

# ALTERNATIVE EXHIBITION SPACES FOR BLACK ARTISTS IN NEW YORK CITY DURING THE 1970S TOWARDS A PARTIAL HISTORY

by *Dennis Raverty*

This essay is intended as a brief introduction to the history of black-owned or black-run, and mostly community-based, alternative art spaces in New York City during the late 1960s and 1970s. It is hoped that this concise overview will serve as the foundation research upon which others will expand.

During the late 1960s and the 1970s several alternative gallery spaces opened in New York City that regularly featured work by black artists. The establishment of these spaces was driven not only by the difficulty black artists had faced in exhibiting with the mainstream institutions but was also the consequence of the maturing of the Black Art Movement itself, which sought expression in venues outside of the mainstream.

In the early 1960s, there was only a handful of black artists (that we know about). By the late 1960s, there were many—a huge proliferation within less than a decade. By the mid 1970s, visual arts and crafts in various forms—street murals, posters, hand-dyed fabrics, handmade jewelry and other craft art, as well as painting and sculpture—were an integral part of the Harlem scene. The only thing lacking was the exhibition space.

The flagship organization in the alternative art space movement was The Studio Museum in Harlem, founded in 1968. However, as a museum with ties to the established art world, it was more institutional than alternative. According to artist Otto Neals, many people in the local community couldn't relate to what they perceived to be the avant-garde work that was often shown at The Studio Museum during those first years of its existence. In describing one such exhibit he says, "I don't think that most of the people in the community who saw the show thought it was relevant."

The Studio Museum's inaugural show in 1968 was *Electronic Refractions 11* by *Tom Lloyd*. The striking installations of light bulbs and light panels in various configurations was a unique métier for an African American artist and refracted trends within the larger art world. But the social and political "relevance" of projects was key to success in the black community of those times.

## NYUMBA YA SANAA GALLERY

In 1967 the artist's cooperative, Weusi, was formed to support art that was accessible and relevant to average people in the black community. Weusi grew out of a larger group

of artists, under the inspiration of James Sneed and Malika Rahman. "They wanted to show together, to educate the community to its own beauty and to create an alternative to the integration of black art into the mainstream galleries," says Otto Neals. This opposition to both the mainstream art world and to black artists integrating it was a characteristic attitude that was shared by the Weusi artists who broke off from the larger group.

Weusi artist Ademola Olugebefola recalls that the larger group initially met at the NAACP office on 125<sup>th</sup> Street and organized outdoor art exhibitions hung on the fences along Seventh Avenue between 128<sup>th</sup> and 135<sup>th</sup> Streets, starting in 1964. They also organized shows at Minar's Furniture Store located on 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Eventually, Sneed opened a small gallery on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue in that neighborhood.

A few years later, eight or nine of the artists broke away from the group and started to meet informally on their own at the artists' studios. They organized exhibits together at the Countee Cullen Public Library on 136<sup>th</sup> Street. They called themselves Weusi, the Swahili word for "black," and from the beginning they were dedicated to developing a black aesthetic independent of the mainstream art establishment.

In 1967 they rented the ground floor of a building on West 132<sup>nd</sup> Street and renovated the space as a gallery, which they called Nyumba Ya Sanaa, "House of Art" in Swahili. There was no administration or staff—the gallery was run as a cooperative, that is, expenses were shared by the member



Weusi artist Okoe Pyatt on steps of the Nyumba Ya Sanaa Gallery, late 1960s. PHOTO COURTESY OKOE PYATT.



Ben Jones  
*Black Face and Arm Unit*, 1970  
 acrylic on plaster, life-size plaster casts  
 COLLECTION OF THE NEW JERSEY STATE MUSEUM COLLECTION  
 Ben Jones was a member of the Weusi collective.



Invitation to the opening exhibition at the Nyumba Ya Sanaa, 1967  
 PHOTO COURTESY OKOE PIATT

artists. Rejecting mainstream art conventions and history from which blacks had been conspicuously and almost structurally excluded and inspired by the period's spirit of black cultural nationalism, the artists of Weusi cultivated an African aesthetic.

To understand the significance of Weusi's defiant position, it is helpful to consider the artistic context of the late 1960s. The mainstream model of art historical development most widely accepted in the art world at the time was called formalism, specifically the version put forward by the influential modernist art critic, Clement Greenberg. Briefly stated, Greenberg held that the most significant art of the twentieth century was abstract and self-referential. This was in contradistinction to what he called "kitsch"—popular or representational art. Art must be about art, he asserted, not about the outside world.

The acme of formalistic art was Minimalism. Dedicated to an extreme reductivism that eliminated anything extraneous to the purely formal properties of the medium itself, including, of course, art with any political content, the Minimalist movement had dominated the mainstream art-world from the mid-1960s and into the 1970s. All the significant art of the past century (which to Greenberg meant European-derived) was considered to be driven by this formalist impulse.

In retrospect, it seems oddly incongruous that the cool, detached art of the Minimalists reached such heights of art-world consensus during a decade so politicized by the Civil Rights Era and so shaken by the controversial war in Vietnam (and is perhaps a testament to the rarified and elitist stance of the mainstream art world at the time).

Almost the opposite of the aloof attitude of the formalists, the Weusi art was populist, interactive and democratic. The cooperative wanted to reach out to the local community and present works that could be understood by ordinary people. "This interaction between the artists and the community led to a new consciousness," says founding member Olugebefola, "a new acceptance of the art as something that was here to stay, something that was a part of, not separate from, the community."

Art historian Sharon Patton characterizes the new African-inspired aesthetic as concerned with abstract motifs, brilliant color and dense, rhythmic designs. *Black Face and Arm Unit*, by Weusi member Ben Jones, first shown at the Nyumba Ya Sanaa Gallery in the artist's 1971 solo show, brilliantly exemplifies the new aesthetic.

The gallery continued as a cooperative and eventually established its nonprofit status so that it could be eligible for grants. According to Neals, however, the period when they began to receive grants coincided with the decline of the gallery.

## ACTS OF ART GALLERY

In 1969 at the same time that The Studio Museum and the Nyumba Ya Sanaa gallery were formed up in Harlem, Pat and Nigel Jackson, both of them artists, opened up the Acts

of Art Gallery downtown in Greenwich Village. In a 1972 interview, Jackson says he wanted to create an alternative to what he refers to disparagingly as the "Greenberg-stamped artists" of the mainstream galleries. "Up till now the black artist had to conform to that limited concept in order to fit in," he laments.

In 1971, as a reaction to the Whitney's exhibition, "Contemporary Black American Art," which was boycotted by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition and others because the museum failed to consult the black community or assign a black curator, Jackson mounted a counter-exhibition at Acts of Art conceived of as a rebuttal to the Whitney show. It was reviewed favorably by well-known critic, John Canaday, who said it was more related to black culture than the Whitney show.

Jackson says he wanted to create a gallery downtown where he could begin to build a clientele to buy art by black artists. The gallery was a commercial venture that enjoyed some success and attracted many museum professionals and others connected to the mainstream art establishment. Jackson was also the first to show the black women artists' collective, "Where We At," later in 1971 at his gallery.

Despite such progressive exhibitions that went well into the mid-1970s, Acts of Art was less radical by its very nature as a commercial gallery than either The Studio Museum or the artists of the Weusi cooperative. Jackson states that he didn't want to change the world, he "only want[ed] a piece of the pie, and a piece of the pie for the black artist."



Nyumba Ya Sanaa Gallery, 1968, PHOTO COURTESY OKOYE PIATT

## CINQUE GALLERY

Another downtown gallery was established in late 1969 at the Public Theater near Astor Place. Named Cinque, after Joseph Cinque, the leader of the slave rebellion aboard the *Amistad*, it was dedicated to the exhibition of young emerging black artists, and at first no one over age 29 was even considered for exhibition in the gallery.

Cinque was founded by established middle-aged African American artists Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis and Ernest Crichlow so that young artists would have a place to exhibit their work where they did not have to pay rent (as in a



cooperative) or pay commissions (as in a commercial gallery). The gallery's inaugural exhibition presented the paintings of Malcolm Bailey, who at the time was only 22 years old.

Professionally staffed by director Chris Shelton and marketing and public relations person Peg Alston (who also had art exhibitions of various artists at the time in her small uptown apartment), Cinque moved to another donated space across the street a few years later and eventually moved to a location on east 72<sup>nd</sup> Street in the neighborhood of Lincoln Center. The gallery continued to flourish into the 1980s and 1990s under the directorship of Ruth Jett.

Patricia Johnson, a clerical worker and single mother of two, recalls that she made her first art purchase, a \$125 lithograph, at Cinque. "I really couldn't afford it but they trusted me and let me take it home (that day) and pay in installments of \$25 a month."

### JUST ABOVE MIDTOWN GALLERY

The Just Above Midtown gallery (or JAM) was located on 57<sup>th</sup> Street near Fifth Avenue in the very heart of the uptown gallery district. Linda Goode-Bryant, the entrepreneur who started the gallery, had worked at The Studio Museum and was a graduate fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art when she conceived of opening a gallery in the uptown gallery district to showcase the work of black artists.

She wanted to, as she put it, "place the black artist on the same level" as artists exhibiting in the pricey commercial

galleries on 57<sup>th</sup> Street. Because of the recession, rent for office space—even on 57<sup>th</sup> Street—was coming down. Many offices were left empty and unrented. In this lean economic environment, Goode-Bryant was able to talk a landlord into letting her rent a space for \$300 a month to open a gallery. She was able to raise enough money for renovations of the space and even advertise the first exhibit there in *Artforum* magazine. The opening was well-attended according to Goode-Bryant, "Thousands of people were there. You couldn't get into the gallery space, you couldn't get in the hallways, you couldn't get on the elevator. People were down the stairwells, in the lobby."

The other uptown galleries resented the presence of JAM, claims Goode-Bryant. "Talk about a hostile environment, my God! The galleries were so nasty." She would encounter antagonism at the meetings of the Art Dealer's Association. "When I would attend meetings and would suggest things, it was just open hostility."

Goode-Bryant tried to develop a group of regular black clientele by having brunches at the gallery with a guest speaker, an artist or curator. Despite the gallery's upscale address, her aim was to "expand upon and build a stronger infrastructure within the black community" and develop a pool of predominately black collectors.

Goode-Bryant eventually converted the gallery into a nonprofit entity so she could get grants from private foundations, as well as from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Arts Council. But when the landlord sold the building in 1977, the \$300 a month rent

ended. JAM moved downtown to a larger space in Tribeca, and eventually moved to a gallery on Broadway in Soho.

Goode-Bryant says that for years people had been telling her that she would do much better downtown than uptown on 57<sup>th</sup> Street. This was at the time when Tribeca and Soho were the centers of the more avant-garde galleries in New York City. JAM continued at its Soho address under the direction of Goode-Bryant until it closed in 1986.

### KENKELEBA HOUSE GALLERY

What was to become the Kenkeleba House Gallery in the East Village had its start at the studios of Corrine Jennings and Joe Overstreet, a large three-story loft on the Bowery at Delaney Street.



The Cinque Gallery housed at the Public Theater on Lafayette Street in New York City, 1970s. Norman Lewis is standing at far right; Romare Bearden, standing (back to camera), third from right. PHOTO COURTESY HATCH-BILLOPS COLLECTION

Between 1974 and 1978, together with fiction writer and essayist Samuel Lloyd, they organized various projects there—art exhibits, performance art and dance events. They also supported craft art (ceramics, weaving and jewelry, etc.) with exhibitions and what they called “African Markets,” large fair-like exhibitions that they organized in a number of places in and out of the city, including a studio on 35<sup>th</sup> Street on the far West Side at the edge of the garment district.

Incorporating themselves as a private nonprofit organization in 1975, they named themselves Kenkeleba after a medicinal plant used widely in West Africa, because the spiritual link to Africa was an important objective of their projects, classes and exhibitions. With incorporation they could seek grants and organize fundraising for their various projects.

They arrived at their present address on Second Street near Avenue B in the Lower East Side in 1979. It had been Hennington Hall in its heyday, a center for catered events and ballroom dancing. By the 1970s it had been abandoned and had fallen into severe disrepair. When Kenkeleba leased it, the block had several deserted and boarded-up buildings and the street had become habituated by drug dealers and their clients. The building had no working plumbing or electricity, the windows were all boarded up, some walls were decaying and sections of the building needed to be cleared of asbestos. Nonetheless, the tireless Jennings and Overstreet renovated the spaces and by early 1979 had their first music and poetry performance event in the second-floor studio.

From the beginning, Kenkeleba showed an interest in documenting the history of African American art and in 1980 organized an ambitious show of second-generation abstract expressionists. After the death of well-known abstract painter Norman Lewis (who had been one of the founders of the Cinque Gallery) in 1979, Kenkeleba decided to put together a retrospective of his work and published an impressive, lavishly illustrated scholarly catalogue to accompany it; a project that was a decade in the making. Kenkeleba’s more recent publications include what is one of the definitive treatments of 19th-century landscapist Edward Mitchell Bannister, a free black man who was born in Canada, lived in and worked in Boston and later taught in Providence, Rhode

Island and founded the Providence Art Club, a forerunner to the Rhode Island School of Design.

Kenkeleba is still sponsoring exhibitions and other multimedia projects in its now totally renovated building, in what is currently a safe, multicultural neighborhood. The Kenkeleba complex also leases studio space to more than 20 artists at cost as part of their nonprofit mission to make working and practicing art in the city possible at a reasonable cost for emerging and established artists.

## DEMOCRATIZING IMPACT

Several black-run spaces for black artists to exhibit their work opened in various areas of New York City during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. These exhibition spaces varied in philosophy and practice and included both commercial ventures and nonprofit organizations; both those who wanted to create an alternative to the art-world establishment and those who wanted to help black artists enter the mainstream. Over the past 40 years, these community-based venues have helped make visual art an integral part of the black struggle against oppression.

### Sources

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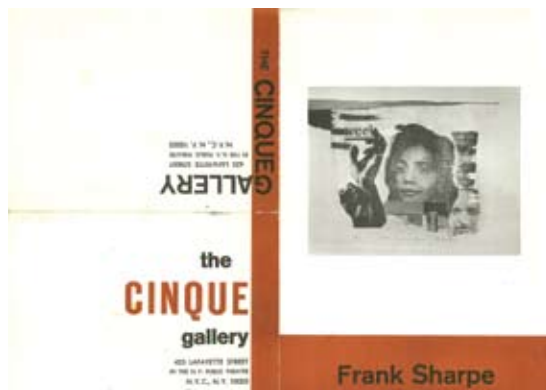
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Corrine Jennings, in discussion with the author, March 25, 2008.

Patricia Johnson, in discussion with the author, August 14, 2008.

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Cinque Gallery exhibition announcement  
COLLECTION OF PATRICIA JOHNSON





Weusi artist, Otto Neals, with his paintings displayed on the fences along Seventh Avenue in Harlem, mid-1960s.

PHOTO COURTESY OKOE PYATT



Kenkeleba Gallery: the Amiri Barakas at the opening of *Jus' Jass, collocations of Painting and Afro-American Classical Music*, 1983.

PHOTO COLLECTION KENKELEBA GALLERY



Joe Overstreet and Corinne Jennings in front of abandoned building that they renovated to create Kenkeleba House.