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Ken Johnson, Times Art Critic, Taken To Task In Open Letter

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An [open letter](#) is demanding New York Times critic [Ken Johnson](#) acknowledge racist and sexist language in his recent writings.

The art critic's review of "[Now Dig This! Art & Black Los Angeles](#)" and November's preview of "[The Female Gaze: Women Artists Making Their World](#)" are being called out for their generalizations of black and female artists. The open letter states:

"Using irresponsible generalities, Johnson compares women and African-American artists to white male artists, only to find them lacking."

Johnson's "[Now Dig This!](#)" review states: "Black artists didn't invent assemblage...Thanks to white artists like George Herms, Bruce Conner and Ed Kienholz, assemblage was popular on the West Coast in the 1960s." The open letter counters:

"No historian, artist or curator has ever made a claim that anyone, black or white, "invented" assemblage. In fact, assemblage has roots in many cultures and it is well documented that European and American Modernist artists borrowed heavily from African art in their use of the form."

On his Facebook page, Johnson later acknowledged that the initial statement, "[taken out of context seems needlessly provocative](#)," but argues "my overall point, however, I think is consistent with Ms. Jones's [the museum curator's] description of the historical and social milieu in which black sculptors were working in Los Angeles in the 1960s."

Johnson's [review](#) also pushes buttons towards the end when it praises the artists whose work "you don't have to be black to feel," which seems to place the burden on the black artist to appeal to the white viewer.

ArtFagCity's Paddy Johnson [suggests Johnson should focus less on the distance](#) separating art and personal experience when she writes, "Rather than wondering at the size of the gap between how white visitors and black visitors view 'Dig This!', we should be looking at what can be done—and what has been done, by curator Kellie Jones—to shrink it."

Soon after the "Now Dig This!" review Johnson seemed to make [another uninformed generalization, this time about female artists](#):

"The day that any woman earns the big bucks that men like Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst rake in is still a long way off. Sexism is probably a good enough explanation for inequities in the market. But might it also have something to do with the nature of the art that women tend to make?"

Johnson does not go on to elaborate on what kind of women *do* tend to make, because of course *women do not tend to make any certain kind of art*. Instead Johnson seems to place women at fault for their lack of representation in the art market, even though he mentions sexism in the art market. This isn't the first time Johnson has been under fire for his opinions, however. [ARTINFO](#) reminds us that Johnson's previous reviews have been accused of being insensitive toward both [Asian](#) and [Chicano](#) artists.

The open letter concludes: "Johnson replays stereotypes of inscrutable blackness and inadequate femininity in the guise of serious inquiry, but that inquiry never happens." It demands that the New York Times acknowledge its lapse in judgment for publishing Johnson's contentious reviews.

With 1,182 signatures and counting, it's difficult to ignore this call to arms, especially since [the petition includes prominent artists and critics](#) such as Emily Roysdon, Clifford Owens, Lucy Raven and Lorraine O'Grady as well as curators Chon Noriega, Brooke Davis Anderson and Dan Cameron.

What do you think, readers? Are Johnson's statements prejudiced or are readers being overly sensitive? [See the open letter here](#) and leave your opinion in the comments below.

Clarification: *Although the document was posted on iPetition.com, the writers of the letter have suggested that it is merely an "open letter," and not a petition. Language has been changed throughout to reflect this fact.*