ART GALLERY
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
AT STONY BROOK
OCT. 16 TO NOV. 8, 69
AND THE ART MUSEUM
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
NOVEMBER 12-23, 1969
SPONSORED BY THE AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAM
The way in which this exhibition came about should be recorded, as it is the only way to express our gratitude to its organizer, Frank Bowling. Frank Bowling was uniquely able to surmount the divisive cultural problems involved. Mr Bowling is a Black artist living in the United States, but not of American birth; the other five artists are American by birth and, like him, now live in New York City. (In this respect all six artists are like most artists in New York, out-of-towners by birth.) Mr Bowling's position as part of the Black community is complemented, as a result of his different background, by the knowledge of detachment as well as of participation. He is the only artist at present in a position to act as a critic, a man able to speak to two different groups—the artists and their audience (an audience that is still mostly White).*

The situation of Black artists is ambiguous: there is considerable use of the idea of art as an instrument to advance Black identity, Black rights; there is, also, clearly and successfully, an impulse towards the making of art as art. In the artists' statements in this catalogue, both possibilities oscillate. One attitude shared by the present artists is worth isolating. Edwards' desire for an art beyond aesthetics, Loving's view of the "artist as part-prophet", Williams' "we are action painters", Bowling's relevant-relevant account of the genesis of his present paintings, are pungently mid-century in ideas and style (another name for mid-century is "Art Since 1945").

This is the period of existentialist criticism, of Abstract Expressionist attitudes; thus the language of the present artists is not specifically their own, but a shared language of post-war art. The alienation, the floating revolutionary impulses, the epistemological doubts, are not racial in origin but professional. Viewed in this way, the two themes of aesthetics and protest can be joined. The Black artist has a social framework in which to enact artistic problems; protest serves as a metaphor of the alienation felt by all Abstract Expressionist artists. Hence the fact of making art becomes its social significance.

Lawrence Alloway  
professor, Department of Art, S.U.N.Y. at Stony Brook

Sam Hunter  
professor, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University

*During 1969 Bowling has published criticism in Arts, Vol.43, February, March, April, May, Summer.
FRANK BOWLING: 

In a lecture on "Liberation from the Affluent Society," Professor Herbert Marcuse names several philosophers, none of whom deal with Black existence. Marcuse, an eminent thinker on the contemporary scene, is often called upon to pronounce on current issues. When he talks about "a society which develops to a great extent the cultural needs of man, a society which delivers the goods to an ever larger part of the population," does he mean to include Blacks? In reference to the title of his lecture: Blacks have always been "liberated" from the affluent society. From masks to funeral jazz, from politically subversive spirituals to the work of present Black artists and writers, the relationship between aesthetics and reality is binding, deliberate, and harmonious.

It is certain that Black art is not as readily available as Black as militant. Black art, conceptually, philosophically, sociologically, Black art is not isolated from Black life, nor is it a mere reflection of the mainstream. Two positive virtues of Black art: (i) an awareness of the solid canons of traditional African art and thought, and (ii) a powerful instinctive ability which Black people have shown time and again, despite the degradations they have suffered, to rearrange found things, to make new and interesting art.

The late Bob Thompson and his work is an example of great importance. Dead, tragically, before he was thirty, he managed nevertheless to bring an intuitive understanding of Black life to his own art, very much like the edgy and complicated existence of Blacks in the United States. It is an understanding which is not merely instinctive, but rich in the studied variety of a people who live an utterly ambivalent interior life in complete contrast to the smiling and dancing stereotype.

Two positive virtues of Black art: (i) an awareness of the solid canons of traditional African art and thought, and (ii) a powerful instinctive ability which Black people have shown time and again, despite the degradations they have suffered, to rearrange found things, to make new and interesting art.

The work of Mel Edwards has Black content: the way chains, barbed wire, trusses, and the like are put together has a kind of high-spirited canter, a humour, the equivalent of which can only be found in the "rapping" and palm-lapping and carrying-on when Black cats meet.

Frontally, "uptown" William T. Williams' paintings seem dead-pan, unsmiling, and precise. From the side all the "flawa" appear; the dragging of a paint-clogged brush creates a zig-zag pattern like the charting of a breathless pulse-beat. This surface is Black in so far as the way the paint is brushed on, and the way the wide bands of color collide and disperse, is achieved by the most irrational of means.

Jack Whitten's paintings are the intense end-product of a running, jumping, and standing-still mind not afraid to re-open the argument about, and add a new twist to, gesture as content.

Al Loving's paintings are the intense end-product of a running, jumping, and standing-still mind not afraid to re-open the argument about, and add a new twist to, gesture as content.

NOTES FROM A WORK IN PROGRESS

FRANK BOWLING:

1 2 3 5 6 7 8 9 10 4
It is necessary to be free enough to create beyond the boundaries of any esthetic and make that freedom plastically manifest. To improvise is the only real and constantly dynamic revolutionary way to be. I have known for thirty years that the color of the first earthman to visit the moon would be “White”. I have taken the stand that I can deal with perception from any angle or as directly as I choose. The time is a choice, the place is a choice, and the act or object is a choice in time which I often choose to syncopate. To put some English on the ball is a choice of moves and weapons in the middle of the struggle’s circle of stainless steel. Black and white, red, yellow and azul, are necessary angles and rattles modifying the connections of the cosmos. It is murderously masochistic and sadistic to put art before man. All formal values are rhetoric and at this time real beauty is the knowledge that I would burn, slash, trample, and destroy all of the objects in the world in order to create a better time and place.

To me the wall is the painting. I am tired of objects on walls. The wall must be pierced, brought forward, pushed back. The hexagon is capable of expanding, of occupying a given space. I am an universalist. I see the role of the artist as part-prophet, one who creates a visual reaction to possible projected changes. Being black at the expense of all other things is capitulation. Most viewers either like a thing or they don’t. Explaining the reasons for their feelings doesn’t change their view very much. The social-political perceptions I have which motivated my particular approach I can only speak about personally. I have been asked how my isometric cubic or septahedrons could possibly be of any relevance to present social political ideals. The truth is that there is none. I say “prepare the senses” as opposed to informing the senses, as the media says.

My vision of art is that of Pinkism. Pinkism is the personality of the world expressed in pure plastic symbols. Pinkism combines all the isms of art history, especially those of contemporary times. At present I am the only true believer in Pinkism, but like all isms when introduced to the mass media it establishes instant followers. The creation of a pink world became evident to me when I started seeing pink angels on my canvas, pink horses, pink women with pink blip, pink cats that blip pink blip, and big pink elephants with tiny pink blip. I have seen pink mountains where pink stinky goats grazed upon pink grass placed within a pink holy sky. I have seen pink pigs and pink dollars...