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Mending Abstraction: Howardena Pindell's Black Feminisms

By

Sarah Louise Cowan

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

Requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History of Art

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Julia Bryan-Wilson, Chair
Professor Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby
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Professor Leigh Raiford

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Abstract

Mending Abstraction: Howardena Pindell's Black Feminisms

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Doctor of Philosophy in History of Art

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Julia Bryan-Wilson, Chair

In 1969, artist Howardena Pindell (b. 1943) carted several of her large, abstract paintings uptown to the Studio Museum in Harlem. The recently opened institution, situated in a predominantly black neighborhood, was established to provide quality exhibition space for living African American artists. The director of the museum roundly rejected Pindell, telling her to "go downtown" and "show with the white boys." "Downtown" was not a viable option for the young artist, as galleries there almost entirely excluded women artists and artists of color from their rosters. Taking the highly politicized, often contradictory artistic imperatives of this period as a starting point, "Mending Abstraction" offers an interdisciplinary examination of how abstract art in the United States changed as a result of the Black Arts Movement and the feminist art movement of the 1970s. The first scholarly monograph on Pindell's groundbreaking work, it examines her practice from the late 1960s through the early 1980s—densely textured paintings, conceptualist works on paper, multimedia photographic experiments, and video work.

Pindell arrived in New York City in 1967, a newly minted graduate of the MFA program in painting at Yale University. Over the course of the following two decades her most enduring contributions to modernisms, I argue, would emerge from an extended, implicit use of the metaphor of mending in her multimedia artistic practice. This textural, hand-worked approach to art-making occurs in Pindell's oeuvre primarily through collage, tactility, and a textile logic. "Mending" offered Pindell a reparative approach to abstraction, allowing her to find possibilities in the idiom as she navigated the widespread era belief that a black, white-collar woman could not produce meaningful abstract art. The study emphasizes the materiality of her post-minimalist works, examining, for instance, how she wielded labor-intensive processes drawn in part from Nigerian and Ghanaian textiles. It illuminates the scope and significance of Pindell's abiding contributions as an artist, curator, and art world activist. My analyses are undergirded by black feminist theories and draw extensively on interviews I conducted with the artist and original archival research.

"Mending Abstraction" centers the work of women of color artists and challenges the prevailing historiography of abstraction, showing that the silos it creates—especially black feminist cultural production and modernist abstraction—obscure historically important interactions and innovations. By attending to these blind spots, my dissertation contributes to more complete

accounts of how abstract art and ideologies of race and gender have co-developed around issues such as authorship and aesthetic hierarchies. Pindell's career serves as an ideal springboard for studying neglected interactions between black feminist cultural practices and late modernism because, as I argue, she critically took up the intersections of these terms in her work. This project aims not only to provide a comprehensive account of Pindell's practice, but more broadly to examine black women's contributions to post-civil rights era cultural debates. It therefore discusses Pindell in relationship to poet Audre Lorde and artists such as Senga Nengudi and Beverly Buchanan. My research suggests that these black women's innovations influenced a subsequent generation of artists who investigated how the personal and social converge in even the simplest, most "universal" of forms. "Mending Abstraction" reveals how abstraction both persisted within and changed as a result of post-1960s developments in performance art, video art, and post-minimalist sculpture, and argues that black women figured centrally in these artistic developments that transformed late modernist art.

Ultimately, "Mending Abstraction" traces Pindell's movements through a variety of artistic institutions in order to expand scholarly understanding of abstraction and of contemporary art more broadly. It offers a reconsideration of how vernacular practices and modernist discourse intersected during this vibrant period in U.S. art history. This research challenges disciplinary assumptions that have mapped artistic ambitions onto artists' social identities, revealing that women of color artists have intervened in, rather than simply denounced, developments in American modernisms. Through more robust examinations of women of color artists' contributions to the period's drastic reconceptualization of art, art historians can better understand how aesthetic practices and social transformations have helped to develop one another.

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Introduction

[Abstraction] doesn't have a concrete meaning, but can relate back to signification in the world.
–Howardena Pindell

In a recent interview, Howardena Pindell (b. 1943) reflected on her more than five decades as an artist.[1] Her remarks, above, attest to an enduring commitment to the capaciousness of abstraction. They also belie the fraught conditions under which she developed a largely abstract practice from the late 1960s through the early 1980s, the historical focus of this dissertation. A differing view of abstraction in this period is offered by Adrian Piper. One of the most well-known American artists of her generation, Piper has called her abstract practice of the 1960s, "the work I did in the Garden of Eden, before I found out I was a black woman."[2] Never one to mince words, she illuminates the naivety presumed to undergird a black woman artist's decision to work abstractly. Her gnomic comment references the sobering reality that this choice could result in artistic exile or dismissal. In the 1960s and 1970s, the black liberation movement and women's movement in the United States catalyzed drastic reconceptualizations of art—its proper forms and function, its possible locations and aims. Leaders of the Black Arts Movement privileged figurative work with an explicit political message.[3] Feminist artists of this period, as art historian Helen Molesworth has noted, also largely viewed abstract painting as a secondary concern of the women's movement.[4] Black women artists worked at the intersection of these movements, their concerns marginalized by the most vocal proponents of each.[5] "Mending Abstraction" examines the work of black women abstractionists, most especially Pindell, who were compelled to forge their own contexts and criteria for artistic meaning in this period, asking how abstract art in the United States changed as a result of the intersections of the Black Arts Movement and feminist art movement of the 1970s.

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[1] Howardena Pindell, interview by Andrianna Campbell, "1000 Words: Howardena Pindell," *Artforum* 56, no. 6 (Feb. 2018): 155.

[2] Claudia Barrow, "Adrian Piper: Space, Time and Reference, 1967-1970," in *Adrian Piper* (Birmingham and Manchester: Ikon Gallery and Cornerhouse, 1991), 15. Piper's comment can be read in a couple of ways. It suggests that she made her abstract paintings in a period of personal naïveté and that once she gained racial and gender consciousness, she was compelled to make art that could attend more directly to the political urgencies of social injustice. Just as likely, in my read, is that Piper's naïveté adhered to her belief that she could be seen and accepted as a black woman abstract painter.

[3] See, for instance, Margaret Burroughs, "To Make a Painter Black," in *The Black 70s*, ed. Floyd B. Barbour (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1970), 129–37; Jeff Donaldson, "Africobra: African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, 10 in Search of a Nation," *Black World* 19, no. 12 (October 1970): 80–89; Tom Lloyd, ed., *Black Art Notes* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971); Emory Douglas, "On Revolutionary Art," *The Black Panther,* January 5, 1970, 5; Larry Neal, "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation," *Ebony* 24, no. 10 (August 1969): 54–58, 62.

[4] Molesworth writes that "paintings that are both abstract and feminist suffer from a kind of illegibility." Helen Molesworth, "Painting with Ambivalence," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, eds. Cornelia Butler and Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 430.

[5] Legal studies scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139–68.

This dissertation offers the first scholarly monograph on Pindell's career. From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, she created a dynamic, multimedia, largely abstract oeuvre. Although intimately familiar with the exclusions of so-called advanced art through her positions within modernist institutions, Pindell embraced abstraction in these years. She arrived in New York City in May 1967, a newly minted graduate of the MFA program in painting at Yale University. Shortly thereafter, Pindell began working fulltime at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, initially as an assistant in an international exhibitions department; she would rise to the rank of associate curator of the department of prints and illustrated books. She made an artistic home in New York, moving through art worlds embroiled in the rancorous debates of a tumultuous period of social and political upheaval. My study commences with her arrival in New York in 1967 and concludes with a decisive, though ultimately temporary turn to figuration in the early 1980s. I examine both the possibilities and the constraints Pindell encountered in abstraction in these years, as she strove for the highest levels of institutional artistic recognition. Interactions between modernism and activism, abstraction and autobiography informed her ambitious practice, which frequently critiqued the conditions of artistic reception and viewership that framed her efforts.

As art historian Huey Copeland has noted, black women's art is inextricably linked to the modern, yet left out of establishment art historical narratives and museum collections.[6] In the twentieth century, normative art historical narratives rarely have looked to black women artists as important contributors to modernism or to abstraction. The scholarly lacunae around black women's abstract artistic production can be attributed in part to the erasures and negations of an ongoing cultural inheritance of racism and sexism.[7] For instance, although a recent growth in scholarship on the abstract work of black American artists has enriched the field of contemporary art history, the contributions of black women continue to be minimized in these accounts.[8] This study not only addresses this persistent blind spot, but also asks how narratives of contemporary art shift when we center the work of black women.

During Pindell's first years in New York, the waning myth of a politically detached modernist art seemed to die amid the exigencies of global crisis and domestic unrest. Demonstrations against the Vietnam War erupted on city streets and campuses.[9] Antiwar sentiments helped fuel the 1970 Art Strike that temporarily closed museums and exhibitions in Manhattan.[10] In the late 1960s, uprisings in cities including Detroit and Newark attested to the failure of incremental legislative change to deliver widespread social and economic

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[6] Huey Copeland, "In the Wake of the Negress," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, eds. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 480–97.

[7] See the essays in Howardena Pindell, *The Heart of the Question: The Writings and Paintings of Howardena Pindell* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997).

[8] See Darby English, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); Mark Godfrey, "Notes on Black Abstraction" in *Soul of a Nation,* eds. Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley (London: Tate, 2017), 147–90; Kellie Jones, "To the Max: Energy and Experimentation," in *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964–1980* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006), 14–34.

[9] See, for instance, Nora Alter, *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War on Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Margot Fortunato Galt, *Stop This War!: American Protest of the Conflict in Vietnam* (Minneapolis: Lerner, 2000); Marc Jason Gilbert, ed., *The Vietnam War on Campus: Other Voices, More Distant Drums* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001).

[10] See John B. Hightower Papers, III.1.13. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

transformations for many black Americans.[11] Support for black nationalisms bloomed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and many artists gathered under the banner of the Black Arts Movement to espouse a revolutionary black culture distinct from the white American mainstream.[12] Drawing on the strategies of the civil rights movement, the women's movement emerged at the end of the 1960s, as women agitated for a wide variety of legislative and societal reforms. Various other social movements, including the Chicano movement and the gay rights movement, likewise contributed to a widespread rethinking of public life.[13]

In these years, advanced art in the United States underwent major transformations, as artists drafted new relationships between their politics and artistic practices.[14] These changes were especially profound in New York City, home to a density of artists and major art institutions. Abstract art became a site of material and aesthetic experimentation rife with metaphorical possibility and political potential. For instance, the burgeoning mediums of video, performance art, and installation opened up painting and sculpture to new techniques.[15] Feminist artists inaugurated expansions of the materials, mediums, and sites of advanced art, often incorporating ordinary, everyday gestures and objects into their works. Alternative institutions abounded as artists sought to display and distribute their work outside commercial circuits.[16] Artist-activist groups such as the Art Workers' Coalition, the Ad Hoc Women's Committee of the AWC, and the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition intervened in museum business by demonstrating against discriminatory practices and the military-industrial entanglements of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, and Whitney Museum of American Art.[17] Although the art shown by these museums continued to garner the bulk of critical attention and market

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[11] See, for instance, Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995); Malcolm McLaughlin, *The Long, Hot Summer of 1967: Urban Rebellion in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[12] For discussions of the political imperatives of the Black Power movement and the impact of their discourses on the cultural production of black artists during and since the late 1960s, see GerShun Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, eds., *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movements and 21st Century Black Aesthetics* (Urbana–Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2009). For an account that gives special consideration to the flows between black liberation movements of the 1960s, see Leigh Raiford, "Come Let Us Build a New World Together," and "Attacked First by Sight," in *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2011), 67–128; 129–208.

[13] See, for instance, Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); Carlos Muñoz, *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (New York: Verso, 1989).

[14] For a discussion of this topic, especially as it pertains to notions of artistic labor, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

[15] See Katy Siegel, "Another History is Possible," in *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975*, ed. Katy Siegel (New York: Independent Curators International, 2006), 30.

[16] See Julie Ault, ed., *Alternative Art: New York 1965–1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

[17] See Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*; Susan E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

recognition, many artists succeeded in charting careers outside these sites of mainstream modernisms.

Pindell was at the center of these debates and the institutions that bore them. She and her art moved through the intersections of pressing modernist, feminist, and black cultural developments. During her time at MoMA, the institution both solidified its claim as a preeminent modernist institution and became a primary target of artist–activism. Pindell's museum affiliation prevented her full participation in AWC, as members including artist Carl Andre saw her as a "spy."[18] She nonetheless organized with AWC affiliates and former members throughout the 1970s. At the encouragement of her close friend the art critic Lucy Lippard, Pindell entered feminist artist circles.[19] In 1972, she co-founded the first women's cooperative gallery in the United States, A.I.R. Gallery. Her art moved through sites of artistic and political contention in this period. For instance, one of Pindell's spray-painted canvases appeared in the groundbreaking though controversial, BECC-protested *Contemporary Black Artists in America* exhibition at the Whitney in 1971.[20]

Attending to these various flows of Pindell's career requires a rethinking of modernist art. Her works serve as an ideal springboard for reexamining American art of this period, as they bring together terms that dominant institutional and scholarly narratives typically categorize as resolutely distinct. Long-held disciplinary boundaries and biases continue to limit the possibilities for scholarship on black artists, especially black women, who have been excluded almost entirely from accounts of abstraction in the United States.[21] "Mending Abstraction" attends to a broad array of artistic production, aesthetic-political debate, and scholarly inquiry in order to account for Pindell's wide-ranging engagements with, for instance, 1960s color field painting, contemporary Ghanaian textile production, post-minimalist aesthetics, feminist reclamations of craft, and bureaucratic aesthetics. Ultimately, my dissertation proposes that fuller consideration of the abstract production of women of color artists reveals central, though neglected, tensions of contemporary art. For instance, Pindell's experiences unsettle accepted accounts of how and why some artists in the late-twentieth century renounced their claims to authorship or shuttled between vernacular and elite practices.

This dissertation participates in a growing field of scholarship on modern and contemporary art, emergent over the last fifteen years, that has reconceptualized the contours of non-inclusive art historical narratives by focusing on the works of artists of color.[22] "Mending

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[18] Howardena Pindell, interview with Camille Billops, April 21, 1980, Audio-visual recording, Billops-Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

[19] Howardena Pindell, interview with Kellie Jones, April 2, 1989, Audio-visual recording, Billops-Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

[20] See Robert Doty, *Contemporary Black Artists in America* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1971).

[21] See Steven Nelson, "Turning Green into Black, Or How I Learned to Live with the Canon," in *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (London: Routledge, 2007), 54–66.

[22] See, for a few examples, Kirsten Pai Buick, *Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American*

Abstraction" participates specifically in black feminist art history and draws on an array of black feminist theories generated from fields such as geography, poetry, and sociology.[23] The dissertation's monographic approach follows from black feminist methodologies for centering the works and lived experiences of black women.[24] It responds directly to art historian Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis's call for a black feminist art history discourse that prioritizes black women artists.[25] An important recent example of this subject-centered methodology appears in Kara Keeling's study of the black femme cinematic subject.[26] I examine the fiercely contested New York art worlds of the post-civil rights era through consideration of Pindell's varied artistic entanglements. In addition to centering Pindell's art, I consider her curatorial work and published and unpublished essays and speeches. For instance, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, she regularly contributed to *Feminist Art Journal* and the feminist arts and politics publication *Heresies* and spoke at public events at museums and universities in the New York area and beyond. I also draw on numerous interviews, including a dozen I conducted as part of research for this dissertation. However, my assessments of Pindell's art regularly depart from her own; I ground my arguments in evidence drawn from her works and her words, the broader artistic and political contexts in which she worked, and interdisciplinary theoretical sources.

Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Kobena Mercer, ed., *Annotating Art's Histories,* 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005–08); Derek Conrad Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity After Civil Rights* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2016); Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). Many of these works draw on the contributions of black feminist art historians and cultural theorists who began publishing in the 1980s and 1990s. For one instance, art historian Kobena Mercer's influential theorization of Romare Bearden's photostat collages of the 1960s builds on the insights of cultural critic Michele Wallace, which illuminate the denials of cross-cultural borrowing that frames modernism. Kobena Mercer, "Romare Bearden, 1964: Collage as Kunstwollen," in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 124–45. See Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson and Trinh T. Minh-ha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 38–50.

[23] For examples of black feminist art historical texts, see Arna Alexander Bontemps and Jacqueline Fonvielle-Bontemps, "African-American Art History: The Feminine Dimension," in *Forever Free: Art by African-American Women, 1862-1890*, ed. Arna Alexander Bontemps (Alexandria, VA: Stephenson, 1980), 9–52; Lowery Stokes Sims, "African-American Women Artists: Into the Twenty-First Century," in *Bearing Witness: Art by Contemporary African-American Women,* ed. Jontyle Theresa Robinson (New York: Rizzoli, 1996), 83-94; Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis, "In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s that Center the Art of Black Women Artists," in *Gendered Visions: The Art of Contemporary Africana Women Artists*, ed. Salah M. Hassan (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1997), 73–92; Judith Wilson, "Hagar's Daughter: Social History, Cultural Heritage, and African-American Women's Art," in *Bearing Witness*, 95–112.

[24] A wide variety of black feminist theorists have advocated for this approach. For several germinal texts, see Hazel Carby, "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in Seventies Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 212–35; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990); E. F. White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

[25] Tesfagiorgis, "In Search of a Discourse."

[26] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

Throughout the first two decades of her career, Pindell moved through elite institutions of modernist art. Her blue-chip training at Yale and subsequent employment at MoMA gave her enviable access to eminent artists, teachers, and curators. Pindell's training and employment contributed to the complex interactions of race and class in her life. The only child of a middle-class family, she grew up in Philadelphia, a city she recalls being largely segregated throughout her childhood.[27] Pindell's parents each came from large, poor families and emphasized education for their daughter. They each had been the first generation of their families to attend college, and both obtained graduate degrees.[28] The Pindells enrolled Howardena in a wide variety of enrichment programs from a young age, including extensive art classes.[29] She attended an elite public high school in Philadelphia, and received both a BA and BFA from Boston University in 1965.[30] Despite her educational credentials, Pindell made little money at MoMA and struggled financially for years as she sought to support her artistic endeavors.

As she established a career in New York, Pindell's artistic interlocutors were diffuse and diverse. She exhibited alongside and drew explicitly from an eclectic milieu of cultural producers that included artists David Hammons, Ree Morton, and Larry Poons. In the early 1970s, Pindell's most enduring artistic friendships formed with feminist artists, most of them white. In part through the connections she forged at A.I.R., she became longtime friends with Lippard, artist Sylvia Sleigh and her partner, art historian Lawrence Alloway, and artist Brenda Miller (who was also Pindell's neighbor at Westbeth Artists Community Housing).[31] However, the racism Pindell encountered in feminist circles led to a profound sense of isolation. She left A.I.R. in 1975. By this time, she felt "yanked back and forth" between racial and classed exclusions from the gallery.[32] Unlike most of her colleagues there, who were married, Pindell financially supported herself. At MoMA, her colleagues regularly dismissed or ignored her. Pindell suspected her entry into these spaces was intended to symbolize those institutions' liberal goodwill.[33]

Subsequently, she increasingly showed her work alongside other artists of color in spaces such as Just Above Midtown Gallery.[34] Pindell formed friendships with black artists such as Beverly Buchanan, Sam Gilliam, Hammonds, Janet Henry, gallerist Linda Goode-Bryant, and art historian Judith Wilson. When she left MoMA at the end of the decade, following an art world controversy around issues of racism and censorship, she became an increasingly vocal activist.[35] Over the course of the late 1970s and 1980s, she participated in art world manifestations of the Third World Women's movement, forming friendships with artists such as Ana Mendieta and

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[27] Oral History Interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[28] Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.
[29] Oral History Interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Howardena Pindell, interview with the author, telephone conversation, Dec. 2018.
[32] Ibid.; Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 161–68.
[33] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.
[34] Linda Goode-Bryant, interview by Judith Wilson, 1979, Judith Wilson papers, 1966–2010. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[35] See, for instance, Howardena Pindell, "Action Against Racism in the Arts," *Heresies* 8 (1979): 108–11.

Kay WalkingStick.[36] Pindell's publications and lectures helped to shape women of color artist–activism of the 1980s. Hers became a prominent voice in artists' efforts to redefine a women's movement outside of the whiteness that had monopolized mainstream feminisms in the United States since the early 1970s.[37]

While Pindell's career provides my primary point of entry into the convergences of modernisms, feminisms, and black liberation efforts, it developed within a broader field of black feminist modernisms. Pindell showed her work and agitated for art world reform alongside black women artists including Emma Amos, Betty Blayton, Beverly Buchanan, Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, Piper, Ringgold, Betye Saar, and Alma Thomas (figs. 0.01 and 0.02). These artists' diverse practices engaged with the idioms, forms, and materials of modernist formations including color field painting, minimalism, assemblage, and conceptual art. They developed in dialogue with a wider network of black women's cultural production, as well as with black feminist artistic modes articulated in opposition to modernisms. For instance, artists such as Kay Brown, Barbara Jones-Hogu, Dindga McCannon, and Ringgold at times explicitly developed their works with the intention of eschewing dominant aesthetic forms (figs. 0.03 and 0.04).[38] Throughout the dissertation, I show how Pindell's non-representational black feminisms, which were multiple and shifted over time, emerged alongside the work of other black women cultural producers.

Pindell's most enduring contributions to modernisms, I argue, emerged from her extended, implicit use of the metaphor of mending in her artistic practice. This textural, hand-worked approach to art-making occurs in Pindell's oeuvre primarily through collage, tactility, and a textile logic. "Mending" recurs in her paintings, works on paper, photographic and video works. The conceit spans her abstract and figurative art. Mending exemplifies Pindell's committed attempts to produce conceptually and aesthetically innovative art, especially abstraction, despite the limitations that institutions and her peers imposed on her work. For instance, she introduced collage to her oeuvre and unstretched her canvases following her first encounters with a texturally adorned Ghanaian textile in 1972 (figs. 0.05 and 0.06). She most explicitly treats the cut and sewn paintings of the late 1970s as textiles, transforming canvas into cloths to be trimmed, stitched, and decorated (figs. 0.07 and 0.08). Her simultaneous engagements with abstract painting as an all-over field and a surface for handicraft operations reveals textiles as the sublimated medium of the twentieth century.[39] Through this expansion of

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[36] For instance, Pindell participated in the 1980 exhibition *Dialectics of Isolation: Third World Women Artists of the United States*, organized by Mendieta, Kazuko Miyamoto, and Zarina at A.I.R. Gallery.

[37] See Lowery Stokes Sims, introduction to *The Heart of the Question,* vii; Lowery Stokes Sims, "Synthesis and Integration in the Work of Howardena Pindell, 1972–1992: A (Re)Consideration," in *Howardena Pindell: What Remains to Be Seen,* eds. Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2018), 54–78.

[38] See Kay Brown, "'Where We At' Black Women Artists," [1972] in *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85, A Sourcebook*, eds. Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2016), 62–64; Kay Brown, "The Emergence of Black Women Artists: The Founding of 'Where We At,'" *Nka* 29 (Fall 2011): 118–27.

[39] On the signal importance of textiles to histories of modern and contemporary art, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Joan Livingstone and John Ploof, eds., *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Jenni Sorkin, "Affinities in Abstraction:

modernist painting onto West African textiles, Pindell investigated her own theory of African diasporic art.

Pindell's literal, if not always overt, engagements with collage and textiles draw on the metaphorical capacities of relational, vernacular materials imbricated in social, economic, and epistemological systems.[40] Textiles are social membranes. They mediate the body's entry into the public sphere, interpolating us into a wide variety of social designations—class, gender, ethnicity, ritual, and life stage. The textiles that we wear discipline our bodies into and through these categories and life events, shaping our movements and gestures and our sense of self. Amid the artistic expansions of the 1960s and 1970s, a wide variety of artists adapted textile (as well as collage) approaches to their practice. Pindell was familiar with efforts by artists such as Gilliam, Harmony Hammond, Mary Heilmann, Joe Overstreet, Ringgold, and Alan Shields to incorporate a textile logic into their paintings, sculptures, and quilted art objects (figs. 0.09 and 0.10). In Pindell's hands, the textures of textile mending offered a way to reimagine the relationship between herself as artist, her artwork, and her audience. Her engagements with collage, tactility, and textiles participated in the intersecting efforts of black artists and feminist artists to reroute aesthetic hierarchies.

In the 1970s, many feminist artists, Pindell among them, took up feminine-coded materials and processes such as craft-inflected sewing in an effort to redress longstanding modernist exclusions. This approach constituted one point in a broad spectrum of feminist artistic methods that included subtle gestures and manifest woman-centered calls for political action. Some artists aimed to resuscitate a cohesive "women's sensibility" that could form the basis for a new, separate women's art.[41] Other feminists chafed at the proposition that any set of qualities could stand in for women's experiences, on the basis that this comprised an essentialist definition of womanhood.[42] Many artists adapted different positions over time. On the whole, a dizzying plurality of perspectives was precisely the point—the undergirding goal of feminisms in the arts was that women should have the freedom to choose to make any kind of art, without the reception of their work collapsing onto their gender.

Pindell, from her position within a major art institution, wanted to see more women artists in museums and galleries. She said in 1972, "Whether our work is part of a feminine aesthetic or not, we must get our work shown, be it in galleries, museums or [alternative] systems…I feel we must address ourselves to changing the power structures which perpetuate the myth that art has a gender."[43] She also emphasized how aesthetic expectations based on gender intersect with those drawn from race and class: "Comments about gender always seem to be elicited when the artist is not white, male and middle class. When gender is applied to art, it is usually with patronizing condescension, i.e., 'X' paints like a man."[44] Gender, race, and class, in

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Textiles, Otherness, and Painting in the 1970s," in *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, ed. Lynne Cooke (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 92–105.

[40] On the complexities of textile as both material and metaphor, see especially Bryan-Wilson, *Fray*.

[41] For instance, artist Judy Chicago advocated "Cunt Art," making the case "for an intrinsic female imagery created out of round, pulsating 'womb-like forms.'" See Cindy Nemser's overview in Cindy Nemser, "The Women Artists' Movement," *The Feminist Art Journal* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1973/1974): 8–10.

[42] A group of feminist artists in New York rallied against "Cunt Art" in 1971, objecting to its use of "outworn, male inverted stereotypes." Ibid., 9.

[43] Pindell quoted in Patricia Mainardi, "Feminine Sensibility: An Analysis," *The Feminist Art Journal* (Fall 1972): 22.

[44] Ibid.

other words, only become relevant to art when they mark difference from a "universal" social position. Only women "paint like a man." Men just paint.[45]

Pindell's relationships to not only the feminist movement, but also notions of femininity were complicated by race. While her use of overtly feminine materials such as glitter and talcum powder participated in broader feminist efforts to recuperate women's culture, it also must be understood in relationship to era debates that construed whiteness as a prerequisite for a normative, non-pathological femaleness. For a paradigmatic example, in 1965, sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan published *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,* a study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor that came to be known as The Moynihan Report. In it, Moynihan posited the "black matriarchy" as a driving force of the economic woes of black Americans.[46] The study, which synthesized the findings of several social scientific reports on poverty among black Americans, controversially located the roots of racialized economic inequality in the "aberrant" formations of the black family. Moynihan argued that families led by domineering black single mothers perpetuated the systemic emasculation of black men, who in response shirked familial duties. The solution, he concluded, was to foster feminine submissiveness among black women.

The Moynihan Report reproduced longstanding stereotypes rooted in racist ideology. Black feminist theorists from abolitionist Sojourner Truth to artist Lorraine O'Grady have argued that since at least the nineteenth century, black women have been seen as "contentious and masculine," the "flipside" of womanhood that shores up ideal white femininity.[47] For several decades after its initial publication, Moynihan's incendiary report was a touchstone for black feminist investigations of the racialization of gender as well as the racist and sexist underpinnings of normative accounts of the American family.[48] Critics charged the sociologist with laying blame for "the results of centuries of slavery, racism, and social and economic discrimination" at the feet of black women.[49] A major flashpoint in public debates around the 1960s struggles for black liberation, the publication stoked existing hostilities, having what cultural critic bell hooks has called "the greatest impact on the consciousness of many black people" among all the negative stereotypes assigned to black womanhood.[50]

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[45] Hortense Spillers has theorized black women's social position as "marked woman." Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65. Pindell's comments also evoke Linda Waugh's theorization of marked and unmarked subject positions. See Linda R. Waugh, "Marked and Unmarked: A Choice Between Unequals in Semiotic Structure," *Semiotica* 38, nos. 3–4 (1982): 299–318.

[46] Daniel Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Labor, 1965).

[47] See Darcy Grigsby's indispensable study of Sojourner Truth, Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Enduring Truths: Sojourner's Shadow and Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). See also the germinal essay Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," [1992] in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader,* ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 174. Quotes from Lisa E. Farrington, "Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude," *Women's Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (Autumn 2003–Winter 2004): 21.

[48] See, especially Spillers; bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 72.

[49] Farrington, 21.

[50] hooks, 78. See also Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and The Myth of The Superwoman* (New York: Dial Press, 1979), 11.

The antipathies stirred by the Moynihan Report still hung in the air when Pindell began contributing to the feminist art movement. Its distortion of black women's femininity would have been on her mind as she began to incorporate pink and peach paints and women's perfume into her abstract artworks. While black feminists in the early 1970s rejected the framework of the Moynihan Report as racist, many conceived of black womanhood as operative in a family formation.[51] For instance, a special episode of the American public affairs television program *Black Journal,* titled *The Black Woman* (1970), featured a panel of prominent black American women.[52] In the episode, poet and community organizer Amina Baraka, along with most of the rest of the panel, construes black women as wives and supporters whose labors should bolster the political work of black men. This heterosexist framework excluded queer women as well as unpartnered women from normative notions of blackness. Pindell, who tends to be reticent about some aspects her personal life, has never been married or publicly spoken about her romantic relationships. A single, white-collar working woman, her biography did not conform to the predominant models of blackness espoused within the Black Power movement.

The mending operations of Pindell's practice applied to these large-scale societal exclusions, and not only to the local conditions of her artistic production. From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, she developed a reparative approach to the limiting ways in which black women were seen and depicted in the world around her. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has offered a complex theorization of reparative practices in contrast to the paranoid.[53] Although inherently difficult to define, reparative motives, according to Sedgwick, "are about pleasure."[54] Pindell has conceived of her own artistic labors as "pleasurable" and "meditative."[55] She found refuge in them, despite the fact that they often involved tedious processes such as labeling and hole-punching. As I show, her abstract art stitches together the materials, the irreconcilable forms of labor, and the artistic discourses that shaped her life and career. In this way, her works made meaning of the seemingly incongruous spheres of modernist abstraction, bureaucratic labor, feminist reclamations, and West African textiles. Indeed, they reveal these cultural formations to be inexorably linked. The discursive mobility of Pindell's art has the potential to help erode longstanding assumptions that place black feminist cultural production and modernist abstraction in discrete silos, which we rarely imagine as coming into contact, much less shaping one another. However, her works both literally and resonantly leave intact the traces of her efforts to bring these spheres together. Mending does not return its object to an original, whole state, but rather, tends to it, extending and perhaps expanding its usefulness.

"Mending Abstraction" proceeds largely chronologically in order to account for the continuities and shifts in Pindell's career and life over time. Each of its four substantive chapters addresses a body or bodies of work developed in relation to one another. The first chapter,

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[51] For instance, see Joyce Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1971). See also E. F. White's genealogy of black feminist thought in "Black Feminist Interventions," in *Dark Continents,* 17–77.

[52] Stan Lathan, dir., "The Black Woman," special episode of *Black Journal*, 1970, WNET.

[53] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51. Sedgwick builds on Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic framework.

[54] Ibid., 144.

[55] Howardena Pindell, interview with Linda Freeman, undated transcript, Linda Freeman papers, 1996–2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

"Moving in Modernism," examines Pindell's first forays into abstract painting amid the ascendance of the Black Arts Movement. Her spray-painted color field paintings drew on theories of modernist painting espoused by Josef Albers and Ad Reinhardt (fig. 0.11). I analyze how Pindell combined these concerns with an idiosyncratic understanding of the social meanings of the circle and grid. These early modernist experimentations show her working through the complexly intertwined spatial, racial, and geographic dynamics of modernisms as she developed an ecumenical approach to abstraction. Ultimately, this early abstract art issued a challenge to both modernist and black cultural configurations of the relationship between form and subjectivity—a concern Pindell would carry forth in abstract and later figurative work.

Chapters two and three examine Pindell's development of a densely textured approach to abstraction in works on paper and paintings. "Paper Work, Collage Play" focuses on Pindell's collage practice, initiated around 1972. I trace collage through theories of African diasporic aesthetics, origin narratives of modernist art, and feminist reclamations of craft. Pindell's collage practice addressed each of these facets of the technique, while also asserting it as a critical form of play. I examine play in relationship to Pindell's contributions to conceptual discourses about artistic labor. In collaged works on paper, she used the forms and materials of bureaucratic work, with which she had a personal relationship as a white-collar administrator (fig. 0.12). Through a critical examination of work and play, I argue, Pindell complicated conceptualist notions of agential authority and knowledge production. In "Texturing Abstraction," the third chapter, I examine Pindell's ongoing investments in texture and its affective conceits, further situating her textural innovations in black women's cultural practices that center the haptic. The cut and sewn paintings participated in feminist efforts to reclaim the decorative (figs. 0.07 and 0.08). They embraced an avowedly feminine-coded aesthetic in order to reroute modernist expectations and theorize femininity as a racialized masquerade. It is the cut and sewn paintings, I argue, that culminate Pindell's efforts to "mend" abstraction. Through a series of structuring tensions, such as her post-minimalist concern for the relationship between the handmade and the industrial, she most fully invested in a black feminist approach to a non-representational idiom.

The final chapter, "Mass Media and Ambivalent Skins," addresses Pindell's tentative use of figuration in the early 1980s. I situate this shift in the artist's engagements with mass media, the Third World Women's movement, and activism against art world racism. In the 1980 video *Free, White, and 21*, Pindell plays two characters who each deploy a series of gestures that thematize skin (fig. 0.13). These membranes, I argue, show Pindell theorizing representation as a series of imaginative surfaces that interlace lived experience and mediated depiction. *Free, White, and 21* frequently has been construed as emblematic of the end of Pindell's process-oriented, abstract practice. I include an examination of this canonical video work in "Mending Abstraction" in order to illuminate further the complex interplay Pindell attributed to abstraction and figuration. In the video, as well as an earlier photographic series, representation appears as an inherently abstracting procedure. (Conversely, throughout her career as an abstractionist, Pindell navigated calls to "represent" herself in her art.) Further, the video elaborates on the artist's longstanding concerns for textured surfaces, collage aesthetics, and textile logic. In the brief conclusion to the dissertation, I reflect on Pindell's changing artistic legacy and its uptake by a younger generation of artists working today. The conclusion also considers her gradual incorporation of representational elements into paintings of the 1980s. I end my analysis with this development in order to gesture to the enduring themes of her practice across an abstract–figurative spectrum, but also to mark the shift in artistic priorities constituted by these works, which explicitly explore themes of communal memory, trauma, and histories of slavery.

A particular joy and challenge of this project has been to track and participate in a recent uptick in Pindell's art world exposure, including a recent career retrospective, after decades of alternatingly waxing and waning public attention.[56] Her works urge a scholarly reconsideration at this juncture of renewed allure, which coincides with a period of widespread institutional interest and investment in inclusion. Pindell astutely has remarked of the reception of black artists: "Every ten years, the Euro-Americans come out and it's 'please tell us where you've been all this time?' Suddenly we are of great interest and then the interest dips and we hear nothing…Every time the wave comes, we are there. We were there all along. We've been doing our work. We've been plodding along."[57] "Mending Abstraction" offers an extended, scholarly consideration of Pindell's work, as well as the work of other black feminist modernists, in the hope that this crest might become a sea change, and with the belief that it is art historians' charge to help make this so.

[56] Pindell's work recently has appeared in prominent traveling exhibitions including *Howardena Pindell: What Remains to Be Seen* (MCA Chicago, 2018); *We Wanted a Revolution* (Brooklyn Museum, 2017); *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (Tate Modern, 2017); *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today* (Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017); *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 2018). Pindell also received institutional recognition with the 2019 College Art Association Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement.

[57] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.

Chapter One: Moving in Modernism

In 1969, artist Howardena Pindell carted several of her large, abstract paintings uptown to the Studio Museum in Harlem. The recently opened institution, situated in a predominantly black neighborhood, was established to provide quality exhibition space for living African American artists.[1] The director of the museum, Ed Spriggs, roundly rejected Pindell, telling her to "go downtown" and "show with the white boys."[2] As the retort lays bare, Pindell—like many artists in New York in the late 1960s—navigated artistic imperatives assigned on the basis of race and gender. These aesthetic expectations, mapped onto local New York geographies and onto artists' bodies, continue profoundly to shape art historical narratives of the era.

The paintings that Pindell took to the Studio Museum belonged to a series of brightly colored works in which geometric shapes, circles and ellipses, overlay a hand-drawn grid (fig. 1.01). Produced in the years 1968 and 1969, the compositions were among the first of the artist's abstract works and with them, she established some of the formal concerns that would help to motivate her artistic production for the following two decades. This chapter examines Pindell's early development of a range of abstract idioms, which occurred amid the Black Arts Movement's calls for consolidated artistic efforts aimed at better representing black Americans and black American culture, as well as socio-political pressures from the women's and anti-war movements.[3] In an era marked by the moral crisis of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War and the civil unrest garnered by social liberation movements, the unfulfilled cultural project of modernism seemed for many artists and critics irresponsibly disconnected from political urgencies and therefore no longer viable.[4] For black Americans, the political complacency ostensibly symbolized by abstraction in this moment only added to its historically detrimental effects. As literary scholar Phillip Brian Harper has argued, abstraction has contributed to black

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[1] On the establishment of the Studio Museum, see Susan E. Cahan, "*Electronic Refractions II* at the Studio Museum in Harlem," in *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13–30. Pindell has noted that she understood the purpose of the establishment of the Studio Museum as being in part to take pressure off of downtown museums, especially MoMA, to provide exhibitions and programming that would appeal to New York's non-white audiences. Howardena Pindell, interview with Camille Billops, April 21, 1980, Audio-visual recording, Billops-Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

[2] Pindell has recounted this experience in several interviews including Howardena Pindell, interview with Kellie Jones, April 2, 1989, Audio-visual recording, Billops-Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. This specific phrasing is quoted in Hilarie Sheets, "The Changing Complex Profile of Black Abstract Painters," *Art News* 113, no. 6 (June 2014): 62.

[3] For instances of these calls from the Black Arts Movement, see Margaret Burroughs, "To Make a Painter Black," in *The Black 70s*, ed. Floyd B. Barbour (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1970), 129–37; Jeff Donaldson, "Africobra: African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, 10 in Search of a Nation," *Black World* 19, no. 12 (October 1970): 80–89; Tom Lloyd, ed. *Black Art Notes* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971); Emory Douglas, "On Revolutionary Art," *The Black Panther,* January 5, 1970, 5; and Larry Neal, "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation," *Ebony* 24, no. 10 (August 1969): 54–58, 62..

[4] On this topic see Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in The Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Katy Siegel, "Another History Is Possible," in *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975,* ed. Katy Siegel (New York: Independent Curators International, 2006), 29–91.

people's subjection in the West; it is through abstracting processes that dehumanization, stereotype, and historical exclusion occur.[5]

As modernism's pertinence to advanced artistic practices came under widespread scrutiny amid the rise of the Black Arts Movement and a coincident ascendency of conceptual practices, Pindell made the risky, perhaps counter-intuitive, decision to embrace modernist abstraction. The first bodies of work she produced in New York, shortly after graduating with an MFA in painting from Yale, indicate that she saw tremendous opportunity in modernism despite the expectation that black artists could not meaningful engage with it. Her commentary on how and why she turned to abstraction in 1967 suggests that she understood modernism as affording her the opportunity to make her own deeply personal vision of the world legible in a public context, as a formalist proposition. The young artist conceptualized her abstract vocabulary as emerging from a process of drawing "inward," an account that follows a widely held view of modernism as an aesthetic project hinged on interiority.[6] However, what she found and produced from this inward place countered the modernist expectation that she should aspire to an art "refracted by subjectivity itself," that is, subjectivity beyond its social construction through specific gendered and racial positions.[7]

Rather, Pindell engaged modernist painting as a site of interiority *and* understood interior life as being in part formed and marked by social conditions that include racial and gendered categorizations. This is not to say that Pindell understood her social position as a black woman as determinative of her artistic practice—indeed her choice to work abstractly in the context of the late 1960s suggests otherwise. She did, however, conceive of her abstract art as inflecting individual experiences and beliefs that could not be jettisoned from the realities of a social world that assigned certain meanings, constraints, and possibilities to her as a black woman and as an artist. I argue that in this context, Pindell's greatest contribution to modernism was to authorize her own modernist vision using both autobiographic valences that spoke to her social positions and forms that seemingly exceeded social discourse. In other words, she insisted that modernism was relevant and useful to her as a black woman.

While Pindell's immediate artistic concerns were largely formal, and in a certain sense, removed from the political debates of the era, urgent socio-political projects historically frame her production. In the late 1960s, two interrelated ideas gained purchase in New York artist-activist circles. The first, promoted by critics associated with the feminist art and Black Art movements alike, contended that modernism and its attendant aesthetic modes were not only ill-equipped to address pressing social concerns, but also irrevocably tethered to a subject position that was both white and male.[8] At the same time, artists began voicing frustrations that New

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[5] Phillip Brian Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 56, 62. Harper contends that not only is abstraction the process through which African Americans were constituted as an enslaveable entity, but it is also through a process of abstraction that personhood has historically been defined as white, ruling-class, and male.

[6] Howardena Pindell, interview with Helen Ramsaran, in *High Times, Hard Times*, 105. For instance, see Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[7] Darby English, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 48.

[8] See, for instance, Amiri Baraka, "Counter Statement to Whitney Ritz Bros," in *Black Art Notes,* 10; and Lucy Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s," *Art Journal* (Fall/Winter 1980): 362. On the parallels and intersections of the Black Arts Movement and feminist art movement, see Lisa Gail Collins, "The Art of Transformation: Parallels in the Black Arts and

York's major art institutions failed to represent the range and vitality of practices occurring right at their front doors. The rampant racial and gender discrimination of New York's art institutions was a central concern of artist-activist groups such as the Art Workers' Coalition and the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition.[9] Through her artistic and museums careers, Pindell was intimately familiar with each, contributing to their efforts in her own way, and benefitting from the gains of civil rights era and artist-activist organizing through increased, though still profoundly uneven, exhibition opportunities.

Ironically, it was only after her arrival in New York, when she was first exposed to "Black art," that Pindell began working abstractly.[10] Well aware that her decision to do so ran counter to demands of movement leaders, Pindell also knew the odds were against her in the galleries and museums "downtown." In this chapter, I focus on the specific formalist means she developed to situate her work consciously in a lineage of modernist painting despite these adverse conditions. These strategies included her use of color, savvy engagement with the grid, and thematization of spatial ambiguity on the surfaces of her canvases. I give particular attention to her understudied engagements with formal concerns inherited from a U.S. American tradition of "post-painterly abstraction" or late modernist painting.[11] The geometric and boldly colorful works of artists such as Kenneth Noland and Larry Poons encouraged Pindell's experimentations with staining and explorations of the relationship between pictorial depth and surface and the role of the artist's hand in painting.[12] These themes bear especially on her spray-painted canvases of 1970 to 1972 (fig. 1.02).

The immense measure of fortitude and conviction required to pursue one's modernist project amid the antagonisms Pindell faced as a black woman working in the late 1960s motivates my attention to the formal vocabulary of the paintings, to which she so ardently applied her efforts. Recent scholarship, notably work by art historian Darby English, has critiqued the ways in which black artists working in abstraction have been cast as aberrant, deluded, or complicit in their own oppression. Despite this uptick in scholarship, black artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s continue rarely to be understood as modernists, and black women even less frequently so.[13] (English, for instance, gives only passing attention to any woman artist in his *1971*.) I therefore foreground the significance of Pindell's participation and contributions to modernisms of this era, offering the first extended scholarly account of her work as a

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Feminist Art Movements," in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, eds. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

[9] For instance, the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition responded to the Metropolitan Museums of Art's failure to exhibit or involve contemporary, Harlem-based artists in the landmark exhibition *Harlem on My Mind* in 1969.

[10] Despite the promotion of abstraction in the painting department at Yale, she worked figuratively during the MFA program. See Oral history interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[11] For an influential account of "post painterly abstraction" see Clement Greenberg, "Post Painterly Abstraction," in *Post Painterly Abstraction* (Los Angeles: F. Hensen Co, 1964), 5–8.

[12] Howardena Pindell, interview with Joseph Jacobs, *Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University, 1985), 35; Oral history interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[13] English, *1971*; Mark Godfrey, "Notes on Black Abstraction," in *Soul of a Nation,* eds. Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley (London: Tate, 2017), 147–90; Kellie Jones, "To the Max: Energy and Experimentation," in *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964–1980* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006), 14–34.

modernist, and focusing on the period most often overlooked in the growing literature on her dynamic oeuvre.

Art history's reticence to address Pindell and her work as modernist is especially striking in light of her training and institutional affiliation. Yale was well-known as a training ground for late modernist painters when Pindell attended—for instance, one of her painting instructors was Al Held, and the abstract painters Peter Bradley and William T. Williams each graduated the year after her.[14] Her education was steeped in modernist principles of medium specificity (she graduated with a degree in painting). Yale's courses promoted abstract work, focusing on pictorial elements such as color and composition.[15] Within a few months of graduating with her MFA, Pindell entered another vaunted modernist institution, joining the staff at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, then widely regarded as the privileged home of U.S. and European modernisms. Over the first several years of her professional career, she drew inspiration from the myriad accounts of modernism on display there. Indeed, there were many modernisms available to Pindell in the late 1960s, and she made use of idioms from several of its seemingly conflicting versions—for instance, both what art historian Helen Molesworth has called "the self-expressivity, and perhaps the vulgarity, of Abstract Expressionism," and "the stringency of the grid's refusal or renunciation of language."[16] Rather than locating Pindell's early abstraction in a particular modernist narrative, I draw attention to how her work *moved* in modernism, drawing on forms and techniques from a resplendently animated New York cultural milieu in which experimental approaches to modernism were common.

Perhaps the most enduring facet of Pindell's modernist practice was the belief that, as English has argued, art had value as a site marked by possibility rather than necessity.[17] One of the aims of this chapter is to privilege the choices Pindell made with respect to modernism, in defiance of feminist as well as black cultural denunciations.[18] By attending to her subtle movements as a modernist, we might reinvigorate the critical force of her early work, and reconsider both the expansiveness of abstraction and the agency artists have brought to modernist protocols. When we embrace the ambivalence with which artists have regarded critical discourse, and the complex, even contradictory, ways in which they have addressed modernisms, we foster art historical narratives that are dialogical and in which artists are seen as making choices that matter.

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[14] As I will show, it was in part Yale's reputation as a training ground for late modernist painting that attracted Pindell to it. See especially Oral history interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[15] This is made clear in Pindell's MFA thesis, where she discusses her progress in bringing greater attention to color and composition in her paintings. Howardena Pindell, "Problems Encountered and Posed in My Development as a Painter," 1967, Yale University Records, School of Art, New Haven, CT.

[16] Helen Molesworth, "Painting with Ambivalence," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, eds. Cornelia Butler and Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 438.

[17] English writes that "art affords a space, maybe the *one* space in which possibility trumps necessity." English, *1971,* 39.

[18] Art historian Anne Wagner has noted that feminist theory, in its antipathy toward modernism, "has helped to obscure just those protocols that have made modernism a serviceable, downright expressive choice for female artists." Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 16.

The earliest body of Pindell's abstract works juxtapose a grid with a field of circles and ellipses to create a shallow sense of depth (fig. 1.03). She worked in this mode in both paintings and drawings in 1968 and 1969, alternatingly experimenting with loose marks in works such as the irregularly shaped unstretched canvas of *Space Frame* (1969) and more rigid forms in the graphite on graph paper work *Space Frame* (1968) (figs. 1.04 and 1.05).[19] These approaches to abstraction related to contemporary practices around geometric abstraction, conceptual art, and an emergent field of post-minimalism. In addition to these artistic valences, Pindell conceived of her early abstractions in terms of her personal history and worldview, both of which had been shaped in part by social realities such as racial discrimination. In this section, I examine how the artist used abstract forms with implicit autobiographical significance to authorize her earliest contributions to modernist abstraction.

Two formal elements consistently appear in Pindell's abstract works from her earliest experimentations in 1968 through the 1970s—the circle and the grid. Each of these simple forms took on different meanings throughout this decade, and the artist's stated reasons for anchoring her practice in them have changed over the years as well. What has remained consistent, I argue, is that Pindell has understood the forms she used as both personally meaningful and aesthetically legible beyond those personal meanings. Viewing Pindell's earliest abstract paintings alongside the artist's statements, I contend that her case is paradigmatic of a generation of abstract painters working in the 1960s and 1970s who understood form and social meaning as mutually imbricated, but nonetheless insisted on the unique capacities of art to open possibilities foreclosed in the social world.

Pindell's accounts of her interest in the circle as a predominant formal element of her paintings and drawings swing from an argument for primary, even universal form to an anecdote about racial segregation.[20] In an interview conducted in the late 1970s, Sally Swenson asked the artist if her use of the circle might be meaningful vis-à-vis feminist art critic Lucy Lippard's theory of the form as a "reminder of women's center in their art."[21] Pindell was familiar with this theory of "women's center," a term that implied the womb. She was at this point good friends with Lippard and knew her work, which was a frequent subject of discussion in feminist circles, such as the all-women collective gallery A.I.R. that Pindell had co-founded.

Nonetheless, Pindell responds by telling Swenson that she "tr[ies] not to read too much," indicating her reluctance to merge her aesthetic language with a critic's sense of gendered form. The artist then says that her "attachment" to the shape comes from her particular way of seeing "nature": "I thought of the circle in other terms. To me it's the simplest form. Our eyes are round; we don't have square eyes. Somehow it's primary for me…The earth is round…When gravity works, you get a mass that's circular…the sun is round and the stars are seen as points of

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[19] This work was stretched on a canvas for Pindell's 2018 retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

[20] See for instance, Howardena Pindell, interview with Sally Swenson, in *Lives and Works: Talks with Women Artists*, eds. Lynn F. Miller and Sally S. Swenson (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1981), 136; Pindell, interview with Ramsaran, 105; Howardena Pindell, interview with Andrianna Campbell, "1000 Words: Howardena Pindell," *Artforum* 56, no. 6 (Feb. 2018): 155.

[21] Pindell, interview with Swenson, 136. Swenson may have been referring to Lippard's tenuous postulations in either the introduction to *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: Dutton, 1976) or *26 Contemporary Women Artists* (Ridgefield, CT: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 1971).

light. I see everything as energy represented by little circles that move at a certain velocity."[22] For Pindell, the circle is primary—the basis of seeing (through round eyes), the shape that supports our bodies and lived environment (the earth), and the source of earthly light and energy (the sun).

Pindell suggests throughout the interview that she learned how to see in this way from looking at "nature."[23] Here, she uses the term "nature" in an expansive way, to refer to natural phenomenon such as celestial bodies, birds, plants, and microbes, but eventually this concept spirals out to "everything" that she sees. Rather than stemming from knowledge about the field of physics, Pindell is quick to point out, her theory of energetic perception arose from childhood encounters, experiences through which she began to learn how the world was organized. Her father took her on nature walks. She had a microscope through which she could examine microcosms, "like drinking water under high magnification."[24] Circles do not appear in Pindell's work because she is a woman, as Swenson's question suggests, but because the form seemed to her foundational to cosmic structures. In the context of her art, the circle could formally convey her idiosyncratic way of internally visualizing the energetic forces and masses that comprise the universe.

Ellipses, or ovals, also appear frequently in the early abstract paintings. In most instances, they accompany circles. The relationship between the two shapes suggests alternating states of stasis and movement, as if the ellipses depict circles on the move, distended by their propulsion. Two examples of Pindell's early abstract work, *Untitled* (c. 1968) and *Untitled* (1969) contain no circles at all, but a dense field of ovals (figs. 1.06 and 1.07). In each of these paintings, the ellipses are arranged in groups that share an orientation, their narrower ends pointed in the same directions. This lends the composition a sense of directional movement or energy. The later example has a rich aquamarine ground overlain by two sets of transparent ovals, one in a light and the other in a dark wash (fig. 1.08). These shapes overlap, forming a web of contrasting directional energies that evoke oceanic undulations and the play of light through bodies of water. This 1969 painting stands out amid Pindell's work of these years. It lacks a grid and its uninterrupted deep hues differ from the pop colors of other paintings she was making. The painting portends the more somber tone, the use of "veils" of color, and the recession of the grid that Pindell would ardently pursue in spray-painted works for the following three years. Despite her compelling early use of the ellipse as a repeatable formal element, it would be the circle alone that she would carry through her oeuvre of the 1970s.

When asked about her prolonged attachment to the circle, Pindell has frequently spoken about an encounter during which she was "scared to death by one," not one of the pedagogical vignettes of her childhood (such as looking through a microscope).[25] Driving through Northern Kentucky on their way to visit family in the early 1950s, when Pindell was around ten years old, she and her father stopped at a drive-thru for root beer floats. When she finished her road trip treat, the young Pindell discovered a red circle on the bottom of her mug. Her father explained that the mark indicated that the mug was for use by "colored" customers, and that it reflected a

[22] Pindell, interview with Swenson, 136.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 137.
[25] "Abstraction or Essence: Three African-American Perspectives," June 17, 1997, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Sound Recordings, 97.29a. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

broader culture of segregation that affected how black Americans could travel, where they could sleep or eat on the road.[26]

The experience of being literally, though surreptitiously marked in this way—as an "other" whose bodily contact needed to be contained—stuck with Pindell through adulthood. She had grown up in Philadelphia, a city whose neighborhoods Pindell recalls being segregated, where "you knew when you stayed in your neighborhood you were safe but…when you crossed that boundary you weren't safe. No one was there to protect you. Safety was in the community."[27] By the early 1960s, the elite high school Pindell attended had begun to integrate, but vestiges of segregation remained in the city.[28] In 1960, she joined students involved in the Philadelphia Youth Committee Against Segregation to picket Woolworth's counters in predominantly black neighborhoods of the city.[29] Inspired by the Greensboro sit-ins, the group protested Woolworth's racially discriminatory policies.[30]

Despite her lived familiarity with segregation, the road trip incident in particular stayed with Pindell for many years. We might imagine that the experience of being in a new place whose racial codes were not immediately legible instilled her with an acute and traumatic sense of danger. As an adult, she purchased a mug of her own and painted a red circle on it, feeling that recreating the traumatizing object might help "take the sting out" of the experience.[31] Eventually, she would come to see the roadside encounter with racial segregation as a primary motive of what she has called her "obsession" with the circle.[32]

In addition to these individual associations, the circle also could be used to signify in relation to artistic and cultural conversations. For instance, the round has been ubiquitous in modernist painting. Artist Betty Blayton, one of the few black women Pindell met at MoMA, made circular shaped canvases stained in jewel tones in the 1960s and 1970s (fig. 1.09).[33] Jasper Johns and Kenneth Noland, each of whom Pindell has cited as influences, made extensive use of the circle, specifically the bullseye, as pop-inflected compositional device.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the circle also was redolent of the worldview espoused by proponents of the U.S. ecology movement, who emphasized the interconnectedness of natural and manmade phenomena.[34] The circle became an important symbol of this "whole systems

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[26] Many black Americans relied on *The Negro Motorist Green Book,* first published in 1936 by New York mail carrier Victor Hugo Green, to identify food and lodging amenable to nonwhite customers amid the hostility and uncertainty of Jim Crow travel. On the physical markers of segregation in the Jim Crow South see Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Time: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

[27] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.

[28] Oral history interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[29] Howardena Pindell, interview with the author, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, April 2017.

[30] Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 98. See also "Pickets Empty Woolworth's At Peak Store Hours," *Philadelphia Tribune*, February 23, 1960.

[31] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.

[32] Pindell, "Artist's Statement," *High Times, Hard Times*, 105.

[33] The women both worked on the Byers Committee, discussed below. Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.

[34] Touchstone texts that helped to inspire the "whole systems thinking" espoused within the ecology movement include Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (Urbana–Champaign:

thinking," which was frequently expressed by images of planet Earth. Demands for photographs of the "whole earth" amid the space explorations of the 1960s reflected the beliefs that humans had a moral imperative to care for the planet, and that a photographic document of Earth from space would offer compelling visual evidence of humans' shared destiny, spurring its citizens to take ecological and socio-political action.[35] While there is little proof to suggest that the politics of the ecology movement were at the front of Pindell's mind when she introduced the circle to her abstract paintings, we might understand her conceptualization of the circle as universal structure as having been informed in part by this prominent cultural valence. Certainly, her ability to find small circles of energy in everything from the microscopic organisms visible under a microscope to planetary masses resonates with ecologists' conceptualizations of the earth as a series of interdependent and structurally analogous systems.

These examples illustrate the diverse meanings Pindell may have encountered with the geometric form. The disparate nature of the associations drawn from her own biography suggests that the artist valued the circle as an artistic form in part for its ambivalence and range. Further, the ability of the circle to signify so broadly and yet so specifically in Pindell's life indicates that she thought of the meanings adhering to personal experiences, social codes, and even cosmic structures as inextricable from one another.

Shortly after launching her abstract practice, the artist reflected that her development of a non-figurative visual vocabulary had entailed a turning inward, a decision to paint "from within."[36] When Pindell moved to New York and began her day job at MoMA, she started painting in her studio at night, without the benefit of natural light. In the absence of adequate illumination, she "became tired of depending on things outside" and no longer arranged still life objects to render them in paint (during her years at Yale, she most frequently used a human skeleton for these purposes).[37] Instead, in an interior, she conjured forms from her own imagination.

Alongside this need to find artistic subject matter in the "internal" world of the mind, Pindell's two accounts of circular form suggest an interest in abstraction as a personally, psychically driven endeavor. In each instance, the circle emerges as artistic matter from formative childhood experiences, though they demonstrate clear differences in mood and socio-political meaning. Pindell's complementary theories of her artistic use of the circle suggest that she thought of her lived experiences as authorizing her abstract, modernist practice. The shape emerged as an important element of her unique artistic vision because her individual experiences had consistently led her to imbue the circle with meaning. When Pindell looked "inward" in the late 1960s, she found abstract forms that she could wield to position her work in dialogue with late modernist painting.

Color

Southern Illinois University Press, 1969); Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1954).

[35] In 1966, Stewart Brand, founder of the *Whole Earth Catalog,* initiated a public campaign to pressure NASA to release satellite photographs of Earth as seen from space. See Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[36] Oral history interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[37] Ibid.

I.

In the spring of 1965, Pindell newly encountered what she called "an entire radical way of seeing," one that alerted her to the existence of a fundamentally different use and definition of painting and that planted the seeds for her early abstract practice.[38] This transformative experience occurred at an exhibition entitled *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella* at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University. Michael Fried, then a junior fellow in the art history and architecture department at Harvard, had organized the show as "…a comprehensive statement of abstract art of the mid-sixties."[39] The nineteen paintings on view were brightly colored, entirely non-representational, large, and were unlike any painting Pindell had seen.[40] This eye-opening encounter, I contend, catalyzed her early interest in modernist abstraction. When she began working abstractly several years later, she took up some of the signal concerns of the late modernist painting on view at the Fogg, most especially through her use of color in stained, spray-painted canvases.

Pindell's deliberate and skillful use of color constituted one of her primary artistic investigations as an emerging modernist. Her approach to color in the spray-painted canvases especially exemplified a modernist concern for spatial ambiguity. This spatial theme also related to the discursive position in which Pindell found herself as a black woman modernist. The paintings pushed against artistic projects (whether emerging from modernism or the Black Arts Movement) that would "locate" her in a fixed position in relation to competing aesthetic categories. This discursive maneuver was not the primary function Pindell intended for her paintings—they are first and foremost objects for visual contemplation.

On view at *Three American Painters* were striped shaped canvases by Stella, such as the rainbow-hued *Cipango*; jewel-tone color washes by Olitski, and Noland's pop-colored chevrons (fig. 1.10). Each artist's contribution offered a dramatic departure from the version of painting Pindell was then studying in the fine arts program at Boston University, where she was pursing an undergraduate degree.[41] At Boston, which she later derided for what she saw as its bland traditionalism, only the tasks of articulating muscles and rendering objects' dimensionality mattered.[42] According to Pindell, "composition was a dirty word," "the total painting was not important at all" and neither was color.[43] *Three American Painters* presented precisely these aspects—composition, concern for the full physical surface of the painting, and color—as the privileged sites of interrogation of the most advanced art in the country. It asked its viewers to contend with pared down geometric shapes, color juxtapositions, and the paintings' ground in works absent any apparent markers of the artist's brush. While Pindell would continue to work

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Robert E. Abrams, "3 Modern American Painters," *The Harvard Crimson*, April 30, 1965, n.p. See also Michael Fried, introduction to *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella,* [1965] (New York: Garland Publishing, 1978), 3–53. The essay was also printed as "Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 213–65. Subsequent citations will use page numbers from this printing.

[40] Each work on view measured at least six feet in height. Abrams, "3 Modern American Painters," n.p.

[41] Oral history interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[42] Ibid. See also Pindell, interview with Swenson, 133; Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.

[43] Oral history interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

figuratively for several years, the exhibition inspired her to apply for the MFA program in painting at Yale, where she knew she would get a different kind of education, one more in line with the artistic visions displayed at the Fogg.[44]

Fried, the show's curator, had anticipated his exhibition would generate a new kind of viewing experience for the majority of its viewers. The pedagogical tone of his catalogue essay aids readers through the difficult task of beginning to develop the "visual skills" necessary to understand the new painting, and is echoed in reviews of the exhibition.[45] One reviewer cautions visitors that they will need to "accustom" themselves to the new images, and advises them foremost to spend a substantial amount of time before the canvases.[46]

Despite these claims to the cutting edge, as art historian Courtney J. Martin has noted, *Three American Painters* was the final major exhibition of the 1960s to present a second generation of U.S. American abstract painters as a "newly minted attraction."[47] These artists broke from certain protocols of Abstract Expressionism, but persisted in its commitments to the uniqueness of inspired authorial vision and the primacy of painting as the site of advanced art. Dubbed "post-painterly abstraction" by art critic Clement Greenberg, the new modernist painting was characterized by an "investigative" approach to color, a consistently large scale, an absence of gestural brush marks, and the assertion of the painterly ground through shaped canvases or other means.[48]

By the time *Three American Painters* debuted in 1965, formal modernist painting had lost the purchase of its claim as the singularly advanced artistic contribution of the U.S. Many of its artistic concerns already had been taken up by simultaneously developing movements. Most notably, minimalism had removed the artist's hand and asserted the material facts of the art object to such a degree that for some, Fried included, it threatened the proper function of art-viewing as an elevating endeavor.[49] Pindell would develop her abstract vocabulary from the entangled sources, including post-minimalist, feminist, and conceptual forms, that characterized much of advanced art in New York in the late 1960s. However, in the first years of her career as an abstractionist, her most salient references were the geometric and atmospheric compositions of late modernist painting.

Pindell received her first opportunity to exhibit a group of abstract works in November 1971, at the age of 28, four years into her curatorial career at MoMA. She presented four drawings and five spray-painted abstractions on stretched canvas in a two-person show at Spelman College in Atlanta.[50] The black women's college was the first significant site of exhibition for Pindell's art, helping to launch her career as a modernist. Displayed in the John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Fine Arts Building, the exhibition attracted little critical attention, although it

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[44] Ibid.
[45] Fried, "Three American Painters," 214.
[46] Abrams, n.p.
[47] Courtney J. Martin, "The Re-selection of Ancestors: Genealogy and American Abstraction's Second Generation," in *Energy/Experimentation*, 82.
[48] Greenberg, 8; See also, Martin, 83.
[49] See especially, Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," [1967] in *Art and Objecthood,* 148–72.
[50] See the exhibition booklet, *Paintings and Drawings By Howardena Pindell and Vincent Smith, November 7–21, 1971* (Atlanta: The Coordinated Art Program of the Atlanta University Center, 1971), in Evans-Tibbs Collection, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, DC.

allowed the artist to show a much larger number of her works than she had in the competitive gallery scene of New York.[51]

Curated by Hans Bhalla, Acting Chairman of Spelman's Art Department, the exhibition formed part of the Atlanta University Center Coordinated Art Program, which brought the work of a cadre of renowned black artists to campus between 1967 and 1979.[52] In the years immediately surrounding Pindell's show, the program hosted exhibitions of work by important black artists: Harlem Renaissance painter Charles Alston, Brooklyn-based sculptor John W. Rhoden, Jamaican painter Barrington Watson, and rising Black Arts star and BECC co-founder Benny Andrews.[53] The program, spearheaded by Bhalla, also offered opportunities for lesser-known artists to exhibit their work.[54] Pindell, then little-known outside of a small circle of colleagues, showed alongside New York artist Vincent Smith, who was in the early stages of his career.

Through this robust roster, Bhalla made Spelman into an important site of inquiry into the nature of "Black art" amid a period of cultural production that saw the proliferation and contestation of that term. Over the course of the program's lifespan, it hosted Herman "Kofi" Bailey, Floyd Coleman, Sam Gilliam, Lloyd McNeil, and Freddie Styles, allowing Spelman to acquire works by these artists for its art museum's collection. In 1971, Regenia Perry, who was the first African American woman to hold a PhD in art history (University of Pennsylvania, 1965), gave a talk titled "Africa Vs Afro-American Art" as part of the AUC arts programming.[55] The array of ideas, mediums and aesthetics presented at Spelman in these years—sculpture, painting, and drawing, social realism, abstraction, and folk-inspired art—suggests that Bhalla saw the program as an opportunity to expose the AUC's students to black artists' wide ranging approaches.

Given this expansive view of Black art, Spelman ostensibly offered Pindell an amenable site for the debut of her early abstractions. She presented all-over compositions comprised of layers of innumerous small circles (fig. 1.02). One reviewer favorably compared the works to the "very sophisticated work" of Abstract Expressionist painter Mark Tobey.[56] Pindell made the paintings on view by spraying acrylic paint through hole-punched templates and repeating this process dozens of times, until she had generated a field of colors.[57] In a photograph taken at her studio in Westbeth Artist Housing in Manhattan, where she began living in the housing project's

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[51] There is a brief, favorable review of the exhibition, titled "At Spelman," printed in the December 2, 1971 issue of *Atlanta Journal*. Clyde Burnett, "Burnett on Art," *Atlanta Journal*, Dec. 2, 1971, 2-F. Inexplicitly, there are no reviews of the show in either the student newspaper or the campus newsletter, both of which regularly printed reports on campus goings-on such as concerts and social gatherings. See Spelman College archives. Unfortunately, there are no known photographs of the exhibition.

[52] "Collection Highlights," *Spelman College Museum of Fine Arts,* July 27, 2013, museum.spelman.org/collection-highlights/.

[53] See relevant issues of *Spelman Messenger,* May 1971; Nov. 1971; Feb. 1972; May 1972. Spelman College Archives.

[54] On at least one occasion, a Spelman College undergraduate senior received a one-woman exhibition in the Fine Arts Building Galleries. The Nov. 1972 issue of *Spelman Messenger* lists an exhibition of works by senior Gwen Ferguson to be held Dec. 1–13, 1972.

[55] *Spelman Messenger,* May 1971, 43.

[56] Burnett, 2-F.

[57] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.

inaugural year, 1970, Pindell is pictured working a spray-painted canvas (fig. 1.11).[58] The protective respirator around her face, the spray "gun" she holds with gloved hands, and the template mediate her physical contact with the surface of her painting. Nonetheless, she works very close to her canvas, applying pressure with her left hand to the template so that it lies completely flush against the painting's ground. Pindell also physically engaged in her painting process in the fabrication of her templates. She used a handheld single-hole punch to laboriously make the incisions. The apparent remove of markers of the handmade from the surface of the finished works belies the physical intimacy and effort that went into their production.

On the large stretched canvas of *Untitled*, one of the paintings shown at Spelman, vermillion dots seem to float above a mass of deeper hues, including blue, burgundy, and violet (fig. 1.02). Small areas of steel blue stand out from a distance as well, particularly on the right-hand side and in the center of the canvas. A closer look at the painting reveals, despite the illusion, that these tones were not sprayed on top of the deeper colors; dark violet and navy-blue points accumulate over many of the brighter circles (fig. 1.12). From afar the painting is atmospheric, its particles dissolved into an indivisible and all-over tonal mass. Within a few feet of the work, the surface variation becomes more apparent and spots emerge from the field. Still, the cohesiveness of the composition holds, the enmeshed dots forming a visual cloth or web.

Close to the painting, we see nothing but layers of colored dots. Blurred edges indicate that the circles were stained onto an unprimed canvas. Occasional glimpses of light tones might be views of the cloth, but never resolve as such. The effect of the painting at this nearness is somewhat jarring. Where we expect to find a ground, perhaps a background or other kind of painterly support for the dots that emerged at midrange, we see instead an incessant repetition of indefinite shapes. The circles' leaky borders and semi transparency (for the paint was thinly applied) give the entire composition an air of diffusion, as though we cannot firmly or precisely locate the individual circles. Areas of relative light and dark seen from afar indicate a sort of painterly gesture and compositional intentionality; the artist must have applied the corresponding tones to those sections with deliberation. At close range, however, this sense of cause-and-effect dissipates. We see no signs of the artist's hand or of compositional order, only the repetitive proliferation of a simple shape in contrasting hues. The canvas leaves the viewer adrift in color.

Pindell's use of the technique of staining allowed her to achieve the atmospheric veils of dots and sense of spatial ambiguity that characterize the spray-painted works. The thinly applied layers of paint seeped directly onto the surface of the unprimed canvas, so that the texture of the textile was left visible through the colored paint. She had been introduced to the way staining draws attention to the flat surface of painting in *Three American Painters.* Noland's and Olitski's works on view were stained. The slightly irregular edges and saturation of Noland's stained chevrons breathe subtle variation into his striking forms, while Olitski used staining to create immersive color fields pocked by occasional dabs or stripes. In each of these three artists' works, their stained, matte surfaces avoid visible buildup of paint on the canvas. Aside from the color, stain and canvas ground are "indistinguishable," seemingly integrated and seamless.[59]

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[58] Pindell, interview with Ramsaran, 105. The spray-gun became a popular implement for painting in New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Artists including Dan Christensen, Jane Kaufman, Olitski, and Lawrence Stafford took it up as a tool for controlling their paint's application and mediating direct traces of their hand.

[59] Fried, "Three American Painters," 230.

Fried, for his part, understood staining as a technique by which one might make paintings that "address themselves to eyesight alone," as in the works of Morris Louis.[60] His catalogue essay places Noland's and Olitski's staining practices in a lineage with Louis's "optical" paintings. Opticality, the isolation of visual perception, was a primary concern for Fried's account of recent tendencies in advanced art of the mid-1960s, and formed the foundation of his version of modernism's highest achievements. Significantly, Fried posited opticality in opposition to tactility and to marks of the artist's hand. The stained edge, Fried writes, "…conveys the strong impression of not having been circumscribed by a cursive, draftsmanlike gesture. It resists being read as *drawn.*"[61] Further, staining softens contours, which would "[invite] one's touch."[62]

We can understand Pindell's use of staining partially in relationship to Fried's notion of modernist opticality, and the lineage of painters beginning with Abstract Expressionism that used the technique, as Rosalind Krauss has argued, as "a way of avoiding the violence of a hardened contour."[63] The small circles of Pindell's canvases slightly seep and bleed into one another. Both the blurred edges of stained circles and the layers of application obscure the precise boundaries of individual forms. The tactile properties of paint are obfuscated by its matte finish and thin layers. Paint dissolves into color.

Although staining generally mutes the tactile properties of paint, the process often leaves visible the texture of a painting's canvas surface. Thus, staining can be understood as a method of revealing and exploring the textile basis of modernist painting. Pindell emphasized the textile logic of her stained canvases in an example, *Untitled* (1971), that uses crease-like lines to create a sense of texture (fig. 1.13). These folds draw attention to the textile ground of the painting and evoke the stained, draped canvases that Washington, DC painter Sam Gilliam was making in the early 1970s, and with which Pindell was familiar by 1971 (fig. 1.14). In Gilliam's paintings, the sculptural drapes and folds of loosely hung canvas obscure the painted surface and activate a three-dimensional viewing space. Pindell's use of creases raises questions about the process by which they and the painting were made—are they illusionistic marks added as the paint dried? Or did the artist scrunch the canvas just before or after applying the paint? The textural effect complicates the optical thrust of the sprayed circles.

In other examples from the early 1970s, Pindell introduced contour and the illusion of texture to spray-painted canvases, again suggesting that her intent with staining did not center on a purely "optical" effect. A rectangular halo punctuates *Untitled* (1972), marking the off-center area where Pindell had apparently placed a piece of paper or folder before spraying paint around it (fig. 1.15). The straight lines of the shape interrupt the atmospheric field and disturb the viewer's tenuous impression that color had somehow accumulated on the surface according to natural physical properties, without intervention by the artist. By revealing the shape that the template blots out, the rectangle inverts the logic of the sprayed circles whose layering obscures the apparatus, the template, that made their application possible. The rectangle draws attention to the process of its own creation, and thereby destabilizes the optical basis of the painting. In a final example, one of the last spray-painted canvases Pindell would make, paper chads collaged flat onto the canvas give material mass to the spray-painted circles they repeat in size and shape.

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., 229.
[62] Ibid., 248.
[63] Rosalind Krauss, "'Specific' Objects," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 46 (Autumn 2004): 223.

These chads portend Pindell's decades-long engagement with the material, and with collage and texture.

Despite these exceptional spray-painted canvases' implicit concerns for textile, texture, and contour, most of the paintings in this body of work register primarily as meditations on color, surface, and depth. Pindell learned how to use color to dynamic spatial effect during her training in the MFA program at Yale. Under the tutelage of artist Sewell (Si) Sillman, she and her cohort learned the color theory developed by German émigré Josef Albers in the 1950s.[64] Albers's color theory promoted a practice-based understanding of the relative nature of color.[65] The most fundamental observation promoted by Albers is that color "is almost never seen as it really is" and that this makes it "the most relative medium in art."[66] By learning how to see and feel color in its relative forms, rather than acquiring knowledge about a theoretical system, students could develop the skills needed, among other things, to exploit the varying "weights" of hues.[67]

In the spray-painted works, the principle of color weight, or what is typically called value, accounts for the illusion that certain colors float above others. Regardless of the order of application of pigment, many of the lighter circles appear close to the surface of the work, "in front" of deeper colors that recede into pictorial space. The interaction between colors gives the impression of depth—a pictorial depth at tension with the surface emphasis of the unprimed canvas. This sense of spatial depth relies on the contrast of colors. In an example from 1972, for instance, clouds of peach seem to float slightly in front of areas dominated by blues and lavenders (fig. 1.16). The interlacing of blues and oranges in another example from the same year makes it more difficult for the eye to settle on a spatial organization (fig. 1.17). They alternate coming to the surface, shifting as the viewer spends time in front of the canvas. In this way, Pindell expressed her interest in a signal concern of modernist abstraction as it had developed in the U.S. and Europe since the early twentieth century—experimentations with the tension between the flatness of the painted surface and the illusion of pictorial depth.[68]

Further, Pindell's use of disparate hues participated in late modernist experimentations with colors, evoking Olitski's widely-remarked ability to "…prove that literally any colors can be combined successfully."[69] In one example of her spray-painted work, shades of taupe, black, brick red, lavender, and teal evoke an Impressionist palette (fig. 1.16). While the hues within an individual spray-painted composition are diffusely distributed across pastels, neutral tones, and saturated reds, the overall hues, the paintings' first color impressions, tend to be deep and cool, though in a few examples bright pinks or greens predominate. Three of the most widely exhibited paintings from this body of work favor maroon, a color that rarely appears elsewhere in Pindell's oeuvre, and that recalls Mark Rothko's use of dense, deep reds to solemn effect. Another three examples from 1971 initially appear as nearly-black monochromes, their palettes opening up to deep blues and violets with extended viewing.

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[64] SR 97.29a. MoMA Archives, NY. According to Pindell, Sillman presented the same curriculum that Albers had taught in the painting department at Yale in the 1950s.
[65] Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971) [1963].
[66] Ibid., 1.
[67] Ibid., 2.
[68] On this development, see, for instance Clement Greenberg, "Collage," [1959] in *Collage: Critical Views,* ed. Katherine Hoffman (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989), 67–77.
[69] Fried, "Three American Painters," 247.

Pindell applied her knowledge of color theory in order to generate a dynamic viewing experience of her paintings. Although she used contrasting dots of color in the spray-painted works, many of the paintings first register as cohesive fields. This effect is caused by the extensive layering that causes viewers' eyes to blend the distinct hues, the dots' allover application, and Pindell's use of close-value colors, which have similar levels of darkness or lightness. Regardless of hue, close-value colors share similar color weights and appear to merge in space. The result is a variegated field of enmeshed dots. Since many of Pindell's paintings use close-value color in combination with contrasting values, they contain passages where clouds of light color imbue the composition with a sense of shallow depth. The artist has remarked that she was inspired to work with close-value color by a fellow graduate student at Yale, Nancy Murata, who had "started working with Reinhardt's color thing where there's a lot of one color and then you see there is much more."[70]

In tracing her sources for close-value color, Pindell refers to Ad Reinhardt's influential near-monochromatic works of the 1950s, which at first glance appear as monolithic single-hued compositions. As the viewer spends time in front of the canvases, she perceives subtle variations in hue, many compositionally organized along a three-by-three square grid, as in *Number 87* (1957). These paintings ask to be viewed over time. Yve-Alain Bois has argued that Reinhardt's paintings of the late 1950s generate an increasingly long interval between the viewer's perceptions that "…there is nothing to see, then almost nothing."[71] The viewer experiences this interval, Bois contends, "as a 'narrativization' of his own vision."[72] In other words, the hyper-close values of Reinhardt's colors generate the conditions for a viewer to gain awareness of changes over time in her own visual perceptions.

The values in Pindell's works are not nearly as close or as dark as Reinhardt's. But the spray-painted canvases also offer a shift in the viewer's perception of color. From afar, we conjecture that a few deep, cool hues of maroon, blue, and violet, comprise *Untitled* (fig. 1.02). At close range, with individual circles in view, this group multiplies and includes oranges, pastels, and grays. While time is operative in this transformation, as in the one that takes place in front of a painting by Reinhardt, the viewer's proximity to the surface of the work is also significant.

Building on Bois, the spray-painted compositions might be said to "spatialize," as well as "narrativize" our vision and our more broadly physical relation to the paintings. They ask us to move closer, then back again to test our new perceptions against what we can see from a distance. This tension between the scale of the dot, in this case the size of a standard hole punch, and the dimensions of her all-over abstraction would endure as a device in Pindell's paintings through the 1970s, as she moves to more experimental materials and methods of making.

Thus, although Pindell's spray-painted canvases foreground optical effects, they also prompt a choreography of viewing. The constituent dots draw us inward; then the apparent

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[70] Oral history interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. See also Andrea D. Barnwell, "Been to Africa and Back: Contextualizing Howardena Pindell's Abstract Art," *International Review of African American Art* 13, no. 3 (1996): 43. Pindell had been introduced to Reinhardt's work when he visited Boston University's art department when she was an undergraduate there. The visit constituted a unique opportunity to hear from a modernist in a program known for its traditionalism.

[71] Yve-Alain Bois, and Christopher Lyons, trans., "What Is There to See? On a Painting by Ad Reinhardt," *MoMA* 8 (Summer 1991): 3.

[72] Ibid.

mismatch between the color combinations before us and the overall hue of the painting send us back again. We might repeat this process, and perhaps we even identify the moment, or the distance at which, our perception flips from individual dot to the synthesis of many dots. The paintings compose themselves in our engagement with them, and they make us aware of this process.

This choreographic function is underscored by the striking resemblance of Pindell's colorful dot paintings to a noteworthy postmodern dance backdrop. In 1958, Robert Rauschenberg set to work on the décor for a new dance choreographed by Merce Cunningham called *Summerspace*.[73] With the assistance of Jasper Johns, he created a cloth backdrop that flowed onto and covered the stage, spray painting colorful circles directly onto this canvas as well as the leotards and tights the dancers wore (figs. 1.18 and 1.19). Clusters of circles in shades of brown, yellow, green, pink, orange, and blue intermixed to give an atmospheric illusion to the backdrop, which Rauschenberg likened to a jungle.[74] One effect of the camouflage treatment was that the dancers' movements activated the backdrop, imbuing the field of dots through which they moved with a sense of its own motion.[75]

This figure–ground confusion caused Cunningham to remark on the success of the backdrop that even when he walked off stage, he felt like the dance continued.[76] While Pindell was not familiar with *Summerspace* prior to making her spray-painted paintings, they likewise set movement and surface, individual form and collective effect in animated tension. Allover composition is central to these spatial effects. A diffuse, overlapping placement of circles rids the paintings and the backdrop of compositional focus and gives the illusion that the patterns might extend forever in all directions. The repetitive mark making process, nearly "mechanized" by Pindell through the use of stencils, heightens the impression that equal attention and significance has been distributed to all areas of the canvas.

For Pindell, allover composition further signaled a desire to be situated in a modernist discourse around painting, and in a particular lineage emerging from Abstract Expressionism. Jackson Pollock had popularized the compositional technique with his drip paintings in the late 1940s. As Fried has noted, the allover composition allowed Pollock to weave elements together, to create a "homogeneous visual fabric which both invites the act of seeing on the part of the spectator and yet gives the eye nowhere to rest once and for all."[77] Without a place to focus one's attention, the viewer of an allover painting is unable to identify figure–ground or inside–outside relations. For Fried, this left her in "something like pure, disembodied energy," that is, in the realm of the purely "optical."[78]

By contrast, Pindell's paintings extend their interrogation of the figure–ground relationship to the structuring encounter between the figure of the viewer and the art object. Rather than generating a state of "disembodied energy" that is purely "visual," the spray-painted

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[73] On *Summerspace* and its backdrop see Merce Cunningham, *Changes: Notes on Choreography* (New York: Something Else Press, 1968), n.p.; Carolyn Brown, "Summerspace: Three Revivals," *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2002): 74–82; Michelle Potter, "'A License to Do Anything': Robert Rauschenberg and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company," *Dance Chronicle* 16, no. 1 (1993): 1–43.
[74] Brown, 78.
[75] Potter, 9.
[76] Ibid., 11.
[77] Fried, "Three American Painters," 224.
[78] Ibid.

canvases site the figure–ground problem in the viewer's body, which moves toward and away from the canvas as the eye attempts to orient itself to the field of colors. With these compositions, Pindell wielded her coloristic acumen to generate fields of spatial ambiguity that operate visually as well on the viewing body. In the following section, I examine how this commitment to formal ambivalence countered the expectation that her artworks locate themselves in relation to the socio-political project of Black nationalism.

II.

Pindell became a modernist in a period of heightened political stakes around the abstract–figurative binary that had seeped deeply into mid-century accounts of art in the U.S. While her concern for color was primarily formal in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a different, racialist sense of the term dominated the discussions of abstract art produced by black artists in this era.[79] The emergence of the Black Power movement saw a growing public platform for vocal proponents of a cohesive and ideologically driven Black Art, which would serve to bolster the broader politics of Black nationalism.[80] Under the auspices of Black Art, *representation,* in its valences as both aesthetic mode and political goal, was the signal aim of artistic production. This discourse left many of the abstract works of black artists, like Pindell's, adrift in a battlefield of critical negation.

Beginning in the late 1960s, spokespersons of the Black Arts Movement called for art forms that would "[stand] for the spiritual helpmate of the Black Nation."[81] The urgent need for "Revolutionary Cultural Consciousness" required black artists to work collectively to supplant the images, values, and associations of a dominant white American culture with a "capital-B" Black culture.[82] Arbiters of black culture such as poet and eminent Black Arts promoter Amiri Baraka and playwright Larry Neal deemed figurative, explicitly political work as the most expedient means to these ends, because, they believed, these idioms would be most legible to black Americans with a wide variety of cultural experiences, and therefore most useful to the purposes of cultivating a Black culture apart from the white mainstream.[83] African imagery—such as the outline of the continent against pan-African colors in Nelson Stevens's *Jihad Nation*—played an especially important role in these efforts at artistic and political consolidation (fig. 1.20).[84]

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[79] See especially English, *1971,* for a discussion of "color" as both a late modernist and racialist concept and tool.

[80] See GerShun Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Collins and Crawford, eds., *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*; Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movements and 21st Century Black Aesthetics* (Urbana–Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2009); Leigh Raiford, "Attacked First by Sight," in *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2011), 129–208.

[81] Neal, 161.

[82] Ibid., 162.

[83] Ibid.

[84] For a discussion of Stevens, who was a member of the Chicago-based collective AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), and his works, see Barbara Jones-Hogu, "Inaugurating AfriCOBRA: History, Philosophy, and Aesthetics," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 30 (Spring 2012): 90–97.

In this same period, abstract art came to be coded as white, as Black Arts critics downplayed or disregarded "Africa" as a site and source of abstraction. Baraka, for example, argued that "'Non-political' black artists do not actually exist in the black world at all. They are within the tradition of white art."[85] Abstract artists were assigned, with few exceptions, to this category of the "non-political." Baraka's assignment of abstract artists to a "tradition of white art" speaks, of course, to historical conditions. The abstract art on view in New York's museums and galleries indeed overwhelmingly was produced by white artists. In 1969, when Spriggs, the director of the Studio Museum, rejected Pindell's abstract work uptown, black artists and women artists of all races rarely had been given space in museums or galleries downtown. This year, the Whitney extended its first ever invitation for a solo exhibition to a black artist, Al Loving.[86] Alma Thomas received the Whitney's first solo exhibition of a black woman's work in 1972.

Conceptual artist Charles Gaines has reflected that "…part of the black experience of modernism was that historically it was an ideology that helped discriminate against minority inclusion in the art world of the 1960s and 1970s."[87] As the women's liberation movement began to gain traction in the early 1970s, *Time* magazine reported that in 1971, 96.4% of artists shown by "leading" New York galleries were men.[88] Black women were excluded from museums and galleries not only on the basis of each of these individual forms of exclusions, but were underrepresented within the margin of exhibition space given over to black artists, which went primarily to men, and the space for women, the bulk of which went to white artists.[89]

Dominant strains of modernist criticism, which continued to hold sway over New York art institutions in the 1960s and 1970s, even as minimalist and conceptual art forms challenged their hegemony, had for decades forcefully posited a close relationship between abstraction and non-political expression and between figuration and socio-political content.[90] In this sense, modernist abstraction more frequently than not had entered the public sphere as an apparently white and putatively non-political cultural phenomenon. The most renowned modernist critics

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[85] Baraka, "Counter Statement," 10.

[86] Kellie Jones, "'It's Not Enough to Say "Black Is Beautiful"': Abstraction at the Whitney, 1969–1974," in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 158. Jones also notes that although MoMA had given a solo exhibition to a black artist thirty years prior (to William Edmondson in 1937), its second one took place in 1971 when both Romare Bearden and Richard Hunt were given shows and Sam Gilliam received a "Projects" Space exhibition. These occurred in response to artist-activist protests. Pindell has criticized MoMA's handling of the Bearden and Hunt exhibitions on the basis that they were "thrown together." See Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.

[87] Charles Gaines, "Howardena Pindell: Negotiating Abstraction," in *Howardena Pindell: What Remains to Be Seen,* eds. Naomi Beckwith and Valeria Cassel Oliver (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2018), 143.

[88] "Art: Situation Report," *Time Magazine,* Special Issue: The American Woman, March 20, 1971, 77.

[89] Pindell has commented on this mutual exclusion in her own lectures and publications. See especially Howardena Pindell, "Art World Racism: A Documentation," and "Free, White, and 21," in *The Heart of the Question: The Writings and Paintings of Howardena Pindell* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997), 7–18; 65–71.

[90] Clement Greenberg both wrestled with the critical difficulties of this model for understanding the emergence of abstraction and promulgated it in some of his earlier essays. See, for instance, Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," [1939] and "Towards a Newer Laocoön," [1940] in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5–22; 23–37.

and institutions had claimed it as such, either directly, in the case of its presumed apolitical mode, or through racially exclusionary practices.

Moreover, as Harper has argued, abstraction is the central cognitive function of processes of dehumanization that have been detrimental to black Americans.[91] It has underwritten "an exalted generic national personhood"—a white, generally male position—"from which they have typically been excluded."[92] National histories of slavery and practices of caricature and stereotype have relied on the subjection of black Americans to relentless procedures of "representational abstraction."[93] For these reasons, Harper contends, formal abstraction historically has held a place of deep suspicion in black American culture. In light of the longer national history of racialized representational abstraction, we might better understand the debates of the early 1970s as a momentary intensification of long simmering critiques and resistance to a pervasive form of violence.

English has noted that frequent characterizations of abstraction as "irrelevant" to black experience limited the range of officially legitimated artistic means available to black artists, thereby establishing an exclusionary basis for "Black art."[94] Black artists working abstractly were admonished by spokespeople for the Black Arts Movement as lacking political sophistication, or castigated as capitulating to their oppressors' cultural tastes. For instance, Tom Lloyd, who prominently advocated for the political relevancy of his own abstract work, derided Loving and other abstractionists for their participation in the Whitney Museum of American Art's controversial 1971 exhibition *Contemporary Black Artists in America*, referring to them as "non-political 'cooperative' Negro artists whose bowing movements are readily spotted as talent."[95] Pindell participated in the exhibition; it was her first opportunity to show her work in a major New York museum.[96] The heady urgency of the Black Power movement, brought on by state-sponsored violence in the U.S. and Vietnam, led Black Arts proponents to require art and artists to speak directly to a targeted range of concerns. Understated engagements with themes of black experience or African culture, especially if rendered abstractly, rarely registered for critics as Black art.

An example from Pindell's early career is emblematic of the discursive position into which abstract art by black artists was frequently placed in these years. To accompany Pindell's 1971 two-person exhibition at Spelman, curator and faculty member Bhalla wrote a brief text.[97] In it, he establishes the primary curatorial framework for the show—juxtaposition. Pindell's abstract paintings and drawings "belong to the mainstream of the 20th century American art," while the figurative work of fellow New York-based artist Vincent Smith "expresses the disenchantment of only Black people."[98] Smith's works use red and black to give warmth and gravitas to otherwise banal subject matter, as indicated by titles such as *Pot-Belly Stove*, *Clothes Line*, and *Store Front*, all included in the Spelman exhibition. From the outset, Bhalla finds value

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[91] Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics,* 4.
[92] Ibid., 62.
[93] Ibid., 28.
[94] English, *1971*, 16–17.
[95] Tom Lloyd, "Black Art–White Cultural Institutions," 5.
[96] An untitled spray-painted color field painting of 1970 represented Pindell in the exhibition. It is now in the Whitney's permanent collection.
[97] Hans Bhalla, introduction to *Paintings and Drawings by Howardena Pindell and Vincent Smith* (Atlanta: The Coordinated Art Program of the Atlanta University Center, 1971), i-ii.
[98] Ibid., i. All following quotations in this paragraph are taken from this page.

in both artists' work, writing that each use their materials and techniques with "commendable discipline" and "fresh inventiveness." They deal "with their themes with authority and subtle perceptiveness." This framework suggests that Bhalla presented his audience with strikingly differing practices as a way of concisely alluding to the variety of aesthetic approaches being developed by contemporary black artists.

By the end of the brief essay, however, it becomes apparent that the contrast between Pindell's and Smith's works serves foremost to educate gallery visitors in the proper forms and themes of the increasingly publicly visible "Black art." Smith's representations of scenes from black life, in Bhalla's estimation, "reveal something unique" about "black experience and ethnic integrity."[99] A painting of a young man kneeling at a church altar, titled *Easter Sunday*, sets a luminous orange-red background against black architectural armatures to create a compelling, though tenuous, sense of contemplative, stained-glass lit interior space (fig. 1.21). Bhalla opines that these works by Smith "for the most part, reveal anguish and disillusion of Black Americans in a white dominated society."[100] Ultimately, he concludes that this art warrants the label "Black art" because it "rejects the traditionally Western oriented themes of styles" and instead "truly concentrates" on the artist's "own people."

Pindell's spray-painted abstract paintings and drawings serve as a foil to Smith's "Black art," for her works "in no way relate to the themes of Black experiences or Black awareness." Instead, Bhalla identifies varying sources for her art: Poons's work, the colors of "Persian miniatures," and "the dream world of her subconscious." In the essay, this plurality of concerns is taken to indicate Pindell's primary investment in artistic freedom, a commitment at odds with the imperatives of "Black art." Bhalla writes: "Like many other Black artists, she wants to be completely free in choosing her visual statements rather than using one source."[101] The openness of abstraction would seem to forestall politico-aesthetic allegiance to the Black Arts Movement, which, it is implied, constitutes and requires a single "source." Bhalla's text does not address the political stakes of freedom as an artistic project of black Americans, whose rights to basic civil liberties had been contested throughout the 1960s.

An article penned by Bhalla in the February 1972 issue of Spelman's quarterly newsletter, titled "The Dilemma of Afro-American Artists," evinces that he saw the diffuse aesthetics practiced by black artists as an existential threat to the efficacy of Black art.[102] With some black artists embracing social protest and a "straightforward," "primitive" aesthetic, others exploring the representational and thematic imagery of African art, and others still rejecting these various concepts on the basis that "art is universal," "Black art" was in peril of becoming merely "nominal," with "no practical convenience."[103] This accounts for his efforts to preempt the viewer's identification of Pindell's abstraction with "Black art." The article further reveals that Bhalla worried that Black art had yet to develop an expression truly outside "the western idiom," ostensibly a necessary condition for a uniquely Black art form. Despite these reservations, and in contrast to more well-known tracts on Black art, Bhalla's pedagogical tone in the exhibition pamphlet and article offers a diplomatic account of abstraction, judiciously avoiding overt disapproval or an explicit categorization of the aesthetic formation as racially white.

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[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Hans Bhalla, "The Dilemma of Afro-American Artists," *Spelman Messenger* 88, no. 2 (February 1972): 12–17.
[103] Ibid., 16.

It was thanks to the committed activism of artists, writers, and critics that museums began in the late 1960s to devote gallery space to black abstract artists such as Gilliam, Loving, and Thomas. The artist-activism of the early 1970s impacted Pindell's life and early career in both subtle and profound ways, as it threw into question the purpose and proper audiences of major New York art institutions. In 1969, the Art Workers' Coalition formed, asking what artists, audiences, and what public MoMA served. Pindell attended several AWC meetings at the encouragement of Lippard, but was eventually "thrown out" as a result of her institutional affiliation.[104] AWC files in the MoMA archives suggest that the group initially imagined that museum staff would liaise with the activists.[105] Pindell's dismissal from the group under these circumstances suggests that it was not her institutional affiliation alone that motored AWC suspicions, but perhaps its intersection with her race and gender. Thereafter Pindell stopped pursuing membership for several years in this or other outside groups aimed at institutional reform.[106]

Pindell, however, did join efforts within MoMA to redress issues of discrimination. In May 1970, the board of trustees requested a study of "the Museum's role in regard to artists of minority ethnic groups who have expressed serious grievances against major cultural institutions, including museums."[107] The resulting group was known as the Byers Committee, named after its chairman, trustee J. Frederic Byers III. According to Pindell, the request to form the committee came in response to pressure from black artists including Andrews and Williams, who recently had helped to form the BECC.[108]

After an incident in which a prominent museum board member and subcommittee chair, Blanchette Rockefeller, wrote a memo suggesting that there were no black artists qualified to exhibit at MoMA, Pindell lobbied to become a member of the group. She recalled "screaming and yelling" until her demand was met.[109] The working group, which was assisted by black cultural consultant Carroll Greene Jr., reviewed the museum's practices around racial inclusion and, in a report submitted to the board in June 1971, proposed changes to staffing and curatorial and outreach procedures.[110] Pindell's contribution to the international exhibitions subcommittee focused on the museum's collection of prints and illustrated books, which she helped to oversee at the time. Her report, which includes a breakdown of artists' nationalities, foreshadows the statistical research that would undergird her more public art world activism of the 1980s.[111] The subcommittee's seven-point recommendations to the museum place great emphasis on the need to direct resources to the promotion of "African art and culture" within the museum's

[104] Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.
[105] See document titled "List of Committees Formed with Art Workers Coalition, Meeting of November 25, 1969," John B. Hightower Papers, III.1.8. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
[106] Ibid.
[107] "The Byers Committee: Highlights of a Forthcoming Report to the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art," Carroll Greene Papers, unprocessed, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.
[108] Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.
[111] See, for instance, Pindell, "Art World Racism," and "Covenant of Silence," in *Heart of the Question*, 3–28; 32–50.

programming.[112] Pindell would participate actively and benefit from these efforts, traveling to six countries in East and West Africa in 1973 to identify sites for donated art libraries, and taking artistic inspiration from the museum's much touted 1972 exhibition *African Textiles and Decorative Arts.* As a youth growing up in Philadelphia, Pindell notes, she had experienced a cultural "embargo on knowledge related to Africa" as a result of the city's de facto segregation, which coded museums as white spaces.[113] These encounters as an adult would help to transform profoundly her artistic production.

At the same time that Pindell contributed to efforts to reform MoMA, her artistic career benefitted from the wins of fellow artist-activists. Perhaps most notably, examples of her spray-painted canvases appeared in two significant exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971 and 1972. Organized in response to the BECC's demands, the 1971 exhibition *Contemporary Black Artists in America* was part of a twelve-show series (1969–1974) intended to correct the glaring racial inequities entrenched in the museum's practices.[114] In theory, it participated in a broader effort to incorporate black art, black curatorial input, and black scholarship into the Whitney's programs.[115] The exhibition, along with six solo shows given to black artists working primarily in abstraction, pointed to the museum's commitment to a more expansive notion of what constituted "black art" in an era that saw many attempts to narrow that category.[116]

Contemporary Black Artists, however, opened to controversy and received poor reviews. A full six months prior to the opening, black artists slated to appear in the show began protesting the museum's "abandonment of critical and intellectual responsibility."[117] Eventually, twenty-four of the seventy-eight artists invited to participate would boycott by withdrawing from the exhibition.[118] Rather than hire an outside curator with expertise on contemporary black art, the Whitney delegated the show to their own Robert Doty.[119] His inclusion of a large proportion of abstract works, over half of the eighty-four artworks on view, defied some artist-activists'

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[112] J. Frederic Byers III, Chairman, "Report to the Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art: The Committee to Study Afro-American, Hispanic, and Other Ethnic Art," Carroll Greene Papers, unprocessed, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

[113] Howardena Pindell quoted in Jack Flam, ed., *Western Artists/African Art* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1994), 56. Pindell's few encounters with African art as a child included trips to the Egyptian wing of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and visits to her parents' home by Ethiopian exchange students. See Howardena Pindell, "Ancestral Memories and Visual Coincidences," 1994, unpublished manuscript in Samella S. Lewis Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. This paper was given as a talk at the College Art Association Annual Conference, San Antonio, January 1995.

[114] The exhibition has been written about extensively in recent years. See Cahan, "*Contemporary Black Artists in America* at the Whitney Museum of American Art," in *Mounting Frustration*, 109–70; English, "Making a Show of Discomposure," in *1971*, 123–90; and Jones, 'It's Not Enough to Say "Black Is Beautiful.'"

[115]Jones, 'It's Not Enough to Say "Black Is Beautiful,'" 173.

[116] Ibid., 171.

[117] Ibid., 173.

[118] Cahan, 109.

[119] Correspondence in the Whitney's exhibition files indicate that Doty reached out to artists, heads of art departments, and scholars around the country with greater expertise in black American art. Many of the artists included in the exhibition were brought to his attention by these unpaid, outsourced advisors. *Contemporary Black Artists in America,* Exhibitions files. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

expectation that the show would privilege art that demonstrated a commitment to the Black Arts Movement by hewing to figurative forms expressly concerned with social realities or political aims.

However, some of the most voluble and effectual protests of the exhibition came from black artists who worked primarily in abstraction. Seven artists who had withdrawn from the exhibition admonished the museum for what they called "the worst form of tokenism."[120] In a letter published in *Artforum* in May 1971, these artists—John Dowell, Melvin Edwards, Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Daniel Johnson, Joe Overstreet, and Williams—critiqued the exhibition as an "anti-curated…survey" with an ahistorical approach to black American art. They took particular issue with the exhibition's "primary focus on the racial identities of the artists" and only secondary regard for their work.[121]

These abstract artists had complex, often contradictory, and shifting ideas about the relationship between form and racial identity, between aesthetics and blackness. While their artistic output would seem to place them at odds with the protests organized by BECC, whose leaders disapproved of the emphasis on abstraction, there is no evidence to suggest that these groups thought of their aims as antithetical. They shared alarm at what they perceived as the show's deficiencies of intellectual rigor and care, and a commitment to actively combatting the art world conditions that had led to the exhibition. Further, the black modernists who boycotted *Contemporary Black Artists,* far from repudiating the pertinence of socio-political realities to their works, wanted to reserve the right to introduce such content on their own terms. Gilliam has remarked that "figurative art doesn't represent blackness any more than a non-narrative media-oriented kind of painting, like what I do."[122] He and many members of his cohort wanted to be acknowledged for the "artistic merit of their creations, rather than for the social content of their works," and they also frequently attempted to "make the social ferment of the time present in the work" through titles, materials, and themes, as art historian Kellie Jones has argued.[123] Further, artists who did heed the calls of Black Arts Movement leaders did so in a variety of productive ways. If black nationalist-inspired discourse sometimes prescribed imagery and content to cultural producers, the lived reality was more complex as artists chose how, when, and for whom to engage big "B" Black culture.

Pindell's case is paradigmatic of the ways in which black modernists have viewed abstraction as a site of ambivalence around social content, rather than a tool for its repudiation. As noted in the introduction, she has remarked that "[abstraction] doesn't have a concrete meaning, but can relate back to signification in the world."[124] Pindell's comment locates the spaciousness of abstraction in that word, *can,* which signals the possibility and variation available to the artist and the viewer. Abstraction can mean in relation to the social world, but it does not have to do so. Its power lies in its lack of fixed position with respect to socially agreed upon meanings. We might understand the spatial ambiguity of Pindell's spray-painted canvases as a formalist analogy for the ambivalence she found and valued in abstraction.

Pindell was well aware of the controversy surrounding *Contemporary Black Artists*. BECC co-founder Andrews petitioned her and other artists to withdraw from the exhibition, and

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[120] John Dowell, et al. "Politics," *Artforum* 9, no. 9 (May 1971): 12.
[121] Cahan, 149–50.
[122] Sam Gilliam, interview with Joseph Jacobs, *Since the Harlem Renaissance,* 21.
[123] Henri Ghent, "Notes to the Young Black Artist: Revolution or Evolution," *Art International* (June 1971): 33; Jones, "To the Max," 24.
[124] Pindell, interview with Campbell, 155.

further, to not show "in any of those racist institutions."[125] Ultimately, she stayed the course, remaining in the exhibition. After all, this was her first chance to show her work in Manhattan; she had struggled to find anywhere to exhibit in these early years of her career.[126] Further, she understood the difficulty of her situation as being related to both racial and gender discrimination, later commenting that, "My idea was that I have so few opportunities to show my work. All these men came to me telling me to withdraw work. They're the ones who are going to be shown anyway. I'll be the one that will be left out. So, I decided not to withdraw."[127]

Pindell's prediction has been proven astute. Although black modernists were subjected to dismissal or censure by some of their peers, artists such as Edwards, Gilliam, Loving, and Williams also received enviable support from black and white cultural institutions alike. They continue to be collected and exhibited frequently in major U.S. museums into the twenty-first century. Indeed, their works partially comprise canonical narratives of abstraction and of African American art of the 1960s and 1970s. The artistic lineage of black modernists traced by major art institutions and art historical scholarship is profoundly marked by gender disparities.[128] This skewing toward male artists both reflects historical barriers to black women's participation in artistic discourses and ongoing exclusion.

Remarkably, Pindell found a measure of freedom in the unlikely site of gender inequity. She has noted that being perceived as falling outside of an artistic lineage (*any* publicly agreed upon artistic lineage) in the early days of her career allowed her to make the work she wanted: "As a woman, one is free to do your own work [*sic*]."[129] If there was no place for her in the art worlds she encountered in New York, she did not have to fit into any of them.

In addition to contending with art world sexism, as a museum insider, the young artist was all too familiar with the arbitrariness of curatorial and institutional will. She knew she could not count on future opportunities to garner such a large and illustrious audience for her work as that offered at the Whitney. She also knew that MoMA, which she understood to be one of the "racist institutions" Andrews had warned her against, had recently acquired his painting *No More Games* (1970) (fig. 1.22). Why should she step aside from the Whitney, she later asked, so that Andrews and others could speak on her behalf and leap at the opportunities they forbade her?[130]

The same year that *Contemporary Black Artists* opened, Pindell received an invitation to show in the Whitney's *1972 Annual Exhibition: Contemporary American Painting*. Her deep maroon painting in that exhibition contrasted with the bright, pop greens of the canvas that represented her in the slightly earlier show, though both were painted using her spray-paint template technique (figs. 1.02 and 1.23). In the final months before the annual exhibition's opening, the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee, a group that emerged from the AWC, wrote to Whitney director John I. H. Baur to urge him to assure equal representation for women artists in the high-profile show.[131] The previous year, a group of committee members and coalition affiliates including Poppy Johnson, Lippard, Brenda Miller, and Faith Ringgold had lobbied the museum to include "fifty percent" women in its Sculpture Annual and of that group, fifty percent

[125] Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Pindell, interview with Swenson, 148.
[128] See especially English, *1971*; Godfrey, "Notes on Black Abstraction."
[129] Pindell, interview with Swenson, 139.
[130] Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.
[131] John I. H. Baur, letter to Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee, Nov. 12, 1971. Exhibition files,Whitney Museum of American Art Archives, New York.

black women. They staged sit-ins and demonstrations in the months leading up to the exhibition, placing unused menstrual tampons and uncooked eggs in the museum galleries and staircases.[132] While their demands were not met, the exhibition opened with twenty women of one hundred total artists, up from the eight women out of 151 artists in the 1969 Painting Annual.[133]

For the 1972 Annual, the Ad Hoc Committee sought to keep the pressure on the museum to represent women equitably. While Baur responded somewhat dismissively to the committee's demands, arguing that the museum had "no control over the percentage of slides by women submitted" to them, museum records indicate that the exhibition curators made an effort to seek out women artists for inclusion in the exhibition. A memo from Marcia Tucker to fellow Annual curators Doty and James Monte titled "Women Painters" lists several dozen women artists, Pindell among them, whose studios they planned to visit.[134] Pindell has credited her inclusion in the exhibition in part to the Ad Hoc Committee's efforts, though she declined to participate in the group when Lippard attempted to recruit her, feeling that her concerns as a black artist would not be adequately addressed by the group.[135]

Despite the hard-won gains in exhibition opportunities of the 1970s, working abstractly as a black artist entailed a particular set of risks—including the risk of being illegible to art audiences and unmarketable to art institutions looking to maximize the social goodwill generated by their newly "diverse" offerings.[136] Pindell's abstract works of the late 1960s and early 1970s were indubitably subjected to critical machinations that denied the relevance of abstraction to black experience. For instance, in the late 1960s, it was not expected that a black woman artist looking "inward" would find forms that so seamlessly lent themselves to modernist abstraction. If leaders of the Black Arts Movement were to be believed, the paradigmatic structures of modernism came from outside black culture and were imposed by a colonizing white Euro-American culture.

Pindell clearly rejected this premise. Rather, she conceived of even quite simple forms, such as the circle, as powerfully imbued with social meaning. Her case is instructive for considering how entangled personal vision and social structures can be, and how insufficient broad social categories are for accounting for one's visual orientation toward the world. In the following section, I look at Pindell's use of the grid in her early abstract works to further consider how the artist aspired to reimagine form as a resource for promoting and critically intervening in artistic narratives that might adhere to her as an individual and a black woman.

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[132] Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 175–78.

[133] Grace Glueck, "Women Artists Demonstrate at the Whitney," *New York Times,* December 12, 1970, A19.

[134] Marcia Tucker, "Painter for the Annual: Women Painters," undated. Exhibition files, Whitney Museum of American Art Archives, New York. Pindell's inclusion in the 1972 Painting Annual was complicated when Tucker rescinded her invitation on the basis of a museum policy that an artist could not show in two exhibitions within any twelve-month period. (*Contemporary Black Artists in America* had closed in May 1971 and the Annual was set to open in January 1972.) Letters show that Pindell, based on her familiarity with museum protocol, baulked at what she considered a thinly veiled act of discrimination. Howardena Pindell, letter to Lucy Lippard, Dec. 2, 1970, Lucy R. Lippard papers, 1930s–2010, bulk 1960s–1990. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[135] Pindell, interview with Swenson, 148.

[136] As Kellie Jones has noted, figurative art by black artists was useful not only to arbiters of the Black Arts Movement, but also to white, liberal institutions who wished to make visible, and profitable, their humanist commitments to racial inclusion. Jones, "It's Not Enough," 172.

Grid

In many of her early abstract paintings, Pindell juxtaposes the "feminine" circle with a grid—a form by the 1960s associated with the civilizing, traditionally masculine-coded forces of modernity.[137] Indeed, in her interview mentioned above, Swenson follows her question about Pindell's use of the circle with one about the grid. "The grid," she asks, "is that modern civilization?"[138] Many an abstractionist might blush, or bristle, at the suggestion of this kind of tidy one-to-one correlation between her forms and such concepts. Pindell responds in stride: "I'm not sure. Look at a map with longitude and latitude: these are points, and where they cross are points of energy."[139]

The artist relates the grid to geographic space and to cartography. For Pindell, grids are closely linked to the physical forces that form circles. "When gravity works, you get a mass that's circular, and somehow points along the mass are designated by lines drawn from A to B and they intersect," she told Swenson.[140] Here, the intersecting lines that comprise a grid, that constitute longitude and latitude, are overlaid on a "circle," or the sphere of the earth. These marks of energetic movement indicate motion, trajectories. The taut, straight lines suggest propulsion. They trace the forces of velocity, attraction, and drives, rather than conveying a neutral stasis.

Pindell's was hardly the prevailing artistic notion of the grid in the late 1960s, when she first drew the form on canvas, or used graph paper as the ground of drawings in works such as *Untitled* (1968) and *Space Frame* (1969) (figs. 1.03 and 1.04). Over the course of the decade, the grid had come to be strongly associated with minimalist and conceptual art practices, and through these channels, a rationalizing or bureaucratic aesthetic.[141] Andre's floor pieces, for instance, mobilized the grid as a simple, modular structure, one encouraged by the protocols and forms of industrial materials. The decade also saw what one critic called "the great graph paper period," in which countless artists turned to the found industrial and pedagogical material as a support for drawings.[142] Graph paper, the grid, served as a bureaucratic "container" for information.[143] Pindell herself would turn to this aspect of the grid in dozens of works on graph paper she made beginning in 1973, which I discuss in the next chapter (fig. 1.24).

The grid has had a long and varied career in modern art, and artists throughout the 1960s appealed to various aspects of its formal and conceptual resonances, including those that predated minimalist and conceptual art. Writing a typology of the grid in *Artforum* in 1972, John Elderfield outlines several common recent usages: the grid as "factual display" in the minimalist-inflected paintings of Agnes Martin; as a "framework" for Joan Snyder's expressive brushstrokes; as "scaffolding" in the geometric abstractions of Poons; and as the

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[137] See for instance, Lucy Lippard, "Top to Bottom, Left to Right," in *Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1972), n.p.
[138] Swenson, 136.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.
[141] On the importance of an aesthetic of bureaucracy to conceptual practices of the 1960s, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105-43.
[142] John Elderfield, "Grids," *Artforum* 10, no. 9 (May 1972): 53.
[143] Ibid., 54.

"objectification" of Pollock's decentralized, allover compositions (figs. 1.25 and 1.26).[144] Earlier that year, the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania hosted an exhibition on the theme of grids. In her essay for the catalogue Lippard notes that "the grid per se is of no importance" to the artists in the exhibition and that nothing could be said to unite their artworks beyond the form itself.[145] Despite, or perhaps because of the glut of artistic practices that mobilized the grid and the many, disparate ends to which they did so, both Elderfield and Lippard emphasize the grid's status as a "neutral," "arbitrary framework."[146] Seemingly, it could be adapted to any use whatever. While these observations helpfully point to the fact that the grid's use had become ubiquitous and multivalent in modern art, they take this fact for granted, coming short of asking why this might be the case, or what underlying attributes of the grid had made it serviceable to such diverse practices.

To a greater degree than her predecessors, Krauss struck on a unifying theory of the grid that sought to account for the form's particularities as a paradigmatically modern phenomenon. In a 1979 essay, at a remove of several years from the grid's minimalist-conceptualist heyday, Krauss contends that the structure has a "schizophrenic" character.[147] The grid announces "modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse."[148] It declares art to be autonomous and autotelic.[149] But beneath these features, which screen out the world in a gesture of refusal, we find appeals to the spiritual. What the grid reveals is modern art's repressed spiritual function. Krauss considers, for instance, Kazimir Malevich's, Reinhardt's, and Martin's gridded works, in which the repetition of the structure both occurs as a matter of materials and surfaces and also as a vehicle for accessing or conveying the metaphysical.

It has been Krauss's contribution, in particular her structuralist theorization of the grid's emblematic relation to "modern art's will to silence" that has most profoundly shaped subsequent art historical accounts. Her observation that the grid functions not only as a visual tool, but also as an organizing principle "that metaphorically extends beyond the surface of a painting and enmeshes the viewer in a visual and intellectual experience with the object" has been particularly influential.[150] Krauss also deploys a cartographic metaphor in her theorization of the grid. She writes that the grid "maps the surface of the painting itself.…The physical qualities of the surface, we could say, are mapped onto the aesthetic dimensions of the same surface."[151]

This formulation reveals several functions of the grid. Firstly, through the "transfer" of physical qualities onto the aesthetic plane of the artwork, the grid displays its "naked and determined materialism."[152] It makes what Elderfield calls a "factual display" of the material ground of art by drawing attention to its surface, its measurability, its capacity to be organized and divided like any other surface.[153] In doing so, it performs two more of the grid's most

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[144] Ibid., 52–59.
[145] Lippard, "Top to Bottom," i.
[146] Elderfield, 59; Lippard, i.
[147] Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* Vol. 9 (Summer 1979): 50–64.
[148] Ibid., 50.
[149] Ibid., 52.
[150] Naomi Beckwith, "Body Optics, or Howardena Pindell's Ways of Seeing," in *Howardena Pindell: What Remains to Be Seen*, 94.
[151] Krauss, "Grids," 52.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Elderfield, 53.

significant functions: it makes the work of art legible as such, placing it in a matrix with other artworks, and renders visible the material basis of that artwork.

Krauss importantly theorized that the grid can help to locate the viewer in an intellectual, art historical discourse by marking out the space of modern art. However, her accounts of the grid take the rarified cultural context of modernism for granted, not examining how or whether any given artist or artwork might be socially recognized as participating in modernist discourse. Pindell, by contrast, recognized, as an artist whose entry into modernism was neither guaranteed nor encouraged, that the grid could be useful to her efforts. She approached the ubiquity of the grid with skepticism and opportunity in mind, as curator Naomi Beckwith has noted, seeing it not merely as an aesthetic tool but as "a vehicle for signaling the desire to be taken seriously as an artist."[154]

As she became a savvy art world participant and observer from her post at MoMA, Pindell realized that the grid, as a paradigmatic sign of modern art, might be used by the artist to signal aesthetic seriousness. If the grid maps "physical qualities" onto "aesthetic dimensions," it could, conversely, be used as a device to render a physical surface into an artistic one. In other words, if the grid could symbolize the material fact of the work of art, its "transfer" function could also operate in the reverse, to indicate the presence of aesthetic intentionality on an otherwise merely physical surface. With this insight, Pindell homed in on the social constructedness of the grid as an indicator of modernist intent. This use of the grid complicates Krauss's contention that the form connotes artistic originality, declaring the artist's arrival at the scene of representation.[155] For Pindell, the fact that the grid had already been codified as modernist form prior to her adoption of it was precisely the point. However, her observation about the grid's utility in signaling artistic seriousness does not preclude her earnest and committed formal engagements with it, which endured through the 1970s. The artist's shrewd insight into the grid's usage would motivate her to develop a practice with an evolving interest and approach to the emblematic marker of modernist ambition.

Pindell's use of the grid ran counter to the emerging perception that the form could be understood as analogous to a white male positionality. In 1971, African American poet Michael S. Harper published "The Nature of the Grid," a treatise in verse that characterizes the grid as brutally destructive in its rationality.[156] Two years later, Harper would explicitly link the violence of the grid to its "annihilation" of "nonwhites."[157] The literary scholar Phillip Brian Harper (NB: There are two Harpers at play here, one a poet and the other a literary scholar) has convincingly situated the poet Harper's "suspicion" of the grid in the context of the form's centuries-long development in Western history as "effectively an avatar of the white-masculine form itself."[158] In the U.S., the apparent uniformity and rationality of the grid was mobilized to "conceptualize the ideal proto-republican citizen" as a white male land-owner.[159] A tool for

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[154] Beckwith, 93. Elderfield too noted this capacity of the grid, though he lamented its frequent usage as "a prop around which to decorate a surface, with the art no more than in-filling." Elderfield, 59.
[155] Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," [1981] in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 158.
[156] Michael S. Harper, "Apollo Vision: The Nature of the Grid," in *History Is Your Own Heartbeat* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 90–91.
[157] Michael S. Harper, "Michael Harper," in *Interviews with Black Writers,* ed. John O'Brien (New York: Liverlight, 1972), 106.
[158] Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics,* 34.
[159] Ibid.

measuring individuals against this ideal subject position, the grid also functioned as an administrative apparatus for partitioning land during early-republic settling. As the literary scholar Harper notes, the grid's "nullity" and putative neutrality packaged land for easy consumption, belying the pre-existing presence of people, including native peoples, and the politics of their forceful removal.[160]

While Pindell may have been aware of these resonances of the grid in the late 1960s, her primary concern appears to have been its potential utility in her efforts to establish herself as a modernist. Her astute usage of the grid helped her to "locate" her work in a modernist art context that did not, by convention, grant access to black women. Pindell's awareness of these social barriers may have heightened her consciousness of the grid's status as a potential signifier of aesthetic intentionality and as a symbol of agential authority.

The use of the grid in Pindell's early paintings, especially its juxtaposition with circles and ellipses, closely resembles Poons's canvases of the mid- to late 1960s (fig. 1.27). Poons, a once frequently exhibited artist whose stature waned as modernist champions such as Fried lost ground in New York art circuits of the 1970s, subtly deployed the grid in paintings with optical effects. He drew grids on his canvases to help place geometric shapes, then painted over most of the grid in acid colors, concealing the marks except where lines intersected with the ellipses he regularly placed across his canvas. Poons's insistence that the grid played a merely supporting role in his works, offering his paintings "scaffolding," rather than structure, played a significant role in subsequent literature on the grid, especially Elderfield's typology.[161]

At first glance, Pindell's use of the grid in *Space Frame* (1969) resembles Poon's use of it as skeletal "scaffolding." A field of white and orange circles and ellipses appear to float above the grid, which is drawn atop pink acrylic paint striated with blue oil stick, mixing to create passages of sunset lavender (fig. 1.04). While the grid is visible in the painting, its thin lines recede to the background. It helps to locate the ellipses and circles scattered across the canvas, nearly all of which are centered on at least one axis of a gridline. This grid's relatively rigid lines contrast with the round shapes and with the loosely drawn marks and bleeding colors. Indeed, the formal rationale of the painting seems to lie in the juxtaposition of formal elements—circles with lines, vertical with horizontal, gestural with mechanical. Within this aesthetic system, the grid plays an important role. Its internal logic is one of predictable but visually interesting contrast between the stretch of verticality and span of horizontality, the same visual quality, as Lippard remarked, that drew many artists to the grid.[162] The grid in Pindell's early paintings plays a significant compositional role, as its contrast with other elements of the paintings generates much of her works' visual interest.

Space Frame of 1969, arguably, participated in a post-minimalist expansion of the grid, evoking what Lippard called its "temptingly despoilable" perfection.[163] Pindell uses the grid to introduce variation and irregularity to her canvases. The lines of her grid, though taut and straight, are not perfectly parallel. Some of them grow gradually closer or further from one another across the surface of the canvas, which may account for Pindell's decision to fracture the lines (fig. 1.28). In several passages one line ends and another begins slightly higher or lower than the other, a small mismatch that suggests the artist was course correcting as she drew. These

[160] Ibid., 42.
[161] Larry Poons, interview with Phyllis Tuchman, "An interview with Larry Poons," *Artforum* (December 1970): 45.
[162] Lippard, "Top to Bottom," i.
[163] Ibid., ii.

irregularities offer a glimpse into the artist's production of the painting. The straight lines indicate that she used a ruler, the imperfect attempt at parallelism that she did not pre-mark regular intervals for her lines. Where the lines break, perhaps the artist observed the sloping of lines and lifted her ruler to commence drawing at a more secure position. Pindell's apparent disregard for the geometric bases of the grid—equal measurements and parallel lines—repeats at the painting's edge. The unstretched canvas cuts a wobbling line on its left-hand side, which dips down and then upward again at the bottom left corner, creating an acute angle. A large rectilinear tab of unpainted canvas on the right-hand side offers a counter-balance to this dip on the left. The resulting shape resembles a state whose borders have been drawn through a combination of concern for longitudinal lines and the imperatives of geo-politics, a reading supported by Pindell's conceptualization of the grid in cartographic terms, as "longitude and latitude." The painting alludes to the grid's rigid regularity and rationalizing associations without adhering to those aspects of its form and psychological resonances. Instead, they are muted by these apparently hand-drawn elements as well as the painting's candy store colors.

A highly skilled and trained artist, Pindell consciously and strategically intervened in the rectilinear protocols of the grid by inserting overt markers of the handmade. This gesture anticipates her embrace of post-minimalist idioms in subsequent years. The irregularities of her grid in this work also evoke the scaffolding of handwoven textiles. Warp and weft threads form intersecting patterns of vertical and horizontal lines, but variability in thread thickness and weave can create subtle irregularities. In the following two chapters, I discuss how Pindell's oeuvre in the subsequent decade more explicitly rearticulates the putatively optical grid as the tactile weave.

Pindell thought of the grid as a tool for locating her work in dialogue with modernisms. She also embraced its cartographic connotations. The circle, like the grid, appears in Pindell's theories as a symbol of location and movement. It was a red circle on the bottom of a root beer mug that traumatically located her, identifying and fixing her position as a "colored" customer whose touch needed to be separated from un-marked whiteness. This circle intersected with the line of Pindell's family's trajectory as they traveled across the historic line that had divided "slave states" from "free states," and that by the 1950s represented the cultural divide between the South with its Jim Crow laws and the North's propagation of racial segregation through different means.

Pindell's theorizations of the circle and the grid suggest that she valued the structures as formal elements in part because their ubiquity rendered them ambivalent. The forms generate an ambiguous sense of space on the surface of her paintings. Through their cartographic and autobiographic resonances in her works, the circle and grid also refer to the ways in which geographic place and artistic terrain are parsed by racial and gender ideologies. Pindell's theory of the forms as potential resources resonates with human geographer Katherine McKittrick's observation that cartographic rules are socially produced and alterable.[164] McKittrick observes that black women have utilized the malleability of these rules in order to struggle against "geographies of domination" that place them in positions of subjugation.[165] We might understand Pindell's cartographic theory as such a gesture of "saying place"—an enunciation that defied the ways in which others had located her, whether with a red circle painted on a mug or a finger pointing downtown to the white galleries.

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[164] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Woman and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), x.
[165] Ibid.

At the same time, Pindell seems to have understood the grid and circle as signifiers of concrete social relations. Her experiences showed that lines and circles could trace the borders of permissible freedoms and expected affiliations. As she became a modernist, she committed to using forms that deeply connected to her sense of where she was in the world, where she had been, and where she wanted to go. By dissolving the personal resonances of these forms in an abstract vocabulary, she signaled that she believed that her personal vision, shaped by her upbringing, experiences, and training, belonged at the center of modernist abstraction.

Conclusion

When Pindell took her abstract canvases to the Studio Museum in 1969, Spriggs assigned to her paintings a social identity different than the one that had brought her uptown for a chance to exhibit in the first place. In this exchange, he cannot, chooses not to reconcile the artwork with the person in front of him. Besides expressing the view that abstraction belonged to white men and in white institutions, his rebuke of Pindell's modernist practice reflects a conviction deeply held in the New York artistic milieu of that era, that "my abstract painting is a proxy for my selfhood."[166] There was no place for Pindell in the Studio Museum because her art was not legibly black, and this disqualified her from being recognized as a black artist. Nor was her art legibly female in these years, and this disqualified her from recognition as a woman artist. For Spriggs, her art belonged to a "white boy."

Pindell's early abstract art troubles the ways in which both black cultural and modernist discourses have construed the relationship between form and subjectivity. Within her formal cosmology, both circles and lines have the potential to operate symbolically as part of a violent system of social ordering *and* demarcate the effects of "primary" forces, which organize the universe on the levels of astrophysics and microbiology, shaping planets, microbes, and atoms. The tension between these two modes of signification constitutes an important site of inquiry, one that has at times been suppressed by art historical scholarship, which continues to render the formal and socio-historical concerns of black American and women artists as a binary.[167]

Pindell had something to say about—and through—modernism. She expressed it repeatedly, through great effort, and at the risk of no one responding, or looking. Her practice encourages art historians to continue to question disciplinary narratives in which the biographies of white male artists can enter the scene of analysis without trouble, while the biographies of other artists are seen to threaten obfuscation of artistic meaning, intent, and agency. At the beginning of the 1970s, Pindell negotiated the tightrope of artistically addressing both abstract idioms and her sense of self as a black woman. All of these things were part of what she found when she looked "inward" and what she made as she moved through the world.

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[166] English, *1971,* 10.

[167] This occurs even as the disciplinary divide between these two "camps," once deeply entrenched, has become permeable over the course of the past decades, and it is not only commonplace, but expected that scholars operate between these two modes. See Huey Copeland, "Flow and Arrest," *Small Axe* 48 (November 2015): 220.

Chapter Two: Paper Work, Collage Play

Howardena Pindell completed a spray-painted canvas in 1973 that at first glance largely resembles the nearly two-dozen she had made over the course of the previous three years. Deep maroons and violets serve as backdrop to thin layers of pastel blues, greens, and yellows in *Untitled* (1972–73) (fig. 2.01). The resulting high-contrast dappling makes the example one of the more visually dynamic of this body of work. It also contains Pindell's first use of collage in a painting. Paper chads affixed to the surface of the canvas repeat the rounds of color comprising what she called her paintings' "veils of dots."[1] Several dozen of the paper cutouts smatter the lower half of the canvas and reach upward on the right-hand side. Whereas earlier examples of the atmospheric stained paintings generated a sense of pictorial recession, the chads in this work draw greater attention to the literal fact of the painting's surface. Sitting atop the diaphanous field of color stain, they unceremoniously break the illusion that the painting's constituent materials had dissolved into purely visual phenomena.

Over the course of the following decade, I argue, collage would become the single most significant element of Pindell's oeuvre, the aspect of her practice into which she would delve the deepest, and whose lessons she would apply most diligently to her production. Although the nomenclature denotes a wide variety of technologies, its most common current day usage, and the one I invoke here, refers to both a technique for adhering elements to a larger ground, which is often though not necessarily two-dimensional, and to the resulting collaged object. Variably claimed as a method of production, an aesthetic, and occasionally, a medium, collage capaciously accommodates imagery and materials from disparate sources. Artists in the United States in the postwar era—notably Romare Bearden, Jasper Johns, Lee Krasner, and Robert Motherwell—embraced it, as European Cubists had done earlier in the century, as a technique of collapsing distinctions between "high" and "low" culture.[2] Insofar as collage scholars theorize it as a medium, a method of artistic production with its own internal logic, they cite juxtaposition—heightened visual, conceptual, and material contrast—as its defining rationale.[3]

Collage offers a productive angle onto histories of twentieth-century art because it has been central to both modernism and the resistance to it. By the 1970s, narratives of Euro-American formalist modernisms, African American modernist art, and feminist art all sited collage at the center of their origin stories.[4] How is it that collage has been so central to modernism and to artistic formations that have issued challenges to it? Despite supposedly being a repudiation of modernism, postmodernism shares the structuring metaphor of collage.[5] These

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[1] Howardena Pindell, interview with Joseph Jacobs, *Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University, 1985), 35.

[2] See Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: Modern Art in the Era of Dissent* (New York: Abrams, 1996); Kobena Mercer, "Romare Bearden, 1964: Collage as *Kunstwollen*," in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambrdge: MIT Press, 2005), 124–145; Gwen Raaberg, "Beyond Fragmentation: Collage as Feminist Strategy in the Arts," *Mosaic* 31, no. 3 (September 1998): 154.

[3] See, for instance, the essays in Katherine Hoffman, ed. *Collage: Critical Views* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981); Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: The Invention and Early Practice of Collage, 1912 – 1919* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1991).

[4] See for instance, Clement Greenberg, "Collage," [1959] in *Collage: Critical Views,* 67–77; Lucy Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges," *Art Journal* 40, no. 1 / 2 (Fall/Winter 1980): 362–65.

[5] For example, see, Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July–August 1984): 59–92.

disparate accounts of collage hinge on the technique's purported capacity to metaphorize aspects of modern life through formal qualities such as fracture and disjuncture.[6] African diasporic and feminist narratives in particular note the resonances between collage's formal and conceptual juxtapositions and the lived experiences of minoritarian subjects. As feminist art critic Lucy Lippard has argued, "It is a collage experience to be a woman artist or a sociopolitical artist in a capitalist culture."[7] Other scholars, such as literary critic Gwen Raaberg, have emphasized the ways in which artists in culturally marginalized groups have developed strategies for drawing on collage's features, for instance, its pictorial malleability, for a variety of artistic purposes.[8] This approach tempers what in art historical record occasionally veers into naturalized connections between the technique and social marginality by underscoring the agency of artists of color and women. In the first section of this chapter, I trace the modes of collage that Pindell combined through her engagements with the technique in the 1970s.

Pindell's uses of collage exemplify its structuring tensions, as her practice mobilizes the seemingly disparate concerns of modernist, African diasporic, and feminist approaches to the technique. An instructor at Yale, Knox Martin, first introduced Pindell to collage as a potential method of producing large-scale abstract works in the mid-1960s.[9] Pindell's eventual turn toward collage occurred slightly later, in 1973. It accompanied a major shift in her artistic production brought on in part by her recent introduction to West African textiles and her entry into feminist artistic circles, especially the group at the women's collective A.I.R. Gallery. I explore these formative encounters in both this and the next chapter. Through her collage practice, Pindell both owned and disavowed modernism. In works on paper and paintings, she deployed the technique to create protuberant surfaces. Collage enabled her to combine unexpected materials—cat hair and hole-punched chads—and gestures drawn from seemingly disparate sources such as childhood games and conceptualist accounting. In the early 1970s, she glued orderly chads flat onto graph paper, using collage as an instrument of categorical precision in works that participated in conceptual art's bureaucratic themes and forms (figs. 2.02 and 2.03). Slightly later works engage with post-minimalist concerns for repetition with variation, textured, hand-worked surfaces, and neutral colors (figs. 2.04 and 2.05). Powdered paper accretions pile on mat-board and stumble over string in gravity-defying formations. Pindell used collage in similar ways in densely textured paintings throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Over the course of this period, she made increasingly colorful and chaotically composed works on paper that belie the meticulous processes she used to fabricate them (fig. 2.06). Collage also brought Pindell back to figuration: she used the technique in her photographic series *Video Drawings* to meld televisual broadcast imagery and an idiosyncratic notation system (fig. 2.07).

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[6] See Rachel Farebrother, *The Collage Aesthetic in the Harlem Renaissance* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009); Harriet Grossman Janis, *Collage: Personalities, Concepts, Techniques* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1962); Daniel Louis Haxall, *Cut and Paste Abstraction: Politics, Form, and Identity in Abstract Expressionist Collage* (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 2009); Judy Loeb, ed., *Feminist Collage: Educating Women in the Visual Arts* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1979).

[7] Lucy Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: New Press, 1995), 136.

[8] Ibid.

[9] "Abstraction or Essence: Three African-American Perspectives," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Sound Recordings, 97.29a. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

The technique of collage introduced new materials, forms of labor, and themes to Pindell's oeuvre. This chapter examines these changes, which would lay the groundwork for her artistic pursuits of the following two decades. It also begins to account for how her use of collage expands scholarly understandings of the technique and its relationship to artistic and collective identity. In Pindell's hands, collage became a tool with which to address how specific formal problems, such as those posed by the rise of an aesthetics of administration in conceptualist practices of the early 1970s, intersected with constraints imposed by gendered and racial bias in artistic reception.[10] More broadly, I argue that Pindell theorized collage as a form of play always held in tension with work. Through this black feminist approach to the technique, she generated a collaged aesthetic of the individual. In her hands, the technique became a method of mending rather than a metaphor merely for fragmentation.

Collage Work

Collage has been recruited to perform all kinds of work for seemingly competing cultural camps. Once regarded as a frivolous, feminine pastime, collage technique momentarily ascended to a privileged position in accounts of the development of modernist Western art in the 1950s. For instance, in his 1959 essay, "Collage," art critic Clement Greenberg argues that Cubist artists Georges Braques and Pablo Picasso's purported "invention" of collage between 1907 and 1914 motored the inevitable progression of modernist art toward its defining characteristic—a dynamic tension between flatness and pictorial recession.[11] Collage also allowed artists to thematize juxtaposition and difference. For instance, artists in Cubist and Dada circles working in the 1910s and 1920s drew on its inherent capacity to inject everyday materials into the rarefied realm of so-called elite art. Some of these Dada uses of collage as well as later Surrealist experimentations generated psychological effects and commented upon social crisis through the technique's dissonances.[12] Through juxtaposition and fragmentation, artists aimed to undermine conventional associations and shock the viewer or reader "into a perception of a new reality—social, political, and psychological, as well as aesthetic."[13] For instance, artist Max Ernst's Dada collages thematize the dark absurdity of life in post-war Germany by "producing an air of anarchy" with hybrid creatures (fig. 2.08).[14]

However, collage also posed a danger to modernists who wished to maintain cultural hierarchies. In 1912, Cubist painters Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger recognized that emergent forms of abstraction, which drew on collage aesthetics, problematically blurred the boundaries between design and art, making it difficult to distinguish between inspired artistic production and the rote machinations of merely skilled laborers.[15] Their historical theorizations of the

[10] On the "aesthetics of administration" see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105–43.
[11] Ibid., 67.
[12] See, for instance, Matthew Biro, *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009); John G. Frey, "From Dada to Surrealism," *Parnassus* 8, no. 7 (Dec. 1936): 12–15; Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," *October* 19 (Winter 1981): 3–34; Lucy Lippard, "Dada into Surrealism," *Artforum* (September 1966): 10–15.
[13] Raaberg, 154.
[14] Lucy R. Lippard, "Max Ernst: Passed and Pressing Tensions," *The Hudson Review* 23, no. 4 (Winter 1970–1971): 701–09.
[15] Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, "On Cubism," [1912] in *Modern Artists on Art: Ten Unabridged Essays,* ed. Robert Herbert (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 1–18.

"decorative" would inform Greenberg's abandonment of collage over the course of the 1960s. During this period, Greenberg espoused modernist theories increasingly predicated on the separation of art from the outside world. Painting supplanted collage as the preeminent modernist medium, for unlike collage, its material means need not point to the broader cultural milieu.[16] Collage's associations with craft and feminine pastimes prevailed by the 1960s, despite the widespread acknowledgment that its application to fine art contexts had been a necessary step in the development of Euro-American modernisms.

From her position at the Museum of Modern Art, Pindell became familiar with Dada and Surrealist collage. She assisted with preparations for the 1968 exhibition *Dada, Surrealism, and their Heritage,* curated by William Rubin, and recalls in particular a conversation with Lippard around this time about Ernst's collages, which appeared in the show.[17] Several years into her curatorial career, in 1974, Pindell looked to a later generation of modernists engaged with principles of collage. She organized *Printed, Cut, Folded, and Torn*, a show that presented textured works from the print department's collection. Her selections included an untitled work by Alan Shields featuring interwoven strips of stitched paper, and prints by Lucio Fontana, Jasper Johns, and Richard Tuttle that included punched and pierced holes.[18]

Pindell's own collage practice in these years incorporated similar material concerns, as she punched and pasted materials onto graph paper and mat-board. *Untitled #2* (1973), a work now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is typical of her graph paper collages (fig. 2.09). Pindell hole-punched chads from manila folders, tidily hand-wrote digits in ink onto each of these rounds, and then pasted them onto the surface of the graph paper. Each chad fits snugly within a square formed by the page's intersecting light blue lines. The work shares a concern for the repeated paper round with Fontana's punched paper works, such as *Concetto Spaziale—Teatrino (bianco)* (Spatial Concept—Theater [white]) (1968) (fig. 2.10). Although Pindell avoided printmaking during her years as a curator of prints and illustrated books, in order to avoid a "conflict of interest," *Printed, Cut, Folded, and Torn* shows her curatorially working through the formal and material concerns of her artistic practice.[19] She expands the modernist category "print" by approaching the department's collection through the collage protocols of cutting, folding, and tearing.

MoMA was an important site of exposure to collage for Pindell and another exhibition there helped to catalyze her early use of the technique. In the fall of 1972, the museum hosted the exhibition *African Textiles and Decorative Arts.* Guest curated by Roy Sieber, an Africanist based at Indiana University, the exhibition presented two hundred and fifty examples of textiles, jewelry, and other objects of bodily adornment from sub-Saharan Africa. For the four-month run of the New York showing, Pindell visited the exhibition several times a week, taking advantage of the opportunity to view its galleries when they were closed to the public.[20] There, she saw a

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[16] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," [1960] in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85–93.

[17] Howardena Pindell, interview with Sally Swenson, in *Lives and Works: Talks with Women Artists*, eds. Lynn F. Miller and Sally S. Swenson (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1981), 148.

[18] *Printed, Cut, Folded, and Torn,* Museum of Modern Art press release, 1974, Records of the Department of Public Information, II.A.634. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

[19] Pindell, interview with Swenson, 147.

[20] Howardena Pindell, interview with Kellie Jones, April 2, 1989, Audio-visual recording, Billops-Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

panoply of objects, the vast majority of which were designed to be worn, held, or applied to the body—"complex woven…cotton and silk from Ghana and Nigeria… strip weave from Upper Volta.…and "cosmetic accoutrements" such as "combs, hair-pins, wigs, and tweezers."[21] The show introduced her to a wide range of African cultural objects for the first time and motivated her to travel to West Africa the following year.[22]

Reviews show that the survey was favorably received, and in no small part for its welcomed focus on materials previously little known to museum visitors.[23] African sculpture, particularly masks, had become familiar to modern art enthusiasts through their appropriation by European and black American artists earlier in the twentieth century.[24] Functional and decorative, the materials on display in *African Textiles* ranked low in the prevailing hierarchy of modern art that began to shift in the early 1970s. The show was also timely for its ability to attract a higher proportion of black visitors than the typical MoMA exhibition. Since the late 1960s, artist-activist groups in New York had been organizing to place pressure on the city's public art museums to attend to glaring inequities, particularly around issues of racial and gender inclusion.[25] An early episode in this period of heightened artistic activism occurred, for instance, when the organizers of MoMA's 1968 fundraising exhibition *In Honor of Martin Luther King Jr.* failed to involve a single black artist or juror. Artist protest resulted in the expansion of both rosters, though work by most of the black artists was exhibited in a separate gallery.[26]

The following year, MoMA became the primary target of the newly formed Art Workers' Coalition, which sought to democratize the art museum with free entry and greater public accountability.[27] A roster of AWC demands in 1970 included an "exhibit showing the impact that the artists of African [*sic*] and South America have had upon the twentieth century western cultural revolution in painting, sculpture, music and dance."[28] Whether or not *African Textiles* directly fulfilled this demand, one reviewer argued that it presented "evidence of the self-reliant creative powers of [the] ancestors."[29] Further, the exhibition appealed to growing public interest in Pan-Africanism, which had been spurred in part by the efforts of leaders of the Black Arts Movement to promote Black cultural heritage.

The exhibition subsequently traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, de Young Museum in San Francisco and Cleveland Museum of Art. Although Pindell was employed by MoMA at the time, she did not work on the exhibition or have other special access to it. Howardena Pindell, interview with the author, telephone, Dec. 2018.

[21] *African Textiles and Decorative Arts,* Museum of Modern Art press release, 1972, PI, II.A.557. MoMA Archives, NY.

[22] Sieber, in fact, helped her to plot her itinerary. SR, 97.29a. MoMA Archives, NY.

[23] PI, II.A.557. MoMA Archives, NY.

[24] Ibid.

[25] See Susan E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Kellie Jones, "'It's Not Enough to Say "Black Is Beautiful"': Abstraction at the Whitney, 1969–1974," in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 154–80.

[26] Cahan, 203–4.

[27] See Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in The Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

[28] "Program for Change: Black and Puerto Rican Culture," John B. Hightower Papers, III.2.16. MoMA Archives, NY.

[29] "Magic, anybody?" *Warwick Valley Dispatch,* Nov. 21, 1972, 23.

This exposure to African art and culture profoundly affected Pindell's art making practice with particular consequence for her development of a collage practice. According to Pindell, her encounter in *African Textiles* with a charm- and amulet-encrusted Akan batakari, or war tunic, spurred her to experiment with dense accumulative textures (fig. 2.11).[30] Small works on mat-board made shortly after the exhibition display her first efforts at lifting collage elements off the ground (fig. 2.12). Clusters of chads held together by adhesive and talcum powder pile on top of sewing thread that forms a grid. Several hole-punch scraps protrude from the board as they balance improbably on their paper-thin edges. The accretive results evoke, though on a smaller scale, the adherence of packets, horns, and shells to the batakari.

Recent scholarship has laid claim to collage as a distinctly African diasporic medium. Art historian Patricia Hills has noted, for instance, that a generation of African American artists who came of age in the 1930s and 1940s, including Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, used collage to situate their practice in relation to European modernisms, their African ancestry, and localized cultural practices (fig. 2.13). These artists adapted cubist collage techniques that had been developed by early-twentieth-century European modernists, "knowing full well that those artists had themselves been influenced by African art."[31] This embrace of the cross-cultural flows of Western culture reflected in part the model of philosopher and cultural critic Alain Locke, who in these same decades advocated for regionalist art and the first self-consciously racial art movement in the United States.[32]

Bearden and Lawrence, according to Hills, each drew in their use of collage technique from "personal art histories" that included southern cultural practices such as quilting and the papering of domestic walls with newspapers and magazines.[33] A subsequent cohort of artists whose practices developed in the 1960s and 1970s, including Benny Andrews and Faith Ringgold, expanded these artists' "vernacular" cubist collage and included more "direct" engagements with African textiles in their works.[34] Crucially, for Hills, both generations of artists "paid homage to a way of life that sees virtue in improvisation and in making do."[35]

Other scholars have avoided the sentimental regard for struggle implicit in Hills's discussion by focusing instead on how artists have used collage as a strategy for addressing specific formal and conceptual problems.[36] Art historian Kobena Mercer has influentially argued

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[30] Howardena Pindell, "Ancestral Memories and Visual Coincidences," 1994, unpublished manuscript in Samella S. Lewis Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

[31] Patricia Hills, "Cultural Legacies and the Transformation of the Cubist Collage Aesthetic by Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Other African-American Artists," *Studies in the History of Art* 71 (2011): 223.

[32] See Alain Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present* (Washington, DC: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936); Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art* (Washington, DC: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1940). On these texts, see Mary Ann Calo, "Alain Locke and American Art Criticism," *American Art* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 88–97.

[33] Hills, 223.

[34] Ibid., 240. For an example of a white artist's appropriation of black southern vernacular culture in collage works, see Lauren Kroiz's discussion of Arthur Dove's "things" in Lauren Kroiz, "The Sense of Things: Collage, Illustration, and Regional American Culture," in *Creative Composites: Race, Modernism, and the Stieglitz Circle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 145.

[35] Hills, 223.

[36] As Patricia Hill Collins has argued, in white culture, images of black women's fortitude and strength are sometimes used to assuage guilt and mask the constructed nature of systems of oppression. See

that Bearden's embrace of collage in 1964 constituted a pivotal breakthrough that "answered a deep structural dilemma for African American artists" around issues of race, racism, and representation.[37] That dilemma emanated from the prescriptive demands placed on non-white artists to work in a "representative" way, reflecting the aspirations of African Americans as a group.[38] In Bearden's hands, collage "articulates an anti-essential understanding of black identity" that offers a possible way out of this "burden of representation" by pointing to the cross-cultural borrowings at the root of modernism.[39] He achieves this in works that leave visibly torn seams between collaged source material drawn from popular magazines and art books. Juxtapositions of African sculptures and documentary photography speak to the accumulative nature of representation, of identity itself as it is forged through cultural materials.

Similarly, art historian Rebecca VanDiver has argued that Loïs Mailou Jones's collages on the subject of Haitian Vodou connect to the artist's "complex diasporic literacy."[40] The artist's prolonged study of Vodou practices propelled her use of the technique, which could mimic the additive character of its rituals and, furthermore, reflects the "hybridization" of diasporic experience.[41] Indeed, despite their differences, each of these accounts of African diasporic collage argues that the juxtapositions and fissures available in the technique have made it a historically important metaphorical resource for artists investigating the syncretic character, the "disjuncture" and "relocation," of hyphenated identity.[42] Relatedly, they all emphasize the capacity of collage to translate vernacular visual culture into high art. With collage, artists can collect everyday objects and images that speak to localized traditions and recontextualize them as artistic material.

These existing accounts of African diasporic collage tend to hinge on figuration. For instance, it is specifically through pictorial representation that, Mercer suggest, Bearden was able to address African diasporic identity and experience.[43] Pindell's case shows us that African diasporic artists also have engaged with collage through abstract idioms. Further, her lifted collages draw on West African textiles as a source of abstraction and texture. Jones's Haitian collages likewise approach the aesthetics of "African religious traditions" through abstract forms.[44] These black American women's practices issue a challenge to European modernism's purported monopoly on abstraction.

While Pindell eventually engaged with African diasporic collage in an abstract way, her earliest experimentations with the technique show her drawing on Bearden's figurative photo-stat collages.[45] She made two figurative collages in the late 1960s that thematize the period's heightened racial strife. Fabricated from newsprint photographs, *Untitled* (1967) presents a

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Patricia Hill Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and The Politics of Empowerment* [1990] (New York: Routledge, 2000), 86.

[37] Mercer, 125.

[38] Ibid., 131.

[39] Ibid., 126, 131.

[40] Rebecca VanDiver, "The Diasporic Connotations of Collage: Loïs Mailou Jones in Haiti, 1954–1964," *American Art* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 26.

[41] Ibid., 29.

[42] Ibid.

[43] This tendency may reflect a long-standing bias toward figuration in art histories of African American production. See the introduction to Darby English, *How To See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007).

[44] VanDiver, 27.

[45] Mercer, 126.

disjointed urban scene (fig. 2.14). High-rise buildings, railroad tracks, and an empty lot frame two uniformed police officers, one black and one white, emerging hurriedly from a brick building. Five young black men, their backs turned to us, gaze over a fence at railroad tracks, seemingly missing the scene above. Two clusters of mostly white adult onlookers, much more closely cropped, flank them. The subject matter, a vaguely sinister take on Bearden's collaged cityscapes, ominously evokes the era's rolling urban unrest, much of which occurred at least partially in response to racist policing. The "long, hot summer of 1967" saw 159 riots in cities across the United States, including uprisings in black communities in Detroit and Newark that reduced several city blocks to burnt-out rubble and resulted in scores of deaths and injuries when police and National Guard officers responded to protests with force.[46] In another collage, *Memorial—Homage to Martin Luther King* (1968), Pindell pays tribute to the recently assassinated civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (fig. 2.15). A burst of red ink near a blunt sketch of the reverend's visage invokes a bullet wound as well as the sudden, puncturing violence of his death. In their use of collaged newsprint material to touch on the period's struggles for black liberation, Pindell's early works are redolent of aspects of Bearden's aspirations for the technique, which he began using in 1964 as part of efforts to address pressing issues of the civil rights movement.[47] Pindell encountered Bearden's work by 1968, when she met him during preparations for the MoMA exhibition *In Honor of Dr. Martin Luther King*.[48]

Pindell's development of an abstract collage practice in 1973 coincided not only with her introduction to West African textiles but also with her entry into feminist artist groups. These two series of encounters had overlapping and intertwined significance for Pindell's career. Collage figured centrally in feminist critiques of art world gender politics in the 1970s. Feminist reclamations of collage mined its associations with domesticity and resourcefulness. At A.I.R. Gallery, which Pindell co-founded in 1972, she first became emboldened to embrace feminine aesthetics.[49] Artists including Dotty Attie, Mary Grigoriadis, Susan Williams, and Barbara Zucker had approached her, as well as thirteen other women, about establishing the cooperative at a time when women artists were almost entirely shut out of major galleries in Manhattan.[50] For Pindell, the group served initially as an alternative to the intimidating downtown "bar scene" frequented by art luminaries.[51] She helped to name the gallery, proposing Eyre, a reference to the self-reliant protagonist of Charlotte Brontë's famed bildungsroman.[52] The group adapted the name to their local context, borrowing the homonym A.I.R. ("artist in residence") from fire codes used to designate the occupation of non-residential buildings by artists.

A.I.R.'s conveners learned of Pindell's art from critic and curator Lippard, who had included her in the Women's Slide Registry, a collection accessible to galleries and museums

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[46] See Malcolm McLaughlin, *The Long, Hot Summer of 1967: Urban Rebellion in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[47] Mercer, 139.
[48] Howardena Pindell, interview with Camille Billops, April 21, 1980, Audio-visual recording, Billops-Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.
[49] See A.I.R. Gallery Archives, ca. 1972–2008, MSS 184, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University; "A Short History," *A.I.R. Gallery,* https://www.airgallery.org/history/.
[50] Pindell, interview with Swenson, 149. In 1972, Maude Boltz and Nancy Spero as well as Attie, Grigoridadis, Williams, and Zucker invited fourteen artists to join the cooperative.
[51] Oral History Interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[52] Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.

with the express purpose of promoting greater inclusion of women artists in New York shows.[53] Pindell's relationship with Lippard would prove consequential in other ways as well. In fact, the artist has attributed her induction into feminist art circles to the critic.[54] The two met at MoMA in 1967, where they worked together in a now-defunct traveling exhibition department. In her first years at the institution, Pindell assisted Lippard, among other employees, with curatorial administration.[55] Pindell has noted that for a period, the two worked together "almost daily," even though Lippard was not a fulltime employee.[56]

Lippard distinguished herself from other colleagues in Pindell's eyes when early in their working relationship she "asked [her] opinion" about Ernst's collage studies, breaking with what the upstart saw as an implicit institutional policy to exclude subordinates from any aspect of curatorial decision making.[57] Shortly thereafter, the critic asked to visit the young artist's studio, a request that left Pindell "in awe."[58] Her proximity to curators, critics, and other art world power brokers rarely translated into access to their time, as the majority of these professionals, in Pindell's estimation, prejudicially failed to view her as "an equal" worthy of their attention.[59] The studio visit impressed Lippard. As a result, she included Pindell in the Women's Slide Registry and selected three of her works for inclusion in her 1971 exhibition *26 Contemporary Women Artists* at Larry Aldrich's gallery in Ridgefield, Connecticut, an early influential feminist exhibition.[60]

A.I.R. offered the emerging artist opportunities to exhibit her abstract works in Manhattan at a formative period in her career. It also served as a platform for her most pressing artistic experimentations with collage and feminine forms. In fact, she debuted her collaged works at her first show at the gallery.[61] Noting that she was "in a limbo period" during preparation for the exhibition, a phrase suggesting uncertainty about her housing and studio situation, Pindell decided to make small-scale works, rather than paintings, because she could store them more easily when they returned to her at the conclusion of the show.[62] The joint exhibition with Harmony Hammond took place in January 1973. Pindell's contributions included collaged works on mat-board as well as examples on graph paper (figs. 2.02 and 2.04).

These collaged works centered concerns for post-minimalism that were typical of the art shown at the cooperative. Broadly speaking, post-minimalisms of this period tended to thematize loosened geometric forms, repetition and seriality, and tensions between handmade and

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[53] The Women's Slide Registry was developed by the Art Worker Coalition's Ad Hoc Women's Committee, which Lippard helped to organize. She housed the registry in her apartment for many years. See Carey Lovelace, "Optimism and Rage: The Women's Movement in Art in New York, 1969 – 1975," *Women's Art Journal* 37, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2016): 6.
[54] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.
[55] Pindell, interview with Swenson, 148.
[56] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Oral History Interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[59] Ibid.
[60] See the exhibition catalog, Lucy Lippard, *26 Contemporary Women Artists* (Ridgefield, CT: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 1971).
[61] Pindell, interview with Swenson, 143.
[62] Ibid.

industrial processes and materials. They also often favored "neutral" colors such as beige.[63] As Hammond has noted, "most of the work exhibited at A.I.R. was abstract, material-based and/or conceptual. The emphasis was on materials and their natural color."[64] The density of post-minimalist idioms at A.I.R. reflected in part Lippard's affinity for them. She gathered many of the slides that populated the registry from which the gallery's founders drew their selections. Art critic Robert Pincus-Witten has noted that post-minimalism's "relationship to the women's movement cannot be overly stressed."[65] Artists' concerns for process, soft materials, and the expansion of mediums simultaneously participated in feminist and post-minimalist discourse. At A.I.R., Patsy Norvell's diaphanous sculptures, Rachel bas-Cohain's warped grids, and Rosemary Mayer's gauzy structures exemplified this co-constitutive character. Pindell worked alongside these artists at the intersection of these visual vocabularies. However, the gallery also promoted a wide-range of styles across media and figurative modes, including Judith Bernstein's phallic "screw" drawings, the conceptual drawings of Agnes Denes, and Nancy Spero's *Torture in Chile*, which addresses violence against women. Gallery members supported this ecumenical approach as part of their effort "to demonstrate that women did work worthy of inclusion in any mainstream gallery."[66]

Many of the artists at A.I.R. imported into their art objects personally meaningful materials culled from their local, largely female communities. Hammond constructed sculptures in the early 1970s from old bags and textiles collected from friends.[67] Norvell presented a "hair quilt" at A.I.R. made from strands provided by women in her consciousness-raising group.[68] In many cases, women's consciousness-raising groups (abbreviated as CR) not only created the conditions for material exchange, but also were in part responsible for the introduction of overtly feminine-coded content into art.[69] In these groups, women spoke round robin on a particular topic, such as family obligation, work, or sex. These exchanges generated "the startling realization that feelings…experienced in isolation were shared by others—and were, in fact, the result of being a 'class' of women."[70] By surfacing realms of experience previously left unspoken, CR helped to generate feminist frameworks of personal and social inquiry. Artists used these openings in their work. For instance, Joan Jonas attributes her idea for the work *Mirror Check*, in which she examines her nude body with a small mirror in front of an audience, to discussions in her CR group (fig. 2.16).

Pindell participated in CR by 1972, when she reported sharing a group with Lippard.[71] Like many of her peers, she has credited the discussions that unfolded within the group as a

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[63] On post-minimalism, see for instance, Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Remaking Art After Modernism* (New Haven: Yale, 2004); Lucy Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction," [1966] in *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971); Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism* (New York: Out of London Press, 1977).
[64] Oral History Interview with Harmony Hammond, 2008 September 14. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. See also Lovelace, 8.
[65] Pincus-Witten, 16.
[66] Lovelace, 8.
[67] Oral History Interview with Harmony Hammond, 2008 September 14. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[68] Lovelace, 7.
[69] Ibid., 4.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Oral history interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

source of artistic encouragement.[72] In the years immediately following her entry into feminist groups, she began incorporating materials from her everyday life. While objects such as sewing thread and talcum powder explicitly referenced a domestic culture, Pindell also drew upon aspects of her daily life associated with different forms of labor through her use of objects such as graph paper and hole-punched chads.

Collage was particularly well suited to feminist efforts to resuscitate the "personal" as a worthy subject of artistic endeavor. In its application in crafts and popular arts, from which feminists drew, collage had recruited materials from everyday life, whether treasured memorabilia or found detritus. Feminists exploited this aspect of collage with zeal, and critiqued hypocritical modernist narratives that championed the technique while eschewing its associations with feminized practices of remembrance and decoration such as scrapbooking. For instance, in an influential article first published in 1978, artists Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro offered a feminist theorization of collage that celebrated women's ability throughout history to make aesthetic interventions with few material resources.[73] They coined the term *femmage* to refer to a wide range of women's cultural production, which they urged women artists to take up with pride. Significantly for Meyer and Schapiro, traditional women's practices, of which collage is paradigmatic, remained accessible to women throughout history because in contrast to fine art mediums such as painting or sculpture, they require relatively little access to training or specialized materials.[74] Indeed, this accessibility to women and working-class people accounts in part for its devaluation in modernist hierarchies of art.

In the early years of her career, Pindell's "life was concentrated around getting supplies."[75] Collage provided her an economical means to make art in a period of financial strain and amid spatial limitations. She began working intensively with the technique in 1973, when she could no longer afford the large canvas rolls needed for the atmospheric sprayed paintings she had produced for several years.[76] (As mentioned, she also had recently run out of room to store these stretched canvases in her small studio apartment.) With her embrace of collage, she discovered her everyday surrounds, including the material excesses of her employer, as a possible mine of artistic supplies. For instance, the mat-boards that serve as ground of many of her collages came from dumpsters in the basement of MoMA.[77] For a period, Pindell lived in a SoHo loft where, due to zoning restrictions, she could not access the building's refuse. She took her trash to the museum, where she discovered that the framing department disposed of the cutouts produced as a by-product of the matting process. These archival, 100% rag, beveled boards were a boon to the financially strapped artist, and she collected them in garbage bags. There is a poetic irony to her appropriation of these discarded materials, the "negatives" of the mats that adorned the artworks on view in the rarefied institution where she worked. As an

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[72] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.

[73] Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro, "Waste Not, Want Not: An Inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled," *Heresies* 4 (1978): 66–69. See also Heresies Archives, Rutgers Special Collections, New Brunswick, NJ.

[74] See also Linda Nochlin's formative feminist text on the structural barriers to art-making that women historically have faced, Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" [1971] in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader,* ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 229–34.

[75] Oral history interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

[76] Judith Wilson, "Howardena Pindell Makes Art That Winks At You," *Ms.,* May 1980, 69.

[77] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.

employee, Pindell had access to the museum's infrastructural underbelly, but as a black woman artist, her chances of entry into the institution were dubious. One of these mat-board artworks, *Untitled #7*, now belongs in MoMA's permanent collection (fig. 2.04).

Pindell sourced most of the other materials used to make the mat-board collages from scraps or items she already had on hand, including the paper chads. She punched some of these from manila folders pilfered from museum offices, and generated many more in the production of templates used to make her spray-painted works.[78] To form grids on the mat-board collages, Pindell pulled thread from her home sewing kit, the same spools she used to sew her own clothes when she could not afford store-bought versions.[79] (Eventually, she would purchase sturdier threads produced for applications such as sail fabrication and crochet.[80]) Alongside this resourcefulness, Pindell was fastidious about her materials. Her time at MoMA had alerted her to the pitfalls of non-archival materials, while a contact-induced allergy to lead attuned her to the dangers of toxic art supplies.[81] She researched and tested her materials. For instance, she sourced the photo dry mount spray used to fix many of her collage materials from the industrial manufacturer 3M after meeting in her studio with a chemist from the company who showed her adhesive samples.[82]

Other aspects of the collages demonstrate a more free-wheeling approach to materials. Strands of cat hair are suspended in the talcum powder glaze of many of the mat-board works. The hairs wafted into the works in her studio home, where her two pets roamed freely.[83] An example in the collection of the National Gallery of Art features scores of hairs, some of them in small clumps (fig. 2.17) Pindell thought of the hair as part of the finished works, though never included them as part of her materials lists, leaving them for the viewer to notice.[84] Along with the talcum powder and sewing thread, the pet hair carries domestic associations. Collage practice enabled Pindell to invite this broadened range of materials into her artworks.

While found materials proliferate in histories of modernist art, the circumstances of this pivot in Pindell's production speak to the specific socio-economic conditions of 1970s New York. The agitations of the civil rights and feminist movements resulted in incremental legislative changes that promised to equalize pay across race and gender, but actual improvements to the wage gap were uneven and slow developing.[85] In fact, in 1973, the year Pindell's financial situation put a stop to her spray-painted canvases, the gender wage gap grew to the largest it had been since the Census Bureau began tracking earnings across gender in 1960.[86] On average, a white woman working fulltime, year-round made fifty-seven cents for

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[78] SR, 97.29a. MoMA Archives, NY.
[79] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.
[80] Alison Dillulio (associate director, Garth Greenan Gallery), email correspondence with the author, March 2017.
[81] Oral history interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[82] Pindell, interview with Swenson, 143.
[83] Pindell, interview with the author, 2018. Pindell had several cats throughout the 1970s whose fur ended up in her paintings and works on paper.
[84] Ibid.
[85] See, for instance, Solomon W. Polacheck and John Robst, "Trends in the Male–Female Wage Gap: The 1980s Compared with the 1970s," *Southern Economic Journal* 67, no. 4 (April 2001): 869–88.
[86] Abby Lane and Katherine Gallagher Robbins, "The Wage Gap Over Time," *National Women's Law Center*, May 3, 2012, https://nwlc.org/blog/wage-gap-over-time/.

every dollar earned by her male counterpart.[87] Black women fared worse, making forty-eight cents for every dollar earned by a white male in a comparable position.[88] As Pindell noted, museums like MoMA hired women (unlike the dozens of university art departments to which she applied after the completion of her MFA), but they did not pay them well.[89]

The relationship that feminist artists posited toward modernism varied. Some feminist artistic engagements with feminine handiwork operated not only at a distance from modernist practices but specifically sought to counter them. For instance, when feminist artists began incorporating traditional women's work into their art in the early 1970s, some commentators noted a coincident "size race" among male artists making increasingly unwieldy sculptures and land art.[90] As literary theorist Naomi Schor argues, the detail has been gendered as feminine in normative Western aesthetics, the inverse to masculine concerns for monumentality.[91] The potentially small scale of collage accretions was one effective means feminists used to contextualize their practices in feminine-coded cultural practices. For instance, artist Pat Lasch lavishly adorned her cake-like sculptures with small baubles and beads (fig. 2.18). Pindell's painstakingly constructed collages plainly embraced the detail, even in the face of censure. One critic derided her work: "Oh goodness, how many Lord's Prayers can you get on the head of a pin?"[92] This admonishment reflects the modernist tenet that too much detail rendered an artwork "excessive," a gendered and racialized term that invokes stereotypes of women, especially women of color, as immoderately emotional and physically unrestrained.[93] The critic's comment also reveals modernist anxieties about the "decorative" character of detail and women's handiwork, which Pindell more explicitly engaged in her collaged cut and sewn paintings through their additional incorporation of glitter, sequins, and perfume.

Feminist artists of the 1970s frequently embraced collage as "rife with possibilities," not only for its gendered associations, but also its metaphorical valences.[94] Lippard, for instance, who influentially theorized feminism as an artistic and political mode that operated outside of modernism, placed a "collage aesthetic" at the center of feminist practice.[95] Distinct from mainstream uses of collage, "feminist collage aesthetic" exhibits "a kind of 'positive fragmentation'" born from the experience of social marginalization.[96] The critic argues that the collage strategies of marginalized artists arise from their awareness of the fractured nature of social structures, writing, "Collage is born of interruption and the healing instinct to use political consciousness as a glue with which to get the pieces into some sort of new order."[97]

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[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.
[90] See Muriel Castanis, "Behind Every Artist There's a Penis," *The Village Voice*, March 19, 1970, 15–16, 60.
[91] Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 4. See also Lippard's assertion that Eva Hesse's work transcends the cliché of detail as women's work in *Eva Hesse* (New York: NYU Press, 1976).
[92] Pindell, interview with Swenson, 137.
[93] See Nicole Fleetwood, "Excess Flesh: Black Women Performing Hypervisibility," in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 107–111.
[94] Raaberg, 157.
[95] See Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges."
[96] Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan*, 136.
[97] Ibid.

Pindell's case, of course, contrasts with Lippard's articulation of the feminist collage aesthetic as somehow divorced from modernist usage of the technique. Her works on paper inextricably layer collage investments in pictorial depth and feminine handicrafts. By working across these modes, her art draws attention to the particular role of collage in modernist histories of appropriation and the inherent tension between the technique's status as feminine craft and its signal role in the development of modernist art.

As discussed, Pindell also simultaneously looked to West African textiles and African diasporic practices as sources of a collage aesthetic. She couched the textural logic of the batakari in the protocols of abstract, post-minimalist collage. Her insistence on the simultaneous relevance to her work of modernist, African diasporic, and feminist collage echoes black feminist lesbian poet Audre Lorde's earlier theorizations of her own "collaged self-construction."[98] Through the collaged genre of *biomythography*, Lorde asserted her own avowedly heterogeneous identity, which she conceived as an inherent feature of black womanhood.[99] She wrote and spoke extensively about the use of the embodied self to "reintegrate" the parts of oneself fragmented by oppression. For Lorde, collage metaphorizes the process by which one accumulates histories, including collective memories, and assembles them into a sense of personhood. Pindell's theory of collage shares a view of the technique as a method of mending rather than fragmentation. In the following section, I further explore Pindell's black feminist approach to collage, which she saw as a form of "play." Collage play, and its inherent proximity to work, allowed the artist to place this, plus that, on the same surface, articulating her own collage experience.

Play

I. Paper work

Pindell's earliest abstract collages comprise hand-numbered chads pasted onto graph paper (figs. 2.02 and 2.09). These works, whose production was concentrated in 1973 but would continue until 1975, engage with conceptual idioms of order, "low" materials, and bureaucratic systematization. To a degree, they are formulaic, each produced through a methodical process with discrete steps resulting in works of slight variation. Pindell thought of these rigorous collages as both playful and pleasurable. She made them "just for the sheer pleasure of writing a number and seeing the clusters of dots as color and seeing the variations of grays and darks."[100] Indeed, the works offer abundant visual interest despite their dry aesthetic. The paper rounds protrude from the graph paper in subtly variable ways. Barely visible dabs of adhesive outline some of the chads, and the hand-written numbers enigmatically suggest a numerical pattern without ever resolving into one. Variation is dramatized in these studies of seriality. In this section, I investigate how Pindell found pleasure, or what she elsewhere calls "visceral" enjoyment, in the tedium of paper work.[101] With these collages, she explored play as an important means for engaging and critiquing prevalent conceptual idioms of rote administrative labor.

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[98] Elizabeth Alexander, "'Coming Out Blackened and Whole': Fragmentation and Reintegration in Audre Lorde's *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals*," *American Literary History* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 696.
[99] See Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1982) and Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Spinsters, 1980).
[100] Pindell, interview with Joseph Jacobs, 35–36.
[101] Wilson, 69.

Pindell used numbering and bureaucratic material such as the hole punch, manila folders, and graph paper to place her works in leading discussions of conceptual art while also referencing her post as a white-color worker. The procedures of hole-punching, labeling, and sorting chads resemble the bureaucratic assignments, including extensive paperwork, she performed as an assistant curator at MoMA.[102] As art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson has theorized, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, artists in the United States attempted to redefine artistic labor.[103] For instance, conceptual artists frequently conceived of bureaucratic labor as a set of impersonal procedures that would allow them to remove a degree of their subjective voice from the work of art. In 1967, artist Sol LeWitt voiced a nascent view of artist as bureaucrat, writing in the pages of *Aspen Magazine*: "The aim of the artist would…[be] to give [the viewer] information.…He would follow his predetermined premise to its conclusion avoiding subjectivity. Chance, taste, or unconsciously remembered forms would play no part in the outcome."[104] The "serial artist" does not produce enchanting objects but "functions merely as a clerk cataloging the results of his premise."[105]

LeWitt's view of the "cataloguing clerk" evokes social theorist Max Weber's consequential theory of modern bureaucracy. Weber argues that bureaucracy develops more "perfectly, the more it is 'dehumanized,' the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation."[106] The precision and continuity of the modern bureaucracy, valued traits in a capitalist society, are ensured by the "impersonal" and "functional" roles of its officers and the codified "rules" according to which they act. Management of the modern office is based upon its files, or written documents, rather than the subjective capacities of its functionaries. LeWitt's model positions artists as "a staff of [subordinate] officials and scribes" whose duties lie in the administration of "information."[107] Here, LeWitt writes of the bureaucratic labor performed by a secretary or other clerical worker, rather than a high-flying executive. Ironically, the work LeWitt himself typically performed in relationship to his own artistic production was more managerial than secretarial—he often submitted specifications to manufacturers or institutions to distribute to laborers who fulfilled his "order."[108]

Although conceptual artists in this period masculinized white-collar office aesthetics, women were the secretaries undergirding these administrative spaces—punching holes, typing, and filing. Conceptual renunciations of artistic agency issued a challenge to the processes of commercialization that had transformed artists' names and "styles" into brand signatures. The gendered complexities of these authorial repudiations in some cases also served to uphold sexist hierarchies of labor.

Unlike many of the artists who turned to an aesthetic of administration in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Pindell was herself a practicing bureaucrat. Her intimate knowledge of administrative labor helps to reveal the limiting assumptions that undergirded some

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[102] "At a Glance," *MoMA* no. 4 (1977): 7; Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.
[103] Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*.
[104] Sol LeWitt, "Serial Project #1, 1966," *Aspen Magazine*, nos. 5–6 (Fall–Winter 1967): n.p.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Max Weber, "Bureacracy," [1922] in *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 975.
[107] Ibid., 957.
[108] On LeWitt as "executive," see Caroline Jones, "Frank Stella: Executive Artist," in *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 112–86.

commentators' descriptions of the fundamental shifts in artistic labor putatively brought on by conceptual idioms. For instance, Lippard wrote of conceptual practices of the late 1960s that "…art is not just play, it is the counterpoint to work."[109] Her gesture toward the socially liberatory promise of conceptualisms hinges, in this example, on the antithetical relationship between art and work. Art historian Benjamin Buchloh has countered Lippard's view, arguing that "[w]hat Conceptual Art achieved…was to [temporarily] subject the last residues of artistic aspiration toward transcendence (by means of traditional studio skills and privileged modes of experience) to the rigorous and relentless order of the vernacular of administration."[110] In other words, conceptual artists subordinated "artistic aspiration" to the rational confines of bureaucracy through means such as dematerialization, de-aestheticization, and the prioritization of linguistic and other structures.[111] How does Pindell's insertion of administrative labor into her visually appealing collages push against these models that oppose (Lippard) and collapse (Buchloh) two aspects of her daily life?

Pindell's tactile engagement with bureaucratic materials and processes challenges the notion that bureaucratic labor, of the type performed by a functionary, necessarily entails a renunciation of agency. Through their explicit allusion to MoMA with the profligate repurposed "files," in Weber's model the foundation of the office, the collages point to the "dehumanizing" effects of bureaucracy. But by endowing these materials with aesthetic intent and the possibility of "visceral" enjoyment, Pindell puts pressure on a model of the bureaucratic-artistic laborer as lacking, to borrow LeWitt's formulation, "subjectivity." In contrast to Buchloh's model of conceptual art, which understands the movement's "success" in the subjection of art to an administrative vernacular, Pindell submits the administrative tools of the hole punch and file folder to a process, or set of "rules," of her own artistic devising. Her extraction of these symbolic materials from the rationalizing context of the bureaucratic office points to the fluidity of her lived experiences shuttling between the roles of artist and bureaucrat. For Pindell, the bureaucratic could be wielded to bring an aspect of daily life into her collages, rather than to renounce the pertinence of her subjective experience to her artistic creations.

Furthermore, we can relate this gesture of authorial assertion to what Pindell experienced as "the basic dishonesty of the society at large which simply says [as a black artist] you're not supposed to be there."[112] Perhaps as a black woman Pindell felt she could not afford to forsake her claims to agential authority, as some conceptual artists did. For in rarefied fields of cultural production, black women, in the words of cultural theorist Michele Wallace, "are systematically denied the most visible forms of discursive and intellectual subjectivity."[113] In Pindell's paintings, the durational and physical aspects of handiwork could function as anti-erasure

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[109] Lucy Lippard, Introduction to *955,000* (Vancouver: The Vancouver Art Gallery, 1970), n.p.
[110] Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 532.
[111] As Lippard theorizes in her indispensable text, *Six Years,* conceptual practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s deemphasized the traditional material aspects of art—"uniqueness, permanence, and decorative attractiveness." Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972, A Cross-Reference Book on Some Esthetic Boundaries* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 5.
[112] Howardena Pindell, interview with Linda Freeman, undated transcript, Linda Freeman papers, 1996–2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[113] Michele Wallace, "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity," in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990), 215.

gestures through which to assert, rather than renounce, authorship.[114] As artist Lorraine O'Grady notes in her germinal essay, "Olympia's Maid," there is a cruel irony in the fact that "the idea of subjectivity itself…[became] 'problematized'" in the very decades when black women began to publicly articulate their life experiences as part of a process of theorizing black female subjectivity.[115] Indeed, conceptual denunciations of individual authorship emerged in a period marked by the growing public visibility of artists of color and women artists.[116]

In Pindell's early collage practice, numbering formed an avenue onto broader questions about the role of rationality in art, the ability of physical labor and material to hold meaning, and the necessity of engaging ubiquitous aesthetic markers to secure artistic validity. Numeric digits as well as graph paper proliferated in conceptual art shown in New York in the 1960s and early 1970s. For instance, dozens of artworks in MoMA's 1970 exhibition, *Information*, which gathered an international cadre of young artists working in conceptual modes, featured numerals. These digits performed functions such as ordering, counting and measuring. Mel Bochner's *Measurements Series: By Formula (Circle)* (1970) consisted of a black wall with a circle and its dimensions neatly written in white chalk. Siah Armajani's *Number Between 0 and 1* (1969), a centerpiece of the exhibition, comprised a print-out "of all the digits between zero and one."[117] At over nine feet tall and five hundred pounds in weight, the work purported to exhaustively catalog these numerals using an advanced administrative machine, offering dry commentary on the productive capacities of technological innovation. While the purposes of such numerical exercises remained opaque, even confounding, to some visitors, the rationalizing function of the numbers themselves stayed reassuringly in place—digits follow a pattern, or they quantify a real spatial relationship.[118] As curator Kynaston McShine explained, the artworks on view demoted aesthetics to an emerging function: "the style…is…simply a method of distributing information that interests the artist."[119] It follows that artists deployed digits as a potentially effective means to communicate or organize information. *Information* influentially introduced a wide range of conceptual practices to a large audience and inaugurated the mainstream institutionalization of the idiom. As an employee of the museum, Pindell not only had convenient access to the show at MoMA, she also had personal relationships with several of the artists in the exhibition, including Lippard and Carl Andre.[120]

Pindell defined her engagement with numbers against that of artists using them as part of "mathematical problem-solving" and "philosophical theories."[121] German artist Hanne Darboven's *Konstruktionen* (1968), which appeared in *Information,* come to mind as examples. With these works, Darboven initiated a years-long investigation of various calendrical systems

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[114] Thanks to Olivia K. Young for this suggestion.
[115] Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming black female subjectivity," [1992] in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 177.
[116] For instance, see Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Aspen,* 5–6 (1967): n.p. It is notable that Barthes's and LeWitt's renunciations of authorship both appeared in the multimedia publication *Aspen Magazine*, which came in a customizable folder or box filled with media formats such as postcards, posters, and phonograph recordings.
[117] *Information,* Museum of Modern Art checklist, 1971, PI, II.B.813. MoMA Archives, New York.
[118] See, for instance, Hilton Kramer's review of the exhibition in *The New York Times*, Hilton Kramer, "Show at the Modern Raises Questions," *The New York Times,* July 2, 1970, 26.
[119] *Information,* Museum of Modern Art checklist, 1971, PI, II.B.813. MoMA Archives, NY.
[120] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.
[121] Wilson, 69.

using complex mathematical logic to structure drawn works on paper, which she considered a form of writing (fig. 2.19).[122] To the contrary, Pindell approached numbers, she has adamantly remarked, as a form of drawing rather than signs in an informational system.[123] As art historian Judith Wilson has noted, the artist "thumb[ed] her nose at her colleagues' obsession with 'meaning' by placing her meticulously inked chads randomly, without regard for their order."[124] Pindell, in other words, embraced the aleatory as a method of overcoming the constraints of rational meaning. Doing so allowed her to pursue aesthetic pleasure in her works, even as many of her conceptualist counterparts jettisoned these concerns from their practices.

An anecdote illustrates Pindell's sidelong approach to the conceptual trope of numbering. According to the artist, an interaction with a gallerist inspired her to start numbering chads. During a studio visit in the early 1970s, Cincinnati-based critic and gallerist Carl Solway asked Pindell how many spray-painted dots appeared in one of her large, stretched canvases.[125] Diligently frugal, the artist had saved the chads generated when she made hole-punched templates to create the stained works discussed in chapter one (fig. 2.20).[126] These by-products sat in garbage bags in her studio. As a repost to Solway's inquiry, she began hand-numbering the rounds with a Rapidograph, a kind of technical pen, and collaging them to graph paper.[127] She intended the gesture as a "dig at the conceptual stuff" other artists were making.[128] By evoking the rational systems ubiquitous in emerging artistic practices through her fastidious numbering and placement of dots, Pindell parodied the emptiness of those procedures. If other conceptual artists were beholden to convey what she called an "elaborate psychological rationale for their work," she could instead embrace the physicality and pleasure of working with numbers.[129] Her appropriation of conceptualist procedures for these differing ends suggests that she gleaned artistic meaning, insofar as she thought of it as pertaining to these works, from her materials and their aesthetic organization.

Autobiographic valences subtend Pindell's engagements with collage, including her embrace of the depersonalized aesthetics of administration. Seemingly impersonal rows of digits held idiosyncratic significance for the artist; it bears mentioning that her father, an accountant and statistician, kept ledgers of numbers. He used these in professional capacities, for instance in his work tutoring high school students in high level mathematics, as well as for domestic purposes such as recording readings of the family automobile's odometer.[130] In these contexts, numbers performed their normative functions. They partook in a process of quantification that rationalized an aspect of the world—tracking changes in student performance or measuring gas mileage. The artist created her own tidy rows and columns of digits. Her numerals convey, quite differently, an individualized sense of order secured by fond, and emotionally charged, memories of a scrupulous parent. From this intergenerational transmission of the visual form of rows of

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[122] Victoria Salinger, "'Writing Calculations, Calculating Writing': Hanne Darboven's Computer Art," *Grey Room* 65 (Fall 2016): 36–61.
[123] She has said, for instance, "Numbers, to me, are drawings," in Wilson, 69. See also SR, 97.29a. MoMA Archives, NY.
[124] Wilson, 69.
[125] SR, 97.29a. MoMA Archives, NY.
[126] Ibid.
[127] MoMA PS1 Archives, III.B.52. MoMA Archives, New York.
[128] Pindell, interview with Jacobs, 35.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Skowhegan Lecture Archive, 282. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, Queens.

digits, she made her own meaning, using numerals as a convenient unit of draftsmanship. With the collaged works on paper, she continued the approach to abstraction she had developed with her deployment of the circle and grid in paintings of the late 1960s and early 1970s—she forged an aesthetic arena in which to both test individual meanings and camouflage them in the apparent universality of modernist forms.

Her strategic deployment of digits signaled Pindell's interest in positioning her practice in discourses around conceptual art. It also placed her work in dialogue with other modernist idioms, notably Jasper Johns's proto-Pop work. In December 1970, MoMA opened a survey of lithographs by Johns. The exhibition included over a dozen examples of his numeral prints. Hosted by the department of prints and illustrated books, in which Pindell worked, the show did not fall directly under her purview. Nonetheless, her prolonged artistic engagement with Johns's oeuvre over the course of the following two decades suggests it made a strong impression. Pindell would title a painting after a Johns print that entered her department's collection in 1978—she adapted *Dutch Wives* for her *Dutch Wives (Circled and Squared)*, and several of her most ambitious paintings of the 1980s employ bold hatch marks redolent of the artist's signature canvases of the 1970s. The press release for the Johns survey emphasizes the lithographs' success in "forc[ing]" the viewer into "a new awareness of common objects."[131] Johns's means for undertaking this task are formal. Through deliberate use of color and line, he renders banal signifiers into aesthetic units.

Pindell's graph paper collages share some of these same concerns for numerals. By approaching digits as "drawings," she rendered them aesthetic objects capable of bringing the viewer into "new awareness" of the visual. This concern for the aesthetic countered conceptual art's oft-noted "anti-aesthetic" turn, which involved the subordination of aesthetic aims to informational or other purposes.[132] Pindell's position at MoMA situated her ideally to reckon with the legacy of proto-Pop numerals within emerging conceptual practices. Commonly, the conceptualist anti-aesthetic took the form of repetition, a narrow color palette, the demotion of the hand, and lowly materials, and could generate visual boredom. Darboven's drawings are paradigmatic. Pindell's collages embraced many of these characteristics, but also countered them through understated contrast. Patterns of alternating curved and straight lines are formed as the round edges of the pasted chads graze the taut rectilinear lines of graph paper. Variations in Pindell's tidy handwriting and in the precise placement of the chads relative to the graph lines give the collages a delicate rhythm. The compositions evoke boredom through their repetitive seriality, but they do not reproduce that tedium for the viewer.

Crucially, Pindell sought to achieve aesthetic effects by dealing "with numbers on a visual, visceral level."[133] Humble hand-written digits are given heft through their proliferation on the hundreds of chads that speckle each of the collaged graph paper works. The accumulation of the lowly hole-punched paper scraps in these works participated in conceptualist concerns for "dematerialization," an era term that in its broadest meaning refers to the demotion of material preciousness as an artistic concern.[134] A logic of accretion operates in conceptual works like

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[131] *Jasper Johns Lithographs,* Museum of Modern Art press release, 1970, PI, II.B.866. Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
[132] On this topic, see, for instance, Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: New Press, 2002); James Meyer and Toni Ross, "Aesthetic/Anti-Aesthetic: An Introduction," *Art Journal* 63, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 20–23.
[133] Pindell quoted in Wilson, 69.
[134] See Lippard, *Six Years.*

Pindell's collages and Armajani's *Number Between 0 and 1*, both of which thematize the physicality of low value materials—whether bureaucratic detritus or technological out-put—through their accumulative mass. Pindell's "visceral" engagement with numbers also extends to her intensely physical production of the collages. Unlike Armajani's paper sheets, each one of the chads pasted onto Pindell's works passed through her hands several times. She hand-punched the paper rounds, wrote a number on each one, and then individually and meticulously pasted them to a graph paper sheet, assigning each circle to a single square. With their dense and abundant traces of her labor, the collaged graph paper works initiated an artistic investigation that Pindell would intensify in the following years, when her engagements with the aesthetics of administration would become less overt.

Pindell, however, did not simply counter conceptualist repudiations of artistic agency. Rather, she brought together automation and authorship through her theorization of collage as play. Pindell has remarked that collage introduced a playfulness to her artistic production, specifically citing its capacity to withstand the aleatory, noting that randomness "gives…the image more options."[135] At the same time that her collage process allowed her to imbue bureaucratic materials with authorial agency, it also permitted her a "sense of abandonment or non-decision."[136] Pindell renounced decision-making through the arbitrariness of her works' distributions of numbers and through their compositional regularity.

The random and the arbitrary figure prominently in French sociologist Roger Caillois's typology of play.[137] Among four primary modes of play, he designates *alea* as a category marked by the random. The unique appeal of *alea'*s games lies in the capriciousness of chance.[138] *Alea* "negates work, patience, experience, and qualifications," ultimately voiding the will itself.[139] Pindell's introduction of chance play into her oeuvre entailed a renunciation of certain kinds of decision-making, and thus gave her more latitude to work in personally gratifying ways. Play loosened the constraints placed on her works by external systems, whether those associated with conceptualism or bureaucracy. She found the resulting sense of abandon in her works "meditative."[140] As a form of play, the graph paper collages place the random and the rigorous in tension.

In ways that resonate with earlier twentieth-century ideas about collage, theories of play emergent in the 1960s and 1970s emphasized its potential to expose, and possibly change, existing social orders. Sociologists and philosophers followed earlier theorizations of play; they viewed it as a voluntary and open-ended activity without a purpose outside itself, but which is nonetheless governed by a set of rules.[141] However, following Marxist thought, theorists such as philosopher and critical theorist Herbert Marcuse furthered these accounts by conjecturing that play, given the right conditions, offers a state of being and consciousness transcendent of the

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[135] SLA, 282. MoMA Archives, QNS.
[136] Pindell, interview with Jacobs, 36.
[137] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, [1961] trans. Meyer Barash (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 12.
[138] Ibid., 17.
[139] Ibid., 17–18.
[140] Pindell, interview with Jacobs, 36.
[141] See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a study of the play-element in culture* [1950] (Boston: Beacon, 1955); Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," *Psychiatric Research Reports* 2 (1955): 39–51; Richard Burke, "'Work' and 'Play,'" *Ethics* 82, no. 1 (1971): 42.

alienation of modern work.[142] Marcuse held that play's critical function, its ability to serve as an access point to this way of being beyond labor, lies in "its refusal to forget what *can be*."[143] In other words, play, as a context in which the regulations and expectations of reality are momentarily set aside, permits individuals and collectivities to behave "as if" a different reality exists.[144] Crucially, this alternative context, far from anarchic, generates its own arbitrary rules and order.

Building on Marcuse, philosopher Francis Hearn contends that play "often proves more satisfying than the prevailing social arrangements; it enables the individual to acquire an awareness of the self as a cause of activity."[145] His theory suggests that play can provide people with a critical distance from the implicit rules of everyday life, including those governing social systems such as education, racialization, and bureaucracy. Hearn goes so far as to argue that play has the potential to expose the limitations of existing reality and that it is often, if implicitly, used to "celebrate" a more satisfying, "a more equitable and just" order.[146] The great burden of hope these theories place on play would seem to contradict its status as an activity with no purpose outside itself.

Though relatively modest in its ambitions to give her works "more options," Pindell's introduction of collage to her oeuvre suggests a shared concern for the creation of a new "order" articulated against a prevailing reality.[147] She used numbers in her early collaged works to signal her participation in conceptual informational idioms, but also to reroute the rational flows undergirding many of her peers' works. It seems that Pindell found a wry humor in her peers' attempts to derive meaning and convey information through administrative systems, because she spent her days laboring through such procedures without much satisfaction.[148] Art, for her, could offer something distinct from this other kind of work. It did not have the same constraints or obligations; rather, it might just refuse "to forget what *can be*."[149]

II. String Games

In the same years Pindell made graph paper collages, she also forged the body of works on mat-board, experimenting with a collage method that opened her practice to new textures and materials. Works such as *Untitled #7* (1973) diverge from the tidy restraint of their graph paper counterparts (fig. 2.04). In this example, hand-inked chads pile atop the surface of the ground, which a grid comprised of sewing thread divvies into squares of about one-inch. These paper scraps not only defy the confines of the grid, crossing its fibrous borders, but also the flat surface of the support itself. They pile atop one another, lifting from the board. Their three-dimensionality marks a vastly different angle onto collage than the graph paper works, although they share basic forms and materials. Visually, they are far more ebullient. If the graph paper chads seem to stand at attention in their assigned modules, these paper rounds dance. The mat-

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[142] Herbert Marcuse, "On the Concept of Labor," *Telos* 16 (Summer 1973): 14.
[143] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* [1955] (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), 149.
[144] Francis Hearn, "Toward a Critical Theory of Play," *Telos* 30 (1976-1977): 150.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 170.
[148] See, for instance, her accounts of frustrations working at the museum in Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.
[149] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 149.

board works also raise different questions about their facture. In the graph paper collages, the neatly inked numbers underscore the tedium inherent to a miniaturized cataloguing process. There is little to be obscured in this straightforward process, and indeed, the works seem to make a tidy display of their own fabrication. The three-dimensional collages are less transparent in this regard. It is not at all apparent how the artist managed to affix the paper rounds to her ground, or to achieve the flawless monochrome. These inscrutable aspects of the works motor a good measure of visual interest.

In fact, a tedious and meticulous process undergirds these effects. Pindell adhered collage elements, including hand-numbered chads, to the board by using tweezers and pins.[150] She fixed these paper scraps in place with spray photo dry mount, a material she had learned about in a photography course at Yale.[151] The spray functioned as a permanent adhesive that would not become brittle or yellow over time.[152] Its role in Pindell's collage process underscores aspects of their production that resemble the photographic—the adhesive "fixed" the aleatory effects of gravity on the chads. Other aspects of her extended involvement with hole-punching evoke the positive–negative relationship of photographic prints and film. The screen-like templates she used in the production of her spray-painted canvases of the early 1970s functioned as negatives, blocking the passage of paint onto canvas. Reversals and impressions redolent of photographic processes also appear in her collaged paintings and works on paper through the early 1980s. Chads lie on these works' surfaces alongside the "negative" strips of paper from which they were punched.

The works on mat-board not only share a concern for the random with the graph paper works, they amplify the chance operations of Pindell's collage practice through the placement of chads on their surfaces. Pindell states that she "sprinkled" the chads onto the boards before affixing them, though she clearly intervened in gravity's effects by mounting some of the paper scraps directly on their edges.[153] A snow-like dusting of talcum powder over the entire surface of the collages, including the vertical surfaces of lifted chads, lends them a "frosted" texture and an even, monochrome palette. Pindell began applying the powder because she did not like the fibrous "patina" that spray adhesive left on the collages.[154] With the exception of the black inked numerals, the collages made in 1973 are all beige monochromes. *Untitled (Talcum Powder)* stands out for its darker beige tone, a muted ocher, as well as its derivation from Pindell's numerical titling system (fig. 2.21). It is likely an early experiment with the titular substance.

In 1974, just one year into her production of the mat-board collages, Pindell began replacing their beige monochrome with a vibrant palette. *Untitled #69* (1974) is mottled with deep and pastel blues, oranges and reds (fig. 2.22). The artist has credited this introduction of saturated colors to her coincident experimentations with televisual imagery in the photographic series *Video Drawings* (1973–76).[155] Pindell's turn toward the televisual in 1973 stemmed from earlier investigations. The artist thought of her spray-painted canvases of the early 1970s, through which she adamantly pursued the lessons of Josef Albers's color theory, as "a blown up

[150] SLA, 282. MoMA Archives, QNS.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Ibid.
[155] SR, 97.29a. MoMA Archives, NY.

TV screen with all those little dots."[156] In Pindell's metaphor, the stained points of color which seem to dematerialize into the canvas are analogous to the ephemeral grains of electro-magnetic current that comprise the televisual image. Her decision to embrace a colorful palette in the collages turned away from the muted tones of post-minimalist and conceptualist idioms, though Pindell would continue to produce predominantly pastel paintings until the end of the 1970s.

Chads abound in these slightly later, colorful works—slender slivers of the mat-board ground peer from the clustered mass of paper only at the works' edges. The collage elements lift as much as an inch from the board, creating a much denser and more three-dimensional texture than any of the artist's previous works. No hand-inked numbers appear in these works, which in their stead offer a glut of color. In its layering of saturated hues through overlapping circles, *Untitled #69* resembles the atmospheric studies of surface and depth Pindell pursued in her canvases earlier in the decade. But whereas the circles of those earlier works had sunk into the ground, as the textile absorbed the stained acrylic paint, the chads of the multicolored works on paper extend from the surface, almost seeming to push away from it. Pindell stretched the organizational logic of her works on paper into even less regimented territory towards the end of the 1970s. In works such as *Untitled #84* (1977), she positioned a dozen small T-shaped paper props across the board to suspend a thread grid about an inch above the surface (fig. 2.23). This technique further expanded the spatial apparatus available to the chads, which clamber chaotically across the board, up the props and along the tightrope thread.

These collaged works on paper exemplify Pindell's post-minimalist concern for pushing rationality to its limits, where it bends toward the irrational. In them, a throng of chads overcomes the grid—that paradigmatic signpost of late modernism, that, as art historian Rosalind Krauss has theorized, lies always on the cusp of both the rational and irrational.[157] The relationship between chad and grid emphasizes the material aspects of the grid, rendering it a scaffold, something more akin to a clothesline than a graph. This proliferation of chads evokes the 1960s drawings and collages of Yayoi Kusama, who also long has deployed the round as a deeply personally resonant but nonetheless "universally" legible abstract form.[158] In both artists' works, exuberant accumulations conjure the reproductive logic of late capital, but render it absurd through chaotic multiplication. As art historian Briony Fer has argued, repetition figured in many artists' strategies for remaking modernism beginning in the late 1950s.[159] Pindell and Kusama, as well as artist Eva Hesse participated in this broader post-minimalist project in works that addressed gendered tropes of rationality through their increasingly textured accretions.

Pindell's mat-board collages emerged from her investigation of a common string figure game she played in childhood—cat's cradle.[160] Like many other string figure games, cat's cradle involves the manipulation of a looped length of string between two or more pairs of hands. A sequence game, players build off of the shapes made by their partner. The game ends, and a player loses, when she makes a shape from which no further string formations can be formed. Speculative lineages of string figures vary, but it is generally accepted that they have developed independently in societies globally. Franz Boas wrote the first Western anthropological text discussing them in 1888, observing that cultures in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America all

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[156] Oral history interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[157] Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 5 (Summer 1979): 50–64.
[158] See Frances Morris, ed. *Yayoi Kusama* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012).
[159] Fer, 2.
[160] Beckwith, 94.

feature string figure practices, which can function as story-telling and mnemonic devices, and as games.[161] In the early 1970s, an uptick in interest in global folk traditions, especially traditions associated with indigenous cultures, brought increased attention to string figures. U.S. folklorist and artist Harry Smith first began collecting string figure instructions and documenting their uses on Lummi and Swinomish Native reservations in the Pacific Northwest in the late 1930s.[162] His collections of American folk music and other cultural artifacts such as the string figures made him a fixture of New York countercultural scenes of the 1960s and early 1970s. Although it is unlikely Pindell encountered Smith's string figure collection in this period, their shared milieu fostered each artist's distinct concern for the objects.[163]

Smith's view of string figures exemplifies ideas expressed in a white counterculture based in the United States that construed cultural and ethnic otherness as a source of "authenticity" that had been lost to an industrialized society.[164] Despite the prevalence of string figures as a child's pastime in industrialized societies, he hails the figures as an idiosyncratically "primitive" tradition. Smith remarks, "It was the only thing that I could isolate off hand that was produced by all primitive societies and by no 'cultured' societies."[165] By learning, collecting, and recreating the material practices of "traditional" cultures, members of the U.S. counterculture sought to feed a hunger for a cultural experience outside the bounds of consumer capitalism.[166] (Of course, such ideologies created large markets for craft kits and other DIY products, such as those visible in the *Whole Earth Catalog*.[167]) Despite their appeals to liberatory aims, these forays into otherness maintained the uneven power relations of what black feminist theorist bell hooks has called an imperialist status quo.[168]

In the early 1970s, invigorated interest in global folk and craft traditions arose in tandem with feminist art's reclamation of "women's work." As Smith situated string figures in broader concerns for an enlivened "primitive" culture, Pindell's examination of the forms occurred in the context of her engagements with feminine-coded materials and processes. String carries overt associations with domesticity and with craft. It appeared prominently in fine art practices, such as the work of Sheila Hicks, which gained public visibility and critical approbation in this period (fig. 2.24). Significantly, Pindell first introduced string to the surface of her works in 1973, a year after joining A.I.R. Gallery and amid her involvements with women's consciousness-raising groups.

Both as a specific reference to string figures, and as an allusion to domestic labor more broadly, Pindell's use of string announces the hand as a vital, if not directly visible, component

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[161] See Franz Boas, "The Central Eskimo," *Sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, 1884–85*, (Washington: n.p.).
[162] Rani Singh, "Harry Smith, An Ethnographic Modernist in America," in *Harry Smith: The Avant-Garde in the American Vernacular*, eds. Andrew Perhuck and Rani Singh (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010), 49–50.
[163] As Singh notes, Smith moved between unstable living situations in these decades and rarely granted access to his collections to people beyond a small group of close friends. Ibid., 49.
[164] On this trend of the last decades of the twentieth century, see bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 22.
[165] Harry Smith, "John Cohen—Chelsea Hotel, NYC [*Sing Out!* Volume 19, No. 1, 1969]," interview with John Cohen, in *Think of the Self Speaking: Harry Smith—Selected Interviews,* ed. Rani Singh (Seattle: Elbow/Cityful, 1999), 15.
[166] Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art + Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 54.
[167] Ibid.
[168] hooks, 25.

of the artwork. In string figures, digits enliven the fiber, hold it in place, and give shape and symbolic meaning to the material. These objects evoke both the domestic rhythms of childhood leisure and the skilled household labor traditionally relegated to women. The manual manipulations of string figures resemble fiber-based processes such as weaving and embroidery, while Pindell's allusion to cat's cradle suggests a domestic sociality, as two or more players are required to play the game. String games are inherently durational and ephemeral—cat's cradle collapses into a jumble of string once the game is complete.

String imported a childhood fascination with tactility to Pindell's oeuvre. Significantly, her earliest memories of art center on interactions with the textured surface. On a wall of their middle-class Philadelphia home, Pindell's parents displayed a "thick, puffy reproduction" of a Van Gogh painting.[169] Made of a thin sheet of molded plastic, these inexpensive prints purported to convey a sense of the textured surface of the artworks they reproduced. The young Pindell made a game of sitting on her parents' desk and touching the painting. She has noted of the childhood memory that she was "sure that's why she does puffy stuff" in her own work.[170] Her comment suggests that this physical proximity to a touchable artistic product, which was conditioned by her middle-class upbringing, educated her into tactile familiarity with art.

Pindell's use of the string figure, however, complicates its association with childhood play and craft. By contorting the material into a grid, she signals her simultaneous concerns for conceptualist idioms and the domestic. This adaptation of the string figure emphasizes its status as a system for organizing and conveying information. Indeed, Pindell's allusion to string figures illuminates how the objects comprise a graphic semiotic system that manifests in the union between string and fingers. As a storytelling and mnemonic device, they function as a finger-based language.

This assertion of a domestic, tactile game as a form of knowledge production is underscored by the analogous relationship between string in Pindell's mat-board works and the printed grid of her graph paper collages. By developing works with string and on graph paper simultaneously, she experimented with the interchangeability of industrially produced and handmade objects. The graph paper's mechanically printed lines exhibit minimal variations in spacing or thickness. They conform, and they do so effortlessly. The string grid, by contrast, attests to the artist's exertions. Small graphite marks near the edges of the board indicate where she measured its regular intervals. With great care, she cut into the edges of the mat-board, creating an anchor for her strings with a slit through which they wrap to the back of the board. Despite the differences between these materials, Pindell's oeuvre indicates that string can operate as effectively as graph paper to form a grid. She weds the tactile sign system of the string figure to the grid's tenuous logic.

The introduction of a tactile approach to the surface of her art through the use of collage and thread would have a profound effect on Pindell's artistic production over the course of the following decade, when she would increasingly favor loosened, hand-wrought forms. Her works never again look so regimented as they do in the graph paper works of the early 1970s. Thread brought new kinds and degrees of texture to Pindell's art. The girth of the thread itself pushed her collage into new three-dimensional terrain and also helped to support the lifted chads that activate the surface of her mat-board works. In these pieces, string enabled Pindell to knot together her abiding interest in the bureaucratic with an emerging affinity for handiwork. The

[169] SR, 97.29a. MoMA Archives, NY; Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989. In the Jones interview, Pindell says the reproduction was of Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890).
[170] Ibid.

material allowed her to extend her earlier critiques of conceptual discourses by promoting the hand. Her embrace of string figures in particular elevated the manual and recognized it as a source of knowledge, illuminating the centrality of previously denigrated domestic and folkloric activity to the informational systems that have organized modern life. String figures seem to have suggested to her that handiwork could communicate in ways that conceptual art had largely abandoned. With her use of the string figure, she further asserted that she found value in a pleasurable art-making practice, and that "visceral enjoyment" constitutes a vital form of cultural information.

Conclusion

Feminist theories of collage have ascribed radical possibilities to the technique. For instance, Lippard has argued that the collage aesthetic "is a kind of dialectic exposing by juxtaposition the disguises of certain words and images and forms and thus also expressing the cultural and social myths on which they are based."[171] Her commentary rhymes with the high-minded notions of play advanced by sociologists and philosophers in the same period, suggesting that collage, like play, makes reality perceptible by denaturalizing its structuring components. Lippard continues that the connections between unlike parts forged through collage "is also a metaphor for the breaking-down of race, class, and gender barriers, because it moves out from its center in every direction."[172] Thus, the collage aesthetic is "a metaphor for cultural democracy."[173] For Lippard, collage permits a re-articulation of the social order by creating new relationships between the objects it gathers.

Pindell's conceptualization of collage as a form of "play," a context free of the burden of easily legible meaning, counters the lofty identitarian aspirations Lippard ascribed to the technique. Perhaps as a black woman she was less optimistic about the possibilities for this kind of widespread social transformation. Rather than positing collage as a metaphor for identity writ large, Pindell understood it as a playful realm in which the constraints of social reality might be momentarily subordinated to an idiosyncratic set of rules. If this "game" allowed her to experiment with aesthetic hierarchies and gendered labor, it was not the purpose of her artistic play to remake them. First and foremost, collage was about "visceral, visual" work, and it motored Pindell's ardent investigation of this kind of "meditative" artistic labor, which would become a central theme of her oeuvre.[174] In this sense, the artist's use of collage tracks more closely with Lorde's theorization of collage as a black feminist strategy for maintaining a sense of self amid the fractious violence of intersecting racial and gender oppressions.[175]

Collage play expanded the materials, forms, and effects of Pindell's work. It brought the outside world and the artist's interior life to the surface of her art in increasingly overt ways. Collage introduced texture and references to vernacular cultural practices such as sewing to her previously staid modernist aesthetic, opening her artistic production to increasingly individual and politically germane meanings. The playfulness of the technique injected the bureaucratic form of the grid with the sensuousness of the weave. Through these means, Pindell expanded her conceptualization of her artistic production as a form of mending—a process of using one's labors to create something new from worn remnants. The persistence of collage in her oeuvre

[171] Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan,* 181.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Ibid., 209.
[174] Pindell, quoted in Wilson, 69.
[175] See Lorde, *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals*.

attests to the artist's enduring belief that this kind of reparative work could be playful and that it depended on tactile engagements with the material world. In the following chapter, I investigate Pindell's ongoing pursuit of collage as a site of pleasurable, "healing" labor. With the cut and sewn paintings we see that a dense, protuberant collage technique would have profound implications for her development of a black feminist theory of "empowering" art. Through her deployment of the technique in the elaborate fabrication of her cut and sewn paintings later in the 1970s, she fully realized a black feminist theory of abstraction that positioned the work of her own hands at the center of modernist art.

Chapter Three: Texturing Abstraction

In 1976, Howardena Pindell began making paintings by cutting strips of canvas, sewing them together into a large rectangular grid, and covering them with collaged and painted materials to form an abstract field (fig. 3.01).[1] Pastel hues dominate these all-over compositions, though specks of more saturated color mottle their surfaces. From afar, an early example, *Untitled #20 (Dutch Wives Circled and Squared)* (1978), repeats the principal formal theme of Pindell's spray painted works—"veils" of dots. However, a closer look at the surface of the unstretched canvas, solicited by the colorful irregularities, reveals a dense, nubby texture (fig. 3.02). Small pieces of paper, chads produced by a hole punch, are ossified in gesso and acrylic paint. Countless paper rounds extend from the works.

I address in this chapter how and when Pindell's horizons extended beyond New Haven and New York as she developed her densely textured abstract paintings. Largely inspired by her exposure to textiles from Ghana and Nigeria earlier in the 1970s, I argue, Pindell used texture as a vehicle to enmesh allusions to these fiber-based forms with administrative and craft labor, feminine aesthetics and various modernist idioms, including those associated with conceptualism and Abstract Expressionism.[2] These cut and sewn canvases both built on Pindell's earlier work and marked the culmination of her increasing concern for an aspect of painting beyond the strictly visual—texture, or what she has called "surface tension."[3] Pindell used this term to describe the textural density of her cut and sewn paintings, and the "empowering" potential of handmade surfaces in works by artists of the African diaspora. Surface tension then refers both to the material effects of a tactile approach to painting and the psychological dimensions of the haptic.

Between 1977 and 1981, Pindell completed six abstract cut and sewn paintings.[4] On average, each of the paintings took two months to make and measures around seven by eight-

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[1] The first of these paintings is no longer extant. Pindell dates it to circa 1976. Other early cut and sewn paintings are dated 1977. Alison Dillulio (associate director, Garth Greenan Gallery), e-mail correspondence with the author, March 2017.

[2] On the impact of Pindell's encounters with African art on her artistic production of the 1970s, see also Andrea D. Barnwell, "Been to Africa and Back: Contextualizing Howardena Pindell's Abstract Art," *International Review of African American Art* 13, no. 3 (1996): 42–49.

[3] Pindell discusses surface tension in Howardena Pindell, interview with Joseph Jacobs, *Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University, 1985), 35; Howardena Pindell, interview with Kellie Jones, April 2, 1989, Audio-visual recording, Billops-Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA; Howardena Pindell, "The Aesthetics of Texture in African Adornment," *Beauty By Design: The Aesthetics of African Adornment*, ed. Marie-Therese Brincard (New York: African American Institute, 1984), 36–39.

[4] Writings on the cut and sewn paintings include: Lowery Stokes Sims, "Synthesis and Integration in the Work of Howardena Pindell, 1972–1992," and Holland Cotter, "A Resolutely Global Journey: The Life and Work of Howardena Pindell," in *Howardena Pindell: Paintings and Drawings* (New York: Roland Gibson Gallery at Potsdam College of the State University of New York, 1992), 13–19; 10–12; Judith Wilson, "Howardena Pindell Makes Art That Winks At You," *Ms. Magazine* 8, no. 6 (1980): 66–70; Barry Schwabsky, "Howardena Pindell in the 1970s: Development of the Grid," *Howardena Pindell: Paintings, 1974–1980* (New York: Garth Greenan Gallery, 2014), 5-8.

and-a-half feet.[5] Some of the works hang horizontally, in the traditional format of landscape paintings, while others are vertically oriented, like portraiture. With the cut and sewn paintings, Pindell brought the raised surface to her paintings for the first time. In addition to the West African textiles, I locate the artist's tactile modes of making in a black women's cultural tradition of the haptic—a resource for memory transmission and expressions of cultural authority.[6]

Pindell's cut and sewn paintings "signify" the conventions of abstract, all-over painting in order to "reroute" its dominant associations with a white, male subject position.[7] For instance, with these works, she heightened her involvement with overtly coded feminine materials and methods of making. Nonetheless, she continued to contextualize her work in the realm of so-called advanced art. For example, most of the paintings are untitled and numbered according to their order of production, following modernist protocol, while a pair *Carnival at Ostende* (1977) and *Dutch Wives (Circled and Square)* (1978) allude to works in MoMA's prints and drawings collections, which Pindell helped to oversee until 1979 (figs. 3.01 and 3.03).[8]

The cut and sewn paintings not only exemplify the artist's black feminist modernisms, but also allow for a renewed understanding of the possibilities and constraints held by abstract art of the 1970s more broadly. By surfacing the tensions that continue to be embedded in disciplinary silos, many of them shaped by racial, gendered, and other social expectations, the cut and sewn paintings texture abstraction. Indeed, part of the paintings' punch concerns precisely the capricious, socially determined nature of artistic reception. Their theoretical operation extends beyond the material character of their surfaces, mustering layered aesthetic interactions, entwining artistic media, and provoking multi-sensorial viewing encounters. With

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[5] Howardena Pindell, interview with the author, telephone, May 2018. The artist continued making cut and sewn paintings well after this period, but began incorporating figurative elements in the works, initially through the use of collaged photo-transfers.

[6] On a black women's cultural tradition of tactile material engagements see Arna Alexander Bontemps and Jacqueline Fonvielle-Bontemps, "African-American Art History: The Feminine Dimension," in *Forever Free: Art by African-American Women, 1862-1890*, ed. Arna Alexander Bontemps (Alexandria, VA: Stephenson, 1980), 9-52; Huey Copeland, "In the Wake of the Negress," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, eds. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 480–497; Lowery Stokes Sims, "African-American Women Artists: Into the Twenty-First Century," in *Bearing Witness: Art by Contemporary African-American Women,* ed. Jontyle Theresa Robinson (New York: Rizzoli, 1996), 83-94; Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis, "In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s that Center the Art of Black Women Artists," in *Gendered Visions: The Art of Contemporary Africana Women Artists*, ed. Salah M. Hassan (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1997), 73–92.

[7] In a 1971 review of Melvin Edwards's barbed wire sculptures, artist and critic Frank Bowling uses the terms "signify" and "re-route" to describe Edwards's exemplification of black artists' ability to use the non-figurative "time and time again, despite inflicted degradations, to rearrange found things, redirecting the 'things' of whatever environments in which Blacks are thrown, placed, or trapped." Bowling homes in on Edwards's re-routing of the formal language of post-minimalism to include references to "agony." Frank Bowling, "Notes from a Work in Progress," in *5+1* (New York: Art Gallery of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1969), n.p. Bowling's terminology predates Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s touchstone theorization of an African-American literary tactic of "signifying" in *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[8] A printed poster *Carnival at Ostende* (1931) by Belgian artist James Ensor was accessioned by MoMA in 1962. Jasper Johns's screen-print, *The Dutch Wives* (1977) was accessioned in 1978. "James Ensor, Poster for *Carnival at Ostende*, 1931," *MoMA*, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/67449; "Jasper Johns, *The Dutch Wives,* 1977," *MoMA,* https://www.moma.org/collection/works/65046.

these varying modes of texture, Pindell expanded received notions of abstraction to better accommodate her own lived experiences.

I.

On July 24, 1973, Pindell addressed a postcard from Nairobi, Kenya, to her friends, art critic Lucy Lippard and artist Charles Simonds: "I will return forever changed. We are so ignorant of Africa. Kenya is full of contradictions."[9] Written on the artist's second day in Africa, the text captures her earliest impressions of the continent—an experience that challenged her expectations and promised to alter her "forever." It also demonstrates Pindell's particular position as a black American artist who approached "Africa" as a source of inspiration with a degree of longing and, perhaps, romance.[10] While her first visit apparently complicated her view of the continent, her commentary sometimes reflected the limitations of U.S. artistic circles of the era in their uptake of the vastly diverse cultural and societal practices found in Africa.[11] For Pindell, who worked and had trained in predominantly white institutions, "Africa" may have offered a potent point of access to a cultural blackness that was absent from her workaday environs. Over the course of the following two and a half decades, she would publish four articles on African art and culture, and speak on numerous occasions about the relationship between her work and African diasporic art.[12] Her extended engagement with African art, textiles in particular, led to changes in the way she approached her canvases, a shift that foregrounded the pertinence of West African textiles to the aesthetics of modernist abstract art. These specific involvements with African art intervened in the figurative protocols espoused by proponents of the Black Arts Movement in these years.

Pindell and Lowery Stokes Sims, then an educator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, spent two months traveling Africa in the summer of 1973.[13] They visited Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Senegal and made unscheduled stops in Uganda and Mali. The two young art professionals traveled under the auspices of MoMA's overseas books program.[14] Their primary objective, according to MoMA records and reports, was to identify appropriate recipients for the donation of books to several art libraries.[15] An additional, and we might imagine for the two

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[9] Howardena Pindell, postcard to Lucy Lippard and Charles Simonds from Nairobi, Kenya, July 24, 1974. Lucy R. Lippard papers, 1930s–2010, bulk 1960s–1990. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[10] When possible, I use country- and culture-specific language to describe the African cultural materials Pindell engaged. In other cases, I resort to "African," despite the limitations of this term, which refers to innumerable cultures and practices, in order to maintain a sense of the language that Pindell and many others used throughout the 1970s.

[11] See Tobias Wofford, "Feedback: Between American Art and African Art History," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 41 (November 2017): 154–64.

[12] Howardena Pindell, "Mandeleo Ya Wanawake," and "Notes from Africa," in *The Heart of the Question* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997), 51–53; 54–59; Pindell, "The Aesthetics of Texture in African Adornment"; Howardena Pindell, "Afro-Carolinian 'Gullah' Baskets," *Heresies* 1, no. 2 (1978): 22.

[13] This was not Pindell's first trip abroad. She had traveled to Sweden as a high schooler as part of an exchange program. After the trip to Africa, Pindell became a voracious traveler, visiting Egypt in 1974, and Japan, Brazil, India, and Paris in subsequent years. The cultures, religions, and cosmologies she encountered on these trips became themes in her works for decades thereafter.

[14] Pindell was thirty and Sims was twenty-three.

[15] Howardena Pindell Papers, Public Information Records, II.C.162, II.C.163. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

aspiring curators, driving motive was to visit artists' workshops and studios. In Oshogbo, Nigeria, they saw printmaking workshops where drop-in locals could carve wood or linoleum blocks, and where artists combined personal experience and Nigerian mythology and folklore in their works.[16] They witnessed the effects of colonial suppression in Ivory Coast and Senegal, where Pindell reports she heard "stories of French art instructors telling African students to draw street scenes of Paris."[17] In Kenya, a non-profit gallery provided training and studio space for artists to practice their painting, dance, music, photography and printmaking.[18] Pindell and Sims saw artists make pottery, starch-dyed, batik and kente cloth, and jewelry in workshops, for commercial sale, and in artist's studios.[19] Pindell concluded from her trip that although artists were often poorly resourced, there was "abundant talent" in Africa.[20]

While formative in the breadth of artistic material it introduced to her, the visit to Africa was not Pindell's first encounter with African art.[21] As discussed in the previous chapter, MoMA hosted the exhibition *African Textiles and Decorative Arts* in the fall of 1972. Guest curated by Roy Sieber, the exhibition presented two hundred and fifty examples of textiles, jewelry, and other objects of bodily adornment from sub-Saharan Africa. Pindell reports that she visited the exhibition dozens of times when the museum was closed to the public, but did not otherwise have special access to the show or participate in its preparation.[22] Reviews indicate that critics and visitors alike approved of *African Textiles*. An oft-repeated point of praise was the exhibition's dispelling of the myth of "primitive" Africa.[23] Sieber diverged from the well-worn trope of African culture as frozen in time, underscoring the contemporaneity of the objects on display. He writes on the first page of the catalogue, "Nearly all of the objects have been produced within the last century; many are recent, and some are new. Almost all represent technical processes that are still in use and reflect contemporary African taste."[24] The materials were predominantly designed for the body—the titular "textiles" were mostly clothing and the "decorative arts" were objects for bodily adornment or grooming. These objects of dress and adornment may have further vivified the exhibition's presentation of diverse African cultures with their references to everyday lives and ceremonial enactments.

African Textiles piqued Pindell's appetite for African art and motivated her to apply to travel to Africa.[25] The exposure profoundly affected her art making practice. Most markedly, she

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[16] Pindell, "Notes from Africa," 55.
[17] Ibid., 57.
[18] Ibid., 56.
[19] Howardena Pindell, "Ancestral Memories and Visual Coincidences," 1994, unpublished manuscript in Samella S. Lewis Papers. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.
[20] Pindell, "Notes from Africa," 57.
[21] Pindell eventually also became aware of Africanist Robert Farris Thompson's work. He was a professor at Yale when she was in the MFA program, but she did not take any classes with him. Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.
[22] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.
[23] Diane L. Zimmerman, "What Tarzan missed: the arts of Africa," *New York News*, Nov. 5, 1972, 55, 57, 60.
[24] Roy Sieber, introduction to *African Textiles and Decorative Arts* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 10.
[25] Sieber, in fact, helped her to plot her itinerary. Howardena Pindell, "Abstraction or Essence: Three African-American Perspectives," June 17, 1997, Sound Recordings of Museum-Related Events, 97.29a. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

never again stretched her canvases, instead allowing her paintings to "hang free."[26] This decision to unstretch her canvases marked a departure from a fundamental facet of modernist abstraction as developed by painters including Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, and Frank Stella. It also aligned Pindell's painting practice with the work of black, abstract artists such as Sam Gilliam and Joe Overstreet who had unstretched their canvases to generate sculptural effects in the late 1960s and early 1970s (fig. 3.04). At MoMA, the first African textiles to catch Pindell's eye were "free flowing garments from South Africa, Senegal, and Nigeria."[27] Installation photographs show that some of the textiles and garments hanged from the ceiling, suspended vertically in the middle of the gallery (fig. 3.05). Others, including kente cloth, were hung like paintings, flat against the wall. In African contexts, such textiles would generally be worn—wrapped and folded around the body and therefore never fully still.[28] Director of MoMA's architecture and design department, Arthur Drexler, arranged the objects for the New York presentation, focusing on rendering the textiles wholly and immediately visually accessible. In other words, he maintained the protocols of a modern art museum in the display of functional and ritual objects. As art historian Doran Ross has noted of a subset of the textiles on view, "with their electric colors, vibrant geometry, and impressive scale, the weavings worked well (in the early 1970s) as dynamic examples of modern, if not contemporary, art."[29] In other words, the color, abstract design, and display of the textiles located them in proximity to modernist, abstract painting. Pindell's first encounter with African textiles, then, foregrounded their present-day cultural relevance and their pertinence to a form of contemporary art with which she was already intimately familiar.

The study of African art also inspired Pindell to incorporate a new way of handling materials into her production of the cut and sewn paintings—weaving. Several of the canvases, including *Carnival at Ostende* and *Untitled #19* partially comprise interwoven strips of canvas, though thick paint and collage largely obscure this facet of their fabrication (figs. 3.03 and 3.06). Pindell constructed the cut and sewn paintings through an elaborate series of steps that underscored her labor and situated them in post-minimalist concerns for process and bodily effects. Notably, the paintings are not "painted" in the sense of applying brush to canvas, but fashioned through a process of accumulation. Pindell began by painting sheets of card stock and oak tag in rainbow hues, then excised small dots of color with a hole punch, effectively destroying a two-dimensional painting in order to create a three-dimensional one. With these dots set aside for later use, she fabricated her canvases. While methods varied across the cut and sewn works, each first required an arrangement of canvas pieces to compose the ground. Several works comprise approximately eight-inch squares arranged to form a grid, which as discussed is both the paradigmatic modernist form and the underlying structure of weaving (fig. 3.07).[30] Some examples combine this approach with a "woven" pattern; in sections of the canvas, Pindell folded six- to eight-inch wide strips over and under one another, "like a basket."[31] A final

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[26]Pindell, "Ancestral Memories and Visual Coincidences."

[27] Ibid.

[28] See Sieber, introduction to *African Textiles.* I am grateful to Ivy Mills for sharing her insights into West African textiles and their relationship to the human body.

[29] Doran H. Ross, *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), 9.

[30] On the grid as modernist paradigm see Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 50–64.

[31] Howardena Pindell, interview with Sally Swenson, in Lynn F. Miller and Sally S. Swenson, eds., *Lives and Works: Talks with Women Artists*, (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1981), 144. None of the

example, *Feast Day of Iemanja II December 31, 1980* (1980), is made of long, two-inch wide strips (fig. 3.08). In each case, with the canvas arrayed, the artist then hand-sewed the pieces of fabric to form a seam-ridden and slightly irregular field. The degree to which the composite character of the ground remains visible in the finished works varies across examples. In *Feast Day of Iemanja*, lattice-like stitches bridge strips of canvas, revealing slight slivers of gallery wall, whereas in *Untitled #19*, stitched fissures are perceptible only in select passages, as paint and collage cloak many of the seams (fig. 3.09).

To achieve her paintings' densely textured surfaces, Pindell applied thick layers of acrylic paint to her canvas, then pressed a hole-punched stencil onto the wet surface, pushing the paint through the screen, in a process evoking both embossing and extrusion. The raised paint increased the surface area on which she could collage the previously painted chads. Pindell individually lodged thousands of these paper rounds into globs of paint, layering them atop one another, on their sides, and in the seams of the canvas with tweezers and dry photo mount spray.[32] More layers of paint, which often collected cat hair from the pets that roamed the artist's studio-home, a careful application of glitter and sequins, and a final dousing of "all kinds of cheap perfume" completed the paintings.[33] The smell of these paintings, which has faded completely over time, would have activated a sense typically thought tangential to the perception of abstract painting. A strongly artificial odor would have permeated the areas around the paintings, perhaps attracting some viewers and detracting others.

Pindell blends mediums and techniques in the cut and sewn works—painting, collage, sewing. Although rooted in the medium of painting through their scale and orientation to the wall, with them Pindell explores painting's textile logic. More than any other body of her work, the cut and sewn paintings play with the artistic surface as a tactile, textured, and olfactory membrane that accrues social meaning through its colors, materials, and uses. For instance, the basic structure used to assemble the interwoven components found in some of the works resemble kente cloth, the most recognizable of African textiles, which Pindell and Sims saw being woven on narrow looms in Kumasi, Ghana.[34] In fact, Pindell has opined that her cut and sewn works have more in common with kente or Ewe textiles from Ghana than with the quilts to which critics sometimes compare them—a topic discussed further below.[35]

The term *kente* can be applied to a wide variety of textiles, patterns, and techniques. In the West African context Pindell cites, it generally refers to a strip-woven textile used as festive dress and royal regalia by the Asante people of Ghana and the Ewe people of Ghana and Togo. This cloth consists of three- to four-inch wide strips of cotton or silk sewn together in an alternating over–under pattern to create textiles of various sizes.[36]

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extant paintings are entirely woven. Pindell made one such painting but found the doubled layers of canvas too heavy to roll up and transport by herself. Howardena Pindell, interview with the author, July 2015, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

[32] This account is pieced together from several interviews Pindell has given. See Howardena Pindell, untitled lecture transcript, summer 1980, 5, Skowhegan Lecture Archive, 282. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, Long Island City, Queens; Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.

[33] Pindell, interviews with the author, 2015, Dec. 2018. Pindell remarks that the cat hair ended up in her paintings "serendipitously," and that she allowed it to become part of the work.

[34] Pindell, "Ancestral Memories and Visual Coincidences."

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ross, 19, 29.

In contrast to kente, the woven strips of canvas in Pindell's paintings are not apparent in most cases. Collage, paint, and stitches camouflage the canvas's folds. Intermittent slivers of green paint in the crevices of *Untitled #19* hint at the under-layer of canvas (fig. 3.09). As a technique for binding materials, weaving has its own relationship to concealment, as it creates hidden layers.[37] Visible passages of textile conceal those beneath them, only to be hidden in turn. This alternating relationship between visible and concealed surface undulates in two enmeshed directions. Given the additional labor and materials required to achieve the woven passages of her paintings, why did Pindell obscure them to such an extent? By interfolding portions of her canvas, she heightened her textile-based approach to the medium of painting. In obfuscating those folds with collaged paint, she privileged the artistic forms of collage and painting. The tension between textile and painting here points to the fact that the ground of most modernist painting is, of course, a textile. By conveying this tension through means of diminished visibility, the works might be understood as thematizing how textiles' foundational role has been sublimated, or hidden, in accounts of modernist painting that foreground medium specificity.[38]

Given the artist's relish for African art, it is notable that throughout the 1970s, her paintings conveyed her interest exclusively through non-pictorial means, particularly through their dense and loose hanging textures. This tactic contrasted with ideologies of Black Art that were being generated at the time. In 1973, when she first unstretched her canvases as a result of her encounters with African art, Pindell entered a lively discourse about the relationship between art made by black artists in the U.S. and African cultural heritage. For a black artist explicitly to evoke Africa in her work at the beginning of the decade was to bring, or risk bringing, the politics of Black Power to the reading of her art.

Sims, Pindell's traveling companion, has situated their trip to Africa squarely in the context of Pan Africanist consciousness advocated by the Black Arts Movement, writing: "It was a startling revelation for us both, and we both arrived back in the United States having been jolted to a new plane of awareness about the actual relationship we could have with the Motherland that had haunted our consciousness as African-American women. We have often reminisced about that trip…"[39] In contrast to prevailing discussions of the role of African heritage in a diasporic consciousness, Sims emphasizes that she and Pindell gained greater awareness of their potential relationship with Africa as "African-American women." The gendered distinction further underscores the feminine denotation of *Motherland*. Her comments suggest that she and Pindell charted a woman-centric, museum-sponsored African "homecoming" of their own, a fact that countered what some saw as the Black Power Movement's stiflingly patriarchal social structure.[40] The two opened a black feminist and

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[37] On secrecy and concealment in African art see Mary H. Nooter, "African Art that Conceals and Reveals," *African Arts* 26, no. 1 (January 1993): 54–69, 102.

[38] On the role of textiles in contemporary art, see Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Jenni Sorkin, "Affinities in Abstraction: Textiles, Otherness, and Painting in the 1970s," in *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, ed. Lynne Cooke (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 92–105.

[39] Sims, "Synthesis and Integration," 14.

[40] See Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Dial Press, 1979); bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Angela Davis, *Women, Class, and Race* (New York: Vintage, 1981); Kimberly Springer, "Black Feminists

professional black women's space for relating to "the Motherland" by leveraging the resources available to them at their respective institutions.

The particular set of politics associated with Black Arts ran counter to the modernist artistic training and feminist sensibility Pindell was engaging in the early 1970s. Black Arts politics also contrasted with the black feminist political consciousness Pindell was developing, which centered on the black woman as working professional rather than as part of a family formation. She turned to texture, a "covert" site of cultural engagement that exceeds the visual, in order to forge a different kind of interaction with African culture. As discussed in chapter two, the dense, accumulative textures of an Akan batakari in *African Textiles* catalyzed Pindell's investigation of textural surfaces in her collages and paintings (fig. 3.10).[41] Speaking retrospectively, Pindell has said that her attraction to densely textured African objects translated into an exploration of what remained a "subconscious" connection to Africa that she possessed as a black American with ancestral ties to the continent.[42] Texture became both the medium and the content of her investigation of African art and culture.

In addition to drawing on the textural effects of African art, Pindell also drew on U.S. literature that framed West African textiles as affectively charged objects.[43] She understood examples including the batakari as apotropaic and empowering for the wearer.[44] Over the course of the 1970s, she adapted the conceit of the apotropaic functions of African textiles to her own work in order to describe the unintuitive link she saw between the apparently fragile, hand-worked qualities of her collaged paintings, and their potential to "empower" viewers. She argued that textural variety and a sense of "surface tension" were common characteristics of a black American artistic tradition that stemmed from a diverse set of African cultural inheritances.[45] According to Pindell, artists of the African diaspora shared a "spiritual" concern for art and an appreciation for the spiritual power of beauty—all characteristics she found in African cultures.[46]

By the mid-1980s, Pindell's "subconscious" affinity for African art had resolved into a theory of black diasporic artistic sensibility and overt allusions to African diasporic culture. For instance, in 1980, she broke with her practice of naming her paintings according to the protocols of modernist painting, titling a cut and sewn painting *Feast Day of Iemanja II* (fig. 3.08). Named after a Brazilian holiday celebrating the *Candomblé* goddess of the sea and of love, whose ceremonies Pindell encountered during her travels to Brazil in 1977, the work was the last wholly abstract cut and sewn painting she would make for several decades and an early example of her turn toward more overt references to her travels.

Pindell's dynamic accounts of the effects of African art on her artworks attest to the ambivalence she and many black American artists shared in the 1970s regarding the potential of African cultural forms. Dozens of black American artists, several of them Pindell's colleagues

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Respond to Black Power Masculinism," in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era,* ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 105–18.

[41] Pindell, "Ancestral Memories and Visual Coincidences."

[42] Ibid.

[43] For example, Arnold Rubin, "Accumulation: Power and Display in African Sculpture," *Artforum* 13, no. 9 (May 1975): 35–47; Sharon F. Patton, "The Stool and Asante Chieftaincy," *African Arts* 13, no.1 (Nov. 1979): 76; Patrick R. McNaughton, "The Shirts That Mande Hunters Wear," *African Arts* 15, no. 3 (May 1982): 54–58, 91. Pindell also saw Mande garments in *African Textiles.*

[44] See especially Pindell, "The Aesthetics of Texture in African Adornment."

[45] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.

[46] Pindell, interview with Jacobs, 35.

and friends, traveled to Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, and gleaned inspiration from cross-cultural contact with nations newly independent from colonial rule as the U.S. lurched through its own civil rights struggles.[47] Sculptor Martin Puryear, who is known for his reticence on the relationship between his social position as a black man and his abstract work, lived in Sierra Leone from 1964 to 1966 and was influenced by local approaches to woodworking.[48] Artist Vivian Browne, an acquaintance of Pindell's, went to Nigeria in the summer of 1971 "as an artist looking for new experiences," "realistic about the fact that American culture" was the only one she had ever known.[49] And in 1977, dozens of U.S. artists including Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, and William T. Williams traveled to Lagos and Kaduna, Nigeria for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), dedicated to the "revival, resurgence, propagation and protection of black and African cultural values and civilization."[50] Taken together, black American artists turned to African art as a potential source of artistic inspiration and for "fresh approaches to cultural and political thought" with a wide array of intentions and outcomes.[51]

As the political urgency of the Black Arts Movement has been historicized, accounts of its didactic focus and ideological rigor have eclipsed some of the variety and nuance of artistic approaches to African art. African art was one among many points in constellations of concerns for Pindell and her peers, some of whom turned to this diverse array of practices as a source of abstraction. April Kingsley's 1980 exhibition *Afro-American Abstraction* at MoMA PS1 brought together black artists, including Ed Clark, Houston Conwill, and Pindell, who consciously and explicitly evoked African art in their abstract works' titles and materials or in their artists' statements.[52] Each of them were inspired to do so by trips to Africa in the 1970s. By presenting a wide array of abstract practices that drew on sources from Africa, the exhibition challenged Euro-American modernism's purported monopoly over abstraction.

To disregard the exhibition as "essentialist," as one recent critic has done, on the basis of its premise—that some black artists working in abstraction in the 1970s looked to Africa as a source of artistic material—exchanges one set of foreclosures for another.[53] Squeamishness about the multiplicity of African cultures and their inventive, syncretic treatments in the works of artists of the African diaspora at times further perpetuates the myth that there is something inherently "essentialist" about African art (what art historian would dream of calling curatorial

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[47] See Mark Godfrey, "Notes on Black Abstraction" in *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,* eds. Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley (London: Tate, 2017), 142.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.
[50] Jonathan C. Randal, "African Festival: Protecting Values," *Washington Post*, January 15, 1977, C1.
[51] Godfrey, 142.
[52] See April Kingsley, *Afro-American Abstraction* (New York: April Kingsley, 1981).
[53] In a 2015 article in *Art in America,* which addresses contemporary black artists' abstract practices, critic Adrienne Edwards accuses April Kingsley's 1980 exhibition *Afro-American Abstraction* of "essentialism" on the basis that Kingsley asserted an affinity between the non-representational work in the exhibition and African artistic practices. Adrienne Edwards, "Blackness in Abstraction," *Art in America*, January 5, 2015, http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/blackness-in-abstraction/. Though some contemporaneous critics expressed skepticism about the "one-to-one relationship" Kingsley charted between African art and the abstract work on view, the exhibition was generally well received for its thematic coherence. See Kellie Jones, "To the Max: Energy and Experimentation," in *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964–1980* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006), 31.

framing around European art or culture "essentialist?"). Efforts to establish the meaningful complexity of black artists' work of the late twentieth century need not obscure the earnest and richly varied ways in which they have chosen and may continue to choose to engage African and African diasporic cultural themes and materials.

In discussions of her encounters with African art, Pindell interweaves firsthand encounters in Africa and curated viewings in New York museums. At MoMA she "was continually introduced to a confluence of Western and non-European visual art."[54] Recall that she first encountered African art in an exhibition there, where garments hung like paintings. Likewise, her contemporaries David Hammons and Saar, whose allusions to African art are well documented, saw African art for the first time at the Field Museum in Chicago.[55] Many artists of this generation took African art and culture as a set of traditions—not their own, but potentially relevant to their work and experience—that could expand artistic thinking in any number of ways that were not predetermined. Materials, shapes, colors, textures, and forms, themes, patterns, and senses of rhythm and order became the basis for cross-cultural art that was not necessarily about black identity, but in which black artists could seek a "multi-voiced mode of address."[56] For Pindell, for several years, the cut and sewn paintings served as fecund ground where she could interweave artistic explorations of West African, post-minimal, feminist, and modernist forms and ideas.

II.

Pindell labored for many hours to achieve the delicate collage work that enlivens the cut and sewn paintings. As mentioned, by her estimates, she spent about two months on each canvas, filling her weekends and evenings with their production.[57] While the labor intensiveness of the works is apparent, little scholarly attention has been given to the fact that the repetitive labor and dense textures of the cut and sewn paintings participated in the artist's efforts to "heal" herself from the "traumatic" isolation of her working life at MoMA.[58] In a candid unpublished manuscript from 1994, Pindell writes of the working process she developed in the 1970s:

> I utilized a repetitive process of hole-punching in the construction of works made of accumulated circles to heal myself of the stress of fending for myself in a job category often inhabited by dormant, frustrated artists who had permanently stopped producing art to work in a museum. This accumulation process therefore reflected my emotional state… Produced in isolation, these were symbolic works evoking my painful experiences working in isolation straddling two worlds, the museum and that of an artist's life.[59]

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[54] Pindell, "Ancestral Memories and Visual Coincidences."
[55] "Betye Saar," in *Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960–1980*, ed. Kellie Jones (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2011), 152.
[56] With this phrase, I expand on art historian Kobena Mercer's articulation of a "double-voiced mode of address" to describe black artists' engagements with both blackness and the avant-garde, discussed below. Kobena Mercer, "Tropes of the Grotesque in the Black Avant-Garde," in *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures,* ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 137.
[57] Pindell, interview with the author, May 2018.
[58] For an exception see Sims, "Synthesis and Integration."
[59] Pindell, "Ancestral Memories and Visual Coincidences."

Pindell counterintuitively connects the repetitive, many would say tedious, bureaucratic labor of hole-punching to a self-healing practice, giving insight into her motivations for undertaking such painstaking work. The isolation of the labor and the process of accumulation it garnered healed the artist not by opposing, but by, in her words, "evoking" and becoming "symbolic" of painful experiences of isolation. Before further analyzing these recuperative strategies, we must attend to the sources of pain they seek to redress. In this passage, Pindell locates her stress in the particular trauma of feeling isolated as an artist—at MoMA, she notes, she was surrounded by "frustrated artists" who no longer made art. Not only would she return home to her studio each evening to work in solitude, but she was alone among her artist-coworkers in doing so. When the occasional opportunity to connect with other working artists arose, Pindell often encountered the burden of expectation; fellow artists of color and women artists asked her to wield her position to open the museum's doors to their work. [60] But she found herself powerless to instigate widespread institutional change, stymied by bureaucratic slog and the prejudice she faced as a black woman. The trouble of "straddling two worlds," then, lie not only in her professional double identity, but also in the Sisyphean tasks assigned to her as a black woman with institutional stature amid the urgent demands brought to museums by struggles for social equity.

Elsewhere in describing her experiences of seclusion at MoMA, Pindell emphasizes her "token" status as, at times, the only black woman working on staff.[61] She was discouraged from being a full participant in the dynamic social-professional life of curatorial work. Pindell recalls an unsupportive atmosphere in which colleagues and supervisors overlooked her contributions and discouraged her from progressing professionally. (The sole exception, she has noted, was Lippard.)[62] On several occasions Pindell found herself the only member of curatorial staff not invited to important museum social functions that doubled as professional networking opportunities. And for years her department head passed her over for a promotion.[63] In 1979, tensions reached a fever pitch over the controversy surrounding a solo exhibition held at the alternative art gallery Artists Space. The resulting heated debates, discussed at length in the next chapter, led to Pindell's resignation from the museum.

In addition to the frustrations she faced as a curator, Pindell has remarked that as a black woman artist her mere existence was regularly denied by the dominant art world of museum exhibitions and art reviews in major newspapers and magazines.[64] Her account evokes what artist Adrian Piper has called the "triple negation of colored women artists," who are negated from the "Euroethnic" art world on the basis of race, gender, and vocation.[65] Often this entails the denial of one's status as an artist, if not one's ability to make "meaningful art," a code for work legible to Euroethnic discourse. This erasure is not unique to the visual arts—black feminist literary

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[60] Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Oral History Interview with Howardena Pindell, 1972 July 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[63] Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.
[64] Howardena Pindell, interview with Linda Freeman, undated transcript, Linda Freeman papers, 1996–2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[65] Adrian Piper, "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists," [1990] in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader,* 2nd ed., ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2010), 242. Tesfagiorgis has also noted the connection between Piper's and Pindell's commentary on this point. Tesfagiorgis, "In Search of a Discourse," 75.

critic Barbara Christian has noted that when she approached publishers in 1978 with proposals for her *Black Women Novelists,* most presses "could hardly believe black women were artists."[66]

How did the repetitive process of hole punching alleviate the traumatic stress of being a black woman artist and curator in the 1970s? The administrative labor of hole punching, which evokes what art historian David Joselit has called the "disciplinary beat of repetition," may strike us as an unlikely strategy for combatting isolation.[67] In fact, it is precisely the durational and physical aspects of this handiwork which functioned as anti-erasure gestures. Pindell asserted her authorship by leaving incessant traces of her hands' work in improbably delicate piles of chads and coarsely stitched seams. In the following, I situate this laborious strategy of creative authority in a U.S. black women's cultural tradition. Art historian Huey Copeland notes that African diasporic women have long "turned to the haptic as a resource for self-fashioning and for the preservation of memories otherwise lost to history."[68] Within this tradition, black women have worked in tactile, sculptural ways that exceed the denigrating terms imposed by Euro-American scopic regimes. A large and diverse corpus of black feminist scholarship examines the realm of the visual as a site of violence for the black female body, a realm marked by caricature, stereotype, exoticization, and eroticization.[69] This scholarship intersects with a broader body of literature in the interdisciplinary field of black studies that concerns what cultural critic Michele Wallace has called the "negative scene of instruction" of the visual, which investigates the visual's deleterious effects on black subjects.[70] In many black feminist texts, which address the intersection of racialized and gendered visual schema, the haptic—a bodily, touch-based approach to the material world that includes but exceeds the visual—serves as a refuge from the

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[66] Barbara Christian, "But What Do We Think We're Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My Version of a Little Bit of History (1989)," in *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000,* eds. Barbara Christian and Gloria Bowles (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 11.
[67] David Joselit, "Notes on Surface: Toward a Genealogy of Flatness," *Art History* 23, no. 1 (March 2000): 24.
[68] Copeland, 490.
[69] On the topic of the visual as a realm of violence and caricature of the black female body see Patricia Hill Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and The Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 67-90; Lisa Farrington, "Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude," *Women's Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (Autumn 2003-Winter 2004): 15-23; Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," [1992] in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader,* 174-186; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 203-29.
[70] Wallace argues that a "negative scene of instruction" around the visual in general and art more specifically both "disavows and disallows exchange." In other words, black cultural producers and white cultural producers working in the visual deny the dialogic and intertextual exchanges that are foundational to artistic innovation. Wallace contends that this blockage is rooted in the strongly visual logic of racialist ideology. Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson and Trinh T. Minh-Ha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 41-45. For other exemplary texts, see Frantz Fanon, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," in *Black Skin, White Masks* [1967] (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89–119; Phillip Brian Harper, "Introduction: Against Positive Images," in *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 17–68.

visual and a site of personal and communal empowerment. (It is important to recognize that touch certainly has had a history of violence too.[71])

In tracing this tradition, art historians have argued that black women in the U.S. have strategically handled materials as part of everyday struggles for physical and cultural survival since the violent rupture of the Middle Passage. These strategies have been handed down and adapted through generations of black women. Art historian Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis theorizes that the presence of vernacular forms such as quiltmaking, basketry, and pottery in the work of contemporary artists "provide[s] primary evidence of historical, material, and aesthetic links to the history of African American fine arts in the United States, and links to the past/African heritage."[72] She calls on art historians to attend to these tactilely intensive practices, which convey cultural meaning in materially embedded ways. Other scholars have noted that haptic perceptions have functioned as a tool for preserving and conveying cultural memory because they were "more likely…to survive the trauma of enslavement than clearly observable aspects of the art itself."[73] Folklorist Gladys-Marie Fry argues that quilting functioned largely in this way for enslaved people. For those denied literacy, quilts could serve as a visual "diary" and a route through which to transmit symbols derived from African cosmology and mythology.[74] The haptic renderings of these cultural forms evaded detection by white slavers.[75]

Pindell has also contributed to the art historical theorization of the connection between handicrafts and black women's cultural memory. In "Afro-Carolinian 'Gullah' Baskets," a brief, hand-written essay published in a 1978 issue of *Heresies*, a feminist publication on art and politics, Pindell considers several facets of U.S. cultural "amnesia"—forgetfulness around the "finer points" of anti-black racism, including the historical atrocities of slavery, and the erasure of black Americans' motivation to create under these conditions. Pindell concludes the article by grieving the loss of knowledge of African traditional crafts in her own family, which were supplanted by crafts that she felt were coded as Anglo-American.[76] (She specifies that her father taught her to knit and that her mother's sisters crocheted.) For many black feminist theorists, tactile know-how has been a cornerstone of enduring black women's cultural practices in the United States. Alice Walker, for instance, in a germinal text in *Ms.* in 1974, argued that intensely hand-worked, carefully rendered objects and sites—quilts, baskets, gardens, and homes—are central to black women's cultural traditions.[77] Walker writes in particular of the Southern black

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[71] On the topic of bodily boundaries and the right not to be touched, see Hortense Spillers, "To the Bone: Some Speculations on the Problem of Touch," (lecture, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, Nov. 19, 2018). For a historical account of touch and slavery see, Mark M. Smith "Getting in Touch with Slavery and Freedom," *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (Sep. 2008): 381–91.

[72] Tesfagiorgis, "In Search of a Discourse," 86.

[73] Bontemps and Fonvielle-Bontemps, "African-American Art History," 12.

[74] Gladys-Marie Fry, *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1990), 1. A cotton sack on display in the inaugural exhibition of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, exemplifies the use of cloth as a vehicle for memory. An enslaved woman named Rose filled the bag with pecans, a lock of hair, and three tattered dresses and gave it to her daughter Ashley before the girl was sold away from the Middleton Place Plantation in Charleston, South Carolina. In 1921, Ashley's granddaughter Ruth Middleton embroidered this family history onto the fabric.

[75] Ibid, 1, 6-7.

[76] Pindell, "Afro-Carolinian 'Gullah' Baskets," 22.

[77] Walker looks at the dire odds against black women's creativity, particularly in the generations preceding the civil rights and women's liberation movements. Her mother's exquisitely beautiful gardens

woman's creative work, generally made with "the only material she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use."[78] Only by acknowledging "low," vernacular sites of cultural production as creative labor, Walker argues, can we recognize fully the expansive range of black women's creative expression.

Professional artists showing in art museums and galleries in the 1970s and 1980s turned to the tactility and textures of black women's cultural practices as a way to refuse the visually driven tradition of easel painting. Ringgold's sewn panel paintings conjure quilt making, hair braiding, and dress making (fig. 3.11). She has specifically remarked that her move into fabric and soft sculpture entailed a deliberate effort "to get away from" European traditions.[79] Artist Beverly Buchanan cites her father's wood working in her shack sculptures, while craft coded beadwork and blown glass comprise most of artist and jewelry maker Joyce Scott's sculptures (figs. 3.12 and 3.13). The creation of artistic contexts that go beyond the parameters of advanced art has been a vital activity for black women whose recognition as artists, as Pindell and others have pointed out, has never been guaranteed.

Copeland has built on black feminist art historical texts by identifying a "modernist sensibility" manifested in black women's haptic engagements with the visual.[80] His essay, "In the Wake of the Negress," argues that the haptic quality of late-twentieth-century art by black women artists such as Pindell, Piper, and Ringgold embodies an epistemological shift: "Touch brings the world close without presuming to master it, allowing for a recalibration of the self and the object, the aesthetic and the vernacular, that disarticulates notions of quality, medium, and cultural hierarchy."[81] His analysis focuses on works in MoMA's collection, but could readily apply to works by other artists, including Senga Nengudi, Saar, and Renée Stout. Longstanding visual regimes (such as those represented in MoMA's permanent collection) distort or elide black women, especially black women's bodies. By placing their bodies in their works on their own terms, in Pindell's case through the traces of her handiwork, black women artists reroute normative ways of reading them. Black feminist theorist Tina Campt's postulation of the sonic and haptic "frequencies" of photography further illuminates the "multiple levels of the human sensorium" that perceive ostensibly visual objects.[82] Her theorization also suggests that attention to these sensorial registers might allow for fuller accounts of black subjects' quotidian resistance to disciplining visual technologies.

Black feminist strategies for engaging with the non-visual intersect with other feminist deployments of the haptic, such as the craft-based feminist practices discussed below. But they also relate to historically black experiences and practices. For instance, Nengudi, a contemporary of Pindell's who moved between Los Angeles and New York in the late 1970s, started working with pantyhose after the birth of her first child in 1974, as a way to think through the elasticity of

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and a quilt hanging in the Smithsonian made by "an anonymous Black woman in Alabama" exemplify the everyday manifestations of vernacular forms that art has taken in the lives of black women. Walker writes of efforts to trace a black women's artistic lineage: "We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked high—and low." Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South," *Ms.*, May 1974, 64-70, 105.

[78] Ibid., 70.

[79] Faith Ringgold, quoted in Lowery Stokes Sims, "African American Women Artists: Into the Twenty-First Century," in *Bearing Witness*, 86.

[80] Copeland, 490.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 6.

the human body.[83] Her *R.S.V.P.* series, sculptural-performative works constructed from worn pantyhose weighted with sand, obscure modernist hierarchies of medium and materials and attend to a black women's material history (fig. 3.14). Both nylon mesh and pregnant bodies resiliently expand to accommodate the life inside of them, but are indelibly marked by this elastic expansion. The artist understood her own pregnancy in relationship to a history of black women's laboring bodies, drawing inspiration for her sculptures from her reflection upon "black wet nurses suckling child after child—their own as well as those of others—until their breasts rested upon their knees, their energies drained."[84]

Nengudi further connected the sculptures to a community of women of color by collecting the pantyhose used in her sculptures, which run a spectrum from tan to deep brown, from her friends. The abstract, though redolent bodily gestures of the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures thematize stretch, confinement, and labor in expressive bounding arcs and drooping sacs. Their tensile activation through performance underscores the haptic concerns permeating the sculptures. Artists working in the 1970s, Nengudi and Pindell among them, forged a black feminist modernism "predicated…on the feel of the subject's psychic and corporeal position," rather than on the haunting caricature of racial and gender stereotypes, by leaving bodily traces through handiwork and performative gestures.[85] Their haptic practices do not necessarily represent the body through figuration, but nonetheless wield the body and its indexical, textural marks as a critical site of self-formation and recuperation of black women's culture.

The bodily "position" of Pindell's cut and sewn paintings, the ways in which they make present the artist's emotional and physical labors, is achieved in large part through their dense surfaces. In 1982, Pindell began using the term "surface tension" in an idiosyncratic way to name the textural effects of her cut and sewn paintings.[86] For Pindell, surface tension describes the "empowering" presence of dense, hand worked textures. This effect is perhaps best illustrated through a negative example she has provided: "surface tension" contrasts with the "manufactured" finish of works such as Richard Serra's Cor-Ten steel sculptures, whose vast surfaces, though textured by the metal's protective weathered layer, lack marks of the artist's hand.[87] Pindell believes that through their repudiation of human-scaled labor, such works propose a "dominant" or "disempowering" orientation toward the viewer.[88] The artist has removed himself, in some significant way, from the surface of his sculpture. Surface tension, by contrast, is capable of ensuring viewers' instant recognition of the artwork as a human creation.[89]

Touch and texture are intimately related in the cut and sewn paintings. Their surfaces entice our skin with a rich density of information, suggesting that, perhaps, our digits could understand something our eyes cannot glean about the stability or constitution of these materials. As queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, to touch is "also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually [touched the same surface] before oneself, if only in the

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[83] Linda Goode-Bryant and Marcy S. Philips, *Contextures* (New York: Just Above Midtown, Inc., 1978), 46.
[84] Ibid, 46.
[85] Copeland, 490.
[86] Pindell, interview with Jacobs, 1985; Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989; Pindell, "The Aesthetics of Texture in African Adornment," 37.
[87] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.

making of the textured object."[90] Textural perception occurs through both visual and tactile means and necessarily entails, Sedgwick declaims, a cognitive procedure that includes curiosity about how the surface came to be thusly textured. This conceptual exchange between viewer, maker, and object enacted by texture "makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity."[91] The textural density of Pindell's cut and sewn paintings infuse the works with her past labors, lending her human presence to the abstract compositions. Each chad on a cut and sewn painting indexes a squeeze of Pindell's hand against a hole punch and a subsequent meticulous application. The direct, textural recording of these past moments of creation communicates to viewers that we are not alone with this object. Someone was here before us; someone left the traces that we now investigate.

The extensive handiwork—punching, cutting, spraying, dusting, gluing, stitching, weaving—that draws attention to the fact of surface in the cut and sewn paintings had an "empowering" function for Pindell, in addition to its intended effect on the viewer. Tactilely intensive work helped her to "connect with [her] body" when the "constant disapproval" she encountered as an artist and curator caused experiences she has described as "dissociation."[92] In psychoanalytic discourse *dissociation* describes a group of pathologies of personhood in which a person "splits apart and excludes from consciousness psychic materials" that are usually experienced in a unified way.[93]

Pindell took refuge in her artistic labor, connecting to her body and to "empowering" cultural expressions through the repetitive labor of hole punching, which became "a kind of a comfort….almost a kind of meditation or prayer….[a] slowing down, shutting down....and then stepping into another space that was very peaceful."[94] Her strategy of turning to her body, the site of her traumatic stress, for self-"healing" echoes the work of black lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde.[95] Pindell's contemporary, Lorde saw the self-definition and assertion of her own heterogeneous identity as a necessity of black womanhood.[96] She wrote and spoke extensively about the use of the embodied self to "reintegrate" the parts fragmented by oppression.[97] (As

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[90] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 14.
[91] Renu Bora, "Outing Texture," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 101.
[92] Pindell, undated interview with Freeman.
[93] Orna Guralnik and Daphne Simeon, "Depersonalization: Standing in the Spaces Between Recognition and Interpellation," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 20, no. 4 (2010): 401.
[94] Pindell, undated interview with Freeman.
[95] Though Pindell did not read Lorde's work until the 1980s, she was "familiar with" her poetry and ideas by the late 1970s. Maggie Hire (representative, Garth Greenan Gallery), e-mail correspondence with the author, Aug. 2017. On the topic of the black woman's body as a site of empowerment and pleasure see Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
[96] Lorde has said, "As a Black woman, I have to deal with identity or I don't exist at all. I can't depend on the world to name me kindly, because it never will. If the world defines you, it will define you to your disadvantage. So either I'm going to be defined by myself or not at all." Audre Lorde, interview with Karla Hammond, *American Poetry Review* (March-April 1980): 18. For a discussion of this quotation see Elizabeth Alexander, "'Coming Out Blackened and Whole': Fragmentation and Reintegration in Audre Lorde's *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals*," *American Literary History* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 695-715.
[97] See Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1982); Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Spinsters, 1980).

discussed in chapter two, "collage" was one metaphor Lorde used to imagine and enact this process of reintegration.)

In 1978, at the peak of Pindell's production of the abstract cut and sewn paintings, Lorde delivered a talk at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women at Mount Holyoke College titled "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power."[98] In it, she inverts popular understandings of "the erotic" by theorizing it as a source of power that "lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane" and that is "firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling."[99] Encompassing but also operating beyond the sexual, the erotic provides the basis for female authority by removing "the necessity for certification of one's ideas by the dominant group."[100] Lorde roots the erotic in her own experiential position as a black lesbian, but at the same time expansively frames the "resource" as something that could be shared among women in general, should they be willing to accept the responsibilities that attend it. For once accessed, the erotic requires us to feel "acutely and fully," to live lives of "excellence."[101]

"Uses of the Erotic," like other texts in Lorde's oeuvre, identifies the embodied self as a source of authority. Throughout the speech, Lorde locates the erotic in acts of physical, mental, and emotional exertion. The erotic is potentially present in the painting of the fence, the writing of a poem, and in physical and spiritual "woman-love," which Lorde poetically describes as "moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love."[102] In the essay's sole narrative passage, Lorde offers a metaphor for the erotic that illuminates the concept's intertwining with the physical, material world. The beautifully descriptive passage requires full quotation:

> During World War II, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly coloring it.[103]

Lorde finds the erotic in her, and presumably her family members', ritual manipulation of an everyday household product. She lavishes attention on the touch of hands, which "pinch" and whose fingers "knead," "back and forth, over and over."[104] The margarine passage metaphorizes and exemplifies the erotic, revealing how intentional feeling can bring color to the world. Lorde uses corporeal materiality to locate the profundities of life in the banal. The artificial and domestic associations of margarine—a foodstuff that is not always considered one—underscores the vernacular, "low" potential of the erotic. A butter replacement made from refined vegetable

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[98] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 53-59.
[99] Ibid, 53
[100] Estella Lauter, "Re-visioning Creativity: Audre Lorde's Refiguration of Eros as the Black Mother Within," in *Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 415.
[101] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 54.
[102] See Lorde, *Zami*; Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 58.
[103] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 57.
[104] Ibid.

oils, margarine has been variously villainized, outlawed, and embraced by the American public. Lorde's passage both underscores and overturns its artificiality by focusing intently on the yellow coloring packet and through simile rendering it a gemstone. The simile illuminates the fact that jewels, like margarine, are highly processed goods derived from materials in the earth. It challenges the idea that when we look "high" we should see feats of human ingenuity, and when we look "low" we should see cheap substitutes for something more authentic. One's material resources, in other words, do not determine their proximity or access to the erotic. Rather, even the imposed intentionality and resourcefulness of wartime rations might serve as the seedbed of an emotionally transformative erotic encounter.

Pindell, like Lorde, found in her body a resource for bringing herself back together. Through her fabrication of the cut and sewn paintings, she turned painstaking tasks, work that seemingly reinforced her social isolation, into a process of "healing." This meant using her hands in "comforting" and "meditative" ways, "making something beautiful, almost to put beauty where [she] found ugliness."[105] Pindell made use of the haptic through a textural approach to painting to confound expectations that abstraction could not speak to or from a black female subject position. In the following, I continue to explore how the canvases reconfigured abstraction as a site that could accommodate femininity, artificiality, craft and administrative labor and other formations that intersected with Pindell's life.

III.

The cut and sewn paintings developed nearly a decade into a period of fervent feminist debate about the relationship between art and gender, and four years into Pindell's own experimentations with feminine materials and processes. In this section, I further examine how she contributed to efforts by feminists to stake out space for women's art in the New York art worlds of the 1970s. Speaking on a panel at the 1978 College Art Association Annual Conference called "Women View the N.Y. Art Scene," Pindell declared that analyses of gender alone failed to address her day-to-day life as an artist and curator: "As a woman I have one experience, as a black woman I have another."[106] The remark alludes to the failure of the women's liberation movement to heed the concerns of women of color, whose encounters with gendered oppression intersected with racism. Women of color encountered familiar forms of racism in women's groups. Consider the women's movement's use of the slogan "Women are the niggers of the world," a phrase that, as black feminist scholar bell hooks points out, blatantly upholds racial hierarchies and excludes black women from the category "women."[107] The metaphor also diminishes the differences in social and economic opportunities granted to black and white women. In 1970, critic Linda LaRue rejected the notion of a "common oppression" of women calling it a "tasty abstraction designed purposely or inadvertently to draw validity and

[105] Pindell, undated interview with Freeman. Pindell, who has never been married, has been reticent about her personal, erotic life. Even in private letters to close friends, such as Lucy Lippard or Judith Wilson, Pindell uses initials, male pronouns, and nicknames (such as "The Dane") to refer to her lovers. Lucy R. Lippard papers, 1930s–2010, bulk 1960s–1990. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Judith Wilson papers, 1966–2010. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[106] Howardena Pindell, quoted in "Special Report: Women's Caucus for Art/College Art Association 1978 Annual Meetings," *Womanart* (Spring 1978): 25.
[107] hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 142.

seriousness to the women's movement through a universality in plight."[108] This appeal to universal struggle belied "the difference between being hungry and out of work, and skipping lunch and taking a day off."[109]

In the CAA discussion, Pindell offers a second, seemingly unrelated dichotomy to characterize the feminist artist movement. She counterposes overt, didactic art that has a feminist "message" with covert feminist art that uses "feminine materials and processes" and has no explicit political meaning.[110] The two dyads that Pindell lays out on the panel—black and white women; overt and covert feminist art—are four vectors among many in a complex web of perspectives distributed across unequal power relations that comprised feminist debates about art in the 1970s. In this context, she theorized a "covert" feminism and a critically inflected black femininity.

While femininity and feminism each constitutes distinct theoretical terrain, in the 1970s, many feminist artists including Pindell used visual markers of femininity as a tool for reconfiguring dominant aesthetic hierarchies. The cut and sewn paintings introduced feminine colors and materials to Pindell's painting practice, marking a conspicuous aesthetic shift. Dabs of bright hues punctuate the mostly cream color of *Untitled* (1977), creating a buoyant smattering of yellow, lavender, pink, and blue on the textured canvas (fig. 3.07). Splotches of metallic glitter reflect light from the work's surface. *Carnival at Ostende* has a similar palette, though its dominant hues are pink and peach (fig. 3.03). Along with glitter and paper, sequins and strands of thread are embedded in its surface. An opalescent sheen appears in patches on *Carnival at Ostende,* redolent of shimmering, pale make-up or nail polish. In case the visual cues were insufficient, the women's perfume that Pindell sprayed on the backs of several of the cut and sewn canvases originally lent an olfactory buttress to the paintings' "femininity."[111]

Many feminist artists, like Pindell, turned to colors, materials, and methods of making culturally associated with women, for example craft practices such as sewing or knitting. Ringgold stitched together panels quilted by her mother Willi Posey, evoking the collectivity of traditional women's handiwork. Mary Kelly and Mierle Laderman Ukeles centered the feminized labor of child rearing and house work in conceptual projects. Other artists deployed patently visual markers of femininity—for instance, Mary Heilmann introduced pink paints to her abstractions (fig. 3.15). These practices signaled in relationship to contemporaneous artistic developments such as post-minimalism, conceptualism, and fiber arts at the same time that they proposed new ways artistically to address women's culture.

With the cut and sewn canvases, Pindell asserted a form of "feminine" painting. Her comment about having two different sets of experiences as a woman and as a black woman suggests that she developed this feminine approach with full cognizance of the historical and ongoing racialization of womanhood. While her feminism was heartfelt and motored by personal experience, her artworks suggest a more complicated orientation toward femininity per se. The obvious artificiality of the glitter, sequins, and perfume make for a femininity that is "put on" and exaggerated, even as these markers are subsumed in an abstract composition that muffles their flirtation with camp.[112] Pindell's cut and sewn paintings thus approach femininity as a form

[108] Linda La Rue, "The Black Movement and Women's Liberation," *Black Scholar* 1, no. 1 (May 1970): 36.
[109] Ibid., 36-37.
[110] Pindell, "Special Report," 25.
[111] Pindell, interview with the author, 2015.
[112] Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Partisan Review* (1964): 515–30.

of masquerade—a theatrical (but oftentimes compulsory) performance of feminine gender.[113] (In the case of *Carnival at Ostende,* this concern for masquerade is repeated in the title.[114]) The painting's particular concerns for facial cosmetics, in their evocation of make-up and Pindell's use of tweezers in their construction, evoke in particular practices of masking. As film theorist Mary Ann Doane has written, "it is femininity itself which is constructed as a mask—the decorative layer that conceals a non-identity…The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance."[115] Masking and masquerade both conceal an absence of an essential feminine identity and draw attention to the surfaces constructed by feminine signifiers.

Pindell was not alone in taking a sidelong approach to femininity. Contemporary Ree Morton, whose works Pindell admired, created an installation of "dime-store materials—paper doilies, small cheap 'Old Master' reproductions, contact paper, glitter, and candy gumdrop-like 'jujubes'"—for a women's faculty exhibition at the Philadelphia College of Art in 1974 (fig. 3.16).[116] Though initially the pink swag and pastel bows of *Bake Sale,* as the work was titled, were intended as an ironic repost to the premise of the exhibition (which the women faculty considered an anemic gesture toward glaring issues of gender inequity in the department), these feminine forms became motifs in Morton's subsequent work.[117] Pindell's and Morton's approaches to femininity, which each draw on a post-minimalist concern for bodily effects and conspicuous insertions of the hand, contrast with the more literal searches for viable feminine aesthetics undertaken by feminists artists such as those involved in the Pattern and Decoration movement, like Joyce Kozloff.[118] Nonetheless, they also earnestly contributed to feminist efforts to expand what counted as "art," flaunting a hammy femininity as they did so. The waggish presentation of bedazzled surfaces suggests that Pindell and Morton thought of femininity as a social code whose signifiers could be playfully taken up, teased out, performed or pinned on the wall.

The cut and sewn paintings' glitzy femininity contributed to a feminist probing of the modernist suppression of the decorative. Once wryly dubbed "the only art sin" by Eva Hesse, the decorative played a defining though ambiguous role in modernist art criticism throughout the twentieth century.[119] Beginning with the first appearances of abstraction in twentieth-century European art, critics posited decoration's chief characteristics to be unreflective labor and

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[113] Many important scholars have weighed in on the topic of the feminine as masquerade and their theorizations of the term vary. See, for instance, Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23, nos. 3–4 (September–October 1982): 74–87; Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 220; Joan Rivière, "Womanliness as Masquerade," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 303–13; Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Legs of the Countess," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 65–108.

[114] As mentioned, this title refers to a 1931 poster by Ensor, which is in MoMA's permanent collection. Ensor had an enduring interest in carnivals and frequently depicted masks, including in this poster.

[115] Doane, 81.

[116] Howardena Pindell, "Artist's Statement," in *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975,* ed. Katy Siegel (New York: Independent Curators International, 2006), 105. Allan Schwartzman and Kathleen Thomas, "Ree Morton: A Critical Overview," in *Ree Morton Retrospective, 1971-77* (New York: The New Museum, 1980), 40–41.

[117] For example, see Morton's *Beaux Paintings,* 1975.

[118] See Anne Swartz, *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision of American Art, 1975-1985* (Yonkers, NY: Hudson River Museum, 2007).

[119] Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 217.

dependence on a larger aesthetic scheme, and argued that these traits distinguished it totally from art.[120] Such arguments appeared shortly after the publication of architectural theorist Adolf Loos's infamous vision, evocative of then current theories of social Darwinism, which placed the decorative at the bottom of an aesthetic hierarchy. Loos contended that given the nascence of essential, "functional" modernist aesthetics, ornamentation was an excessive and "unhealthy" superfluity.[121] The hierarchy translated to a moral order as well. Although the "aristocrat" had a social obligation to overcome his outdated taste for the decorative, those who produced ornamented goods—Slovak peasant women, Africans, and Persians are all examples Loos gives—could be excused for clinging to their "sacred" though ultimately regressive work.[122]

As art historian Ann Gibson has noted, modernist discourse continued to associate the decorative and craft with non-white cultural and ethnic groups as well as with femininity throughout the twentieth century.[123] It functioned in part as a discursive strategy for shoring up an aesthetic hierarchy that assigned value to artistic labor and tastes across social categories including class, race, and gender. At midcentury, within Greenbergian criticism the decorative described the threatening "specter" of abstract, all-over painting devolving into a uniform field of "equivalency," a wallpaper pattern that could extend indefinitely.[124] In other words, the decorative was an inherent liability of all-over abstraction, and it defined advanced art's limiting condition as "superficial ornamentation."[125] The trained eye could identify its insidious conventions—craft, skill, and precision were some of its telltale signs.[126]

The "adamant decorativeness" of Pindell's cut and sewn paintings occurs in their display of materials associated with feminine masquerade, such as glitter, and the precise labor obviously required to achieve their detailed collage.[127] The cheerfully colorful chads collaged to their surfaces are redolent of confetti. Glitter and sequins catch ambient light, further evoking festive décor. This visual effect also creates the impression, as one commentator has noted, that the paintings "wink at you," suggesting a flirtatious femininity at play.[128] The glitter's glint resists photographic capture; these paintings require in-person viewing in order to express the full range of their decorative signifiers. Pindell further played up the decorative connotations of

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[120] See Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, "On Cubism," [1912] in *Modern Artists on Art: Ten Unabridged Essays,* ed. Robert Herbert (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 1–18.
[121] Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime," [1908] in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), 19–24.
[122] Ibid, 24.
[123] Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 36.
[124] The cover of the *Heresies* issue in which Meyer and Schapiro's "Waste Not Want Not" article appeared was a sheet of wallpaper—a jab at Greenberg's and other modernist critics' disavowal of the domestic decoration. Greenberg wrote "Decoration is the specter that haunts modernist painting," in Clement Greenberg, "Milton Avery," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 4, Modernism with a Vengeance,* ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 43; See also Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 2, Arrogant Purpose,* ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 221–24.
[125] Elissa Auther, "The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg," *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 342.
[126] Ibid, 341–64.
[127] Cotter, "A Resolutely Global Journey," 11.
[128] Linda Goode-Bryant, quoted in Wilson, 69.

her materials in their idiosyncratic application; she filled plastic bottles with powdered pigments and then covered their openings with old pantyhose, dusting color onto her canvases in an evocation of cosmetics or cake decoration. The artist has described this process as "seasoning," a cooking metaphor that recalls Lorde's insights into the potential erotic pleasures of food preparation.[129]

Feminine odors bolstered these visual cues of the decorative. The "cheap perfume" Pindell spritzed on the canvases carried classed as well as gendered associations. Her use of perfume breached the boundary between artwork and the viewer's body. The scent created an atmosphere around the works wherein viewers could take them in, in a literal sense, for smell entails the incorporation of invisible particles into the body.[130] Perfume brought another haptic resonance to the paintings, reaching out and "touching" the viewer. This co-existence of a multiplicity of sensuous information—olfactory, tactile, and visual—amplified the feminine presence of the paintings. Scent in particular, with its ability to trigger the mnemonic, could activate the paintings as surrogate bodies, as viewers might conjure memories of people or places associated with the odors.[131] Through the cut and sewn paintings, the self-made, artificially enhanced feminine body asserted itself into the realm of advanced art.

The cut and sewn paintings are at once strikingly modernist, as well as feminine. The "covert" feminism of the canvases, expressed through their feminine colors, materials, and modes of making, is undergirded by the male-coded modernist forms of the grid and large, all-over abstract painting. Lippard in fact once praised Pindell's works for "embodying the synthesis between women's sensibility" and these more familiar masculinist conventions of abstract art.[132] For instance, the canvases combine the putatively feminine scale of collage and the "masculine" dimensions of modernist painting. Tension between the miniscule textural details and the all-over abstraction causes viewers to step forward, then pull back. The paintings ask us to swivel between these two scales, to appreciate the delicate work of skilled fingers and the compositional repetition with variation. By collaging an abstract painting, Pindell consciously evokes the competing protocols ascribed by the discourses of feminist artists and modernist art criticism, as well as the contradictions inscribed in each.

Reflecting on the gains wrought by women artists of the 1970s, Lippard wrote, "Feminism's greatest contribution to the future of art has probably been precisely its *lack* of contribution to modernism."[133] Pindell's art differed. In contrast to the full-throated disavowals of modernism that many of her feminist peers voiced, her practice remained rooted in the protocols of abstract painting through the 1970s. Her contribution to "the future of art" was not a complete abandonment of all-over abstraction, but a hands-on make over. In this way, Pindell joined several other feminist artists, Heilmann for example, in combining paradigmatically

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[129] SR 97.29a. MoMA Archives, NY.

[130] Pindell, interview with the author, 2015. On scent as a process of incorporating invisible, potentially toxic particles into the body, see Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 198–203.

[131] For a discussion of black artists' use of surrogates for the black body, see Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 10.

[132] Susan L. Stoops, "From Eccentric to Sensuous Abstraction: An Interview with Lucy Lippard," in *More than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s,* ed. Susan L. Stoops (Waltham, MA: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1996), 28.

[133] Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges," *Art Journal* 40, no. 1 / 2 (Fall/Winter 1980): 362.

modernist idioms with forms, materials and methods of making associated with the feminine precisely in order to re-route modernism's de facto associations with masculinity.[134]

The cut and sewn paintings' syncretism furthermore can help us to see and trace other "feminine" hauntings of modernist abstraction. Consider Pollock's *Lavender Mist,* a work whose colloquial title, through its conjuring of a mythical feminine ephemerality, could well share a name with a cosmetic spray marketed to women (fig. 3.17). The painting's titular light-grey violet dances alongside warm peach paint, contributing to a palette similar to Pindell's. While certain qualities are constructed as "feminine" in works by women artists, such as Lee Krasner, they rarely are coded as such when they appear in works by Pollock or other male artists such as Sam Francis.[135] Pindell's cut and sewn paintings ask us to see how modernist forms and the "feminine" are intertwined. Rigorous confections, they theorize a femininity culled from seemingly disparate sources that were in fact the commonplaces of Pindell's life and work—an abstract, black femininity inflected by post-minimalism and an aesthetic of administration. In the following, I examine how Pindell developed this idiosyncratic, critical approach to the feminine through the paintings' everyday materials and vernacular forms of labor such as sewing.

IV.

Many of the materials that Pindell wielded to create her cut and sewn paintings were pulled from her everyday life and allude to various spheres outside the white cube of the modern art gallery.[136] By interweaving allusions to her white-collar job, feminine embellishment, craft and domestic labor, and conceptual art practices, the canvases bring together disparate social conversations. This feminist gesture conveys the interrelationships that, though unrecognized by normative discourses around gender, race, and labor, characterized Pindell's complex life and careers. The tension generated by the surprising juxtaposition of materials such as hole punch remains and glitter furthermore points to the fact that as viewers, we assign gender, race, class and other social statuses to even the smallest bits of visible matter.

With the cut and sewn paintings, Pindell expanded her use of vernacular materials beyond those she had deployed in her collaged works on paper. Filmmaker and gallerist Linda Goode-Bryant has identified a specifically black American conceptualist approach to found materials in a group of black artists working in the 1970s, whom she calls "Contexturalists."[137] The Contexturalists, according to Goode-Bryant, work in an additive way, layering "context meaning" in their works. They do so, she argues, through the use of *remains,* which are ambiguous and indefinable materials that, in contrast to readymades or discards, never had a socially assigned function. Pindell's hole punch scraps, the seemingly useless and worthless remnants of bureaucratic processes, are remains.[138] Other artists in this group include Wendy Ehlers, whose *Three Inches Equals One Week of Laundry* (1974) places laundry dryer lint in the

[134] For a discussion of Heilmann's, Pindell's, and Joan Snyder's paintings in this context, see Helen Molesworth, "Painting with Ambivalence," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, eds. Cornelia Butler and Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 428–39.
[135] See Anne Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K.," *Representations* 25 (Winter 1989): 42–57.
[136] See Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* [1976] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
[137] Goode-Bryant and Philips, 39. Fred Moten also has spoken about "contexture" as a musical term. See "Dear S/F: interview with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney," interview with artist MPA in *The Interview: Red, Red Future* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2016), 2.
[138] Goode-Bryant and Philips, 40.

rationalizing confines of a Plexiglas grid (fig. 3.18). In these examples, remains continue to be recognizable in the artworks' overall compositions, conjuring the office or laundromat.

Art historian Kobena Mercer has likewise theorized a particular set of relationships to materials embodied in works by several contemporary black American artists. In "Tropes of the Grotesque in the Black Avant-Garde," he argues that artists such as Robert Colescott, Hammons, and Saar use found materials to articulate "a double-voiced mode of address."[139] Hammons, for example, employs what Mercer calls "the poetics of the found object" in assemblages like the *Bag Series* (1975-79) (fig. 3.19). Rib bones, glitter and greasy brown paper bags evoke a "material culture" of Hammons's Harlem neighborhood.[140] The collaged abstract compositions of these objects recuperate markers of normatively designated "low" social value and inducts them into the "semantics" of the avant-garde by borrowing its familiar forms.[141] These practices intersect with black feminist practices, which, as discussed, assert vernacular cultural materials into the rarified sphere of artistic contemplation. This space traditionally and implicitly has been devised, as art historian Brian O'Doherty has noted, for the endurance of a particular white masculine power structure.[142] Pindell's cut and sewn paintings do not mobilize overt markers of racial and cultural blackness per se. But with their multiple entendre and concern for the haptic, they nonetheless position everyday materials as both personally and culturally meaningful signifiers with the potential to disturb socially imposed hierarchies and categories.

Most curious amongst Pindell's materials is cat hair. Initially, the long, wispy fibers wafted into her works by chance (or rather, they moved there according to the properties of cat hair, which go everywhere). The artist had several cats throughout the 1970s, though no more than two at a time.[143] As a photograph dating to this decade illustrates, the pets were no stranger to her studio (fig. 3.20). Pindell never included the hair as part of her materials list or intentionally applied it to the surface of her works; she nonetheless thought of the fibers as part of her finished works.[144] Her willingness to adapt to the presence of cat hair on her artworks' surfaces speaks to the continuity of the various spheres of Pindell's life at the time—the private space of her home, where she cared for furry pets, was the same place where she constructed large, abstract paintings for public view. [145] Artist Carolee Schneemann also incorporated cat imagery into her works in ways that speak to her intimate fondness for her pets and to feline cultural resonances. In collaged paintings and video works created over the course of five

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[139] Mercer, "Tropes of the Grotesque in the Black Avant-Garde," 137.
[140] Godfrey, 188.
[141] Ibid, 152, 154. More recently, curator Adrienne Edwards and performance studies scholar Sampada Aranke have each argued that contemporary black artists have continued a tradition of developing abstract and conceptual practices that mobilize the material dimensions of blackness in order to "trouble the panoptic qualities of the visual." In the work of artists such as Sadie Barnett and Adam Pendleton, the textures and tactility of materials insist on "blackness as a multiplicity." Edwards, "Blackness in Abstraction"; Sampada Aranke, "Material Matters: Black Radical Aesthetics and the Limits of Visibility," *e-flux* 79, Feb. 2017, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94433/material-matters-black-radical-aesthetics-and-the-limits-of-visibility/.
[142] O'Doherty, 9.
[143] Pindell, interview with the author, Dec. 2018. In a letter dated Sept. 25, 1989, Pindell writes to Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art curator Andrea Miller-Keller, "…one of my paintings in the 1970s was peed on by one of my cats. I think after the Serrano business I should list it as a medium." The letter is housed in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art curatorial files.
[144] Ibid.
[145] See SLA, 282. MoMA Archives, QNS; interview with Jones, 1989.

decades, according to Schneemann, the cat symbolically refers to the alleged intuitiveness and elusiveness of feminine sexuality.[146] Cats function simultaneously as an intimate marker of Schneemann's movements through life, and as muses who offer lessons on improvisation, risk, and tenderness.[147] Both artists' use of cat hair disrupts the traditional divide between home and work, domestic privacy and public arena to which so many feminist artists of the 1970s applied pressure.[148]

The most enduring of Pindell's vernacular materials, the paper chad proliferates on the surfaces of her cut and sewn paintings. In these works, the rounds allude to the physically repetitive aspects of the artist's remunerative labor at MoMA. The hole punch was a commonplace administrative instrument in the pre-desk-computer era of the 1970s, and one that she used at the museum. Pindell worked as an assistant curator from 1971 to 1977, when she received a promotion to associate curator of the prints and illustrated books department. Though prior to this promotion she curated twelve of her own exhibitions, regularly published, and traveled abroad under MoMA's auspices, she continued to perform administrative tasks for her department and spent the majority of her working hours in the museum offices.[149]

The repetitive handiwork required to make the cut and sewn paintings, exemplified in the chads, couches the machinic in the handmade.[150] This post-minimalist idiom is charted in the intertwining of the serial repetition of hole punching and the industrial materials of paper, string, and office supplies with the craft practices of collage, sewing, and weaving. Robert Morris likewise used industrial materials in surprisingly physical ways that countered the formal closures of minimalism. In *Untitled (Pink Felt)* (1970), segments of the titular material form an undulating pile on the gallery floor (fig. 3.21). Morris's post-minimalist emphasis on process disarticulated expected forms such as orderly stacks and grids, and drew attention to artistic labor. Post-minimalist propositions from Morris and Pindell share a structuring tension between the body and the machine that speaks to their ongoing entanglements under late capitalism, against the heralding of technological innovations that would putatively reduce the role of labor in daily life.

Several years prior to making the cut and sewn paintings, Pindell sewed two soft sculpture grids—some of the only sculptures in her oeuvre (fig. 3.22). Overlooked in many accounts of her artistic production of the early 1970s, the soft grids offer insight into her early thinking about the fruitful tension between industrial materials and craft processes. Pindell finished both of the sculptures while living at Westbeth Artists Community in the early 1970s, where she had space to produce three-dimensional objects. To make the works, she cut scraps of canvas into thin rectangles and sewed them with a machine to form tubes. Pindell stuffed the tubes with polyurethane foam, and then tucked and sewed both ends of each tube. She sprayed the canvas surfaces with metallic silver paint and punched one to three grommets into the ends of each tube (fig. 3.23). Metal rings connect the tubes, which are slightly lumpy. The entire sculpture hangs from the wall so that the bottom row of squares drapes onto the ground.

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[146] Carolee Schneemann, unpublished manuscript, May 1981.
[147] In 1974, Schneemann went so far as to declare "The cat is my medium!" Carolee Schneemann, letter to Margaret Fisher, July 17, 1974, in *Correspondence Course: An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and Her Circle*, ed. Kristine Stiles (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 218.
[148] See Helen Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," *October* 92 (Spring 2000): 71–97.
[149] "At a Glance," *MoMA* no. 4 (1977): 7.
[150] On the inherent tension between the industrial and the handmade embodied by textiles, see Bryan-Wilson, *Fray*.

Pindell's drooping grids make tongue-in-cheek allusion to bodily de-composure. The overall effect of the works suggests an old-fashioned jungle gym set, though the sagging sculptures plainly could not support the weight of a human body. The sculptures thematize the rational giving way to irrationality, another post-minimalist idiom, and a trait Krauss has identified as characteristic of the grid.[151] For instance, the sculpture's hardware follows its own rules rather than adhering to a logic of engineering efficiency. The number of grommets and rings at any given joint varies. In some cases, three rings attach four tubes that each have one grommet; in others, one ring connects three tubes and grommets are left empty.

The soft sculptures and Pindell's cut and sewn paintings both engage with Eva Hesse's model of post-minimalism. For instance, the paintings recall the dialectic central to Hesse's work of the mid- to late 1960s, between pregiven forms (grid, machine, industrial process) and bodily effects.[152] In *Accession II* (1967), for example, Hesse wove thousands of lengths of rubber tubing into a galvanized steel cube with an open top (fig. 3.24). The resulting surfaces contrast external order and symmetry with internal bristling appendages. Pindell's paintings likewise fill a structure, the grid, with a proliferation of protuberant materials. Her soft sculptures play with the form of painting in a way evocative of Hesse's *Hang-Up* (1966). Art historian Anne Wagner has argued that Hesse's primary contribution to modernism lies in her works' revelation that "the aesthetic need not re-create the effect of bodily alienation that is the hallmark of modern life, but rather should counter that alienation by its insistent summoning of the sensual realm."[153] Pindell's theory of the potentially "healing" properties of the handmade art object echoes this insight.

As art historian Katy Siegel observes, Pindell's grid sculptures "not only parod[y] the flatness of the modernist picture plane but [let] the 'painting' sag off the wall onto the floor, suggesting the play between painting and sculpture so key to artistic debates at this time."[154] This artistic discourse placed painting in an inferior position relative to sculpture, and incessantly harkened its "death."[155] However, many painters staked out ever more expansive definitions of the medium in the early 1970s, and did so in part by scrambling elements of sculpture, performance art, and other mediums with the conventions of painting. Lynda Benglis's latex paintings (1969), poured directly onto the floor and allowed to harden, relocated painterly colors and gestural flows to the site of minimalist sculpture, while Schneemann's performance *Body Collage* (1967) emerged "directly from the painterly experience."[156] In an inversion of Benglis's move, Pindell's soft grids place sculpture where painting ought to go—on the vertical wall, though they playfully droop into the horizontal realm of minimalist and post-minimalist sculpture. In mobilizing the modular form of the grid to bridge the two mediums, Pindell suggests that recent sculptural practices had not so much exploded the logic of painting, as relocated or reoriented it.

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[151] Krauss, "Grids."

[152] Pindell admired Hesse's work and was inspired by the textures of her surfaces to work with talcum powder to give her collaged works on paper a "frosted" finish. The two artists were acquainted before Hesse's death. SLA, 282. MoMA Archives, QNS.

[153] Anne Wagner, "Another Hesse," in *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 275.

[154] Katy Siegel, "Another History Is Possible," in *High Times, Hard Times*, 42.

[155] For one notable example, see Gregory Battcock, "Painting Is Obsolete," *New York Free Press*, Jan. 23, 1969, 7.

[156] Carolee Schneemann, "Artist's Statement," in *High Times, Hard Times*, 137.

Shortly after its production, the second of Pindell's grid sculptures appeared in Lippard's consequential exhibition *26 Contemporary Women Artists*. The exhibition, held at Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, in 1971, featured the work of twenty-six women artists who had not yet received solo exhibitions in New York City. Hailed by the Aldrich as "the first major exhibition of women's art since the Women's Movement," the exhibition "constitute[d] an attempt to remedy traditional neglect, to show how much good art by women has simply never been seen."[157] Artists in the exhibition included Heilmann, Piper, and Jacqueline Winsor. Works varied across a spectrum of figurative, abstract, conceptual, and sculptural idioms, and intentionally so, for Lippard wished to convey the expansiveness of "women's art" in what she called "a form of personal retribution to women artists [she]'d slighted, unintentionally, in the past."[158] Pindell was represented by the 1970–71 grid sculpture as well as two irregularly shaped, abstract paintings. The sculpture returned to New York, where Pindell stored it in her studio (fig. 3.25). Indeed, she made the work from light, soft materials in part because these made for easier transport.[159]

The soft sculptures introduced sewing to Pindell's oeuvre, but it was with the cut and sewn paintings that she first consistently experimented with the craft technique. Her use of hand-stitching in these works invited vernacular, domestic associations. In a 1982 interview, she addressed her recent use of sewing in her paintings:

> I...liked sewing because of the internal geometry it gave the surface. Not only do you have the painted surface, but you also have this strange quirky geometry going on in the inside, which you may or may not notice…Sometimes I allow for a separation in the thread so that you can see through the wall behind, which also gives more variety to the surface.[160]

The sewing, she says, diversifies and texturizes the canvas's surface, bringing paint, thread, and gaps in conversation with one another. It gives the paintings "geometry"—a term that connotes mathematical rigor. Pindell's remarks underscore the fact that craft practices, such as sewing and quilting, often entail precision and technical knowledge. However, the visible stitches in her cut and painting tend to be subtly uneven and large. These characteristics distinguish them from most of the work that a skilled seamstress would perform. Pindell learned to sew as a child and throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s, she made some of her own clothes, especially formalwear required for events at MoMA, since she could not afford to buy dresses for these occasions.[161] Thus, she "skilled down" her sewing in its application to her abstract paintings. The stitching in these works both distances her labor from craft and invites the comparison. She

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[157] "Spring Exhibition-'26 Contemporary Women Artists'-opens April 18," The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art press release, April 1, 1971.
[158] Lippard, introduction to *26 Contemporary Women Artists* (Ridgefield, CT: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 1971), n.p.
[159] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.
[160] Pindell, interview with Jacobs, 34.
[161] Howardena Pindell, e-mail correspondence with the author, March 2019. Pindell first learned to sewn on a machine. Her parents enrolled her in classes held by the Singer Sewing Corporation in Philadelphia when she was "ten or twelve years old." Pindell has never considered herself a skilled seamstress, but performed the work out of necessity. She incorporates hand sewing into her artworks to this day, she notes, for the "pleasure" of it.

experimented with various types of thread that provided different thicknesses and textures, including carpet thread and sail thread.[162]

Sewing, as craft and handiwork, was both a gendered and racialized form of labor that artists of the 1970s wielded as a tool of reclamation and critique. Ironically, the return to "women's work" undertaken by feminist artists coincided with broader struggles to move white, college-educated women from the domestic to the corporate work force. Many middle-class women wished no longer to be confined to the unremunerated duties of mending, childrearing, and feeding their families and fought for access to the broader capitalist job market, demanding equal pay for equal work. In 1971, writer Toni Morrison critiqued the hypocritical oversights that allowed upper-middle-class white women to pursue a white, male model of success while relegating domestic labor to low-paid black women. She wrote, "It is a source of amusement even now to black women to listen to feminist talk of liberation while somebody's nice black grandmother shoulders the daily responsibility of child rearing and floor mopping and the liberated one comes home to examine the housekeeping, correct it, and be entertained by the children. If Women's Lib needs those grandmothers to thrive, it has a serious flaw."[163] That "serious flaw" was that white middle-class feminists prioritized their own liberation, refused to hear the concerns of women whose lives looked different than theirs, and failed to make political commitments to those women.

Painters, white and black alike, found sewing a resource for opening the traditionally vaunted medium of painting to associations with "experiences that did not belong to the story of art."[164] Al Loving, an acquaintance and contemporary of Pindell's, introduced sewing to his abstract painting practice after seeing an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art titled *Abstract Design in American Quilts* (1971).[165] The exhibition reminded him of quilts his grandmother had made. Facing charges of "cooperation" from black artist-activists protesting the earlier *Contemporary Black Artists in America* (1971), a controversial exhibition detailed in chapter one, Loving was actively seeking ways to draw U.S. black cultural practices into his abstract paintings.[166] He transitioned from hardline geometric abstraction on stretched canvases to deconstructed paintings comprised of strips of canvas sewn together and hanged loosely from a beam (fig. 3.26). The reference to quilting, his radiant colors, and the material textures of the unstretched paintings allowed Loving to connect, in his own estimation, to jazz and African religions.[167]

Tempting though it may be to read the cut and sewn paintings as homages to a black women's tradition of quilting, such as is immediately evident in Ringgold's quilted panels and apparent in Loving's accounts of his artistic resilience, Pindell has resisted this interpretation,

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[162] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.
[163] Toni Morrison "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," *New York Times Magazine*, August 22, 1971, 64. Saidiya Hartman has likewise theorized the particular relationship to labor of black American women. See Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18, no. 1 (2016): 166–73.
[164] Siegel, "Another History Is Possible," 30.
[165] April Kingsley, "Alvin Loving: On a Spiraling Trajectory," in *Al Loving: Color Construct,* ed. Judy Collischan and April Kingsley (Purchase, NY: Neuberger Museum of Art, 1998), 7.
[166] Godfrey, 148.
[167] Ibid, 149.

and has underscored instead her interest in African textiles.[168] Her aversion to the quilting comparison is somewhat unusual in her career, during which she has remained open to a wide range of interpretive possibilities for her paintings. A photograph of the artist sitting atop an in-progress cut and sewn painting from a March 1990 issue of *Elle* also suggests that she did not always shy away from the comparison—a quilt hangs prominently behind her head, on the wall of her studio (fig. 3.27). Looking at the photograph, we understand that the paintings share a geometric concern for form with quilts, that they too are hand sewn, textural, and can be colorful.

Within the pages of *Elle,* a popular culture magazine marketed toward women, the overt contextualization of the paintings within a women's cultural tradition of quilting may have been an attempt to bring them closer to the lives and interests of a broad readership. But in other contexts, Pindell eschewed the association in order to re-focus her artistic authority. Her fraught relationship with quilting was catalyzed by a noxious comment a critic offered her in private sometime in the 1980s, telling her that he did not know if he liked the cut and sewn paintings, but thought that he would "like to have sex under one of them."[169] Reading the comment generously, we might see that the anonymous critic referred to the form of the canvases, whose visible seams and rectilinear form resemble a blanket or quilt, and perhaps as well to the appealingly sensuous texture of their surfaces. But his lascivious remark also reveals his inability to see Pindell as an artist, and a reluctance to conceive of her personhood beyond a stereotype of black female hypersexuality.[170] Confronted by an abstract painting that moved across several contemporary artistic discourse—post-minimalism, feminist recuperations, the expansion of color field painting—the critic saw and voiced a violent trope of anti-black racism. Pindell's refusal of the quilt then, served to redirect viewers from the sexualizing potential of horizontality. With this notable critical reframing of her works, she defended the status of her paintings as art, and her own position as an artist—an astonishing but all too common requirement of combatting the "triple negation" of women of color artists, who face discrimination at the intersections of race, gender, and vocation.

The cut and sewn paintings' juxtaposition of craft and administrative labor does not resolve the tension between the body and the machinic, but it does point to the common perception that each entails rote functions and labor. By embracing administrative and craft labor in her production of abstract paintings, Pindell asserted that each of these forms of work could entail the highest levels of agential authority. Rather than being quilted—a process of drawing stitches through top and bottom surfaces of fabric that sandwich a middle layer of batting—the cut and sewn paintings are stitched together at seams. Stitches "close" the space between canvas strips in works such as *Untitled* (1977), but they also draw attention to these closures. Thick, irregular pieces of thread index the movement of Pindell's hands across these junctures of the textiles, underscoring the painting's handmade origins. These stitched seams thematize the processes of fragmentation and reconstitution that predated the artwork's aesthetic harmony. They show Pindell bringing things together to make an abstract art expansive enough for her ambitions.

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[168] Pindell, "Ancestral Memories and Visual Coincidences." According to Pindell, no one in her family quilted. Further, her paintings are made in the isolation of her studio rather than the communal space of the quilting bee, and are not quilted in the technical sense of the term.

[169] Pindell, interview with the author, 2015.

[170] On the topic of the interlocking notions of black female sexuality as both excessive and invisible, see Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, nos. 2-3 (1994): 127–45.

Conclusion

Of Pindell's abstract works, the cut and sewn paintings offer the most sustained engagements and astute explorations of the contradictions she encountered as a black woman artist. By overlaying the modernist grid, kente cloth, and the quilt, the paintings ask us to reconsider received narratives, particularly those that have located black feminisms and abstraction in far flung discursive sites. The paintings bring together disparate forms of labor—the paperwork of bureaucracy, craft procedures, the routines of feminine bodily adornment, and the seclusion of modernist studio painting—that each speak to Pindell's effortful movements through the world. They are indubitably individual in the sense that their fabrication evoked Pindell's experiences of "traumatic isolation" and participated in her efforts to "empower" and "heal" herself. But the aesthetic force with which they surface the tensions of late-twentieth-century life, labor, and artistic formations points to Pindell's capacities to turn subjective experience into social knowledge, to make use of abstraction, to "put beauty…where [she] found ugliness."[171]

Pindell's abiding investment in "surface tension" not only attests to a clarity of vision around African diasporic and black women's cultural traditions, but concomitantly taps into what Joselit has identified as a defining concern of modernism—the registration on a painting's surface of psychic depth as a social condition of human subjectivity.[172] Part of the paintings' critical work is that they both meet and thwart this expectation that the artwork is, in a sense, a distillation of the artist herself. The cut and sewn paintings give us no clear, singular, or fixed sense of where to place them, or the artist. Rather, they knot and make less comfortable supposed antinomies of late-twentieth-century art, such as those posited between African cultural affinities, feminist commitments and modernist aims.

The paintings subtly thematize the push and pull of experience. For a period of time after the works were made, viewers may have been drawn close by a sniff of perfume, only to be repelled by a cloying cacophony of scents. Details such as the collaged chads invite closer inspection, while the shine of glitter deflects our gaze through a reflection of light.[173] Dense textures of extruded pastel paint tempt our fingers, but the paintings maintain the modernist prohibition on touch. The layering of bureaucratic and domestic materials scrambles traditional ideas about the site of art-work. Exuberant in their feminine beauty and their multivalent allusions, the cut and sewn paintings play with the reach of our sight and our hands, our ability to know and understand what is in front of us. In other words, the paintings do nothing short of ask us to look afresh at the viability of abstraction as a critical practice. With them, Pindell made abstraction all her own. In subsequent years, she would carry the lessons of these abstract paintings into a figurative practice, using collage and layered surfaces to attend to the contradictions of representation.

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[171] Pindell, undated interview with Freeman.

[172] See Joselit, "Notes on Surface."

[173] Art historian Krista Thompson notes that shine both draws attention to surfaces and deflects the gaze through their reflective properties. Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practices* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 225.

Chapter Four: Mass Media and Ambivalent Skins

In New York's record-breaking heat of the summer of 1980, Howardena Pindell "couldn't shake" an idea—she needed to see herself in a blonde wig.[1] This nagging image could not be conveyed via her usual methods of art making; Pindell considered herself foremost a painter and had long abandoned figuration as part of this practice. She needed to make something more immediate, more biting and more quickly executed, than the laboriously collaged all-over abstract canvases she had produced in recent years. Pindell knew that it had to be video, and her conviction on this point overrode significant concerns, including that she considered herself "totally ignorant" of the medium, and that up to this point she had largely dismissed it as "very narcissistic and self-involved."[2]

Free, White, and 21, the twelve-minute color video that emerged from this urgent image, opens with a brief shot of Pindell in whiteface. Pancake make-up, dark cat-eye sunglasses, and that unremitting blonde wig, styled in an outmoded bob, transform her into the character of the White Woman (fig. 4.01). The video centers on a series of verbal responses this character directs at the Artist, a black woman also played by Pindell, who matter-of-factly recounts seven experiences of racial discrimination and harassment (fig. 4.02). For each shot, the Artist wears a different top against a variously hued monochromatic backdrop. The two characters form foil and partner to one another, engaging in a conversational *pas de deux* through the use of crosscut editing. The Artist speaks; each of her anecdotes offers a painful illustration, drawn from Pindell's own life, of the mundane, sometimes violent, inequities wrought by racial discourse. She describes, for instance, being passed over for enrollment in an honors class by a teacher who told her that while she was qualified, a white student would "go further." The White Woman responds dismissively to each narration, calling the Artist "ungrateful" and "paranoid" in a high-pitched, nasal tone. She repeats the titular catchphrase, "But of course I'm free, white and 21," by way of explaining her inability to understand either what the Artist says or why she says it. The once-common phrase had had its heyday in 1930s Hollywood cinema; like the hairstyle the White Woman wears, it was an anachronism by 1980.[3] However, the expression would have

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[1] Howardena Pindell, quoted in Leslie King Hammond and Lowery Stokes Sims, "Reflections on Art as a Verb: Twenty Years Later, in the New Millennium," in *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the Moving Image Since 1970,* eds. Andrea Barnwell-Brownlee and Valerie Cassel Oliver (Houston: Contemporary Art Museum Houston / Atlanta: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, 2008), 15.

[2] Pindell, quoted in Hammond and Sims, "Reflections on Art as a Verb," 17. This view echoes the argument in Rosalind Krauss's influential 1976 polemic on video art. See Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* (Spring 1976): 50–64.

[3] Andrew Heisel, "The Rise and Fall of an All-American Catchphrase: 'Free, White, and 21,'" *Jezebel* September 10, 2015, https://pictorial.jezebel.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-an-all-american-catchphrase-free-1729621311. Heisel notes that the catchphrase appeared frequently in "fallen woman films" of the era. Examples include *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), *Strangers May Kiss* (1931), and *The Singing Hill* (1941). In 1935, Walter L. Lowe, a prominent Chicago-based insurer broker wrote in an editorial in *The Chicago Defender*: "To the average person of color, the phrase: 'free, white and twenty-one,' as it is employed in moving picture dialogues, conveys the following suggestions or ideas: You are not white; you are therefore, an inferior person. You are not white; you are not, therefore, entitled to social and industrial freedom." Walter L. Lowe, "Free, White, and 21," *The Chicago Defender,* Mar. 2, 1935, 11. Heisel notes that use of the phrase petered out around 1943, as the U.S. Office of War Information noticed that it contributed to negative views of the United States abroad. Newspapers stopped printing the phrase almost completely by late 1960s.

been familiar to audiences who had lived through American segregation and the civil rights movement.[4]

Although Pindell's deliberate turn to video would be fleeting—she has made only one other work in the medium, *Doubling* (1995), about war atrocities, which has not been exhibited widely—it initiated a drastic reconceptualization of audience and authorship that have been integral to her artistic legacy. With *Free, White, and 21,* I argue, she launched a reinvigorated artistic project that exploited the reproductive capacities and mass appeal of video to examine the racial dynamics of artistic viewership. The video continued the interrogation of artistic discourse that Pindell long had pursued in her abstract work, but newly approached this project through a representational idiom. *Free, White, and 21* thematizes the contradictions inherent to representation as a dually depictive and political project. Through confrontational strategies that lampoon the emotional and intellectual blind spots inherent to racism, Pindell articulates her frustrations with the contradictions of American multiculturalism, a set of political and cultural agendas that encourages the growing public visibility of people of color at the same time it forecloses the range of expressions deemed beneficial to its putative goal of social harmony.[5] In the artist's words, "the history and culture of people of color has been appropriated, distorted, and used as images and points of focus by white artists while artists of color have been excluded from speaking visually and interpreting themselves on the same platform."[6] Becoming visible in a dominant culture, Pindell tells her viewers, does not secure power in the public sphere. For people of color, public visibility often involves extensive abstraction from lived experience.[7] In *Free, White, and 21*, Pindell expresses a profound skepticism about mass media representations.

Existing scholarship on Pindell's video, easily the most well-known piece in her oeuvre, has largely construed the work as an affecting turn toward representation—a practice that figuratively placed the artist on the surface of her works through self-depiction and autobiographical content.[8] Pindell cites *Free, White, and 21* as the inaugural project in her *Autobiography* series, a body of work she pursued throughout the 1980s that explored themes of communal memory and trauma.[9] She credits the video with marking her transition from a practice centered largely on process to one deeply invested in autobiography and more direct

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[4] For instance, it was the title of a schlocky 1963 courtroom film drama made by Larry Buchanan. The film follows the aftermath of an alleged rape of a white woman by a black man.

[5] On American multiculturalism and the visual arts see Jeff Chang, *Who We Be: The Colorization of America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2014); Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[6] Howardena Pindell, "Autobiography: In Her Own Image," in *The Heart of the Question: The Writings and Paintings of Howardena Pindell* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997), 72.

[7] See, for instance, Phillip Brian Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 2.

[8] See, for instance, Uri McMillan, "Is This Performance About You? The Art, Activism, and Black Feminist Critique of Howardena Pindell," in *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 153–95; Brian Wallis, "Coming to Voice: Howardena Pindell's *Free, White, and 21*," in *Howardena Pindell: What Remains to Be Seen*, eds. Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2018), 169–80.

[9] Howardena Pindell, interview with Kellie Jones, April 2, 1989, Audio-visual recording, Billops-Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

political messaging.[10] Rather than employing the symbolically public platform of mass media to "represent" herself in a straightforward way, however, Pindell used this site to interrogate the procedures that allow works of art to become visible, and that, in some cases, disallow their circulation. Ultimately, I argue, she theorized representation as an abstracting set of procedures. Through the use of several imaginative "skins," textured membranes applied and removed from the two characters' heads throughout the video, she emphasizes the mediating effects of representational practices. These gestures contribute to a tactile, collaged approach to character development that echoes the techniques she so ardently pursued in her abstract practice. Thus, Pindell brought her expertise as an abstractionist to the figurative realm of mass media.

A series of occurrences beginning in 1979 led the artist to see an urgent need for making racism visible by articulating and visualizing its effects. This chapter asks how Pindell addressed her work to these changing stakes of representation. What summoned her out from "behind" her work?[11] What did it mean for her to become visible as a figure in her art in 1980? The video's imagery and the content of its spoken narration draw viewers' attention to the ongoing traumatic stress of racial discrimination. It also refers to recent traumatic events that deeply touched Pindell's life—a nearly fatal car accident and a rancorous art world debate that resulted in her departure from MoMA, where she had worked for twelve years. The video marked her exit from artistic circles that had failed to address the art world's rampant racial discrimination. According to Pindell, she created the work in direct response to "yet another run-in with white feminists."[12] Collectively, these events shook Pindell's belief in abstraction as a potential site of artistic mending. For a period, her privileged idiom appeared to her too complicit in cultural processes that fed into systemic inequities. Hence, abstraction temporarily became a secondary concern, although, as I show, it remained a tool in her practice.

Free, White, and 21 built upon Pindell's enduring interrogations of mass media as a site of artistic possibility and constraint. This chapter draws out her longer-standing engagement with mass media imagery, which coincided with her abstract practice. I trace the origins of the artist's experimentations with mass media to the photographic, television-based series *Video Drawings* (1973–76). With these works, Pindell theorized an engaged and ambivalent mode of mass media spectatorship. In both the photographic series and the video, the artist intervened in the pleasurable flows of mass media spectatorship in order to subject markers of racial whiteness to scrutiny. As I show, this practice placed a representational burden back on whiteness, countering the demands aimed at women of color to depict themselves in ways that would be legible to wide audiences. It joined other manifestations of black feminist critique that pushed against the "simultaneous high visibility and total lack of voice of black women" in mass media.[13] At the end of a decade that had failed to redress deep and widespread racial inequities, Pindell wrestled with how to be seen and not merely depicted.

Free, White, and 21

[10] Howardena Pindell, "Howardena Pindell: Some Reminiscences and a Chronology," in *Howardena Pindell: Paintings and Drawings* (Potsdam, NY: Roland Gibson Gallery at Potsdam College of the State University of New York, 1992), 20.
[11] I borrow this formulation from Anne M. Wagner, "Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence," *October* 91 (Winter 2000): 74.
[12] Howardena Pindell, "Free, White, and 21," in *The Heart of the Question*, 66.
[13] Michele Wallace, "Negative/Positive Images," in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990), 3.

In *Free, White, and 21* Pindell stages a dialogue between the Artist and the White Woman. Although the video is a single-monitor piece that depicts only one character at a time, the two characters seem to speak to one another. As the Artist, Pindell reports seven encounters with racist discrimination—a number that underscores the very everydayness of racial oppression by suggesting an episode for each day of the week. These incidents, drawn from Pindell's own life, chart the effects of racism across various life stages. They also attest to the pervasiveness of racism as it occurs in wide ranging spheres of experience—early childhood education, student governance, and romance. The character begins with a single event from her mother's life, and then narrates experiences from the first-person point of view, proceeding in chronological order so that the episodes span the arc of her own nearly middle-aged lifetime. By beginning the narration with an event from an earlier generation, Pindell suggests that racism operates genealogically; it passes from one generation to the next, and stories of its manifestations are part of an oral heritage shared between grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and children.[14] Pindell had written about the familial transmission of such knowledge in a 1978 article in the feminist journal *Heresies*.[15] The text juxtaposes her handwritten account of racist atrocities inflicted on her ancestors with typeset archival narratives of similar brutal incidents. In the late 1970s and 1980s, Pindell's interest in her ancestry grew. Through the *Autobiography* series, she began exploring the American histories of slavery and colonialism that touched on the lives of her forbearers, who were black, white, and Native American.

The Artist's tone in *Free, White, and 21* is calm and deliberate. She chooses her words with care, occasionally pausing to formulate her sentences. Throughout, she faces the camera directly, gazing into it and blinking frequently, perhaps in response to the bright fixtures lighting her from off-camera. The Artist's bald frankness is juxtaposed by the White Woman's oblique address. She aims her commentary exclusively at the Artist, mostly speaking to her in the second person. The White Woman frequently holds her head at an angle from the camera, either tilting her chin down in a position that obscures her mouth or sitting perpendicularly to the camera so that viewers see her in profile (fig. 4.03). These dissembling gestures are heightened by the accouterments of her mask-like visage. An acid yellow wig forms a helmet over a heavily made-up face, whose cosmetic artifice is evident in the contrast between a ghostly white nose, heavily rouged cheeks, and bubblegum pink lips. Large, dark sunglasses shade her eyes. These visual cues suggest the utter inaccessibility of the character's interiority. The obvious artificiality of the White Woman's costuming situates the character in an African American tradition of whiteface.[16] This critical set of practices attempts to make visible the contradictions and privileges of whiteness.

Free, White, and 21 debuted at an exhibition organized by artists Ana Mendieta, Kazuko Miyamoto, and Zarina at A.I.R. Gallery, when it was located on Wooster Street in SoHo. Titled *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States*, it brought together the work of eight women of color artists working across diverse idioms—Judith Baca, Beverly Buchanan, Janet Henry, Senga Nengudi, Lydia Okumura, Pindell, Selena

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[14] On this point, see Wallis, 174.

[15] Howardena Pindell, "Afro-Carolinian 'Gullah' Baskets," *Heresies* 1, no. 2 (1978): 22.

[16] See Faedra Chatard Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014); Marvin Edward McAllister, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels & Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

Whitefeather, and Zarina. Many of these artists knew one another prior to the exhibition—they were friends, colleagues, and acquaintances who formed part of a small supportive network of women of color artists showing in New York.[17] Henry displayed selections from her *Juju Bags* series, each work composed of a small doll and an assortment of hand-crafted accessories reflecting the fictional figure's interests and social position. An arrangement of blocky concrete sculptures by Buchanan sat directly on the floor, evoking minimalist installations and the material experimentations of post-minimalism. Pindell's was the sole video work on display.

The exhibition proposed that despite their disparate practices, these artists shared a project as "Third World Women." The term "Third World" emerged during the Cold War to describe a collection of nations unaligned with either Communist or Euro-American political and economic structures. By the late 1960s, civil rights activists began to use the term to link the struggles of these nations, most of which were rebuilding in the aftermath of colonial occupation, to the efforts of people of color in the United States to topple the oppressive forces of a dominant white culture.[18] Black feminist activists in the United States first adopted the moniker "Third World Women" in these same years to signal their solidarity with women of the Third World who likewise experienced the double oppressions of gender and race or ethnicity.[19] In the context of the New York art world in which Mendieta, Miyamoto, and Zarina organized *Dialectics,* "Third World Women" signified a rallying, if fraught, point of connection between women of color whose concerns about racism and imperialism were unheeded by largely white feminist groups and organizations.[20]

In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Mendieta establishes the participants of the "dialectic" or critical dialogue staged by the show; the exhibition became a platform through which the Third World Women artists gathered could "speak" to the white middle-class feminists who "failed to remember" them as they politicized in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[21] Mendieta writes, "American Feminism as it stands is basically a white middle class movement. As non-white women our struggles are two-fold. This exhibition points not necessarily to the injustice or incapacity of a society that has not been willing to include us, but towards a personal will to continue being 'other.'"[22]

The exhibition's venue was also highly symbolic with regards to this dialogue. *Dialectics* targeted the marginalization of women of color within the feminist movement broadly, but it also directed its critique specifically at A.I.R., whose largely white, middle-class membership had

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[17] For instance, Pindell knew Henry through the gallery Just Above Midtown and became friends with Buchanan following the exhibition. She included Henry and Mendieta (posthumously) in the 1988 traveling exhibition she curated, titled *Autobiography: In Her Own Image*. See Howardena Pindell, *Autobiography: In Her Own Image* (New York: INTAR Latin America Gallery, 1988).

[18] See Komozi Woodard, "Amiri Baraka, the Congress of African People and Black Power Politics from the 1961 United Nations Protest to the 1972 Gary Convention," in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era,* ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 55–78.

[19] See Stephen Ward, "The Third World Women's Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and the Black Power Movement," in *The Black Power Movement*, 119–44.

[20] See Lowery Stokes Sims, "Third World Women Speak," *Women Artists News* 4, no. 6 (Dec. 1978): 1, reprinted in Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley, eds., *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85: A Sourcebook* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2017), 190–93; Editorial Statement, "Third World Women: The Politics of Being Other," *Heresies,* no. 8 (1979): 1.

[21] Ana Mendieta, introduction, *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States* (New York: A.I.R. Gallery, 1980), n.p., reprinted in *We Wanted a Revolution*, 214.

[22] Ibid.

become paradigmatic of the New York feminist art world.[23] While the critically lauded gallery had provided an important site for women to show art in the early 1970s, when well over ninety percent of artists shown in commercial galleries in New York were men, a bias toward white artists plagued the institution from its earliest days.[24] *Dialectics* challenged A.I.R.'s continuing shortcomings around racial inclusiveness.[25]

Pindell, a founding member of the cooperative who had resigned her post in 1975, was intimately familiar with her white colleagues' blind spots around issues of race and racism. By the time she left the gallery, she regarded herself as a "token" artist of color who was expected to be grateful for the opportunity to participate in the group.[26] Thus, the exhibition served for her as a return of sorts—five years after her departure, she might newly articulate her frustrations with members who failed to see her as a full participant in the institution. Indeed, she has noted that she imagined her video as a retort to the "white feminists" she encountered in spaces like A.I.R. and has suggested that she drew the White Woman's lines from interactions with these colleagues.[27]

If white, middle-class women had long monopolized local feminist platforms, *Dialectics* aimed to confront those women with the limitations of their discourses by asserting the existence and value of nonwhite experiences. By holding space for nonwhite feminist artists with a variety of backgrounds and aesthetic priorities, the exhibition sought to destabilize a widespread complacency with what amounted to a partial view of women's struggles and concerns. Mendieta's declaration that the show pointed to a "will to continue being 'other,'" suggested that this "dialectic" would not resolve with the assimilation of women of color into mainstream, white feminisms. The women's movement would have to find another way forward or remain fragmented.

Pindell produced *Free, White, and 21* specifically for *Dialectics* and the video shows the artist working through its premise. For instance, it places autobiographical content about a woman of color—the artist—in what Pindell and the exhibition organizers understood as a predominantly white space in order to unsettle institutional assumptions about the kinds of experiences women artists might bring to their work. The video also uses the signal conversational strategy of Third World feminism, referenced in the exhibition title and practiced by Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, and Barbara Smith, to stage a "conversation" between women of color and white feminists.[28]

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[23] For another example of women of color critiquing white women's dominance of feminist artistic conversations, see Editorial Statement and Heresies Collective Statement in "Racism is the Issue," *Heresies*, no. 15 (1982): 1, reprinted in *We Wanted a Revolution*, 198.

[24] A report on the art world published in *Time* magazine in 1971 noted that 96.4% of artists shown in major New York galleries that year were men. "Art: Situation Report," *Time Magazine,* Special Issue: The American Woman, March 20, 1971, 77.

[25] On the exhibition, see Stephanie Weissberg, "Ana Mendieta's *Dialectics of Isolation*," in *We Wanted a Revolution*, 210–13; Aruna D'Souza, "Early Intersections: The Work of Third World Feminism," in *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85: New Perspectives* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2018), 73–96.

[26] Pindell, "Free, White, and 21," 65.

[27] Ibid., 66.

[28] Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deveare Smith* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 101.

As visitors to *Dialectics* approached the back gallery of A.I.R.'s ground floor space on Wooster, they heard the measured ticking of a metronome.[29] Pindell installed the device atop the monitor displaying *Free, White, and 21* in order to "hypnotize" her audience, to capture their attention for the duration of what she anticipated would be a difficult work of art.[30] (The metronome did not appear in subsequent installations of the video as Pindell encountered difficulties transporting and setting it up.[31]) On a slow day, the sound would have echoed through the high-ceilinged space. Crowds on the weekend would have dampened the sound, perhaps rendering it imperceptible beyond a small radius of the video display. Pindell had selected the video monitor for its ordinariness—it was neither large nor particularly small for a television of its time—and set it on a plinth for viewing from a standing position.[32]

Visitors also heard the voices of the Artist and the White Woman before seeing them on screen. These characters' verbal exchanges filled the air as viewers made their way toward the back of the gallery, encountering the two-dimensional works and sculptural installations on display. Perhaps, for the attentive visitor, the video's sound seemed to voice something in these other artworks. With this auditory lead-in, visitors might reach and begin watching *Free, White, and 21* at any point during its twelve-minute runtime. However, the relatively brief duration of the video, the "hypnotic" repetition of the metronome's beat, and the simmering tension between the characters on screen would have urged a viewing in its entirety, from beginning to end. Despite these characteristics and *Free, White, and 21*'s status as easily Pindell's most well-known and widely studied work, its full narrative arc has rarely been analyzed by scholars.[33] A careful examination of the video reveals several glitches that offer insight into how Pindell approached representation as an abstracting procedure.

Although the vast majority of the twelve-minute *Free, White, and 21* is devoted to the Artist's narratives, the White Woman frames the work. The video opens with a title card, whose text "Free, White, and 21" primes the audience for a brief glimpse of the titular character. She appears, for just a few seconds, silently sitting with her head tilted downwards. Her dark sunglasses reflect what appears to be a white piece of paper in her hands. Redolent of a script, the paper underscores the scripted nature of the racist deflections the White Woman will offer. Indeed, throughout the video she speaks in a rehearsed manner that contrasts with the Artist's occasional conversational pauses and hedges.

The video quickly cuts to the Artist's first appearance, in which she wears a periwinkle cardigan over a green mock turtleneck in front of a textured white wall. First, she narrates an event from her mother's childhood. Her mother received chemical burns when a white babysitter scrubbed her with lye, mistaking the darkness of her skin for stubborn dirt. As the Artist recounts this story about the babysitter's violent, racist fantasy of removing dark skin, the video cuts to the White Woman, who bites her thumb and emits a low, quick "hmm." Curiously, the hand that reaches into the frame, clearly the actor's own appendage, is brown (fig. 4.04). The inclusion underscores the theatricality of the video's production and destabilizes the White Woman's racial representation, casting doubt on the reliability of video as a transmitter of fixed subject positions.

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[29] The following description is drawn from an interview with the artist. Howardena Pindell, interview with the author, telephone, Dec. 4, 2018.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] The lengthiest and most comprehensive analyses of the video appear in McMillan and Wallis. Each focuses on a few select anecdotes.

It also suggests that although the White Woman and the Artist serve as foil to one another, their difference is not so firmly grounded—they also operate as doubles.

The video cuts back to the Artist in a purple scoop-necked top against a vibrant orange backdrop (fig. 4.05). She reappears with this combination of outfit and backdrop several times. These colors contrast with the White Woman's consistent yellow top and blue backdrop. The pairing of complementary colors across these shots shows Pindell thinking about color in a modernist way. Her training in Josef Albers's theory of color relativity taught her that these colors would intensify one another, setting up a visual tension to match the emotional tenor of the video. During this appearance, the Artist recounts an early childhood experience, a perverse event that took place in her kindergarten classroom. In response to the narrator's request to go to the restroom during a class nap, her teacher tied her to a cot with sheets, remarking that she "couldn't stand these people." At this point in her narration, the Artist breaks her even tone with an incredulous simper. The teacher left her young student there "for a couple of hours." As the Artist utters these words, she brings a roll of white gauze to her head, applying a strip down the center of her face, tucking it under her chin, around her neck and up the back of her head. She continues to roll out the gauze, wrapping her head with it as the camera blurrily zooms in on the white fabric. Her voice largely unaffected by the gauze, the Artist continues, informing viewers that another student, perhaps a white student who had "not yet learned to differentiate" race, reported the incident to a parent. The abusive teacher was eventually fired for "bothering a student," but the Artist remains skeptical about the implications of this punishment. She doubts that the administration at the predominantly white school realized, or would have responded to, the racial motivation behind the teacher's abusive behavior. As she concludes these remarks, the Artist's nearly entirely wrapped head makes for a haunting presence, cutting a cartoonish white, oblong shape against the vermillion backdrop—another form of whiteface. She continues wrapping in silence, covering all but a fragment of her chin and a few tufts of her hair.

The camera dwells momentarily on this uncomfortable image. This pause lets in the suffocating warmth and dampness of the gauze, skin-like shroud. The material cordons off the Artist's head from her body and must have muffled her perceptions of the world around her. This sense of confinement and separation evokes the restraints applied in the kindergarten classroom. The image of the Artist's wrapped head, and especially her use of gauze, also conjure Pindell's recent car accident and subsequent convalescence. By focusing the wrapping on her head, she makes direct reference to the head injury and amnesia that destabilized her life in the months following the collision. The white strips of fabric also point back to the textile-based artworks Pindell made immediately prior to the car accident and the video work, her cut and sewn paintings.

After a third narration in which the Artist describes her high school teacher's racially motivated denial of her request to be placed in an accelerated history course, the White Woman speaks for the first time in the video. Shot in profile, she responds shrilly to the Artist: "You know you really must be paranoid. Those things never happen to me. I don't know anyone who's had those things happen to them. But then again, they're free, white, and twenty-one, so they wouldn't have *that* kind of experience." Unable and unwilling to accept that the Artist's reality differs from her own, the White Woman defensively pathologizes her. By acknowledging that the white people she knows "wouldn't have *that* kind of experience" because "they're free, white, and twenty-one," the White Woman reveals a level of racial awareness that viewers cannot ascribe to the character, who incessantly attempts to deny the realities of racial difference. Pindell asserts her authorial voice in the parodic friction of these passages, where the White

Woman's defensiveness rubs against her recognition of racial inequity. The phrase allows Pindell to name whiteness and acknowledge the limits of white experience.

Four scenes follow in which the Artist narrates anecdotes from her young adulthood. She attempted to run for a student government position at Boston University, where Pindell received her undergraduate degree, only to have a college administrator and elected student officials remove her name from the ballot on the basis that it would be a "highly inappropriate" office for a black student to hold. In response, the White Woman snipes, "Well you ungrateful little, after all we've done for you." The Artist recounts a day she witnessed discrimination against black and Latina job searchers at a *Time-Life* magazine office in Manhattan. By way of reply, the White Woman warns: "Don't worry. We'll find other tokens." In two anecdotes, the Artist describes her harassment at the hands of white guests at a wedding she attended in Kennebunkport, Maine.

At this point in the video, for the first time, the Artist's vocation is clarified. The White Woman responds: "You really must be paranoid. Your art really isn't political either. You know I hear your experiences, and I think 'well, it's gotta be in her art.' That's the only way we'll validate you and it's gotta be in your art in the way that we consider valid….In fact, you won't exist until we validate you." Two scenes follow in which the Artist silently removes skin-like membranes from her head. In the first instance, she appears in a yellow ribbed sweater against a blue background, echoing the color combination of the White Woman's appearances. With the camera zoomed on her face, the Artist pinches a bit of film at the bottom of her chin and begins peeling a translucent mask from her face. She works methodically, first removing the film from the right side of her face, then her forehead and left side. With care, she holds up the mask and unfolds it. Briefly, against the blue backdrop, it forms a white, twisted, clownlike mask (fig. 4.06). The Artist discards it, then with her eyes closed gingerly feels her face for remnants of the film. In a subsequent shot, the Artist reappears with her head wrapped in gauze. For a moment, she sits in profile, then the camera cuts to a frontal view in which she begins to unwind the fabric, rolling it neatly in her hands, which move deftly around her head. Finished with this task, she stares blinkingly into the camera. By executing these oblique gestures in response to the White Woman's blunt complaints that her "art really isn't political," the Artist seems to refute the character's demands for a legible artistic statement. Thus, Pindell refers to her own abstract practice and its reception through these insertions of material meditations centered on bodily films, or skins. The precise intervention she sought to undertake through deployment of these membranes will come further into focus with an analysis of her longer engagements with mass media and screens.

In the final minute of the video, the White Woman inverts the Artist's gestures of removing skins by pulling a tight white pantyhose over her head. The camera zooms on her face as the stocking sets her sunglasses slightly askew and compresses her nose. In a deeper and more emphatic voice, she says: "You ungrateful little, after *all* we've done for you. You know, we don't believe in your symbols. You must use our symbols. They're not valid unless we validate them. And you *really* must be paranoid. I've never had an experience like that, but then of course I'm free, white, and twenty-one."

The credits roll. They give special thanks to Downtown Community Television Center (DCTV) and credit Maria Lino and Maryann De Leo with "camera and editing." Upon conceptualizing the video from that initial affecting image of a blond wig, Pindell "asked

around" about who could help her make it.[34] Eventually, one of her friends gave the artist's contact information to someone at DCTV, a community media center founded in 1972 by documentary film director Jon Alpert and his wife and collaborator, Keiko Tsuno. The Center called Pindell and the two parties arranged for Lino and De Leo to bring video equipment to the artist's apartment, tape the artwork, and assist her with editing.[35]

Despite the assistance Pindell enlisted for the production of her video, *Free, White, and 21* bears innumerable traces of the artist's relative inexperience as a video maker. Ambient noise from the street outside Pindell's loft, which was located on 28th street and 7th avenue, near a subway stop, filters into the video. The artist notes that while the camerawoman warned that the street noise presented a problem for the video's production, she, Pindell, decided to "[do] it anyway."[36] This spirit of "doing it anyway" infuses the video. Early in the video, the camera pans to the left of the Artist, momentarily making the edge of the backdrop visible against a white wall (fig. 4.07). Throughout, the camera operator somewhat clumsily deploys zoom, so that the White Woman or Artist's face appears out of focus for several seconds at a time (fig. 4.08). In one shot, the microphone becomes visible in the lower left-hand corner of the shot (fig. 4.09).

Art historian Romi Crawford has theorized black women's experimental film and video work as embracing "a paradoxical logic" of the amateur–auteur.[37] Black women filmmakers working in the 1970s and 1980s frequently used "minor" modes of filmmaking including video and short format film, and techniques such as handheld camera and raw sound to assert "a resolute and confident" voice.[38] For instance, Julie Dash's 1975 short film, *Four Women,* stars the dancer Linda Martina Young, who plays four personas that dance against a simple stage set in different costuming. Crawford notes that beyond reflecting uneven access to ample film budgets, this strategic use of diminished material means reflected a desire to position one's production outside of industry norms. By wielding small "procedures" and "gestures," black women filmmakers participated in a lineage of avant-garde cinema, placing their work alongside efforts by artists such as Yoko Ono, Man Ray, and Andy Warhol, who exploited their lack of expertise as filmmakers to produce innovative experimental artworks throughout the twentieth century.[39]

Pindell's investment in explicit markers of amateurism likewise helps to situate the video in a lineage of avant-garde experimentation. These aspects of the video heighten the work's theatricality; the piece seems to comment on the conditions of its own production through the excessive visibility of its edges, props, and technological means such as zoom. These inclusions and their failure to recede into a seamless viewing experience also suggest a point of continuity in Pindell's oeuvre—just as she gathered many of her collage materials from her everyday

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[34] Pindell, quoted in Hammond and Sims, "Reflections on Art as a Verb," 15.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Romi Crawford, "Amateurism & Auteurism: Contrary Instincts in Black Women's Experimental Film Forms," in *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded*, 30.
[38] Ibid. Crawford discusses these filmmakers as making "a practice of amateurism," p. 31. This topic is also discussed by cultural theorist Jacqueline Bobo, who has noted that many of these filmmakers and video artists are not amateurs in the strict sense of the term—they pursued their creative careers professionally. Jacqueline Bobo, preface to *Black Women Film & Video Artists* (New York: Routledge, 1998), xi.
[39] Crawford, 30, 33, 35.

surroundings including the institutional detritus of MoMA, so too did she collect the materials and resources necessary to make the video from local sources. Both the Artist and the White Woman wear clothes Pindell's mother had purchased at Sears Roebuck and sent to her when the curator struggled to make ends meet on MoMA's paltry salary.[40] (Pindell "hated" these clothes and did not wear them normally, though she kept them in bags in her studio.[41]) She purchased the blond wig at a nearby Woolworth's. The backdrops came from a local photography store, and as mentioned, Pindell sourced the expertise necessary to run the video equipment and edit the work from DCTV. Her foray into video involved a degree of amateurism absent from her production of paintings and works on paper. This experimentation with a wholly new medium contrasts with the deliberate de-skilling of the sewing she performed in her cut and sewn paintings, which recast a familiar form of labor for Pindell. Her ongoing investment in cobbling together a work of art from materials at hand in seemingly non-expert ways reflects her enduring predilection for informal networks of material, resource, and skill acquisition.

The artist's desire to make *Free, White, and 21* expediently also speaks to the urgency of its message, an exigency felt in the broader project of *Dialectics* and which Mendieta expressed in its catalogue: "Do we exist?...To question our cultures is to question our own existence, our human reality."[42] Both artist and exhibition organizer understood that the stakes of the dialogue being staged at A.I.R. were high and both used a direct mode of address to confront viewers with feminism's central hypocrisy. Recent scholarship has tended to interpret the exhibition and the video as specifically targeted at a white audience. For instance, art historians have argued that the exhibition's venue and its conceptualization as a "dialectic" (between women of color feminist and white feminists) indicate that its organizers intended a white audience.[43] Likewise, scholars such as Cherise Smith have contended that the "didactic tone" of *Free, White, and 21* reveals that Pindell sought to reach white viewers specifically.[44] Indeed, the work makes an earnest appeal to white audiences to see and hear the effects and the denials of racism.

However, while Pindell anticipated a white viewership at A.I.R., she hoped to expand her artistic audience beyond the white feminist circles in which she had regularly shown over the course of the previous decade. As art historian Lowery Stokes Sims has argued, video and performance serve "as a bridge between the seclusion of the studio and the gallery to the 'real' world, the street."[45] A reproducible and mass medium, Pindell's video could travel and proliferate in ways that her paintings could not, and it might appeal to different audiences. While early video artists generated challenging, sometimes repelling viewing conditions through aggressive modes of address and monotonous repetition, Pindell deployed several strategies to

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[40] Pindell recalls that she made about $5,000 a year at MoMA. Howardena Pindell, interview with the author, 2018. This income was well below the median American household income in the 1970s, which ranged from $9,870 (1970) to $15,060 (1978). See "Median Family Income Up in 1970," *Consumer Income, A United States Department of Commerce Publication* P-60, no. 70 (May 1971): 1–2; "Money Income in 1978 of Households in the United States," *Consumer Income*, P-60, no. 121 (Feb. 1980): 1.
[41] Pindell, interview with the author, 2018.
[42] Mendieta, introduction, *Dialectics of Isolation*, n.p.
[43] See, for instance, Weissberg, 212.
[44] Smith, *Enacting Others*, 103.
[45] Lowery Stokes Sims, "Aspects of Performance by Black American Women Artists," in *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology,* eds. Arlene Raven, Cassandra L. Langer, and Joanna Frueh (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), 208.

draw an audience.[46] Consider her use of the "hypnotic" metronome, a benign instrument of coercion meant to captivate viewers so that they would endure the discomfort of confronting racism. Its insistent ticking marks the persistence of racism across time, uninterrupted by notions of historical progress, as the Artist chronicles events spanning the early to late twentieth century. The vibrant coloring of the video's costuming and backdrops and the clarity of her even-toned narrations also make for engrossing viewing. In contradiction to recent readings of her video, Pindell has noted that she imagined a diverse audience for *Free, White, and 21,* which has circulated broadly.[47] She has sought out this wide circulation; when staff at Franklin Furnace, an alternative art space in Brooklyn that hosted the video's second presentation, told Pindell they planned to charge admission to the gallery, the artist elected to forego her honorarium in exchange for an open-door policy.[48]

This broad audience has not always responded favorably to the video.[49] For instance, Pindell recalls that a jury for a 1980 video competition rejected the tape on the basis of its "divisiveness."[50] By the end of the decade, it "became a kind of underground cult tape" shown mainly in universities, where it continued to draw occasional ire from both white and black viewers.[51] For instance, a white woman student in a New England university audience tauntingly asked Pindell if making the tape had made her "feel better." Pindell notes that the older black security guards at a New Jersey museum refused to turn on the television set "because they felt it was offensive to people of color."[52] Other artists of color, Pindell reports, told her that the video "was not forceful enough," and critiqued its focus on instances of discrimination that occurred in contexts of "privilege."[53]

Perhaps the most arresting aspect of *Free, White, and 21,* and of some early video art more broadly, is the medium's capacity to purport to make the artist present before the viewer.[54] In her video, Pindell speaks in the first person, in the role of the Artist, to her audience. With her eyes trained on the camera, she appears to look directly at her viewers and we seem to return her gaze, though of course these views are highly mediated by the technological apparatus of camera and monitor. Whereas Pindell's cut and sewn paintings proliferate with multitudinous traces of the artist's handiwork, their material resplendence also distances her from their surfaces. The video, by contrast, operates through the conceit that it bluntly transmits the subtle inflections of her voice and gestures.

By turning to video in 1980, Pindell asserted herself into her work in a newly literal, if mediated, way. In the context of *Dialectics,* this pivot in her oeuvre targeted white feminism's "failure to remember"; confronted with the incommensurability of the Artist's encounters with racism and their own privileged existence, viewers at A.I.R. would have to acknowledge the double oppression of women of color, or else risk looking as callously aloof as the White Woman. But Pindell also sought to access the difference and the distance between her life and its

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[46] See Wagner "Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence," 59–80.
[47] Pindell, interview with the author, 2018.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.; see also Howardena Pindell, "Free, White and 21," in *The Heart of the Question*, 66.
[50] "Free, White, and 21," 66.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid., 67
[53] Ibid.
[54] On the "presence" of video art, see Wagner, "Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence," 59–80.

mediated representation. In her artist statement for the exhibition, she wrote: "As a Black American woman, I draw on my experience as I have lived it and not as others wish to perceive my living it as fictionalized in the media and so-called 'history' books."[55] This statement reveals Pindell's understanding of mass media representation as a form of fiction, and perhaps, abstraction.

A longer view of the artist's engagements with mass media reveals an abiding skepticism about the capacity of screen-based media to depict black women, and profound uncertainty about the efficacy of attempts to counter these distortions and disfigurations. In 1973, Pindell initiated an extended investigation of television—exploring the tension between its ability to bring the outside world close and its distancing effect. With the *Video Drawings*, I contend, Pindell explored a deeply ambivalent view of mass media. Analyzing the development of these works allows for a more thoroughgoing understanding of how *Free, White, and 21* envisioned a sharply critical project aimed at the abstracting procedures of representation.

Video Drawings

Although frequently noted for its singularity in Pindell's oeuvre, *Free, White, and 21* emerged from a longer engagement with mass media. In 1973, Pindell began making a body of photographic works she would later dub *Video Drawings.* Despite the titular reference to the medium, the works contain no video elements—they comprise photographs of television broadcasts overlain by drawing. Pindell began making the *Video Drawings* when she encountered difficulties in the production of her intricately collaged works on paper (fig. 4.10). While the collages offered her a financially sustainable and spatially economical avenue of artistic production, they also generated a new problem for the artist who worked long hours under artificial light. Her eyes became strained by the extensive detail work involved in numbering and pasting hundreds of chads onto each collage.[56] To alleviate the strain, an eye doctor recommended that she vary her focal line by occasionally training her gaze on moving objects more distant in space. Pindell's solution was to purchase her first color television set, which she could watch from across her studio. This introduction of a stream of colorful televisual imagery to her workspace stimulated several developments in her artistic practice. For one, she began incorporating a range of vibrant colors to her collaged works on paper (fig. 4.11).[57] The resonances of works such as *Untitled #43* (1974) with color television grain marked a return to earlier investigations; her spray-painted canvases of the early 1970s also referenced color television (fig. 4.12). A newly intimate proximity to the technology enabled Pindell to once again address the aesthetics of electro-magnetic current. In the collages, she gave texture to televisual "dots," rather than emphasizing the ephemerality of televisual signals, as she had in the stained paintings.

The television set led directly to Pindell's production of the *Video Drawings.* She made the works when she became "bored" with network programs.[58] Borrowing elements from the notation system she was then using in her works on paper, she applied clear acetate sheets marked with vectors and numbers to the surface of her television screen (fig. 4.13). With the television set flipped on, a static electric current formed, causing the plastic to cling tightly to its

[55] Howardena Pindell, Artist's Statement, *Dialectics of Isolation*, n.p.
[56] Howardena Pindell, interview with Sally Swenson, in *Lives and Works: Talks with Women Artists*, eds. Lynn F. Miller and Sally S. Swenson (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 143.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Pindell, interview with the author, 2018.

surface. Her thumb on the trigger of a shutter release cable, Pindell waited for compelling interactions to emerge between the public broadcast televisual image and the drawing, capturing the fleeting alignments, blur and all, with her film camera. From scores of photographs taken in a single session, she selected a few from contact sheets for positive printing at a commercial lab.[59]

Images of athletic sporting events abound in the *Video Drawings.* More than half of the several dozen photographs Pindell made in the 1970s feature bodies in the midst of activities including track, swimming and diving, weightlifting, football, hockey, baseball, and tennis (figs. 4.14 and 4.15). Most often male and seemingly racially white, these athletic figures strike alert poses, prepared to execute highly choreographed motions, or they lunge, suspended mid-play (fig. 4.16). Others stand awkwardly, exhibiting the gawkiness of highly trained bodies performing utterly mundane tasks between feats of physical prowess. Pindell found that sporting events lent themselves especially well to her operations. The athletic imagery "transform[ed]" itself and became "something else" through the chance-based collage process that matched televisual image with hand-drawn notation.[60] Her procedure pays off in instances where the marks seem to direct or annotate the athletic gestures. In one example, a round encircles a runner's eye as he contorts his face in a jittery pre-race ritual (fig. 4.17).

Printed at an average size of eleven by fourteen inches, the photographs roughly mimic the dimensions of a small television screen from that era. This homology underscores the series' thematization of televisual spectatorship. The emphatic layering of media in the *Video Drawings* contributed to Pindell's investigations of collage and processes of mediation. She submitted the low fidelity transmissions of live sporting events to two additional layers of her own manipulations, first placing her drawings over the work and then translating the hybrid image into photography. Like the works on paper Pindell made in these same years, the photographic series function as collage, though in this case, the artist's combination of disparate elements occurs across the various mediums she deploys. Through their attention to sports, the works also extend the concerns for play so central to the collaged works on paper she produced concurrently.

Commentators have noted similarities between Pindell's idiosyncratic notation system and symbols used to describe physical activities, including the lines of scrimmage used in football and Labanotation, a system for recording and analyzing human movement that is often used to choreograph dance.[61] Her use of athletic imagery, of course, amplifies these resonances. Pindell has claimed no particular familiarity with these systems, insisting, rather, that the signs used in the photographic series are "random" and that they functioned like an Etch-a-Sketch, quickly created and then easily removed.[62] The putative arbitrariness of these vectors and numbers foregrounds the role of chance and unpredictability in human movement. Just as Pindell awaits alignments between her drawn markings and the rapidly moving televisual image, so too must the bodies in motion on the screen operate in harmony to produce a desired outcome. Skill, of course, plays a role in the likelihood of success, but Pindell's inscrutable marks conjure the

[59] Pindell, interview with Swenson, 143.
[60] Ibid.
[61] See, for instance, Camille Ann Brewer, "Moving Pictures: Video Drawings by Howardena Pindell," in *Howardena Pindell: Video Drawings, 1973–2007* (Boston: Howard Yezerski Gallery, 2013), n.p.; Grace Deveney, "Interrupting the Broadcast: Howardena Pindell's *Video Drawings,*" in *Howardena Pindell: What Remains to Be Seen,* 151–68; Howardena Pindell, "Howardena Pindell: Some Reminiscences and a Chronology," in *Howardena Pindell: Paintings and Drawings*, 30.
[62] Skowhegan Lecture Archive, 282. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, Long Island City, Queens.

innumerable variables—wind patterns, currents, and fatigue—that likewise operate contingently in the movement of bodies through space.

Pindell's notations evoke a system of critique without resolving into one. This central ambivalence of the *Video Drawings* is heightened by the fact that the artist drew on the format of a popular television program in her development of the *Video Drawings*.[63] The children's program *Winky Dink and You* originally aired from 1953 to 1957, years during which Pindell would have been ten to fourteen years old.[64] It was revived in 1969. The first fully interactive television program on American airwaves, *Winky Dink* required its young viewers to place an acetate sheet on their screens (fig. 4.18).[65] Its titular cartoon character asked for audience help navigating puzzles and perilous situations by drawing with markers on the sheet, connecting dots to reveal objects or additional characters. In order to cohere as a series of narratives and puzzles, the show required this tactile participation. Pindell's later photographic works echo the program's play across media through their seamless incorporation of drawing and the fleeting moving image.

Pindell came of age in a period that saw the widespread dissemination of television. Between the years 1948 and 1955, more than half of American homes installed a set.[66] The technology transformed how many Americans consumed news and entertainment and organized their domestic lives and leisure time. These widespread social changes generated anxiety as well as optimism. By the 1960s, both critics and champions of television promoted geographic metaphors to describe how the medium had changed Americans' global spatial position. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan anticipated the emergence of a democratic "global village" brought on by new flows of information, while Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton N. Minow lamented television's descent into a "vast wasteland" replete with violence and "screaming, cajoling, and offending" commercials.[67]

The contradictions inherent to television were central to Pindell's experiences with the medium from her earliest days as a viewer. Although influential for her later artistic production, she has noted that she grew up believing that television had "nothing to do" with her life, specifically citing shows such as *Ed Sullivan*, *Ernie Kovaks*, *You Asked for It*, and *This is Your Life*.[68] White hosts and actors populated these programs, which rarely depicted people or places Pindell recognized from her daily life. As film scholar Jacqueline Bobo has noted, this situation

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[63] Ibid.

[64] Ian Smith, Fiona Stewart, and Phil Turner, "Winky Dink and You: Determining Patterns of Narrative for Interactive Television Design," in *Proceeding of the Second European Conference on Interactive Television,* eds. J. Masthoff, R. Griffiths, L. Pemberton, 2004, http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.141.423&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Lynn Spigel, "Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948–1955," in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 3.

[67] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964); Newton N. Minow, "Television and the Public Interest," May 9, 1961, National Association of Broadcasters, Washington, DC, *American Speech Bank*, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/newtonminow.htm.

[68] Pindell, "Howardena Pindell: Some Reminiscences and a Chronology," in *Howardena Pindell: Paintings and Drawings*, 20.

changed only slightly by the 1970s.[69] In 1968, NBC introduced the first nationally televised program featuring a black actor in a leading role since 1950.[70]

Taken in this historical context, white males proliferate in the *Video Drawings* because those were the figures available to Pindell on public broadcast television. Their profusion in the series reflected a media landscape that depicted and valorized these bodies and their physical exertions while excluding others. Pindell's manipulations might then signal her understandable mistrust of a medium that failed to represent black women. By annotating those broadcasts, however indecipherably, her photographic series asserts the presence of a critical television viewer who notices and reframes images.[71] This relationship between the marks and the popular imagery evoke what cultural critic bell hooks would later theorize as an "oppositional gaze"—a critical gaze that black women utilize to assess mainstream representations of womanhood.[72]

Pindell's approach to the televisual medium—enacting active viewership through artistic gesture—contrasts with work by artists such as Carlota Fay Schoolman and Richard Serra. Contemporaneously to the *Video Drawings*, the pair created *Television Delivers People* (1973), a video consisting of scrolling white text against a blue backdrop that didactically pronounced television as a tool for converting audiences into consumers: "You are consumed. You are the product of television." Schoolman and Serra's commentary echoes FCC chairman Minow's earlier lament of the "vast wasteland." Pindell's notations, which drew on popular programs, suggest a more equivocating view of the medium. The *Video Drawings* suggest that television might serve as a fecund site of cultural observation and that even its popular forms had critical capacities.

Other feminist artists working with video and television in the 1970s, like Pindell, explored their ambivalence about the mass media. Made the same year that Pindell initiated her *Video Drawings,* Eleanor Antin's *Caught in the Act* juxtaposed video of the artist's clumsy and assisted attempts at ballet with photographs that capture moments of poise by editing out bodily inelegance (figs. 4.19 and 4.20). The contrast between the video and photograph components of Antin's work puts pressure on the truth claims of both mediums. It also suggests that each have a role to play in the production and circulation of ideas about the gendered body. Antin's work joined a broader surge in feminist experimentations with video, exemplified by the founding in 1976 of the L.A. Women's Video Center at the Woman's Building.

At the same time that the introduction of television to everyday American life elaborated on systemic social inequities, it also served from its nascence as a site of artistic exploration. In fact, in the early years of network television, as television historian Lynn Spigel argues, the medium played a major role in the integration of art into everyday life.[73] For instance, in 1952, MoMA initiated a "Television Project" that introduced family audiences to its collections.[74] In this same period, networks hired avant-garde artists, designers, and filmmakers to develop

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[69] See Bobo, *Black Women Film & Video Artists*, 6.

[70] The show, *Julia*, was criticized for its comfortable image of black success and refusal to be topical. See Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Is This What You Mean By Color TV?: Race, Gender, and Contested Meanings in NBC's *Julia*," in *Private Screenings*, 143–67.

[71] See also Deveney, who emphasizes Pindell's notations as critical marks.

[72] bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115–32.

[73] Lynn Spigel, introduction to *Revolution of the Eye: Modern Art and the Birth of American Television* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), xii.

[74] Ibid.

graphics and incorporate experimental techniques into their shows. For example, avant-garde filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek produced animations for *Winky Dink and Me*.[75] Another program Pindell recalls watching as a child, *The Ernie Kovacs Show*, encouraged viewers to investigate "television's transformation of reality into images."[76] Kovacs appropriated special effects from Surrealist, Dada, and other avant-garde film, techniques such as dream sequences, autonomously moving inanimate objects, and disorienting angles, all of which he intended to reveal the televisual image for what it was—"an amalgam of electronic signals shaped by myriad procedures, conventions, and cues."[77] Over the course of his series, which was hosted on various networks from 1952 through 1956 and again between 1961 and 1962, he even invited viewers to take photographs of his shows as they were being televised and to send these images to the studio—a process resonant with Pindell's later *Video Drawings*.[78] While this televisual ecology may not have generated scenes of daily life that resonated with the young Pindell, it framed the newly popular medium as a realm of aesthetic and interactive possibility.[79] Although sited in the home, television could offer an avenue to modernist and avant-garde experimentation.

Artists in the United States began working with television as a medium in the early 1960s. Building on techniques of the historical avant-garde and Dada, Ono and Nam Jun Paik used the mass medium in order to strategically intervene in everyday flows of spectacular consumption. Ono's *Sky TV* (1966), for instance, used a closed-circuit television to transmit video of the sky into a gallery, "showing the poetic and political possibilities of an alternative television that is not beholden to the imperatives of capitalist modernity."[80] Another early television work, Dennis Hopper's *Kennedy Funeral* (1963) used a photographic technique similar to the one Pindell would deploy a decade later. Pointing a camera directly at a television screen broadcasting the funerary proceedings of the assassinated president, Hopper generated blurred, low-fidelity images that intervened in the easy conflation of televisual representation with lived experience (fig. 4.21).[81] The four-day coverage of the events following Kennedy's shooting had become "the first national event in which television played a central role in giving viewers a sense of immediate, personal participation."[82] Hopper's visually degraded photographs and the thick, black rounded border of the television screen in the frame of each photograph underscored the mediated nature of the broadcasts.

By 1973, when Pindell began the *Video Drawings*, televised accounts of nationally and internationally significant events proliferated on network airwaves—the Watergate scandal, inmates attacked at Attica Prison, the My Lai trial, and anti-Vietnam War protests.[83] The United States' military involvement drew to a close this year, but broadcasts of the Vietnam War in

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[75] Maurice Berger, "Revolution of the Eye," in *Revolution of the Eye*, 59.
[76] Ibid., 86
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., 81, 86.
[79] I borrow the concept of the image ecosystem from David Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).
[80] John Alan Farmer, "Pop People," in *The New Frontier: Art and Television, 1960–65* (Austin: Austin Museum of Art, 2000), 49.
[81] Ibid., 56.
[82] Elizabeth Ferrer, forward to *The New Frontier*, 11.
[83] See Chang, 55. Chang discusses this televisual ecosystem in the context of the 1971 Coca-Cola "Have a Coke" television advertisement.

particular indelibly had reshaped American televisual spectatorship.[84] Often called the first "living-room war," some photographs and film of the war transmitted to as many as twenty million television viewers in the United States.[85] This mediated proximity proved incendiary, as televisual depictions of the war's ghastly violence likely played a role in turning public opinion against the government and military.[86] But by bringing war to the comfortable space of the home living room, the technology had the potential to contain and domesticate war for American spectators.[87] As art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty argues, television broadcasts of the Vietnam War "telescoped" the distance between Saigon and New York, both magnifying and collapsing it.[88] The conflict became "shrunken and contained by domestic features, the bodies [of soldiers]…stripped of their reality, even as that reality…beamed back in a newly direct way to the audiences at home."[89] Artist Martha Rosler thematized this effect in her photomontage series *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful.* The collages combine magazine clippings depicting well-appointed, upper-class American homes with images drawn from *Life* of armed soldiers and injured Vietnamese.

Although not directly depicted in the *Video Drawing* series, broadcasts of the Vietnam War likely provided a salient point of reference for Pindell's commentary on televisual spectatorship. Her notation system, among its myriad evocations, conjures the symbology of antiquated military maps. The young, agile bodies in the photographed sports broadcasts belong to men ostensibly of draft age. Their physical exertions and vulnerability, then, may serve as a site of displacement—these images summon and appear in lieu of spectacularized depictions of the disproportionately black and brown soldiers sent to perilous posts in Vietnam. This albeit tenuous relationship between athletic and wartime imagery renders the racial make-up of the sports broadcasts all the more poignant, reminding viewers how much more easily draft exemptions came to white, educated, and upper-class men. In a later instantiation of her *Video Drawings*, titled *War Series* (1988), Pindell explicitly works with mediated representations of military conflict, layering vinyl lettering over images drawn from documentaries on military conflicts in Ethiopia, Cambodia, Nicaragua, and the Persian Gulf.[90] This turn toward war imagery further suggests that the Vietnam War may have been an implicit concern of the initial series.

The *Video Drawings* enacted a new mode of address that allowed Pindell to attend more directly to the conditions of spectatorship her viewers brought to bear on her works than she had in her abstract practice. In one sense, this project built on the work of earlier artists, such as Hopper, who used televisual imagery in series that highlighted the mediated status of mass communication. Pindell too generated slightly blurred, grainy photographs as she sought to break

[84] In January 1973, Vietnamese and United States leaders signed the Paris Peace Accords (though they were immediately broken) and Selected Service ended.
[85] Michael J. Arlen, "Living-Room War," *The New Yorker,* October 15, 1966, 200–02.
[86] See Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4–5.
[87] See also Michael Arlen's book, Michael J. Arlen, *Living-Room War* (New York: Viking Press, 1969).
[88] Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 149.
[89] Ibid. On these effects, see also Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* [1971] (New York: Da Capo Press, 1984), 170.
[90] Deveney, 165.

down the televisual image "just one level" from its transmission.[91] As Sims writes of this use of visual distortion in the *Video Drawings*, "the resulting photographs emphasize the graininess of the electronically transmitted image…so that we begin to focus on the structure of matter transmitted as impulse."[92] The grain of Pindell's photographs draws the viewer's attention to the physical properties and larger systems that make televisual images appear. Their marked acetate skin charts the movement of televisual imagery through evaluative systems. These annotations of the visual field point to the possibility of other configurations of popular representation. By positioning herself behind the camera, and wielding an editorial pen, Pindell shifts the stakes of representation from issues of visibility to access—from questions of who gets depicted in mass media to who gets to write, and rewrite, visual codes.

Pindell drew on her experience as a custodian of art to assert her authority as an actor who could intervene in mass media imagery. While she has welcomed connections scholars have drawn between her notations and lines of scrimmage, Labanotation, and systems used to visualize weather data, she had no training in any of these schema.[93] By 1973, she had, however, gained proficiency in the notation system used by conservators to record information about the condition of artworks. In her first years at MoMA, before she settled into curatorial roles, she occasionally executed condition reports for the registrar.[94] The vectors and circles of the *Video Drawings* resemble the marks used in this application (fig. 4.22). Pindell's constant exposure to artworks as physical objects needing to be managed heightened her awareness of the material nature of even fleeting images. This attunement to the physical properties of art positioned her ideally to engage with the malleability of the televisual image. At MoMA, Pindell also encountered trans-media photographic experimentations in the 1973 exhibition *Collage and the Photo-Image*, hosted by the department of drawings. Pulled almost entirely from works in the collection, the selection of photography-based collage was based on a provisional definition of this mode of production as "any image made from a juxtaposition of photographic images by any means and in any medium." Curator Bernice Rose drew many examples from Dada and Surrealist works of the 1920s and 1930s. Jarring juxtapositions of human and animal forms abounded alongside the use of text as a visual element. Pindell began making her photographic collages the same year as this exhibition, which put photography in dialogue with drawing and collage.[95]

Despite the various visual rhymes between her notations and other visual systems, Pindell has insisted that her marks on the *Video Drawings* "mean nothing."[96] Thus, abstraction, and its non-reliance upon external systems of signification, remained a capacious resource for the artist as she experimented with figurative elements in the photographic works. By applying her "random" notations to a medium that presented her with both the capacities of interactive viewership and the constraints of racial representation (and lack of representation), Pindell charted an ambivalent regard for mass media. The series plays out the artist's cynicism about televisual imagery and about the ability of artistic interventions to meaningfully alter those

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[91] Lowery Stokes Sims, "Synthesis and Integration in the Works of Howardena Pindell, 1972-1992," in *Howardena Pindell: Paintings and Drawings*, 15.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Howardena Pindell, interview with the author, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, July 2015.
[94] Ibid.
[95] See *Collage and the Photo Image* Museum of Modern Art press release, 1973, Records of the Department of Public Information, II.B.1051. Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
[96] SLA, 282. MoMA Archives, QNS.

transmissions. With the *Video Drawings*, the artist planted seeds of skepticism about mass media representation that would blossom in *Free, White, and 21*.

Crisis and Representation

By 1979, Pindell had ceased making her initial series of *Video Drawings.* She nonetheless applied a felt pen to an acetate sheet this year, writing "yes" and "no," drawing vectors and points in a work that appeared in an issue of the feminist art and politics magazine *Heresies* devoted to "Third World Women: The Politics of Being Other." *Yes–No* shows Pindell's signature marks atop an image long absent her oeuvre—the artist's visage (fig. 4.23). In three black and white photographs placed side-by-side, she sits on a radiator in front of a light wall wearing a striped kaftan over a cowlneck top. The arrangement suggests that the photographic prints came from a contact sheet. White text reading "Kodak Safety Film" appears along the black margins between the images. Across the photographs, Pindell's mouth seems to move, she blinks, and the shot grows closer in range to her body. This image appeared alongside the artist's article, "Criticisms / or / Between the Lines," which discusses the racial and gender bias encoded in art world criticism (fig. 5.24).[97] Pindell draws on her experience as an art world insider to explain that criticism operates within a prestige system to authorize or exclude artists of color from the market and the ranks of validated artistic production.[98] The juxtaposition of the article with the reproduction of the artwork suggests that such artistic judgments have a gatekeeping function—the vagaries of criticism can make or break an artist.[99] In order to see Pindell, we must look through the annotated "skin of the screen" that has registered critical assessments of the image beneath.[100]

Yes–No signals a departure from Pindell's previous engagement with mass media in the *Video Drawings*, which demonstrated a pronounced ambivalence. The work marks her first entry into a more direct mode of critique—aimed at the art world—that would undergird *Free, White, and 21*. In this section, I investigate the events that led to a profound shift in Pindell's understanding of the stakes of artistic production, leading her to work intently with representational idioms. A series of catalyzing events occurred for her on a personal level, but also spoke to broader transformations in local feminist and artistic circles. The video emerged as Pindell joined a growing contingent of "Third World Women" artists navigating rancorous debates about art world racism and censorship. I analyze her artistic redirection in the wake of these changes, and return to *Free, White, and 21* to consider the video as part of her protracted theorizations about the abstractions inherent to representation.

On March 5, 1979, artist Janet Henry visited Artists Space, a publicly funded "alternative" gallery located on the edge of newly redeveloped SoHo, with the intention of viewing one of the four solo shows on view.[101] Artists Space had opened in 1972 with the aim of showing avant-garde work that increasingly commercialized Manhattan galleries rarely

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[97] Howardena Pindell, "Criticism / or / Between the Lines," *Heresies*, no. 8, Third World Women: The Politics of Being Other (1979): 2–4.
[98] Ibid.
[99] See also D'Souza, "Early Intersections."
[100] On the "skin of the screen," see Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).
[101] For a broader account of "alternative" New York art spaces of this period, see Julie Ault, ed., *Alternative Art New York, 1965–1985* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2002).

supported.[102] The exhibition Henry saw, which had opened on February 19, featured seven untitled triptychs measuring five by seven feet, each of which combined black and white photography and charcoal drawing.[103] In one instance, two vertical black rectangles rendered in charcoal flank a photograph of a coniferous tree in a small forest clearing. The artist, a recent CalArts graduate named Donald Newman, began making the works in 1976, the year he arrived in Manhattan.[104] None of these unremarkable circumstances drew Henry to the Hudson Street gallery. She wanted to know why the exhibition bore the incendiary title *The Nigger Drawings*.

Henry notes that she went to Artists Space initially to "confirm her assumption" that the show presented works by a black artist—a possibility that required first-hand corroboration because the gallery, like other well-funded "alternative" art spaces, so rarely showed works by artists of color.[105] (This de facto exclusion, discussed below, became a centerpiece in subsequent protests of the exhibition led by Pindell.) Henry wrote to Jim Reinisch, head of the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), on March 6: "Giving everybody the benefit of the doubt I went to the show. I wanted to see how Donald (the aforementioned artist) visualized the word and to confirm my assumption that a black male was actually being shown at Artists Space." During her visit to the gallery, the receptionist, Cindy Sherman, who had herself recently moved to New York to pursue an artistic career, informed Henry that "Donald" was a young white artist. She relayed to the visitor that Newman's title referred to his intensive use of the charcoal in the works on view. After hours applying thick layers of the black, friable material to the surface of his works, Newman had told Artists Space, his arms and hands became blackened and he felt he looked like a "nigger."[106]

Cultural historian Jeff Chang has located Newman's use of the racist epithet in a local cultural scene, noting that the artist saw himself as a participant in a punk aesthetic and politics that imagined "nigger" as "the darkness at the edge of town, the last sign out of civilization on the highway to freedom."[107] Indeed, in the debate that ensued, Newman defended his choice to follow in the footsteps of such countercultural darlings as John Lennon, Ono, and Patti Smith, all of whom had used the term to designate and at times romanticize a subject position that they imagined to exist outside the bounds of societal regulation and acceptability.[108] In fact, Newman was not the only white artist in orbit of Artists Space to appropriate an ostensibly racist practice as fodder for edgy artistic experimentation. While existing accounts of the controversy surrounding Newman's show make only passing reference to Sherman's role, it is worth noting that she had recently posed in blackface for her photographic series *Bus Riders* (1976) (fig. 4.25).

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[102] The following account of the exhibition and the surrounding controversy draws heavily from letters, memos, and other materials found in the Artists Space Archives at Fales Special Collections at New York University. See also the extended discussions of the protests in Chang, "Color Theory: Race Trouble in the Avant-Garde," in *Who We Be*, 79–97; Aruna D'Souza, "Act II: *The Nigger Drawings*, Artists Space, 1979," in *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2018), 65–100.
[103] *The Nigger Drawings* press release, Artists Space Archives, 1973–2009, MSS.291. Fales Special Collections, NYU.
[104] When Newman arrived in New York, be began using just his first name, Donald, as a professional pseudonym.
[105] Artists Space Archives, 1973–2009, MSS.291. Fales Special Collections, NYU.
[106] D'Souza, "Act II," 74.
[107] Chang, 85.
[108] See an article published at the time, Richard Goldstein, "Art Beat: The Romance of Racism," *The Village Voice*, April 2, 1979, 43–44.

Protest of the exhibition precipitated quickly thanks to the efforts of gallerist Linda Goode-Bryant, Henry, Pindell, and a multiracial group of artists and critics including Carl Andre, Cliff Joseph, Lucy Lippard, Faith Ringgold, Ingrid Sischy, and May Stevens. As art historian Aruna D'Souza notes, the issue took on a pre-internet form of virality, with several rounds of impassioned telegrams and letters traded between parties within days.[109] In an open letter written on March 5, the protestor group, which called itself the "Emergency Coalition," wrote:

We assume [the title] was chosen as some sort of puerile bid for notoriety, but we are amazed that the staff of Artists' Space has lent itself to such a racist gesture. Surely it must have occurred to you, if not to [the artist], that this was an incredible slap in the face of Black and other artists, of Black audiences and everyone connected in any way with one of our leading alternative spaces. Did anyone object to these antics, or is social awareness at such a low ebb in the art world that nobody noticed?[110]

Letters written by Pindell and Sims to the NYSCA echoed this tone of incredulity. They, along with art historian Carol Duncan, objected especially to the use of tax payer dollars to support the exhibition—Artists Space received 60% of its funding in 1979 from the NYSCA.[111] In her letter, Pindell wrote, "It is appalling to think that the staffs of institutions, alternative spaces, and some artists, have grown so smug and secure as to think that a racial slur used under the guise of aesthetic freedom would pass unnoticed."[112] The council responded to the letters with a telegraph sent to Artists Space censuring the gallery for its unjustified use of the slur.[113] In these initial exchanges, protestors bemoaned the curatorial failure that had permitted such a large public platform for a form of hate speech.[114] As art historian Brian Wallis has noted, the subsequent debates assumed far greater significance as they **"**exposed the ways that language and institutional privilege perpetuated art-world discrimination."[115]

Support for Artists Space and Newman's title also mounted. Critics such as Douglas Crimp and Rosalind Krauss contributed their renown to the cause in texts that defended the artist's right to free speech.[116] They also justified their support by pointing to the pliability of language in post-structuralist thought. A statement written by Artists Space director Helen Winer, an intimate friend of Pindell's prior to the controversy's eruption, epitomized the position that linguistic meaning had become salubriously malleable: "People are neutralizing language. These words don't have quite the power they used to—and that seems like a healthy thing."[117] To the artists and critics who condemned the exhibition, this line of argumentation proved exasperatingly out of touch with the realities of ongoing racial injustice and its manifestation in the New York alternative art world.

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[109] D'Souza, "Act II," 73.
[110] Emergency Coalition, open letter, March 5, 1979, Artists Space Archives, 1973–2009, MSS.291. Fales Special Collections, NYU.
[111] D'Souza, "Act II," 78.
[112] Howardena Pindell, letter to NYSCA, Artists Space Archives, 1973–2009, MSS.291. Fales Special Collections, NYU.
[113] Jim Reinish, telegram to Artists Space, ibid.
[114] Wallis, 175.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Douglas Crimp, "Commentaries on Artists Space's Exhibit of 'Nigger Drawings,'" *Art Workers News,* June 1979, 12.
[117] Helen Winer, Statement, Artists Space Archives, 1973–2009, MSS.291. Fales Special Collections, NYU.

Protestors' frustrations mounted as Artists Space's response to their grievances failed, as Pindell noted, to acknowledge "the structural reasons that allowed the offense to occur."[118] For the Emergency Coalition, the gallery's heedless use of the racist epithet exemplified the endemic racism that continued to plague the art world, including the double standard applied to white artists, whose unfettered freedom of speech Artists Space defended, and black artists, systematically shut out of state-funded art institutions. By 1979, less than four percent of artists who had shown at Artists Space were black.[119] That year, the gallery received $74,000 in funding from NYSCA, while the three top-funded organizations focusing on artists of color received a combined allotment of $18,500.[120] As Henry stated in a letter to Artists Space associate director Rags Watkins, "You have to understand that 'The Nigger Drawings' show was a symptom of a disease and that the malady won't disappear until something is done about it."[121] The protest came to stand not only for opposition to the distorting misrepresentations performed by a racist epithet, but also the lack of representation artists of color experienced in even "alternative" art spaces.[122] As Duncan wrote, the protestors' demonstrations targeted the issue of "whose images become visible," rather than white artists' freedom to make certain kind of images.[123] Pindell would eventually theorize this systematic exclusion of artists of color from art world circulation as "de facto censorship."[124]

Artists Space supporters, in turn, accused protestors of censorship. Crimp and critic Craig Owens, for instance, each asserted that the Emergency Coalition's exhortations to Artists Space's funder NYSCA constituted a censorial ploy, with Owens writing that the group attempted "to use the governmental agency as an instrument of repression."[125] The critics condescendingly lamented the protestors' putative "insensitivity to the complexities of both esthetics and politics," and their lack of "sophistication."[126] Such remarks, however unwitting, appealed to racist notions about the putative intellectual inferiority of the many protestors who were black. Other aspects of the debate became racially charged as well: many Artists Space supporters, including Winer, who had been close friends with Pindell, repeatedly targeted their charges of censorship directly at the artist rather than at white protestors such as Andre or Lippard, or even Duncan, who took on a very vocal role in the protests. Crimp singled out Pindell's "insidious" censorial tactics.[127] Artist Donald Sultan berated her in a vaguely threatening letter.[128]

These attacks may have had their intended effect; following the controversy, Pindell felt increasingly ostracized at MoMA, where her colleagues mostly aligned with supporters of Artists

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[118] D'Souza, "Act II," 79.
[119] Chang, 91.
[120] D'Souza, "Act II," 78.
[121] Janet Henry, letter to Rag Watkins, Artists Space Archives, 1973–2009, MSS.291. Fales Special Collections, NYU.
[122] Chang, 91.
[123] Carol Duncan, quoted in Elizabeth Hess, "Art-World Apartheid," *Seven Days* 3, no. 6, May 18, 1979, 27.
[124] Howardena Pindell, "Covenant of Silence," [1990] in *Heart of the Question*, 32–49.
[125] Craig Owens, "Black and White," *Skyline*, April 1979, 16.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Crimp, 16.
[128] Donald Sultan, letter to Howardena Pindell, Artists Space Archives, 1973–2009, MSS.291. Fales Special Collections, NYU.

Space.[129] She reports feeling that her coworkers viewed her as a "censor."[130] As a result, Pindell resigned from her post in June, by which date she had secured a job offer to teach studio art at Stony Brook University. Far from her first frustrating encounter with her predominantly white coworkers at MoMA, the situation brought to a head the tensions that Pindell had felt from her earliest days at the museum.

As D'Souza notes, Artists Space supporters' particular disdain for Pindell's public grievances betrayed their discomfort with and fear of black anger, especially black female anger.[131] The uneasiness may have extended to the protestors as well—Lippard wrote to Winer in early March that she thought of herself as having a mollifying effect on other members of the Emergency Coalition.[132] African American cultural commentators have long reflected on the role of anger in responses to racism. As cultural critical Michele Wallace notes, "Being a black woman means frequent spells of impotent, self-consuming rage."[133] In her essay "Uses of Anger," black feminist poet Audre Lorde describes the deleterious effect of white women's fear of black women's anger within the women's movement.[134] She emphasizes the appropriateness of anger as a response to racism, writing "Women responding to racism means women responding to anger; the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation."[135] Lorde also posits anger as a resource shared amongst women, arguing that feminists can make "use" of the anger that every woman experiences when confronted with her oppression.

In *Free, White, and 21*, a work Pindell made in response to the Artists Space debates and her encounters with white feminism, she uses her anger to serve up a withering indictment of the racism of her white colleagues. The calm demeanor she deploys in her role as the Artist belies what she has called the "rage" she felt in situations like the ones she narrates.[136] Pindell's anger about her ostracization from professional circles and about the de facto censorship of Manhattan's art circuits swelled when she sustained serious injuries in an automobile accident in October 1979. In the aftermath of the collision, which occurred as the artist commuted to Stony Brook with colleagues including art department chair Donald Kuspit, she faced months of rehabilitation.[137] Attempting to cover from partial amnesia that temporarily damaged her short- and long-term memory, Pindell feared that she would be "silenced" by her injuries, that her critiques of art world racism would fade from public view as she recuperated under the care of her parents, who lived with her in her loft for several months following the accident.[138] In retrospect, she noted, "I was also aware that there were those who were pleased: because of my

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[129] Howardena Pindell, interview with Camille Billops, April 21, 1980, Audio-visual recording, Billops-Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.
[130] Ibid.
[131] D'Souza, "Act II," 91.
[132] Lucy Lippard, letter to Helen Winer, Artists Space Archives, 1973–2009, MSS.291. Fales Special Collections, NYU.
[133] Wallace, 23.
[134] Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," in *Sister Outsider* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 1984), 124–33. Lorde originally delivered the text as a keynote presentation at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, Storrs, CT, June 1981.
[135] Ibid., 124.
[136] Andrea Barnwell-Brownlee, "The Skin I'm In: Black Women, Color, and Video Art," in *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded*, 47.
[137] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.
[138] Pindell, interview with Billops, 1980.

injuries there was the possibility of my voice being muted. I know now that the desire to keep me silent, and to be pleased that I might be by default forced into silence, was an extension of the legacy of slavery and racism."[139] Pindell's reflections astutely underscore how discourses of disability and race operate in tandem to silence or make invisible disabled people of color. As disability studies scholar Chris Bell has influentially theorized, disability in the United States overwhelmingly has been defined as white by institutions and scholars.[140] Pindell's decision to make her disability visible through her gesture of wrapping her head in gauze in *Free, White, and 21* thus might offer an intervention in such forces of erasure.[141]

The context in which Pindell unexpectedly turned to video as an artistic medium, then, was marked by a growing desire to counteract the forces that might like to see her silent. Video would allow her to broadcast her discontent with an art world that had both celebrated her work and urged her to keep quiet about ongoing racist discrimination. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Artists Space controversy, Pindell expressed a profound reluctance to continue what she saw as her role as a "token" woman artist of color—a "superwoman" held up by white women to both attest to their inclusivity and to set a staggering standard of entry for other women of color who might wish to join their ranks.[142] Pindell's fears about silence and tokenism responded to a broader tendency in representational regimes of the early 1980s as well. As Wallace has noted, black women became increasingly visible in the public sphere in this period as advertisers and television networks realized that appeals to "multiculturalism" were good for business.[143] Political voice or social power, however, rarely accompanied this high visibility.

1979 marked an inflection point in Pindell's conceptualization of her audience. Her heightened disillusionment with the alternative New York art scene and feminist artistic circles led to her growing anxiety about how viewers encountered her art. Pindell's suspicions grew that her work was complicit in an art world that paid lip service to diversity in order to conceal a much deeper investment in an unequal distribution of resources along racial lines. In an influential essay originally presented at Hunter College, she describes this situation, using the term "restraint of trade" to refer to the "closed, nepotistic, interlocking system" of artistic display and sales that keep artists of color out of galleries, museums, and criticism.[144] Pindell has remarked that the autobiographic shift in her work resulted from a desire to unsettle the complacency of an audience who had ignored these broader circumstances under which she worked.[145] What happens when an artist no longer trusts the institutions that deliver her work to a public? With *Free, White, and 21* Pindell attempts to wrestle with racial discourse as an underlying condition of artistic viewership.

Since its earliest days an artistic medium, video has served as a means to investigate the changes in viewership wrought by modern technology. Art historian Anne Wagner has noted that

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[139] Pindell, "Free, White, and 21," 65.
[140] See Chris Bell, "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal," in *The Disability Studies Reader,* 2nd ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 275–82.
[141] For a striking account of how invisible disabilities can become visible, in particular through "masks," see Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 199–201.
[142] Pindell, "Free, White, and 21," 67.
[143] See Wallace, "Negative/Positive Images."
[144] Howardena Pindell, "Art World Racism: A Documentation," reprinted in *The Heart of the Question,* 3–27.
[145] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.

in the early 1970s, video became a significant site for articulating "the uncertainties that…had begun to accumulate around 'artist' and 'viewer' as art's two correlative terms."[146] Through video (as well as performance) artists channeled anxieties around the existence of an audience—how had and how would the rising tide of mass media in everyday life affect the terms of artistic viewership? If artists had once used their work to enlist an audience in acts of artistic "witnessing," how had mediums such as television altered notions about truth and trust that had long subtended this conventional mode of viewership?[147] According to Wagner, artists in the early 1970s used the new medium in part to counter the pleasurable flows of spectatorship offered on their television screens, often thematizing the urgent need to develop more skeptical modes of viewership by aggressively or coercively addressing the audience.[148] For instance, in Vito Acconci's *Undertone* (1972), the artist sits at a wooden table muttering confessions and fantasies for more than forty minutes. He breaks this litany at several points to address his audience. Passages such as "I need you to be sitting there facing me, because I have to have someone to talk to, to address this to" both interpellate the viewer into the work and register anxiety about the availability of a willing or interested audience.

Pindell's video borrows and complicates the "confessional" mode of address exemplified in Acconci's work through her use of the feminist strategy of "personae-play." Art historian Moira Roth theorizes persona-play as a performative tactic that combines equal parts autobiography and mythology.[149] Consider, for instance, Adrian Piper's expanded multimedia performance of the Mythic Being—a persona culled from stereotypical representations of the young black man of the Black Power movement and from the artist's own childhood diary entries. In a 1973 film clip about the piece, Piper applies the Mythic Being's garb to her body. Dressed as the character of the Mythic Being, she recites entries from Piper's childhood diary and moves from the private space of her apartment to the public site of a crowded New York sidewalk (figs. 4.26 and 4.27). With *Free, White, and 21,* Pindell compresses questions of autobiographical veracity and mythological yarn-spinning into the confrontation between her two primary characters: in the simplest terms possible, the Artist recounts autobiographical stories, while the White Woman gives voice to the mythology of American racism. (Pindell, in fact, has referred to the White Woman as a "mythical creature."[150])

The video triangulates the viewer in a high-stakes conversation structured by these two characters' competing narratives. Through this "dialogue," Pindell reveals issues of truth and trust in viewership to be subject to racial discourse. As viewers, who do we believe and with whose point of view do we identify? The critical efficacy of *Free, White, and 21* depends on the recognition viewers will have when confronted with the White Woman's canned phrases, having heard, thought, spoken, or been given similar responses to racism. Its edge also bets on the audience's awareness of the emotional and intellectual obtuseness of the deflecting character.

Pindell's mobilization of the intimate mode of address available to video allows her to investigate her own artistic reception. The White Woman taunts the Artist in response to one of her anecdotes: "it has to be in the work, and it has to be in the work in a way that we consider valid." She disparages the Artist's longstanding commitment to abstraction, suggesting that this idiom undermines the Artist's right to speak—"your art isn't even political." By constantly

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[146] Wagner, "Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence," 60.
[147] Ibid., 75.
[148] Ibid., 73.
[149] Moira Roth, cited in Smith, *Enacting Others,* 37.
[150] Pindell, interview with Jones, 1989.

denying the Artist's claims about her own experiences, the White Woman also forecloses the possibility that the autobiographical politics of the video itself will be considered "valid." These comments render explicit the racialized expectations that Pindell had encountered since her earliest days in New York. In this sense, *Free, White, and 21* allowed her to rehearse the transition she was then anticipating in her work; the video served as a platform for imagining the reception for her newly autobiographical practice and exposing and critiquing the limits of a form of viewership both fixated on and unable to acknowledge racial difference.

Recent scholars have underscored the role of performativity in *Free, White, and 21*, arguing that although Pindell recites autobiographical material, her role as the Artist must be viewed at a distance from the maker herself. Thusly, these accounts attempt to counter the tendency in art history and criticism to read the work of women of color as straightforward commentary on the artist's individual "identity."[151] Performance studies scholar Uri McMillan offers the term "avatar" to theorize Pindell' participation in a black feminist strategy of mobilizing a persona in order to highlight and stretch "the subordinate roles available to black women."[152] He notes that although Pindell narrates in the first person, she speaks her autobiographical encounters "through performed *versions* of herself."[153] Art historian Brian Wallis likewise points to the multiplicity of the Artist's presentation. Her fragmented narratives undercut "the notion of the unified 'self'…acknowledging that negotiating African American identity requires a range of disguises, or voices."[154] In the video, Pindell signals her use of multiple personae through tropes of theatricality. Her outfits and the vibrant hued backdrops change between takes. She silently applies and removes a series of masks from her face. This collage approach to the character of the Artist recalls Pindell's longstanding engagements with collage technique in her abstract practice. The method of bringing together seemingly disparate materials was one way she sought to mend abstraction. In *Free, White, and 21,* the skins she applies to and removes from her face echo her attempts to construct a meaningful artistic context from her local resources, this time in representation.

Pindell's iconic video was not her first time working with skins. Over a year before making *Free, White, and 21,* and amid the Artists Space controversy, she addressed a letter to Lippard.[155] Pindell tells her close friend about a new "protest piece" she had planned in response to Newman's show. In this performance work Pindell will cover her body with one of two materials—either oatmeal or "white dots." This second material would have explicitly connected the performance piece to the hole-punched paper scraps Pindell had been collaging to abstract works on paper and paintings for nearly a decade. Whether she used the oatmeal or the white dots, the intended effect was the same—Pindell notes to Lippard that the bodily covering would serve as a kind of whiteface. Taken in the context of the Artists Space debates, Pindell's whiteface references Newman's purported accidental blackface, which he used to justify the racist title of his exhibition. Her performance work, with either the oatmeal or the white dots, would never be executed. But the timing of the correspondence, a month after Pindell completed

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[151] For a discussion and critique of this tendency see, for instance, Jennifer Gonzalez, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).
[152] McMillan, 12.
[153] Ibid., 171.
[154] Wallis, 172.
[155] Lucy R. Lippard papers, 1930s–2010, bulk 1960s–1990. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Yes–No, suggests that this specific photographic project, and perhaps the *Video Drawings* more broadly, played a role in her eventual use of whiteface in *Free, White, and 21*.

Across these projects, Pindell plays with applying "skins" to her own image. In *Yes–No,* the acetate sheet operates as a skin. On this translucent surface, she marks a hypothetical critic's approvals and rejections. These notations overlay and mediate our view of Pindell. In this way, the work points to the inextricability of perception from the racialized thinking of art criticism. The unrealized performance work and *Yes–No* show Pindell working through the abstracting logic of racialization. These pieces bridge her abstract art and the figurative turn of 1980, and reveal a shared concern for textured, modernist surfaces across these idioms. For instance, Pindell's proposal to cover her face with chads suggests that she may have thought of the surface of her abstract works as a kind of skin.

Through a series of gestures in *Free, White, and 21*, Pindell unsettles racial schema that take the epidermis as an unchanging and unambiguous signifier of racial identity. Recall that early in the video, for example, the White Woman moves a hand into the frame of the video (fig. 4.04). For a brief moment, the viewer can catch a glimpse of a brown hand, untreated with make-up, reaching toward the flattened white visage. In another instance, the Artist peels a translucent facial mask from her face. When she holds it up against the bright blue backdrop, a white face materializes momentarily (fig. 4.06). These brief glitches in the video show the simultaneity of the Artist and the White Woman. Pindell's gesture of removing the film transforms the mask from an imperceptible surface to a tactile material. She has stated in an interview that she thought of this gesture as an expression of her desire to extricate herself from whiteness.[156] Pindell refers here to her involvement with white feminists in spaces like A.I.R. But she also has specified that she was thinking about her own multiracial ancestry, and particularly the histories of rape and coercion she saw implied in her light skin.[157] This gesture of removing the mask, then, serves as a metaphor through which Pindell could enact this transformation. As a symbol of whiteness, the mask suggests that white racial identification operates as an insidious film that can cling to nonwhite bodies, evoking Frantz Fanon's important theorization of colonial racism in *Black Skin, White Masks*.[158]

Pindell, in contrast to Fanon, approaches the mask as a metaphor for whiteness through the procedures and materials of cosmetics—the facial mask and make-up. Her simultaneous concerns for racial identification and skincare operations point to the ways in which racial presentation and feminine masquerade coincide and overlap. By locating whiteness in these feminine-coded epidermal procedures, Pindell comments on the racialized character of femininity. In the negative dreamscape of the video, to become a "woman" is to apply whiteness to one's body. This concern for imaginative, gendered, and raced skins in *Free, White, and 21* evokes the adamant markers of femininity the artist deployed to create masquerading effects in her cut and sewn paintings.

At the same time, the video shows that the marks of racialized oppression can be etched deeply into the skin. The arms of the Artist's mother still bear burns from where a babysitter washed her with lye as a child. By the end of the video, however, the Artist has wrested herself from surface treatments that metaphorize her injury and her imbrication in whiteness—the gauze and facial mask come off her head. The act of removing the skins offers a recuperative

[156] Barnwell-Brownlee, 47.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1967).

possibility. It echoes the efforts of Third World Women to establish a feminist context outside of white feminism.

The face of the White Women, by contrast, becomes distorted by the compression of a white pantyhose—an object Pindell has likened to both a bank robber's stocking and the "polite" ladies' corollary to the white hood of the Ku Klux Klan.[159] These textiles, like the gauze the Artist wraps around her head, evoke the canvas strips Pindell used to make her cut and sewn paintings. With her use of the prop in the video, she challenges the alleged mutability of racial whiteness, its putative ability to shapeshift and deny its own existence, as the crimes committed in the name of whiteness indelibly mark its "mythical" benefactor. The visible layer of make-up that the White Woman wears throughout the video of course also operates as a prosthetic skin.

By training the video on signifiers of whiteness, through the whiteface of make-up, white stocking, gauze, and facial mask, Pindell's project ran counter to multiculturalist calls to make racial difference visible by superficially highlighting people of color. She submits whiteness to procedures of visibility that expose it as an insidious and unstable racial ideology undergirded by violent attempts to accrue and maintain power. In *Free, White, and 21*, Pindell continues to shirk demands that her art ought to provide "validated" insights into her own identity and experiences. Rather, she turns the tables—the video displays the White Woman's psychological machinations and renders her whiteness a matter of surface and deception. The Artist's anecdotes do more to expose the discomfort, anger, and paranoia of the white people who have harmed her than to "represent" Pindell. Ultimately, her parodic ventriloquism attempts to strategically reroute the representational onus of multiculturalism from a black woman to white women.

Conclusion

Through her engagements with the mass media technologies of television and video, Pindell theorized from her own experiences as a woman of color while also speaking to and critiquing whiteness. Subsequent artists have acknowledged the efficacy of her approach by borrowing her techniques. For instance, Adrian Piper's *Cornered* (1988) echoes Pindell's deployment of a deadpan narrator who directly, calmly addresses an audience about the limitations and violence of racial discourse. The 1980s saw a surge of black feminist artistic projects centered on the recuperation of the black female figure. Both Renee Cox's photographs and Lorraine O'Grady's performances center the black female body as a site of critical and aesthetic inquiry. Pindell's video offered an early and formative example of new directions in black feminist conceptualizations of biography and representation.

With the metaphor of "skins," Pindell investigated the complex relationship between her life "as she lived it" and its image in mass media. Her "skins" show her both attempting to push past this binary and finding it over and again. The surfaces point to the inter-relationality of her life as she experienced it and its public depiction in television and video. In this way, *Free, White, and 21* shows the convergence of two skins—the skin of the screen and the skin of the body. These imaginative skins theorize the representational entanglements we all live with. Skins both form the surface of our bodies and they exceed them—they slough off and move through the world in ways that we cannot control or always foresee. They abstract from our realities. Of course, how and what specific skins represent depends on racial discourse. The screen is a social membrane, enrobing living bodies. Sometimes, like in *Free, White, and 21,* the screen even aspires to register the losses and the connective possibilities of representation itself. In this

[159] Pindell, "Free, White, and 21," 65.

figurative work, Pindell worked through the deep mutual imbrication of representation and abstraction. At the social site of artistic reception, the two form foil and partner to one another.

Conclusion

Free, White, and 21 was a pivotal piece in Pindell's transition from fully abstract paintings and works on paper to an increasingly, though temporarily figurative practice. She began incorporating figurative elements into these mediums in 1979, amid a crisis of memory that destabilized her sense of self. In the aftermath of the head injury she sustained in a severe car accident, she began utilizing postcards and photo-transfers to recuperate her memory.[1] These same materials migrated to the surface of her works. Pindell culled imagery from *National Geographic,* her travels, and her mother's postcard collection to collage onto the surface of her paintings and works on paper.[2] The mnemonic resonances of the materials are personal and individual, and therefore largely indecipherable. For instance, in *Memory: Past* (1980–81), Pindell incorporated photo-transfers of microscopic images of appendage-like biological forms (perhaps cilia, a type of sensory organelle that protrudes from some cells), and a fragmented image of what appears to be a storefront (figs. 5.01, 5.02 and 5.03). Often oriented sideways or upside down, the figurative elements seem to float in a shimmering sea of paper, paint, thread, and glitter. However, their broader commentary on memory remains accessible—Pindell's scattering of representational elements across much larger expanses of her painterly materials conveys "the difficulty of retrieving precise memories and the multifaceted nature of perspective."[3]

In addition to connecting to her past, imagistic passages also helped Pindell to secure her ability to remember future events. A detail of *Memory: Future* (1980–81) shows a sloping roofline of Japanese architecture; Pindell would spend seven months in Japan on an artist's fellowship shortly after completing this work (figs. 5.04 and 5.05).[4] She also explored the memory of the car accident itself. Pindell retained a vivid recollection of bystanders observing her in the wreckage of the vehicle, where she was trapped, yelling for help, until rescue crews arrived. This memory is explored in *Autobiography: Earth (Eyes, Injuries)* (1987), where collaged eyes coolly observe and emerge from a silhouette (fig. 5.06). Like many paintings Pindell has made since the early 1980s, its ovoid canvas jettisons rectangular form.

Gradually, across works in the *Memory* and *Autobiography* series, modernist questions about all-over abstraction and gridded space receded from the foreground of Pindell's practice. A cut and sewn painting from 1988 that uses the figure as well as abstraction, *Autobiography: Water (Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts)* is paradigmatic of the artist's shifting concerns. Slavery became a sharply focused issue for Pindell in the 1980s. The work thematizes the trauma of the Middle Passage and its persistent haunting of life in the United States (fig. 5.07). Part of her autobiographical series, the piece also explores the artist's multiracial family lineage. The eleven-foot tall painting centers on a woman's face modeled in shades of gray and

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[1] Howardena Pindell, interview with Kellie Jones, April 2, 1989, Audio-visual recording, Billops-Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.
[2] Ibid.; See also, Howardena Pindell, interview with Andrea Miller-Keller, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, June 1989. Curatorial files, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT.
[3] Valerie Cassel Oliver, "The Tao of Abstraction: Howardena Pindell's Paper Works," in *Howardena Pindell: What Remains to Be Seen*, eds. Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2018), 130.
[4] Pindell wrote about this time in Japan in Howardena Pindell, "An American Black Woman Artist in a Japanese Garden," *Heresies* 15, no. 4 (February 1983): 54–55.

based on the artist's own visage.[5] A silhouetted body, traced with stitched seams, branches from the face and recedes behind a watery layer made of blue hatch marks. Four pairs of arms float above the head in different skin tones, suggesting that this canvas is a palimpsest of women's lives. Collaged photo-transfers of eyes dot the canvas, staring out at the viewer, bearing witness to our own acts of looking. Near the bottom left of the composition, impasto paint yields to a flat, white vessel in a familiar pointed shape. This representation of a slave ship is immediately recognizable for its similarity to diagrams reproduced in history books and exhibitions, and the painting's title of course primes us to find this content. Through figurative elements and text that describes atrocities of slavery, *Autobiography: Water* materializes the flotsam of a violent and unresolved history. Pindell's insistence on the relevance and visibility of these events to an audience in the late twentieth century, and the ongoing need to remember the human beings who lived under conditions of enslavement, recalls poet Elizabeth Alexander's insight that "bodily experience, both individually experienced bodily trauma as well as collective cultural trauma, comes to reside in the flesh as forms of memory reactivated and articulated at moments of collective spectatorship."[6]

Made amid the so-called culture wars, which brought a new kind of urgency to the visibility of the black female body, *Autobiography: Water* addresses itself overtly to the exigencies of "re-membering." In the novel *Beloved,* Toni Morrison coins the term "rememory," a word that functions as both noun and verb. Through this concept, Morrison theorizes the interconnectedness of individual and collective memories, and the difficulties of reimagining one's heritage.[7] In her foundational text on the self-making practices of enslaved black Americans in the nineteenth century, literary theorist and historian Saidiya Hartman builds on Morrison's insights to theorize an archival and historical performative practice of "re-membering the body."[8] Chattel slavery was designed to obliterate enslaved people's connections to an empowering culture, to cultural memory, and to their own humanity. The Middle Passage—the horrific transatlantic sea voyage during which Africans were forcibly transported to the Americas in what Hortense Spillers calls the oceanic "nowhere" of identity—functioned as a critical site for the distortion of humans into property.[9] According to Hartman, to re-member the body under the conditions of slavery is an act of reconstitution that acknowledges pain and articulates the body's "violated condition," while also "[attending] to its pleasure, eros, and sociality."[10] The body, as site of trauma, becomes a resource for self-making, for restitution.

In its casting of the body and its extensive use of collage, sewing, and thick layers of paint, *Autobiography: Water* extends some of the concerns of Pindell's earlier, abstract cut and sewn paintings. Put differently, the work continues to think through the textured, hand-worked surface, and the body as resources. However, *Autobiography: Water,* as an exemplar of a

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[5] Pindell, interview with Miller-Keller, 1989.
[6] Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can you be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 80.
[7] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987). For a discussion of "rememory" see, for instance, Caroline Rody, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: History, 'Rememory,' and a 'Clamor for a Kiss,'" *American Literary History* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 92–119.
[8] Saidiya Hartman, "Redressing the Pained Body: Toward a Theory of Practice," *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford Press, 1997), 77.
[9] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 72.
[10] Hartman, 77.

broader, incremental shift in Pindell's oeuvre, supplanted many of the priorities that had marked her practice for years. Throughout the 1970s, she produced modernist propositions that issued a challenge to the socially determined contours of artistic discourse. The later works, to a large degree, replace this project with explicit, public questions about the American psyche, including issues of complicity and collective memory. They mark a pause in Pindell's endeavor to mend abstraction.

During the 1980s, Pindell drastically expanded the scope of her artistic materials. For instance, she made an artist's book and undertook enterprises such as a digitally generated light sculpture in Times Square and a sand *mandala* based on the drawings of students at public elementary schools in Hartford, Connecticut (fig. 5.08).[11] These public-facing projects participated in her broader reconceptualization of her practice in the aftermath of her departure from MoMA. With her shift to a teaching career at Stony Brook, Pindell was able more fully to devote herself to her artistic practice. Her activism and art-making became more explicitly aligned in works such as *Separate But Equal Genocide: AIDS* (1991–92), a two-panel painting that features vertically oriented American "flags"—one black, one white, each with a red band running down the right side (fig. 5.09). Stitched seams mark the boundaries between stars and stripes, shapes filled with over-painted vinyl letters spelling out first names. The painting uses some of the techniques of abstraction, collage, and craft Pindell had long embraced. Here, they operate in service of an explicit political statement about the inequitable distribution of HIV/AIDS resources across black and white communities.

Pindell has promoted the idea that the works she made after 1979 increasingly thematized her own experiences and withdrew from concerns for process. While works such as *Free, White, and 21* and the *Autobiography* series indeed seem to place biographical content at the fore, they also continue to investigate modernist concerns for the painterly surface. For instance, the "skins" in *Free, White, and 21* take up layering, abstraction, surface, and depth. To make *Autobiography: Fire (Suttee)* (1986–87), Pindell lay on a large sheet of canvas and traced the contours of her own body (fig. 5.10). She cut her silhouette from the canvas, trimmed a narrow margin of fabric from the original sheet, then sewed the figure back into place—this work, too, is a cut and sewn painting. Despite the incision and the sutures, the silhouette cuts a subtle line in the final composition. Layers of gesso and acrylic paint camouflage the figure. Impasto paint in reds, oranges, and greens cross the border between bodily representation and the surrounding negative space. Pindell has likened these series of short lines to keloids.[12] This allusion to the violence of scarring is echoed in the work's titular reference to immolation. The pleasing textures and saturated colors of the paint belie these sinister undertones and, further, evoke the signature hatch marks of Jasper Johns's paintings and prints of the 1970s (fig. 5.11). Thus, like so many of Pindell's abstract paintings, these later figurative works both incite aesthetic pleasure in a modernist way and refer to experiences of individual and collective harm.

Figuration reappeared in Pindell's practice also as a way to examine how whiteness operates as a representational and psychological device. She used whiteface in *Free, White, and 21* to investigate the instability of racial whiteness and its concrete effects on human lives. In

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[11] See Michael Winerip, "Computerized Billboard Brightens Up Times Sq. With Art-of-the-Month," *New York Times,* Aug. 26, 1983, B1, B4; Press release for "Howardena Pindell: Making of a Mandala," January 1996, The Charter Oak Cultural Center Gallery, Hartford, CT. Curatorial files, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

[12] Howardena Pindell, Artist's Statement for *Autobiography*, unpublished, New York, 1989. Irving Sandler Papers, ca. 1950–2000. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

#108 Memory Series: Sorry, It Was an Accident (1979), a pair of delicate white hands comprised of miniscule paper chads eerily materialize from a white square centered in a colorful collaged composition (fig. 5.12). The work evokes the ways that accident, disability, and race became entangled in Pindell's recovery and her fear of being silenced by white feminists. Another work on paper from this period, *Memory Test: Free, White and Plastic #114*, (1979–80), centers a white plastic toy gorilla in a colorful hole-punched composition (fig. 5.13). A prize from a gumball machine, the small toy plays on and inverts anti-black stereotypes and links whiteness to both animality and artifice. In these early instances of Pindell's reintroduction of the figure, it functions as a tool for theorizing whiteness. The artist thus refutes the racialized expectations she encountered throughout her career, which posited abstraction as the privileged domain of whiteness and figuration as the realm in which artists of color could articulate their own subjective experiences.

From the late 1960s through the 1970s, Pindell pursued the belief that an artist could make something meaningful without recourse to figuration. Even after this period, she maintained a conviction in a tactile, "visceral" approach to art-making. Textured surfaces remained a privileged strategy in her oeuvre. They extend across her black feminist projects of mending abstraction, critiquing the representational regimes of mass media, and re-membering diasporic histories. Collage, a textile logic, and imaginative skins all contributed to her attempts to heal herself from the traumatic stress of her social isolation, in the hopes of feeling her way to an "empowering" artistic expression.[13] Texture became a search for something human in abstraction and in the abstracting realm of representation. For Pindell, artistic production served as a salve and sanctuary from the persistent abrasions of everyday life. The intense physicality of her works' facture helped her to "reintegrate" herself.

Ultimately, Pindell's figurative "turn" proved temporary. In recent decades, she frequently has worked in a fully abstract idiom. *Night Flight* (2015–16) centers many of the formal, textural concerns of Pindell's works of the 1970s (fig. 5.14). It combines visible seams and collaged hole punches on its irregularly shaped, unstretched canvas surface. Like many of her more recent paintings, its palette is brightly saturated, a brilliant blue in this case. Other aspects of her practice have changed. Pindell no longer fabricates her paintings by herself.[14] Her aging body does not permit it. On her studio wall hang labeled plastic bags full of hole punched circles and ellipses of various sizes and colors. Assistants help her to punch these collage materials and retrieve them as she attaches them to her canvases. Pindell still performs her own sewing in the cut and sewn paintings, though. In a recent interview, she remarked that she maintains this element of her practice "for pleasure."[15]

In the last five years, Pindell's work has been warmly received by art museums, critics, and collectors. Since signing with Garth Greenan Gallery in 2014, her works have shown widely, appearing in several major exhibitions that have sought to expand narratives of American art by centering artists whose contributions long have been marginalized.[16] Pindell's 2018 retrospective

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[13] See especially Howardena Pindell, "Ancestral Memories and Visual Coincidences," 1994, unpublished manuscript in Samella S. Lewis Papers. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

[14] Howardena Pindell, interview with the author, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, July 2015.

[15] Howardena Pindell, e-mail correspondence with the author, March 2019.

[16] These include *We Wanted a Revolution* (Brooklyn Museum, 2017); *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (Tate Modern, 2017); *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today*

at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, curated by Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver, received glowing reviews. In her review of the show, art historian Jenni Sorkin deploys words I heard often when speaking to artists and curators about Pindell: "iconic," "sui generis," "trailblazer."[17] Artists such as Rashid Johnson, Marilyn Minter, Amy Sillman, and Lorna Simpson, who work in diverse idioms and some of whom belong to a younger generation, admire Pindell's work and have embraced her as a model.[18] For many, Pindell's legacy lies in her dual commitments to an uncompromising aesthetic vision and political righteousness. Her wide-ranging contributions as artist, activist, curator, and educator exemplify the tenacious labors necessary to an ethical creative practice.

This resurgence has come amid a broader shift in art world priorities. Many major museums and blue-chip galleries in North America have made concerted efforts in recent years to show the work of artists of color, including specifically black artists working in abstraction.[19] The market for this art has grown accordingly, setting record after record. Private collectors and museums have purchased Pindell's works at rates exponentially higher than other periods in the artist's career. Research archives strive to stay atop these trends as well—the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art recently hired its first curator of African American manuscripts. Pindell's papers are bound for these archives, where they will join the recently acquisitioned papers of fellow black women artists Betty Blayton, Beverly Buchanan, and Senga Nengudi.

Amid the current conservative bent in national politics, which has seen insidious forms of white supremacy move into the mainstream, attention to black women's art is an urgent political project. As heady market forces help to catalyze efforts at art world inclusivity, the effects, at times, can feel widespread. However, Pindell's words, quoted in the introduction to this dissertation, would caution us against the view that these recent changes reflect a permanent reconfiguration of the art world into a more egalitarian mold. Could we be experiencing another "wave" of interest in artists of color, one that will recede in more subdued political times? Some news reports covering this most recent surge recycle tropes of discovery. In response to a recent question about "finally" getting widespread recognition, Pindell said, "People say to me, 'You know, you're famous,' but I do not feel like that at all. I always tell people I feel like a message in a bottle that washes up on shore. Maybe someone might find out something about me."[20]

To "find out something" enduring about an artist and her art, perhaps we should not look to the celebratory crest of a wave. Pindell's "message" does not lie in the apparently effortless ways in which the story of her life and career meet the perceived needs of the current political moment. A message in a bottle carries histories. It is a durational object, traveling in some cases for many decades, with no guarantee of connecting to its imagined audiences. I have argued in this dissertation that Pindell's art—her message, to follow her metaphor—works in its seams. It happens in knots and layers. Only through sustained attention can we trace her navigations of contemporary art and life, the social contradictions she has bumped up against and the

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(Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017); *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 2018).

[17] Jenni Sorkin, "Howardena Pindell," *Artforum* 56, no. 10 (Summer 2018): 313.

[18] Alex Greenberger, "Full Circle: Howardena Pindell Steps Back into the Spotlight with a Traveling Retrospective," *ARTnews* 116, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 85.

[19] See Hilarie M. Sheets, "Discovered After 70, Black Artists Find Success, Too, Has Its Price," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/23/arts/design/black-artists-older-success.html.

[20] Howardena Pindell, quoted in Greenberger, 85.

structuring tensions she astutely has investigated. Pindell has never needing discovering. To return to her words—she was already there; women of color artists have always been there.

Pindell, contrary to the words of Adrian Piper in this dissertation's introduction, made neither her abstract nor her figurative art in the "Garden of Eden."[21] Pindell worked with her eyes wide open, fully aware of the limiting ways in which her art likely would be seen, if it would be seen at all. Her career is paradigmatic of a generation of artists who strove to make art that might make some kind of difference, even as many of them eschewed the modernist belief that art should aspire to that goal. By weaving together craft and fine art, the visual and the haptic, West African and American artistic traditions, Pindell forged a black feminist modernism that negotiated a tightrope of expectation. With her works of this period, and the particular relationship to material that they embody, she endeavored to expand abstraction's possibilities, asking us to reimagine its contours.

[21] Claudia Barrow, "Adrian Piper: Space, Time and Reference, 1967-1970," in *Adrian Piper* (Birmingham and Manchester: Ikon Gallery and Cornerhouse, 1991), 15.

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