

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

- [About](#)
- [Store](#)
- [Contact](#)

Sources of Harm: Notes on the Alternative Artworld

by [Joseph Henry](#) on September 11, 2014

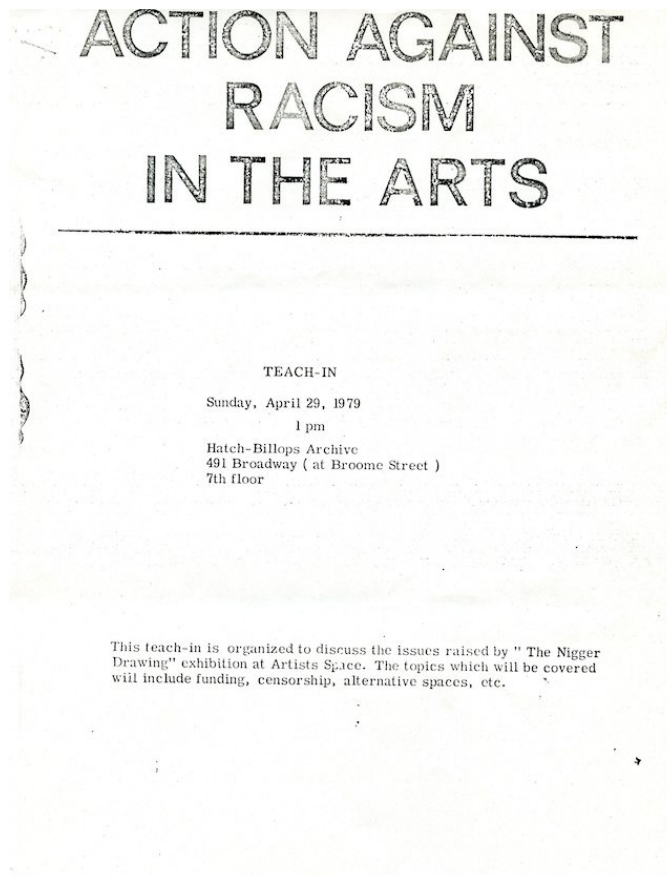


Protest sign, probably from Artists Space occupation by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (all images dated 1979 and courtesy Artists Space)

Within and beyond the American artworld, the politics of race have assumed a central position this year with a degree of ugliness that feels particularly virulent. The names are, by now, familiar: Michael Brown, Kajieme Powell, Eric Garner. On a far different, yet not unconnected social plane, so are the titles of exhibitions and their race-based controversies: Kara Walker's intense, operatic installation at the Domino Factory, the Yams Collective's withdrawal from the Whitney Biennial, and the Guggenheim's presentation of Carrie Mae Weem's retrospective — the *first* by a woman of color at that institution. As with most politically tremulous cultural phenomena, the critical chatter at all levels of publicity has endured beyond the actual display dates. The reason for it, I think, is the woozy

sensation of repetition. For those who follow the various race- and ethnicity-based injustices internal and external to the high cultural sphere, the circular patterns of infraction, backlash, apology, and subsequent variation-on-original-infraction become wearily apparent. Police casually kill people of color, courts absolve murderers, museums dismiss dissenting artists, and by virtue of their inertia, the general conditions of survival for most non-dominant populations continue to diminish. To risk an oft-quoted aphorism by Frederic Jameson, “history is what hurts.”

Coco Fusco **observed** a similar historical pattern in her article for *The Brooklyn Rail* on Joe Scanlan and the Biennial, where she brought up a 1979 group of charcoal and photographic triptychs called *The Nigger Drawings*, shown by the little-known figure Donald Newman at the downtown non-profit gallery Artists Space (full disclosure: I’m currently a Curatorial Fellow there). It goes without saying, hopefully, that when Artists Space debuted Donald’s work (he went by his first name), parts of the New York artworld did not receive the casual curation of an exhibition with perhaps the most loaded racial signifier in American culture calmly. According to Fusco, the resulting backlash of letters, protests, teach-ins, editorials, and news coverage on all sides of the political spectrum galvanized debates around race and exclusion in relation to the visual arts.



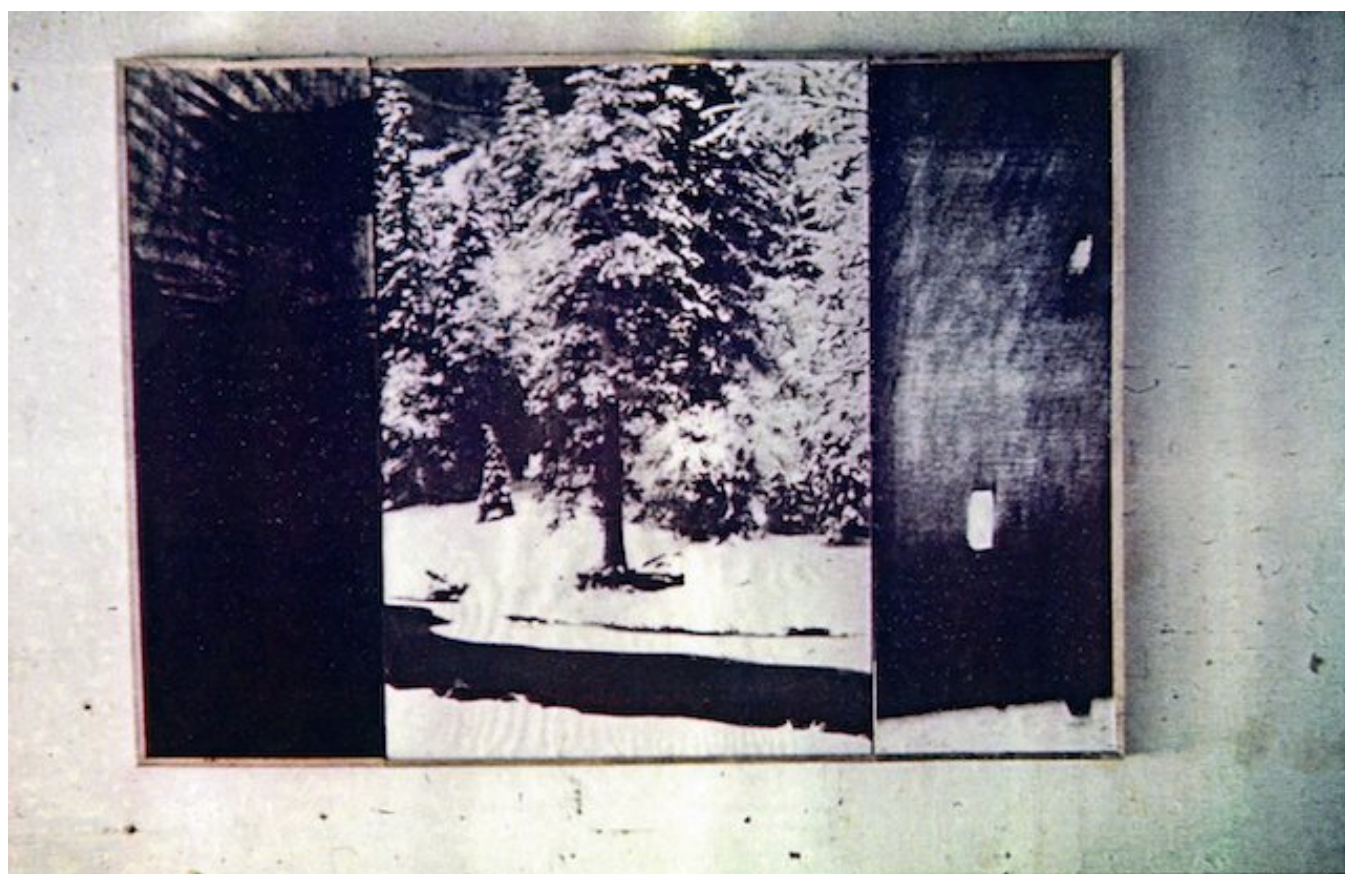
Announcement by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition’s teach-in at Artists Space ([click to enlarge](#))

Artists Space has kept most of their documentation surrounding the event, some of which we’ve republished here. Held up in light of Kara Walker and the Yams, the archive of *The Nigger Drawings* invites a curious sort of emotional shuffle: there’s the excitement of historical discovery, of gaining a sharper, more complicated picture of a largely mythologized New York artworld, but there’s also the fatiguing, creeping recognition that things might not be so different than they were in the safely distant past. Placed alongside in split-screen proximity, “2014” and “1979” cohere into a feedback loop of history, where the notion of racial equity in contemporary visual art production staggers,

stumbles, and only eventually covers some ground. *The Nigger Drawings* form a retroactive coda to Joe Scanlan and racist Kara Walker visitors, of a bored Whitney response and opportunistic Creative Time, of political resistance, oppression, and perhaps, change.

There is a thorough history of *The Nigger Drawings* waiting to be written, from the racial politics of New York's alternative gallery system, to now almost quaint questions of public funding and accountability. (The journalist Jeff Chang has just published in *n+1* an [excerpt](#) on Newman from an [upcoming book](#), focusing on a stylized portrayal of Donald as an NYC punk eager to make it big among the avant-garde.) In February 1979, Donald exhibited the drawings as suite of triptychs consisting of a Plexiglas-lined center panel bookended by charcoal abstractions. Barring some explicit representational content in the photography, like a tree or Newman himself, *The Nigger Drawings* seemed to have very little to do with race at all.

To my eyes, the drawings are admittedly compelling on a formal level. Their triumvirate structure and engagement with negative space dislocates yet associates the images across the entire picture plane. Gestural charcoal sweeps meet unresolved abstraction. Writing for *Art in America* that summer, Roberta Smith called them “mysterious and raw,” but insisted, “the images are not racist, but — with their visionary charcoal motifs and blurred, coarse-screened black and white photographs, both of which often suggest or allude to night skies, swirling smoke, or infinite darkness — the drawings are clearly about different kinds of blackness, visual, material and metaphorical.”



Slide image of an untitled triptych in 'The Nigger Drawings'

Whether the images are racist or not was never quite the point. The title on the other hand, and the breeziness with which Artists Space set off Donald in their galleries, posed the problem. On March 5, five days before the show's close, a group of artworld figures wrote Artists Space and its then director, Helene Winer, an open letter admonishing the gallery for their agreement to present

Newman's work. Spearheaded by critic and curator Lucy Lippard and featuring names like Carl Andre, Faith Ringgold, and Howardena Pindell, the group, many of whose members were in the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, wrote, "Surely it must have occurred to you, if not to [Newman], that this was an incredible slap in the face of Black and other artists, of Black audiences and of everyone connected in any way with one of our leading alternate spaces ... The appalling title is an abuse of the esthetic freedom artists allegedly enjoy in this society."

What followed was an active, at times brutal transmission of correspondence. In a statement on behalf of his exhibition, Donald offered (or equivocated):

The title 'The Nigger Drawings' was not meant to arouse racism. My reasons for choosing that title are as complex as they are contradictory and given even the best of explanations they would remain unclear; leaving one still to consider the question of any work of art's relationship to its title.

Open letters were written to the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) and more specifically its Committee for the Visual Arts, which provided 60% of Artists Space's funding. Though they rarely asked for an actual decrease in the gallery's financial support, the letters demanded that NYSCA consider Artists Space's expenditure of public funds on a work that offended so many of its constituents.

Artists and Artworkers

*Come today, Saturday, April
21, 1pm to 105 Hudson Street
to express our protest against
racist practices by the staff
of Artists Space*

Help -

*Artists Space
to become a true alternative
space. Join us!*

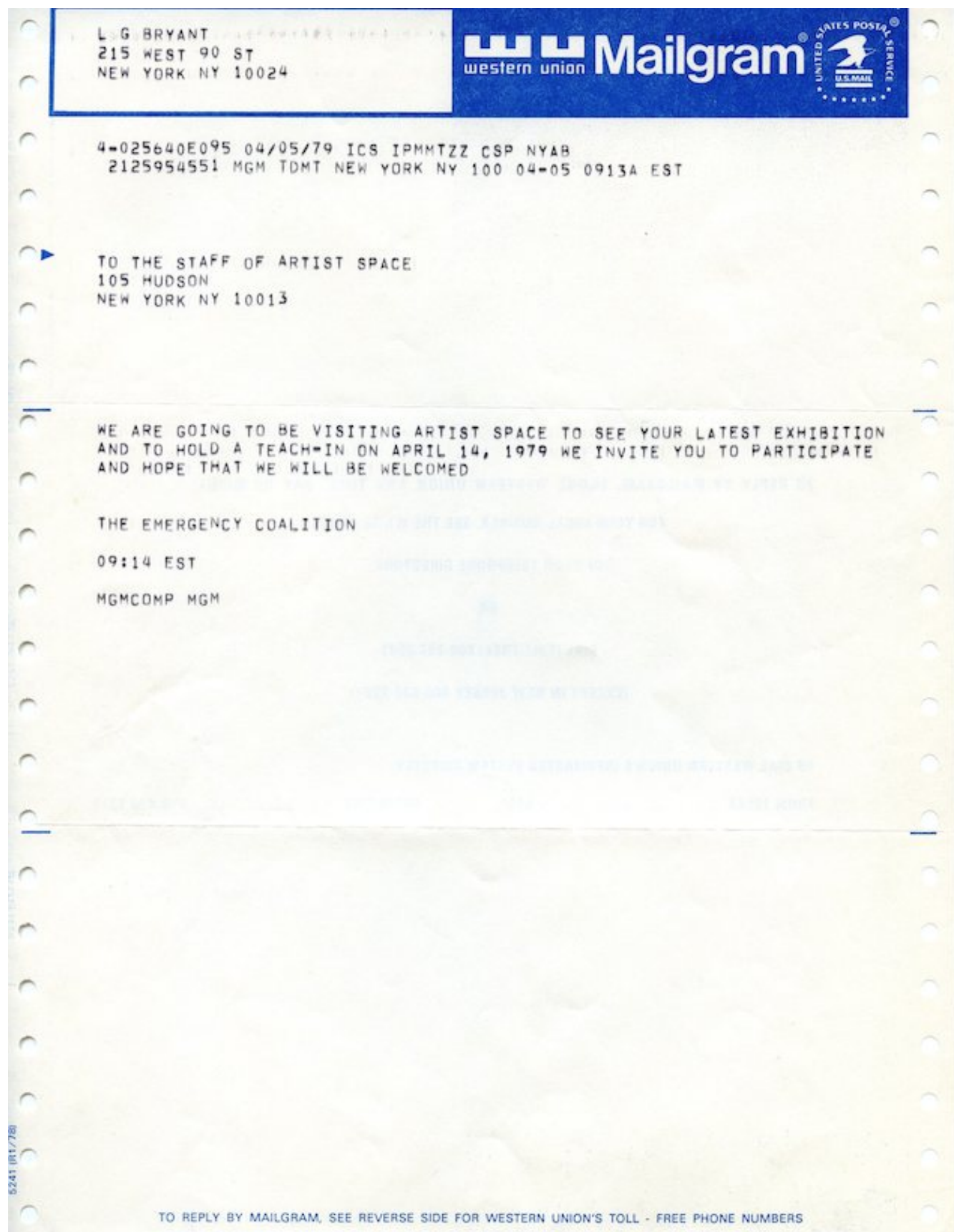
EMERGENCY COALITION

Poster by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition

From there, the controversy dilated: figures from around the country wrote to Winer, NYSCA, or each other well into the summer months after the show had closed, with national outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* eventually contributing reporting. The uses and meanings of “censorship,” “public accountability,” and even a theoretical distinction between content and title

underwent constant treatment, while the Emergency Coalition planned protests and teach-ins at the gallery directly, one of which was locked out by Winer and staff on a rainy Saturday (later, in 2011, Artists Space would again be **taken over**, this time by an Occupy Wall Street offshoot). Artists Space remained tame in their response throughout, apologizing for any possible political infringement and admitting their negligence in allowing Newman the show without consultation, but vociferously defending their curatorial license. NYSCA also walked a timid line, initially reproaching Winer for her failure to predict a backlash in promotionally using the word “nigger.” Both parties promised to consider and consult minority communities from that point on; later that year and ostensibly in response to the whole affair, the National Endowment for the Arts organized a commission on minority artists in Washington. Donald would show only a few more times before hanging up his brush in 1993.

In a recent **article** on Kara Walker’s Domino installation, Nicholas Powers describes his feeling of creeping disempowerment at the hands of spectators mocking the more painful or sexualized elements of Walker’s piece. “The ‘alarm’ is a reflex most minorities have,” he explains, “it’s a rising anxiety that signals you are surrounded by people too privileged to know they’re hurting you. Or who would not care if they did. It can beep quietly. Or blare like a foghorn.” With *The Nigger Drawings*, Artists Space treated the foghorn just like a muted bleeping: writing to the Committee for the Visual Arts, filmmaker Linda Goode Bryant portrayed hearing or reading the word “nigger” as a sort of mnemonic trigger, as if the ostensibly progressive alternative artworld of 1979 downtown New York had dissolved into the nightmarish American South she had left.



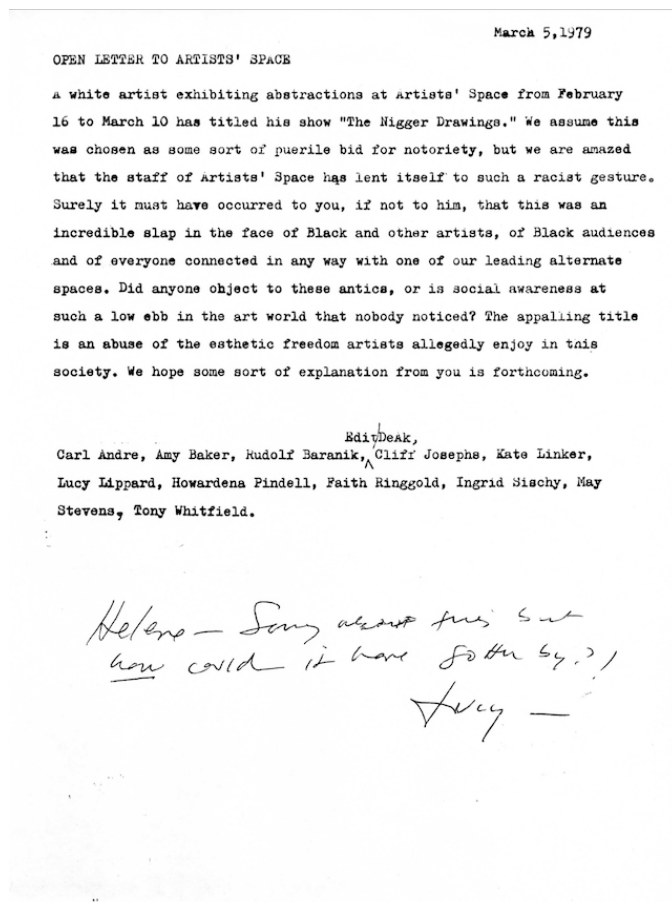
Mailgram from Linda Goode Bryant to Artists Space

That is the immediate effect of painful epithets, which operate firstly on the level of shock compounded by years of bad associations and violent references (there is something to be said for their very application here). In an important addendum to the Creative Time extravaganza, the

organization's former director of public relations Carol Diehl **describes** a consistent dynamic of controversial programming on the basis of social politics: "Whites are discouraged from criticizing black artists, but white critics, curators, and collectors are free to ratify work that enrages many black intellectuals, whose protests are then dismissed as attempts at censorship." So too went the response to the Emergency Coalition's request that NYSCA take notice of Newman's provocation; figures from every level of prominence in the artworld decried the anti-racists' efforts at anti-racism as the supreme evil of cultural censorship. Uncomplicated artistic expression was effectively fetishized as a god-given right, no matter if that right was distributed along wildly asymmetrical lines.

But for critics in *both* 1979 and 2014, it wasn't and isn't the immediate use of an injurious racial signifier that demands criticism, but rather its blasé deployment at the hands of arts organizations like Artists Space or Creative Time. In a 1970s post-civil rights context that saw the subtraction of welfare services and debates on affirmative action, Artists Space's lethargic awareness of their exhibition's potential offense rang as an honest symptom of alternative New York's not-so-alternative modus operandi. This has always been the painful reality of the contemporary, especially non-profit, artworld, which for the most part remains committed to a liberal project of "critique" or "ideas" or the "public" while absorbing any matter of inequalities, from the elite capitalist pedigree of its management to its acutely skewed membership demographics. The middle ground between these contradictory sensibilities presents itself as the terminology and decorum so aptly described by the Yams Collective in their withdrawal from the Whitney Biennial. In terms of race, think of the sacrosanct fallback of "diversity," as if the mere appearance of numerous social strata corresponded to an active effort to open institutional barriers. (The Whitney, for some reason, appears time and again as the aggressor in these situations. Its lobby was referred to in the 1970s as "The Nigger Room," for the room's smalltime exhibition value, part of a larger postwar context of universalizing the word "nigger" to represent any number of politically or even affectively depressed subjects).

The immediate discourse swirling around the Walker and the Yams will probably disperse by the end of the year, if it hasn't already. The Domino factory will be destroyed in the name of Two Trees Management's selective housing, a company whose owner **co-chairs** the Creative Time board. The Whitney will host another Biennial, and probably welcome its political myopia as proof of its conceptual density, no matter its lived damage. The idea of alternative art spaces in Manhattan will continue to render itself funereally historical.



Open letter to Artists Space, signed by Carl Andre, Amy Baker, Rudolf Baranik, Edit DeAk, Cliff Josephs, Kate Linker, Lucy Lippard, Howardena Pindell, Faith Ringgold, Ingrid Sischy, May Stevens, and Tony Whitfield (click to enlarge)

In so much of the criticism supporting Newman and Artists space, some of it conspicuously on *October* letterhead, proponents argue that no word or picture carries any absolute and fixed meaning, per the discourse of poststructuralist theory then in operation. Douglas Crimp (who would, it must be said, through his AIDS activism and criticism of the 80s and 90s embody the ideal of a politically engaged critic rarely seen thereafter) writes, "It is, of course, the context of words and images that determines their meaning, and I would like to ask the [Emergency Coalition] in this case to explain in what way Newman's drawings might provide their title with the context that could be construed as racist, or in any other way offensive." The problem is precisely that: an art establishment peering into its own discourse and objecting to political problems that for the most part exist outside their immediate frame of reference.

Maybe the onus is on curation then. I don't mean curation merely as the institutional play of deciding what's in and what's out, or in the now more generalized sense of the word as self-cultivation by means of aestheticized collecting and consuming. I mean curation as translation, as presentation, as pedagogy, where the myriad strains of lived reality that inflect artistic reception are to be brought forth with some degree of courage and confrontation. I mean curation in its denotative sense, of taking care, of custodianship. This is not "curation" as an analgesic. Care-taking, or healing, can be active, aggressive, and direct. In terms of *The Nigger Drawings'* lineage, it means tending to the sources of harm as they materialize, which for the institutional artworld is so often itself.

If there's something compelling in looking back at Donald's provocation and the Artists Space debacle now, it's partly because its very temporal distance might enable the reactivation of more utopian threads historically at play, even if the dystopian elements seem leadenly constant. In some sense, it's no wonder an artworld veering toward consumer excess and privatization keeps offending its more marginalized demographics, as if major museums have yet to one day reach their innate progressive potential. What is necessary is something more active, more creative, something less interested in working with the system and more invested in replacing it: the viable promotion, promulgation, and support of a truly alternative culture of contemporary art.