

Lessons from Below: Otabenga Jones & Associates

September 13 – December 9, 2007



Communiqué #1515

Otabenga Jones & Associates (OJ&A) does not believe in museums. However, housed in such vessels are objects of the past that, when seen through the proper lens, have the ability to propel you into the future.

The museum has long been a storehouse for the proofs of colonial pursuits. OJ&A does not consider these institutions or their directors, curators, and administrators to be objective purveyors of truth capable of providing the knowledge necessary to reach the domain of liberatory consciousness. Lying dormant in many of these museum typologies, tucked away under glassine or on shelves of temperature-controlled cabinets are objects that can, if put to good use, serve as potent texts. When read in the proper light, they have the ability to awaken the pineal gland, shattering some of the most powerful gates of the slave matrix into tiny splinters.

OJ&A is not a fetishistic lover of these texts, for they have no intrinsic power. In order to yield power these texts must be engaged with a methodology that seeks to coax out from beneath their very pores, bits of knowledge that can move one into brighter states of mind. Consider, for example, an old pedagogical tradition explicated in some of the earliest narratives of captives. As explained by scholar John Ernest "The task of the early historians was to write not a continuous narrative but rather a story of disruption, of fragmentation, so as to identify the contours of a story beyond the reach of representation." Ernest also refers to this tradition as a meta-history involved with teaching its audience "to become active readers of history." Similarly, with this project OJ&A seeks to promote amongst its followers critical, creative, and expansive readings of his-story.

This project may be seen as a free-form improvisation with the ideologies and goals of Black liberation movements that preceded us. Many of the objects and works of art housed by this institution were collected in that moment, wrapped up then laid to rest. Important histories boxed, catalogued, and hidden from us. However, monuments to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. exist. That history is allowed to remain, and is even celebrated, for there is no threat of violence associated with his legacy except the beatings, imprisonment, and murder he suffered. But what about the rest of it? Where are the monuments to those blessed ones who struggled and fought "by any means necessary." Well, this exhibition becomes a modest monument. A repositioning of sorts. We will step into spaces that do not belong to us and command those spaces. Building tiny pockets of resistance along our journey. The most important aspect of this action is "our" reworking of the meanings of these formerly obedient objects so that they switch sides, re-establishing allegiances and politics. Polyrythmic Mumuye insurrections in the west wing of African Antiquities, creating galleries over-run by field sculptures, witnessing and testifying in the spirit. Unhh!!!*

This will begin new research into our histories, learning lessons from below, or rather new points of emission from which to redefine the trajectory, expanding the definition of ourselves until no definition is useful. Not urban, not proud, not black nor beautiful, only that which is.

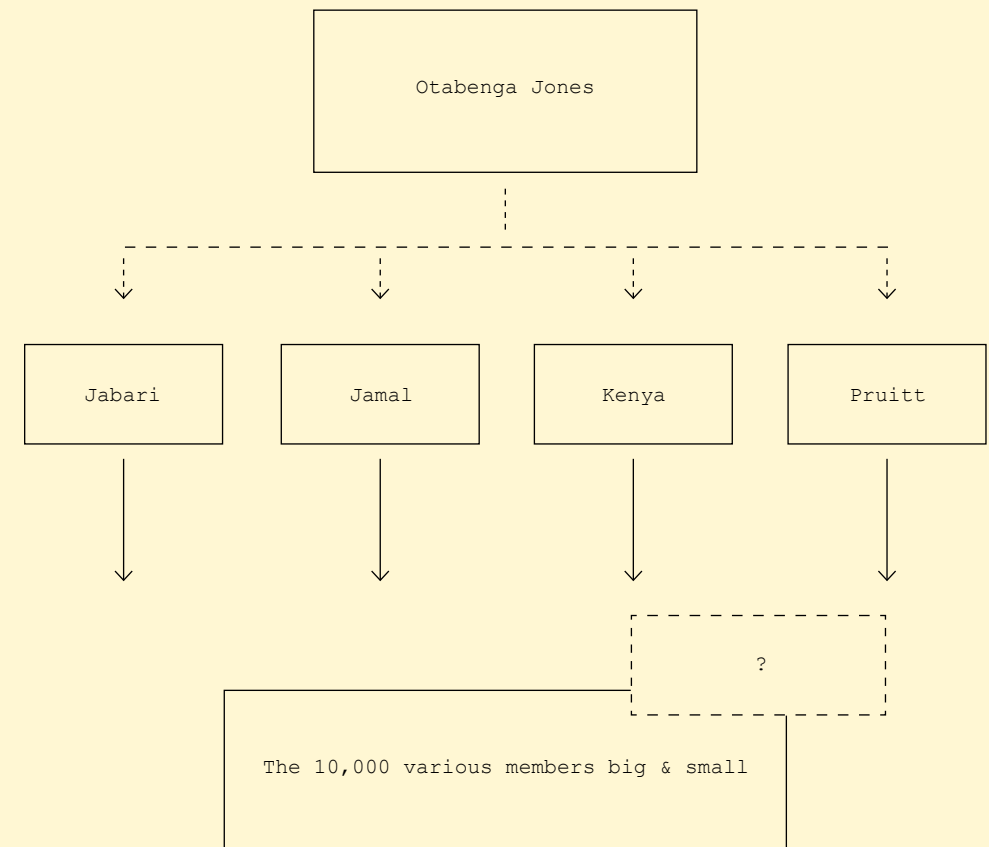
* This is a sample lyric from "Funky Drummer" from the album *Jungle Groove* (J. Brown) King Records, 1970.

Mission Statement

The Purpose of this organization is summed up in three simple objectives.

- 1.) TO TEACH THE TRUTH TO THE YOUNG BLACK YOUTH
- 2.) TO EXTEND THE PARAMETERS OF THE TRANSATLANTIC AFRO-DIASPORIC AESTHETIC
- 3.) TO MESS WIT' WHITEY

Otabenga Jones & Associates (Organizational Diagram)



Pedagogy, Poetry, and Politics in the (Museum) Classroom

MICHELLE WHITE

IN HIS 1822 PAINTING, *The Artist in His Museum*, Charles Willson Peale, the founder of one of the first public natural history museums in the United States, proudly raises a red curtain to reveal a cabinet filled with an encyclopedic array of historical and scientific curiosities. In many ways, his inviting gesture exemplifies the educational agenda of the American art museum, as it formed in the late-nineteenth century. A container of tangible knowledge, it became a place of wonder and a source of information that could alter the spectator's view of the world. John and Dominique de Menil, founders of The Menil Collection, shared Peale's conviction, and while the collection may not display its holdings in Peale's strict method of categorization, it is exhibited with the same respect for the object. Informed by the humanist teachings of French Dominican priest, Marie-Alain Couturier, who believed in the value of intimate and spiritual relationships with works of art, or "poetry over pedagogy,"¹ the Menil is based on the educational premise that quiet encounters with individual works invite a direct intellectual experience. For Dominique de Menil, "Art is incantation," and she wanted to impart this lesson through a museum designed to enable objects to stand alone, without didactic distractions.²

Houston-based artist collective Otabenga Jones & Associates (OJ&A) also has an educational goal: "To teach the truth to the young Black youth."³ Several activist practices of the 1960s serve as inspirations, including "History from Below," a movement that challenged the dominant history by championing the individual narratives of "ordinary" people; Malcolm X's writing on education; and Black liberation groups that organized classes in underprivileged African American communities. As those who came before them, OJ&A are invested in understanding the way teaching fights and *perpetuates* social injustice. In this exhibition, the museum, a historically pedagogical institution in all of its various manifestations and approaches to displaying information, becomes a platform on which to explore the cultural tension of knowledge as both an effective form of self-empowerment and a culprit of racist ideology.

The group includes artists Dawolu Jabari Anderson, Jamal Cyrus, Kenya F. Evans, and Robert



Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827)
The Artist in His Museum, 1822
Oil on canvas, 103 3/4 × 79 7/8 in.
Gift of Mrs. Sarah Harrison
The Joseph Harrison Jr. Collection, 1878.1.2.
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

A. Pruitt, and it operates under the direction of Otabenga Jones, their advisor, of sorts. Jones was named after Ota Benga, a member of the Batwa people from the former Belgian Congo, who was brought to the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 as part of an anthropological exhibit. Two years later he was put on display in the monkey house at the New York Zoological Park to illustrate human evolution. He roamed the grounds as a living spectacle, and lived in a cage where he slept in a hammock next to the primates. For a short time, the cage featured a museum-type label that provided factual information for the viewer, which included his name, age, weight, and place of origin in Africa.⁴ Responding to what OJ&A believe is the continuation to this day of a White authoritative voice presented through an educational facade, the collective's performance and installation-based work adopts the didactic methods of such institutions in order to raise questions about what they see as the colonial lens through which race continues to be viewed in the United States.

For this project, the group has spent over a year working at The Menil Collection exploring the "treasure rooms" (the museum's storage areas),

curatorial offices, archives, and exhibition file cabinets, and even the closets filled with stacks of old exhibition posters and discarded furniture. In part, their interaction with the collection harks back to the exhibition "Raid the Icebox I with Andy Warhol." In 1969, the de Menils asked Warhol to go through the collection vaults of the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design. The artist selected objects, including a cabinet of nineteenth-century leather shoes and rolls of French wallpaper, and displayed them at the Rice University Art Gallery in Houston. Dominique de Menil thought Warhol could "break the spell"⁵ on the normative museum experience, and the exhibition set the precedent of what has become an ongoing tradition at the Menil of inviting artists to go behind the scenes and respond to the museum's unique collection, architecture, and philosophy.⁶ Houston artist David McGee's 2005 curatorial project, "Deep Pools and Reflecting Ponds," for example, drew from the museum's vast holdings of political ephemera; Black memorabilia, which include examples of pejorative racial imagery; and items collected in association with the ongoing archival project "The Image of the Black in Western Art."⁷ Surprised at finding that such a large portion of the collection contained provocative subject matter, he wanted to exhibit a thoughtful selection of this material for the public to see.⁸ This project was similar to Fred Wilson's well-known "Mining the Museum" project at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992. In one area

of the exhibition he displayed rusty slave shackles next to an ornate silver tea set in a vitrine labeled "Metalwork, 1723-1880." In such exhibitions, the viewer's surprise at coming across unexpected objects excavated from the collection's storage and presented in the same way the institution typically displays objects, brings attention to and a reexamination of the museum's claims to an apolitical or even truthful presentation of history.

The images and objects in storage that deal with the representation of race also compelled Mr. Jones and his associates. With their own pedagogical mission in mind, however, rather than following the Menil's curatorial model as McGee did, they are manipulating the museum's method of presenting works of art. The Menil hangs works slightly below eye-level and often far apart, in order to create intimate encounters between the works and the viewer. It also provides discreet contextual information on its wall labels—instead of historical information, only the artist's name and the object's date, medium, and credit line are listed. The works, therefore, are given ample space to be seen in isolation. In contrast, OJ&A fills up the gallery with a combination of selected works from the permanent collection, the archives, and their own collection of found objects. Reminiscent of the breadth of material in Peale's cabinet of wonders, and directly referencing the Menil's "treasure rooms," which brim with objects, the packed installation presents an accumulation of works of art and other things that are

1 Marie-Alain Couturier, *Sacred Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989) 11.

2 According to Dominique de Menil "great museums are overloaded with masterpieces, each fighting for attention, and we are bombarded with information that distracts from contemplation and remains foreign to the magic of a great painting." Dominique de Menil, "Foreword" of *The Menil Collection: A Selection from the Paleolithic to the Modern Era* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987) 8.

3 Excerpt from the mission statement of Otabenga Jones & Associates.

4 The sign on the cage read: "The African Pygmy, 'Ota Benga.' Age, 28 years. Height, 4 feet 11 inches. Weight, 103 pounds. Brought from the Kassai River, Congo Free State,

South Central Africa, by Dr. Samuel P. Verner, exhibited each afternoon during September." It was quickly taken down, and it disappeared. It is not in the zoo's archives. For groups that protested Ota Benga's display, this sign was material evidence of inhumane treatment. See Phillips Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume, *Ota Benga, the Pygmy in the Zoo* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) 181.

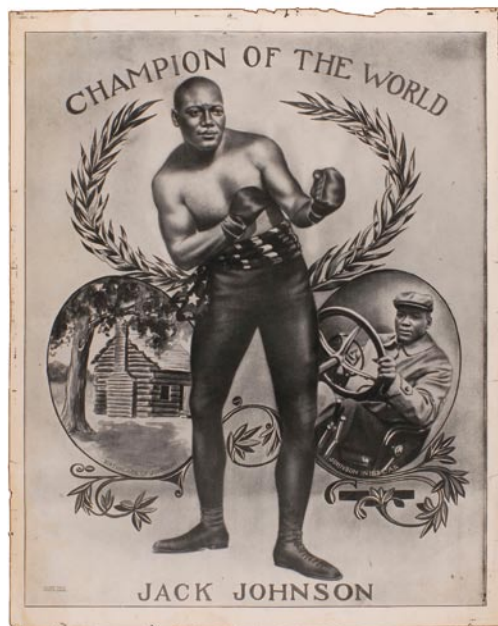
5 Dominique de Menil, "Raid the Icebox I with Andy Warhol" (Providence: Rhode Island School of Design, 1969).

6 In 2001, former Menil curator Matthew Drutt began a series of projects that revisited the premise of the Warhol exhibition. Artists that have since participated include Robert Gober, David McGee, and Vik Muniz.

7 "The Image of the Black in Western Art," was initiated by the Menil Foundation in 1960. It intends to document, in four volumes, the history of occidental representations of the Black in western culture, from antiquity, to the present. In 1994, it moved to the W.E.B. du Bois Institute for African and American Research at Harvard University. Additionally, the museum contains two major collections of Black Americana, ranging in date from the eighteenth-century to the 1970s, The Kokomo Collection and The Pearl Collection.

8 McGee's exhibition, "Deep Pools and Reflecting Ponds" was the first exhibition that presented the material for public view in the museum.

Champion of the World Jack Johnson
Brandt & Acheible, 1909
Insert medium, 21 1/2 x 17 1/2 in.
The Menil Collection, Houston.
Photo by Paul Hester.



not typically shown in an art museum. Similar to the display the artists create in their Houston studio, where *objets d'art*, bootlegged DVDs, African sculpture, cassette tapes and other outmoded technology, Black power posters, and archival photographs are squeezed into taxonomic cases, it eschews a hierarchy of “high” and “low” art. By not providing a way to visually distinguish value or cultural importance, the artists create a storehouse of decontextualized material loaded with cultural and racial meaning. Without a “precious” pretext, the manner of presentation forces the viewer to respond in new ways because it makes all of the objects seem as if they are equally useful as educational devices.

In many ways, understanding the object as a teaching tool derives from the collective’s experience in the classroom. With the exception of the group’s leader, OJ&A studied art at the historically Black Texas Southern University in Houston, where, they say the curriculum was based on addressing historical omissions. Works of art were not treated as discrete aesthetic objects, rather they

were used as points of departure and often served as tangible evidence of the erasure of Black contributions to the history of cultural production. In the artists’ drawing courses, for example, their classical training in formal analysis was taught through a careful study of African art objects, not European “masterpieces.” Thus, recognizing the

paradox of the Menil’s protection of the work’s aesthetic importance and their own belief in using a rich trove of art and “non-art” objects as dichotomous starting points to engage with a larger set of issues and ideas, OJ&A began to ask what might happen if the quintessential learning environment—the proverbial elementary school classroom complete with visual teaching aids, chalk boards, pop quizzes, and a syllabus of teachers—was assembled in this museum. How might a visitor’s view of the collection’s well-known modernist paintings by Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman change, for instance, after seeing objects from the collection, rich with racial and political connotations, presented in a performative space as didactic material for an academic lesson?

This practice has an important precedent in Institutional Critique, an art historical movement beginning in the mid-1980s. Revisiting projects in the 1960s, which attacked the idea that a museum is a neutral container or repository of truth, it extended the critique to talk about the vested issues of class, race, and gender. The museum became a site in which to reflect on the conditions in all social institutions. Performance artist Andrea Fraser, for example, famously tackled the neutrality of educational practices by exposing the museum’s privileged position in tours, which she originally conducted at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in

1989. Posturing as a volunteer docent, she used various sources of information in her tour.⁹ An amalgamation of text pulled from museum educational brochures, marketing language, and moralizing judgments about taste, the confusing presentation in expected and unexpected museum locations revealed how ideology is distributed through “natural” modes of passing on knowledge because it made viewers suddenly question the typical way they receive historical information.¹⁰

OJ&A is complicating this critical practice because its educational program in many ways compliments the history of The Menil Collection. Long before the museum opened, the de Menils began building a teaching collection for the University of St. Thomas.¹¹ In its conception it was a distinct group of art available for students in the art and art history department to study, research, and use for exhibitions. As opposed to the type of work that the de Menils were acquiring for their own collection, the objects in the teaching collection could be used for scholarly inquiry or serve as exemplars of art history. The collection also contained works that had qualities that might entice multisensory response. Students were encouraged to handle, touch, and smell the objects. Beyond a contextual reading of the work, the sensual immediacy catapulted the work of art out of history and into a contemporary reality.¹² As Dominique de Menil explained, “Scholarly judgment can be passed without involvement. But the work of art is aggressively present. It forces our reaction. It puts us on the spot.”¹³

In addition to informing the current curatorial philosophy at The Menil Collection, this humanist notion, which gives full authority to the intellectual capacity of the viewer, influenced John and Dominique de Menils’ social activism. In 1971, they organized “The De Luxe Show.” Held in a renovated theatre in Houston’s historically Black Fifth Ward, it was one of the first integrated exhibitions of abstract art by Black and White artists.¹⁴ The show consisted of abstract painting with works by Sam Gilliam, Joe Overstreet, and Kenneth Noland, among other post-Abstract Expressionist artists. Attempting to break down the inaccessibility of modern art’s sometimes heady and conceptual language, the exhibition aimed to bring new and challenging ideas to a community historically not well represented in museum attendance figures. Importantly, in accordance with the de Menils’ progressive educational aims, the show *did not* provide a lesson about contemporary minimalist art practice. The integrated exhibition, with selection criteria based

Visitors looking at *Phyllis I*, 1970, by Michael Steiner at “The De Luxe Show,” Houston, 1971. Courtesy Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo by Hickey-Robertson, Houston.



9 See Alexander Alberro, “Introduction: Mimicry, Excess, Critique,” in *Museum Highlights, the Writings of Andrea Fraser* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005).

10 For example, in one portion of the performance Fraser led the group to the museum cafeteria. Gesturing towards quotidian garbage cans, and institutional dining room tables, she said, “This room was much frequented by Washington while Commander-in-Chief and President,” a quote from a passage from the museum’s 1931 guide book that clearly did not correspond to the space.

11 The de Menils began the teaching collection at the University of St. Thomas in 1962; in 1969 it moved to Rice University. When the museum opened in 1987, it had become a part of the collection of the Menil Foundation.

12 Scholar Gregory Battcock, has argued that the hands-on premise

of the teaching collection radically set forth the idea “that art cannot remain isolated from the real, practical problems of modern man and his metaphysical environment.” Gregory Battcock, “A Young Teaching Collection”: from Art to Idea,” *Art Journal* 18, vol. 4 (1968) 406.

13 Dominique de Menil, *A Young Teaching Collection* (Houston: The Menil Foundation, Inc. 1967) 10.

14 According to exhibition curator Peter Bradley, “The De Luxe Show” marks the very first time that good [B]lack artists share the attention and the tribute with good [W]hite artists.” In a conversation with Peter Bradley and Simone Swan. *The De Luxe Show* (Houston: The Menil Foundation, 1971) 67.

15 Importantly, the integrated exhibition was a conscious reaction to how major museum exhibitions at that time were ghettoizing art by

African Americans, by separating it from the larger contemporary art discourse. A number of artists who participated in “The De Luxe Show,” for example, protested the exhibition “Harlem on My Mind” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969. As part of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, they argued that the exhibition was a homogeneous and voyeuristic presentation of African-American culture intended for White audiences. See “Interview with Cliff Joseph Conducted by Doris Holmes, 1972,” The Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Additionally, New York artist and curator of “The De Luxe Show,” Peter Bradley, said he did not want to be “lumped politically” into racial categories, so he chose work for the show that could stand on its own merits within the art world. See Peter Bradley, quoted by George Davis “The Deluxe Show,” *Art and Artists* (February 1971) 37.



Installation views of Otabenga Jones & Associates
*Exploring the Outer Reaches of the Garden of the
 Pro-Black Sanctuary*
 2006 Whitney Biennial
 The Whitney Museum of American Art.
 Photos courtesy of the artists

on the work's relevance to current conversations in contemporary art, presented a model of display that did not categorize, or make assumptions about race.¹⁵ Appreciating the abstract pieces on their own terms, without historical or racial context, furthered the politics of social equality.

Given this history, OJ&A's negotiation of the classroom and the museum sets up more than a two-sided argument. The exhibition's prominent use of footage from William Colville's 1970 film of a lecture given by writer and activist Amiri Baraka (formally known as LeRoi Jones) at Texas Southern University articulates this complex interaction.¹⁶ Essentially a lesson on strategies of consciousness raising in the face of an educational system that he claims perpetrates racism, Baraka's polemic speech on Black nationalism was sponsored by the Menil Foundation and runs on television monitors in unexpected spaces throughout the museum's

permanent collection galleries to engage in an animated dialogue with the museum's transcendent modernist paintings. The juxtaposition of these two different models of teaching challenges the way we see works of art at the museum because it makes both methods of displaying and imparting knowledge seem equally strident.

OJ&A's installation is not the first example of bringing a classroom into the museum. A well-known installation is *Democracy*, which was held at the Dia Arts Foundation in 1988. Organized by the New York-based collective Group Material, the piece, inspired by author and activist bell hooks's stance that "we must focus on a policy of inclusion so as not to mirror oppressive structures," opened up the museum as a place where people could gather to address contentious issues.¹⁷ In one portion of the project, "Education and Democracy," the artists assembled a classroom

students, and community leaders, the artists chose students they felt would be able to disseminate the lessons learned to a larger audience.

20 Author in conversation with Otabenga Jones, May 17, 2007.

21 Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (Los Angeles: jpr | ringier, 2007) 131.

16 In a memo dated April 8, 1970, in the LeRoi Jones lecture files in the Menil archives, Dominique de Menil states the conditions of their direct sponsorship of the lecture through the Menil Foundation, which was initiated by the University Student Forum Committee at Rice University. She says that it was suggested that it "would be a nice gesture towards LeRoi [sic] Jones and towards the [B]lack if the lecture were held at TSU."

17 Group Material (Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Felix Gonzalez-Torres), *Democracy: A Project by Group Material* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990) 1-3.

18 See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les presses du reel, 2002).

19 The class roster for the OJ&A classroom is a group of approximately fifteen individuals. Consisting of university professors, college

in the museum as a forum of free expression, a place for museum visitors to gather to discuss the problems of public education in the nostalgic space of blackboards and rows of wooden school desks. Symbolically fusing social reality with the hermetic space of the museum, the walls were hung with works of art by junior high school students interspersed with modern works by Joseph Beuys and Peter Halley, among others. The setting pointed out a type of participatory process that the cultural and educational institutions being referenced otherwise lacked. Recent social sculpture and the practice of "relational aesthetics", which attempts to forge human connections within the alienation of a globalized world by celebrating social interactions between people, carries on this democratic faith.¹⁸ From the egalitarian platform where people assembled at Utopia Station at the Venice Biennale in 2003 to Rirkrit Tiravanija's ongoing invitations to communally eat noodles that he cooks and serves in the gallery, artists are continuing to seek social solutions within the perimeters of the art world.

In contrast, the space that OJ&A has created at The Menil Collection is not entirely democratic. The class roster is set, so as a visitor, you might only be able to peep into the working space or, if there is room, squeeze into the back as a "drop-in" student if you happen to come across the class in session.¹⁹ Citing the Black Panther Liberation Schools as a model, Otabenga Jones describes this project as a reference to civil rights-era-activist practices, a time he describes as an "incubator where Black expression grew in its own time."²⁰ This notion of selectivity was also addressed in their installation, *Exploring the Outer Reaches of the Garden of the Pro-Black Sanctuary* at the 2006 Whitney Biennial. The artists created a natural-history-museum-like diorama, a mythical paradise of fake foliage and African sculpture. Bathed in a warm glowing light with a retro Kodachrome

National Geographic photograph of green hillsides in Kenya as a backdrop, the space was a refuge of earthly activist delights, complete with audio of political speeches. Access into the garden, however, was denied. The viewer could peek in from slits in a brick wall; but the message was to keep out.

OJ&A recognizes the problems of assuming that a museum can serve a democratic function and collectively speak for all audiences. They also acknowledge their own inability to fully distance themselves from the institutional structure of the art world. As Fraser has said, "With each attempt to evade the limits of institutional determination, to embrace an outside, to redefine art or integrate it into everyday life, to reach 'everyday' people and work in the 'real world,' we expand our frame and bring more of the world into it. But we never escape it."²¹ By working within the museum's inherent position of privilege to explore the very different ways art objects can successfully be used and displayed to further the politics of their educational agenda, the collective is affirming—albeit hesitantly—the power of the museum as an instructional starting point for social change.

Captions for following double page

left
 Mark Rothko, *No. 10*, 1957
 Oil on canvas, 69 1/4 × 61 1/2 in.
 The Menil Collection, Houston.
 Photo by Hickey-Robertson, Houston.
 © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

right
 Still from lecture by Amiri Baraka at Texas Southern University, 1970.
 Film by William Colville.
 Courtesy Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.



Correspondence

January 11, 2007

Dear Otabenga Jones,

Let me begin by saying, "Thank you." I am honored to have been brought into this collaboration, which has been in the works at The Menil Collection for some time. There are several questions—or maybe it is better to say topics—that I would like you to address as the leader of the group.

I will begin broadly. Do you have an agenda, an axe to grind, or a political statement to make? Who is your work aimed at?

Sincerely,

Franklin Sirmans

January 16, 2007

Mr. Sirmans,

Greetings and a belated welcome to Houston. I am sorry that we have not met in person yet; I know at some point in the struggle, our paths will cross.

If we did not have an agenda, it would be quite a waste of time and money to go through the trouble of establishing our Central Committee. As with many of the associations, chapters, and organizations that have come before us, our mission is twofold: to speak to two different audiences, which sometimes overlap and become one. We used to think that one was especially important and should come before the other, but we have since backed away from that position—for the meantime. We believe mutability is essential for working in the current environment.

Yours,

Otabenga Jones

January 20, 2007

Dear Otabenga Jones,

In your reply you have raised an important question regarding efficacy. While you state that your mission is twofold—that your audience is divided though on parallel paths—in order to be effective in your enterprise you seem to be advocating a DuBoisian approach. And, I mean

that in the strictest sense, as applied to the African American condition, as well as in a broader approach that often contends with the equally contentious cultural space between "high" and "low" art. Of course you take this further by stressing "mutability," rather than one way or the other, but there is something in your approach that reminds me of Valerie Cassel Oliver's exhibition "Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970" (a show that included one of your pupils), at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in 2005. In that show, the question was raised about how artists confront a system—the marketplace and an intellectual place, which the conceptual artist and scholar Charles Gaines alluded to as a critical space defined as a "Theater of Refusal." This brings me to a question that arises in light of your mission statement. If you want to "teach the truth to the young Black youth," why are you not rapping? Or, why not teaching as academics for that matter? The art world is notoriously unconcerned with actually speaking the truth.

Sincerely,

Franklin Sirmans

January 27, 2007

Dear Mr. Sirmans,

To begin with, it's limiting to believe that Black youth can only be educated through rap or some antiquated academic school system. It's not the form, but the voice. Even if the art world were the only place we were active, it would still be an appropriate place for our dialogue, as we do not limit ourselves to a narrow perspective of what art can be or do based on the requisites of the art world. I have chosen to enter into this field with these young men because I found the opportunity for a challenging discourse in the visual and conceptual arenas. In this gallery space there are no boundaries to our gestures. This project is the perfect example. Here we can venture into an educational arena subsidized by, your organization.

In addition, these young men have always participated in Hip Hop as a cultural movement and continue to do so today. They were originally active in Houston's underground scene in the mid-90s, arguably the time period that concluded the golden era of Hip Hop music (from the late 1980s till about 1996). I believe the corporate colonization of this art form during the 90s became one of the issues instrumental in these artists' pursuit of an alternative media outlet. Remember, Black leaders of my generation refused to support the music in its embryonic stage. Instead they aligned themselves with the mainstream's crusade to censure and control this guerilla art form. As a result, what should have been nurtured within the community was lost to these multinational corporations that now guide the music of our culture in whatever direction they see fit in order to fill their pockets and political aspirations.

The new outlet these young men turned to for the dissemination of their ideas—the art world—was, however, without the honest voices of a Public Enemy, of a Rakim, of the Poor Righteous Teachers, etc.... So my charges became dedicated to filling this void in the visual arts.

Sincerely, OJ

February 4, 2007

Dear OJ,

Thank you again for the food for thought, and how appropriate at this time, in lieu of the recent discussions regarding talk radio and rap music, and the rapper's responsibility, as if a fortune 500 company had a responsibility to act with a conscience in the pursuit of making money. Of course, Don Imus was fired because the radio company was scared of losing advertising dollars, not because he said something that could be perceived of as racist. You mentioned leadership. Tactics of leadership have often involved activism and political confrontation. Was your protest of the 2005 show "African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection," at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston your first action? There, you wrote on a sign, "My Blackness Is Bigger Than Your White Box." Have there been others? Were you annoyed with the exhibition or the museum for taking the show? Your protest reminds me of the many Black artists and others who organized and stood up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969 for its organization of a show called "Harlem on My Mind," because there were no Black critics or curators participating and there was little fine art amid a plethora of documentary materials.

One out of many important outgrowths of that event was that some of the protesters founded a group called the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition—just one of many diverse groups coming together in the name of women's rights, gay rights, and civil rights, against the backdrop of the Vietnam war.

With the recent exhibition "Wack: Art and the Feminist Revolution," at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, organized by Connie Butler—which looks at feminist art practices through the historical lens of the 1960s and 70s—do you think that the time is ripe for a reconsideration of activist practices in contemporary art?

Sincerely,
Franklin Sirmans

February 9, 2007

Dear Mr. Sirmans,

That was not our first public happening but that was our first public performance in response to something specific. We operate with many seen and unseen strategies. Most we choose not to speak of. Marching and protesting has been around for ages and can often be an effective tactic. We were annoyed with the dialogue around the show. We thought it was simplistic and narrow. There are 53 countries in Africa! Clearly, in the case of the MFAH exhibition, there needed to be a discussion about what it means when a White man starts to collect this work and determine its value. How do the artists really benefit? Will all of these artists make it into great museum collections, or does this major exhibition become a footnote in the liberal "self"-consciousness?

I think that it is perhaps the right time for activists (and I am going to make the leap and say that this group of "activists" are those who genuinely care and feel very strongly about their issues) to begin considering what they do and offer as art, their manners of service and protest as creative practices. The acts of civil disobedience of the 1960s are examples of happenings and spectacle par-excellence. Martin Luther King Jr. purported the notion of creative resistance as a means to transform society, which was later taken up by other groups such as the Panthers, the Black Artist Repertory Theatre (BARTS), The Black Artist Group (BAG), etc.

As for the "Harlem on My Mind" exhibit, I think we are still at a nexus where we wrestle about who writes and defines our histories. Our protest becomes ironic because after 30 years there has been no closure and little progress. I would like it to be less about asking for change within these institutions, and more about Black folks creating their own institutions. I mean real institutions, not Black versions of White spaces. We have needs that the present spaces cannot provide, places where our histories are archived and studied from the appropriate perspectives. Until we get to that point, we are forced to rely on the institutions that do take care to collect our capital. It is up to us to provide an alternative definition of that capital. While we are at it we can also provide new definitions of the objects and works that are never considered to be of concern to us. At some point however, we will have to rise up and reclaim our artifacts. When going through the Menil Archives I pondered, "What if I could take these materials home?" There is a fine line between reclamation and incarceration however, and this is the path to navigate.

OJ

THE MENIL COLLECTION

1515 Sul Ross
Houston, Texas 77006
713.525.9400
www.menil.org

Funded in part by the City of Houston



Front cover
Storage case in the Houston studio of
Otabenga Jones & Associates, 2007.
Photo by Robert A. Pruitt

Back cover
African storage room, The Menil Collection.
Photo by Paul Hester