

“Exquisite Corpse” by Ted Joans

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The final artwork on display at the Met’s latest exhibition, “Surrealism Beyond Borders”, is an exquisite corpse, a Surrealist “game” that spans 30 feet and features the drawings and writings of over 100 artists, poets, and intellectuals. “Long Distance”, as it is titled, is artist and jazz musician Ted Joans’ collaborative drawing that circulated around the world. It took 30 years to complete.

The drawing reflects Joans’ free-form lifestyle as he traveled to London, Lagos, Dakar, Marrakesh, Rome, Berlin, Mexico City, amongst other cities. Joans was unconstrained by nationality, language, and culture, labels he saw as artificial. These boundaries were considered by Joans and other Surrealists to be limits to freedom.

The collective and international assembly of “Long Distance” made diasporic communities visible and connected. In 1968 Joans wrote, “I was born a Black flower...I use my senses exercised by Surrealism...I am Maldoror, Malcolm X, the Marquis de Sade, Breton, Lumumba, and many others still...I will continue to use all the means to win my freedom, which will become freedom for all. Black Power is a means to achieve this freedom.”

The collaborative authorship of “Long Distance” united artists who believed that the means to gaining political, social, and personal freedom must be achieved beyond the individual. Physical distance is not an obstacle to community, identity, or freedom when traditional boundaries and

conventions are challenged. Much like the work towards liberation, an exquisite corpse like “Long Distance” cannot be achieved in isolation.