FAITH RINGGOLD: ART

AN INTRODUCTION by Josephine Withers

"I don't feel restricted by being female, any more than I feel restricted by being Black or being American—these are the facts of my life. It is powerful to know who you are. The restriction comes in not knowing." By her own account, Faith Ringgold has at times made herself unpopular in her community with her strongly articulated stance as an activist black feminist artist.

Ringgold was born, raised and educated in Harlem (at City College of New York) and today lives only a few blocks from where she grew up. Although her art has always had political content, it is particularly in the past ten years that she has successfully integrated her interests in black history, African culture, and women's history. All of this led her away from conventional painting (she began to see that as "a backdrop for something else") and toward the soft sculptures, masks, and life-size puppets which can also serve as "actors" in performances. That her art deals with visceral issues and is not aesthetically precious or inaccessible has made her especially popular with college audiences. Ringgold's relationship to the "high art" world of commercial galleries and the downtown New York "scene" is a complicated one. Although she occasionally has New York shows, most recently at the Summit Gallery in 1979, she, by and large, shuns that world as being too oriented toward selling objects. By the same virtue, she is very much in step with a whole range of artists, working all over the country, who are exploring new methods of presenting their art, with a view to reaching more diverse audiences than just a pre-selected art audience.

Mama Jones, Andrew, Barbara and Faith, from her Family of Woman series, are portraits of individuals from Ringgold's childhood, and they capture "the quality rather than the likeness of a person." The costumes were sewn by Ringgold's mother, a professional seamstress.

1 All quotations are either from Lucy Lippard, "Faith Ringgold's Black, Political, Feminist Art," Ms. (July 1976), reprinted in revised form in her From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art (New York: Dutton, 1976); or from an interview with Josephine Withers, 8 March 1980.
*Meecha and Cliff*, from the *Couples* series, is an artistic embodiment of every mother's desire. "Meecha is a pseudonym for Michele; I married her off in 1974 to Cliff. Cliff is an actor—I picked him out. I did that and got it over with because I decided that all mothers really want their daughters to get married" (Ringgold's daughter is Michele Wallace, author of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*). Ringgold also "married off" her mother-in-law, who did in fact subsequently remarry. All the *Couples* figures can be presented either dressed or undressed.

Bena and Buba are the central figures in *The Wake and Resurrection of the Bicentennial Negro*, an improvisational performance in which participants don masks and costumes and become the mourning family. Buba has died of an overdose; his daughter, Bena, has died of grief. The scenario is sketched out by Ringgold, who then directs her volunteer actors to improvise the dialogue, sometimes with unexpected results. The *Wake* was first presented in 1976, and many times since then, most recently at the University of Massachusetts in March 1980.