

The Wake and Resurrection of the Bicentennial Negro (1976)

The Wake and Resurrection of the Bicentennial Negro (1976), Ringgold's first multimedia performance piece, reenacts the funeral for Buba, the victim of a drug overdose, and his wife, Bena, who subsequently died from grief. Inspired in part by an African belief that souls must be properly commemorated in order to ensure their release into the afterlife, the thirty-minute ritual was performed by college students in a church and included improvisational dance set to gospel music by Aretha Franklin and a recording of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech "I Have a Dream." The piece culminates in Buba and Bena's rebirth and awakening. Ringgold adorned the mourners and the dead with intricate beading and lace coverings befitting the solemnity of the occasion. The activation of the work through music and monologue was an amalgam of the modes of art Ringgold had explored previously, but her performance was rooted in audience response. As she astutely observed, "Paintings, no matter how skilfully done, rarely get applause."

The timing of the work was pointed. 1976 marked the American Bicentennial, and numerous ceremonies were organized by the United States government with great fanfare. Ringgold was openly critical of the celebrations: "We had no reason to celebrate two hundred years of American independence: for almost half of that time we had been in slavery, and for most of the following years we had still been struggling to become fully free." Here the sculptures are displayed with *The Windows of the Wedding*, rare examples of pure geometric abstraction in Ringgold's work inspired by Congolese Kuba designs and reminiscent of stained glass windows.