

“ART HURTS”: INTIMACY, DIFFICULTY, AND DISTANCE IN  
GWENDOLYN BROOKS’S “TWO DEDICATIONS”

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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In this thesis, I examine Gwendolyn Brooks’s diptych poems “Two Dedications” from her 1968 collection *In the Mecca*. Critical accounts of “Two Dedications” cast the poems as fixed oppositions between “frivolous” Western art and inspiring, communal black art. I propose that such binaries are reductive and overlook the intellectual benefits Brooks locates in abstract modernist art. Using Ezra Pound’s theories of modernist difficulty, Walter Benjamin’s concept of artistic “aura,” and the Black Arts Movement (BAM) manifestoes of Ron Karenga and Larry Neal, I argue that Brooks’s poems demonstrate the benefits of both abstract Western art and representational BAM art. Specifically, Brooks suggests that both types of art provide avenues for self-determination and liberation from institutional conventions.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Criticism on Brooks's "Two Dedications" often establishes rigid binaries between "frivolous," abstract, European art and inspiring, representational, black art. The simplification of these readings reflects the larger simplification in critical accounts of Brooks's 1967 conversion to the Black Arts Movement (BAM). Brooks wrote the "diptych" poems in August of 1967, right after her now-mythologized conversion to BAM at the Second Fisk Writer's Conference. The two poems describe the unveilings of public art in two different areas of Chicago. "The Chicago Picasso" describes the dedication ceremony of a Picasso sculpture in the middle of Daley Center Plaza, while "The Wall" describes the unveiling of the *Wall of Respect* on the corner of 43<sup>rd</sup> and Langley Avenues on the South Side. In these poems, Brooks addresses the nature of abstract and representational art, as well as the effects that these different aesthetics have on their audiences. A closer examination of these two poems will help remedy existing, simplified readings of "Two Dedications" and perhaps contribute to other critical efforts to revise reductive accounts of Brooks's conversion to BAM.

Criticism on "Two Dedications" mainly focuses on the differences between the types of art depicted in each poem.<sup>1</sup> William Hansell examines both poems in the set and argues that "Two Dedications" presents an opposition of two different kinds of art: one, socially relevant art and the other, merely "decorative" (11). Hansell cites differences in the speaker's response to artworks in each poem as evidence that Brooks prefers the socially relevant mural in "The Wall" over the abstract Picasso sculpture. "The Wall," he

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<sup>1</sup> For arguments about the opposing types of art in "Two Dedications," see Melhem 178 and Hansell 11.

explains, portrays “concrete” and “definite” art to which the audience may relate (13). While these claims seem well supported by the excerpts he provides, Hansell assumes that the muted response described in “The Chicago Picasso” evidences Brooks’s dislike for abstract art. When comparing the two poems, Hansell suggests that “Brooks plainly reveals that Picasso’s sculpture has not moved her deeply [...] the statue seems to have done little more than stir her abstract thought” (13). However, Brooks’s own comments on “The Chicago Picasso” articulate the benefits of the discomfort that abstract art creates and assert her approval of the Picasso sculpture, it seems that the relationship between the two poems may be more complex than the binary Hansell presents (Brooks, *Conversations* 38).<sup>2</sup>

D. H. Melhem similarly designates “The Chicago Picasso” and “The Wall” as opposing explorations of “formal” and “popular” art. Her analysis of “The Chicago Picasso” is more nuanced, as she acknowledges the poem’s exploration of art’s “worthwhile demands” (178-80). However, her analysis, similar to Hansell’s, is brief, and mostly emphasizes differences between the two poems and the art they depict (179). R. Baxter Miller presents “The Chicago Picasso” as Brooks’s affirmation of the necessity of “human perception” in the creation of meaning, especially in an increasingly impersonal Western world (113). While all of these critics provide useful commentary on the ways in which “The Chicago Picasso” epitomizes modernist, Western art, a more thorough investigation of the poem’s attitude toward Western art and a more nuanced examination

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<sup>2</sup> For Brooks’s complete explanation of the benefits of the Picasso sculpture, see *Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks* pp.36-38.

of its relationship to “The Wall” can illuminate Brooks’s ambivalence and anxieties over cultural aesthetics during this turning point in her career.

Margo Natalie Crawford briefly discusses “The Wall” in her examination of the legacy of the *Wall of Respect* in the development of Chicago’s black art.<sup>3</sup> She argues that the poem marks Brooks’s conversion to BAM and the transformation of Brooks’s poetry to an “all black space” (28). “The Wall,” Crawford proposes, serves as an exhibition of Brooks’s new black aesthetic and of her newfound support of the Black Power Movement (27). In a similar vein, Laurence Lieberman asserts that “The Wall,” published right before Brooks’s departure from New York presses, communicates Brooks’s desire to separate herself from white culture: “this writer has now made a pledge to become disaffiliated from that [white] world” (Lieberman 29). Both Crawford and Lieberman place “The Wall” in the useful historical contexts of BAM and Brooks’s 1967 conversion, and they both identify numerous examples of Brooks’s black aesthetic. However, both Crawford’s and Lieberman’s analyses of “Two Dedications” overlook “The Chicago Picasso” and suggest that “The Wall” signifies Brooks’s unadulterated rejection of white culture. A closer examination of both poems in her diptych reveals more nuanced approaches to black and white culture in Chicago.

Regarding Brooks’s own views on black and European art, critics have recently argued that the 1967 Fisk Writer’s Conference did not constitute as clean of a break with “white art” as some versions of Brooks’s conversion suggest. D. H. Melhem, Courtney Thorsson, and Karen Jackson Ford have argued that Brooks does not forsake European

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<sup>3</sup> For Crawford’s argument about the significance of the *Wall of Respect*, see “Black Light on the Wall of Respect: The Chicago Black Arts Movement” in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* pp. 23-42.

poetic forms after 1967; rather, she struggles to reconcile the conventional forms of her earlier poetry with the new demands of BAM throughout her career.<sup>4</sup> Ford emphasizes the difficulty with which Brooks departs from the sonnet and ballad forms, which serve as venues for Brooks's formal experimentation and demonstration of ambivalence toward European poetry ("Sonnets" 358, "Quatrain" 372). Moreover, Ford argues that Brooks's anxiety over the "appropriateness of art in the political and social struggle" was constant throughout her nearly sixty-year career ("Sonnets" 348). These arguments show that Brooks did not reject European art after 1967 but that she continued to find these poetic forms useful in expressing the struggle of blacks through the late-twentieth century.

I propose a similar interrogation of the existing binary between black and white art in criticism of "Two Dedications." While there are notable differences between "The Chicago Picasso" and "The Wall," there are also a number of unifying themes that connect the two poems and the art that they depict. In both poems, art functions as a unifying force: the speaker in "The Chicago Picasso" repeatedly refers to the audience as "we," articulating universal struggles and discomforts of audience interactions with high art; in "The Wall," the mural draws together various demonstrations of cultural pride around the common black identity it represents. Furthermore, the religious themes present in both of the poems suggest the way all audiences revere art as sacred objects, containing valuable truths that each audience attempts to access.

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<sup>4</sup> See Thorsson's "Gwendolyn Brooks's Black Aesthetic of the Domestic," Melhem's *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*, and Ford's "The Sonnets of Satin Legs Brooks" and "The Last Quatrain: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Ends of Ballads" for arguments on how Brooks's struggle to reconcile white forms with black content persists throughout her career.

This is not to suggest that the two poems and the art they describe are identical, however. The intimate relationship between the audience and the mural depicted in “The Wall” starkly contrasts the distant and uncomfortable relationship between the audience and the sculpture in “The Chicago Picasso.” “Two Dedications” is thus an examination of the ways art is made distant from or intimate with an audience and the different types of benefits these relationships offer. While the concrete, representational mural depicted in “The Wall” inspires assertions of cultural pride and political protest from the audience, the abstract and distant sculpture in “The Chicago Picasso” encourages equally valid intellectual exercise that pushes observers out of conventional ways of thinking and prescribed methods of interpretation. Brooks does not dismiss or show preference for one type of art over the other, however; both poems demonstrate the useful benefits of abstract and representational art to the revolution of BAM. More specifically, “The Chicago Picasso” and “The Wall” suggest that art offers avenues for self-determination and liberation from institutional restrictions.

## CHAPTER II

### “THE CHICAGO PICASSO”

The title of Brooks’s “The Chicago Picasso” refers to a fifty-foot tall, cubist sculpture of the same name located in the Daley Center Plaza in downtown Chicago (see fig. 1; see Appendix A for figs. 1 and 2). Picasso designed the sculpture and donated it to the people of Chicago to grace the newly completed Center in 1967. The abstract sculpture represents what many believe to be either the face of a woman or one of Picasso’s Afghan dogs (Artner). Brooks wrote “The Chicago Picasso” upon the request of Mayor Richard Daley and read the poem at the sculpture’s dedication ceremony on August 15<sup>th</sup> to thousands of spectators (see fig. 2). Despite being written before the unveiling itself, the poem accurately captures the audience’s ambivalent reaction to Picasso’s sculpture. Reactions ranged from Mayor Daley’s hopeful prediction that “what is strange to us today will be familiar tomorrow” to the insistence of a number of city officials that the sculpture be torn down (Artner).

Picasso’s reputation for innovation, however, was the reason why the Chicago Public Building Commission aggressively sought his services in the first place. One of the lead architects on the Daley Center project, William Hartmann, expressed the group’s desire for the new center to provide “the location for the most important public sculpture in America”; the commission decided that Picasso, whom they regarded as the greatest living artist at the time, could provide such a monumental work (Hartmann qtd. in D’alejandro 24). The erection of the *Chicago Picasso* marked an inaugural moment in the history of American public art: it was the first non-representational, non-memorial public sculpture erected in a major American city and the first monumental sculpture

created by Picasso (D'alessandro 25). The abstract, cubist work starkly contrasts the representational sculptures that comprised the American public art canon in the 1960s, and, in this way, represents a momentous occasion in the history of American art.

The speaker of “The Chicago Picasso” spends little time describing the sculpture itself, however, and instead uses the occasion to ruminate on the ways in which high art is distant from its audience. The speaker contrasts the cubist *Picasso* with more common works of public art in American cities, which audiences easily appreciate for their faithful representation of familiar figures or for their size. The *Chicago Picasso*, as an abstract sculpture, resists such easy appreciation and requires mental work from the observer in order to become meaningful. The poem suggests that this requisite interpretation creates discomfort in the audience and distance between an audience and the sculpture. The poem suggests that the “aura” arising from the audience’s reverence of canonical, high art also prevents emotional or physical intimacy with the work. The sober attitudes and quiet reverence that characterize the proper decorum of audience interaction with high art reinforce this distance. Using Pound’s theory of modernist difficulty and Walter Benjamin’s concept of artistic “aura,” I argue that “The Chicago Picasso” rejects the exclusivity of high Western art and suggests that high art provides benefits for audiences of all classes by pushing them out of conventional ways of thinking. The *Chicago Picasso*, as an abstract, modernist work, epitomizes Western high art during this time.

Ezra Pound’s theories of modernist difficulty partially account for the audience’s discomfort with the *Picasso* in the poem. It may seem counter-intuitive to place Brooks’s poetry in conversation with Pound, a writer whom Brooks claims she does not “even admire” and who constructed his artistic theories over forty years before Brooks wrote

“Two Dedications” (Brooks, *Conversations* 44). However, as a contemporary of Picasso and one of the foremost theorists of modernist art and its relationship to audience, Pound provides a useful theoretical lens through which to understand the audience discomfort described in “The Chicago Picasso.” The application of modernist theory to Brooks’s poem can explain the redemptive benefits that an audience’s uncomfortable reactions to abstract art can provide, reactions that previous critics have used as evidence of Brooks’s distaste for Picasso despite conflicting assertions from Brooks herself.<sup>5</sup>

The erection of the *Chicago Picasso* in the Daley Center coincided with what some critics cite as the end of modernism’s potency through its absorption into the mainstream American canon.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, by 1967, Picasso was “no longer a fashionable artist,” as avant-garde aesthetics characterized the new frontier of American art (Gopnik 13). Nonetheless, the erection of the *Chicago Picasso* marked a significant moment in Picasso’s history in the United States; it completed the transformation of the artist’s status in the American canon, from criticized experimentalist to celebrated master. During the 1913 Armory Show, Picasso’s cubist paintings received negative reviews from *Chicago Daily Tribune* critic Harriet Monroe, who criticized his paintings for being “too intellectual” (D’alejandro 14). By the mid-1960s, however, American audiences generally revered Picasso as one of the greatest twentieth-century artists, and his work frequently appeared in American art museums and exhibitions (14).

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<sup>5</sup> Brooks suggests that abstract art can push audiences out of their “old grooves” and present them with something completely unfamiliar (Brooks, *Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks* 38).

<sup>6</sup> See Robert Genter’s Introduction to *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* and Susan Friedman’s “Definitional Excursions: The Meaning of Modern/Modernity/Modernism” for summaries of critical debates surrounding the end of modernism.

Despite Picasso's high status in the United States, Monroe's initial critique of his art as "too intellectual" rings true with the audience at the dedication of the *Chicago Picasso* over fifty years later. Brooks's poem demonstrates the Chicago audience's continued discomfort with the intellectual rigor that the cubist sculpture demands. The abstract, modernist sculpture creates difficulty for the audience at its dedication, and "The Chicago Picasso" begins with a meditation on this discomfort:

Does Man love Art? Man visits Art, but squirms.

Art hurts. Art urges voyages—

and it is easier to stay at home,

the nice beer ready. (1-4)

The speaker describes the audience's grappling with high art through a lexicon of physical movement. The audience uncomfortably "squirms" and "voyages" in the presence of art that resists easy interpretations. This conception of artistic interpretation as uncomfortable movement or exercise emerges from modernist discourses over difficult art, which cast interaction with difficult art as a form of healthy exercise that invigorates the mind (Diepeveen 156). These uncomfortable mental voyages characterize a specifically modernist form of "pleasure" and push observers out of conventional ways of thinking. In an interview with George Stavros, Brooks hints at the source of "squirming" in front of high art: "those of us who have not grown up or to [art] perhaps squirm a little in its presence. We feel that something is required of us that perhaps we aren't altogether able to give" (Brooks, *Interviews* 37). This notion of becoming the observer that the art requires evokes Pound's theories of modernist difficulty and the ideal audience.

Modernists redefined the type pleasure provided by their art as active and virile “modernist pleasure.” These artists challenged traditional theories of art that maintained that art’s function was to provide passive pleasure for its audience (Diepeveen 150). Moreover, traditional conceptions of pleasure understood the intellectual work of interpretation and difficulty to be at odds with the easy pleasure that came “unbidden” from art (154). Modernists’ promotion of active, “modernist pleasure” repelled early criticisms that modernist art was unenjoyable and, furthermore, provided modernists grounds on which they could claim superiority over the Victorian artistic tradition, a tradition they believed catered to mass audiences. Modernists argued that their art yielded its benefits to only the most educated and elite audiences (163). Conversely, they cast the pleasure of traditional art as feminine and unmotivating, the products of an inane mass culture (162).

“The Chicago Picasso’s” opening stanza illustrates the contrast between the “active” intellectual engagement required by the Picasso and the passive pleasures the Chicago audience expects of art. The speaker acknowledges that “it is easier to stay at home / the nice beer ready” (3-4). This passage contrasts the “easier” lethargy and indulgence of beer-drinking with the mental “exercise” that the Picasso requires. Furthermore, the consumption of “beer” carries a working-class connotation, suggesting that the speaker refers to non-elite audiences normally excluded from interaction with high art. It is these people, not necessarily Pound’s elite audience, who Brooks suggests benefit from interaction with difficult art. In this way, Brooks adapts high modernist conceptions of difficulty and pleasure and imagines more inclusive benefits of modernist art, which audiences of all classes can enjoy.

Brooks's illustration of the benefits of difficult modernist art for working-class audiences refutes the exclusivity associated with high modernism since its conception. Early, elitist modernists intended the difficulty of high modernist art to repel less-educated, mass-audiences who could distort the art's meaning (Genter 2). Furthermore, modernist difficulty has historically functioned as a division between the educated elite and unworthy masses. As Diepeveen notes, “[b]y the early 1960s, high modernism had rigidly established not just its canonical texts, but difficulty itself as the default aesthetic of high culture” (223). An audience’s inability to grapple with difficult art would, for elitist modernists, evidence their lack of intelligence and refinement. Pound maintained that difficult modernist art yielded its benefits only to an educated, elite class possessing the knowledge and skills necessary to access its truth (“How to Read” 38). Modernists believed that an audience *unable* to deal with modernist difficulty would, as a result of their insufficiency, experience anxiety in the presence of their art, just as the audience at the *Picasso* unveiling “squirms” in front of the sculpture (Diepeveen 244).

Brooks rejects the elitism of high modernism by placing the speaker of “The Chicago Picasso” among the audience that is “unfit” to deal with difficult art. She describes her affinity with the confused audience in an interview: “I’m not satirizing them, because I’m too close to them to do that [...] But I do urge them” (Brooks, *Conversations* 37-8). While Pound uses difficult art as a way to divide the elite audiences from “unworthy” audiences, Brooks sees encounters with difficult art as an opportunity to “urge” sluggish audiences outside of conventional ways of thinking. In this way, Brooks’s poem is a more inclusive imagining of the benefits of difficult art; difficult art

encourages beneficial intellectual “voyages,” even in audiences without extensive education or interpretive skills.

These intellectual voyages are necessary because the abstract *Chicago Picasso* does not lend itself to easy interpretations. Even the epigraph of the poem, an excerpt from the *Chicago Sun-Times*, demonstrates the sculpture’s difficulty, describing the *Picasso* as a “big steel sculpture that looks at once like a bird and a woman” (“CP”). The journalist’s inability to place the sculpture into familiar categories of interpretation, either “bird” or “woman,” demonstrates the *Picasso*’s resistance to conventional methods of analysis. The difficulty of the *Picasso*, however is not an intrinsic quality of the art itself; critics emphasize that artistic difficulty results from an audience’s experience with and reaction to obscurity in art (Adams 6, Diepeveen 224). Hazard Adams explains that difficulty arises from an artwork’s deviation from established artistic conventions; difficulty remains until the audience learns the characteristics of the new artistic forms, which subsequently become the new artistic conventions (36). Applying this theory, we can understand the novelty of the *Picasso*, especially in the realm of public art, to be a source of its difficulty. The erection of the *Chicago Picasso* occurs at a time when modernism was in the process of canonization; its previously radical techniques were becoming the conventions of mainstream art. In order to inhabit the American canon, however, the *Chicago Picasso* must break and stretch the conventions of American public art, and it encourages the audience to do the same.

Brooks’s adaption of modernist difficulty is, in effect, a protest against modernism’s elitism and androcentrism. This critique appears in the poem’s characterization of the art-audience relationship. Similarly to Pound, the speaker casts

this relationship as sexual one when she asserts that “we must cook ourselves and style ourselves for Art, who / is a requiring courtesan” (8-9). The poem’s casting of high art as a “requiring courtesan” suggests that artistic engagement is the site of reciprocal exchange. Conversely, Pound characterizes the art-audience relationship in his poems as a violent rape.<sup>7</sup> Brooks genders high art as an empowered courtesan who demands intellectual “payment” before she will yield her services. The term “courtesan” carries upper-class connotations, as well, evoking the elitism of high art. However, the fact that Brooks’s “beer drinking” audience has access to the art’s benefits suggests that they can overcome modernism’s class barriers. The repetition of “ourselves” suggests the potential for self-improvement available to lower-class audiences through interaction with the sculpture.

Despite the beneficial voyages that the *Picasso* inspires, the speaker suggests that seeking a definitive interpretation of the abstract sculpture may be missing the point altogether. Instead, the speaker argues that audiences should appreciate abstract art simply for its aesthetic qualities. The speaker enjoins the reader to

Observe the tall Cold of a Flower  
which is as innocent and as guilty  
as meaningful and as meaningless as any  
other flower in the western field. (16-19)

The speaker compares abstract art to a “flower” inasmuch as observers regard a flower as beautiful for its aesthetic qualities only. Although the flower serves as a popular symbol

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<sup>7</sup> Pound refers to his edited poems as “emasculated” and “castrati” (Engler 317, Pound *Letters* 18). In “Tenzone,” Pound casts the art as a male rapist and the audience as timid virgins (3).

for artists, who instill it with subjective meaning, Brooks's speaker reminds us that a flower is tall, "cold" matter, containing no intrinsic meaning other than the interpretations that the audience imposes upon it.

The flowers in this last stanza stand in the "western field," referring to the canon of Western art. During this time, modernist art dominated the Western canon, and high modernists, led by the New Critics, maintained that art carries no obligation to communicate with the audience (Genter 2). Abstract art, the poem suggests, epitomizes the tradition of *art pour l'art* or "art for art's sake": it is apolitical, neither "innocent" nor "guilty," and it serves no definite social function. Black Arts Movement artists criticized "art for art's sake," which they saw as the philosophy of an exclusive, Euro-American art tradition (Karenga 31).

Brooks, however, does not so readily dismiss abstract art. She discusses the flower metaphor in the last stanza of "The Chicago Picasso." "[w]e don't ask a flower to give us any special reasons for its existence. We look at it and we are able to accept it as being something different [...] Who can explain a flower? But, there it is" (Brooks, *Conversations* 38). Brooks locates the benefit of abstract art in its difference from familiar objects, a difference that forces observers out of their "comfortable old grooves" (Brooks, *Conversations* 37).

Despite abstract art's claims to an apolitical nature, reinforced by Brooks's comments, "The Chicago Picasso" actually locates within abstract art the potential for the radical challenging of institutional norms. Abstract art, while seemingly "innocent," encourages a breaking-down of social norms that carries revolutionary potential. Brooks's endorsement of abstract art resonates with what modernist artists saw as the

subversive potential of their own difficult art. Artists such as Ezra Pound attempt to shock readers out of their comfort zones, redefining traditional criteria for successful art as that which creates discomfort, rather than comfort, in an audience.<sup>8</sup> In “How to Read,” Pound describes traditionalists’ resistance to rebellious, modernist art: “This idea may worry lovers of order [...]. They regard it as dangerous, chaotic, subversive. They try every idiotic and degrading wheeze to tame it down” (21). Pound suggests that good art resists the “order” that critics try to instill upon it. The very function of modernist art, in his opinion, is to overturn these conventions. “The Chicago Picasso” similarly suggests that difficult art, such as modernist or abstract art, encourages a rebellious voyaging outside of established, institutional norms.

The speaker depicts the dedication of the *Picasso* as a rigidly organized and formal event. The second epigraph, which provides a concise description of the ceremony’s events, reads “(*Seiji Ozawa leads the Symphony. / The Mayor Smiles. / And 50,000 See.*)” (CP). The form of this epigraph reflects the social and political hierarchy as well as the formal divisions between leaders, performers, and audience at the ceremony. The clearly divided lines recreate the social organization which exalts the mayor above the passive citizens, whom the speaker describes as merely a number, “50,000.” These clear line divisions also suggest the distance between the art and the audience, a distance reinforced by the art’s difficulty. The abstract *Picasso* disrupts the rigid institutional and political organization at the ceremony, suggesting the radical potential of art to challenge established social and artistic conventions.

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<sup>8</sup> Pound expresses his desire to shock readers in poems such as “Tenzone” and “Commission,” in which he casts his poetry as a masculine, sexual force.

Brooks's embrace of modernist difficulty, but rejection of high modernist elitism is, in a way, a mixing of the social consciousness of BAM with the esotericism of modernism. Furthermore, her portrayal of modernist difficulty as a catalyst for knowledge expansion rather than an inhibitor of understanding represents a racial and gender protest against high modernism's Euro- and androcentric history. Gertrude Hughes explains that Brooks's poetry rebels against the epistemological limits imposed by male modernists: Brooks "question[s] patriarchally defined boundaries of knowledge, and [she] call[s] for efforts to expand cognitive capacities rather than accept principled limits to what can be known" (395). Hughes suggests that Brooks's rejection of masculine, modernist obscurity is both a feminist and racial protest inasmuch as it resists the "exotic primitive" and "enigmatic woman" stereotypes assigned to blacks and commonly promoted by modernists as repositories of authentic cultural identities (396).

Not only does the difficulty and obscurity of the modernist *Chicago Picasso* create distance between the artwork and audience, but sculpture's "aura," reinforced by the audience's reverence of high art, makes the sculpture distant and inaccessible. As mentioned before, the erection of the Picasso solidified the artist's place in the American canon, the culmination of his growing acceptance in the U.S. since 1913. Brooks's poem considers how religious-like reverence for high "Art" paradoxically results in that art becoming inaccessible as a result of its aura. Walter Benjamin defines "aura" as the authenticity that a work of art possesses, a remnant of art's original position as a sacred object in religious ritual (Benjamin). He argues that Western art maintains its "aura" through a "cult of the beautiful," that celebrates *l'art pour l'art*. The Picasso sculpture exists within this tradition: it is "pure art" that is "denied any social function [and] also

any categorizing by subject matter” (Benjamin). The speaker describes the dedication using biblical language, suggesting the *Picasso*’s position as a sacred object. Throughout the poem, Brooks capitalizes “Man” and “Art,” elevating the speaker’s ruminations to religious heights (1-2). The aura of the “sacred” Picasso distances the audience from the sculpture, however. As Benjamin explains, one of the principle characteristics of aura is that it evokes “the unique phenomena of distance, however close it may be” (Benjamin). What the Picasso gains in admiration and reverence, it loses in intimacy and potential connection with the audience.

Brooks suggests that the sculpture’s aura contributes to the audience’s distance from and discomfort with the *Picasso*. The speaker compares audience’s distant reverence of high art with their intimacy with more familiar types of public art:

We squirm.

We do not hug the Mona Lisa.

We

may touch or tolerate

an astounding fountain, or a horse-and-rider.

At most, another Lion.” (10-15)

The *Mona Lisa* epitomizes canonical Western art; audiences worship the painting as a sacred work of historical and cultural significance. Consequently, the *Mona Lisa* remains distant from audiences, characterized in the poem by a lack of physical contact. The speaker’s assertive “[w]e do not hug the Mona Lisa” communicates the unwritten rules of audience decorum while engaging with high art. These practices, meant to encourage respect for art, paradoxically prevent an audience from connecting with a work, just as

religious worship encourages impersonal reverence for an abstract deity. Brooks explores this same idea in her poem, “the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon;” in it, she discusses the incompatibility of love and the religious reverence reinforced by organized worship.<sup>9</sup> The speaker of “The Chicago Picasso” suggests that all works of canonical, high art are in a similar position as that of a religious leader or deity: audiences revere art, but this reverence renders emotional connection between the audience and the artwork impossible.

The poem suggests that the introduction of the *Chicago Picasso* into the realm of public art creates a crisis for the Chicago audience. Picasso is an artist whose work audiences would normally observe quietly in a decorous art gallery. Conversely, typical public art does make the same claims to sacred “aura” or untouchability that high art does; it does not demand respectful distance or proper decorum. The “Lion,” “fountain,” or “horse-and-rider” to which the speaker refers characterize the familiar public statuary located in many American cities. The assonance of “astounding fountain” reinforces the familiarity of these works and the ease with which audiences may appreciate them for surface-level qualities like size. Furthermore, assonance is a familiar poetic device appearing in a poem largely devoid of conventional poetic techniques. The speaker suggests that audiences may “touch” these common public artworks, suggesting the intimacy allowed by them. Audiences can be both physically close to public art, as these statues often double as furniture or playgrounds for children, and mentally intimate with

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<sup>9</sup> In “the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon,” Brooks’s speaker muses “I think it must be lonely to be God” and asserts that “No one loves a master. No.” (1-2). The religious diction in “The Chicago Picasso” suggests that the sculpture finds itself in a similar paradoxical situation: audiences revere the sculpture but cannot love it.

the works, as audiences may easily appreciate them for their size or likeness to familiar figures. Typical public art does not demand the intellectual “exercise” or interpretive “voyages” that the *Picasso* requires.

There are ways modernist difficulty and artistic “aura” mutually reinforce each other to create distance between artworks and audiences. Hazard Adams explains that ancient, religious leaders emphasized the difficulty of sacred literature in order to preserve their authority as decoders of the text (24). New Critics used modernist difficulty in a similar way in the middle of the twentieth century. They emphasized the obscurity of modernist literature in order to preserve their authority as literary scholars and create a need for themselves in American universities (Diepeveen 226). The obscurity of the *Chicago Picasso* does not reinforce institutional art authorities, however. In fact, Brooks emphasizes the structure’s ability to push observers out of interpretive methods that artistic institutions attempt to enforce. In this way, modernist art becomes a potentially revolutionary force.

The formal qualities of “The Chicago Picasso” reflect the modernist difficulty of the sculpture and reinforce the discomfort of the audience. The poem lacks easily recognizable forms and poetic devices, and the line length vacillates between multiple sentences in line 1, “[d]oes Man love Art? Man visits art, but squirms,” to a single word in line 12, “We” (1, 12). The frequent enjambment in lines such as “We / may touch or tolerate / an astounding fountain,” and the formal inconsistency throughout the poem disrupt the flow of the speaker’s thoughts, reflecting the difficulty with which she attempts to make sense of the Picasso (12-14). The only stanza that somewhat conforms to conventional poetic form is the final stanza, comprised of four lines of approximately

equal length, which also introduces a flower metaphor, a common poetic feature. Not coincidentally, this is also the stanza in which the speaker reaches a coherent conclusion about the benefits of the Picasso sculpture and the nature of abstract art. Thus, the form of the poem reflects the speaker's journey from disorientation to comprehension, as well as the broader journey of modernist art, from shocking and different to familiar and conventional.

As I mentioned earlier, most of the previous criticism on "Two Dedications" either ignores "The Chicago Picasso" or dismisses the poem as an illustration of Brooks's dislike for European art. Upon closer examination, however, the first poem in Brooks's diptych reveals a much more favorable assessment of abstract art's benefits: while this art seems socially irrelevant and distant, this distance encourages unorthodox thought in the audience that rebels against institutional conventions. Furthermore, Brooks demonstrates that abstract, difficult art can lend itself to revolution by expanding the minds of its observers. When put into context of the racial struggles of the civil rights movement and BAM, we may even understand these benefits of abstract art to be assets to these revolutionary movements. Brooks suggests that modernist art carries the same revolutionary and counter-cultural potential that its earliest proponents promised. The unconventional thinking that this art promotes can aid in the destruction of oppressive racial representation in the same way that modernism challenges Victorian traditions. Far from being impotent and irrelevant, "The Chicago Picasso" suggests that high modernist art still encourages new thinking and new forms of representation that, potentially, can serve the radical movements of the 1960s.

## CHAPTER III

### “THE WALL”

The second of Brooks's “Two Dedications,” “The Wall,” more explicitly addresses the revolution of BAM; both the poem and the mural it describes are influential, early examples of BAM art that contribute to the establishment of the black aesthetic.<sup>10</sup> Brooks's poem, “The Wall,” describes the dedication of the *Wall of Respect* on the corner of 43<sup>rd</sup> and Langley Avenues on the South Side of Chicago (see fig. 3; see Appendix B for figs. 3 and 4). Brooks read her poem at the mural's unveiling on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1967 (see fig. 4). The *Wall* was an initiative of the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), a Chicago group dedicated to furthering the cultural nationalist aspirations of the Black Arts Movement using grassroots art (Donaldson 23). A group of OBAC artists painted a mural of black cultural heroes, politicians, artists, and athletes, as a way to promote black pride and solidarity in the impoverished community. These black heroes included people such as Malcolm X, Mohammed Ali, W. E. B. Dubois, and Charlie Parker. As opposed to the officially sanctioned Picasso sculpture, the *Wall* was a “guerilla project”: artists painted the mural on the side of a tavern wall without the permission of the city (23). Although the *Wall* initially promoted solidarity and respect within the Southside community, it soon became a place of gang violence and exploitation (25). Nevertheless, the *Wall of Respect* served as a symbol of black pride and inspired the creation of hundreds of similar murals after it was destroyed in 1973.

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<sup>10</sup> The black aesthetic, pioneered by BAM, entails the use of simple, direct language, black dialect, and a rejection of Anglo-American literary conventions.

The aesthetics of the *Wall* and the conditions of its creation starkly contrast those of the cubist *Chicago Picasso*. Brooks's poem portrays the *Wall of Respect* as a collaborative, local, and representational mural that invigorates the Southside audience at its dedication. Like "The Chicago Picasso," "The Wall" depicts the mural's dedication ceremony as a kind of religious service and the mural itself as a sacred object. The mural's power does not stem from its place in the Western canon or its untouchable "aura," however, but from its content, which consists of portraits of celebrated African American heroes. Furthermore, the *Wall* does not demand difficult interpretive "voyages" from the audience in order to become meaningful. The audience identifies with these recognizable leaders and the proud, new black identity that they represent. Moreover, the *Wall* inspires protest, both from the audience and the other performers at the ceremony, demonstrating the powerful, political potential of representational art. Thus, Brooks suggests that the intimacy allowed by representational and communal art can inspire self-determination and the revision of oppressive, historical representations of blacks.

Two of the qualities that BAM emphasized in its art were communal collaboration and concreteness. They believed concrete and collaborative art allowed black artists to escape European traditions of institutionalized and depoliticized art. BAM artists called for "concrete" art that could be performed in black neighborhoods, to working-class audiences, outside of the homogenizing influence of artistic institutions; art that could inspire physical acts of protest that furthered the movement's cultural nationalist goals (Karenga 33, Traylor 51). In his influential manifesto, "The Black Arts Movement," Larry Neal states that "poetry is a concrete action, a function" (260). "Concrete art," in the sense that BAM uses it, carries two different meanings: concrete art presents Black

Power ideals that relate to, and can manifest in, physical acts of protest, and, second, concrete art prioritizes clarity, making its political message accessible to all black audiences. Neal explains that black “[p]oems are physical entities [...] poems are transformed from physical objects into personal forces” (260). For BAM, black art is concrete enough to be forceful like a physical weapon and to inspire “personal forces,” further acts of protest against oppressive, white institutions and their characterizations of blacks.

The *Wall of Respect* exemplifies BAM’s requirements of concrete art: the mural is a physical monument to black achievement: it is representational; it is located in a Southside neighborhood, outside of white cultural institutions; and the mural is accessible to all blacks who desire to see it. Natalie Crawford describes Edward Christmas’s painting of Amiri Baraka’s poem, “SOS,” on the *Wall of Respect* as the ultimate display of concrete art: she argues that this act “reveals that, within the Black Arts ethos, poetry should be concrete enough to be painted and visual art should be concrete enough to articulate the ‘call’” (30). Christmas’s act makes Baraka’s poem concrete inasmuch as it becomes a physical object on the mural, which reinforces the concreteness of “SOS’s” call to action.

BAM’s focus on communal collaboration distinguishes black art from European modernist traditions that emphasize individual expression. Proponents of BAM viewed the individualism of abstract art as the white oppression against which their black art rebelled. Ron Karenga goes so far as to say that individuality, both in art’s creation and its reception, is a “useless isolation” that does not contribute to BAM’s goals (34). Black art, he argues, “must move with the masses and be moved by the masses” (34). Larry

Neal similarly asserts that “[t]he Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community” (257). The *Wall of Respect*, in both its content and its creation, exemplifies the type of community collaboration idealized by BAM activists like Karenga and Neal. Local artists from the Organization for Black American Culture painted the mural without permission from the city of Chicago, but *with* the permission of local gangs (Crawford 25). Furthermore, OBAC collaborated with community members to approve a list of black heroes who would appear on the *Wall*.

Not only does the mural exemplify concrete and communal art, but Brooks's poem “The Wall” does as well. The positioning of Brooks's speaker, among the crowd at the *Wall's* dedication, allows other participants' performances to shine through, presenting a diverse collective image of the community. The poem consists of a series of scenes depicting different performers at the ceremony, creating a collage of the community that reflects the *Wall's* composition. Brooks accomplishes this collage composition by presenting numerous, single images of the ceremony rather than one, continuous description. Upon arriving at the ceremony, the speaker encounters sandals; flowercloth; grave hoops of wood or gold, pendant from black ears, brown ears, reddish-brown and ivory ears. (4-8)

The speaker lists articles of traditional African apparel, “sandals” and “flowercloth,” popular among Afro-centric activists in the 1960s. Rather than individual

descriptions each performer's outfit, the speaker depicts an array of disembodied clothing, communicating a unifying theme of Afro-centrism that reinforces the collectiveness of the community. The speaker describes the audience by listing the variegated "ears" present at the ceremony, emphasizing the readiness of the audience to receive messages of black pride. The various skin tones reflect the ethnic diversity of the black audience that has come together in support of the *Wall* and its cause. The word "ivory" denotes fair skin, but also recalls Africa's imperialist past, in which European colonizers exploited the continent for ivory and other precious resources. The Southside community celebrates an African American history of accomplishment while rejecting a history of black oppression by whites.

Through its unique composition, the poem, "The Wall" becomes a mural itself, a collage of individual depictions of black artists expressing their pride and their dedication to black nationalism.<sup>11</sup> The conflation of the mural and the audience suggests the intimacy that this representational art allows, inspiring demonstrations of cultural pride from the audience. The speaker describes one of these demonstrations by actor Val Gray Ward and Black Power activists in the audience:

Black  
boy-men on roofs fist out "Black Power! Val,  
a little black stampede  
in African  
images of brass and flowerswirl,

---

<sup>11</sup> Black Nationalism maintains that the black population of the U.S. constitutes a separate nation and casts white America as a foreign country (Neal 257).

fists out “Black Power!” (10-15)

The poem moves seamlessly between depictions of Ward and the young, Black-Power activists, without the separating punctuation or line breaks. It is unclear, by line 15, whose “fist” is “out” and who is shouting “Black Power.” Additionally, the speaker describes Val Ward as a series of “images,” rather than a person, which blurs the line between the images on the *Wall* and the people at the dedication. Brooks’s swirling combination of discrete images mirrors the composition of a mural, in which separate images are placed together in a single piece without definitive borders between them. Val Ward, known for integrating African traditions into her dynamic performances, is “a little black stampede.” While this description initially may seem to reinforce black stereotypes by comparing a black woman to a herd of African animals, the focus of the description is the energetic connotation of the word “stampede.” Rather than suggesting her primitive ignorance, this metaphor suggests the dynamic energy that Ward draws from her African heritage.

The collage composition of “The Wall” exemplifies BAM’s requirements of concrete and communal art and conflates the descriptions of the audience and performers with the mural. Laurence Lieberman also notes the similarities between the mural and the poem inasmuch as the poem also gives voice to a diverse community of activists (Lieberman 29). This collage composition technique is not new to Brooks’s canon, however. As critics have previously argued, Brooks uses collage composition to present images of diverse communities in her earlier works as well. Courtney Thorsson explains how Brooks’s use polyvocality in *A Street in Bronzeville* and *The Bean Eaters* forces readers to identify with “characters as thinking, speaking subjects rather than objects of

more obviously public texts such as newspaper reports” (151). Melhem similarly refers to *Bonzeville* as a “mosaic” (22). Collage composition allows Brooks to present large and varied, yet intimate depictions of back communities, allowing normally suppressed voices to be heard.

“The Wall” demonstrates BAM’s emphasis on concrete art through its presentation of ephemeral sounds and ideas as physical objects. The speaker vacillates between material descriptions of the ceremony and descriptions of concepts or actions, which she treats as physical objects. The description of Phil Cohran’s performance exemplifies this tension between the concrete and abstract: “Phil Cohran gives us messages and music / made of developed bone and polished and honed cult” (19-20). The immaterial “messages and music” consist of “bone,” suggesting not only the raw emotion of Cohran’s performance but also the concreteness of his art. The speaker describes the communal “cult,” which suggests the unity and devotion of the Southside community, as a precious metal that can be “polished and honed.” This description of art as concrete material suggests that Cohran’s performance epitomizes the concrete art for which BAM strived. Furthermore the art’s political and cultural messages manifest in physical acts of cultural pride and political protest from the audience.

Just as the sounds and actions of the performers become concrete objects, so do the material paintings become symbols of artistic and spiritual value. Brooks’s speaker describes the *Wall* behind her:

Behind me, Paint.

Heroes.

No child has defiled

the Heroes of this Wall (38-41)

She first describes the mural as “[p]aint” before revising her description and referring to the pictures as “Heroes.” This revision suggests that the mural has become more than paint on a wall; the paintings assume the qualities of the black leaders they depict, evidenced by the speaker’s conflation of the paintings with the heroes themselves. Having taken on the qualities of these black leaders, the depictions on the mural garner respect from the audience and become a source of spiritual inspiration. The speaker notes that “No child has defiled / the Heroes.” Despite the fact that the mural is a public object on which no regulations or restrictions are placed, community members preserve the dignity of the *Wall* because of their respect for the leaders it depicts. While the audience in “The Chicago Picasso” reveres the sculpture for its difficulty and perceived “aura,” the Southside audience respects the *Wall* for its realistic representations of black leaders. The recognizable depictions on the *Wall* allow the audience to identify with the art and become emotionally inspired by it.

“The Wall” suggests that BAM’s concrete art has the power to enact real change in the physical world. The religious themes throughout the poem suggest that the *Wall* has become a site of spiritual transformation that manifests in the material world. The creation of the mural imbues a run-down, tavern wall with social, political, and religious power. The epigraph of the poem, an excerpt from *Ebony* magazine, describes this transformation: “The side wall of a typical slum building [...] became a mural communicating black dignity” (“The Wall”). This epigraph suggests a spiritual transformation that turns a “slum building” into a “mural communicating black dignity.” The artwork elevates the impoverished material on which it is painted, and a tavern wall

becomes the symbol of an abstract ideal, “black dignity.” The poem’s religious themes suggest that this transformation is a type of transubstantiation, a Catholic ritual by which a priest consecrates bread and wine into sacred objects. Transubstantiation transforms the essence of regular objects into Jesus’ body and blood, which the congregation may consume to receive spiritual salvation. Similarly, in “The Wall,” a regular “slum building” becomes an emblem of “black dignity” from which the community draws a sense of cultural redemption.

The speaker portrays the *Wall* as a spiritual object and its dedication ceremony as sacred service in which cultural redemption and transformation may take place. The biblical language the speaker uses to describe the ceremony communicates this religious theme: the audience “worship[s]” the *Wall* and the speaker describes Val Ward as a “tract,” a religious or political pamphlet (31, 16). The speaker foreshadows an impending apocalypse or deliverance when describing the ceremony: “It is the Hour of tribe and vibration / the day-long Hour. It is the Hour / of ringing, rouse, of ferment-festival” (21-23). The repetition of “[i]t is the Hour” alludes to the prophecy of the second coming of Jesus in the Bible. This allusion suggests that the Black Power protest at the *Wall* foreshadows the cultural redemption of African Americans and a turning point in their struggle for political autonomy. The words “vibration,” “ringing,” “rouse,” and “ferment-festival” suggest the movement and energy of the ceremony. The word “ferment” additionally suggests natural change over time: tired from years of oppression and limited political gains, the community at the *Wall* is ready to embrace a more assertive and aggressive project of black separatism. The lexicon of sound in this description also

suggests the active and bold protest that the audience displays, contrasting the peaceful resistance of the Civil Rights Movement.

The sacred *Wall* not only transforms the material of the impoverished community, but encourages the self-determination of the black population. The final few stanzas of the poem introduce a number of metaphors that describe the *Wall* and suggest its revolutionary potential to revise a history of black oppression in the United States:

the Heroes of this Wall this serious Appointment

this still Wing

this Scald this Flute this heavy Light this Hinge.

An emphasis is paroled.

The old decapitations are revised,

the dispossessions breakless.

And we sing. (41-47)

The capitalization of these metaphors for the *Wall* mimics biblical capitalization, suggesting the spiritual power of the mural to enact transformation. The words “Wing” and “Hinge” suggest, as Margo Crawford notes, that the *Wall* is a pivotal work of art, inspiring the black struggle for cultural autonomy and the transformation of the entire African American cultural identity (27). “Scald” refers to the hot passion of the black activists, but, as Melhem notes, also refers to a *skald*, or Scandinavian bard (Melhem 180). The mural is a “heavy Light,” which, if we take “light” in either its adjectival or nounal sense, is a contradictory phrase. This phrase suggests BAM’s emphasis on

“heavy,” concrete art and also their redefinition of “black” as a positive quality. The black “light,” as an illuminating device, brings clarity and knowledge to black people, but its heaviness suggests its concreteness and its potential as a social and political weapon.

The final stanza suggests that the *Wall* has revised a history of black oppression, creating a new, black identity around which the activists may rally. The speaker states that “An emphasis is paroled,” which refers to BAM’s “emphasis” on the blackness of their art, created for and by black people. The term “emphasis” also refers to BAM’s re-emphasis of “black” as positive trait suggesting power and passion. The fact that this “emphasis” is “paroled” suggests that racist discourses have kept the term “black” locked up with negative connotations until now. “The old decapitations” refers to the literal and figurative killing of racial movements by whites. The *Wall* revises this history of violence, along with blacks’ history of “dispossession,” presenting a new cultural identity of power and progress. This old history is “beakless,” meaning it no longer has a voice that resonates with this black community. Instead, the audience at the *Wall* declares a new, collective cultural identity, expressed simply by the final line, “And we sing.”

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

Gwendolyn Brooks's conversion to BAM remains a popular topic in critical discussions of her later poetry. It is tempting to impose BAM's uncompromising positions onto Brooks and her poetry during this pivotal moment in her career, just as it is tempting to assume her 1967 conversion was instantaneous and complete. However, the truth is not so simple and is, in fact, more characteristic of Brooks's complex and enigmatic writing. In "Two Dedications," Brooks demonstrates that both communal, representational art and abstract art are pertinent and useful to black and white audiences alike. Her reimagining of the benefits of revolutionary, modernist art as accessible to people of all classes suggests that this art can serve a social function by encouraging audiences to embrace the new ideas. The open mindset this art encourages can aid revolutionary movements, such as BAM, seeking to introduce new ideas and break down old conventions. The benefits of BAM's concrete, communal art, epitomized by "The Wall" are clear as well. Representational art has the power to revise histories and change identities, just as the *Wall of Respect* allows an impoverished, black community political agency and self-determination.

Thanks to the work of recent critics, more nuanced understandings of Brooks's use of the black aesthetic and European poetic forms have opened up critical room to explore how Brooks uses both in her poetry to navigate cultural and artistic demands. Further work might thoroughly investigate how the political implications of Brooks's aesthetic and formal innovations change with a nuanced understanding of her attitude toward black and white art. During 1967, at least, it is clear that Brooks sees value in both

black and European aesthetics, and, furthermore, that both may serve the radical racial projects of the 1960s. While the manifestoes of artists such as Baraka, Neal, and Karenga declare the necessity of a completely separate black art, Brooks demonstrates that she is not ready to forsake European forms just yet.

APPENDIX A  
THE CHICAGO PICASSO

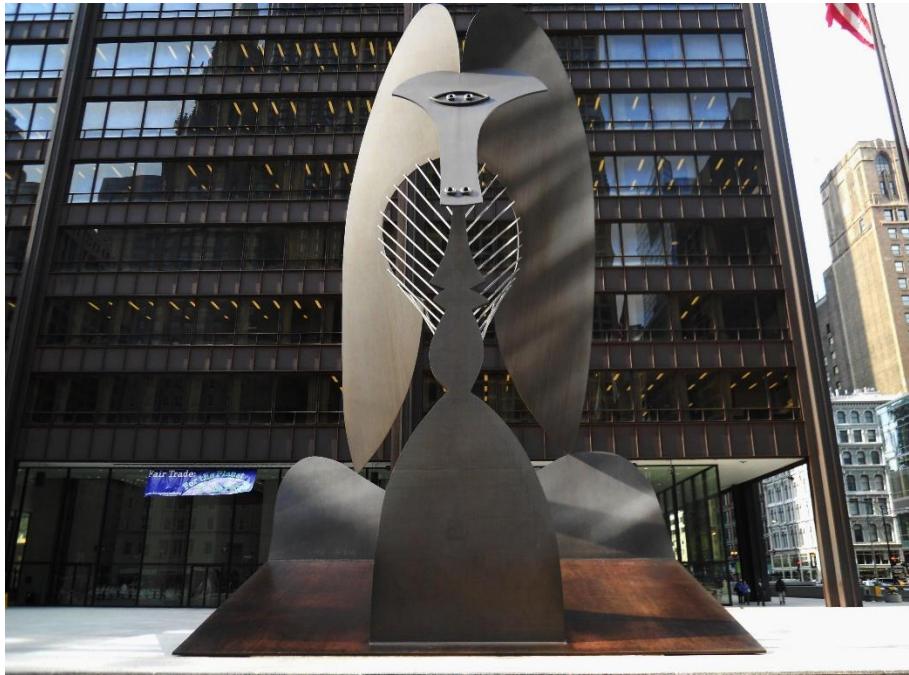


Figure 1: The *Chicago Picasso* in Daley Center Plaza, present day.



Figure 2: Thousands of spectators watch the unveiling of the *Picasso* at its dedication ceremony on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1967.

## APPENDIX B

### THE WALL OF RESPECT



Figure 3: The *Wall of Respect* on 43<sup>rd</sup> and Langley Avenues in 1967.



Figure 4: Community members gather at the *Wall of Respect*'s dedication ceremony on August 27th, 1967.

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