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The Blk Grrrl Book Fair: Justice Through L'art Pour L'art

Teka-Lark Fleming · Wednesday, February 18th, 2015

When I founded the Blk Grrrl Book Fair in 2014, I did it because I wanted a literary and visual arts event where Black people could have agency. I wanted a literary and arts event where all women could have agency. I wanted an event where Black people could write and do art in the spirit of *l'art pour l'art*.

The Blk Grrrl Book Fair is not a social justice event.

The Blk Grrrl Book Fair is an art event, but it is political.

It's political when you advertise a book fair with published writers and MFAs and you continuously get approached by people who want to do health screenings.

I am a Black woman and I like art and literature. I am a feminist who plans art and literary events.

This is radical.

Art and literature are white and mostly male. That's how they are always written about. POC need to be let in, but building our own vehicle? That's unbelievable to the established literary and art worlds.

Apparently the idea of an event by a person of color for people of color that isn't about pathologizing the community or pathologizing the people in the community is a concept that is outrageous in Los Angeles.

All art is political. If you say your art is not political, then it is, as Chinua Achebe said in his book of essays *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, "just another piece of deodorised dog shit." Even then, it is still political.

Agreeing with the status quo by not challenging them is political.

Just being a woman and doing art is political.

Just being Black and writing about your day is political.

Being Black and writing about being Black and eating breakfast—that's radical.

If you are not a person of privilege, every action you take beyond being on your knees is a political

act and anytime you say no—it is an act of radicalism.

No—to staying in a box.

No—to explaining.

No—to being invisible.



The Blk Grrrl Book Fair wants to radically challenge the idea of Black as a personality type for Black people because even Black people have forgotten the diversity within our community. It wants to force the idea that feminism is African. It is an event that does not have to fit into the narrow parameters of a grant, and it will not be performing or explaining or negotiating or erasing Black people's existence.

Too many times I've seen events like the Los Angeles Art Book Fair (LAABF), where Black people were an exotic experience for the white-approved audience.

Let us go beyond the conversation that took place at LAABF on the controversy of artist Edie Fake's appropriation of the Black Lives Matter's logo for a party memento. How much does the LAABF (which took place on a property with Los Angeles in its title) care about Black lives? How much does MOCA care about Black lives?

I thought Los Angeles included all races.

At the core part of the LAABF, which were the exhibitors, there seemed to only be two Black-owned exhibitors. There are Black artists, publishers and art collectives. Where were they? Where were the Latinos? Where was the working class in general?

LAABF was held at MOCA. MOCA was built in part with public money and on public land in Los Angeles. LAABF did not look like Los Angeles and no one seemed to find that problematic or mentioned it outside the Edie Fake controversy.

No one can mention it because no one has agency. Mentioning that will get you uninvited and labeled a troublemaker, and Black people in L.A. need white people—even the white people who are racist in the arts—to like us.

Too often, people of color are forced into the role of the social justice “mammy” at white events because white people want to pretend as if they don't understand and are helpless, delicate flowers when it comes to racism.

White institutions know all about racism. Explaining the racism to those that actively practiced it for nearly 100 years in Los Angeles is akin to masochism for Black people.

The mother of my friend, owner of the Cielo Galleries/Studios, and partner in the Blk Grrrl Book Fair, Skira Martinez, said that there are three types of people in this world:

1) People who get it;

2) People who want to get it;

3) People who don't want to get it.

I'm the first-generation in my family in the U.S. not born under slavery, the Black Codes, racial covenants or Jim Crow—but to many that is not polite dinner conversation. I'm no longer having dinner with people who feel my history and existence is rude and divisive. I'm no longer having conversations with people who don't want to get it.

I have no desire for inclusion into the art or literary communities that play games such as, “I didn't know there were Latinos who could paint!”

In cities that are as big and diverse as Los Angeles and New York, racism isn't accidental. People play stupid, but they are insincere.

The Blk Grrrl Book Fair exists because I want people of color to be able to just write and do art.



I want an event that is integrated—and by “integrated,” I don't mean people of color in relation to white people. I mean everybody.

I want an event whereby people who are transgender or bisexual will be comfortable having a conversation about their partner with a stranger.

I want an event that is openly feminist because as Marie Shear said, “Feminism is the radical notion that women are people.”

I want to create an event where Black women, Latinas and transgender people don't have to spend the entire time second-guessing their names, neighborhoods and credentials.

I want to create an event that Black doesn't automatically mean hiphop. Hiphop does not own the Black experience.

I want to create an event where Black and Brown is normal for a *l'art pour l'art* event and not just a “social justice” component that is merely included for a *we-don't-have-any-people-of-color* and *we-don't-want-to-hear-peoples'-mouths* panic moment.

I want to create an event where the indigenous women, the Latinas and the Black women are the first choices and there are more than one of each of us.

I don't want to be included in oppression because oppression is artless. Everyone being the same class and the same race and the same sexual orientation and the same gender getting to decide who is OK and who is not, is boring.

Black people feeling they need to act a certain way in order to be successful is sad. Why would I want to be included in something boring, artless and sad? I don't want to go to a party unless I'm enthusiastically invited and sincerely wanted.

Am I saying that racism doesn't matter and it's just about a positive attitude? No, I am not.

The reasons behind appropriation, exclusion, humanity as a product to be bought and sold are important, but the solution is not to superficially include more Black people, more transgender

people or more women.

Predominantly white literary and visual art institutions know they are white. They want to remain white; more importantly they want to remain wealthy, white-man controlled institutions.

My book fair will not be concerned with what that dude thinks. He can come because the goal of the Blk Grrrl Book Fair is not to mimic oppression and exclusion, but to choose the Z path. The Z path is freedom through cooperation and there are no boots. The wealthy white guy will be like everyone else at the Blk Grrrl Book Fair: his opinion will be no more important than the Indigenous grandmother's.

Justice is agency. When Women, Indigenous people, Black people, Disabled people and Transgender people have real agency there will no longer be this need to be validated, this need to beg and this compulsion to prove exceptionalism.

Funding for diversity for mostly white institutions should be pulled. A big chunk of people's operating budget comes with a diversity component. There are many mostly white cultural institutions that would close if their diversity funding got pulled.

That funding needs to be challenged.

It's been 50 years and they've not improved. Children's programs shouldn't count for diversity in institutions that are clearly for adults, especially when it's obvious those programs exist just to keep all funding designated for Black and Latino people.

Grants and fellowships are often created through tax breaks that the wealthy receive, so their money is our money.

Black people, feminists, and Latinos shouldn't have to apply to white, heterosexist institutions for funding. These institutions have shown by their actions that they are active practitioners of exclusion and radical racism, so they should have no say in what our art is and what we do.

They are the ones who drew the line between them, who are white and upper middle class and us, who are people of color and working class. I'm simply pointing out what is there.

The gatekeepers for funding should be us. We should be able to have our own literary and art institutions that we run. That's justice, that's equality. Justice is not you giving me a crumb off the slice of pie you already slabbered all over. Justice is me having my own cake, because I don't like pie.

The idea behind the Blk Grrrl Book Fair is to go beyond the binary, to go beyond the question: is this art or social justice? To go beyond Black and white. To go beyond cisgender. To go beyond the economically oppressed and the privileged. To go beyond the United States of America's borders.

The Blk Grrrl Book Fair is an attempt to challenge the idea of race, to challenge the idea of literature, to challenge the idea of art, to answer, "What does women cooperating look like?" and to see what happens when you label an art event feminist and Black with no corporate funding or approval from the status quo.

The Blk Grrrl Book Fair will be an attempt to demonstrate what freedom looks like.

The inaugural Blk Grrrl Book Fair is a free event. It will be held on Saturday, March 7 from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. the literary programming begins at 5 p.m. The fair will be held at Cielo Galleries/Studios located at 3201 Maple Street in South Central Los Angeles

90011.

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