



From denouncing racism to destabilising systems: the changing focus of black artists

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Adrian Piper, art, civil rights, gallery, Linda Goode Bryant, London, Lorraine O'Grady, Maria Hassinger, New York, tonya nelson, USA

Tonya Nelson examines the changing responses of black artists to racism since the Civil Rights Era

At the heart of the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement is the question: has anything really changed when it comes to race in America? Reflecting on the Civil Rights Movement through the lens of two current art exhibitions: [The Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power](#) at the Tate Modern and [We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85](#) at the Brooklyn Museum – the answer would appear to be no. However, the contemporary work of four artists featured in these exhibitions — Lorraine O'Grady, Maren Hassinger, Adrian Piper and Linda Goode Bryant — provides a more nuanced response to this

question. Yes, racism still exists but its roots run deeper than the institutional and legal barriers of the 60s. The art produced by these four artists over the last thirty years recasts racism as the symptom of a larger set of problems – the inability of Western societies to reconcile their fractured identities, a failure of individual and collective compassion and integrity, and an economic system that relies on haves and have-nots.

Both [Soul of a Nation](#) and *We Wanted a Revolution* are much overdue exhibitions presenting the ways black artists responded to the social, political and economic conditions of the Civil Rights era. The Tate exhibition (until 22 October) features more than 150 works by over sixty artists. Well known [Romare Bearden](#)'s collages hang alongside lesser-known works, such as Jack Whitten's [Homage to Malcolm](#), which is on public display for the first time. The Brooklyn Museum exhibition (until 17 September) explores the work of black women artists and the way they negotiated the conflicting elements of the civil rights and feminist movements. While these are timely retrospective exhibitions, they circumscribe the artists featured to a certain time and place. What may be more instructive is a survey of how their work has evolved. What does their current work have to say about the state of race in America and around the world?

Lorraine O'Grady

O'Grady's work features in both *We Wanted a Revolution* and *Soul of a Nation*. As a performance artist, she created the alter ego [Mlle Bourgeoise Noire](#) (*Miss Black Middle Class 1955*). In a dress made of 180 pairs of white gloves, O'Grady crashed art museum openings in order to make a statement about the exclusion of black artists from the mainstream art world. The Brooklyn Museum presents the iconic white dress and sash along with a number of photos of O'Grady in role.

The Tate exhibition features photographs from O'Grady's work [Art is...](#) in which she uses the concept of the picture frame to challenge the idea of black exclusion from the arts. At an African American Day parade in Harlem in 1983, O'Grady mounted a gold frame to the front of a float, symbolically framing everything it passed as art. She also hired performers to carry gold frames along the parade route and photograph black attendees within the frames.

In the thirty years since completing these performance pieces, O'Grady's work has shifted from focusing on racial exclusion to the complexities of race integration. In 1991, O'Grady presented a new work entitled *The Fir-Palm*, a black-and-white photomontage, depicting a hybrid combination of a New England fir and Caribbean palm tree sprouting from a female torso. As O'Grady was raised in Boston to Jamaican parents, the work represents the idea of physical, psychological and cultural integration. In the subsequent, more controversial, *The Clearing*, O'Grady creates a diptych presenting a sex scene between an interracial couple – one side showing ecstasy and the other showing tragedy. In an



[interview](#), O’Grady explains that the work is not meant to be an ‘either/or’ or ‘before/after’ narrative, but rather the articulation of the complexity of racial integration. In a follow up work, *Landscape, Western Hemisphere*, O’Grady creates a video that has the look of a lush forest landscape but is actually a close up of her dark wavy hair. According to O’Grady, the work is intended to show that race integration is a foundational part of who we are in the Western world. Of this work, O’Grady [stated](#): “I’m really advocating for the kind of miscegenated thinking that’s needed to deal with what we’ve already created here.”

Adrian Piper

The work of Adrian Piper is mentioned in correspondence featured in both *We Wanted Revolution* and *Soul of the Nation*, but not shown, for good [reason](#). The Adrian Piper Archive loan agreement states: ‘Adrian Piper does not permit or approve the inclusion of her work in racially segregated exhibitions.’ Like O’Grady, Piper has advocated fiercely for black art to be acknowledged within the mainstream. However, adhering to her belief that race is a social construct, Piper equally does not want her work presented in shows that are exclusively black. Hence, ironically, her work could not be shown in either the Tate or Brooklyn Museum shows. Piper’s work from the 1970s included the *Mythic Being* series, in



I WILL ALWAYS MEAN WHAT I SAY.

which Piper disguised herself as a black or latino teenage boy and acted out common stereotypes of antisocial behavior, such as pick-pocketing and speaking loudly and incoherently on the street. Augmented photos of Piper's performances are used in exhibitions. One photo has a thought bubble drawn over it, which reads, "I embody everything you most hate and fear."

Over the past thirty years, Piper's work has become more conceptual and expanded to explore more existential subjects. She won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 2015 with a work entitled *The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1–3*. The work offers three statements written in gold text across the walls of the exhibition space, one of which is: 'I will always mean what I say.' Visitors have the opportunity to sign a contract agreeing to abide by the statements at a registry desk. The work has been acquired by the German National Gallery and is now on show at [Hamburger Bahnhof](#) in Berlin (until September 2017). Of the work, [Piper](#) explains: "In order to build trust among ourselves, we must begin right now to train ourselves to become trustworthy. This requires that each of us can rely on ourselves to fulfill our own expectations of ourselves; and this, in turn, that we can bring our actions into accord with our assertions, our assertions into accord with our beliefs, and our beliefs into accord with our values. The Probable Trust Registry offers the public the opportunity to work together, individually and collectively, on strengthening these character traits."

Maren Hassinger: From Black Oppression to Cultural Cooperation



An installation by [Maren Hassinger](#) stands at the entrance of *We Wanted a Revolution*. The work titled *Leaning* (1980) is comprised of tightly bound bundles of silver wires with bush-like frayed ends. It is a surprisingly abstract start to the show, but instructive as to the ways in which black artists pushed the boundaries of art. Hassinger worked with other black artists in the 1970s to challenge the art establishment and find alternative venues for showing work: abandoned buildings, parks and construction sites. If *Leaning* does not communicate a clear political position, Hassinger's 2001 work [Message from Malcolm](#) does. In New York's Central Park North subway station Hassinger has created a mosaic work featuring a Malcolm X quote espousing the benefits of brotherhood and self-determination.

Is Hassinger still a Black Power advocate? In a 2015 interview, she [said](#):

I want to concentrate on issues and environments where we all have a common interest. This is why I'm very tired of the conversation that goes on among many artists of color about being oppressed and victimized. Although that may very well be the case, at this point talking

persistently about victimization is not a conversation that I want to hear anymore. I was recently talking with a friend about cultural ecology; I think that is an appropriate description—we can redirect our voices from oppression to the retelling of humans functioning together.

This point of view is evident in Hassinger's 2014 show *Almost Weightless*, which uses newspapers and plastic bags to create larger sculptures which explore the human condition. [Love](#) is an installation comprised of pink grocery bags inflated with human breath, which contain tiny pieces of paper printed with the word 'love.' In *Wrenching News*, newspaper is twisted and made into sculpture. The [gallery](#) presenting the show described it as “[M]easur[ing] the heaviness of the news against the sometimes unbearable lightness of love. In this conversation of highs and lows, Hassinger plays with the ideas of density and context, inviting the viewer in as she turns conventional wisdom into powerful imagery.”

Hassinger's latest work can be seen in *Uptown*, the inaugural group show at Columbia University's new [Wallace Art Gallery](#) space in New York (until 20 August 2017). In *Fight the Power*, which references the 1989 Public Enemy protest song, Hassinger writes the title phrase on newsprint and twists them into bundles, much like the wires in *Leaning*. From the twisted bundles, she creates a set of sculptural friezes that frame the gallery walls.

Linda Goode Bryant: From Artistic Entrepreneurship to Environmental Empowerment



Linda Goode Bryant features in both exhibitions, not for her art, but for [JAM](#) (Just Above Midtown), an art gallery for black artists that she established in New York in 1975. A number of artists in both exhibitions would not have gotten their work seen without JAM. Bryant speaks eloquently about the need for JAM in a [Tate Shots video](#), stating that many museum curators and directors believed that black artists only made kitsch 'black velvet' paintings. She and artist David Hammons, also featured in *Soul of Nation*, speak about the impetus for JAM in this archive audio interview conducted by [Mimi Poser](#) of the Guggenheim in 1975.

JAM closed in 1988. However, Linda Goode Bryant has worked as a filmmaker and founder of activist organisations. In 2003, she co-directed and co-produced a film called *Flag Wars* with Laura Poitras, which examined the concept of gentrification when one marginalized group (gay couples) pushes out another (African American families). Keeping with her entrepreneurial roots, Bryant established the Active Citizens Project in 2003, which seeks to promote public activism using art and new media as tools for social change. One significant project she has undertaken is Project EATS which focuses on urban agriculture. Bryant was inspired to establish EATS after witnessing the Haitian food crisis in 2008 and learning how vulnerable low-income communities are when they are dependent on the global food

trade. The Project EATS team create site-specific installations such as vegetable gardens, weekly green markets, and an “Energy Hub” stations where visitors pedal a bicycle to generate power for future use. According to [Bryant](#): “While Project EATS grows food, it is not about food,” she adds. “It is about the innate ability of all life to use what it has to create what it needs.”

From denouncing racism to destabilising systems

The Tate and Brooklyn Museum Civil Rights era art exhibitions are very timely. The disproportionate number of deaths of black people at the hands of police and vigilantes is reminiscent of the violence of the 1960s. However, the artists featured in these exhibitions appear to have expanded the context in which they situate racism. Their points of view are now both more global and philosophical. All four artists seem to be pointing us towards a conversation, not about racial inequality per se, but about fundamental human values that have been lost in an increasingly more complex and interconnected society. The majority of artists featured in these exhibitions are still working. Let *Soul of a Nation* and *We Wanted a Revolution* to be start of the conversation about their work, not the end.



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