ART & PERFORMANCE NOTES

Zement. Photo: Armin Smailovic. Courtesy Theatertreffen Festival.

Bearing Witness
Intersections of Art and Protest

Isaiah Matthew Wooden

Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties, Brooklyn Museum, March 7–July 13, 2014.

"The name of this tune is 'Mississippi Goddam,'" activist-singer-songwriter Nina Simone intoned in front of a mostly white Carnegie Hall audience on March 21, 1964, "and I mean every word of it."[1] Still reeling from the 1963 murders of Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers, who was gunned down in the driveway of his Jackson, Mississippi home, and Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, victims of the bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, Simone belted her dismay with the violence, terror, and racism experienced and endured by African Americans throughout the United States before the crowd. "All I want is equality for my sister, my brother, my people, and me," she insisted, the up-tempo, show tune-like melody she banged out on the piano belying the anger and rage in her vocal performance. Simone introduced her audience to what would become one of the most significant protest anthems of the Civil Rights Era that early spring evening. And, with the performance, she aligned herself with a wide range of artists engaging diverse aesthetic practices to address and aid in the fight for racial equality in the 1960s.

The superb exhibition *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*, curated by Teresa A. Carbone and Kellie Jones at the Brooklyn Museum, features the work of sixty-five of those artists alongside of a video recording of Simone performing "Mississippi Goddam." Powerfully, the anthem's forceful challenge to the illogics of white supremacy and racial violence reverberates across the various photographs, paintings, sculptures, graphics, music, and video presented in the exhibition. Opening amidst a flurry of events and activities conceived to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson, *Witness* invites important critical reflection on the intersections of art and protest during the Civil Rights Era. As Carbone and Jones write:

> *Witness* explores the telling intersection of art and activism on behalf of the struggle

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> for racial equality. Embracing the work of sixty-six artists and almost as many aesthetic approaches, the exhibition challenges the persistent inattention of art historians to this pivotal phenomenon in American art of the 1960s. It concertedly explores the origins of these works in experiences of discrimination, conflict, and empowerment, and the means through which artists distilled ideas and actions into forceful emblems of protest, identity, and liberation.[2]

The exhibition highlights the many ways artists were responding to and influencing movements against the turbulence of the times. For those who are not veterans of the 1960s, the unrest of the decade is still sometimes difficult to grasp fully. Over time, sentimental longings and wistful affections for the period have obscured its particularities and its force. Indeed, within contemporary popular discourse, Malcolm X's ever-evolving, complex politics too frequently gets reduced to aphorisms ("by any means necessary"), while Martin Luther King, Jr. too often circulates as an apolitical minister of post-racialism. In assembling a diverse group of artists working across media as well as racial, ethnic, and geographical lines, *Witness*, in its best moments, counters these tendencies by spotlighting artwork whose affective charge is still as palpable in the present as it undoubtedly was in the past. The exhibition is at its finest when exhibiting the crucial role that artists played in indexing resistive acts and actions.

To be sure, without the efforts of photographers such as Richard Avedon, Bruce Davidson, Roy DeCarava, Charles Moore, Gordon Parks, and Moneta Sleet, Jr., among others, much of the violence and resistance to it during the sixties might have remained unintelligible for those who were surrounded by it and the generations that followed. Often operating with an understanding of their photographic practice as a form of activism, these artists documented the decade from the front lines, routinely putting their bodies at risk while capturing the intensity of the freedom struggle and disseminating evidence of it widely via newspapers, magazines, posters, and brochures.

Sleet, who served as a staff photographer for *Ebony Magazine* for over four decades, focused his lens on important figures and ordinary individuals alike. He shot many of the most significant Civil Rights events, including the 1963 March on Washington and the 1965 March from Selma to Montgomery. In *Witness*, his images brim with black bodies in motion and exude profound empathy for their subjects. They bear witness to black strength and black suffering in ways that continue to resonate powerfully. Davidson's somber 1965 photograph of the bullet-ridden, blood-splattered car of Viola Liuzzo—a white, Michigan housewife and mother of five murdered by the Ku Klux Klan following a voting rights march in Selma, Alabama—bears witness to the ways in which violence and death remained real prospects for all who dared to challenge the white supremacist status quo. A noted documentarian-activist, Parks's images of segregation in the South are some of the period's most expressive

artifacts. His talent for documenting the humanity of the decade's leaders provides *Witness* with some of its most arresting images.

The capacity of photographs by Sleet, Davidson, Parks and others to chronicle the vulnerability of African Americans to gratuitous white violence and racist codes, especially when advocating for basic rights, and to capture black dignity in the face of terrorism was not lost on the era's leaders. For King, in particular, scholar Leigh Raiford writes, "The visual media proved a crucial component in capturing 'fugitive' brutality, holding it still for scrutiny and transmitting this 'naked truth' to watching and judging audiences. King praises photography and film for their work of exposure, revealing through mechanical reproduction facts that had remained hidden and therefore difficult to prove."[3] Civil Rights leaders relied on photography and film to claim the attention of passive spectators and to interpellate them as critical witnesses to the era's hostilities and protests. It is, therefore, not surprising that still and moving images are often the period's most significant aesthetic objects and its most important artistic contributions.

Artists, however, were responding to the revolutionary spirit of the times in various aesthetically potent and innovative ways. Each of *Witness*'s thematically organized sections—"Integrate/Educate," "American Nightmare," "Presenting Evidence," "Politicizing Pop," "Black Is Beautiful," "Sisterhood," "Global Liberation," and "Beloved Community"—catalogs the diverse practices artists engaged, from abstraction to assemblage, to register their trenchant replies to and critiques of the chaos swirling about them. Renowned conceptual artist David Hammons's 1969 assemblage sculpture, *The Door (Admissions Office)*, is a winning example. Composed of a rough-hewn door inscribed with black lettering that reads "Admissions Office" and imprinted with one of Hammons's now-iconic body prints, *The Door (Admissions Office)* compellingly re-members the difficulties faced by Ruby Bridges (also the subject of Norman Rockwell's 1963 painting *The Problem We All Live With*), James Meredith, the "Little Rock Nine," and countless others in their pursuits to make quality public education accessible for all. Hammons began experimenting with the practice of covering his body with greasy substances, pressing it against supports, and dusting the objects with dry pigment while working in Los Angeles in the 1960s. In remarkable ways, *The Door (Admissions Office)* makes evident the practice's keen ability to surface and embody some of Hammons's and the decade's existential concerns. Reworking detritus gathered from the 1965 Watts Rebellion, fellow southern California artist Noah Purifoy's 1966 assemblage sculpture *Pressure*—a melted, deformed steel can bounded by a wooden frame replete with chipped white painting—similarly rejoins the era's volatility.

Witness is full of art that acknowledges events and people who, through actions big and small, indelibly changed the course of history. Drawing inspiration from African masquerade performance, Barbara Chase-Riboud's 1969 black bronze and wool sculpture *Monument to Malcolm X No. 2* calls to mind the elegance of the formidable leader

David Hammons, *The Door (Admissions Office)*, 1969. Wood, acrylic sheet, and pigment construction, 79 x 48 x 15 in. (200.7 x 122 x 38.1 cm). California African American Museum, Los Angeles, Collection of Friends, the Foundation of California African American Museum. © David Hammons.

while evoking his manifold transformations. The commanding sculpture, which stands over seven feet tall and beautifully interweaves hard and soft textures, also opens space to consider real and imagined connections to Africa during the period as manifested in its art. Marisol Escobar's 1967 coffin-like wood construction *LBJ* registers less as a tribute and more an indictment of the thirty-sixth U.S. President who, though responsible for initiating important social reforms through his "Great Society" programs in the sixties, also escalated the bloody conflict in Vietnam, leading to countless unnecessary deaths.

Elizabeth Catlett's 1968 red cedar sculpture, *Homage to My Young Black Sisters*, returns attention to ordinary folk, conveying the beauty, grace and defiance of black and brown femininity and working-class womanhood. The sculpture, which displays the artist's technical expertise and her interest in exploring the intersections of race, gender, class and the struggle for freedom, also embodies the refusal of black women artists like Catlett—who maintained a sculptural practice for seventy-plus years and whose work is only now experiencing something of a renaissance—to be made invisible by the racism and sexism of the art world. Like *Homage to My Young Black Sisters*, Charles White's captivating 1961 drawing *Awaken from the Unknowing* also exalts the everyday. Simultaneously, the image of an intensely focused black woman combing through a desk full of newspapers levies an important critique against Jim Crow efforts to forestall African-American literacy.

Much of the graphic art exhibited in *Witness* is less subtle in its criticism of structures of violence and inequality. Featuring a sharply dressed black woman with an afro carrying a rifle against a two-toned pink, circus tent-like backdrop, Emory Douglas's 1969 poster *Afro-American Solidarity with the Oppressed People of the World* is unapologetic in its call for rebellion against repressive regimes of power. Douglas served as the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party from 1967 until the Party's demise in the 1980s and was also the chief illustrator for the Party's newspaper, *Black Panther*. Designed to incite the marginalized into action, his politically charged graphics circulated widely. *Afro-American Solidarity with the Oppressed People of the World* is especially notable for the ways it foregrounds black women's prominence in the Black Panther Party enterprise. Barbara Jones-Hogu's 1971 screen print *Unite* similarly brings focus to the role of women in rights movements. A founding member of the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AfriCOBRA), a collective of Chicago-based artists who, in 1968, created an aesthetic philosophy that centered African American experiences and sensibilities in their art-making practices, Jones-Hogu depicts women and men standing alongside of each other with their fists raised in the silkscreen, creating a visual black mass of solidarity. The graphic hails viewers to do as the text stamped across the image instructs: unite.

As with any survey, *Witness* is not without its gaps. Despite featuring a few works that illustrate the ways artists began to embrace practices that explicitly centered on the body and action during the decade, the exhibition is noticeably thin on examples of performance art, whose origins some

art historical timelines trace back to the 1960s. The performance score for Benjamin Patterson's *First Symphony* is one of the exhibition's more exciting artifacts. A musician and visual artist, Patterson was also a foundational figure in the Fluxus movement. In *First Symphony*, which he premiered in New York City in 1964, the artist enlisted participatory action from audience members—asking them one at a time, "Do You Trust Me?"—as a way to comment, in part, on the fraught relationship between the right to vote and access to citizenship for African Americans. Also exhibited in *Witness*, the performance score for Yoko Ono's *Voice Piece for Soprano* (1961), an "instruction piece" in which the artist encourages screaming "1. against the wind; 2. against the wall; 3. against the sky," certainly testifies to the power of performance to conjure the decade's spirit of dissent. Even so, these examples do not sufficiently standin for the wealth of works by artists who activated and politicized the body to challenge dominant ideologies during the decade.

Notwithstanding these omissions, Carbone and Jones have curated a resonant exhibition teeming with artists who, as Jones writes in the stunning catalogue that accompanies *Witness*, "press onward. unstopped and unstoppable" in and against tremendous uncertainty.[4] And, press on they do, channeling the transformative power of art to offer fresh perspectives on one of the most catalytic decades in history.

NOTES

1. Nina Simone, "Mississippi Goddam" (Rec. March 21, 1964), *In Concert* (Philips, 1964).

2. Teresa A. Carbone and Kellie Jones, *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* (New York: Monacelli Press and Brooklyn Museum, 2014), 8.

3. Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1.

4. Carbone and Jones, *Witness*, 52.

ISAIAH MATTHEW WOODEN is a writer, performance-maker, and Ph.D. candidate in theater and performance studies at Stanford University. His critical writing on art and performance has appeared in *Callaloo*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Theater* magazine. He was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland.