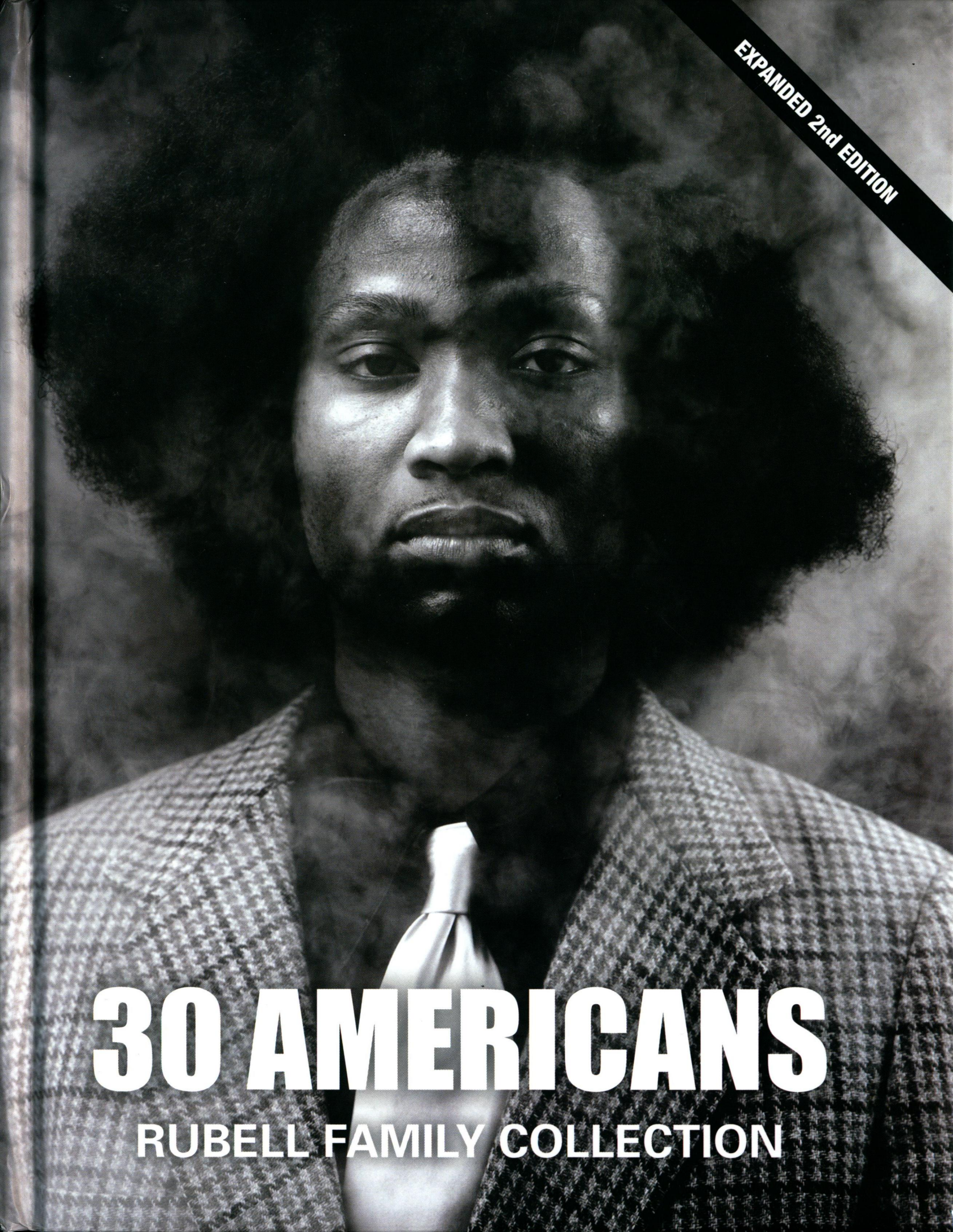

EXPANDED 2nd EDITION
30 AMERICANS
RUBELL FAMILY COLLECTION

Ontology . . . does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. . . . The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. . . .

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1967

The fact is "black" has never been just there either. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found. People now speak of the society I come from in totally unrecognizable ways. Of course Jamaica is a black society, they say. In reality it is a society of black and brown people who lived for three or four hundred years without ever being able to speak of themselves as "black". Black is an identity which had to be learned and could only be learned in a certain moment.

Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," 1984

The ways in which [white mainstream] artists—and the society that bred them—transferred internal conflicts to a "blank darkness," to conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies, is a major theme in American literature. . . .

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 1992

For a while now, scholars of race and whiteness have understood that the construction of white culture as the invisible norm is one of the most, if not *the* most pernicious, constructions of whiteness in the post-civil rights era. . . . [W]hite identity seemed cultureless because white cultural practices were taken for granted, naturalized, and, thus, not reflected on and defined.

Pamela Perry, "White Means Never Having to Say You're Ethnic: White Youth and the Construction of 'Cultureless' Identities," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography,* 2001

A portrait in black by Kehinde Wiley.
We are the canvas. Genius. Original.
Breathtaking. A style our own, never
Before seen, ground breaking. You see
Us, admire us and when you reach out
to touch us, we are gone, leaving art,
impressions and influence in our
passing to be admired, studied and
imitated in black.

Nissan Ad, 2004

In 2008 Hank Willis Thomas scanned the Nissan ad (referenced above) before digitally erasing its text to reveal the image's latent meaning. The completed photo-based work, which he calls *We are the Canvas 2004/2008* (after the ad's second sentence), is one of two images representing the year 2004 in his extended series entitled *Unbranded Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968-2008* (2005-2008). This series, in which all language has been digitally excised, focuses on advertising images from the late 1960s to 2008, found in such popular and widely disseminated African-American magazines as *Essence* and *Ebony*. An artist with an M.F.A. in photography and an M.A. in visual criticism, Thomas is intrigued with corporate ads that target black audiences by first

selling them provocative and timely images of themselves in order to instill a desire for their products.[1] Working in concert with ads intended for middle-class black audiences, Thomas's *Unbranded* series begins appropriately with 1968, a very conflicted time in American politics. Just four years after the Civil Rights Act was passed, guaranteeing equal employment opportunities for all Americans regardless of their race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, the Fair Housing Act was enacted, Robert F. Kennedy was killed, and in the summer of that same fateful year race riots broke out in hundreds of cities across the United States.

1. Hank Willis Thomas, interview with author, New York, 2008.

Before initiating this group of works, Thomas had been involved with his *B®anded* series. In a few of these works he Photoshopped Nike's distinctive swoosh logo directly on the bodies of black figures and implicitly contrasted this company's emphasis on speed with the incarcerating marks that in the nineteenth century had sometimes been branded on the bodies of recalcitrant slaves or left there as telltale marks of brutal whips. Thomas stopped this series, however, when he decided that its overall premises were too subjective and idiosyncratic; he decided that he wanted his art to rise above the personal in order to reveal the ideological filters of corporate advertising that, in the interests of selling products, projects its images of desire on the bodies and lives of African-Americans in both blatant and subtle ways.

To appreciate the impact of these ideological filters, it helps to look at both the manifest and latent meanings incorporated in the 2004 Nissan ad (cited above) that features the cutting-edge young painter Kehinde Wiley seated in the foreground mixing paint. Printed in white, the first line of the ad's text, which reads "A portrait in black by Kehinde Wiley," involves a highly sophisticated intertextuality, connecting it formally with the 1966-67 series known as *The First Investigation, Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)*, created by white conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth. Kosuth presented this series—informally known as Definitions—to the public in the form of Photostats, enlarged exhibition copies of cut-out dictionary definitions affixed to index cards, which more directly documented the specific concepts with which he was working. Thus, through its implied connection with Kosuth's Definitions, this ad has the net effect of making the reference to Wiley's portrait conceptual and ephemeral.

Following this first line in white is the rest of Nissan's text, printed in gray, which begins with the statement "We are the canvas." Appearing in a magazine geared to a black readership, the Nissan ad's gray-and-white text appears to extol the brilliant protean spirit of contemporary African-Americans alluded to in the text, even as it celebrates its own product's ability to transcend, through the open road, the material conditions encumbering them. Supposedly working in tandem with this Japanese automobile is an evanescent spirit so irrepressible and creative that it cannot even be captured by the important representational conceptual work of Kehinde Wiley, who is known for contrasting such traditional images of power as aristocratic European portraits with blacks in contemporary hip-hop dress. According to the text in this Nissan ad, Wiley will paint portraits in which the exuberant spirit of African-American Nissan owners can "be admired, studied and imitated in black."

This ad's very smart allusions to the extraordinary benefits accruing to its prospective customers enable us to see how mass-media culture can appropriate and even co-opt aspects of high art with dry wit and sure intelligence, making its products highly competitive inversions of Pop Art. In consideration of this Nissan ad's complex form of address, we need to ask exactly what Thomas accomplishes

when he excises its entire text in order to create his work. My answer is that he needs to remove this message because it is directed to the specific goal of generating desire for an innovative lifestyle of consummate freedom that, according to this ad's implications, can only be attained with a new Nissan. When Thomas erases this complex sales pitch, he moves the canvas referred to in the text away from Nissan in the direction of African-Americans, and he also encourages viewers of this work to enact their own reflective judgments for ascertaining the work's meaning. When he erases Nissan's message, Thomas also breaks down the implied conjunction between the product's use and Wiley's painting to reveal another message superintending both of them, and this communiqué concerns the clean blank slate of black identity, which is synecdochically represented by the now empty black void at the center of this work. Excising Nissan's text but not its carefully constructed latent image, Thomas is able to underscore the paramount role that corporate America assumes in its attempts to incite and manage blacks' desire by restaging, redirecting, and naturalizing, through capitalist means, the racial relations involved in such an effort.

While the Nissan ad employs the extraordinarily subtle verbal and visual incentives of diversity as a means for encouraging its African-American readers to break away from monolithic definitions of blackness while also recruiting or interpellating them as its prospective customers, we need to remember that prior to the full passage of civil rights legislation in the United States, racial relations rarely involved such gentle and positive means of persuasion. Despite Nissan's subtle approach, the subject of race continues to be a conflicted topic. In this essay I intend to present some of the dynamics of race in the past and in the present. These involve the relentless efforts of the white dominant culture to set a racial agenda for blacks; the resistance of African-Americans in the early and mid-twentieth century who redirected race in terms of unique and distinctly humanist sensibilities that were championed during the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Power period; and the current generation of black artists, well versed in French poststructuralist theory, who understand the profound effects of social and political constructions that frame their views and sensibilities. Rather than obviate these constructions and return to an earlier humanism centered on individual subjects, they use these frames as the basis for work that reflects back on these conditions, particularly on the largely hidden racial agenda known in sociological circles as "white blindness." In addition, they readily acknowledge the polysemic nature of the postmodern self with its allegiances to numerous sign systems that in turn convey it. A sub-theme of this essay will be my rereading of the French theorist Louis Althusser's idea of recruitment that has been misunderstood as one of art's effects. I will demonstrate that this approach is inconsistent with Althusser's view that ideology is only reflected in art, thus enabling it (ideology) to be revealed as a grand invention, and then will show how his idea operates in tandem with the cutting-edge work of many artists in "30 Americans."

The overall insidious history of race relations in the United States is predicated on the disturbing fact that ongoing discriminatory acts against African-Americans have created distinct and differential hierarchies that have left whites in dominant positions, while projecting racism on the bodies and desires of blacks, making it appear to be their fault and destiny. By naturalizing the highly artificial situation of racism, thereby transforming it into an efficient and effective ideology, whites have largely camouflaged the preeminent roles they have assumed in producing and directing it. In order to appreciate more fully the perniciousness of racism and its very material effects on both blacks and whites, it helps to review a number of substantially different and often destructive ideological racial constructions that have their origins in slavery.

In his important study of miscegenation in American culture entitled *Amalgamation! Race, Sex, and Rhetoric in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel*, James Kinney outlines five types of racism operative in the United States, beginning in the antebellum period and continuing through the end of the nineteenth century. His first category, *formal racism*, depends on pseudo-scientific beliefs regarding blacks' presumed sub-humanity and natural servility as rationales for perpetuating slavery, which was then transformed into the white race's so-called benevolent, custodial duty.[2] This specious reasoning that sets whites over blacks as their legitimate caretakers, however, did not prevent whites from transgressing this role as they encouraged the reproduction of increasingly greater numbers of slaves in order to sell them to owners of newly developed plantations in the frontier slave states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana during the 1850s. In fact, rather than shielding blacks from harm, whites were responsible during this decade for a 66.9 percent increase in mulatto slavery; and owners of plantations in Virginia and Kentucky—worn out from planting too much tobacco yet still rich in slaves—"sold down the river" the majority of new workers for this market.[3] At the end of the Civil War, one records office in Vicksburg, Mississippi, calculated that almost forty percent of the more than 9,000 slaves that it registered were mulattoes, who could trace their ancestry to white parents and great-grandparents.[4]

Slaves fortunate enough to escape from the South before the war, sometimes received educations and affiliated themselves with white northerners intent on ending slavery, but their changed circumstances did not rule out prejudice. Their fellow abolitionists tended to regard them under the seemingly benevolent guise of *romantic racialism* by focusing, according to Kinney, on the "natural Christianity that made blacks innocent, good natured, and docile."[5] This sentimental view of blacks as God's children became a *paternalistic form of racism* in the 1880s and then morphed into the particularly *vicious racism* that was initiated in the 1890s when entire sectors of American society started subscribing not only to social Darwinism's characterization of capitalism's leaders as strong Anglo-Saxons, but also its concomitant reproach of immigrants and people of color, occupying society's lower rungs, as weak and morally degenerate.

A limited *differential segregation* had been tentatively established soon after the Civil War by William G. Brownlow, governor of Tennessee, who advocated singling out good and docile blacks, who would be permitted to live and work among whites, and then barring from mainstream society those deemed intractable. Trying to decide which blacks to integrate and which to exclude no longer presented a problem for whites after the 1896 Supreme Court decision in the Plessy v. Ferguson case that upheld the "separate but equal doctrine," which led to segregation as a revived form of social slavery throughout the South. Although the preeminent author and orator Booker T. Washington counseled African-Americans to accept the humiliating constraints of segregation and work slowly for acceptance, his younger archrival W.E.B. Du Bois railed against such a compromising policy, charging that blacks were in danger of becoming slaves of ideology because they were "bound by all sorts of customs that have come down as second-hand soul clothes of white patrons."[6]

In his famous 1897 *Atlanta Monthly* essay entitled "Strivings of the Negro People," Du Bois outlined his still prescient concept of "double consciousness." This theory is predicated on the basic idea that white stereotypical views have been projected on the bodies and lives of black people to the point that they knowingly misrepresent themselves. Du Bois concluded that this concatenation of competing worldviews distanced blacks from mainstream society, and he was convinced the

2. James Kinney, *Amalgamation! Race, Sex, and Rhetoric in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel*, Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, 90 (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1985), 151.

3. Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1980), 63.

4. Kinney, 7-8.

5. Ibid., 152.

6. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926), http://www.webdubois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html, consulted 8/18/08.

internalized split personality resulted from an ongoing awareness of being both black and American at the same time. Instead of considering this two-fold view of the world as a strength, Du Bois regarded it as threat. He characterized "double consciousness" as a never-ending internalized battle and implied, but did not spell out, the omnipresent danger of self-sabotage:

> [t]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. [7]

7. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," Chapter 1 in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: AC McClury and Co., 1903, rpt. New York: Barteby.com, 1999, http://www.barteby.com/114/1.html, consulted 8/30/08.

Considered in terms of the symbolist rhetoric typical of the times in which he was writing, Du Bois's protracted battle between warring souls can be viewed as a tragic ontological situation because it does not permit blacks direct and easy access to their most profound selves.

Despite its stately period prose, Du Bois's amazingly prescient theory permits us to leapfrog over the modern essentializing currents of twentieth-century African-American art and identity following in its wake, and see how his view prefigures a constructive postmodern understanding of socially and politically constructed selves, understood in terms of the benefits to be accrued from multiple subject positions.

Before following this line of thought, however, we need to consider briefly the intellectual lenses that blacks have established for themselves and their culture in the decades following Du Bois's analysis. During this period African-American artists and writers became involved in such defensive and essentialist moves as empowering the Harlem Renaissance's New Negro (1917-28) and characterizing, in the 1960s and '70s, the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and its emphasis on black pride and group solidarity, which were outgrowths of Black Power's social and cultural activism. Both of these basically modernist positions put positive spins on black identity by developing fundamental reaction formations against ongoing racist relations that art historian Darby English has termed "black representational space" and differentiated as "an effect of a politics of representation raging ever since 'blackness' could be proposed as the starting point of a certain mode or type of artistic depiction." [8] In this situation a reified black identity taking the form of "black consciousness" is misconstrued as coming before segregation and is not viewed as a rationalization of its effects. So persuasive was this ideology of black distinction and self-assumed segregation in the twentieth century that it recruited blacks by turning racism on its head, making difference a badge of honor and not a pariah's mark. In the mid-twentieth century black artists also began affiliating themselves with the modern stylistic traits they discerned in West African art, and this attitude gained more adherents during the years of BAM's hegemony. According to African-American art specialist Richard J. Powell, even such innovators as David Hammons "inadvertently joined his more conservative black colleagues [like members of the AFRICOBRA] in their quest to recreate an African sensibility in American art."[9]

8. Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2007), 9 and 29.

9. Richard J. Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997, rpt. 2002), 154.

Although the literary scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. ostensibly joined forces with

this pan-African current by finding antecedents for black vernacular culture in West African prototypes, he managed to theorize a distinct language game called "signifyin(g)," (or, more simply, "signifying" without the vernacular twist) that updated and redirected Du Bois's "double consciousness" in a postmodern direction. This linguistic strategy constituted an innovative means for positing a sine qua non for African-American culture at the same time that it reconceived Du Bois's "double [or black] consciousness" in terms of a

> homonymic pun of the profoundest sort, thereby marking its sense of difference from the rest of the English community of speakers. Their [African-Americans'] complex act of language Signifies upon both formal language use and its conventions . . . established by middle-class white people.[10]

10. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 47.

More than just a word game, signifying is intended to enlist its practitioners in a special empowered subculture that re-encodes the mainstream by both parodying it and diverging from it at the same time it continues to participate in it. The theory is important for highlighting ways that language can be rearticulated and stratified to connote radically different meanings to accord with multiple and different semantic positions.

At this point in our discussion it is tempting to continue with Gates's signifying by demonstrating how it provides blacks with a privileged set of positions, but this situation of creating multiple perspectives through a racially designated underclass's doubly encoded signs is also reflective of a number of different types of subcultures needing to disaffiliate themselves from the mainstream while remaining dependent on it. Most notably, political subgroups including those based on ethnicity, as well as teenagers belong to this larger group because they are also adept at re-interpreting mainstream codes as insider communiqués and jokes that empower, cohere, and partially insulate them from the mainstream. When considered in relation to such situations, Gates's parallels between African-American signifying and the Yoruba-Fon myths of the trickster Esu-Elegbara are insightful concrete historical examples of a far vaster, ongoing double-voiced articulation found in many cultures. Considered in this manner, signifying bears a remarkable resemblance to the oscillating dialogism of double-voice references, advanced by the early twentieth-century Russian literary specialist Mikhail Bakhtin. This theorist defines dialogism in terms of conflicting literary representations predicated on differences between the view of the speaking character or narrator in a piece of fiction and the author's intention. Visual analogies to these essentially linguistic strategies that privilege and denominate African-Americans by transforming segregation into a more socially acceptable and authoritative form of self-isolation, of course, are plentiful, and they come both before and after Gates's landmark study.

Because art usually incorporates a number of ongoing tensions, understood in terms of different subject positions that can be construed as mainstream and outsider at the same time, signifying has become an established strategy for multiplying and stratifying different meanings to the same terms, and as an artistic tool it is capable of generating often brilliant and highly revealing works. Starting with the stock African-American examples of signifying whereby "cool" means "hot" and "bad" means "good," African-American artists can move into the realm whereby they play off entire artistic genres so that mainstream and black meanings are doubly articulated. Examples in "30 Americans" abound, beginning with Robert Colescott's and Xaviera Simmons's acts of signifying on the minstrel tradition by presenting blacks who have assumed the additional

mask of impersonating whites who are making fun of blacks. A similar layering of identities and meanings is at work in Kalup Linzy's art that signifies on race, gender, and sex through the various roles he assumes in his television soap-opera spoof, *All My Churen* (2003).

A number of artists in the exhibition signify on stereotypes of black males as athletes by finding ways to attach new and relevant meanings to clichéd ideas. Notable in this area is the Miami-based outsider artist Purvis Young, who creates images of black basketball players that are also images of self-transcendence.

Signifying in a far different manner than these two artists, David Hammons provides substantially different subject positions for looking at his *Esquire (or John Henry)* (1990). His work takes a wary view of African-American culture and its connections to Egyptian art that is identifiable through his modern-day Ka, or spiritual double, assuming the form of a smooth head-shaped stone, that he found abandoned in Harlem. Collecting discarded hair from a barbershop in Harlem, Hammons glued it to his sculpture and then asked the barber, who provided him with this hair, to give the sculpture a haircut. The title of this work plays off white and black identities since *esquire* is a British term originally employed to designate Anglo-Saxon social status, and John Henry was a mid-nineteenth-century slave hired out to a railway company as a steel-driver. Henry became a folk hero after successfully competing against the recently developed steam-powered hammer just before he died of exhaustion.[11] When considered in relation to Hammons's sculpture, the John Henry reference is ironically circular in its implicit reasoning, since it underscores the ways that African-Americans in the past sometimes participated in their own undoing. This downfall is evidenced by the irony that the figure of John Henry—represented in Hammons's sculpture in terms of a weathered stone—had the job of drilling into rock in order to create holes where explosives could be placed in order to blast through this material, thus detonating the type of material comprising this representation of him.

11. A number of studies have attempted to establish the identity of John Henry. One of the most recent and convincing is Scott Reynolds Nelson's *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Cf. William Grimes, "Taking Swings at a Myth, with John Henry the Man," *New York Times* (October 18, 2006), http://www/nytimes.com/2006/10/18/books/18grim.html, consulted 9/1/08.

Related to signifying but differing from it are Jacques Derrida's theories regarding the slippery nature of language and his recognition following Martin Heidegger's lead, that some terms such as *God* and *being* need to be put "under erasure" (*"sous rature"*) because they can be referenced but never known. This concept of erasure provides Gary Simmons with a modus operandi for his chalkboard drawings that employ "whitewashing" as a medium and consequently are elaborate and ironic plays on the ongoing chimera, "blackness."

In addition to seeing how signifying and *sous rature* have become viable strategies for recent African-American art, it helps to look at some of the new and far more interactive theories regarding black identity that have been advanced in the past couple of decades that have also impacted the dialectical interplays enacted by artists in "30 Americans." The most notable new concept regarding black identity is the almost two-decade-long pluralistic approach variously called the New Black, post-black, and post-soul aesthetic. This line of development focuses on post-civil rights blacks' easy access to both white and black worlds and their ability to choose their identity from a number of viable options.

The generational space marking the elitist New Black Aesthetic (NBA) was advanced in early 1989 in a namesake essay[12] written by Trey Ellis for the diasporic-oriented periodical appropriately named *Callaloo* after the Caribbean dish, which is remarkable for its many variations. An essayist, novelist, screenwriter, and, at the time, *Village Voice* critic, Ellis's biography is germane to his theorization of the NBA, which he describes in a deliberately breezy style

12. Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* 38 (Winter, 1989): 233-243.

intended to gain broad acceptance for his ideas. The son of upwardly mobile black parents educated at the University of Michigan and Yale, Ellis attended private middle school and high school before transferring to Phillips Academy Andover during his junior year. He then attended Stanford where he chose to live in the campus dorm called Ujamaa, whose website describes it as "one [of] four Ethnic theme houses" and notes that its name means "Economic Cooperation in Swahilii," thus underscoring the fact that "though it's the 'Black' dorm, Ujamaa provides a forum for diversity and unity among all ethnicities, peoples and individuals."[13] Tacitly taking this black dorm's open-ended mission as an underlying rationale for his new sensibility, Ellis describes the NBA in a stream-of-consciousness style that can be distilled into the following qualifiers, involving

1. A post-liberated aesthetic, free of such slave legacies as defensiveness and unencumbered with BAM's need to reify blackness in terms of black pride and group solidarity;
2. Ease of access to both black and white worlds, punctuated by the ability to freely choose being black;
3. Recognition that "racism is a hard and little-changing constant that neither surprises nor enrages . . . [and that] racism . . . [is] not an excuse";
4. Confidence in the ability of NBA adherents to change their world by breaking away from old definitions of blackness and extending diversity into heretofore unforeseen realms by demonstrating blacks to be "the intricate, uncategorizable folks we had always known ourselves to be";
5. Reliance on the opportunities afforded by upper-middle class origins, including a refusal to be limited by class barriers.

According to Ellis, initiators of the NBA are "cultural mulattoes." He explains this new category as fluid rather than fixed. "[A] genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who often can get along fine with his white grandparents," Ellis writes with remarkable prescience, fully fifteen years before Barack Obama, perhaps the most famous cultural mulatto, delivered the keynote address, "The Audacity of Hope," at the 2004 Democratic National Convention and nineteen years before he became the Democratic presidential nominee and rolled out images of his white grandparents and introduced his part-Southeast-Asian sister and South Side Chicago black wife. [14] In his essay, Ellis continues by noting, "a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world."[15] After pointing out that the members of his generation of cultural mulattoes are so numerous, confident, and self-determined that they do not need to join either black or white worlds but can "create our own," Ellis then states that, "cultural mulattoism refers to the ability of blacks to . . . take elements from different cultures to create a new diverse and pluralistic self." Moving far beyond the bourgeois politesse of political correctness that tried not to upset any constituency defined in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, and sexual persuasion, Ellis's cultural mulattoism focuses on the individuals who have the ability to forge their own hybridized identities while freeing themselves so that they can rethink blackness without being encumbered with either the shackles of New Negro idealism or BAM black pride. Similarly, it evades the straightjacket of multiculturism that tended to create equal playing fields for minorities and ended up stereotyping them according to group norms whose boundaries were then carefully policed.

Prominent cultural mulattoes in "30 Americans" include Iona Rozeal Brown, whose work focuses on a Japanese sub-culture of young girls intrigued with African-American rap. "Back in 1997," Brown explains, "I read an article in *Transitions*

13. Http://www.stanford.edu/group/resed/lagunita/ujamaa/main.htm, consulted 8/17/08.

14. Ibid., 236. In a February 19, 2007, blog for *The Huffington Post* entitled "Obama: Cultural Mulatto," Ellis writes:

I bit my tongue for as long as I could, reading essay after essay about Obama and his "blackness" that were about as insightful as if they'd been written in the era of Flip Wilson . . . our antebellum notions of race like the "one-drop rule" (one drop of black and you're black) no longer make any sense in this new millennium. . . .

I coined the term "cultural mulatto," to describe people like myself who, because of how we were raised, can easily navigate both the white world and the black. . . .

15. Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," 235.

written by Joe Wood. It was titled 'The Yellow Negro,' and subsequently introduced me to a group of Japanese youth called *ganguro* who darkened their skin and paid top dollar to have their hair permed into afros."[16] In her intriguingly NBA works, Brown contrasts traditional Japanese and contemporary African-American cultural references and plays off Ukiyo-e color woodcuts from the Edo period with telling aspects of hip-hop culture, because, in her words, "we are all mirror images of each other."[17] Ironically, in a postmodern world many of these resemblances are also highly commodified.

16. Iona Rozeal Brown, "Iona Rozeal Brown," Spelman College Virtual Museum, http://www.spelman.edu/bush-hewlett/a3/artiststate.html, consulted 9/1/08.

17. Ibid.

Inflecting the NBA approach in a new direction, Kehinde Wiley deconstructs rigid Western views of power as he establishes uneasy conjunctions between the rich panoply of traditional European portraiture and the hip-hop alpha males he discovers on urban streets. Significantly, the inspiration for his series of dialectical portraits came from a mug shot that he found on the streets of Harlem while working as artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum:

> It was . . . an African-American man in his twenties that appeared sympathetic, attractive, and it had all his information on it—his name, his address, his social-security number and his infractions—and it made me begin to think about portraiture in a radically different way: I began thinking about this mug shot itself as portraiture in a very perverse sense, a type of marking, a recording of one's place in the world in a time. And I began to start thinking about a lot of the portraiture that I had enjoyed from the eighteenth century and noticed the difference between the two: how one is positioned in a way that is totally outside their control, shut down and related to those in power, whereas those in the other were positioning themselves in states of stately grace and self-possession. And the first paintings of "Passing/Posing" were the merging of those two lines.[18]

18. Kehinde Wiley, interview by Roy Hurst, "Young, Gifted and Black: Painter Kehinde Wiley," National Public Radio, June 1, 2005.

Mickalene Thomas's NBA females elaborate on the elasticity of the art of self-presentation (fashion) in the many looks assumed by one individual in *Portraits of Quanikah* (2006), and parody Black Power Afros and their cinematic appearances in coy '70s-style pinups in *Hotter than July* (2005). This latter work refers to the open-ended, playful attitude toward new and different types of identity that can be tried out within the safe confines of the kitsch bedrooms and dens in which her figures are sequestered. A similar NBA openness is evident in Lorna Simpson's many wigs printed on felt backgrounds in *Wigs (Portfolio)* (1994), which literalize and move beyond socially conditioned views of African-Americans as only being involved in soul-work and remaining closely attuned to their feelings when she pictures blackness as a series of fashions that can be as easily donned as newer styles of wigs.

Thelma Golden's highly acclaimed Studio Museum exhibition, "Freestyle," named for a particularly radical, open-ended improvisational style of rapping, proved in 2000 to be an exhilarating visual-arts celebration that has antecedents in Ellis's irreverent NBA. To characterize the new options available to African-Americans, Golden developed the term *post-black,* which she views as

> characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as "black" artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness. In the beginning, there were only a few marked instances of such an outlook, but at the end of the 1990s, it seemed that post-black had fully entered into the art world's consciousness. Post-black was the new black.[19]

19. Thelma Golden, *Freestyle* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.

Golden views the artists, whose works make up her exhibition, as self-directed; and this view is in accord with Ellis's. Her choices include several individuals in "30 Americans," including John Bankston, Mark Bradford, and Rashid Johnson, who has succinctly summed up the overall impetus of Golden's exhibition:

> Now that we all have this knowledge and have a language to deal with it visually, it's the time to start dealing with some of the more playful things. We've accepted privilege, we're conscious of all these major issues that the generation before us laid down. Now that we have that formal language, I think we can finally talk about the smaller things.[20]

20. Rashid Johnson, interview by Barbara DeGenevieve, *Features* (April 2004), http://www.fnewsmagaine.com/2004-apr/current/2004-apr/pages/p18.html, consulted 9/1/08.

In an overview for the Modern Language Association's special 2007 issue on the post-soul aesthetic, literary specialist Bertram D. Ashe updates both the NBA and post-black with new rubrics and more culturally specific traditional black language.[21] He does not, for example, rely on philosopher Arthur Danto's term *disturbatory art*, which Ellis had referred to in his essay on the NBA as the "art that shakes you up" before he added that "the moral imperative of being black in America enrapts us with a militant juju that wards off cynical minimalism."[22] In place of disturbatory art, Bertram complements his post-soul and post-BAM rubric with the injunction to "trouble" or "worry" the category of blackness, by enacting a strategy of "blaxploration" instead of subscribing to commercial blaxploitation. (The term *blaxploitation* is notably used to describe a series of remarkable post-civil rights films like *Shaft*, *Hit Man*, and *Super Fly* [all made in the early '70s] that glamorized black street crime and successful blacks' ability to quell it.) Bertram advocates troubling or worrying conditioned ideas about blackness in order to "stir it up, touch it, feel it out, and hold it up for examination in ways that depart significantly from previous—and necessary—preoccupations with struggling for political freedom, or with an attempt to establish and sustain a coherent black identity" even though it is "done in service to black people," thus pointing to the benefits to be accrued from diversifying and mixing up black prototypes. Focusing mainly on artists and filmmakers, Ashe considers the work of such individuals as Jean-Michael Basquiat, Ellen Gallagher, Spike Lee, and Kara Walker to be exemplary of the post-soul aesthetic.

21. Bertram D. Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction," *African American Review* 41, No. 4 (Winter, 2007): 609-623. Although dated Winter, 2007, this special issue devoted to the post-soul aesthetic was not published until fall, 2008.

22. Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," 239.

All of these artists play with stereotypical views of blacks that they then provoke to tease out additional and often latent meanings. Even though many of the stereotypes are well known paranoid white-racist determinations inflicted on the bodies and lives of blacks, their effects have continued to be felt. The artists, listed by Ashe, have consequently exaggerated stereotypical effects to make points about their racist intent. Kara Walker, for example, points out:

> When stereotypes attempt to take control of their own bodies, they can only do what they are made of, and they are made of the pathological attitudes of the Old South. Therefore, the racist stereotypes occurring in my art can only partake of psychotic activities.[23]

23. Kara Walker, lecture, School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, October 24, 2000.

Rather than subscribing to BAM's crusade to create a morally uplifting and regenerative art capable of revivifying stereotypes, as a number of mid- and late twentieth-century artists like Murry DePillars, Jeff Donaldson and Betye Saar attempted to do with the Quaker Oats Company's trademark Aunt Jemima, Walker and a number of her fellow artists wish to undermine rather than embolden racist stereotypes. Walker's above statement indicates that such well-intentioned efforts as those undertaken by BAM artists are doomed to failure because even the most seemingly benign stereotype, by its very nature, has created, in her words, an "unredeemable" form of alienation. Disapproving of efforts to reclaim

and redirect such imagery, Robert Colescott—the critically attuned painter of an older generation—has noted, "the philosophy did not grow out of the paintings; the paintings grew out of the philosophy. And so they're illustrations."[24]

The almost two decade-long discourse on post-civil rights diversity enunciated by Ellis, Golden, and Ashe that this essay has just reviewed has constituted a healthy and commendable critique of earlier essentialized views such as those espoused by BAM artists. The writings of Ellis, Golden, and Ashe underscore the fact that African-Americans are no longer content to serve as the undifferentiated screens on which mainstream culture can project its biases, and are unwilling to condone reaction formations that reify blackness into an undifferentiated and monolithic whole so that it constitutes one of racism's more insidious and least understood effects. Although their combined approach provides a knowledgeable and sophisticated understanding of a great deal of art that has been made in the past few decades, including black-white interactions, it does not account for the fact that increasing numbers of artists, including those already discussed in this essay, have made concerted efforts to move beyond their personal understanding of experience in order to demonstrate a Michel Foucaultian-type consideration of the social, economic, cultural, and political discourses that frame, support, and even produce these experiences while establishing subjectivity and desire as ways of linking knowledge and representation. As Leonardo Drew explains,

> Imagine that you are a tool for creating this thing and try to remove yourself just enough, SO that you don't get too bogged down by ego or see yourself as an all-important Image.[25]

It helps to get a perspective on this type of Foucaultian critique by looking at the situation (cited above as an epigraph) that the Martiniquean expatriate psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon described in *Black Skin, White Masks* as an exile from ontology, a view that updates Du Bois's "double consciousness." Using Foucault as a means to critique both Du Bois and Fanon as well as to assess the validity of their own experiences, a number of cutting-edge black artists in recent years have relied on this French theorist's concept of the historical a priori. In doing so, they have de-centered traditional views of humanism as an immutable foundational epistemology and recognized the limits of even their own subjectivity as socially, politically, and economically produced. According to Foucault, subjectivity is framed by the broad-base assumptions comprising the archive or discursive formation of what can be said in a given historical setting.[26] It therefore reflects on the coercive role normalization assumes in establishing truth.[27] Working with Foucault's ideas, artists are keenly aware that they are functions of distinct *énonciations* that consist of both the culturally ratified position in which their articulations can be viewed as knowledge, and the resulting concomitant network that provides them with a place and a stylistic voice or métier where their works can assume authority.

A brief look at the work of five artists in "30 Americans" indicates the relevancy of their individual énonciations and historical a priori as working premises. A decisive example of both an ongoing historical a priori as well as a majestic énonciation is evidenced in terms of the perspective provided by the appropriated image of a tribal woman with an elaborate hairstyle, seen in profile on both the right and left sides of Carrie Mae Weems's *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995), which serves as both the artist's and viewer's surrogate in the work. Looking as if her image has been taken from an early *National Geographic* or anthropological study, this mediated and stately profile looks at the collection of appropriated ethnographic photographs of black slaves in the center of the

24. Robert Colescott, oral history interview, conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1999, http://www.aaa.si.edu/collecions/oralhistories/transcripts/colesc99.htm, consulted 9/1/08.

25. Lorraine Edwards, "Navigating a Sea of Chaos," *Sculpture Magazine* 16, No. 2 (February, 1997):20.

26. Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 127 and 129.

27. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 184.

work who have been reduced to the tragic state of representative types. Weems reinforces this demeaning condition by branding each image with a quasi-scientific label, such as "You Became a Scientific Profile," "An Anthropological Debate," "A Negroid Type," and "A Photographic Subject." Playing on differences between African tribal culture and contemporary African-American realities, fashion designer, performance artist, and sculptor Nick Cave has created a series of full-body outfits, called "Soundsuits," in which he morphs found objects with regal African-appearing costumes to redefine race in terms of the twin legacies and dual conflicting énonciations of being American society's cast-off fringe, while invoking the more distant and romantic heritage of tribal ancestry. For Shinique Smith there are several possible énonciations that are articulated through her work: they include—but are not limited to—African-American charms, long-held views about blacks as America's cast-offs, current concerns about recycling and the plights of displaced people throughout the world, as well as the twentieth-century artistic discourse on assemblage. "There is a transient, nomadic sensibility to my work," Smith states, a "place for things that were once displaced." She continues by noting, "I see the urban terrain as nature. My work deals with my interactions with the city and popular culture and broadly with transitory phenomena and human nature."[28] Trenchant African-American artists such as Weems, Cave, and Smith then, do not attempt to achieve subjective correlations of themselves in their work; no longer believing in their experiences as legitimate origins, they aim to show how subjectivity and ideology are staged, personal insights are constructed, and individuals are represented through historical a prioris.

Fully cognizant of the importance of moving from the subjective to the social, Kerry James Marshall in *Souvenir's Composition in Three Parts* (1998-2000), part of his tribute to the civil rights movement, and Mark Bradford in *Whore in the Church House* (2006), rely on the metonymic force of found objects and signs to locate their work in objective, on-going social and historical situations. They also attempt to diminish in these works the role played by their own combinations and articulations of these materials by foregrounding stories about the subjects and lifestyles they are re-presenting. As Bradford has pointed out, "I generally collect merchant posters because they talk about a service, and the service talks about a body and that body talks about a community, and that community talks about many different conversations."[29] On another occasion, he reinforced the role that used materials play in his work. "I don't like things that are first use. I like things that are second use. . . . I want it [found material] to actually have the memories—the cultural and personal memories that are lodged in the object."[30]

In order to appreciate the value of this new emphasis on the social and historical construction of subjectivity as parallel to the ways blacks themselves have been constructed by the dominant outlooks of whites, it is necessary to clear up a basic misunderstanding about differences between ideologies in the everyday world and the roles they assume in works in art. The French Marxist Louis Althusser, whose theories are most pertinent to this difference, developed his concepts in tandem with the ideas of his friend, the noted Parisian psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan. Specifically, he relied on Lacan's theory of the mirror stage in which toddlers are co-opted by images of either themselves or others as well as by language, so that their sense of reality depends on their imagined or intuited perception of themselves as wholes as well as members of the symbolic linguistic system in which they participate. Instead of viewing the toddler as the initiator of this sequence of events, Althusser ascribes agency to the mirror or language Lacan refers to, and re-conceives them as ideologies that hail or interpellate individuals as concrete subjects so that they exhibit the material

28. Ellen Donahue and Ronald Sosinski, "The Proposition: Shinique Smith," http://www.thepropostion.com/last/shiniquesmith_press.html, consulted 9/3/08.

29. "Mark Bradford: "Market > Place," *Art:21 - Art in the Twenty-First Century: The Artists*, http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/bradford/clip1.html, consulted 9/1/08.

30. Ernest Hardy, "The Eye of L.A. / Mark Bradford," *Los Angeles Times* (June 13, 2001), http://www.sikkemajenkinsco.com/markbradford_press.html, consulted 9/1/08.

effects of a particular ideology.[31] Even though Althusser's approach has proven extraordinarily useful to Marxists since it explains how ideologies are embraced by actual subjects and realized in daily life, it needed to be broadened in order to account for the competing ideologies that interpellate individuals in different and often contradictory ways. The consequent refinement of Althusser's basic approach to ideology, which does not reflect the real world but instead produces subjects involved in imaginary relations with others and thus is one step removed from the world, has been undertaken by Michel Pêcheux, his former student. Pêcheux has reworked the concept of interpellation so that it takes into consideration different subjectivities situated across the lines of race, gender, class, and other sociopolitical constructed identities.[32] Both Althusser's and Pêcheux's theories about interpellation are basic to rethinking traditional views of artists and their long-acclaimed experiences as art's primary source. Their approach enables us to re-conceive, as noted earlier, artists as ideologically constituted subjects like everyone else and to re-construe in addition their individual autonomy in terms of the ideological discourses that are channeled through them. This reconfiguration of individual artists' roles so that they are the articulators of socially constructed views that precede them and are not their creators, enables us to appreciate the ways that black artists have been interpellated in their daily lives by the ideologies of race and racial diversity, so that these and many other discourses speak eloquently through them.

31. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

32. An excellent example of Pêcheux's approach is in Martin Montgomery and Stuart Allan, "Ideology, Discourse, and Cultural Studies: The Contribution of Michel Pêcheux," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 17, No. 2 (1992), http://www.cjc-onlin.ca/index.php/journal/rt/printerFriendly/661/567, consulted 9/22/08.

Thus far, my discussion of Althusser and the ways ideology recruits its subjects correlates with orthodox views of his theory. But I wish to diverge from this standard interpretation of Althusser and interpellation by looking at art, which a number of critics and art historians have assumed to be a preeminently active producer of ongoing ideologies rather than being concerned with its effects, so that it recruits viewers as ideological subjects in similar ways to its functioning in everyday life. Particularly notable examples of misconceiving Althusser's approach to art and ideology are found in the writings of the eminent postmodern critic Craig Owens, who contended that "to represent is to subjugate" and who observed that the photo-based art of feminist Barbara Kruger "stages for the viewer the techniques whereby the stereotype produces subjection, interpellates him/her as subject." Owens then goes on to remark on Kruger's "*mobilization* of the spectator."[33] Such misconceptions as Owens's have been appealing and persuasive to many critics, historians, and theorists because they make art appear to be a preeminent way to inculcate and realize specific ideologies. The consequent instrumental views of art as an ideological mode, however, impoverishes art because it obviates the crucial role assumed by artistic form that distances art from the machinations of particular ideologies, thereby enabling viewers to look at them as fictive and as only reflected in art rather than actively produced by it.

33. Craig Owens, "'The Indignity of Speaking for Others': An Imaginary Interview," *Art & Social Change* (Oberlin: Allen Memorial Art Museum, 1983), 84; Craig Owens, "The Medusa Effect, or, The Specular Ruse," *Art in America* 72, No. 1 (January 1984): 104.

Although Althusser wrote little on art, he did summarize a number of his basic ideas about it in the brief yet revealing epistle known as "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Dasperé" (1966), which is only rarely mentioned as a cautionary note to those who would like to view art as a means for enlisting subjects on behalf of specific ideologies. Responding to Dasperé's question about whether or not art should be considered an ideology, Althusser unequivocably states that he does "not rank real art among the ideologies."[34] He then elucidates his position:

> I believe that the peculiarity of art is to "make us see" (*nous donner á voir*), "make us perceive," "make us feel" something which alludes to reality. . . . What art makes us *see*, and therefore gives to us in the form of "*seeing*," "*perceiving*," and "*feeling*," (which is not the form of

34. Louis Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Dasperé" (1966), http://courses.essex.ac.uk/LT/LT204/althusser.htm, consulted 9/15/08.

> *knowing*), is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes*. . . . Balzac and Solzhenitsyn give us a "view" of the ideology to which their work alludes and with which it is constantly fed, a view which presupposes *a retreat*, an *internal distantiation* from the very ideology from which their novels emerged. They make us "perceive" (but not know) in some sense from the *inside*, by an *internal distance*, the very ideology in which they are held.[35]

35. Ibid.

Since Althusser considers knowledge (as opposed to art) to be inherently structural and involved in the articulation of systems and the implicit rules "*of arrangement and combination* that gives them their meaning," he attributes this type of analysis to science, whereas art "is 'detached' from . . . ideology and in some way makes us 'see' it from the *outside*, makes us 'perceive' it by a distantiation inside that ideology."[36] Following up on this observation, I contend that in art the wonderfully absurd opacity of its media and form preclude it from actually interpellating ideological subjects because these formal means obstruct the more direct persuasiveness necessary for this type of enlistment. The theorist Jacques Rancière comes close to ratifying Althusser's ideas about art and ideology when he views art as divided into the irreconcilable yet continually oscillating roles of its punctum (arresting form) and studium (connections with external semiotic chains of meaning that harness art to something external to itself).[37] And this oscillation, in my opinion, reinforces art's "aboutness," its distance from ideology, which it can represent as a fiction or compelling representation rather than a "reality" capable of enlisting subjects who become dedicated believers.

36. Ibid.

37. Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2007).

What this Althusserian realignment of ideology and art means to African-American artists included in "30 Americans" is that their work, like all art, provides us with enough distance not to be interpellated by their ideologies so that we can recognize them to be the illusions they most assuredly are. Ideology, in this sense, becomes the subject but not the object of the art, since the object comprises the sum total of formal elements that provide us with the requisite distance for seeing the subject. We have already seen at the beginning of this essay how Hank Willis Thomas's excision of the text in his Nissan ad releases audiences from the soft-yet-persistent sell of the Nissan text and allows them to think about themselves as the empty black screen on which this corporation and others attempt to project their desires and needs. Considered in this way, art's distanced and abstracted ideology enables us to gain a much broader view of individual works and the world giving rise to them, as well as to ascertain, as in Althusser's symptomatic readings, how art comprises given problematic or discursive structures that can divulge "the undivulged even in the text it reads, and in the same movement . . . [relate] it to *a different text*, present as a necessary absence in the first."[38] This, again, is the type of reading that Thomas undertakes, and it also is a characteristic of Kara Walker's stereotypical shadows that are reflections of mainstream paranoia.

38. Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970).

During the past few decades, the subject of race in daily life has appeared to be downgraded by the evenhandedness of multiculturalism, the widely touted diversity of the NBA, and the openness of the post-black and post-soul aesthetics whose adherents can choose to be black since race is no longer assumed to be an imperative decreed by outside forces. This de-emphasis on race is the case not only for the arts but also for such fields as anthropology, sociology, medicine, and the humanities in general. What is particularly disconcerting about this "winnowing away of racial classifications"[39] is that efforts to defuse them have a very long history. As AFRICOBRA artist and eminent historian of

39. Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres, *After Race: Racism after Multiculturalism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2004), 9.

black art Michael D. Harris explains, the word "colored" "began to be used in the late eighteenth century as an attempt to undermine the monolithic concept of blackness, so those of mixed heritage with fairer skin would not be lumped in with their darker neighbors."[40] And yet, as anyyone who is aware of the history of twentieth-century segregation in the United States knows, "colored" assumed an almost insurmountably absolute designation that was used to differentiate black and white public facilities. Certainly, references to the genre of coloring books found in some of the works of both John Bankston[41] and Glenn Ligon play on this distinction, and ironically both artists, clearly aware of the NBA's approach, have made the decision to leave their works relying on this genre partially unfinished, to indicate that the process of providing ideological hues for ethnic groups is far from over. For his *Untitled (Malcolm X)* (2008), Ligon referenced Black Power-inspired coloring books of the 1970s. During the summer of 2000 he in fact chose images from them for his children's workshops in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, and their involvement with this material serves as a basis for his art that focuses on this means of political indoctrination.

40. Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race & Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 7.

41. In addition to coloring books, Bankston's work incorporates such sources as children's books, homoerotic sadomasochistic fantasies, nineteenth-century slave narratives, and fairy tales.

In the twentieth century, sociologists and others attempted to use the term "ethnic" as a *sotte voce* means for discussing race, but efforts to achieve widespread endorsement of this term have been at best tentative and only briefly successful. In *Racism and Cultural Studies*, E. San Juan Jr. points to early twentieth-century efforts to replace race with ethnicity:

> Among U.S. social scientists of the 1920s and 1930s, ethnicity replaced the biologically based racial paradigm of eugenics and social Darwinist theories of cultural evolution prevalent in the late nineteenth century. "Ethnic group" instead of "race" became the category that defined group-formation process based on descent and culture (religion, language, customs, nationality, and political identification). Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) valorized ethnicity in its analysis of the African-American problem of nonassimilation and economic-political subordination.[42]

42. E. San Juan Jr., *Racism and Cultural Studies: Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 138.

However, despite these efforts to defuse racism's effects, the opening of the Nazi death camps at the end of World War II made the Western world painfully aware of the tragic problems that can ensue from unbridled racism. This realization was an important incentive after the war for UNESCO to commission biologists and social scientists to develop a precise and workable definition of the term "race." Biologists working on this project concluded that the species Homo sapiens has a common source and that groups previously regarded as races were far too interconnected to be segregated on this basis. Reaching a similar conclusion, sociologists decided to use the awkward yet meaningful phrase "race relations situation" when it was absolutely necessary to discuss racial problems.[43] As might be expected, their good intentions and unwieldy terminology did not gain traction.

43. John Rex, *Race and Ethnicity* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), 18-19.

Five decades after these unsuccessful attempts to tone down prejudicial language, scholars and others were still attempting to parry race with ethnicity. In his essay "Through a Glass Darkly: Intellectuals on Race" (1999), Phil Cohen discerns a balanced equation between the two terms. "Race," he notes optimistically, "becomes ethicized and ethnicity racialised so that other terms can be used interchangeably in a way that allows their respective elements of fixity and permeability to be conjugated into more subtle idioms of attribution than either on their own could achieve."[44] Cohen's conclusion ratifies the groundbreaking work by one of the innovators of the academic discipline known as cultural studies,

44. Phil Cohen, "Through a Glass Darkly: Intellectuals on Race" in *New Ethnicities, Old Racisms?* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1999), 2.

Stuart Hall, who developed in 1991 an innovative postmodern reconsideration of new and fluid groupings of people in his essay "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities."[45] In this piece and other related works, Hall explains how new global diasporic identities, predicated on the ongoing contingencies of cultural hybridity, are no longer tied to racial and national histories and are involved, in Derridean fashion, in a ongoing play of difference. His approach is similar to Ellis's NBA, except that Hall goes beyond Ellis's generational and national boundaries and also his art-based theory to explore broadly the ways that his ethnicities are global and multigenerational.

45. Cf., Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities" in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System*, ed. Anthony D. King (London: Macmillan Education, 1991), 19-39.

The openness and democracy promised by the term "ethnicity" as opposed to the strictures enforced by racial terminology seemed in the 1990s to portend a new worldview in which race truly could be an elective, as Ellis had suggested. But, just as in the past, the problem of race continued to reemerge, and it again became particularly timely and topical in the '90s for altogether unforeseen and very legitimate reasons as increasing numbers of impressive thinkers began to recognize that an entirely new civil rights campaign needed to be enacted. Not only were inequities between races not being addressed at the end of the twentieth century, but they were also not even being documented because specialized studies of ethnic minorities were considered undemocratic. The publication entitled *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* by a group of seven respected sociologists summarizes the strange reversal of circumstances in which post-civil rights language and freedom were co-opted by conservatives intent on doing away with any type of affirmative action:

> When private or public organizations set out to correct historical racial disparities, they typically institute some race-conscious remedial plan. But because such plans classify people based on race, the courts routinely strike them down. Even though these race-conscious plans aim to help subordinated groups, the courts believe they constitute reverse discrimination. Under the resulting color-blind norm, lawyers rarely succeed in justifying affirmative action plans that seek to remedy actual racial disparities and societal discrimination.[46]

46. Michael K. Brown, Martin Carnoy, Elliott Currie, Troy Duster, David B. Oppenheimer, Marjorie M. Shultz, and David Wellman, *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University Press, 2003), http://www.ucpress.edu/books/pages/9866/9866.ch01.php, consulted 8/30/08.

In the interests of preserving color-blind equity, statistics employing racial categories were no longer permitted to be tabulated or used to buttress arguments about injustice to minorities. Thus, the following remarkable catch-22 or double bind ensued: government agencies were no longer permitted to record racial inequities because that activity would be undemocratic in a world where everyone is supposed to be equal, and since no documentation exists, no substantive arguments can be made to correct them.[47]

47. Ibid.

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva can be credited with doing the most work to underscore the problem he calls "white racism," and is sometimes referred to as "white blindness" or "color blindness," which constitutes an almost invisible norm as the basis of institutional practices in which racial practices are deeply embedded in their structure. In "Racial Attitudes or Racial Ideology? An Alternative Paradigm for Examining Actors' Racial Views," one of his many important articles on this subject, Bonilla-Silva succinctly enumerates his basic findings regarding this new and particularly insidious form of white racism:

> Colour blindness is a formidable racial ideology because at worst, it seems like racism "lite". Yet, its frames, style, and racial stories are the main ideological elements whites use to explain and justify contemporary racial inequality. As I argued, by supporting equality,

> fairness, and meritocracy as abstract principles and denying at the same time the existence of systematic discrimination and disregarding the enormous implications of existing racial inequality, whites can appear "not racist" ("I am all for equal opportunity"), safely criticize any institutional approach to ameliorate racial inequality ("Reverse discrimination?!") and blame minorities for their situation ("If minorities work hard and complain less, they would be doing much better"). Thus the political beauty of colour blindness as an ideology is that it allows whites to state their racial views in a principled, even moral manner.[48]

48. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Racial Attitudes or Racial Ideology? An Alternative Paradigm for Examining Actors' Racial Views," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 8, No. 1 (2003): 79. Other important essays by this author include "Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation," *American Sociological Review* 62, No. 3 (June 1997): 465-480; "The Essential Social Fact of Race," *American Sociological Review* 64, No. 6 (December 1999): 899-906; and "'I Did Not Get That Job Because of a Black Man . . .': The Story Lines and Testimonies of Color-Blind Racism," *Sociological Forum* 19, No. 4 (December 2004): 555-581.

Because of the work by Bonilla-Silva and others, the American Sociological Association in August 2002 decided that efforts to dispense with the term "race" were specious and no longer tenable. It urged its members to continue using race in their research, even as they recognized that it was a dangerous and damaging ideology that continued to create differential hierarchies and exclude groups on the basis of superficial features. This respected professional group also issued in 2002 the following statement:

> Those who favor ignoring race as an explicit administrative matter, in the hope that it will cease to exist as a social concept, ignore the weight of a vast body of sociological research that shows that racial hierarchies are embedded in the routine practices of social groups and institutions.[49]

49. Sally Lehrman, "Colorblind Racism," http://www.alternet.org/story/16792, consulted 8/30/08.

The American Sociological Association's decision to adopt the term "race" as one of its recommended professional practices might seem surprising in consideration of the decades of concerted work to replace it with the word "ethnicity," which seems self-selective rather than imposed from without, as is race. But its reversal should not be surprising, if one considers the great number of racial inequities that still persist. Although white racism works to minimize statistics regarding racial discrimination, some have still continued to be formulated. Sally Lehrman, an associate with the Institute for Justice and Journalism, posted on the Internet on September 18, 2003, a number of very sobering ones pertaining to racial bias.[50] The following inequities come from her list:

50. Ibid.

> 1. Considered demographically, twice the percentage number of blacks as whites hold low-paying jobs and are likely to be unemployed.
> 2. Blacks and other minorities are denied mortgages far more frequently than whites.
> 3. The National Cancer Institute has reported that cancer death rates are more accelerated for blacks than whites, sometimes by as much as ninety to one hundred times more.
> 4. Black women are more likely than white women to die of breast cancer even though the incidence of the disease is lower among blacks. According to the National Cancer Institute, "Black men have a cancer-death rate about 44 percent higher than that for white men." In fact, African-American men between the ages of fifty and seventy are nearly three times as likely to die from prostate cancer as white men, and their prostate cancer rate is more than double that of whites.
> 5. Exposure to environmental toxins and carcinogens, which are disproportionately located in poor and minority communities, is one important reason for the racial disparities in cancer mortality rates. Differential access to screening, prevention, and treatment is another reason for the disparities.
> 6. Racial differences in mortality rates for stroke and coronary heart disease are also significant. The black mortality rate for strokes is 80

percent higher than the white rate, and the black mortality rate for coronary heart disease is 40 percent higher.
7. The amputation of a lower limb is the one advanced procedure that blacks receive far more often than whites because of inadequate treatment of hypertension and diabetes.

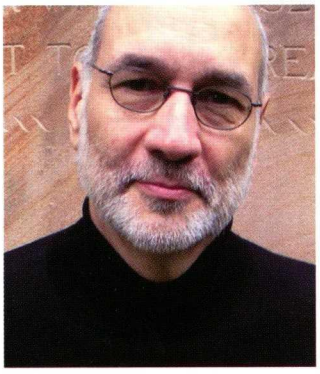
Given this grim situation, it is not surprising that race continues to be an important topic for cutting-edge African-American artists, particularly since these problems are not being addressed by society at large. Because a number of artists also continue to celebrate the free and easy access of NBA and the new ethnicities, they find themselves facing battles on two very different fronts. At the same time they are continuing to critique monolithic racial definitions, these artists need to inject race in their work so that it will be part of the national discussion and not glossed over by the dominant yet still far too little recognized ideology of white blindness.[51] Caught between the conflicting discursive formations of self-imposed segregation and victimization by a homogenous post-civil-rights white-dominated culture, these artists must invoke race while remaining ethnic and look b(l)ack while reflecting white racism. They manage these two conflicting goals by double indexing: they demonstrate in their work ways that racism frames and makes possible their individual experiences even as they also proclaim in it their right to choose blackness among a number of equally viable options. They also balance these different initiatives by underscoring the fact that racism is a white overlay, and one of their key strategies is parody, which in their work ranges from being dry and understated to becoming ribald and hyperbolic. Because it is hierarchical, parody controls its target through the ironic detachment it effects.[52] As Robert Colescott, who paved the way for many of the other artists in the exhibition, concluded about racism:

> We've already come to understand that it's about white perceptions of Black people. And they may not be pretty. And they may be stupid. We didn't make up these images. So why should we take the heat? But it's . . . the satire that kills the serpent, you know.[53]

51. This concept that art's role in bringing racism to light is inherently political is indebted to Jacques Rancière's excellent discussion of this topic in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

52. Lindy Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 34.

53. Robert Colescott, oral history interview.



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