



# YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2022 Volume III: The Social Struggles of Contemporary Black Art

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## Introduction

by Roderick A Ferguson, Professor of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies and of American Studies

Historically, Black art has been not only a domain for various artistic representations but also a venue from which to recast and explore several historical and social struggles. While that exploration has obviously dealt with issues of race, slavery and colonialism, black diasporic art has also been a powerful venue for addressing issues of gender, sexuality, the environment, militarism, technology, and so on. Indeed, recent developments in scholarship, curation, and activism have exhibited the central place that black art occupies in engaging these issues.

These developments have placed at least two significant pressures on how we think of art, in general, and black art, in particular. First, these shifts have challenged conventional assumptions that art is best known and assessed according to its formal properties only. Instead, this rethinking in how we encounter art insists on placing it in dialogue with historical, political, and social contexts. Second, these transformations urge us to understand black art and the social processes that it engages within transnational rather than national frameworks. To this end, these approaches have eschewed frameworks that seek to contain art within any single national tradition and instead has located black art within both national and transnational social processes, movements, and struggles.

To this end, our seminar worked to place art by black artists from Africa, Europe, and Latin America in feminist, anti-colonial, anti-racist, abolitionist, environmental, and queer politics. As the Fellows engaged these works, they produced a dynamic set of conversations about the relevance of black contemporary art in this historical moment. Those conversations led to unit plans that are both pertinent and inspired. In their own individual ways, each one manages to address a variety of social issues and to present the intricacies of black art as well.

Irene Jones's curriculum unit "Reclaiming the Lost Art of Using Textile" puts African American textile artists in conversation with their Navajo counterparts, forging a necessary conversation with two groups that have rarely been in dialogue. In "'Do You See me? I see you:' Identity and Activism in Black Art," Amy McIntosh considers how black art has been used to address and mediate social urgencies and devastations. Sean Means's "The Resiliency of the African American Financial Narrative Presented through Multiple Media of Art" uses visual art, theater, and television shows to demonstrate how financial distress and wellbeing have been central to African American cultural production. Perrine Punwani's "Art as Advocacy: Explorations into Literary and Visual Art to Provoke Change" examines how art by people of color has not only been used to express beauty but to incite social transformation as well. In Katherine Steiner's "Struggle, Defiance, and Triumph: Black Photographers and Their Magic," she presents the work of black photographers to show students how artists have responded to social and political crises with artistic and technical innovations. Tara Waugh's

*“Things Fall Apart: Piecing it all Back Together with Contemporary Black Art”* supplements Chinua Achebe’s 1958 novel with art that addresses the circumstances and legacies of colonialism for black people. To engage black art and its social implications, each of the curriculum units powerfully results in assignments that ask students to become artists, critics, and curators themselves.

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