

## BOOK REVIEW

**Mounting frustration: the art museum in the age of black power**, by Susan E. Cahan, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016, xvi + 344 pp., \$34.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8223-5897-8

After decades of spotty acquisitions, undernourished scholarship and token exhibitions, American museums are rewriting the history of 20th-century art to include black artists in a more visible and meaningful way than ever before, playing historical catch-up at full tilt . . .

art journalist Randy Kennedy wrote in a recent *New York Times* article (2015). Yet, the year before another article in the newspaper reported about the YAMS, a collective of artists that is predominately black and queer, pulling out of the 2014 Whitney Biennial partly on the grounds that the museum lacked diversity (Lee 2014). While Susan E. Cahan's *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* focuses on the moment in the 1960s and 1970s that work by black artists became institutionalized in New York museums at an unprecedented level, it has much to tell us about the not only seemingly contradictory states of progress and business as usual concerning the exhibition and acquisition of work by black artists at non-racially specific museums, but also contemporary developments in the rise of black museums and efforts to racially diversify the curatorial ranks of museums.

*Mounting Frustration* is organized as a series of four case studies that highlight the racial "restructuring of the museum system as a whole" (267) in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Chapter 1 explores the establishment of the Studio Museum in Harlem (the Studio Museum). Chapters 2–4 each focus on specific exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met), the Whitney Museum of American Art (The Whitney), and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) that featured work by black artists, or in the case of the Met, photo-reproductions of black life.

Both contemporary shifts and stasis in the inclusion and representation of work by black artists in "mainstream" museums today can be better understood through Cahan's analysis of the Black Power era. Across museums she finds that resistance to work by black artists is framed as a debate about letting quality prevail or succumbing to politics. The passages in the book reproducing correspondence insisting that black artists' exclusion is based on their work lacking aesthetic merit are striking. In one private letter concerning protests to diversify MoMA, a staff member/trustee at the museum writes

Before we take any action whatever, one way or another, I should think all the members of the Executive Committee and the Board of Trustees should be made aware that we cannot show or buy more works of art by Negro or female artists without *letting down our standards*. This is sad but completely true. (219, emphasis added)

The unrecognized subjective nature of the “standards” of this era is brought into relief by contemporary efforts by the museum to fill in gaps and purchase work by these once neglected artists.

What is also notable about this period of cultural integration is the role of protest in its development. Museum doors opened when artists and others stood in front of them with picket signs. While museum staff often insisted on the museum as an institution that stood above politics, Cahan’s history highlights how the politics of protest led to their racial integration even as the politics of aesthetic neutrality resisted these forces.

With the first black museum (the National Museum of African American History and Culture) opening on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., this September, Cahan’s text also offers fresh insight on the rise of black museums. In particular, given that Burns’ (2013) recent book on black museums does not focus in-depth on the Studio Museum, Cahan’s chapter on this museum enriches scholarship on these institutions. While Burns casts light on the black nationalist roots of black museums, Cahan argues that in the case of the Studio Museum a black nationalist ethos evolved over time. In its first years, Cahan describes the museum as having an integrationist stance reflective of its interracial group of founders including black artists and community leaders along with white members of MoMA’s Junior Council. Criticism of white involvement, which took place against a backdrop of suspicion that a racial takeover of Harlem was underway, led to the eventual shift whereby – at least for a moment – an ethos of black self-determination took hold.

Current concerns with the diversity of museum staff can also be better understood through Cahan’s history. In response to recent reports documenting low levels of staff diversity at museums (such as the *The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey* (2015)), there are new initiatives to diversify the ranks. However, as Cahan shows, these concerns are now decades old. When black artists protested the absence of their work in museums in the Black Power era, they also critiqued the lack of a black curatorial voice in these institutions. Demands often included that along with acquiring and exhibiting work by black artists that museums also hire black curators. However, the level of resistance to black curators often exceeded even that of black artists. Just as in Hollywood where it is often said that the real influence lies with directors and producers rather than actors, it can be argued that in the art world museum curators and directors wield more power than artists. Cahan’s analysis suggests that the particularly trenchant quality of racial homogeneity among museum staff is not unrelated to the position of these roles in the art world hierarchy.


*Mounting Frustration* is a welcome addition to the growing literature interrogating blacks and museums (e.g. Burns (2013) along with Cooks’ (2011) and Wilson (2012)). It offers scholars, as well as practitioners, a much-needed historical perspective on diversity and museums. As Cahan quotes artist Faith Ringgold “I don’t think artists really understand that things do get worse and not better unless you do something. They don’t get better naturally” (249).


## References

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Patricia A. Banks

*Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Mount Holyoke College*

 [pbanks@mtholyoke.edu](mailto:pbanks@mtholyoke.edu)

 <http://www.patriciaannbanks.com>

 Twitter: @PatriciaABanks

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