

The Use of Black Female Art in Public Spaces To Expel Racial Trauma

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Historically, in no other time than the present, have Black Women claimed the moniker of artists--before any other societal notion needed to be upheld.

To give voice to issues that affect Black Women and their collective community has challenges that arise from living in a polarized racist country. This is the reasoning behind the idea that creation and creativity are necessary to combat divisiveness. Because divisions inflict trauma and deepen existing wounds, words get personal in order to impart empathy for sustainable change making—sharing stories to indemnify that encountering forces are aligned against many, not the few. Using the ancient art of storytelling fused to intimate issues to seek reclamation from structural anti-Blackness.

Art can play a crucial role in helping us talk to each other more openly about the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of social inequality and discrimination. It helps in aiding us to communicate about such topics as racism, white privilege, police/gun violence, economic inequality and mass incarceration. Living in a Southern city, difficult conversations get swept under the rug. But through art, we can begin to bridge the “politeness divide” that keeps so many people—especially those in power and those of the dominant culture—from even being willing to listen to a different point of view. As such, this unwillingness or discomfort with dialogue puts the onus of teaching on the groups that are being oppressed and underserved. Without artist expression as a catalyst, and regardless of the passion involved in these discussions, they can feel like being hit by a bus, emotionally.

Arts organizations are often reluctant to give Black artists the same chance they give White artists to explore the depth of their identity outside of a practically placed heritage month. As if one month can contain lived experiences. But more than that, institutions will often support new and provisional works by up-and-coming (white) geniuses. So, the question becomes not one simply of access, but one of support, funding, and trust.

Where can Black artists be given this same experimental and forgiving space?

The solace sought from that emotional drain comes from creating exhibitions. The occupation befell out of necessity, not familiarity. Personal relationships with Black Visual Artists across the country yielded conversations of deep-seated frustration: a continuous dis-inclusion in their respective arts community. There was much conversation, but not any significant movement, with less than a few Black Arts leaders working within the institutional art system locally, and only one major (institutionally supported) show of Black Artists annually. The gap was wide and the ability to fill it was fathomless. In gaining experience through doing and not systemic credentials that typically regulate this role, intentionality was found within a unique vantage point. Being an artist and curator who is a Black voice in White spaces.

Success provided an opportunity to establish a community gallery in the Main public library. Because the building was open to all, the public, it allowed all who entered to become a viewer and experienter of the work. Great setting to start. but not to stay. Intentional collaboration and inquisitiveness led to a production of an all Black Woman exhibition, (KESHA: A Black Female Experience of Identity and Race). The show was widely celebrated by all walks of life because by centering Black Women a pathway to connection was laid. By sharing and not withholding, traditional power structures were inverted. Institutional support finds its limits to consistency in racial arenas due to the lack of infrastructure. Putting those who call out racial issues in jeopardy. In order to keep breaking molds, spaces that would commit to courage were needed to avoid white fragility, and censorship of expression.

As a cultural producer/connector the aim is often less about presenting a perfect experience, but instead to align with access. Accessibility adopted into presenting outside of the physical place and directly into outside. Because artists, especially those who are self-taught or outside of a cliquey milieu, are overlooked within institutions who are guided by Western European standards. Gatekeeping, those notions of what quality is and what deserves exhibiting is inextricably bound up with hundreds of years of art history, who history has deemed genius, or masterful. What materials are fine and what materials are craft? The labeling of outsider, or naive. The result: White male representation is often dominant in those settings and Black women are collected at a rate that is less than 1%. This daunting statistic itself renders the creative works by Black women as outliers. To seek and create venues outside of the normative place for creators, for example an empty lot, a public park, side of a building, or even a backyard. Freedom to be unapologetic. Unapologetically Black.

Grounded in grassroots movements, the initiatives are meant to do more than just showcase the work of minority artists: They are designed to spark conversation and innovation. To let those artists feel seen, as art spaces are typically viewed as white/Caucasian spaces and not welcoming to those who are othered or marginalized. Too, these institutions do not center the perspectives of members of non-dominant culture for fear of retribution from their supporters. This allows white supremacy to foster a legacy that celebrates and acknowledges only itself. The work is to offset those habits through using public spaces as arenas of community-specific communications.

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