion necessary to defend a territory and resources - from other tribes. Tribalism displays the same kinds of loyalties that are recognized in Nationalism. Nations have borders, language and culture, a formal government, and laws. Caucasian tribalism has morphed from a local primitive survival strategy, into a form of global chauvinism that has undone many of the social gains that came from utopian idealism, the Enlightenment, and the conceptualization of Civilization.

The Enlightenment (also known as the Age of Enlightenment) dominated the world of ideas in Europe in the eighteenth century, when the intellectuals were a minuscule specialized elite. It included a range of concepts that came to advance ideals such as liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, constitutional government, and separation of church and state. Celebrated as the foundation of modern Western political and intellectual culture, the Enlightenment brought political modernization to Western society, by introducing Democratic values and institutions, and the creation of modern liberal democracies.



Norman Lewis, circa 1970–73, photograph taken in his Grand Street, New York studio & home. Photo credit: Mary Ellen Andrews.

Currently, historically and globally, Western culture is in a transition away from the Enlightenment ideals. The post-modern condition and the signifier 'Post-Modern' are understood as 'Post-Enlightenment'. The paradox we are experiencing at the present crossroads, having reached the enantiodromia moment, is the tendency of things to change into their opposites. The potential for Hybris and Nemesis was always implicit in the Enlightenment project. The central concerns of the Enlightenment philosophies are now being actively negated and emptied of meaning. The post-modern condition means the negation of all Enlightenment values and ideals, and most noticeably of its central principle of EQUALITY.

For the Western art world (particularly that which has been appropriated by a post-colonial United States) equality is equated with the disappearance of 'whiteness'. That sociopolitical malaise, and lack of inspirational inclusion, everyone keeps complaining about has several names: Bigotry, Racism, and Xenophobia.

To make an oblique reference to a magnificent title for a book: *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* by the cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard: What is Black is not White!¹ Similarly, to appropriate the title of the art historian and critic Hal Foster's essay in *Art in America*: "Signs Taken for Wonders"²: What is Black and not White is a sign that represents particular things.

Consider, for example, the Abstract Expressionist painter Norman W. Lewis (July 23, 1909 – August 27, 1979): Lewis rarely complained in public about the struggles of being an African-American artist in the United States. But in 1979, dying of cancer, he made a prediction to his family. He said: "I think it's going to take about 30 years, maybe 40, before people stop caring whether I'm black and just pay attention to the work."³ An artist's ethnicity is not simply about signs. It is also about appreciating humanity, and understanding the artwork itself in the context of global history, and art history as the history of art practice.

The claim that the Western art world, in all of its institutions and ambitions, upholds the principles of democracy is a fallacy. It is a conceit of both the ignorant and the diabolical. The Western art world, in its convoluted notions on race and class - is unabashedly elitist. The vanity of the profound artistic genius, real or otherwise, is purposefully distinct and remote from ordinary reality and 'common' people. Too often the white art establishment perceives the artwork by ethnic minorities as of 'lesser' significance. These tendencies are among the greatest failures of a standard of moral or ethical courage, and decision-making pressure on the powers that be, for the basic ways in which Democracy is supposed to function. Consequently, the art world and art practice plays no significant social role, in the demands and aspirations on a national or international level. The belief that it does is held in the face of strong contradictory evidence - which is a delusion.

The underlying principle of Western art scholarship is to identify that ephemeral state of culture and society known as the *zeitgeist*, and to reflect it back at the world in artworks, would suggest that what has been happening in curatorial and critical practice actually reflects a broader reality. Two Belgian researchers from the University of Leuven's Faculty of Economics and Business, published "The Conundrum of Modern Art," and found that art experts are not any better than non-experts at distinguishing authentic artworks from fakes. Some images, 'real' and 'fake', were imprinted with a MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) watermark. "The experts were just as bad as the laypersons at spotting the fakes." What tricked the experts was clearly the MoMA watermark. The art experts preferred the fakes if they had the prestigious stamp. The researchers then concluded: "The finding suggests that art experts are particularly inclined to agree with what has previously been deemed prestigious, rather than evaluating artwork solely on its own merits." In short, the study's outcome is summed up by the subtitle of its abstract: "Prestige-driven coevolutionary aesthetics trumps evolutionary aesthetics among art experts."⁴

Racial stamps can also be problematic when used in communicating information about people. The consequences of subtyping 'African-Americans' from 'Blacks' (or Negro) - these racial labels often have a disparate impact on how they are perceived by white people. Too many whites believe that the label 'Black' evokes a mental representation of a person with lower socioeconomic status, education, competence, and warmth than the label 'African-American'. Whites 'will react more negatively' toward 'Blacks' than toward 'African-Americans'. Entire generations have been reducing people to single identities - and then generalizing. As such, African-American

artists are only one thing, and that is simple. Black artists are only one thing, and that is alien. When the Western art world thinks about black people they focus on inner-city poverty, garbage strewn lots and basketball players.⁵

Ethnic minority and women artists have been largely excluded from Western art history. When curators do seek out the artwork of black artists, for example, figuration is useful as a form of representation (*The Political Economy of the Sign*). African-American artists like Norman Lewis were at a great disadvantage because they worked as abstractionists, and were perceived as not 'picturing' the black experience (Black Faces Matter). When making an effort towards inclusion, the approach of the white art establishment is to meander their way through racial and ethnic labels, using stereotypes and clichés as source materials. In the interim, the term 'Black artist' has gone from being an adjective to a noun, a simplistic commercial identity that signs racial categorization.⁶ "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'. This is segregation in the guise of integration."⁷

The rejection of democracy is empowered by ersatz democratic forces that defend Eurocentric cultural authority. This hegemony is tasked with the responsibility to prevent the rewriting of 'their' history - by including ethnic minority artists in a more visible and meaningful way. The specter that someone else's contributions and ideas might be valued as equal to or perhaps even greater than one's own, causes the very fabric of an entire society to be corrupted, simply to protect tribal pride. This is undoubtedly true in post-colonial North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, the former Apartheid South Africa, Western Europe in the midst of their anti-immigrant fever, and in former Communist Eastern European enclaves where Neo-Nazis and organizations such as PIGIDA are now rearing their ugly heads.

"A stable modern European culture is a fiction."

Mieke Bal

No matter how post-racial we think we are, most of us are carrying around some degree of racial and social bias. The only way to get past these biases is by recognizing that these biases exist - and to confront them.

The art world and art practice does not represent some kind of higher order within human affairs. At this very moment, class-warfare is taking place in Los Angeles. In the last several years, a number of art galleries have opened up in the neighborhood of Boyle Heights, creating tension by raising concern from the mostly Mexican-American population that the galleries will spur gentrification, and force them out of their homes.⁸ The mostly white artists and gallerists are lobbying the authorities to charge the Latino protestors with hate crimes, by exploiting the contrasting (signs) ethnicities between the opposing communities.

Lowery Stokes Sims, the first African-American curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and later the president of the Studio Museum in Harlem has been around long enough to know that the art world does not always move in a consistent direction. She warned that any progress in many ways remains fragile. "The canon is like a rubber band," she said. "You can stretch it, but there's always the danger it's going to snap back."⁹

The so-called art world aristocracy (self anointed power players) may or may not have a useful background or experience. The current crop of collectors, curators, and gallerists may have the talent, drive, ambition, and resources to revolutionize the art world, but most simply lack the vision and or the courage to do so.

Binding humanity will require a way of finding a shared identity. If we want to improve race relations, it is not enough to have a conversation simply about race. We also have to emphasize identities people have in common across humanity's spectrum. If you can engage disparate cultures, and different people, together, you can build an empathetic relationship, in which human beings can learn to respect one another's unique experiences naturally. The scenario looking forward however is that we will continue to live in a world where the liberal rhetoric will not match the intransigent reality.

NOTES

- ¹ Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, Mo: Telos press Ltd., 1981).
- ² Hal Foster, "Signs Taken for Wonders," *Art in America* vol. 74, no. 6 (June 1986): 80-91.
- ³ Randy Kennedy, "Black Artists and the March Into the Museum," *New York Times*, November 28, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/arts/design/black-artists-and-the-march-into-the-museum.html>.
- ⁴ Alyssa Buffenstein, "Art Experts Easily Tricked by Prestige, Study Claims. Herd behavior in the art world? You don't say," *artnet*, News, November 25, 2016. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-experts-tricked-by-prestige-study-761507>.
- ⁵ Esther J. Cepeda, "The landmine in labeling someone 'black'," *Washington Post*, December 25, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/esther-cepeda-the-landmine-in-labeling-someone-black/2014/12/25/7425e72a-8c9b-11e4-8ff4-fb93129c9c8b_story.html.
- ⁶ David Brooks, "The Danger of a Dominant Identity," *New York Times*, November 18, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/opinion/the-danger-of-a-dominant-identity.html>
- ⁷ Isaac Kaplan, "How African-American Artists Fought to Diversify Museums," *artsy*, Editorial, December 27, 2016. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-how-african-american-artists-fought-diversify-museums>.
- ⁸ Fiona Ng and Natalie Chudnovsky, "On Boyle Heights, art galleries, changing neighborhoods and rising rents," AirTalk / KPCC, November 4, 2016. <http://www.scpr.org/programs/airtalk/2016/11/04/52960/anti-gentrification-anger-in-boyle-heights-turns-t/>.
- ⁹ Kennedy, "Black Artists and the March Into the Museum."

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