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5-10-2022

### The Racial Value of “Bad Art”

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ARTH 325  
5/10/22

### The Racial Value of “Bad Art”

For years, people have been classifying art as “good” or “bad.” From someone in a gallery whispering to their friend that they could have painted anything on display easily, to a critic publishing a scathing review that gets published in a national journal, everyone is able to deem art as “bad.” But is there a solid definition of what actually determines the quality of a work of art? “Bad art is a nebulous concept to pin down; an artwork can be deemed good or bad depending on the social context of its viewing, the techniques used in creation, or disparities between the artist’s vision and execution, i.e., failed artworks. AfriCOBRA, which stands for the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, came into being in 1968 Chicago. Founded by five prominent Black artists of the time, the group set out to create works that would be shunned by largely white critical audiences and embraced by the Black community.

I will make three arguments in this paper. My first is that the concept of “bad art” is firmly rooted in racist and colonialist ideologies. One qualification of “good art” is artistic techniques, and what is valued by standards of art are Western stylings and “white” or entirely deracialized art.<sup>1</sup> By not viewing much other than deracialized art as good or worthy of “classic” status, many critics will reject racialized art because of their idea on what makes art “good.” Based on the inherent racism in the concept of “bad art,” I also argue that Black art does not have to be “good” to have value. Black artists do not have to remove themselves and their experiences from their work to create work that will be accepted and glorified. Art that is not deemed good can still have significant power and meaning. This leads me to my third and final argument: AfriCOBRA made good art specifically because they were making bad art. By purposefully

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<sup>1</sup> Dyck, John and Matt Johnson. "Appreciating Bad Art." *Journal of Value Inquiry* 51, no. 2 (2017): 279-292, 282

abandoning the pressure of white art trends, they created art that was meaningful to the Black community and incited solidarity.

But what makes art good or bad? How does one decide whether a piece of art is “bad art”? How can art that is categorically “bad art” be good? There are many arguments as to what makes “bad art” “good-bad,” as termed by John Dyck and Matthew Johnson in their article, “Appreciating Bad Art.”<sup>2</sup> Bad art is an incredibly subjective idea, often shifting depending on what is “good” at the time or what content, technique, or subjects are present in the piece being judged.

In her 1999 article for the New York Times, “In Praise of Bad Art,” Deborah Solomon defines good “bad art” as a cultural phenomenon. She writes about a return to Rockwell’s art and others of his ilk, citing a renewed appreciation for more down-to-earth art in the face of the extreme avant-garde art of the 1990s, saying “By now, avant-garde art is so accepted that even Duchamp's urinal looks classical, which helps explain why nothing seems more outrageous than middlebrow art...”<sup>3</sup> Here, Solomon argues that what is making art that had been previously viewed as uninspiring has come to be appreciated for its simplicity.

This nostalgia is a purposeful cultural tool. While this art has little artistic value when compared to avant-garde standards of the time, it inspired emotional responses in the viewers. One of the core ideas of “good-bad” art is that it inspires an emotional response, rather than just an intellectual one.<sup>4</sup> Solomon describes the appeal behind the trend, saying, “...the rampant revisionism of the 90's...marks the end of coolness--a premillennial yearning for the safe past, for the kind of reassuring experience that avant-garde art aggressively renounced.”<sup>5</sup> In this

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<sup>2</sup> Dyck, John and Matt Johnson. 279.

<sup>3</sup> Solomon, Deborah. "In Praise of Bad Art." *New York Times Magazine* (Jan 24, 1999): 32-6, 32:2, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Donaldson, Jeff R. “Africobra Manifesto? Ten in Search of a Nation.” *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2012, no. 30 (2012): 76–83, 80.

<sup>5</sup> Solomon, Deborah. "In Praise of Bad Art." 34.

context, the art Solomon is discussing appeals to the viewer on a purely sentimental level, making its value as good “bad” art an emotional and aesthetic value. This, as we will see reflected in AfriCOBRA methodology, is a key tenet of good-bad art; that bad art has meaning beyond the artistic technique and skill taken to create it.

On a technical level, “bad art” can be something that is created through “artistic failure.”<sup>6</sup> Dyck and Johnson argue that when an artist sets out with the intention to do something, and ends up with a work of art that has failed to reach those intentions, the artist has created a piece of “bad art.” This is a very technical and logical definition of what makes “bad art,” but Dyck and Johnson additionally posit that what is truly most crucial in “bad art” is not the simple artistic failure, but the emotional response that failure engenders in the viewer. They argue that good-bad works of art take on a bizarre status, which must come from the intentionality of the artist to create a non-bizarre work of art—works that are purposefully bizarre make some sense in their intention to be bizarre.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Dyck and Johnson provide both a technical and emotional validation for their idea of “bad art.” The artist must fail, and that failure must induce an emotional response.

However, these definitions of what makes art “bad” still seem incredibly subjective. One person can look at a work of art, declare it a failure, and become repulsed by it, while another person could look at the same piece and find it utterly gorgeous and awe-inspiring. I argue that “artistic failure” can be applied to failures outside of technical failings; it can also be applicable to failing to meet expectations, standards, or trends. So, racialized and politicized art which does not appeal to white masses can be described as a failure to engage that particular audience, and thus “bad art.” Presumably everyone has internalized ideas of what makes something good or

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<sup>6</sup> Dyck, John and Matt Johnson. "Appreciating Bad Art." 282.

<sup>7</sup> Dyck, John and Matt Johnson, 284.

bad, and given the prevalence of artworks created by and centered around white people used as exemplifications of “good art,” it stands to reason many internalized qualifications of “good art” are based around white art.

AfriCOBRA’s reason for existence was to create art that would speak to the Black community of the 1960s and ‘70s. They were counting on their works producing a galvanizing emotional response in their viewers. This relates directly to one of our overarching ideas of what bad art is and why it is valuable, further cementing AfriCOBRA’s work as good bad art. They also placed little value on technique, focusing solely on emotional and political power. Co-founder Jeff Donaldson describes their mission by saying, “We strive for images inspired by African people—experience and images that African people can relate to directly without formal art training and/or experience.”<sup>8</sup> On one of the most basic levels, “good art” requires some recognized talent or skill, and by fully throwing that aside and devoting themselves to the people they fully enter the realm of bad art.

AfriCOBRA did not just spring into existence fully formed and throwing art shows. Though AfriCOBRA as it is known today and was most prominently recognized formed in 1968, the idea first formed in 1962 between artists Jeff Donaldson and Wadsworth Jarrell.<sup>9</sup> From there, Jeff Donaldson and Wadsworth Jarrell worked with the three other co-founders, Barbara Jones-Hogu, Jae Jarrell, and Gerald Williams, to found COBRA, or the Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists. From there, they evolved into AfriCOBRA and solidified their aesthetic and mission.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Donaldson, Jeff R. “Africobra Manifesto?” 80.

<sup>9</sup> Donaldson, Jeff R. “Africobra Manifesto?” 78.

<sup>10</sup> Jones-Hogu, Barbara. “Inaugurating AfriCOBRA: History, Philosophy, and Aesthetics.” *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 30 (May 1, 2012): 90–97, 92.

From the early COBRA days of AfriCOBRA, they were firm in their goals. Barbara Jones-Hogu says, “We wanted to create a greater role as Black artists who were not for self but for our kind.”<sup>11</sup> Central to their mission has always been the idea of abandoning one’s personal issues for the sake of the cause or the struggle. Their ideals straddle the line between wanting to portray ordinary Black life and Black people as beautiful and the need for political solidarity and movement. Their art centered Black life and excellence at all times. During the creation of AfriCOBRA, they also created guidelines for how to create art that not only centered on Black people but also felt like distinctly Black and AfriCOBRA art.

The group had five philosophical concepts that artists working within the group used as foundations for their work, along with five aesthetic principles which will be covered later. The five philosophical concepts were defined as “a commitment to humanism, inspired by African people and their experience,” “to define and clarify our commitment as a people to the struggles of African peoples,” “dealing with concepts that offer positive and feasible solutions to our individual, local, national, and international problems,” “economical mass production techniques...so that everyone who wants one can have one,” and “[a]rt that moves the emotions and appeals to the senses.”<sup>12</sup> One of their largest goals was having their art be accessible to the general public, for the purposes of greater connection to Black people. Much of their artwork was designed to be reproducible or printed. Jones-Hogu says, “That was one aim that we wanted: to make art that could be bought by anyone—that’s why we got into the idea of doing art posters for a period of time.”<sup>13</sup> They sold their posters for ten dollars, making their work easily accessible to anyone who had some petty cash.

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<sup>11</sup> Jones-Hogu, Barbara. “Inaugurating AfriCOBRA.” 92

<sup>12</sup> Jones-Hogu. “Inaugurating AfriCOBRA” 93.

<sup>13</sup> Jones-Hogu, Barbara, and Edna Togba. “Barbara Jones Hogu in Conversation with Edna Togba.” *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2012, no. 30 (March 1, 2012): 138–44,” 141-142

Aside from their political nature, AfriCOBRA cultivated a very distinct art style. Their five main artistic concepts, which complemented their philosophical concepts, revolved around symmetry, a midpoint between realism and abstraction, clarity of the artwork, “shine,” and bright, distinctive colors they called Cool-ade colors.<sup>14</sup> They cultivated their style by selecting works from each of the group’s contributors and using those pieces as a basis for creating new art. Jones-Hogu outlines early conceptions of their ideas, describing them as “...bright colors, the human figure, lost-and-found line, lettering, and images that identified the social, economic, and political conditions of our ethnic group.”<sup>15</sup> These preliminary ideas would carry forward throughout their time together. AfriCOBRA’s primary theme across all their art is that of Black beauty, excellence, and power.

While it is difficult to label their art as “bad” based on aesthetic or cultural value, AfriCOBRA labeled their art as bad because they knew it would never become truly critically accepted; in fact, they made it part of their mission to keep their art away from critics. Donaldson and Jones-Hogu specifically discuss critical attention to their art; Donaldson says they create “[a]rt for people and not for critics whose peopleness is questionable”<sup>16</sup> while Jones-Hogu explains it as “...the people reflect the art and the art is for the people—not for the critic....”<sup>17</sup> This aversion to critical attention and acceptance enabled them to be more free with their art and exercise greater creativity than trying to make Black art appeal to white audiences would have allowed them, but also ensure their art could never be seen as “good.” They also rejected uniqueness as a measure of the value of art. Accessibility is not a core tenet of good art, and much of what is considered good or classic art is difficult to even see—think of crowds dozens of

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<sup>14</sup> Jones-Hogu. “Inaugurating AfriCOBRA” 94.

<sup>15</sup> Jones-Hogu. “Inaugurating AfriCOBRA” 91.

<sup>16</sup> Donaldson, Jeff R. “Africobra Manifesto?” 80

<sup>17</sup> Jones-Hogu and Togba, “Barbara Jones Hogu in Conversation, 141.

people deep thronging to see the Mona Lisa. AfriCOBRA rejects that idea, saying “The images are designed with the idea of mass production. An image that is valuable because it is an original or is unique is not art...”<sup>18</sup> Their rejection of art as a status symbol further drove them into the creation of “bad art.”

I have selected three works by three of the founders of AfriCOBRA, each by a different artist. No two of these works look alike, yet all of them share the common theme of Black art and “bad art.” We will begin by looking at one of Jeff Donaldson’s works, *Wives of Sango*.

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<sup>18</sup> Donaldson, Jeff R. “Africobra Manifesto?” 81





Fig. 1. Jeff Donaldson, *Wives of Sango*, 1971. Paint, foil, and ink on cardboard.

Jeff Donaldson's *Wives of Sango* depicts the three wives of the Yoruba god of debt and balance, named Oshun, Oba, and Yansa (fig.1). Here, they are reimagined as modern day Black activists. Each woman wears a bandolier of ammunition, and one woman carries a knife strapped to her belt. Donaldson's work is characterized by his kaleidoscopic abstractions of his subjects, distorting the figures but providing undeniable *shine*, as per AfriCOBRA's aesthetic principles.<sup>19</sup> Adding to that, he has used gold and silver leaf to the torsos of the women in the foreground. This both adds more shine to his work and creates a dimensionality with the use of different materials. Donaldson also fulfills the aesthetic principles of symmetry, with the two women on either side striking the same pose, creating a perfect vertical symmetry.

Donaldson is known for using his work to represent an idealization of Black and African existence.<sup>20</sup> Here, he is combining both African and African American iconography to create a glamorous and powerful connection between two disparate but linked cultures. Donaldson frequently collaborated and connected with prominent continental African artists at the time, citing Skunder Boghossian and Papa Ibra Tall as particular inspirations for AfriCOBRA artists.<sup>21</sup> Donaldson has created a colorful, distorted ode to Black power and solidarity.

This painting falls into the category of "bad art" as we have defined it for several reasons. If we posit that "bad art" is largely influenced by race and the prevalence of white art, this would immediately become bad art. Donaldson both glorifies his Black subjects and makes them threatening. The bandoliers and ammunition on women reflect the militarism and politicization of the group and act as a call-to-arms to Black audiences.<sup>22</sup> In short, this painting is undeniably Black.

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<sup>19</sup> Jones-Hogu. "Inaugurating AfriCOBRA" 94.

<sup>20</sup> Gibson, Jeff. "Jeff Gibson on Jeff Donaldson." The online edition of Artforum International Magazine. Artforum International Magazine, May 1, 2017

<sup>21</sup> Donaldson, Jeff R. "Africobra and Transatlantic Connections." Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art 2012, no. 30 (2012): 84-89, 86.c

<sup>22</sup> Gibson, Jeff. "Jeff Gibson on Jeff Donaldson."

The other primary reason why this would be classified as bad art is because of its production value. This piece was specifically created to be reprintable and producible on a large scale. Additionally, this was painted on a simple piece of cardboard, a medium associated with amateur works and not suited to fine art. Not only does Donaldson's piece aesthetically alienate a white audience, his production and intentions are not typically found in fine art.



Fig. 2. Barbara Jones-Hogu, *Unite*, 1970. Color screenprint on ivory wove paper.

Barbara Jones-Hogu created her piece *Unite* (fig.2) in 1970 to fit AfriCOBRA's theme of "The Black Family."<sup>23</sup> Jones-Hogu's primary method of creating art for AfriCOBRA was screen printing, a complicated process involving toxic chemicals—Jones-Hogu had to stop screen

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<sup>23</sup> Wafaa, Kada. "AfriCOBRA." *Obsidian*. 46, no. 1 (Spring, 2020): 114-123, 218-219, 118.

printing entirely for some time because her son was becoming ill from the fumes.<sup>24</sup> She began screen printing again upon joining AfriCOBRA and being able to access other studios. She primarily screen printed for AfriCOBRA because it was an easy way to mass produce work, as once the stencils for a design are created they can be used multiple times.

Similar to Donaldson's work, Jones-Hogu's *Unite* touches on almost every one of AfriCOBRA's aesthetic ideals. Though it is not perfect, there is symmetry in the figures in the painting. The overlap and contrasting colors creates a sense of rhythm in the piece. Those colors along with the highlighting and shadowing of the people provide shine—the skin of the figures is practically glowing.

Jones-Hogu also fulfills the philosophical ideal of providing solutions to Black struggles.<sup>25</sup> She uses this piece to deliver a direct message to her audience: unite. Jones-Hogu uses this piece to argue that unity in solidarity under the cause will increase the power of the Black community. Again similar to Donaldson, the power present in this piece is a significant part of why this can be bad art. This, like all of AfriCOBRA's pieces, centers Black excellence while disregarding whiteness entirely. Additionally, her artistic mediums also are not typical of fine art. Screenprinting, while complex, is a common recreational art form, meaning screenprinting both avoids the elitism of artistic standards and has a use outside of professional artistry.

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<sup>24</sup> Jones-Hogu and Togba, "Barbara Jones Hogu in Conversation, 143.

<sup>25</sup> Jones-Hogu. "Inaugurating AfriCOBRA" 93.



Fig. 3. Wadsworth Jarrell, *Revolutionary*, 1971. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas.

The final painting examined here is Wadsworth Jarrell's *Revolutionary*, a portrait of prominent Black political activist Angela Davis (fig.3). Davis was well known for giving incendiary speeches, and Jarrell has taken words from those speeches and arranged them around the central figure, with the most visible being "I have given my life to the struggle, if I have to lose my life to the struggle that's the way it will have to be." Other words present in the piece are "Black," "beautiful," "revolution," and "resist." Jarrell uses these words that represent Davis' politics and ideals to embody his figure and endow her with power. Jarrell primarily used what the group dubbed "Cool-ade" colors, bright neon hues in shades of "orange, strawberry, cherry, lemon, lime, and grape,"<sup>26</sup> and this painting is a prime example of those colors. Done in pinks, reds, oranges, and blues. Jarrell uses bold colors to grab the attention of the viewer.

One of his goals in his art was to "reflect the everyday beauty of African-American culture that was overlooked due to the struggles for constitutional rights and respect during the civil rights movement."<sup>27</sup> This painting both highlights the struggle of the Civil Rights Movement by featuring a major political leader, but also attempts to beautify the struggle by transforming her into a sort of ethereal figure. Additionally, this piece exemplifies collaboration between artists of AfriCOBRA; in a note attached to the canvas, Jarrell tells the viewer that the suit in his painting is a direct representation of the *Revolutionary Suit* created by fellow co-founder and wife



Fig. 4. Jae Jarrell, *Revolutionary Suit*, 2010 replica, 1969 original. Wool, suede, silk, wood, and pigment.]

<sup>26</sup> Jones-Hogu. "Inaugurating AfriCOBRA" 92.

<sup>27</sup> Moreira-Brown, Caira. "Potent Pigments: A Review of Wadsworth Jarrell at Kavi Gupta." Newcity Art. New City Art, August 8, 2019.

Jae Jarrell (fig.4).<sup>28</sup> The original *Revolutionary Suit* was created by Jae Jarrell in 1969 and has since been lost; what is on display now is . It is a skirt and jacket combination, with full sleeves, a scooped hem, and a bandolier for ammunition across the chest. By recreating his wife's work in his own painting, Jarrell reinforces the connection and unity ideal of AfriCOBRA, as well as contextualizing his artistic choices.

This piece can be classified as “bad art” on both an artistic and personal level. Critiques of his work have highlighted the garishness and brightness of his colors—most of his paintings use these bright colors to highlight Black beauty. This intention behind his use of these colors and the critiques of them are likely intertwined; it's not just that the colors are unappealing, it is also their purpose that makes their usage here an “artistic failure.” As Donaldson and Jones-Hogu's works also do, Jarrell's work fails to appeal to a white audience. Angela Davis was viewed as a very dangerous figure due to the radical political stance she embodied; white viewers would not view this painting as beautiful because of its content. While his work was painted on a typical material, his work was also designed and created for the purpose of reproducibility, with this being one of his most well-known works because of its distribution. But despite the positive effect this proliferation had, it still interferes with the common “good art” ideal of art being elitist and unique.

Reviews of their early showings in the 1970s published concurrently to the actual showings are very difficult to find, making it nigh impossible to accurately represent critical opinion during the height of their production. However, this lack of perusable critical attention does tell us something about the larger art world's reaction to them—they were, for the most part, likely ignored by established art institutions. Considering that one of their missions in the formation of this group was to make art that would be critically insignificant, their artwork seems

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<sup>28</sup> Jarrell, Wadsworth. “Revolutionary .” Brooklyn Museum. Brooklyn Museum, 1971.

to have been successful.

However, there was a small critical AfriCOBRA renaissance in the 2010s, with multiple galleries dedicated to works created by members of AfriCOBRA.<sup>29</sup><sup>30</sup> As Black art and art centered on Black themes becomes more politically relevant, people are returning to protest art created for struggles in the past that still feels uncomfortably relevant toward the modern day struggle. Similar to how Solomon discussed the nostalgia of Norman Rockwell's "bad art," so does AfriCOBRA art provoke a bizarre nostalgia to past revolutions.<sup>31</sup> I argue that the modern critical attention does not mean that AfriCOBRA failed to create bad art; rather, it stems from the critic's newfound ability to effectively evoke double consciousness to view the piece through a Black lens.

In summation, the AfriCOBRA group successfully used the moniker of "bad art" to fulfill their mission and create art that served a significant political and cultural purpose. They wanted their art to connect with and inspire Black people in times of intense political struggle, and their work has been doing that for years. Even now, decades after the group's formation and first show, these artists' work is still being displayed, used politically, and written about. In 2012, the *Journal of Contemporary African Art* published their spring issue, on the topic of the Black Arts Movement, with a full third of articles centered around AfriCOBRA. Their works, while created to represent the specific struggle taking place during the Civil Rights Movement, still feel applicable to current Black struggles.

In selecting which pieces to examine, I encountered some of the most beautiful and visually striking artworks I have ever seen in my life. It is difficult to rationalize this as "bad art," but the group's dedication to creating art that they wanted to escape white critical acclaim is

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<sup>29</sup> Gibson, Jeff. "Jeff Gibson on Jeff Donaldson."

<sup>30</sup> Moreira-Brown, Caira. "Potent Pigments."

<sup>31</sup> Solomon, Deborah. "In Praise of Bad Art." 34.



precisely what makes these works so powerful. Knowing that any art that centered Blackness would never be considered “good art,” and used that knowledge to free themselves from expectations and pressures to conform to white artistic standards. By acknowledging the inevitability of their creating bad art, they were able to ignore white opinions and trends completely to decenter whiteness from their art. Overall, AfriCOBRA recognized that definitions of good and bad art were fundamentally racist, and used this mindset to create and publicize art with significant cultural and political meaning by ignoring expectations of the larger white world and purposefully creating “bad art.”

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