Introduction

Art Matters

One of the first paintings I ever made is hidden in my basement. It was not put there for safekeeping. Damp dank spaces are no place for art work one treasures. All the other pictures I painted growing up have been destroyed, thrown away. They were not valued. This one survived because I took it with me when I left home at seventeen. The assignment we had been given in our art class was to choose a style of painting used by an artist whose work we admired. I loved the work of painters using abstract expressionism because it represented a break with rigid notions of abstract painting; it allowed one to be passionate, to use paint in an expressive way while celebrating the abstract. Studying the history of painting by African-Americans, one sees that abstract expressionism influenced the development of many artists precisely because it was a critical intervention, an expansion of a closed turf. It was a site of possibility.

The artist whose work served as a catalyst for my painting was Willem de Kooning. As a young student in the segregated South, where we never talked race, it was not important to situate a painter historically, to contextualize a work. The "work" was everything. There are times when I hunger for those days: the days when I thought of art only as the expressive creativity of a soul struggling to self-actualize. Art has no race or gender. Art, and most especially painting, was for me a realm where every imposed boundary could be transgressed. It was the free world of color where all was possible. When I studied de Kooning's use of paint, those broad brush strokes, the thick layering of color, I was in paradise. To be able to work with paint and create textures, to try and make color convey through density an intensity of feeling—that was the lesson I wanted to learn.

My pleasure in abstract expressionism has not diminished over the years. It has not been changed by critical awareness of race, gender, and class. At times that pleasure is disrupted when I see that individual white men who entered the art world as rebels have been canonized in such a way that their

standards and aesthetic visions are used instrumentally to devalue the works of new rebels in the art world, especially artists from marginal groups.

Most black artists I know—myself included—have passionately engaged the work of individual white male artists deemed great by the mainstream art world. That engagement happens because the work of these artists has moved *us* in some way. In our lived experience we have not found it problematic to embrace such work wholeheartedly, and to simultaneously subject to rigorous critique the institutional framework through which work by this group is more valued than that of any other group of people in this society. Sadly, conservative white artists and critics who control the cultural production of writing about art seem to have the greatest difficulty accepting that one can be critically aware of visual politics—the way race, gender, and class shape art practices (who makes art, how it sells, who values it, who writes about it)—without abandoning a fierce commitment to aesthetics. Black artists and critics must continually confront an art world so rooted in a politics of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal exclusion that our relationship to art and aesthetics can be submerged by the effort to challenge and change this existing structure. While there are now more working black artists than ever before in the United States, the number of black critics writing about art and aesthetics is only slowly increasing.

More than any other black cultural critic or art historian, Michele Wallace has consistently endeavored to link the dilemmas black artists face with the dearth of critical black voices thinking and writing about art. Her writings on art continually inspire me. In her essay "'Why Are There No Great Black Artists?' The Problem of Visuality in African-American Culture," Wallace insists that black folks must engage the work of black visual artists fully, and that includes understanding "how regimens of visuality enforce racism, how they literally hold it in place." The system of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is not maintained solely by white folks. It is also maintained by all the rest of us who internalize and enforce the values of this regime. This means that black people must be held accountable when we do not make needed critical interventions that would create the "revolution in vision" Wallace calls for. Indeed, Wallace's essay, first given as the closing talk at a conference she organized on black popular culture, challenged black intellectuals to place visual arts on the critical agenda and to reconceptualize aesthetic criteria. Contemporary cultural criticism by African-Americans has nicely highlighted the need to uncover subjugated knowledge in black

communities that relates to art and aesthetics—all too often it is simply assumed that visual arts are not important. Although individual progressive black females (Sylvia Ardyn Boone, Judith Wilson, Kellie Jones, Coco Fusco, and myself, to name just a few) have been at the forefront of critical writing about art that seeks to address the issues Wallace raises, often our work does not receive attention from the conservative mainstream or from more progressive audiences who purport to be our allies in struggle. When it appears either that there is no audience for one's work or that one's work will be appropriated and not directly acknowledged, the will to do more of that work is diminished. Patriarchal politics in the realm of the visual frequently insure that works by powerful men, and that includes men of color, receive more attention and are given greater authority of voice than works by women. While feminist thinkers of all races have made rebellious critical interventions to challenge the art world and art practices, much of their groundbreaking work is used, but not cited, by males.

Concurrently, progressive white critics working from critical standpoints that include race and gender have been persistent in their efforts to produce a body of work focusing on visual politics. Yet this interest often leads such critics to appropriate the discussion in ways that deny the critical contribution of those rare individual black critics who are writing on art. This is especially true with respect to the work of black female critics. For example: Maurice Berger, a white male critic, recently edited an anthology titled *Modern Art and Society*. In the introduction he describes the book: "More than a primer on modernism's exclusions and biases, this anthology will hopefully be seen as a valuable methodological tool for art historians. Through various theoretical and critical processes, these essays, whether they discuss the work of one artist or many, offer new ways of thinking about the visual arts." Positioned as a critical intervention, Berger's anthology functions similarly to more conservative texts in the way in which it both appropriates and excludes the voices of black females writing about art. Most of the essays Berger includes make no reference to art by black women or to critical work about art by black women, even though several of the essays build upon a critical foundation laid by black female critics. The anthology opens with Cornel West's insightful essay "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," which draws on the themes of invisibility and erasure of black voices on art and aesthetics, themes that have been so powerfully highlighted in the work of individual black female critics. West even acknowledges that "the deci-

sive push of postmodern black intellectuals toward a new cultural politics of difference has been made by the powerful critiques and constructive explorations of black diaspora women." The work of black female critics informs this essay, yet our names go unmentioned.

In "Cotton and Iron," Trinh T. Minh-ha makes this useful point: "Liberation opens up new relationships of power, which have to be controlled by practices of liberty. Displacement involves the invention of new forms of subjectivities, of pleasures, of intensities, of relations, which also implies the continuous renewal of a critical work that looks carefully and intensively at the very system of values to which one refers in fabricating the tools of resistance." Progressive men who write about art and visual politics and who highlight difference, especially race and gender, must be vigilant in their critical efforts so that they do not subsume the voices and ideas of women within a critical rubric that reinforces male supremacy. The same may be said about curatorial practices. In both arenas, work by male artists and critical writing by male thinkers tend to receive more serious attention than similar work by female peers. Race does not mediate patriarchal politics in the realm of visual arts.

Art on My Mind: Visual Politics emerged as a response to the dearth of progressive critical writing by African-Americans on art and aesthetics. The book represents my critical response to the ongoing dialogues about art, visual politics, and aesthetics, and it shares many of the ideas that have emerged from discussions I've had with black folks and our allies in the struggle relating to the visual arts. Significantly, conversations with the art historian Sylvia Ardyn Boone and the cultural critic Michele Wallace were a major catalyst compelling me to explore more fully discussions I had begun about art and aesthetics in earlier work, particularly around the issue of subjugated knowledge—the attitudes and ways of thinking about art that black folks from different class positionalities hold and that are rarely talked about.

Even though visual arts fascinated me long before feminist thinking informed my critical consciousness, it was not until I fully engaged the politics of feminism in conjunction with liberatory black struggle that emphasized decolonization of our minds and imagination that I began to recognize the importance of taking the time to write a body of work addressing art and aesthetics. One obvious reason there are so few black folks writing about art is that there are so few rewards to be had for such

writing. And the reality is that, as black female critics entering this domain, we risk having our ideas appropriated or go unacknowledged by those who enjoy more power, greater authority of voice, within the existing structure. This can lead us to choose silence. Audre Lorde spent a lifetime warning us of the danger in such a choice, reminding us that our silence will not save us. When I first began to search for and read art criticism on the work of artists from marginal groups, particularly the work of African-American artists, I was appalled by the dearth of material, by the lack of serious critical engagement. I felt both a tremendous sadness and an intense rage. Constructively grappling with these feelings by writing about the work of African-American artists, about art in black life, I began this collection. Some of the work is brand new; other essays have been published before but in specific contexts where they could easily go unnoticed or read only by a privileged few.

When I began these essays and conversations with individual artists, I did not plan to focus the majority of my attention on the work of black women artists. The book evolved in this direction only as I began to critically examine spaces of lack. I found that even those black women artists whose work is widely acclaimed and receives attention on a number of fronts, both within the mainstream art world and outside, rarely receive serious consideration by art critics. Often critiques of their work are descriptive rather than critically interpretative. Every artist whose work I have chosen to write about makes art that I value. I have had the good fortune to live with pieces by every artist in this book. In some cases their work has sustained me during hard times. Recently, at the end of a lecture on art and aesthetics at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, I was asked whether I thought art mattered, if it really made a difference in our lives. From my own experience, I could testify to the transformative power of art. I asked my audience to consider why in so many instances of global imperialist conquest by the West, art has been other appropriated or destroyed. I shared my amazement at all the African art I first saw years ago in the museums and galleries of Paris. It occurred to me then that if one could make a people lose touch with their capacity to create, lose sight of their will and their power to make art, then the work of subjugation, of colonization, is complete. Such work can be undone only by acts of concrete reclamation.

The works of art I write about here have all had a transformative impact on my life. I first encountered Margo Humphreys's work when I was a grad-

uate student. Lacking the money to buy the real thing, I bought a poster of her print *The Getaway*. During the many years that I remained in a relationship that was heartbreaking, I found hope and renewal for my spirits in this image of union between lovers, of joyous escape. This print was placed so that I would look at it every day when I awakened. It worked magic in my soul. Andres Serrano's photograph *Circle of Blood* was similarly healing to my spirit. In a period of long illness when I was in danger of bleeding my life away, I developed a hatred of blood so intense that it disrupted my capacity to function effectively. Serrano's image restored my appreciation for blood as a life-giving force. These are just two examples of the ways in which beautiful works of art have concretely and constructively influenced my thoughts, my habits of being.

Most art critics write about work that engages them deeply. The arbitrary nature of our choices struck me as I chose works to write about for this collection. Two of my favorite works of art are by white male artists, Leon Golub and John Baldessari. I chose not to write about these pieces at this time because the work of these two artists has received so much critical attention. That does not mean that writing about this work from my perspective would not add to the body of critical work that already exists; it just means that the uses of time, the choices we make with respect to what to think and write about, are part of visual politics. It is my hope that the essays included here will, in conjunction with the work of other progressive critics, stand as acts of critical resistance that actively introduce change within existing visual politics. As we critically imagine new ways to think and write about visual art, as we make spaces for dialogue across boundaries, we engage a process of cultural transformation that will ultimately create a revolution in vision.

As *Art on My Mind* progressed, I felt the need to take my first painting out of the shadows of the basement where it had been hidden, to stand it in the light and look at it anew. The outline of two houses, shacks, is visible. It is autumn. The yellow light of early fall emerges in the midst of earthy brown and red shades. There is chaos and turbulence in the image. It is a time of change and transition. Yet nothing can disturb the inner sanctuary—the place where the soul lives. These are the dwelling places of the spirit. Returning to them, I come again to the memory of a free world of color where ultimately only our engagement with the work suffices—makes art matter.