The year 2018 will mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of the American artist collective African Commune of Black Rodrigo Artists, or AfriCOBRA. Formed on the South Side of Chicago by Jeff Donaldson, Barbara Jones-Hogu, Jae Jarrell, Wadsworth Jarrell, and Gerald Williams, AfriCOBRA is arguably the most influential visual arts group associated with the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts Movement in the United States. The group’s seminal writings describing its importance and its approach to a “Black aesthetic,” its important early traveling exhibitions mounted at culturally specific institutions, and the members’ work as teachers of younger artists have impacted art and social history in ways that we are only now beginning to fully appreciate.

THE FOUNDING OF AFRI COBRA

AfriCOBRA was established in 1968 by a group of academy-trained visual artists and Black cultural nationalists who, according to cofounder Williams, “sought an identity that was independent of, and not defined by, the dominant culture in America.” Their mission was to create a new kind of art that reflected contemporary Black culture and appealed specifically to Black audiences. Jones-Hogu said in 2010, “The people we were making art for looked like us.” AfriCOBRA promoted what some members termed “a school of thought” – an encompassing ideology rooted in the belief that the objects members were making would have a transformative effect on the social, political, and cultural fabric of the Black community. Jae Jarrell recalled this ambition in a 2010 interview: “Well, the whole idea of a school of thought was so that it may influence other disciplines. Something like...a sort of Bauhaus kind of thing.”

The collective was structured, and the members held formal meetings. A secretary kept notes and issued official minutes, and members pooled their money for project expenses. Unlike the loosely affiliated artists of the 1960s whose work was artistically compartmented and branded by critics with umbrella terms like “Pop Art” or “Minimalism,” the artists of AfriCOBRA intentionally collaborated in an effort to forge a new and identifiable style of art that combined African prototypes, as well as by African American vernacular culture, visual when viewed en masse. The “Philosophical Concepts” kept the group focused on its altruistic aim of offering Black people an art in the belief that the objects we were making art for people we were making art for. That’s where we went.”

AFRICOBRA MANIFESTO

Donaldson’s manifesto-like essay “10 in Search of a Nation,” published in the October 1970 issue of Black World and a larger related and expanded essay penned by Jae Jarrell for the AfriCOBRA exhibition catalog (1973) both list the “Philosophical Concepts” and “Aesthetic Principles” of AfriCOBRA. These concepts and principles were developed and clarified during AfriCOBRA meetings, helped guide the members’ collective practice.

Members of AfriCOBRA were part of the Black Power movement, which was demanding greater control over their own destiny as part of global liberation movements, and they had a general respect for some of the more nationalist Black political organizations like the Black Panther Party. But as the group worked to define its core objectives during early meetings, the members strategically pivoted away from making anti-mainstream protest art that would position them in constant opposition to the dominant culture. Instead, they focused on making what some in the collective called “pro-Black” art. Their contribution to their people and community would be to counter racist misrepresentations of African American history, culture, and peoples by offering positive, powerful, and motivating new visual models of Black self-representation. AfriCOBRA artists described their work as art that was not about “Ku Klux Klan, and pointing out that kind of stuff, it wasn’t about that. It was about the Ku Klux Klan, and pointing out that kind of stuff, it wasn’t about mainstream protest art that would position them in constant opposition to the dominant culture. Instead, they focused on making what some in the collective called “pro-Black” art.

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At the Conference on the Functional Aspects of Art, an independent art collective in American history. In the early 1970s, several AfriCOBRA members left Chicago for opportunities in other parts of the United States. Several members from the earliest days of the collective are still active in the group, including Akili Ron Anderson, Adger Cowans, and Michael D. Davis. Other longtime members include mixed-media artist Kevin Cole and the late painter and art historian Murry N. DePillars. AfriCOBRA continued to exhibit regularly at museums and regional art centers from the mid-1970s on. The collective remains active today, making it perhaps the longest-running independent art collective in American history.

Several members from the earliest days of the collective are still active in the group, including Akili Ron Anderson, Adger Cowans, and Michael D. Harris. These members have been integral to the group’s identity and mission. As of 2023, the group continues to exhibit regularly at museums and regional art centers from the mid-1970s on. The collective remains active today, making it perhaps the longest-running independent art collective in American history. Several members from the earliest days of the collective are still active in the group, including Akili Ron Anderson, Adger Cowans, and Michael D. Harris. These members have been integral to the group’s identity and mission. The exhibition AfriCOBRA III — containing black-and-white illustrations of several exhibited works, a major introductory essay entitled “The History, Philosophy and Aesthetics of AfriCOBRA” by Jones-Hogu, brief biographies of the artists, and personal statements by each exhibitor — remains the most important primary-source document on AfriCOBRA. In the early 1970s, several AfriCOBRA members left Chicago for opportunities in other parts of the United States. Several members from the earliest days of the collective are still active in the group, including Akili Ron Anderson, Adger Cowans, and Michael D. Harris. These members have been integral to the group’s identity and mission. The exhibition AfriCOBRA III — containing black-and-white illustrations of several exhibited works, a major introductory essay entitled “The History, Philosophy and Aesthetics of AfriCOBRA” by Jones-Hogu, brief biographies of the artists, and personal statements by each exhibitor — remains the most important primary-source document on AfriCOBRA.
In the past ten years, more than thirty works by AfriCOBRA artists have been acquired by at least seven American art museums. Public institutions—from contemporary art centers to encyclopedic museums—have featured AfriCOBRA art and artists in exhibitions and public programming. Why now? For decades the art made by African Americans, including AfriCOBRA artists, was mostly excluded from permanent public art collections and unmentioned in art world discourse. Perhaps in this moment—when art schools are conferring “Social Practice” degrees on studio majors, when contemporary art survey exhibitions like the Whitney Biennial regularly include art collectives, and when a generation of younger scholars of color interested in reconsidering art history is entering academia and helming museum departments—the art and example of AfriCOBRA appear prescient.

Discussing the relevance of the artists of AfriCOBRA and their contemporaries in the experimental AACM music collective, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago curator Naomi Beckwith wrote in 2015, “Fifty years later, the historical context of these two organizations still matters, particularly to contemporary artists who reference the forms and rhetoric of Black cultural nationalism.” She went on, “Contemporary artists have reached back to language, forms, terms and concerns related to the democratic possibilities that surfaced prominently in the 1960s.”
WADSWORTH JARRELL
THREE QUEENS, 1971
Acrylic on canvas
Detroit Institute of Arts, Museum Purchase, Contemporary Deaccession Fund, 2017

JEFF DONALDSON
WIVES OF SHANGO, 1969
Mixed media on paper

BARBARA JONES-HOGU
RELATE TO YOUR HERITAGE, 1971; Screenprint on paper; Private Collection

BARBARA JONES-HOGU
UNITE, 1969–71; Screenprint on paper. Collection of David Lusenhop and Stacie Anderson
A. IMAGES, a commitment to humanism, inspired by African people and their experience, IMAGES which perform some action which African people can relate directly and experience. Art for the people, the people reflect the art, and the art is the people, not for the critics.

B. IDENTIFICATION, to define and clarify our commitment as a people top the struggles of African peoples who are waging war for survival and liberation.

C. PROGRAMMATIC, art which deal with concepts that offer positive and feasible solutions to our individual, local, national and international problems.

D. MODES OF EXPRESSION, that lend themselves to economical mass production techniques such as "Poster Art" so that everyone that wants one can have one.

E. EXPRESSIVE AWESOMENESS, that which does not appeal to serenity but is concerned with the eternally sublime, rather than ephemeral beauty. Art which moves the emotions and appeals to the senses.

Notes:
1- Gerald Williams, e-mail message to David Lusenhop, Feb. 20, 2010.
2- Interviews with AfriCOBRA founders, 2010, TV Land/Hudson Street Productions. Additional recorded and transcribed materials are held as "Interviews of AfriCOBRA Founders" by the Archives of American Art. For more information, see www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews-africobra-founders-15925.
3- Ibid. 4- Jeff Donaldson, interview by Julieanna Richardson, Apr. 23, 2001, session 1, tape 4, 4-The HistoryMakers Digital Archive.
5- Ibid. 6- Ibid. 7- Ibid. 8- Wadsworth and Jae Jarrell, interview by Rebecca Zorach, 2011, Never the Same, www.never-the-same.org/interviews/wadsworth-and-jae-jarrell/.
9- Jeff Donaldson to members of AfriCOBRA, Apr. 13, 1970, photocopy in the collection of David Lusenhop. Before the group became known as AfriCOBRA in 1970, it was called African COBRA.

THE AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES

These principles were not only drawn from the work of the artists in the group but were also drawn from our inheritable art forms as an African people.

A. FREE SYMMETRY, the use of syncopated rhythmic repetition which constantly changes in colour, texture, shapes, form, pattern, movement, feature, etc.

B. MIMESIS AT MIDPOINT, design which marks the spot where the real and the unreal, the objective and the non-objective, the plus and the minus meet. A point between absolute abstractions and absolute naturalism.

C. VISIBILITY, clarity of form and line based on the interesting irregularity one senses in a freely drawn circle or organic object, the feeling for movement, growth, changes and human touch.

D. LUMINOSITY, "Shine", literal and figurative, as seen in the dress and personal grooming of shoes, hair (process or afro), laminated furniture, face, knees or skin.

E. COLOR, Cool-ad color, bright colors with sensibility and harmony.