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Front cover illustration: Official poster of the 1966 *Festival mondial des art nègres*, designed by Ibou Diouf

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Revealing the 'trends and confrontations' of contemporary African-American art through the First World Festival

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In 1966, Dakar, Senegal hosted the First World Festival of Black and African Culture (FESMAN) and invited black nations to curate exhibitions for this first major Pan-African festival. This was a seminal moment for the presentation of contemporary African-American visual art on a global stage, and one that would remain a touchstone for future Pan-African cultural presentations. This article examines the organization, implementation, and aftermath of the African-American contribution to FESMAN's exhibition of contemporary art, *Tendances et confrontations* ('Trends and Confrontations'). The opportunity to stage an exhibition of contemporary African-American art at the festival in Senegal was as much about raising the profile of black artists within the United States as on the international stage of the festival. The history of this exhibition also illuminates the contributions of African-American artists to contemporary art and how the US Visual Arts Committee sought to organize a truly national exhibition. The controversies surrounding this exhibition, however, also speak to the problematic structures of the US art world, and who had the authority to select and speak for African-American art.

Keywords: African-American art; FESMAN; First World Festival of Black and African Culture; Hale Woodruff; James Porter; William Lieberman

From 1 to 24 April 1966, Dakar, Senegal hosted *Le festival mondial des arts nègres* (FESMAN) – the First World Festival of Negro Arts. Senegal's first president, the poet laureate Léopold Sédar Senghor, invited African nations and countries with significant populations of persons of African descent to curate exhibitions and send delegations of performers and scholars to this first major Pan-African festival. In addition to an opening colloquium of top academics and numerous performances, literary readings

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and films, the festival also had visual displays, including two major fine art exhibitions. Of the latter, the first and foremost exhibition was *L'Art nègre/Negro Art: Sources, Evolution, Expansion*, which dramatically displayed a large survey of traditional African masterpieces drawn from African, European and American collections. The second, and clearly secondary, exhibition was *Tendances et confrontations* ('Trends and Confrontations'), a display of contemporary art.

Studies of FESMAN's exhibitions have centred mostly around the much-acclaimed exhibition of traditional African art (Vincent 2016). As anthropologist Vincent (2017, 89), co-curator of the Archive of Pan-African Festivals at the Institut interdisciplinaire d'anthropologie du contemporain (at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences [EHESS], Paris), has rightly noted, the contemporary art exhibition remains 'the least documented section of the festival', though scholarship by Blake (2001) and Wofford (2009), in addition to Vincent, has helped to correct this gap. Every delegation participating in the festival was in charge of organizing, selecting, and shipping its own contributions for 'Trends and Confrontations'. It was then left to Senegalese painter Iba N'Diaye to organize the results (Vincent 2017, 92). Not surprisingly, this organizational structure led to many challenges. Indeed, many festival observers found much to criticize about the contemporary exhibition, especially in comparison to the more unified, carefully planned, and well-funded exhibition of traditional art (Povey 1966, 67).

Despite its perceived shortcomings, 'Trends and Confrontations' provided a distinct opportunity for contemporary visual artists. The contributors to FESMAN intended to create a powerful statement in this late-1960s moment that was seeing the ending of colonial rule across Africa, the rise of African liberation fronts, and the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements in the United States. This 'festivalization' of Pan-Africanism provided a clear mechanism for the arts and artists of African descent to be on the frontlines of cultural, economic, and social issues (Murphy 2016, 9–11). This was nothing new for African-American artists, who, since the days of the 'New Negro' Movement of the 1920s, had long used art and exhibitions as a cultural weapon to claim a position for African Americans within US society. At the same time, FESMAN created a seminal moment for the presentation of contemporary African-American visual art on a global stage, and one that would remain a touchstone for future presentations of African-American contemporary art (foremost, the Second Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture [FESTAC], which was hosted by Nigeria in 1977).

This article examines the organization, implementation and aftermath of the African-American contribution to FESMAN's 'Trends and Confrontations'. The challenges and protests that surrounded this exhibition received limited publicity and, with the exception of Blake's (2001) and

Wofford's (2009) work, have barely featured in subsequent scholarship on exhibition controversies involving African-American artists (see, e.g. Cahan 2016; Cooks 2011). The history of this exhibition illuminates not only the contributions of African-American artists to contemporary art, but also the structures of the US museum world, and who had the authority to select and speak for African-American art. Lastly, the opportunity to stage an exhibition of contemporary African-American art at the festival in Senegal was as much about raising the profile of black artists within the United States as on the international stage of the festival.

The US Visual Arts Committee

The US Committee of the First World Festival of Negro Arts, under the leadership of chair Virginia Inness-Brown, became the incorporated, non-profit entity charged with organizing US participation in the festival (United States Committee Press Agent's Files, B1F1). Inness-Brown and the US national committee organized the subcommittees and appointed committee members. The Visual Arts Committee (VAC) was charged with organizing the US contribution to 'Trends and Confrontations'. It was led by chair Mrs Lawrence Copley Thaw (d. 2012), Trustee of the American Federation of Arts; her co-chairs were William S. Lieberman (1923–2005; Curator [and later in 1966, Director] of Prints and Drawings, Museum of Modern Art) and painter Hale Woodruff (1900–1980; a Professor of Art Education at New York University). The committee included additional arts administrators: Henry Geldzahler (1935–1994), Associate Curator, American Paintings and Sculpture, Metropolitan, NYC; Roy Moyer (1921–2007), Director, American Federation of Arts (the organization that would prepare the selected works for exhibition and arrange the insurance and round-trip shipping to Dakar); and Dr James A. Porter (1905–1970), painter, art historian, university gallery director, and Department Chair at Howard University in Washington, DC. In addition to co-chair Woodruff, the committee included three additional prominent African-American artists: Charles Alston (1907–1977), instructor at the Art Students League and City College of New York; Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000); and Charles W. White (1918–1979), an instructor at the Otis Art Institute of Los Angeles (Porter Papers, B53F3). Porter and White added geographic diversity, though the rest of the committee remained centred in New York.

The VAC exemplified expertise and institutional authority. The committee, however, also reinforced a stark differentiation between race and roles: all arts administrators, save for Porter, were white. In 1943, James Porter had published *Modern Negro Art*, a path-breaking text in the canon of African-American art history, and a new edition would be published in 1969. He was also the long-time chair of Howard University's legendary

and highly influential Art Department, a training ground for many prominent African-American artists. The structure of the VAC, however, seems to attest that the US national committee did not view the expertise of this prominent African-American art historian and his artist peers as being adequate. Rather, the names of prestigious, mainstream institutions seemed equally important for ensuring successful American participation in Dakar. Co-chair Lieberman and curator Geldzahler worked for two of the most powerful art museums in the nation. But these mainstream museums had long shut out black artists from exhibiting and black curators from having a voice at these institutions (Cahan 2016). The 11 December 1964 US Organizing Committee minutes tout the rising star Geldzahler as being 'very knowledgeable about the recent currents and developments in the art world', though his expertise with specifically African-American art was more limited (Porter Papers, B53F2). Perhaps more curious, the 17 September 1964 minutes for the 'Advisory Meeting for the Inauguration of the United States Committee' record that chair Copley Thaw's appointment was by decree of the Senegalese Festival Mission, which had asked that she 'participate in a leading position on the US Committee for the Festival' (Porter Papers, B53F2). Documents list her as having a fine arts major, and she was therefore assigned to the VAC. Copley Thaw's main expertise seems to have been as an arts philanthropist with prominent connections. This structure of having a white chair paired with a black co-chair was a pattern seen at the international level and at the national level for the US organizing committees (Blake 2001, 54; Ratcliff 2014, 174). This seems to have been done for fundraising purposes in the case of the US committees' structures. Not surprisingly, the appointment of white leadership in the organization of a black festival would be a lightning rod for criticism, beginning with correspondents who attended the festival, and in subsequent analyses (Sanders 1966, 18; Fuller 1966a, 82, 86; Fuller 1971, 93; Ratcliff 2014, 174–175).

'Trends and Confrontations': goals and organization

Following its formation, the VAC quickly worked to set the exhibition's parameters as members began a national search for art. The pre-festival regulations booklet laid out the guiding principles of their efforts, stating that the purpose of 'Trends and Confrontations' was to 'reflect the unity and originality of the present-day Negro world, through its most representative works of art' (Porter Papers, B7F2, 49). Another pre-festival information book, with a handwritten date of 15 September 1965 in the Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, proclaimed:

> Twentieth-century Negroes, forged in the struggle for independence and recognition, are creating dynamic expressions of their life and people ... and the potential creativity of unfettered artists is limitless. ... It is a Festival goal to ensure that the accomplished artists and those in the making are encouraged to their fullest, freest statement. We look to you to help make this possible.

These calls situated the modern privilege of artistic freedom of expression within a sense of Pan-African unity, forged through a history of struggle. It was left to the US committee to define what this meant. Much was at stake with this selection. In this Cold War era, the United States claimed the global lead not only in economic and military power, but also in the avant-garde art world. The US committee's selection of artists, therefore, needed to show that African-American artists were participants in the ascendancy of US cutting-edge modernism as the 'fullest, freest statement' of art (Blake 2001, 45, 50).

The organization of both the traditional and contemporary art exhibitions were meant to be visualizations of Pan-African unity. Both exhibitions gathered together works from across Africa and the black diaspora – a visualized homecoming of sorts. As art historian Wofford (2009) has argued, this mandate to reflect unity was intended to demonstrate a global black identity. Underneath this unity, however, were numerous 'fractures and slippages' in this constructed identity of shared blackness (Wofford 2009, 180–181). For example, there was always a distinct nationalistic chauvinism that undergirded the organization and staging of the US committee for the Dakar Festival. Chair Virginia Inness-Brown noted in a 22 June 1965 news conference: 'It is a matter of deep concern that the presentation of our arts abroad be *modest in concept*, consonant with the contributions of other countries, and at the same time appropriate to the development and excellence of the arts within the United States' (RBF, italics mine). The US organizers presumed that, of course, US talent and accomplishment could easily overpower the presentations from the African countries and other black diasporan delegations.

The VAC initially thought to produce a historical survey. Such an exhibition would have proclaimed the lengthy history of African-American artists being at the forefront of modern art. Such ambitions were certainly a nod to Porter's published research. The committee, however, quickly abandoned this idea due to limitations of space and also because it would go beyond Dakar's call for representative living artists. The committee also briefly considered several small solo exhibitions. While the viewing of a substantial body of work is the best way to understand the depth and innovation of a contemporary artist, this would have severely limited the number of festival participants. The committee therefore also abandoned this idea in favour of a group exhibition. The 6 November 1964 US Committee minutes suggest that they hoped to select 75–85 works of art from approximately 40 African-American artists (Porter Papers, B53 F2, 10). In November 1964, the American Federation of Arts drew up initial

paperwork for handling the shipping and insurance of the exhibition, with ambitious estimates for 100 works: 50 paintings, 30 graphics (works on paper), and 20 sculptures (AFA B65 F27).

'Trends and Confrontations', therefore, was to be a group show within a group show; the US selection needed to communicate with the surrounding contributions of African nations and other black delegations, and also as a coherent group within its display section. That the selection would operate as its own independent exhibition was extremely important as the committee planned that the African-American portion would tour after the festival's close. Indeed, domestic recognition was always a key underlying goal of the US contribution to FESMAN. On 22 June 1965, US President Lyndon B. Johnson sent a telegram to chair Inness-Brown and co-chair John A. Davis congratulating them on the formation of the United States Committee for the First World Festival of Negro Arts. President Johnson noted, 'Nowhere outside of Africa itself have the values and the influence of Negro arts achieved greater vitality than here in the United States. These values, so familiar to Americans, have yet to be fully appreciated beyond our borders' (RBF). Many artists, however, disagreed with the presumption that the talents of African-American artists were 'familiar to Americans'. In fact, the VAC proclaimed in their 6 November 1964 meeting minutes, 'The great output of the American Negro is relatively unknown, abroad as well as in this country' (Porter Papers, B53 F2, 9). Likewise, chair Inness-Brown, in her press statements and fundraising letters, called attention to this problem, noting that the benefits of the festival, with its anticipated significant media coverage, would 'have a lasting effect on the morale of the Negro in general; it will also serve to eliminate many pressures now felt through lack of awareness on the part of the general public' (United States Committee Press Agent's Files, B1F1). As such, the committee anticipated that a nationwide tour would follow the festival in Dakar, and arrangements were pursued with the Smithsonian Institution, the IBM World Trade Corporation, and the American Federation of Arts (United States Committee, B1 F1).

After setting out the scope of the exhibition, the VAC needed to determine its selection criteria and process. In October 1964, Hale Woodruff produced 'Criteria Governing the Selection of Works of Art: A Statement Written for the Visual Arts Committee'. He outlined that the selection was to be from 'various parts of the country' in order to create a 'cross-sectional view' of 'actively engaged' African-American artists. That is, the committee would strive to curate a truly of-the-moment national show and not just display New York City-based artists. More importantly, Woodruff proclaimed that works would be selected based on 'the highest possible artistic and esthetic quality while at the same time revealing some of the unique characteristics peculiar to the life, interests, and experiences of the Negro in America'. Following this sentence, he immediately reiterated:

'The emphasis upon high level quality shall take precedence over any other consideration, however, particularly that of the establishment of a basis for selecting or judging a work of art according the stereotypical notions about 'Negro' quality, sentimentality and romanticized clichés' (Porter Papers, B53 F2). Woodruff does not entirely deny that there could be an identifiable blackness to the work of African-American artists. If it does exist, however, it can '*possibly* be best identified as a sense of vitality (even power) or energy, or rhythmic pattern or movement, of intensity of form or color' (Porter Papers, B53 F2). The problem, Woodruff argues, is that racial litmus tests used to evaluate black art and artists have been based on stereotypes.

Woodruff's statement complicated and even refuted the identity politics reflected in the aesthetic criteria applied to artists of African descent. Discourses of identity have never been far from discussions of art by African-American artists, and like Négritude, the affirming racial philosophy that undergirded FESMAN, there have always been tensions between universalism and particularism in its assessment. On the one hand, it is asserted that art by African Americans should be evaluated as a part of a general aesthetic discourse of American and modernist trends. Yet, at the same time, identity discourses have suggested that it cannot or should not be separated from the particularness of African-American lived experience – of being rooted positively in ideas of African heritage, and of being a response by a minority population to a lengthy history of subjugation.

While Senghor and many FESMAN organizers viewed the festival as an opportunity to display Négritude in living practice, Woodruff admonished that to 'emphasize it arbitrarily is to follow an esthetic "party line"'. Rather, African-American art might include 'involvement in "Négritude"' and 'in present-day issues', but might just as easily reveal contemporary art trends 'in which he [the African-American artist] may rightly share' (Porter Papers, B53 F2). As a manifesto, Woodruff's statement, with its numerous qualifications, interjected a cautionary note towards the philosophies that undergirded the organization of FESMAN, and, on a practical level, sought to reveal central racial biases in the art world – biases that Woodruff, in writing this internal document, possibly saw in his white colleagues on the VAC and US Organizing Committee as a whole.

Exhibition selection and implementation

Having determined its scope and criteria, the VAC embarked on the major endeavour of identifying artists. In addition to selecting high-quality works that could represent the widest swath of African-American contributions to American art, the VAC placed top priority on discovering and bringing recognition to unknown artists. Such a stance enforced the committee's goal of domestic recognition in raising the profile of overlooked and up-and-

coming artists, and shows that the committee did not, at least initially, intend to bring only established artists to Dakar. Professionals at museums, galleries, and schools from across the country were prompted to submit names of promising artists, and from that list, the artists would be invited to submit transparencies to the VAC for their ultimate selection. This type of selection structure had already been used successfully in other national art searches, such as the Ford Foundation's experimental pilot grants to visual artists in the early 1960s. As recorded in the 6 November 1964 minutes, US Organizing Committee co-chair Dr John Davis challenged the VAC on this point, asking if such a competition might exclude already established artists. Hale Woodruff sardonically replied that 'many a well-established artist has not grown in the past twenty years', suggesting that there was a growing divide between established artists working in modernist modes and contemporary artists pursuing even more avant-garde practices. Woodruff, however, softened his response by adding that well-known artists would certainly be invited to participate in the competition (Porter Papers, B53F2, 9–10).

A successful conclusion to the organization, selection, and execution of this national exhibition was by no means guaranteed, and numerous problems arose in the months prior to FESMAN. By 11 December 1964, the VAC reported in the US Organizing Committee meeting minutes that Woodruff, Alston, and Porter had 'almost completed lists of artists to be invited to submit works for selection by the committee' (Porter Papers, B53F2). This suggests that it was the African-American artists, rather than the white museum curators, who took the initial lead in the early process of seeking out a wide range of contemporary artists. Less than a year later, however, Porter would feel excluded from the final selection process. In 10 October 1965 correspondence with Professor Della Brown Taylor, Porter complained that 'Hale Woodruff and Mrs. Lawrence Copley Thaw have been running things, and it is my understanding that only a few New York painters and three sculptors, possibly four, will actually represent the United States' (Porter Papers, B7F1). The US Organizing Committee and its subcommittees were hampered by difficulties, not the least of which was fundraising. Based in Washington, DC, Porter could not be an active member of the committee, 'which met occasionally in New York City but never voted a damned cent to enable the out-of-town member to attend sittings of the committee' (Porter to Roy Sieber, 11 December 1965; Porter Papers, B7 F1). This exclusion presumably also included Charles White in Los Angeles. Porter's complaint that the localized focus of the committee would result in only a few New York painters and sculptors being selected was not quite true. The committee's selection, however, was hamstrung, foremost because of funds, but also because the allocation of exhibition space was contentious. The pre-festival booklet noted that each of the participant countries were to have 32 m^2 (355 sq.

ft.), with the largest delegations (Nigeria, the United States, and Brazil) to receive double that space (Porter Papers, B7F2, 48). At the late date of 15 December 1965, committee minutes announced that Senegal had allotted less than half the expected space, meaning that the US contribution needed to be reduced to about 35 artworks (Porter Papers, B53 F2, 5).

Sixteen artists made it to the final selection: Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Emilio Cruz, Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, William Majors, Richard Mayhew, Norma Morgan, Robert Dennis Reid, Raymond Saunders, Charles White, Todd Williams, and Hale Woodruff (AFA B65F27). This list includes both established artists and younger, emerging artists, with a nod to geographic and gender diversity. At age 66, co-chair Woodruff was the oldest artist; he was joined by committee members Alston and Lawrence and established leaders Bearden and Lewis. Critics might look askance at the fact that all the VAC artist-members were selected (with the exception of Porter, whom the committee seemed to view mostly as an art historian and administrator rather than as a painter); it would be hard, however, to imagine a representative exhibition that did not include these leading artists, who had significant *oeuvres*. Complementing these seasoned professionals, five of the selected artists were under 35 years old: some with well-established exhibition records (Chase-Riboud, Hunt), while others were just emerging (Cruz, Gilliam, Saunders, with Williams the youngest at 27). Of the 16 artists selected, two were women (Chase-Riboud, Morgan). While most of the selectees indeed hailed from New York City, the exhibition did include artists who were based outside of this region, including: Gilliam (Washington, DC), White and Saunders (California), Morgan (Scotland), Chase-Riboud (Paris) and Hunt (Chicago, with gallery representation in New York and Los Angeles).

Although limited to just 16 artists, the selection included a wide range of styles and subject matter, from more neutral explorations of the formal problems of art to works closely linked to the African-American experience and civil rights. While painter and printmaker Norman Morgan's *oeuvre* included abstractions inspired by her travels through the wild moors of Scotland, the committee selected her more naturalistic engraving *David in the Wilderness* (1955–1956) (Figure 1). Porter had included this engraving in Morgan's 1960 solo exhibition at Howard University, where he described her work as 'often forsak[ing] the storehouses of art, to look out into the wild weather in order to feel the mist and beauty of the world' (Porter Papers, B40F33). In comparison, Emilio Cruz's oil on paper *Figure Composition #2/3* of dancing, curvilinear figures pursued the subject matter of the abstracted nude in the modernist tradition of Matisse (Figure 2). The selection also included the high naturalism of Charles White's enigmatic ink drawing *Paper Shelter* (Figure 3), which depicts a bare-chested man, with arms crossed and head tipped slightly

Figure 1. Norma Morgan. *David in the Wilderness*, engraving 1955–1956. 34 5/8 × 17 ½, lent by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund. Image reproduced in *Ten Negro Artists from the United States: First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar, Senegal*, 1966 (New York: United States Committee for the First World Festival of Negro Arts). Credit line: Image courtesy American Federation of Arts records, 1895–1993, bulk 1909–1969, B65, F29. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

upwards, who stands below an enormous bundle of folded and crumpled paper (AFA B65F7). (This work was later substituted in the exhibition and catalogue for White's famous *Birmingham Totem* [1964; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA], an emotive response to the 1963 retaliatory bombing of a Baptist church by a Ku Klux Klan splinter group that killed four African-American children.) Other selected artists abstracted recognizable elements and subject-matter into their expressive individual styles, such as Jacob Lawrence's well-known *John Brown* series (nos 11, 13, 20), which narrated a violent history of US rebellion in the face of slavery and inequality.

The VAC also included artists working with newer modernist techniques. Romare Bearden's 1964 photomontages *Conjur Woman* and *Watching the Good Trains Go By* were innovative in both material and form. Similarly, Richard Hunt and Todd Williams both worked in welded steel, which was now an established material for avant-garde

Figure 2. Emilio Cruz. *Figure Composition #2/3*, oil on paper, 1965, 14 × 19″, lent to FESMAN by Zabriskie Gallery, New York. Credit line: ©Estate of Emilio Cruz. Image courtesy of American Federation of Arts records, 1895–1993, bulk 1909–1969, B65, F28. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

sculpture. Further emphasizing the advanced trends in African-American contemporary art, non-objective abstraction dominated, characterizing the work of all three selected sculptors and many of the two-dimensional works, which included Sam Gilliam's hard-edged *Tempo* (1965) and the more Abstract Expressionistic works of Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff, and Richard Mayhew – though Woodruff's *Ancestral Memory* (1965) also called forth the continent of Africa, while Mayhew's *Fog Bank* (1963) invoked a shimmering atmospheric landscape (Figure 4). Non-objective art even featured on the front cover of the exhibition catalogue, with a rendering of Williams's *Coney Island* (1965) – a mobile constructed of painted welded steel and iron (Figure 5). This was a great honour for the young, emerging artist, though graphic designer Joseph Lawe transformed it into a graphic and rotated it horizontally (Figure 6). (In the published catalogue, Lawe received an entry with portrait photograph and a brief biography, thus making him, in a way, an additional artist selected.)

The exhibition's prevalence of abstraction is not surprising for that was the privileged form for avant-garde art during this period. Its predominance in the FESMAN selection proclaimed that African-American artists could work in the same vein as any white avant-garde artist who

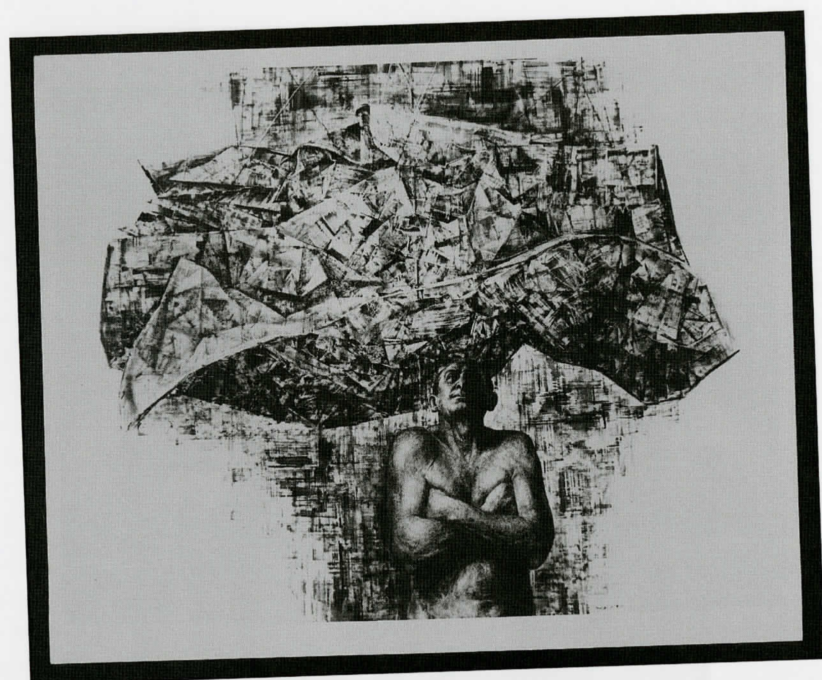

Figure 3. Charles White. *Paper Shelter*, Chinese ink drawing on paper, 1964–1965, 50 × 64″, lent by the ACA Gallery, New York. Credit line: ©1964–1965 The Charles White Archives. Image courtesy of American Federation of Arts records, 1895–1993, bulk 1909–1969, B65, F29. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

strove to communicate a greater universalism through the formal language of art. FESMAN provided an international setting upon which these contemporary artists could proclaim their equivalence to white artists who had gained more recognition, gallery accolades, and patronage. And this was certainly a central concern for the artists involved, especially for six of the selectees who were members of the short-lived, but highly influential, New York-based artist group Spiral (Alston, Bearden, Lewis, Majors, Mayhew, Woodruff).

Spiral first met in June 1963, in Bearden's studio, to discuss as artists their response and responsibilities to the March on Washington and the Civil Rights movement. The group continued to meet over the next two years to discuss their work, their experiences as artists, as African Americans, and also the role, if any, of race in their work (Coleman 1996; Siegel 1966). In many ways, the Spiral group encapsulated the spirit of FESMAN, with its proclaimed yet contested philosophy of Négritude, and its contemporary art exhibition that produced cross-generational conversations among artists of widely divergent styles and goals. In providing a space to discuss aspects of race in their artistic experiences, the Spiral group

Figure 4. Richard Mayhew. *Fog Bank*, oil on canvas, 1963. 35 × 45″ lent by Durlacher Bros., New York. Credit line: ©Richard Mayhew; Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York. Image courtesy of American Federation of Arts records, 1895–1993, bulk 1909–1969, B65, F29. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

helped build a support network of artists who could face the problematic structures of the art world together – an issue that was to become the biggest controversy for the FESMAN exhibition and its aftermath.

Confrontations erupt

On 10 March 1966, a mere three weeks before the festival opened, Richard Shepard in *The New York Times* announced that 10 out of the 16 artists had 'quit' the Dakar festival: the six Spiral members (Alston, Bearden, Lewis, Majors, Mayhew, Woodruff) and Lawrence, Reid, Saunders, and White. The protest centred on budget cuts that seemed to privilege performers over the visual artists. The artists had agreed to $1000 honoraria, with each contributing half to be set aside for $8000 in scholarship awards to young artists of 'any ethnic origin', who could go to Africa the following year to study and paint. These were cut, presumably to fund sending the performing groups to Dakar. The newspaper quoted Bearden: 'The full weight of sacrifice was placed solely on the visual artist'. Bearden stressed that this was not merely a squabble over money, but that 'there are principles here that apply to all artists' (Shepard 1966,

Figure 5. Todd Williams. *Coney Island*, welded steel and iron, painted, mobile, 1965. 62 × 23 × 20″. Credit line: ©Todd Williams. Image courtesy of American Federation of Arts records, 1895–1993, bulk 1909–1969, B65, F29. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

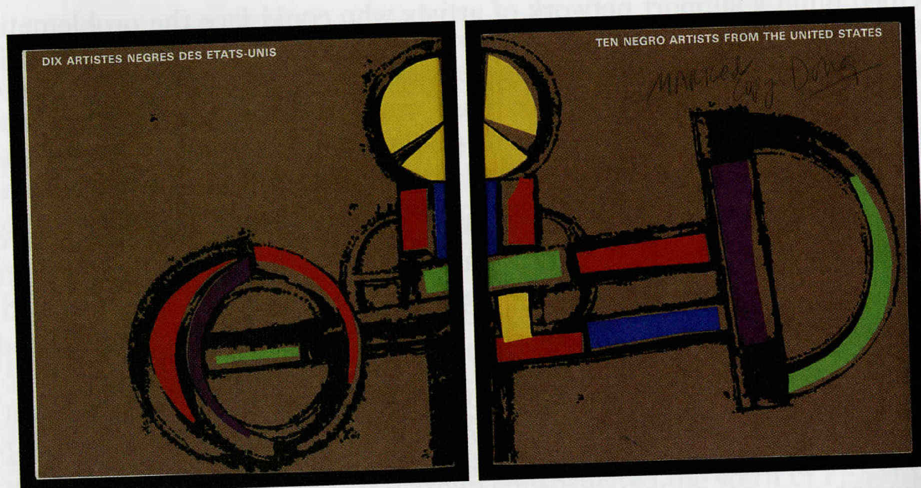

Figure 6. Cover. *Ten Negro Artists from the United States: First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar, Senegal*, 1966 (New York: United States Committee for the First World Festival of Negro Arts, 1966). Credit line: Image courtesy of American Federation of Arts records, 1895–1993, bulk 1909–1969, B65, F27. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

29).[1] Moreover, the artists protested against plans to charge an admission fee to the contemporary exhibition, which they felt would limit viewership and access to their works.

Later reports made the protest sound like a lack of Pan-African unity, or even a character flaw in African Americans. For example, reporter Leslie Carpenter, in the *Washington Star* on 13 March 1966, used the incident to proclaim, 'Negroes can be their own worst enemies'. Carpenter further implied that the artists should have gone along with the exhibition plans in order to have positive exposure of their work at the festival and subsequent exhibition tour of the United States, whatever their hang-ups regarding honoraria or staging.[2] Yet the main point of the protest was that visual artists are constantly asked to donate their works for display, with organizations claiming that it would be 'good exposure' for them without feeling obliged to compensate them for the use of their work. This is in stark contrast to the performers, whose travel costs and company fees were to be paid by the US Organizing Committee. The visual artists, with the exception of Hale Woodruff, who was selected to attend the festival as an official guest of the US State Department, could not attend the Dakar festival unless they paid their own way. The heart of FESMAN was that it was a global diasporic gathering; the interpersonal interactions of all the artists and visitors gathered together in Dakar, and the chance to see the creative and cultural works in dialogue together, meant far more than the individual performances and exhibits. This point is enforced by the artists' desire to create a scholarship: if they could not attend, then at least they could help send a worthy visual artist to experience Africa at some point in the future.

In the end, the exhibition became 'Ten Negro Artists from the United States', with Chase-Riboud, Cruz, Gilliam, Hunt, Lawrence, Majors, Morgan, Reid, White, and Williams (Figure 7). (In actuality, only nine artists exhibited in Dakar because Chase-Riboud's sculptures were lost in shipping [Figure 8] [AFA B65 F27; Blake 2001, 53].) Some galleries and museums agreed to lend works to the exhibition, overriding four of the artists who had withdrawn (Lawrence, Majors, Reid, and White). For example, the Junior Council of The Museum of Modern Art still lent William Majors's print *Ecclesiastes V.15*, which would win the FESMAN Grand Prize in Graphic Arts (Lieberman to Davis, 11 November 1966, B1F7; Alston Papers). Majors did not attend FESMAN and refused to accept the award when President Senghor visited New York (Taylor 1996, 180).

The catalogue publication also went forward. And while not allowing their work to be included, Bearden contributed a poem and Woodruff the preface and foreword. Additionally, the catalogue's listing of the VAC promoted Woodruff to chair, with no mention of Copley Thaw, who had stepped down after having overruled some of the African-American

Figure 7. Installation view of 'Ten Negro Artists from the United States: First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar.' Credit line: Smithsonian Institution Archives. Image # SIA2018-007035.

artists on the selection committee in two of the decisions. This is an important aspect of the controversy, but was only briefly noted in the 10 March 1966 *New York Times* coverage of the protest. That the white chair with no curatorial experience could overrule selection decisions by the African-American artists exposed fissures of authority over expertise that broke along racial lines. It is uncertain who the two artists were, though Woodruff mentions several artists in an early typed draft of his preface, noting that they 'could not include the works' of Eldzier Cortor, John Rhoden, John Biggers, and the late Horace Pippin. Woodruff, however, gives no explanation as to why. He also notes the missing younger generation of artists – citing specifically Calvin Douglas, Alvin Hollingsworth, Rip Woods, and Tom Feelings (Woodruff Papers). Such artists would have brought a much more radical and avant-garde presence to the exhibition, the lack of which, in the aftermath, was one of the main criticisms of FESMAN (Fuller 1966b, 102; Ratcliff 2014, 174).

Assessment and aftermath: the lessons of FESMAN come home

What can be learned from an exhibition that almost didn't happen, that few Americans viewed, and about which its organizers felt deeply ambivalent?

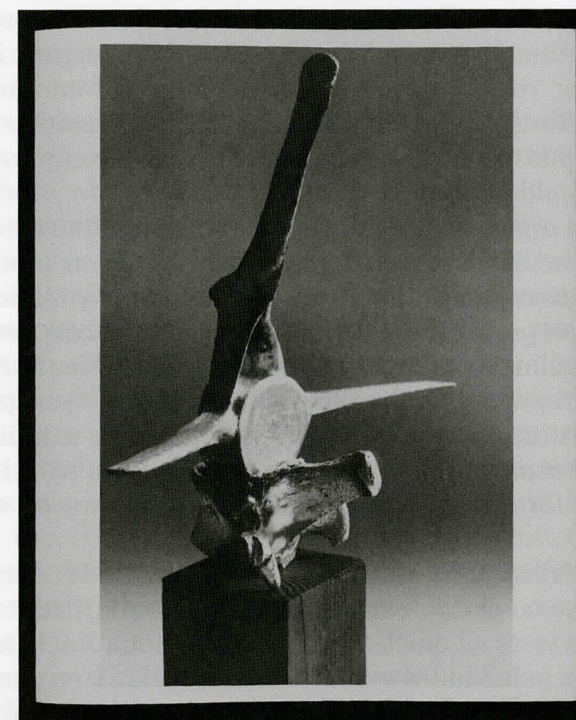

Figure 8. Barbara Chase [Chase-Riboud]. *The Centurion*, silver-plated bone, 1965, 9 ¾ × 9 ½ × 4″, lent by the artist. Sculpture lost in transit. Credit line: © Barbara Chase-Riboud; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY. Image courtesy of American Federation of Arts records, 1895–1993, bulk 1909–1969, B65, F28. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The lack of funding clearly hampered the US Organizing Committee and all its subcommittees, not the least the VAC, and forced the organization to make difficult decisions. Yet the confrontations that erupted reveal how the organizers of the US contribution to FESMAN thought about who should speak for and represent contemporary African-American art. For example, the US Organizing Committee minutes of 15 December 1965 show that the US State Department designated co-chair Woodruff to represent the United States for 'Trends and Confrontations', but the privilege of presenting at the colloquium was initially assigned to William Lieberman. James Porter responded by manufacturing his own opportunity to speak on African-American art (Porter Papers, B7 F1). And, as noted above, tensions over the committee structure of mostly white administrators over black artists came to a head with Copley Thaw stepping down. Of course, many considerations undergirded the appointments of these specific administrators and artists. But, in remembering that a foremost goal of the US participation in FESMAN was to raise the profile of African-American artists to a US domestic audience, we can ask: Did it

open the minds of the well-connected museum administrators to contemporary African-American art? Did the process of organizing FESMAN create a working relationship between these white curators and black artists? In the aftermath of FESMAN, the archival record certainly shows that the artists put the curators on notice that their curatorial decisions mattered and would be evaluated.

An exhibition organized by FESMAN VAC committee co-chair William Lieberman for the Museum of Modern Art just seven months after the Dakar festival exemplifies the inequalities faced by African-American artists. Lieberman prepared *25 Contemporary American Artists as Printmakers* as a travelling exhibition for American embassies in Africa, including: Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Dahomey, Liberia, Niger, Senegal, Togo, and Upper Volta (Alston Papers, B2 F8). The title of the exhibition suggests an inclusive and expansive look at trends in American painting and sculpture through the form of printmaking. The results, however, were less than diverse.

Lieberman's fellow VAC committee member Hale Woodruff, US Organizing Committee co-chair John A. Davis, and the initially-selected artist Romare Bearden were all quick to call him out: not a single African-American artist was included in the exhibition. Lieberman's response was one of curatorial posturing. In a letter to Davis dated 11 November 1966, Lieberman wrote that the exhibit was designed 'to indicate current aspects among American painters and sculptors as it reflects in their graphic work in lithography, serigraphy and inkless intaglio'. His letter notes that of course he remembers that two of the artists from the Dakar Festival exhibition, William Majors and Richard Hunt (with no mention of Morgan), also created prints, but that their best printmaking work was in intaglio, a technique excluded from the exhibition – a seemingly arbitrary parameter to narrow the exhibition selection. Lieberman scornfully mentions Majors' withdrawal from the Dakar Festival and the Museum of Modern Art's quick action to lend its print to the festival so that Majors could still be included. Distancing himself from his role on the committee, he added, 'I was of course delighted when Bill won the grand prize for graphics (even though he refused to cooperate with *your* United States Committee for the Festival)' (italics mine). Lieberman excluded Richard Hunt, in turn, because his work in stone lithography was not as strong as his work in intaglio – though the whole point of the exhibition was to highlight artists (painters and sculptors) who made forays into printmaking and were not necessarily masters of the medium. He then cites the exclusion of one of the foremost African-American printmakers, Robert Blackburn, because he *specialized* in printmaking. Lieberman emphasized, though, that 'The Museum has of course never discriminated against artists on the basis of race, creed or politics. In our collections and exhibitions our choices are made exclusively on the basis of quality' (Alston Papers). Lieberman's

elaborate yet inconsistent logic, however, exemplifies how personal actions mapped onto institutional structures perpetuate the exclusion of minorities from elite institutions.

In a 16 November 1966 letter to Lieberman, Woodruff responded with several points, first noting that there were actually several African-American artists whose work would fall under the exhibition criteria, quickly listing seven prominent names. More problematically, Woodruff noted that the exhibition's limiting criteria were not well communicated, either to the exhibition audience or to the staff of the Museum of Modern Art, leading general observers to conclude that there were simply no qualified African-American artists. On the exhibition's preview night, for example, when a visitor inquired about the absence of African-American artists, the MoMA staff merely said, 'We don't know any Negro artists'. Moreover, as Woodruff argued, even if there were no qualified examples of African-American lithography or serigraph, the curator should have considered more closely the context of the exhibition and shifted its seemingly arbitrary criteria that excluded a wider range of printmaking techniques in order to ensure that African-American artists could be included (Alston Papers).

Citing the spirit of FESMAN and his travels in Africa, Woodruff further countered Lieberman by noting that what visitors and Africans most want to see on view in US embassies is the work of African-American artists. 'Perhaps the museum is not concerned with the social and intercultural relations with other peoples such as the Africans, which is so important today', chided Woodruff, 'but rather appears to be interested in presenting the character of its own private world of art'. Woodruff concludes (ibid.):

> I would venture the thought that art is not simply a commodity or object; it is the embodiment of the thoughts and action of people, of individuals, whose skin may be of various colors. I have my reservations about the practice of many cultural and educational institutions who claim that they are not concerned with the racial identity of persons whose works fall under their jurisdiction or scrutiny. Often this can constitute prejudicial attitudes in reverse.

In a letter dated 29 November 1966, FESMAN US Organizing Committee co-chair and editor of *African Forum* John A. Davis was blunter with Lieberman, accusing him of ignoring the political and racial implications of eliminating African Americans from this travelling exhibition 'while wrapping yourself in the chaste garments of excellence' (Alston Papers).

What Woodruff and Davis articulate is indeed why the Dakar Festival was so necessary. That Lieberman, as a long-standing VAC member, could not understand why his choices and actions could provoke such an

outcry is clearly why the lessons of FESMAN needed to be repeated, and again in future decades in other Pan-African festivals and black-centred US exhibitions. FESMAN's organization and aftermath revealed the art-world inequalities that would soon erupt in more prominent protests and picket lines before major American museums (Cahan 2016; Cooks 2011). The organizational history of FESMAN has not been included in scholarship of black exhibitions and artists' protests because the exhibition was staged abroad, with limited coverage, and the protest was mostly carried out by private correspondence and telegram. Yet the histories of Pan-African festivals and exhibitions were as much about combatting racist domestic structures as they were about a unified global blackness. With each and every Pan-African event, African-American artists took the opportunity to present their art to the world, but also to continue to speak to US audiences who seem always so ready to forget their contributions.

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Notes

1. Unacknowledged or unknown to the visual artists, dance encountered a similar fundraising crisis. See Clive Barnes, "Dance: Hoping for a $130,000 Miracle," *New York Times* (17 March 1966), clipping in Schomburg archives, MG 220, B1 F5.
2. Although the domestic tour of the exhibition would indeed be cancelled, that would not be determined until six months after the festival (see AFA, B65 F26).

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Big Bird's minor upset: Frank Bowling's prize-winning entry to the 1966 Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres

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This essay examines *Big Bird* (1965) by Frank Bowling in the context of its first-prize victory in the category of painting at *Tendances et Confrontations*, the exhibition of contemporary work by African-descended artists at the 1966 Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres in Dakar, Senegal. Prior literature has examined the content and style of *Big Bird*, like other works created during the artist's time in London, primarily with reference to the artist's biography. This article argues, however, that by re-contextualizing visual tropes associated with well-known American abstractionists, the painting reflects critically upon the ways in which relationships between artistic identity, form and power create meaning. Drawing upon Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's conceptualization of minority, I argue that *Big Bird* and *Tendances et Confrontations* play off of one another to upset the perceived stability of the social, racial and intellectual connotations of form and style.

Keywords: Frank Bowling; abstraction; colour field painting; FESMAN; Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Negres; Negritude

The white swan foregrounded in Frank Bowling's 1965 *Big Bird* might seem unlikely subject matter for the highest-awarded painting at the 1966 Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres (FESMAN) (Figure 1). As is often cited, the express purpose that motivated Senegal's first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, to realize the 1966 mega-event was, in his words, 'the defense and illustration of Négritude' (Senghor 1966). Over the twenty-four days of the festival, the capital city of Dakar was overtaken by works of dance, music, theatre, poetry, and literature, all by people of African descent: ample material through which the thousands in its international audience might consider Senghor's philosophical and ideological tenets. But perhaps no element of the festival offered such literal promise of Négritude's 'illustration' as its exhibition of contemporary art,

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