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**The Black Arts Movement  
and its Influence on Contemporary  
Visual Art, Music, and Literature**

Martin Labisch

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## I. The Black Arts Movement

There have been several exciting literary movements in the United States and the Black Arts Movement is certainly one of them. It is regarded as the most important movement in African-American literature. Often it is described "as 'the artistic sister of the Black Power Movement,'" and it also "stands as the single most controversial moment in the history of African-American literature--possibly in American literature as a whole" (Gates 75). Many artists have been inspired by the works of the BAM, short form of Black Arts Movement, and in the following, a closer look on the characteristics of the movement will be offered.

When regarding the roots and the history of the BAM, as well as the multiple artistic fields where works associated with the Black Arts Movement had been published, and setting these in accordance with contemporary artistic works of the same or similar manner, one can recognise how the Black Arts Movement has influenced artists from its early days until today.

## II. History of the Black Arts Movement

### A. Roots

The roots of the BAM and also its history can give one an idea of why the movement always had and still has influence on many artists. So where and when did the Black Arts Movement start? What have been the objectives of the movement that inspired so many artists? Basically, the BAM is a period of artistic and literary development among black Americans in the 1960s and 1970s (Encyclopædia Britannica).

Just like the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and the Post-World War II Writers, the BAM is a black aesthetic movement, concentrating on racial aesthetics. These are artistic rules which are based on ethnic concerns and preoccupations, formulated by African Americans (Harris 67). For example, the Harlem Renaissance's racial aesthetic focused on folk. Artists in the Black Arts Movement centred their works both around the idea of art having the power of transmitting political meaning and also around the ideal that black art should reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience (Harris 68).

The BAM, being referred to as the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power movement (Ya Salaam 70), of course also shows connections to this rather radical political

movement. The term Black Power was first used by Richard Wright to describe the mid-1950s emergence of independent African nations. Later, in the 1960s, "Black Power was associated with a militant advocacy of armed self-defense, separation from 'racist American domination,' and pride in and assertion of the goodness and beauty of Blackness" (Ya Salaam 70). That is why the Black Arts Movement has often been criticised as sexist, homophobic and racially exclusive. But the movement was much broader than these limitations (Ya Salaam 70).

A starting point for the Black Arts Movement, which was generally referred to as a "sixties" movement, was the assassination of Malcolm X on 21st February 1965. Amiri Baraka, probably the most important figure for the movement, moved from Manhattan's Lower Eastside uptown to Harlem (Ya Salaam 70). There he founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School where numerous plays had been staged, musicians were invited to play concerts, and a series of poetry readings were initiated (Neal 67). This can be seen as the formal beginning of the movement. (Ya Salaam 70) Furthermore, "it was the explosions of black anger over continuing oppression despite the victories of the civil rights movement" (Smethurst 369) that initiated the movement. The wish of black political and cultural self-determination were additional factors in the successful spread of BAM (Smethurst 369).

Even before this formal beginning, other literary movements represented black arts. For example Umbra, a group of young black writers based in Manhattan's Lower East Side. They published the Umbra Magazine and thus were the first post civil rights black literary group that made an impact. They were radical in establishing their own opinion and voice distinct from the prevailing white literary establishment. Some Umbra members later joined Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (Ya Salaam 70).

Another formation of black writers that was active at that time might explain why the Black Arts Movement could become so popular. The Harlem Writers guild concentrated on prose, primarily fiction. But fiction did not have the same mass appeal as poetry. Poems were performed in the dynamic vernacular of that time. They were built around anthems, chants, and political slogans. Moreover, poets had the possibility to publish themselves while more resources were needed to publish fiction. So it was easier to reach a big audience with poems, a reason why, for example, Umbra and also the Black Arts Movement succeeded and established themselves (Ya Salaam 71).

But when Umbra fell apart and LeRoi Jones, alias Amiri Baraka, moved back home to Newark (New Jersey) and the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS), having been a radical alternative to the sterile American theatres of that time (Neal 69), the Black Arts Movement was left in a state of disorder and seemed to break apart. It was the idea of an Black Arts centre though that

kept the movement alive, also because it was so closely linked to the at this time flourishing Black Power movement. (Ya Salaam 71) And the spirit of activism and explosiveness expressed by those black artists . . . typified the vitality and outlook of African American writers and organisers across the country during this time period (Ramsby 1). Also, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. then sparked a lot of anger in black writers and artists, giving the idea of a black arts movement new nutrition. (Ya Salaam 71).

Basically, three major groups provided ideologies for the Black Arts Movement. Namely the Revolutionary Action Movement, a national organisation based in New York City, the US (as opposed to "them") organisation and Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. The Black Arts Movement and its artists took their style and ideological direction from these groups. Also non-members of the BAM or of these groups could identify with the ideologies that had been spread (Ya Salaam 71).

## B. Publishing

Another important aspect of the Black Arts Movement and its success is the publication of works in nationally distributed magazines. These magazines printed manifestos and critiques, while offering young writers the opportunity to publish their work (Ya Salaam 72). Magazines like *Black Scholar*, *Negro Digest/Black World* and *Black Dialogue* were not only essential in spreading the BAM's theory and ideals but also largely responsible for providing widespread exposure to both the writings and the activities of black poets during the 1960s and 1970s (Ramsby 18).

At the movement's beginning, no press, whether black or white, wanted to publish works by Black Arts writers. *Freedomways* and *Liberator*, both New York focused (Ramsby 20), became the two first magazines to publish the movement's first literary expressions in the early 1960s (Ya Salaam 72). *Black Dialogue* then became the first major Black Arts literary publication (Ya Salaam 72), a magazine that was started in San Francisco in 1964 and then relocated to New York in 1969, publishing until 1972 (Ya Salaam 71). California based *Black Scholar*, founded in 1969, was "the first journal of black studies and research in this country," and it "was theoretically critical" (Ya Salaam 72). The most important magazine for the Black Arts Movement was the *Negro Digest* (Ramsby 19), later renamed to *Black World*. *Negro Digest* was a monthly, ninety-eight-page journal that was sold on newsstands nationwide, publishing Black Arts creative literature. The journal contained an impressive range of poetry, fiction, criticism, drama, reviews, reportage, and

theoretical articles (Ya Salaam 73). "The magazine's wide circulation, its inclusion of so many leading poets, and its prominent role initiating and showcasing particular concerns related to black writers, made it a defining outlet in the transmission of black literary art and an important social force for getting poets on the same page" (Ramsby 19). In 1970, the magazine changed its name to *Black World*, which reflected the widespread rejection of the term "Negro" (Ya Salaam 73). From then on, the term "Black" was "the designated choice for people of African descent and to indicate identification with both the diaspora and Africa" (Ya Salaam 73). This legitimation of the term "Black" and "African" is one of the important achievements of the Black Arts Movement (Ya Salaam 73).

An additional factor in forming the Black Arts Movement's success were the presses that published these magazines. The two major Black Arts presses were the Third World Press in Chicago and the Broadside Press in Detroit. Especially the Broadside Press played its part in establishing Black Arts literature and poetry, as it focused almost exclusively on poetry (Ya Salaam 73).

The location of the presses and the areas where publications were available played a crucial part in the spread of the Black Arts Movement. With Third World Press in Chicago and Broadside Press in Detroit, the Chicago-Detroit axis was one meaningful area for the movement. The Bay Area and New York are the two other main areas where the Black Arts Movement flourished. For example, the *Black Scholar* was published in California's Bay Area as well as *Black Dialogue* which started originally in San Francisco and only later was moved to New York. Surprisingly, New York, as the centre of the BAM, was not as important in terms of Black Arts publishing as the Bay Area and the Chicago-Detroit axis (Ya Salaam 71).

The magazines only could be so successful, because of the "almost insatiable thirst by African Americans to hear about themselves" (Ramsby 20). They could focus on the black consumer and his social, cultural, and psychological particularities (Ramsby 21). All this shows that African American literary publications, especially magazines and journals, are an important index of the measure and meaning of the sixties (Ramsby 17).

Magazines and publishing houses had such a big success because their financial support came from public and private sponsors that shared the same political interest and were keen to invest in the production of various mass culture media that presented black arts. Only this sort of financing made it possible that African American artists could reach a black audience that was open-minded about art and new developments in it (Smethurst 370).

### C. Breakup

Unfortunately, the movement breaking up in 1974 is also part of the BAM's history. "Black political organizations were hounded, disrupted, and defeated by repressive government measures" (Ya Salaam 74). When major publishers of films, records, books, and magazines discovered the most sellable black artists, the fragile independent economic base of the Black Arts Movement was undermined and collapsed (Ya Salaam 74). During the Black Arts Movement's most active period there were publishing outlets for hundreds, but after the mainstream had taken control of all the creative work again, Black artists were tokenised (Ya Salaam 74). The Black Arts Movement could not recover from this economic breakdown but the Black Arts activity continued into the early 1980s (Ya Salaam 74). Still, the United States had not experienced such a militant artistic movement before (Ya Salaam 71).

The history of the Black Arts Movement and the ideologies and groups in which it was deeply rooted, give a first idea of why the movement did and still does inspire artists. There always was an ideologic concept behind the BAM's works and not the concrete intention to make huge sums of money, only the will of financial independence. Also, the movement launched as a reaction to political ongoings, working as an identification point for the African American citizens in the United States.

### III. Fields of Influence

When regarding the works produced in various genres during the Black Arts Movement, one can understand that many artists were and still are influenced by the movement. African Americans in the US could identify with the BAM, thanks to the variety of works produced in differing artistic fields. The artists associated with the Black Arts Movement did not only produce poetry, although this might be the area of work predominantly linked to the movement, they of course worked on literature in general as well. But also music and visual art had been highly influenced by the movement.

## A. Theory

The influence the movement had in the various genres has to be examined, because "to have cultural power is to have power" (Cashmore 6). One could say that "the Black Arts Movement represents the flowering of a cultural nationalism that has been suppressed since the 1920s" (Neal 78). Something African Americans had been starving for at the time of the BAM. But what is this black culture transmitted by the Black Arts Movement? It might be regarded as "a product and expression of African American . . . creativity, embodying values, ambitions and orientations unique to black people" (Cashmore 8). Many African Americans might felt a kind of despair, and African American artists, especially during the BAM, tried to assert cultural identity itself as necessary resistance to this feeling of despair (Hall 6). Besides, the Black Arts concept represented the African Americans' desire for self-determination and nationhood (Neal 62). Artists sought to create new forms and new values in their art, using new symbols, myths and legends, in short, create a new unique language for their art (Neal 64).

Amiri Baraka's talent of constructing compelling artistic productions, as well as "Hoyt Fuller's and Dudley Randall's significant work designing sites of publication" (Ramsby 2), made these three being considered as some of the most important architects of the Black Arts Movement (Ramsby 2). "Their collective artistic activities and organizing efforts were integral to the construction of an extensive series of interconnected cultural productions" (Ramsby 2).

Sometimes, the radical approach of the BAM overshadowed its brilliant works, for example, when Amiri Baraka declared that they would be "building publishing houses, and newspapers, and armies, and factories . . . to change the world before your eyes" (Ramsby i). Such declarations show the partial militant, black nationalist ethos of the Black Arts Movement (Ramsby i). Mostly the frequent publication works with packaging that corresponded to black nationalist discourses seemed to manifest prevailing assertions concerning the aesthetic and spiritual connection between the Black Arts Movement and Black Power (Ramsby 78). This can be explained by a kind of merging of the Black Arts and the Black Power concepts, as the concept of Black Power found "concrete expression in the aesthetics of African American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, and novelists" (Neal 62). Also, both groups tried to transmit their idea of a black aesthetic through political statements, distinctive rhetoric, and a black-nationalist attitude (Ryan 278).

Black aesthetic was one of the major theories influencing and contributing to the formation of a black arts poetry canon, although writers at the time of the BAM never agreed to a common consensus concerning a black aesthetic (Ramsby 138). A black aesthetic would be a kind of racial

aesthetic, meaning artistic rules which are based on ethnic concerns and preoccupations (Harris 67). Artists would all follow their own kind of aesthetic by producing and publishing certain kind of poems or other artistic works. But the demand for a specified black aesthetic motivated a lot of artists in contributing to the discussion, and among everyone involved, a lively conversation about a philosophy of African American literary art arose. In this discussion about a black aesthetic, the idea emerged that black artists should integrate the virtues of various genres in their art (Ramsby 138). A survey in an issue of *Negro Digest* in 1968, asking black artists about the black aesthetic could not answer the question about it either (Ramsby 139). "The diversity of responses . . . reveals that the writers were far from being of one accord concerning the definition and value of black aesthetics" (Ramsby 139). It rather showed a split among black artists, all looking for individuality, a possible result of African Americans' alternating desire for assimilation and separation. Nonetheless, the survey showed that all black artists during the time of the Black Arts Movement were in favour of a common black aesthetic, even if it was as little as sharing the same medium (Ramsby 139). In general, one could take the black aesthetic as "a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience" (Harris 68). In contrast to other racial aesthetics, the Black Arts Movement's black aesthetic was the only one to include social engagement as a crucial factor to support its ideas (Ya Salaam 70).

So when talking about the BAM, one has to keep in mind that it was a movement which "contained some large ideological and aesthetic contradictions and significant local variations" (Smethurst 367). Overall, the movement was also a starting point for ideological and institutional places where African American artists came together to organise, study, and think about what a new black art could be and represent (Smethurst 368). Often trying to combine ethics and aesthetics in art, makes the Black Arts Movement also an ethical movement, but of course from the viewpoint of the oppressed African Americans (Neal 64).

## B. Literature

A striking characteristic of literary works by black writers during the BAM was their confrontation of their own experiences and the possibility of giving vent to their imaginations without apologies, all through their writings. All those "literary artists of the black arts era relied heavily on a network of supportive publishing institutions and editors to ensure the broad

circulation of their works" (Ramsby 17). This of course shows how writers profited from the movement's connection to magazines and other publications by the earlier mentioned presses. One could go further and say that the emergence of these new black poets and writers was only possible by black publishing venues (Ramsby 17).

The Black Arts Movement arguably produced some of the most exciting poetry, drama and fiction of the post-World War II United States and reached a non-elite, over-regional, mass African American audience to an extent that was unequalled for such a form of art so far, particularly in the fields of poetry and drama (Smethurst 371). Literature during the BAM managed to be political without being "protest" literature, all while speaking directly to the audience of black Americans (Neal 63). Black Arts Movement literature achieved this by being written in a language highly influenced by the black vernacular (Harris 69).

Literature, both fiction and poetry, was essential for the Black Arts Movements success and influence on the diverse genres of art. "BAM writers provided a structural bridge between avant-garde movements and unsettled the concept of 'black poetry'" (Ryan 278). It starts with the assumption that poetry was concerned having a concrete function. Poems were regarded as physical entities like fists, daggers, airplane poems, and poems that shoot guns. They could also be transformed from physical object into personal forces (Neal 66). Examples for this can be seen in Baraka's poem *Black Art* where he writes "put it on him poem. Strip him naked to the world" (Baraka 143) and calls "dagger poems in the slimy bellies of the owner-jews" (Baraka 142). Poems themselves could stand for the collective consciousness and unconscious of African Americans, representing the will toward self-determination and nationhood (Neal 66).

But literature was not everything the Black Arts writers were interested in. "Those writers who ventured to take literary art to the people in such dramatic fashion suggested that they wanted to expand and transform conventional notions about what it meant to be artists" (Ramsby 1). They did not only want to be composers of verse and prose, "they sought to become active on multiple fronts in the processes of artistic production" (Ramsby 1). This goal of expanding readership made Black Arts writers concern alternative approaches to the way they could present and circulate their works, which led them to the production of audio recordings of poets reading their works (Ramsby 79).

### C. Music

Once more, Baraka played an important part in the BAM's evolution, by suggesting that black writers should move beyond the page and produce projects associated with the post literary world (Ramsby 87). Music somehow also suggested itself, as it is not only a reflection of the values of black culture, but to some extent also the basis upon which it is built (Cashmore 3). Artists used the concept of dealing in sound as a point of departure to further expand and diversify their literary art and their audiences (Ramsby 88). "The production of audio recordings gave select poets and musicians important opportunities to participate in the transmission of African American verse" (Ramsby 88); and the various albums and cassettes of poets reading their works confirmed that the poets were not only writers but also performers (Ramsby 88).

The poet Jayne Cortez is a good example where Black Arts influenced music and vice versa. No other black poet has recorded as many jazz texts as her. Cortez published nearly all her poems in jazz arrangements (Ramsby 89). She predominantly worked with the bass player Richard Davis who would assist Cortez during her readings throughout her readings "in raising the intensity of her message by adding phrasing and pitches and increasing his tempo on bass to accent her tone and speed of reading" (Ramsby 89). The collaboration of Cortez and Davis readopts the idea of a convergence between music and poetry, as Blues musicians and their musical forms had been central, for instance, to the writings of Harlem Renaissance poets like Langston Hughes as early as in the 1920s (Ramsby 89). Collaborations like the one between Cortez and Davis made black arts writers pointing out "the significance of African American music, especially the New Black Music, in both verse and critical prose during the 1960s and early 1970s" (Ramsby 89), the time of the BAM's strongest activity.

Amiri Baraka, one of the leading artists of the Black Arts Movement, also produced some of the most dynamic recordings of black poetry. He did use, similar to Jayne Cortez, free jazz as the basis for his recordings. Baraka was an important connector between poetry and jazz, as he both wrote about jazz and had alliances with avant-garde musicians. Most significantly was the appearance of his poem *Black Art* on a jazz album in 1965, before it was first printed in the *Liberator* in 1966. This show Baraka's devotion to the use of audio production in order to transmit verse (Ramsby 91). The audio recording of *Black Art* is a dynamic interplay between Baraka and a group of instrumentalists. While the poet is reading his poem, the musicians produce lively responses that intensify Baraka's message (Ramsby 91). For example, after Baraka states "we want poems that kill" (Baraka 142), the musicians increase their volume and force of their playing

(Ramsby 91). Further on, to accompany Baraka's words like "fuck poems" (Baraka 142) or "setting fire and death to whities ass" (Baraka 142), the musicians' tenor saxophonist plays quick-moving phrasings on his horn (Ramsby 91). The saxophonist's interplay with Baraka is essential to the recording's intensity, as he also plays soft, low, long notes that produce a kind of calming effect while Baraka speaks in a more relaxed manner of "another negroleader on the steps of the white house one kneeling between the sheriff's thighs negotiating coolly for his people" (Baraka 143), only to respond with a high-pitched squeal on his horn when Baraka breaks the mere silence by shouting "agggh" (Baraka 143). The way the saxophonist responds to Baraka's words shows how music can intensify the implications of a poem and give it unique sonic attributes to complement its powerful message. *Black Art* by Baraka is a good model for a fruitful collaboration between a poet and avant-garde musicians, showcasing jazz to literary audiences and present black verse to jazz listeners at the same time (Ramsby 92).

Usually, BAM artists tended to blend poetry with jazz, but rather unusual combinations sparked the diversity of the movement further on. For example, Nikki Giovanni recording her poems over gospel music. Her album *Truth Is On Its Way* sold over one hundred thousand copies after it has been released. Giovanni's recordings did and still does appeal to the sensibilities of audiences who admire black church music traditions. The classic stylistic devices of a gospel choir helped to give Nikki Giovanni's poetry another level of deepness (Ramsby 90). "The accompanying shouts and soul clapping resemble the call-and-response practices of African American church services and performances and thus serve to highlight the proximity of Giovanni and her poem to such realms of expressive culture" (Ramsby 90). Hence, Giovanni's combination of poetry and gospel music refers to a huge field of black expressive culture and reaches a huge number of listeners. The poet's ability to cross her art with gospel music while addressing a black Christian audiences, allowed her to make a rare and also profitable connection between two art forms. Thus, Giovanni's merging of gospel music and poetry on *Truth Is On Its Way* and other recordings increased the possibility of her literary art, as well as her voice and her message to reach audiences beyond the conventional discourses of poetry (Ramsby 91).

Literary scholars have highlighted the dynamic possibilities concerning the performance of black poetry and its relationship to music for quite a while by now, and one should definitely be aware of the technological significance of the poets' activities (Ramsby 88). "Their use of recording devices and their work with instrumentalists contributed to the spirit of innovation so central to the claim that the moment among black poets represented something *new*" (Ramsby 88). During the time of the Black Arts Movement there was a kind of special attention to newness and stylistic

innovation. So artists welcomed the achievements of black music and took the opportunities to collaborate with musicians in order to perfect and diverse their ways of presentation, making bonds with jazz, gospel, and R&B music (Ramsby 93).

One could go as far as regarding the collaborations between poets and musicians as essential to the shaping of the distinct sounds of black verse (Ramsby 93). Sounds, "inscribed in literary and cultural discourses through the use of recording devices" (Ramsby 93). Poets would certainly not have had this amount of success without the use of musical production technologies. They could establish unique sonic qualities for their poetry and had the opportunity to nurture a broad and modern listening audience with new African American verse (Ramsby 93).

These might have been the first advances by writers to distribute their words into the world of music, but printed poetry continued to be the most important publishing way for African American literary culture (Ramsby 88). Magazines, anthologies, and volumes of poetry remained the dominant venues for the presentation of African American poetry, a condition that should change with the course of time (Ramsby 93).

But concluding, one should take in perspective that the utilisation of recording devices and the collaborations between poets and musicians not only highlighted but also legitimised the possibilities of using auditory procedures for the production of literary art (Ramsby 93). These first experiments between different genres increased the forms by which poets and other artists would deliver their message. "The technical processes of dealing in sound, then, provided additional opportunities for innovating the nature of black poetry" (Ramsby 93). The interconnection between different genres of art became more and more important during the Black Arts Movement and should flourish further on.

#### D. Visual Art

The production of visual arts somehow always has been problematic for African Americans, as one has "to sit down and physically make art" whereas in "music you could sing the songs while you were picking the cotton; it didn't matter how much hell you were catching", as black contemporary artist David Hammons explains it (Bernier I). Of course this changed with the course of time. Especially during the Black Arts Movement, poets also collaborated with visual artists to produce books that not only used blends of words and images, but also showed the interplay of verbal-visual ideas throughout the whole publications and not only on the publications' covers

(Ramsby 79). Visual arts by African American artists became more and more popular and reputable, an achievement which was made possible, of course among others, by the BAM.

African American visual artists overcame political disfranchisement, racist brutality, and cultural annihilation. But how did they manage to survive all these obstacles? Their groundbreaking formal qualities and aesthetic properties were one key for the success of black visual art (Bernier 4). Characteristics that had been supported by the Black Arts Movement. Black visual artists suffered from the same preconceptions as black writers. Their art was reduced to their sociological, biographical, and historical implications. A focus on the individuality and diversity of African American visual art and its aesthetics was necessary to establish black art (Bernier 4). This is a similarity to the struggles black writers had and overcame during the Black Arts Movement. The problem is equivalent to the search for a common black aesthetic among black writers and theorists, thereby creating the sought-after ideology, a so called "aesthetic" of "black peoples" (Bernier 161). For a long time, critics concentrated on African American art not being monolithic, homogenous, uniform and fixed, arguing that it lacks a common doctrine (Bernier 4). This led to the actual characteristics of African American visual art being overlooked. A state that was mainly vanquished by the Black Arts Movement and its focus on a black aesthetic and the individuality of black artists. Only then the unique attributes of African American visual art were widely accredited and could flourish. Namely, the richness of "contrasts, conflicts and ambiguities of an established and longstanding tradition which defies straightforward categorisation or synthesis" (Bernier 5). One could state that the Black Arts Movement was a time of sophistication of African American visual art, music, and literature (Bernier 7).

Similar to the supremacy of white publishing houses for literature, the world of visual arts suffered under the predominance of wealthy white art collectors, who were not including black art in important art collections (Bernier 7). African American artists were excluded from major art exhibitions with the aim of securing high quality standards, a neutral seeming intention that was in fact ideologically charged and racially circumscribed (Bernier 8).

African American visual artists' way of shaping their own black art form was resembling the writers' manner of developing their own way of writing and their kind of ideology. Visual artists followed an aesthetic that grew from their culture, from their experiences that made them see and feel differently. Black visual arts had a sort of reawakening in the 1920s, during the Harlem Renaissance. This was the first time black artists honoured primarily their own culture, celebrated a romanticised Africa, and represented African American blues and jazz musicians and performers (Bernier 11). But soon they wanted to bring another level of meaning into their visual art. Artists

like, for example, Jacob Lawrence, experimented with a crossover of genres by mixing text and image to address issues surrounding slavery, heroism, migration, labour, segregation, civil rights, racism, and representations of the black body (Bernier 12). So visual artists adopted the themes mainly represented in the Black Art Movement and were thus an important part of it. Spreading the ideas of the movement and also impropriating the method of combining different genres, just as many poets did by recording their words to music.

African American visual artists predominantly had an abstract style and focused on representing the multiplicity of African American histories and narratives (Bernier 91). Constitutive on the writer's Richard Wright's thesis that "words are weapons" (Bernier 125), black visual artists thought of their images being weapons, too. Works were ought to transmit the feelings and experiences of the artists, based on the idea of a unique black life experience (Bernier 125). This apparently resembles the Black Arts Movement's writers' ideology of black art being a distinct African American product. Moreover, black visual artists shared the BAM's principle of intending to reach a broad black audience in order to contribute to an aesthetic development with the means of pointing out and overcoming political injustice (Bernier 127). Hence, many works of black visual artists during the time of the Black Arts Movement show the tensions between art and politics (Bernier 163), and artists tried to approach them with their aesthetic idea, creating a unique language of painting, similar to the vernacular used in poetry at the time of the BAM (Bernier 164).

Only one of many ideal examples for visual art during the Black Arts Movement is Norman Lewis's painting *Post Mortem* (Fig. 1) from 1964. Lewis's works had been highly influenced by music, dance, performance and especially the struggle for Civil Rights. In his art he discovered new relationships between colour, form and composition, while at the same time displaying the race and class conflicts of the BAM's period (Bernier 167). *Post Mortem* is one of several black and white works in his series of Civil Rights paintings. Lewis was among of a group of artists that decided only to use black and white paint, because the conflict of the Civil Rights Movement involved black and white people. The white strokes of paint on a dark black background could resemble little figures that are resembling musical or dance notations, representing humanity in the space they live in. Black, being used as a kind of backdrop in this painting, does not only surround the white figures but also separates them, hereby displaying the strength of blackness in contrast to the fragility of whiteness (Bernier 170). In addition, the white strokes of paint strongly remind one of hooded figures of the white supremacist organisation Ku Klux Klan. When taking other paintings by Norman Lewis in account, this group of figures on the black background stands not only for the Ku Klux Klan but for collective groups in general. The painter wanted to raise attention on how

people follow each other and the movement of people, reinforcing his conviction that the individual stands against the masses. Thus, Lewis criticises both the brutal doings of the Ku Klux Klan, idealistic marches and mass activity in general, calling for a recovery of the individual freewill. Also the artist's choice of the title, the use of words, plays an important role in interpreting the painting (Bernier 171). By calling it *Post Mortem*, Lewis "suggests the need to enact a 'post mortem' on the failures and disappointments of the Civil Rights Movement to effect change in the future" (Bernier 171). Of course there are various other works of black visual artists to show the influence of the Black Arts Movement in this genre. Norman Lewis painting *Post Mortem* is an exemplary model of how the theory of the movement was readopted in visual arts at that time. In this case transmitting a political message with the use of a unique style of art.

Considering works from various artistic fields, for example literature, music, and visual art, highlights the broad impact the Black Arts Movement had on US culture.

#### IV. The Black Arts Movement Today

The Black Arts Movement might has broken up in the late 1970s, but when one takes the artistic fields in account on which the movement had an impact on ever since and regards contemporary works of art in these genres, it becomes clear that the BAM had and still has influence on a large number of artists.

Not only the theories and ideologies of the Black Arts Movement survived, but also arts centres and schools, galleries, and theatres that were once founded by artists and supporters of the movement. These institutions were essential in keeping the idea of the BAM alive (Smethurst 368). Thus, the Black Arts Movement was not a short-lived failure, but "arguably the most influential cultural movement the United States has ever seen" (Smethurst 373). One of the biggest achievements of the Black Arts Movement might be that whites do not feel uneasy any more but appreciate black cultural works. Black culture is able to be mass-produced and marketed nowadays, with music, visual arts, and literature being open for business and whites buying African American art (Cashmore 1).

## A. Literature

US literature profited from the Black Arts Movement, as many of the movement's artists continued to be artistically productive. Jayne Cortez and Amiri Baraka are only two of a large number of writers that went on to distribute the ideas from the BAM. Especially Baraka's poetry had some of his finest moments in the 1990s and also in the early years of the twenty-first century. (Smethurst 371). And both Baraka and Nikki Giovanni went on to profit from their Black Arts Movement activities decades after the movement's height, being called on to present their work to large and diverse audiences because they made a name for themselves as dynamic performers of poetry (Ramsby 93). A lot of artists that participated in the Black Arts Movement still play vital roles in the cultural infrastructure of their communities and regions (Smethurst 371).

But not only artists that witnessed the BAM contribute to the preservation of the movement's ideas. Numerous post-Black Arts writers like Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and August Wilson were influenced by the movement. And even though not all writers might acknowledge the ideologies of the BAM, negative reactions and disapproval of the movement's ideas also suggest a certain kind of effect it has on artists. In addition to African American writers that are obviously addressed by the Black Arts Movement, other nationalist formations like Asian American, Puerto Rican, Native American, and other ethnic groups of artists took inspiration from the movement as well. One could go as far as claiming that the idea of a radical multiculturalism is based upon the works and achievements of the Black Arts Movement (Smethurst 371). African Americans proofed to these ethnic groups that it is possible to achieve something unique with one's own background, one's own history, tradition, and culture (Ya Salaam 70). Hence, it is no wonder that writers inspired

Regarding solely the effects of the BAM in the genre of literature would not live up to the broad range of accomplishments the movement made since coming up in the 1960s. The Black Arts Movement was fundamental in helping to change American attitudes about the relation between popular culture and high art (Smethurst 371).

## B. Music

The Black Arts Movement was essential in making popular avant-garde a commonplace of rock, hip-hop, jazz, and other musical genres. Political hip-hop artists like DJ Afrika Bombaata or Mos Def recognise the Black Arts Movement as an ancestor of their art form. And because in

return, Black Arts writers look rather upon rappers as their direct descendants than upon other writers, it is legitimate to take a closer look at contemporary music as the artistic genre that was strongly influenced by both Black Arts writers and musicians (Smethurst 371).

Because of the Black Arts Movement's strong emphasis on orality, a shift from written poetry to spoken poetry can be detected. The unique and innovative use of language, speech, music, and performance in Black Arts literature forecasted the importance rap music should have one day for black literature. In Black Arts literature, the ritual use of call and response was often included in both the artists' works and the interaction between artists and their audiences. All these elements are now omnipresent in rap music, which is why rap and hip-hop are both the descendants of Black Arts literature and music (Ya Salaam 74).

This mutual admiration for each other is followed by an already broad range of collaborations between hip-hop artist and Black Arts activists and writers (Smethurst 371). Most importantly, a change took place in the cultural field in which poetry now operates, taking in account that hip-hop as a hybrid of poetry, music and dance, is performed live or on record to a genuinely popular audience. Moreover, the significance of hip-hop and rap for the Black Art Movement's influence on contemporary art and culture becomes obvious when thinking about the fact that all poetry in the United States written in the last three decade was produced during the ongoing era of hip-hop. All poets had and have to take hip-hop in account when writing, no matter if they are in favour of it or not, or positioning themselves somewhere in between. Also the way of presenting poetry has changed, performance poetry and poetry slams being two direct descendants of hip-hop and Black Arts performances (Smethurst 372).

To understand this phenomenon properly, one should take a closer look at the art form of rap. A rap song is a poem that is waiting to be performed and rap has a poetic structure. Just like poetry, rap is defined by the art of the line (Bradley xi). Similar to poets, rap artists choose their line breaks which determine their skeletal system just as in poetry and in contrast to prose writers whose line breaks are mostly determined by the end of the page (Bradley xii). Rap has become a public art over the course of time and thus rappers are public poets in the tradition of Black Arts Movement poets. Because of engines of global commerce, rap is now the most widely spread poetry form in the world, distributing poetry and Black Arts Movement based ideas to the broadest audience possible (Bradley xiii). And similar to the writers of the BAM who used their unique kind of language and developed new forms of presenting their works, rap artists are innovators in terms of rhythm, rhyme, wordplay, and language itself (Bradley xiv). Rap and hip-hop are the ideal mixture of literary verse and music (Bradley xvi), carrying on the legacy of Black Arts Movement poets that

recorded their works. But rap, being an oral form of poetry, relies more on sound than literary poetry (Bradley xvii). Regarding the creation of an African American vernacular as a process, rap is its most recent manifestation (Bradley 125). In the end, both the Black Arts Movement writers' poetry and rap represent a form of communication, trying to transmit a message to the audience (Bradley 90).

Numerous examples for the convergence of poetry and music can be found, as the catalogue of rap and hip-hop music is overwhelming. But among some notable mentions there should be H. Rap Brown's *Rap's Poem* from as early as the 1960s, that shows first steps of poetry being developed into rap (Bradley 181). Furthermore, the group of rap artists known as The Last Poets is a living example for the transformation of poetry to rap. Having started as poets in the 1960s, and being soon known for their complicated rhythms they talked over, they went on to being featured in the song *The Corner* taken off the rap artist Common's 2005 album *Be*. The circle is being closed by Kanye West, who used the words from Gil Scott-Heron's poem *Comment #1* as lyrics for the song *Who Will Survive In America* on his 2010 released album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. *Who Will Survive in America* being the name of an Amiri Baraka poem evidently showing the connection to the Black Arts Movement and giving proof of how important the movement's impact still is in modern day music (Gao).

### C. Visual Art

Because it takes longer to recognise and assert movements in art history, it is harder to find artists influenced by the BAM than in other genres. Of course there are some examples that show the ongoing consequences of the movement. One of the effects the Black Arts Movement had on the genre of visual art is the change in "the landscape of public funding for the arts and the terms of the discussion of public arts support" (Smethurst 372). Cultural projects, including formally radical art like the one of abstract expressionists, experienced an enormous increase of public and foundation money (Smethurst 372). Also the public support for museum exhibits is significantly rooted in debates that arose during the Black Arts Movement era (Smethurst 373).

One of the direct successors of the African American artists from the Black Arts Movement was Jean-Michel Basquiat. Likewise to his predecessors, Basquiat strongly focused on the perception of the black as an individual in his art. He depicted relationships among African Americans as well as between blacks and whites. Displaying both the visibility and invisibility of

black people in American society, objectifying the black female and male bodies. A significant style device in Basquiat's art was the crossing out of words he wrote on the canvas. By obscuring particular words, he intended to make the viewer want to read them (Bernier 194). Basquiat using words in a work of visual art is an indicator of the Black Arts Movement's influence on later artists and their work, as Basquiat only functions as one of many prime examples.

Black visual artists went on to pursue the ideas of the BAM in their work, sometimes without intentionally doing so. Even after the height of the Black Arts Movement, African American visual artists still felt that they had to get out their message and represent the black image. All this by using "their 'new *fucking* vocabulary' via an aesthetics of urban debris, human detritus, body parts and taboo imagery" (Bernier 196). Again, just as writers and visual artists during the Black Arts Movement, the will to transmit political messages and represent African Americans was acted out by using a unique vocabulary, or style, highlighting the speciality of black art (Bernier 196).

Even rather radical approaches to art can be detected, drawing a connection between the art influenced by the idea of Black Power. The artist David Hammons often sought, and still does so, to create art that cannot live on. His idea of producing visual art that only has a certain lifetime is based on the will of discouraging white art collectors to buy his works. Hammons's installations and assemblages out of perishable goods keep art collectors from buying them and thus no one can own a Hammons (Bernier 197). A harsh thesis about the artist's work could be that he stays a free visual artist and the white man cannot own him. This is likewise to the African American owned publishing houses during the Black Arts Movement, which had the intention to be independent from white money.

Even while contemporary artists try to establish new priorities in African American visual art, they still fall back on visualising traditional stories and intend to transmit the essence of unique black imagery (Bernier 222). Black visual artists nowadays continue to experiment with new art forms and attempt to address topics that no one has dealt with yet. Always emphasising the uniqueness of black art (Bernier 226).

The concept of collaboration and crossover between genres lived on after the end of the Black Arts Movement and is one main idea of the movement that went on to influence not only African American art and culture but US culture as a whole. Thus, looking at contemporary art from diverse genres shows that the Black Arts Movement still has influence on various forms of culture.

## V. Conclusion

The Black Arts Movement has influenced diverse genres of art and still does so today. The look at the roots and the history of the movement explained how it could be so successful and emerge until today. Also the multiple artistic fields in which artists associated with the BAM had been active in showing the broad impact the movement's ideas and ideologies had. Comparing these with the same or similar genres from contemporary US culture demonstrates the significance and effects the Black Arts Movement has nowadays. While the influences the movement still has on contemporary literature and music are very obvious and nearly to broad to completely take in account, it always takes a little longer until visual arts movements and its inspirations are being recognised. However, the Black Arts Movement was definitely the most energetic literary movement in US culture, being outstanding in touching and influencing more genres than only literature. One can only be curious about what other developments will be sparked by the Black Arts Movement and its theories in the future.

*I hereby certify that I have acknowledged and identified all borrowings from other sources.*

VI. Table of Figures



Figure 1: Lewis, Norman. *Post Mortem*. 1964. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond (VA).

Picture credits: Bernier, Celeste-Marie. *African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present*.

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 229. Print.

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