

1968 Now: Revolution - Art, History and Philosophy

The Black Power Movement, The Black Arts Movement and its Legacy.

- Abyan Mowleed Mohamed

My essay will be examining the influence of the Black Power movement on popular culture, art, and music. 1968 saw the spirit of revolution explode all over the world, with student protests starting in France but taking place all over the world, protests against the Vietnam War, and just a fever of discontentment among the youth of the world expressing their desires of acceptance, love and refusal of the status quo. The Black Power movement (1966-1976) sought to create a new revolutionary black consciousness through fostering a new aesthetics, declaring that black was beautiful, and saw art, poetry and expression as an integral part of the revolution and promoted education as a vehicle for social and political transformation. In 1966, Stokely Carmichael asserted that black people “have to stop being ashamed of being black. A broad nose, a thick lip, and nappy hair is us and we are going to call that beautiful whether they like it or not. We are not going to fry our hair anymore.”, and I think this epitomises the widespread rejection of the status quo that was in the spirit of 1968. The Black Power movement's validation of blackness and black aesthetics reflected a new consciousness of self-love and racial pride that continues to shape the present. As the 1960s came into full swing and saw the assassinations of leaders of the Civil Rights movement like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King led to a shift from

accommodation-ism to militancy, with groups like the Black Panther Party and Black communist parties gaining widespread popularity.

After the death of Malcolm X there was a tenable shift in attitude that became incredible radical with groups like the Black Panther Party and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee surging in membership. A key counterpart to the Black power movement was the Black Arts movement, with Amiri Barak being largely hailed as the creator, with his opening of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem which had its greatest impact in theatre and poetry at the time, fostering spaces for people to perform and tell Black stories, based on black narratives to black audiences. Amiri Baraka, who had as a young man been a writer was part of New York's then-mostly white Bohemian community, hanging out with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, sought to create new forms of self expression and black ownership of these spaces of theatre and poetry and art in a way that was removed and independent from the influence and to present a radical new message by black people for black people. He grew out of the racial tension of the 60s and 70s and sought to create radical new forms of expression removed from Western culture, and this was clear through his work, below is one of his poems clearly influenced by the beat poets he was around, but still reflective and claimed by his blackness in the style of speech:

*“Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step. ...Fuck poems
and they are useful, wd they shoot*

*come at you, love what you are,
breathe like wrestlers, or shudder
strangely after peeing. We want live
words of the hip world live flesh &
coursing blood.”*

The ‘We Wanted a Revolution’ – Black Radical Women 1965-85 exhibition at the ICA gives the insight that it people, more specifically black women, were fighting for a revolution on multiple fronts, and against multiple forms of oppression. Black women artists in New York formed collectives, found galleries and even babysitters to allow one another to work and produce art, and to reclaim spaces within the black arts community that had been dominated by men and the wider female art space dominated by white women. Artists like Kay Brown, who was the only female member of the Weusi artists’ collective based in Harlem, sought to create spaces for that represented her, and was a founding member of the Where We At Black women’s artist collective that wanted to provide a support system for black women artists, as well as creating spaces that allowed them to showcase their work and share it with the local community. This was radical at a time where black voices were being taken away as a whole, and as the mainstream art world became more aware of other voices, but looked towards the male-dominated Black Arts movement, these women addressed the neglect by forming both an exhibition and a collective. I think that this response and protest through art and aesthetic hasn’t left us, just like the issues of race and discrimination haven’t either.

"WHERE WE AT" BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS

By-Laws

Article I. THE NAME

The name of the organization shall hereby be known as the "Where We At" Black Women Artists.

Article II. PURPOSE AND PHILOSOPHY

The "Where We At" Black Women Artists is a sisterhood which provides a support system for Black women artists. Its members will use its collective talents to serve the community and to heighten its cultural awareness which will include the ultimate establishment of an Academy of Arts. All programs will provide the basis for the continued growth of its artist members, and the advancement of artistic skills of the community at large.

Article III. MEMBERS

Section I Membership

Membership shall be open to practicing Black Women Artists interested in the purposes and goals of the organization. Each member shall be required to pay an annual dues, and participate in the operation of the organization by serving on at least one Standing Committee.

The membership and the Board of Directors may



Beyoncé's superbowl performance shows the Black Power salute reminiscent of previous protest movements and just as relevant today.

A scene from her video 'Love Drought' resisting the pull of taught rope.



Dressed in clothing very similar to the Black Panther Party, in black leather, and berets.

The Black Lives Matter movement was built on the influence is dependent on the existence of the Black Power Movement before it. The Black Power Movement set a standard and a formed a legacy of African American protest against the police discrimination, lack of opportunity and rights that continues today in the face of the continued inequality and lack of radical change. A lot of the imagery used by Black Arts movement artists in the form of African styles of art, references to slavery and chains and police brutality are rife. The Black Lives Matter protest movement formed as a response to the murders of black men and women that were racially motivated, killing innocent people.

Imagery from various of Beyoncé's music videos feature clear reference and influences from both Black resistance movements that came before, and this shows that the spirit of resistance among the African American community is alive today in the face of continued discrimination and brutality. This begs the question of the success of the 1968 spirit of revolution as the same protest have to exist today to fight oppression.



Kendrick Lamar's performance at 2016 Grammy awards was a powerful protest statement regarding mass incarceration of african Americans with the clear use of chains and uniforms.

The lyrics of his song 'The Blacker the Berry':

"Came from the bottom of mankind

My hair is nappy, my dick is big, my nose is round and wide

You hate me don't you

You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture

You're fucking evil I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey

You vandalize my perception, but can't take style from me"

This clearly shows a reclamation of descriptions like 'monkey' and feature like a 'round and wide' nose that have historically been used to devalue and make African feature seem ugly and primitive. Kendrick is reclaiming this and declaring them proudly which is resonant of the people like Kathleen Cleaver and Nina Simone declaring that black is beautiful. On video Cleaver proudly talks about her African hair, and its beauty within, as well as saying that by claiming it as beautiful white people themselves are recognising the same thing and trying to emulate their afro hairstyles.

Overall, I think the Black Power Movement had a profound importance and impact both in 1968 and still does in 2018. Its rejection of white norms, and demands of political and economic equality are echoed in the Black Lives Matter Movement, which calls for an end to police brutality and marginalisation. The impact of black protest on contemporary artists and

musicians like Nina Simone was a symptom of the widespread unhappiness and anger of African Americans. This continues today in artist and musician's responses to things like the deaths of Mike Brown and Trayvon Martin, showing art and events and protest intersecting and intertwining, with black artists reflecting their surroundings and realities. The Black Power Movement's legacy continues and will continue until black equality is achieved.

Sources:

-
- <https://www.npr.org/2014/01/09/261101520/amiri-baraka-poet-and-co-founder-of-black-arts-movement-dies-at-79>
- https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4w7zyg/post-black-art-in-the-age-of-hip-hop-123
- <http://www.revive-music.com/2011/01/25/jazz-poetry-rap-cause-and-effect-of-the-black-arts-movement/>
- [Brooklyn Museum: We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85](#)
- https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/howardena-pindell-free-white-and-21-1980/
- <https://pitchfork.com/news/58421-kendrick-lamars-the-blacker-the-berry-gets-annotated-for-genius-by-pulitzer-winning-author-michael-chabon>
- https://open.spotify.com/track/5Mtt6tZSZA9cXTHGSGpyh0?si=yPaDK6Y8SVG3Z8UpN_rMq
- <http://genius.com/Beyonce-freedom-lyrics>