

***Thematic reading of quotes from Jack Whitten's "Notes from the Woodshed"
selected and grouped by Michel Chevalier, August 2019***

Black Identity / Double-consciousness in America

p. 17 (1968)

LeRoi Jones a.k.a. Amiri Baraka was the first Black man I ever met who spoke freely and bluntly about the power of Black identity.

p. 161 (1980)

The show at P.S. I has really taught me a lesson: My work cannot be shown under those circumstances. I knew that already but I continue to exhibit with Black shows for political reasons. I can never expect anything from such shows. My work does not fit into the present category of Black Art.

p. 264 (1999)

1 OCT: I AM PUTTING THE BLACK EXPERIENCE INTO PAINT.

p. 272 (2001)

BE EXTREMELY AMERICAN + BLACK AT THE SAME TIME

Art-field vocation / Pure art aims

p. 16

More than once, Franz Kline was helpful. Franz had a way of being matter of fact. He said to me and a group of young aspiring artists one night, "the minute you step into that studio and pick up that brush, you are a part of art history and you'll never be lonely." The studio is a lonely place but I have always believed that I have a place in the history of art.

p. 43

I was asked recently about the lines and while I insist upon their being straight instead of lyrical. I feel a kinship to both lyrical school of thought + the disciplinarity of let's say a Josef Albers—by using a guide system I managed to install a certain structural discipline which otherwise without would be totally abstract lyricalism.

p. 44

The psychology of relating the vision of a face, projecting the vision of a face into any pictorial disturbance meant a lot. If I could not see something within the paint it was not what I wanted. I think that Jackson Pollock also experienced this in his last black + white drip paintings: the face was so evident. When I think back now my wanting to see the face was my own face—my own identity—the fruit of earlier experiments where I dealt exclusively with the existential problem of identity.

p. 48 (1973)

Art in its advanced stage is something more than therapy. The Mod. Day Realist gives us art as therapy. Rothko gives us art as a dedication to Painting.

Nothing pleases me except my own paintings now not even the upper echelon—Yes enjoyed the last Noland show and the last Frankenthaler show but you know . . . not. moved. not moved. [. . .] I have no more heroes!

p. 75 (1974)

Some people take joy in the fact that nothing is happening—but Pollock, Rothko, Kline, these are my guys, these are my gods.

p. 335 (2009)

18 MARCH: MEANING IS THE ENEMY OF ART

Art-isms / Competition

p. 39 (1969)

My vision of art is that of Pinkism. Pinkism is the personality of the world expressed in pure plastic symbols. Pinkism combines all the isms of art history, especially those of contemporary times. At present I am the only true believer in Pinkism, but like all isms when introduced to the mass media it establishes instant followers. The creation of a pink world became evident to me when I started seeing pink angels on my canvas, pink horses, pink women with pink *blip*, pink cats that *blip* pink *blip*, and big pink elephants with tiny pink *blip*.

p. 75(1974)

De Kooning needed big house painters' brushes. I took one of those brushes and blew it up to twelve feet. I have a twelve-foot brush. I have a vast brush: 40–50 lbs., easy.

p. 163 (1980)

Two years ago I wrote of completing the Modernist principle or where Western Art ends. It's all over: Modernism has run its course. The grid was our gift of modernism. The grid explains the nature of visual perception, it represents the atomic structure of seeing. I am free of plasticism!

p. 265 (1995)

THE TRANSITIONAL AESTHETICS OF POSTMODERNISM HAS PASSED; WE ARE NOW ENTERING THE THIRD PHASE OF MODERNISM. IT IS BEYOND MEISM. ONE MUST BE ABLE TO PROJECT BEYOND THE SELF . . . BEYOND ETHNIC, GENDER, POLITICAL + RELIGIOUS BARRIERS. THIRD PHASE MODERNISM DEALS WITH COMPRESSION: TO COMPRESS ALL OF OUR MISTAKES, OUR FAILURES AND OUR SUCCESSES. IT MUST ALL BE IN THERE. I AM A COMPRESSIONIST.

p. 277 (2006)

My understanding of AB/EX painters is paint was subject and later both Johns + Stella insistence upon the painting as object. Now the paint is object used in the service of building the painting as object which is a strange ironic twist upon the history of painting.

p. 322 (2008)

How does one bypass the conceptual? To seek the opposite of the conceptual. Which is? This is difficult and simultaneously not falling into the trap of automatism. Is there such a thing as PERCEPTUAL ISM? I feel like someone wanting everything and nothing at the same time!

p. 334 (2010)

I HAVE CONSOLIDATED THE CONCEPTUAL WITH THE RANDOM. THIS IS A NECESSARY STEP IN BECOMING A PERCEPTUALIST.

p. 356 (2010)

The space in third phase modernism is mine + mine alone! If you own the space you own the battlefield: the battlefield is worldview.

Disenchantment / Contradictions of art field

p. 48 (1973)

I really don't know the meaning of what I am doing or the significance of working this way. Why the emphasis upon surface? I must look at my surroundings for purity for honesty for absolute materialization of matter; it is not to be found in the painting of today's art world. On the sidewalk I can see more purity of form than in any New York art gallery.

Working this way is very manual. The whole body comes into play. Most of time I am working on my knees, brushing on paint, using a sponge or removing water with a smaller window-cleaner type squeegee. After four or five hours of working I am totally exhausted. I like the idea of working in a physical manner because it prevents me from thinking about what I am doing.

p. 75 (1974)

Take Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. He uses tons of dirt; I use paint. Art comes from everywhere.

p. 155 (1979)

I can no longer afford the ambiguity of Abstract Expressionism nor the sterility of Constructivist thought. I want something free of those movements something to exist just for what it is worth.

p. 295 (2007)

I WANT PURE MIND: NO ETHNICITY, NO NATIONALISM, NO GENDER, NO POLITICS,
NO GOD PURE MIND IS A SPIRITUAL EQUALVENT TO MINIMALISM
i.e., NO ATTACHMENTS TO ANY THING OTHER THAN MIND
—I AM TIRED OF BEING TESTED—

p. 298 (2007)

Spirituality takes care of its' self. I have no control of that, Art history has confused the hell out of me! Fuck art history! Especially Modernist Western Art History. It's time for payback. It has made me suffer, now its' time that I make it suffer! I always knew that history was organic. So, lets make it suffer!

p. 318 (2009)

Went to the whack! Show at P.S. 1 today. It was good to see in retrospective a lot of stuff from the past. I do not understand why Mira Schor is not represented. She should be in that show. Most of it is boring, no poetry, mostly propoganda, exhibitionism, self pity, not sensual. I am convinced that the feminist movement was a necessary act of history but when that history becomes institutazized as an end within itself. . . . It's a mistake. So much of this show is purely sensibility with no plastic thought. Most is just poor art a good example of art as therapy. I must maintain my critique in dealing with young women be firm in insisting upon using the feminine as sensibility along with the plastic. Do not rely upon sensibility alone. Use it to structure the plastic.

p. 360 (2010)

12 sept Basel was a nice experience: the market place for art. I have trouble accepting art as market but what can I or any other artist do. We are part of the capitalist system. I don't like it

but there is no alternative.

Primitivism?

p. 162 (1980)

I believe that the present emphasis placed upon art works of obvious “primitive” character is a direct result of this “new man vibration.”

In other words, we read the vibration to mean a new society with new myths, new symbols, a starting from the beginningthe present day artist will create the new symbols needed for a new society. My African ancestry places me in a better position to take advantage of this “new man mentality” I more than any man represent the new race.

p. 174 (1984)

Henry’s [Geldzahler] studio visit helped. His telling me that I am “no primitive” really struck home. His evaluation of me is correct. I am a very sophisticated abstract painter dealing with problematic ideas in modern painting and this I must continue to project. At no time should I allow confusing signals to emanate from the studio.

Mythomania

p. 95 (1975)

May the history of Western painting die within me. [. . .]

p. 169 (1980)

I stake my claim as the Guardian of the Flame. I, alone am entitled to this legacy and only time will give another: At present, I am alone.

p. 197 (1989)

10 DEC: THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF WHAT I AM DOING DEPENDS UPON MY ABILITY TO PROJECT BEYOND ART HISTORY. THE SO CALLED MAINSTREAM MUST BE BENT, DEFLECTED AND DETOURED IN A DIRECTION DICTATED BY THE PROFUNDITY OF MY SENSIBILITY.

p. 231 (1995)

OBJECT = IMAGE (this is my contribution to art history)

p. 330 (2009)

14 FEB: HAPPY VALENTINE DAY, MARY. . . I HAVE SUCCESSFULLY COMPRESSED THE TOTAL HISTORY OF ART! AMEN

Jazz as orientation / inspiration

p. 335 (2009)

In order to do what I am doing one must be capable of understanding what John Coltrane is doing. Not just listening to J.C. but understanding i.e., comprehending. J.C. is operating on multiple layers of space/time. He is truly the 21st century man. I knew I this in the 1960’s but its has taken me this long to compress what he is doing into a two dimensional plane of paint. Believe me. . . This is not easy. I am thankful for my health. . . . I need more time to continue my work. This I pray for.