



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Faith Ringgold,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Faith Ringgold in 1972. The interview was conducted by Doloris Holmes for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Art World in Turmoil oral history project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

DOLORIS HOLMES: Doloris Holmes. I am interviewing for the Archives of American Art, and am presently talking with Faith Ringgold, an artist and member of WSABAL. WSABAL means Women, Students, and Artists for Black Artist Liberation. Faith, can you tell me something about the history of WSABAL and the kinds of activities that you've been involved with?

FAITH RINGGOLD: WSABAL was started last year in May 1970 as a result of the Boston show which was a show of artists from New York and Boston. There were 72 artists in the show and only nine were women. And Michele Wallace, a young black student and also my daughter, decided that really the exclusion of black women in art had gone too far with this show of 72 black artists and only nine women and none from the New York area. None of the women from the New York area were included. Most of the women came from Washington, DC, California, and even one from Paris. So we decided that this was really the epitome of exclusion as far as the black male artist at this attempt to do the black art himself, and to leave black women out of the field completely.

DOLORIS HOLMES: So that's how WSABAL began. And what kinds of activities have you been involved with?

FAITH RINGGOLD: Well, one of the first things we did was to find out who put the show together, because usually what they would say was, "Oh, well, we didn't have anything to do with it. You know, some what person put the show together. They did it." So we found out that three different people put the show together; one white man and two black artists, one black director of a museum, and two black artists. And so that meant that three black people had had something to do with the New York putting together the show. Therefore, it was an intentional thing that me and Vivian Browne, you know, and Iris Crump and all of us had been left out again. So immediately WSABAL got together with the women artists supporting the students. The students were doing most of the work. And we were also involved at that time with open shows which I'll discuss more about later. And we were also involved—the students were—with doing the survey of the community centers, you see. We were doing the nine, code nine, centers in the metropolitan area of Harlem, Bed/Stuy, East Harlem, Lower East Side, and so on. We were surveying these centers to get cultural institutions that would fit the needs and the interests of the people. This was a project which an artist had gotten a grant to do and so there were many students involved. And since they were our students, and they were involved, they all got involved with all of these different activities together. So we really had a really great type beautiful thing going. And the women artists, because they also felt a tremendous need to do something about the situation, supported the students. And this is what WSABAL was really all about. What did we do after that? We wrote letters to the *Times* explaining that black women artist do wish to be included in shows. And certainly a show that was supposed to be the largest survey of any black art show to date should have included, we felt, fifty percent women. As a matter of fact, this whole concept of having fifty percent women in anything was started by WSABAL that summer when we wrote the first letter to Barry Gaither who was the director of the whole show in Boston. The show as at the Boston Museum in May 1970.

DOLORIS HOLMES: This raises a question that we were talking about before. I asked you how many female black artists you felt were around. You mentioned the fifty percent figure. Could you elaborate on that?

FAITH RINGGOLD: All right. Now, I have been collecting names; in fact, we all have been doing that. And, every time I meet another black women artist, I ask her to give me all the names that she has, and we have—the last time I checked, I think we had about 125 names. But now I think I may have to close to 150 because I've been getting more, you know. So I'm not really sure how many. I know it's more than 125, because my last check was 125. I've been concentrating, however, on the East Coast, although I have a lot of women from the West Coast. There are a lot of people in the West Cost and in the South that I don't have. Plus there are other organizations that have stemmed up. There's the National Conference of Artists, and there are a lot of women in that, and I haven't had a chance to sit down and put their names in the list. So it could be maybe 200 now that I could really get together and have names for. But, you know, like it takes a lot of time. But I have a list at home with those 125 and then the others I have to put in. But let me say this to you, that when, in 1968, the first demonstration at a museum by a group of black artists was done—this was out in front of the Whitney Museum

—the people at the Whitney asked that question: "Oh, how many black artists are there?" Nobody was even thinking about women in those days. "How many black artists are there?" And the black artist was constantly in the position of trying to number and say how many there are. Well, what happened is that when the opportunities increased for the black artist—it was really the black male artist—I thought I was included in that. But I found out later that they really meant men. As a result of the demonstrations at the Whitney and later on at the Museum of Modern Art, a lot of people decided they were artists, so that the ranks of the black artist swelled to the extent that today you could probably get a list of five or ten thousand black male artists. In 1968, however, you would have been hard-pressed to find five hundred, six hundred—you see what I mean—all over the country. But opportunities for the black artist have increased. You see, they're not really what they should be, that's definitely granted, but at least they do exist for the black male artist. They are non-existent for the black women artists. And so the black male artist, because he sees that a black artists does get to show at the Museum of Modern Art, at the Whitney, and does get a chance to sell work here; or there, or the other place, and does get private shows and private galleries, and get noticed here and there, lots of people have come in, so that today there are many, many, many black male artists. And what I'm saying is that if black women artists were to be able to exist that way, I believe that more black women artists—who have long ago put down their brushes or their sculpture materials—would pick them up and decide that they could continue on and do their art.

DOLORIS HOLMES: Before you were talking about a new show that you're going to be in which involved, as I understand it, only black female artists. Can you tell me about that? And is it the first totally black female art show that you know about?

FAITH RINGGOLD: Yes, I would say that this is definitely the first black female show in New York. I was in one in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was an all-women's show, yes, but I don't believe that the theme or the purpose of it was as pointedly pro women as this one. We have this show as a result of our insistence, and as a result of the work that WSABAL started. This group is not a group of women who are WSABAL. This is WSABAL's show, incidentally. This is a group of artists, some of whom have never shown before, some of whom have. Vivian is in this show, Vivian Browne. Iris Crump is in the show. Kay Brown is in the show. Some of these women have been shown in men groups, you see. They haven't been allowed in NYUNBAYAASANAAA, which is a group of artists in the Harlem community who do a neo-African kind of art, and there are thirteen or fourteen of them. And two women in our exhibit said that they used to show with them, but they were never allowed to have full membership. At least one of them wasn't. So, in their discouragement with not being able to participate fully in that group, they have come to realize that it is important that they belong to a group where they could participate fully. And so they are exhibiting with us. I don't know how together this group will be or whether they will stay together as a group or what exactly will happen. They are not as political as WSABAL.

DOLORIS HOLMES: When and where is this show that you're talking about?

FAITH RINGGOLD: This show will be given at Acts of Art Gallery which is 15 Charles Street. It will open Tuesday, June 22, at 7:30. And it will go through to July 30, and the gallery is open every day except Monday, from two to eight p.m. And there will be thirteen women in the show, and it threatens to be very exciting. And I'd like to make it as political as possible. I also was able to talk the women into having it opened, as that it is an open show. However, it is excluded [ive?] to black women. See, these are some of the problems that you run into, because so few black women have been active in this whole rip-off thing that we've been doing. It's going to take a long time before they become politically aware enough to realize that having an all black women show is another trick bag. But I can't say that now, because of the fact they they've never shown before and they are not aware of the problem that all women have in art. The white women have it much better than we do, but they still have it very badly, and we can relate together in this field far better than we can in a lot of fields, because it is really bad everywhere for women in art. And there is much to be accomplished in this one particular field, I think, by women doing things across color lines, how, while we're all young, so to speak. We can do this before one group gets too far ahead of the other group, meaning that the white group can get too far ahead of the black group, and then the insidious racism can become a powerful tool as a thorn in the side, an added extra thorn in the side of black women. But I don't know that I can do very much about that at this particular time.

DOLORIS HOLMES: Let me respond to that since you direct it to me personally. I am all for this black female artist exhibition and I know from my contact with WAR and WSABAL that we have done other things together, for example, the meeting with the Commission of Human Rights and the Whitney show. So that's fine. I also know that you want to talk generally about open shows and you want to mention the Venice Biennale show which took place last summer.

FAITH RINGGOLD: Right. The Venice Biennale show, you see, is another reason why I've made the statement that I made at first, because I wouldn't want anybody to tell me that I can't be in a show because of anything anymore at all. Like I want to be in anything I want to be in. The Venice Biennale artists—the American ones—decided that they were going to pull out, and came here as part of an art strike thing, you know, action. They

were going to pull out of the Venice Biennale and bring their show here and show it at the School of Visual Arts as an act against war, repression, sexism, and racism, and so on. I went to a meeting of the Art Workers Coalition and I heard they saying that. Since I was a very young artist, I always wanted very much to be in the Venice Biennale show, because it was the epitome of shows to be in. And I've always been very unrealistic. And furthermore, it was paid for by the Federal government, right? I mean to say that I pay taxes even though I'm not really a citizen. I mean I'm a second class one. But the taxes come out nevertheless. So I always wanted very much to be in that show and was always very interested in it. So when I heard they were bringing they work here to New York, I said, "Wow, this is the greatest thing, because every time I ever go to Europe it's not the year that the Venice Biennale is there. So this year the Venice Biennale is coming to me." So I hot-footed it over to the School of Visual Arts and, much to my surprise, I found out that there were no women in this liberated Venice Biennale, plus there were no black people in it. And that was when WSABAL picked up that cudgel and we opened our show which had about fifty percent women. Lots of black women came into the show. As a matter of fact, WSABAL really gained its support of black women through the open show.

DOLORIS HOLMES: Were was the open show actually? Where did it take place?

FAITH RINGGOLD: The open show did not happen at the School of Visual Arts, because there were problems with the black students there who were trying to get a black studies program. So the open show, the liberated Venice Biennale, took place at Museum. And of course there were many problems there, because the whole thing of feminism in art was new and it was having birth pains. So there were difficulties, which somebody else might talk about, that arose as a result of the Venice Biennale, but it happened. And it was a political show, and it was an open show. And all the superstars showed with the people, and it was really a beautiful thing. I think shows today, for instance like the *Flag Show*, which was another open show last November, was an extension of the Venice Biennale in which lots of different artists and people participated to show their feelings about the American flag. So that's another open show. You see, we're going on. And then we had the *She Show* which was at the Judson Church in the Village. Unfortunately, that show, even though it was a beautiful show in which many, many artists got a chance to do political art and be expressive about the American flag, was busted on November 13, and three artists got arrested—John Hendricks, Jean Toche and me, Faith Ringgold. We are not appealing to the Appellate Court and our attorneys with the ACLU have just filed the first appeal and we expect to win. And we expect to go on to the Supreme Court. So that's the story on the second open show. And then a young woman, Sonnia Fox, had another open show called the *He Show* and that was well-attended and very good. I emceed that show, and you were there, Doloris. And they had films and poetry, and that was good. Then Iris Crump was having an Ethnic open show on the 23rd at Hunts Point. That consists of all kinds of Ethnic art: ethnic meaning anybody. And let's see, what's another one? Oh, our show, the black women's show, which is called *Where Are We At?* And that's happening June 22. So the open shows are moving. But what's so important, Doloris, about open shows and why they should really be open is because in this way, all the people who would be ordinarily kept out—because they're women or because they're black or because they're unknown or because what they do is unpopular or because of other things—can get in. And this is why it's really so important.

DOLORIS HOLMES: Mainly, you're saying that a lot of the art that's in the museums and the galleries is completely irrelevant to much of what is going on in this country, that there's the establishment, and there are many of us artists who are really trying to do something about changing the whole system. And open shows will allow some of the real vitality in the country to come forth. Isn't that what you're saying?

Okay, Faith, can you tell me something about your own history as an artist, and also about some of the black female artists in the past who of course have been forgotten?

FAITH RINGGOLD: Okay. Well, Augusta Savage, who was working in the early nineteenth century, did a very famous sculpture. She went to Rome as many black artists did, because they couldn't work in this country either because they were in slavery or because they were suffering from a great a deal of racial prejudice after slavery. Anyway, she went to Rome and when she heard of the emancipation, she did a sculpture called *Forever Free*. She did it in marble. And it's a sculpture of two slaves—a woman and a man—and they are rejoicing over their new-found freedom. When you look at this sculpture—it's all in white marble—you really don't think that these are black people because she still had the white image in her mind. And all of the work that she had seen art-wise had been white-orientated physical appearances. she hadn't been exposed to any African art because it's not until the early twentieth century when Picasso and Matisse and so many other artists began to look at African art and realize the magnificent power in that kind of confrontative imagery that African artists use. So, up 'til then, African art was something that was in curio shops throughout Europe and maybe even in this country. But it was not considered art as such. When I say "confrontative," I mean that when you look at a piece of African sculpture you are immediately arrested by the strong geometric forms that sometimes clash with each other, which take eyes, the nose, and the mouth, the principal parts of the face that the African uses, and makes them into the most drastically contrasting forms. So that the eyes may go out as much as three, four, five inches and an eye opening becomes a circular hole, or maybe just a tiny slit. And a mouth may become a long, fluty thing. Or it may go back into the head. So that all parts of the African feature, and even the face itself are

drastically designed, and with no extras, you know. African art is all about basic forms, so that things are reduced to their basic form, but in an ingenious way so that you feel the life-blood of the form without it looking naturalistic. European art which comes from the Greeks idealize the human form. African art is conceptual. And that's what I always think of when I heard people doing conceptual art. I always think immediately of African art, because it attempts to take the mood and the spirit of the person and visualize that, instead of the human roundness and the suppleness of the form. In European art, the attempt is to make it as lovely, as soothing, and as subtle as possible. In African art it is to make it unsubtle; to make it as strong; to make it as different from what life looks like as possible, but to breathe life into the form nevertheless. I'm really talking about the whole lifestyle and feeling of black people as it comes from Africa. It comes from the ground where people live, very close to the earth and the sun and the trees and the animals and all of the dynamics of nature. This is a very important part of the life of black people. And so this came out in the art, it comes out in the drum beating, it comes out in the dance, it comes out in the language—the way their language with inflections is like animals talking or like birds and so on. So all of these things are new, were not available to Augusta Savage. Nor were they available to many other black artists, you know, before now. Nor were they available to white artists before now. But now we are aware of those things and I'd like to say that this has been a very strong influence in my work. From the time I was a very young artist, I was trying to get an art form that would be realistic but not smooth and subtle. And I didn't know what I was trying to do, but I was trying to express myself, my life, my yearnings. And I finally got what I wanted and it is a kind of abstract realism, shall I say. So that people can identify with my form as human beings, as themselves, but that those forms are stronger than life so that they are able to confront you very much, I hope, like African art does. You know, even minimal art and cereal art, which are two of the so-called anti-art forms, basically come from African art. In African art very often the artist takes one theme and repeats it and repeats it and repeats it. In fact, this is done constantly throughout the sculptures. It's done in the fabrics, and it's done on the wall hangings. It's done on the building, and so on. And the forms are always reduced to their subtlest terms, and this in essence is minimal art. But it is in relationship to the people and to their lives and not opposed to it which is the difference between it and minimal art.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]