What is Black Art?

Edited by Alice Correia

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SOLEMN DEDICATED BLACK PEOPLE TO UNDERTAKE THE ENORMOUS TASK OF RECLAIMING THE SHATTERED PSYCHES AND CULTURE OF THE BLACK RACE

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Contact Eddie Chambers
First Year Fine Art
Backhouse Building
Sunderland Polytechnic

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What is Black Art?

Dr Alice Correia is an art historian. Her research examines late twentieth-century British art, with a specific focus on artists of African, Caribbean, and South Asian heritage. She has worked at Tate Britain, Government Art Collection, and Touchstones Rochdale. She has held Fellowships at the Paul Mellon Centre for the Study of British Art and the UAL Decolonising Arts Institute. She is a Trustee of *Third Text* and co-Chair of the British Art Network's Black British Art Research Group. Her articles have appeared in *Art History*; *British Art Studies*; and *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*.

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What is Black Art?

Writings on African, Asian and Caribbean
Art in Britain, 1981–1989

Edited by Alice Correia

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Introduction

As an Art History student in the late 1990s I learnt about the history of twentieth-century modernism and the way that white European artists including Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso and Henry Moore had appropriated Oceanic, African and South American art and visual culture in their work. But while it was clear that 'global cultures' were central to the development of modernist art in Europe, I also realized that I could name very few artists of colour. I had had a lecture on Cuban surrealist Wifredo Lam, and my father had told me about the Goan painter F. N. Souza, but what about the other African, Asian and Caribbean artists working in Britain? When Chris Ofili won the Turner Prize in 1998, much of the media coverage noted that he was the first person of African descent to win the prestigious award and there were suggestions that this was a momentous moment for multicultural Britain. However, amidst the celebrations it was apparent to me that the praise heaped on Ofili was unusual. Up to that point, I had never seen an art exhibition that reflected the diverse communities in which I had grown up, or my own mixed-race heritage. The realization that there were significant gaps in my knowledge of British art stimulated my subsequent research into what has become known as the British Black Art Movement of the 1980s.

The question posed by this book's title, *What is Black Art?* is deceptively simple, and yet what the texts assembled in this anthology reveal is that there is no single, universally agreed answer. The

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artists' statements, conversations and interviews, the conference papers, exhibition catalogue essays and reviews, all written between 1981 and 1989, address the definition of the term 'Black' and the form and function of 'Black Art' in Britain during the 1980s. What is critical to this anthology is an acknowledgement and understanding that during the 1980s 'Black' meant different things to different people, and that the debates and disagreements over the constitution of 'Black Art' simmered throughout the decade.

In Europe, the term 'Black' as a racial signifier has a long history dating back to fifteenth-century encounters between Portuguese and Spanish traders and Bantu peoples in sub-Saharan Africa.[1] Over time, it became a pejorative and discriminatory word to distinguish African and African diaspora peoples as 'other' from white people.[2] During the twentieth century the term was variously replaced with 'Negro' and 'Coloured', but by the 1960s it had been reclaimed, particularly by the Black Power and Civil Rights movements in the United States.[3] In Britain during the late 1960s and 1970s 'Black' was commonly – although not always – understood to include people of African, Asian and Caribbean heritage. Cross-cultural allegiances were fostered by organizations such as the Universal Coloured Peoples' Association, founded in 1967,[4] and during the 1970s, by the British Black Panthers whose members included Darcus Howe, Farrukh Dhondy, Linton Kwesi Johnson and Mala Sen.[5] Artist, and former Black Panther member, Rasheed Araeen argued in 1982 that 'we cannot understand the full significance of the word "black" outside the historical context of our struggle against racism, against cultural imperialism'.[6] By the end of the decade, cultural theorist Stuart Hall observed that the term 'came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, amongst groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities'.[7] This collective definition of 'Black' encapsulated the strategic alliances and coalitions undertaken by a broad spectrum of people working in opposition to the

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marginalization, discrimination and racism they faced in white-majority Britain. In this book I use 'Black' as a historically situated political term, to denote people and communities of African, Asian and Caribbean backgrounds with common, albeit different, experiences of racism, rather than as a racial descriptor referring only to people of African ancestry; not all the texts I have included concur with this definition.[8] While the terms 'Black' and 'Black Art' were, and remain, highly contentious, what is certain is that the texts assembled here reveal the urgency, determination and resolve with which a generation of artists in the 1980s worked, even as their art was derided, marginalized or ignored.

* * *

> . . . the Arts Council of Great Britain should now look into the possibility of organising a survey exhibition of the works of black artists in Britain. Although I'm aware of the pitfalls in approaching art from a point of view that may lead to separate groups based on sex, race, etc., the separateness already exists and it is not of our own making but a result of the attitude of the society. Moreover there doesn't seem to be any choice for us except in asserting now our historical presence here separately, till the cultural institutions of the country come to terms with the multi-racial aspect of this society by fully recognising the equal abilities of all peoples irrespective of colour and race.
>
> Rasheed Araeen, letter to Andrew Dempsey, Arts Council of Great Britain, 28 October 1978.[9]

At the start of the 1980s a generation of artists of African, Asian and Caribbean heritage were leaving art school: dynamic, aesthetically innovative and politically vocal, these artists are now collectively described as the British Black Arts Movement. This generation were the children of post-war migrants who had arrived in Britain during the 1950s and 60s. Born in Britain, or having migrated here

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as young children, this generation had grown up during the 1970s in a country beset with an education system that regarded Caribbean children as not only a 'problem', but often 'educationally subnormal'; where consecutive governments decried the 'breakdown of law and order' on British streets, but did little to prevent the 'Paki-bashing' enacted by racist thugs; and where industrial disputes, such as the 1976–8 strike at the Grunwick Film Processing Laboratory in North London, and rising unemployment laid bare the fragile alliances between Black and white working class communities.[10] In the lead-up to the 1979 general election, the leader of the Conservative Party, Margaret Thatcher, discussed the apparent fears of ordinary (white) British people that their country might be 'swamped' with foreigners should immigration remain at current levels.[11] Her comments 'were widely condemned as pandering to popular prejudices',[12] but she and her party went on to win the election, ushering in a decade of social unrest and political conflict.

As the 1980s progressed questions of race, patriotism and nationhood were braided into the political discourse. The introduction of more stringent immigration laws in the 1981 Nationality Act may be understood as part of a governmental response to the perceived threat of 'others' which also included the increased surveillance and policing of Black people.[13] The government's apparent disregard for Black life in the wake of the tragic New Cross arson attack in which thirteen children and young people died in January 1981 prompted the Black People's Day of Action.[14] On 2 March 1981 around 20,000 people, mainly from Caribbean and African communities, marched through the streets of London, protesting against the conduct of the police investigation and the 'media indifference to mass murder'.[15] The march did not effect changes to police procedure, or improve so-called race-relations, but rather resulted in 'Swamp 81', a massive stop-and-search operation organized by the Metropolitan Police in Brixton. During this initiative teenagers and young men of African and Caribbean heritage were

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particularly targeted under suspicion of loitering with intent. In protest, on 11 April 1981, rioting broke out on the streets of London and other British cities. After the riots of 1981, police powers were increased, and were put to use during the 1984 miners' strike. Riot police from across the country congregated in small Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire mining villages, leading to wider questions over whether the police were pro-active agents of the state government. Also in 1984, amidst public outcry, Margaret Thatcher became the first British prime minister to welcome the leader of apartheid South Africa in over twenty years.[16] Against this backdrop, artists including Sutapa Biswas, Sonia Boyce, Chila Kumari Burman, Eddie Chambers, Lubaina Himid, Keith Piper and Donald Rodney were making work that variously addressed the histories of British involvement in the transatlantic trade of enslaved African people; British exploitation of people and natural resources in its colonies; and the legacies of British colonialism, as manifested in everyday – often violent – racism in contemporary Britain. In their engagement with social and political issues, these artists reflected a wider cultural climate in which resistance groups from the 'margins' did much to challenge dominant modes of authority.[17] While larger organizations and events such as Rock Against Racism and the Artists Against Apartheid concert in London in 1986 would later bring the politics of race and racism to a mass audience,[18] during the 1970s and early 1980s, grassroots organizations such as the London-based socialist, pan-African Black Liberation Front, the Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) and the Bradford-based youth protest group the United Black Youth League[19] worked from within communities to challenge the political discourse that cast 'blacks as an "outside" force, an alien *malaise* afflicting British society'.[20]

The 1980s was a socially turbulent and politically polarized decade, and as Lubaina Himid later recalled, she and her contemporaries faced 'diffidence, prejudice, hostility and hatred'.[21] But the story of this 1980s generation is one chapter in the longer

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history of the production, display and reception of art created by people of African, Asian and Caribbean ancestry in Britain during the twentieth century. It is a history of neglect underpinned by both subtle and overt institutional racism. Ronald Moody arrived in London from Jamaica in the 1920s, and his figurative wooden sculptures were in tune with contemporaneous ideas about 'direct carving' and 'truth to materials', as seen in the work of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. Yet until recently he was entirely omitted from narratives of British sculpture in the 1930s and 40s. Similarly, F. N. Souza and Aubrey Williams, from Goa, Portuguese India, and British Guiana respectively, were celebrated by the London art world in the late 1950s and early 60s, but subsequent histories of post-war British painting minimized or excluded their contributions to that milieu. A comprehensive history of the Indian Painters Collective, formed in London in 1963, whose members included Balraj Khanna and Lancelot Ribeiro, and its subsequent incarnation as Indian Artists UK, established in 1976, has yet to be written.[22] The work of the visionary novelists, poets, artists and film-makers who became members of the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) in London, founded in the autumn of 1966 by Edward Kamau Brathwaite, John La Rose and Andrew Salkey, would, arguably, be largely forgotten were it not for the essential work of author Anne Walmsley.[23] David Medalla, originally from the Philippines, was a founding member of two radical exhibition spaces in London: Signals Gallery which opened in the mid-1960s, and Artists for Democracy, founded in 1974, but his work has largely been omitted from narratives of British Conceptual art.[24] The same can be said about the Chinese conceptual artist Li Yuan-chia, who established his LYC Museum and Art Gallery in Cumbria (1971–82) and made a significant contributions to artistic communities in northern England.[25]

Importantly, in 1996 Stuart Hall reminded us that these earlier generations of artists who migrated to Britain from across the globe:

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> came to London in a spirit not altogether different from that in which Picasso and others went to Paris: to fulfil their artistic ambitions and to participate in the heady atmosphere of the most advanced centres of artistic innovation at that time . . . they came to Britain feeling that they naturally belonged to the modern movement and, in a way, it belonged to them. The promise of decolonization fired their ambition, their sense of themselves as already 'modern persons' . . . Their aim was to engage the modern world as equals on its own terrain.[26]

But the reality of racism and discrimination in everyday life in Britain, and the insidious primitivizing and orientalizing of their work by gallerists and critics undercut those hopeful ambitions. In post-war Britain, contemporary artists of colour from the Empire, and later, the New Commonwealth found that opportunities to exhibit were sporadic, and often limited to particular venues. Exhibitions such as those at the Commonwealth Institute in London during the 1960s arguably siloed migrant artists from contemporary avant-garde artistic contexts. When he was omitted from the *New Generation* exhibition of contemporary artists at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1964, Frank Bowling, who had graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1962, was reportedly told that 'England is not ready for a gifted artist of colour.'[27] He left for New York in 1966.

By the 1970s curatorial and academic interest in the generation of post-war migrant artists from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean was nominal; Souza had followed Bowling to New York in 1967; others such as South African painter Albert Adams, and Anwar Jalal Shemza from Pakistan, forged teaching careers while attempting to sustain their artistic practices in relative obscurity. Simultaneously, a new generation emerged: originally from Jamaica, painter Errol Lloyd had been a member of CAM from its inception and during the 1970s established himself as an award-winning illustrator

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and children's author; born in St Lucia, painter Winston Branch graduated from the Slade School of Art, London, in 1970 and was awarded a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship in 1978; while the Jamaican-born photographer Vanley Burke created important accounts of Britain's African and Caribbean communities, capturing events such as the African Liberation Day rally in Handsworth Park, Birmingham, in 1977.

In 1975, Rasheed Araeen staged his first solo exhibition at the Artists for Democracy space. The show included *For Oluwale* (1971–3, 1975), a conceptual text and image work that addressed the death by drowning of David Oluwale, a Nigerian man who, it is believed, was last seen alive being chased by two police officers near the River Aire in Leeds.[28] Following his arrival in Britain from Pakistan in 1964, Araeen had created minimalist sculpture and undertaken conceptual performance-based work, but *For Oluwale* marked a radical, and political, shift in his work. Subsequently, he produced work explicitly addressing neo-colonialism and the exploitation of the 'Third World', and his own status as a 'Paki bastard' in Britain.[29] David Oluwale's case was the first, and remained for decades the only successful prosecution of serving police officers for their involvement in the death of a Black person, and in 2019 artist Sonia Boyce identified *For Oluwale* as the first piece of 'Black Art' made in the United Kingdom.[30]

In 1976, cultural adviser and journalist Naseem Khan published her influential report, *The Art Britain Ignores*.[31] Khan argued that Britain's ethnically diverse communities had much to offer in terms of arts and culture and argued for better funding and access to support. But what ultimately resulted was not equal access within the existing arts funding structures, but dedicated funding bodies for 'ethnic minority arts' that prioritized community (understood as amateur) groups rather than the professional 'fine arts'.[32] As white institutional systems failed to recognize the aesthetic and cultural merits of art by Black artists, in 1978 Araeen

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published his 'Preliminary Notes for a BLACK MANIFESTO' in the radical arts magazine, *Black Phoenix,* which he co-edited with poet Mahmood Jamal.[33] Araeen refused to be marginalized and worked tirelessly to challenge the persistent, systematic omission of African, Asian and Caribbean artists from mainstream national narratives. He first proposed a 'survey exhibition of the works of black artists in Britain' to the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1978, pointedly noting that such exhibitions, selected and organized according to race, were a problematic necessity in the face of the white institutional exclusion of Black artists.

In 1979 the artists Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper met whilst undertaking a Fine Art Foundation course at Lanchester Polytechnic in Coventry. Both Chambers and Piper were interested in the writings of African-American political activists who gained prominence during the late 1960s and early 1970s; Larry Neal's essay, 'Black Art and Black Liberation' (1965) and Ron Karenga's 'Black Cultural Nationalism' (1968) were particular points of reference, informing not only their knowledge of the Black Power Movement in the USA, but also their understanding of radical Black activism. During the first year of his undergraduate course at Sunderland Polytechnic in 1980–81, Chambers undertook a typography exercise, and produced a visceral poster proclaiming:

> Needed
>
> Solemn Dedicated Black people to undertake the enormous task of reclaiming the shattered psyches and culture of the Black race. A race scattered over the continents of the world where they exist in the mud of the floor of the foul dungeon into which the world has been transformed by the white power structure.

In 2021 Piper recalled: 'Eddie wanted to create a support network for Black artists and minorities, to create visibility for these artists.'[34]

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Chambers, with Piper, established a network of like-minded artists located in the West Midlands, and in 1981 staged the exhibition *Black Art An' Done* at Wolverhampton Art Gallery. The show marked the beginning of a remarkable sequence of exhibitions and events which showcased the anger and frustration, but also the creative aspirations and artistic innovations of the next generation of British-Caribbean artists. Chaired by Chambers, the Wolverhampton Young Black Artists group would evolve into The Pan-Afrikan Connection, and later The Blk Art Group. Membership was fluid, and during its period of activity between 1979 and 1984, included Piper, Claudette Johnson, Marlene Smith and Donald Rodney, amongst others. It is notable that although the writings of the American Black Power Movement were important touchstones for Chambers and Piper, and Smith and later Maud Sulter noted the importance of African-American women writers including Angela Davis, bell hooks and Alice Walker, this generation of African and Caribbean disapora artists were arguably more influenced by the ideas and possibilities proposed and embodied by African-American writers and activists than by specific artists or artworks associated with the American Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s. In 2021 Marlene Smith recalled that as an A-level art student, she had been able to access limited amounts of material about the American Black Arts Movement and that at the start of her career, of greater importance to her were the connections she made with her peers and with older generations of British-based artists and photographers, including Vanley Burke, Frank Bowling and Ronald Moody.[35] On 28 October 1982 the Wolverhampton Young Black Artists group organized the First National Black Art Convention, staged at Wolverhampton Art Gallery; speakers included the artists Araeen and Johnson; film-maker Imruh Bakari (listed as Imruh Caesar), and designer and curator Shakka Dedi. Sonia Boyce later recalled the 'sense of relief and exhilaration when I walked into that first conference; seeing so many black artists there!'.[36]

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While the organizers of the Convention had taken an open approach to who might be defined as 'Black', and Araeen argued for solidarity amongst artists of colour in Britain, disagreements and anxiety over who the term included remained. The Organisation for Black Arts Advancement and Leisure Activities (OBAALA), which established The Black-Art Gallery in London, used the term 'Black' in relation to a Pan-African world view. The Black-Art Gallery rejected any trans-racial definition of 'Black Art', stating that 'Black-Art is born and created out of a consciousness based upon experience of what it means to be an Afrikan descendant wherever in the world we are.'[37] As Mumtaz Karimjee recounts in this volume, 'while I consider myself part of the Black community, there are clearly occasions when the word Black does not include me',[38] while in 1989 Sunil Gupta conceded that not all South Asian people were 'at ease with' with the term.[39]

Nonetheless, by the middle of the 1980s, 'Black' was used regularly in exhibition titles. Shows such as *The Thin Black Line* curated by Lubaina Himid in 1985, and *Reflections of the Black Experience* staged at Brixton Art Gallery in 1986, included the work of artists from African, Asian and Caribbean backgrounds. Chila Kumari Burman's essay, 'There have Always Been Great Black Women Artists' detailed the shared experiences of women of colour and the obstacles and challenges they faced in establishing their careers. Maud Sulter's Blackwomen's Creativity Project encompassed exhibitions and writing, working with British-based women artists including Karimjee and Ingrid Pollard, and authors Bernardine Evaristo and Meera Syal. Artistic collectives including Black Audio Film Collective; the Manchester-based Black Arts Alliance; and the London-based Autograph: Association of Black Photographers, demonstrate that there were active collaborations and productive allegiances between what Araeen regularly described as 'Afro-Asian' artistic constituencies during the 1980s.

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In 1988, Rasheed Araeen and Eddie Chambers each curated exhibitions of 'Black Art': *The Essential Black Art* (Chisenhale Gallery, London, and touring), and *Black Art: Plotting the Course* (Gallery Oldham and touring), respectively. Both artists used an open and expansive definition of 'Black' in their curatorial work, but where they differed was in their definition of 'Black Art'. In his exhibition Chambers took a looser, more inclusive view, including work that addressed subjects representing everyday Black life, broadly defined as the 'Black experience'. Araeen, on the other hand, defined Black Art stylistically:

> 'Black Art', if this term must be used, is in fact a specific historical development within contemporary art practices and has emerged directly from the joint struggle of Asian, African and the Caribbean people against racism, and the art work itself explicitly refers to that struggle. It specifically deals with and expresses a human condition, the condition of Afro-Asian people resulting from their existence or predicament in a racist society or/and, in global terms, from Western cultural imperialism.[40]

For Araeen, Black Art should actively engage with the contemporary politics of race – with early works by Chambers, Rodney and Piper exemplifying this position. But as the decade progressed, Black artists, and especially Black women artists such as Shanti Thomas and Maxine Walker, sought to address a range of themes and concerns, from the personal to the aesthetic. In the highly charged 1980s little space was given to those artists, such as Simone Alexander, Joy Gregory, Eugene Palmer and Veronica Ryan, whose work was not overtly political or confrontational. Issues of disability and sexuality were often overshadowed or excluded from debates as racial politics were prioritized, and as Sunil Gupta recounts, it often seemed that only one 'issue' could be addressed at a time.[41] Art historian Kobena Mercer would later describe the

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expectations placed on Black artists to address issues of race in their work as 'the burden of representation'.[42]

This book starts with statements from the exhibition pamphlet *Black Art An' Done* written in 1981. Following numerous rejections and setbacks, Araeen eventually staged his survey exhibition *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1989.[43] I conclude with reviews of that show published that year. Although these two exhibitions bookending the decade were very different, they shared an important characteristic: both were initiated by artists. Throughout the 1980s, Black artists found that to get their work seen and discussed they had to do it themselves. Many had been alienated or racially bullied within educational institutions, and upon leaving college found that curators in museums and galleries were rarely receptive to their work. Simultaneously, institutions arguably felt some pressure to 'deal with' Black artists in the wake of the 1981 Brixton riots and the subsequent Scarman Report, which according to Paul Gilroy initiated a period of 'municipal anti-racism'.[44] *From Two Worlds*, staged at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1986, which included the work of Zarina Bhimji, Denzil Forrester, Gavin Jantjes and others, exemplified the type of group survey show of Black artists that took place in public galleries in the mid-1980s. Generally, little connected the work exhibited in these survey shows except the diasporic backgrounds of the exhibitors. To their detractors, exhibitions such as *From Two Worlds* and *Black Art: New Directions* at Stoke-on-Trent City Museum and Art Gallery in 1989, were efficient ways of showing the work of large numbers of Black artists without jettisoning the regular – white – exhibition programme. Galleries were criticized for instrumentalizing the Black artists who curated or exhibited in them.[45] Nonetheless, some regional art galleries seemed more receptive to working collaboratively with Black artists, and throughout the 1980s important group and solo exhibitions were staged at Wolverhampton Art Gallery, the Bluecoat in

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Liverpool, Rochdale Art Gallery and elsewhere. In London, smaller venues such as the Africa Centre, Horizon Gallery and 198 Gallery, most of which were founded and run by artists or Black cultural collectives, offered opportunities while mainstream institutions in the capital remained largely inaccessible.

As the 1980s came to a close, *The Other Story* opened at the Hayward Gallery. The culmination of more than ten years of work, the exhibition was a monumental achievement for Araeen, but was not without its critics. Concurrently, a new form of 'internationalism' emerged at the start of the 1990s, and the confrontational politics of the 1980s were arguably neutered by the twin forces of globalization and the evolution of a British youth culture that was simultaneously loud, brash, and regressively parochial.[46] While racism remained prevalent in British society, exemplified by the murder of teenager Stephen Lawrence at the hands of white fascists in 1993, and the Macpherson Report's conclusion in 1999 that the Metropolitan Police Force was 'institutionally racist', for Kobena Mercer, the cultural climate of 'multicultural managerialism'[47] in 1990s Britain enabled artists of colour to gain prominence within the art world, but only if their work was denuded of politicized racial discourse. Although Iniva (the Institute of International Visual Art), founded in 1994 under the directorship of Gilane Tawadros, organized and supported important exhibitions including David Medalla's *The Secret History of the Mondrian Fan Club II* (1995) and Aubrey Williams' solo show at the Whitechapel Gallery (1998), the majority of artists included in this book remained marginalized within, or excluded from, mainstream survey exhibitions of British art and art historical publications. During the 1990s some artists stopped working; some continued to make art alongside other jobs and careers. Some died without experiencing the acclaim their work is now generating.

The texts in this book are arranged chronologically according to their year of publication, or in the case of conference papers, the

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year of their presentation. This arrangement allows the debates regarding 'Black Art', identity politics and white institutions, to unfold and develop. Themes, issues and concerns overlap; texts build on and bounce off each other. Most were published in self-produced exhibition pamphlets; books and catalogues that are now out of print; or arts magazines, feminist journals and periodicals dedicated to issues of race and culture, most of which have ceased publication. From the early 1980s *Echo: Living Arts in Britain's Ethnic Communities*, a newsletter published by the Minorities' Arts Advisory Service (MAAS) run by Fay Rodrigues and Errol Lloyd regularly included exhibition reviews, as did *Race Today*, produced by the Race Today Collective. In November 1982, *Echo* was succeeded by *ArtRage: Inter-Cultural Arts Magazine*, which was later joined by *Bazaar: South Asian Arts Magazine*. The journal *Third Text*, founded by Araeen in 1987, was, and remains, a key publication specifically addressing Black cultural activity in Britain.

This anthology is one of a growing number of exhibitions, books and research projects reassessing the dynamism, power and criticality of the British Black Art Movement. In 2011 artists Claudette Johnson, Keith Piper and Marlene Smith established The Blk Art Group Research Project; in 2011–12 *Thin Black Lines* curated by Paul Goodwin and Lubaina Himid at Tate Britain revisited Himid's curatorial work of the 1980s; in 2017 the exhibition *No Colour Bar: Black British Art in Action 1960–1990*, organized by the Friends of the Huntley Archives was staged at the Guildhall Gallery, London, and contextualized Black visual arts practice through the activities of Eric and Jessica Huntley, who ran the important and influential Walter Rodney Bookshop in West London. In the same year Himid became the first Black woman to win the prestigious Turner Prize, with Ingrid Pollard and Veronica Ryan receiving nominations for the Prize in 2022. In 2022 Sonia Boyce became the first Black woman to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale, where she was presented with what many regard as the art world's highest

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accolade, the Golden Lion award for Best National Participation. At the start of the 2020s a succession of solo exhibitions of work by Chila Kumari Burman (Tate Britain, 2020–21), Sutapa Biswas (Kettles Yard, Cambridge, 2021–2), Lubaina Himid (Tate Modern, 2021–2) and Keith Piper (New Art Gallery, Walsall, 2022) have brought the work of this generation to new audiences. The popularity of shows such as *Life Between Islands*, an exhibition of Caribbean-British art at Tate Britain curated by David A. Bailey and Alex Farquharson (2021–2) demonstrated that there is an appetite for complex, trans-cultural stories of art in Britain, which reflect the diversity of British people.

In selecting this anthology, I have aimed to give an overview of the artistic practices and debates taking place during the 1980s. Many of the texts in this volume were written forty years ago. What is striking and disheartening is how relevant they remain. So many of the social and political struggles addressed in this volume – including institutionalized racism, the deaths of Black people at the hands of the police, homophobia and sexism – continue to dominate contemporary life. Inevitably there are omissions, and this book could easily have been two or three times as long. Artists including Pogus Caesar, whose photographs are now held in the National Portrait Gallery collection; Symrath Patti, who curated the landmark exhibition *Jagrati* at Greenwich Citizens Gallery in 1986; and the internationally acclaimed sculptor, Sokari Douglas Camp, are notable omissions.[48] Likewise, it has not been possible to include the writings of art historian Kobena Mercer, film-maker Pratibha Parmar and author Kwesi Owusu, each of whom have made hugely significant contributions to the debates on representation, race and British art.[49] However, what these omissions demonstrate to me is the intellectual depth and discursive breadth of this creative moment: there are many more books to be written and exhibitions to stage. In assembling these archival materials here, I hope that each text will prompt further research, and help new audiences question, challenge and expand

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how Black art, and its contributions to the creative culture of Britain, is written about and understood.

NOTES

1 See Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440–1870*, London: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

2 See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: Penguin, 1952; reissued 2021.

3 Ben L. Martin, 'From Negro to Black to African American: The Power of Names and Naming', *Political Science Quarterly* 106:1 (Spring 1991), pp. 83–107.

4 See Ambalavaner Sivanandan, 'From Resistance to Rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean Struggles in Britain', *Race and Class* 23:2–3 (1981–2), p. 136.

5 See Kehinde Andrews, *The British Black Panthers*, BBC Radio 4, first broadcast 3 August 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0007boy

6 See this volume, Rasheed Araeen, *Art & Black Consciousness*, 1982.

7 Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in Kobena Mercer (ed.), *ICA Documents 7: Black Film, British Cinema*, London: ICA, 1988, p. 27.

8 See Reni Eddo-Lodge, *About Race* podcast (2018), 'Episode 4: Political Blackness', https://www.aboutracepodcast.com/4-political-blackness. For further discussion of the term 'Black' within British art during the 1980s, see Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity*, London: IB Tauris, 2000, pp. 4–10.

9 Rasheed Araeen, letter to Andrew Dempsey, 28 October 1978, Asia Art Archive, https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/rasheed-araeen-archive-correspondence/object/letter-from-rasheed-araeen-to-andrew-dempsey-28-october-1978/sort/title-asc

10 See Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, London: Routledge, 1982; reissued 1994, and Sally Tomlinson, 'Britain's racist 1970s education policies still resonate today', *Guardian*, 28 May 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/28/britains-racist-1970s-education-policies-black-children-educationally-subnormal. For useful introduction to the Grunwick Strike, see https://www.striking-women.org/module/striking-out/grunwick-dispute

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13 See Ian R. G. Spencer, *British Immigration Policy Since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain*, London: Routledge, 1997; and Adam Elliott-Cooper, *Black Resistance to British Policing*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021.

14 See John La Rose, *The New Cross Massacre Story*, London: Black Rose Press, 1984; and Darcus Howe, 'Why I Still Think the New Cross Fire Was a Massacre', *New Statesman*, 12 February 1999, p. 16.

15 Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, London: Pluto Press, 1984, p. 398.

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17 See Sivanandan, 'From Resistance to Rebellion'.

18 For more on the intersection of music and youth protest, see Keith Gildart, Anna Gough-Yates, Sian Lincoln, *et al.* (eds.), *Youth Culture and Social Change: Making a Difference by Making a Noise*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

19 See Anandi Ramamurthy, *Black Star: Britain's Asian Youth Movements*, London: Pluto Press, 2013.

20 John Solomos, Bob Findlay, Simon Jones and Paul Gilroy, 'The Organic Crisis of British Capitalism and Race: The Experience of the Seventies', in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, London: Routledge, 1982; reissued 1994, pp. 9–46, 26.

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New Beacon Books, 1992; and David A. Bailey and Allison Thompson (eds.), *Liberation Begins in the Imagination: Writings on British Caribbean Art*, London: Tate Publishing, 2021.

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28 See *Remember Oluwale* website, https://www.rememberoluwale.org/

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35 Marlene Smith in conversation with Alice Correia, 'She Is Not Bullet Proof', *Black British Artists and Political Activism*, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, London, 9 December 2021; https://youtu.be/ZB4cT96MrIw

36 John Roberts, 'Interview with Sonia Boyce', *Third Text* 1 (Autumn 1987), pp. 55–64, 60.

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38 See this volume, Mumtaz Karimjee, *Black and Asian: Definitions and Redefinitions*, 1987.

39 Sunil Gupta, 'Fabled Territories: An Introduction', in *Fabled Territories: New Asian Photography*, exhibition catalogue, Leeds: Leeds City Art Gallery, 1989, pp. 5–8, 6.

40 Rasheed Araeen, 'The Emergence of Black Consciousness in Contemporary Art in Britain: Seventeen Years of Neglected History', in Rasheed Araeen (ed.), *The Essential Black Art*, exhibition catalogue, London: Chisenhale Gallery, 1988, p. 5.

41 See this volume, Sunil Gupta, 'Desire and Black Men', 1986.

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43 The exhibition would later tour to Wolverhampton Art Gallery in March–April 1990, and Manchester Art Gallery and Cornerhouse in May–June 1990.

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47 Kobena Mercer, 'Iconography after Identity', in David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce (eds.), *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, London: Duke University Press, 2005, pp. 49–58, 51.

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Douglas-Camp', *Women Artists Slide Library Journal* (October–November 1987), p. 20.

49 See Kobena Mercer, *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s*, London: Duke University Press, 2016; Pratibha Parmar, 'Black Feminism: The Politics of Articulation', in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference,* London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 101–26; and Kwesi Owusu (ed.), *Storms of the Heart: An Anthology of Black Arts and Culture*, London: Camden Press, 1988.

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A Note on the Texts

This anthology comprises artists' statements, articles, reviews, exhibition essays, interviews, and speeches, sourced from a range of magazines, journals, newspapers, pamphlets, books and catalogues. The texts have been reproduced whole, except in a very few cases where it was impossible to include the complete text due to length. Omitted text is marked by an ellipsis in square brackets […]. In the main, editorial interventions to the texts have been kept to a minimum. Idiosyncratic phrasing, capitalization, punctuation and spelling have been retained, except in instances of obvious typos or where spelling mistakes inhibited comprehension. Where possible, corrections and amendments have been made in consultation with the respective authors and artists' Estates. All footnotes and endnotes are original to the texts, except in clearly noted instances. The texts are arranged in chronological order; in instances where the date of publication or presentation cannot be ascertained specifically, they are ordered by year according to the information available, such as Spring, Summer etc. Each text is preceded by a short introduction which provides some information about the author(s) and an outline of the context in which the text was written. Details of where each text was originally published can be found in the Sources and Permissions section at the end of this book.

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1 *Black Art An' Done: An Exhibition of Work by Young Black Artists*, 1981

In 1981 a group of politically conscious young Black art students staged an exhibition of their work, *Black Art An' Done: An Exhibition of Work by Young Black Artists* at Wolverhampton Art Gallery from 9 to 27 June. The exhibiting artists were all of Caribbean heritage from the West Midlands: Eddie Chambers, Dominic Dawes, Andrew Hazel, Ian Palmer and Keith Piper. The group was mentored by local school teacher Eric Pemberton, and had been actively forging collaborative networks with other Black artists since 1979. During the period of its existence, the group's membership was fluid and it variously exhibited as Wolverhampton Young Black Artists, The Pan-Afrikan Connection and The Blk Art Group. In its early years the group was all male and inspired by the American Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and particularly the Pan-African writings of Larry Neal and Ron Karenga. Faced with institutionalized racism at art school, from teachers, curators and galleries, Chambers and his contemporaries staged their own exhibition, on their terms: *Black Art An' Done*. The title of the show provided a sense of forthright certainty: 'An' Done', is a colloquialism meaning, 'and that's an end to it'. The exhibition included work in a range of media, including painting, sculpture and printmaking, and addressed the civil rights of Black people in Britain and internationally. According to artist Rasheed Araeen, this exhibition was,

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arguably, the first time that the term 'Black Art' had been used to describe contemporary artistic practice in a British context.

* * *

INTRODUCTION

This exhibition of visual art work by five young black artists, is the first of its kind to be mounted in Wolverhampton.

It is a stride along the road to "sombodyness" for the black community.

These artists have all struggled to succeed in an adverse situation. We hope that they will "Keep on Keepin' on".

We hope that the exhibition will inspire other black youngsters to develop their creative genius.

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We wish to thank –

1. Mr. Rodgers and all of the staff at Wolverhampton Art Gallery, expecially Mr. Flynn, for their help.
2. Mr. I Henry, President of the Afro-Caribbean Teachers Association (ACTA), for officiating at the opening ceremony.

ARTIST'S STATEMENTS

To me, the black art student cannot afford the luxury of complacency as enjoyed by many of his white counterparts. These people, finding little worth responding to in their decadent lives of leisure and pleasure seek out ever more obscure playthings amongst the self indulgent vogues of art 'for arts sake'.

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