



A RIOT OF OUR OWN: A REFLECTION ON AGENCY

Carol Tulloch

Abstract

The article is a reflection on the exhibition A Riot of Our Own, an archival narrative on the Rock Against Racism Movement (RAR) that ran between 1976 and 1981. This was told through the exhibition-making collaboration between Syd Shelton, Ruth Gregory and Carol Tulloch. The exhibition drew solely on the RAR personal archive of Shelton and Gregory who were RAR (London) committee members, key contributors to the graphic design of RAR and Shelton took photographs of the movement's events and contextual material. The exhibition was first shown in 2008 at the CHELSEA Space Gallery, London, and went on tour to venues in London and Croatia. The paper traces the tenacious pursuit of anti-racist agency of RAR that has not lost its historical relevancy in the twenty-first century.

What is discussed here is the black and white dynamic of difference as unity against the intolerance of difference that marked Britain during this period; why and how the exhibition A Riot of Our Own was produced in response to an open invitation from CHELSEA Space; the critical, curatorial and auto/biographical frameworks that informed this instance of exhibition-making. As a reflective article by the co-curator and collaborator of the exhibition, the writing of this article is an opportunity to look back on how the exhibition-making process produced new forces – the need to exercise agency as a connecting thread between the impetus of experimentation, the concept of 'the edge' and exhibition-making as a liminal space. The article contributes to the developing area of study in histories of exhibitions and 'design activism'.

Keywords: Rock Against Racism, activism, agency, curating, difference, personal archives, reflection, experimentation, curatorial voice, quotation

DOI: dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2014s12ct

Biographical note

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An earlier version of this material was presented on the occasion of the project conference 'Disturbing Pasts: Memories, Controversies and Creativity' (20 -22 November 2012, Museum of Ethnology/Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna). To view the film footage on the Open Arts Archive, www.openartsarchive.org, follow this link: <http://www.openartsarchive.org/oaa/content/disturbing-pasts-memories-controversies-and-creativity-conference-19>

'Disturbing Pasts: Memories, Controversies and Creativity' is financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme 'Humanities as a Source of Creativity and Innovation', co-funded by AHRC, AKA, DASTI, ETF, FNR, FWF, HAZU, IRCHSS, MHEST, NWO, RANNIS, RCN, VR and the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 235366/291827.



Co-funded by
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A RIOT OF OUR OWN: A REFLECTION ON AGENCY

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TIME— BEATING TIME	THIS COUNTRY MIGHT BE RATHER SWAMPED BY PEOPLE WITH A DIFFERENT CULTURE MARGARET THATCHER	ROCK AGAINST RACISM ... WAS A JAIL BREAK	THE TWO-TONE LABEL THE MIDLANDS' SHORT-WINDED TAMLA-MOTOWN
OUTSIDE CONVENTIONAL POLITICS	SPIRIT OF RESISTANCE	RAR ... REGGAE SOUL ROCK AND ROLL JAZZ FUNK AND PUNK : OUR MUSIC	VICTORIA PARK 290-ACRE EAST END HYDE PARK
COMMON HUMANITY	WE WERE GOING TO STRIKE BACK KUNG-FU RUB-A-DUB SURREALIST STYLE	SOMETHING WAS IN THE AIR	'THE REAL ANARCHY OF THE UK' - THE RAR CLUBS
RANK-AND-FILE MOVEMENT OF THE ORDINARY	COMMITTED LEFTIES	SERIOUS MUSIC- POLITICS- BLACK-WHITE MIX-UP	RAR ... A CAMPAIGN TO CHANGE ATTITUDES WITHIN POPULAR CULTURE
MILITANT TRADITIONS	CONFRONTATION ON THE STREETS	DIY CLOTHES	THERE IS, IN THE UK A HIGH LEVEL OF CREATIVE INTERACTION BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE TRADITIONS
A CELEBRATION OF A DIFFERENT KIND OF PRIDE AND SOLIDARITY	BOARDING-UP SHOP FRONTS	A GREAT WAVE OF NEW ENERGY	THERE IS NO US WITHOUT THEM
THE INVISIBLE	EAST LONDON COMRADE	A REAL FLUIDITY BETWEEN MUSIC, STYLE AND VISUALS	THERE IS A FIGHT GOING ON FOR THE SOUL OF OUR COUNTRY
THE GENERAL LEVEL OF RACIAL VIOLENCE IN THE EAST END	THE FRONT ... THE POLICE ... THE LEFT	WANTED: GARAGE POLITICS	BEATING TIME DAVID WIDGERY 1986

Beating Time: A Concrete Poem, 2008. Edited by Carol Tulloch, design by Syd Shelton.

This concrete poem is constructed of quotes taken from the book *Beating Time* by David Widgery, published in 1986. This was Widgery's documentation of the Rock Against Racism (RAR) Movement, its history and political philosophy. Widgery was a founding member of RAR and a prominent writer for the movement. The poem was first shown at the exhibition *A Riot of Our Own* at CHELSEA Space, London 2 July to 2 August 2008. It was shown on a monitor, with each quote viewed as a single image.

Introduction

RAR is a campaign. A political campaign.
Its aims are:

1. To fight the influence of racism/fascism in Popular culture, especially music.
2. To build an anti-racist/fascist movement WITHIN Pop culture and use it to fight racism and fascism EVERYWHERE.

RAR is run by an Adhoc Committee of young people, rock-pop fans, whose job it is to promote the aims of the campaign. To set up RAR gigs where anti-racism is the message; to encourage bands and musicians to reject Establishment pressure and perform on a positive anti-racist platform; to produce anti-racist propaganda in the form of T-shirts, leaflets, posters, badges, stickers, the Fanzine – and to spread it around; to break the commercial stranglehold on bands, provide them with gigs AND pay them; to put the RAR into ROCK. **RAR is a campaign. A political campaign. – Join Us.**

(*Temporary Hoarding*, 1977, no.2)

Between 2007 and 2008 I engaged in the curatorial collaboration *A Riot of Our Own* with Syd Shelton and Ruth Gregory about the Rock Against Racism (RAR) Movement, which ran between 1976 and 1981.

Ruth and Syd¹ were RAR (London) committee members², graphic designers of posters, ephemera and RAR's paper *Temporary Hoarding*. Syd intuitively took photographs of RAR's activities that have resulted in the largest collection of images on the movement. The exhibition was shown at the CHELSEA Space Gallery, London, between 2 July and 2 August 2008. *A Riot of Our Own* was the culmination of the lived experiences of the three collaborators that have revolved around difference, racism, belonging and culture. A culmination that revisits a moment of British activist history of only five years yet had tentacles that stretched back to British slavery, colonialism and imperialism and its contribution to what it means to be part of Britain in the 21st century.

RAR brought black and white people together to confront racist ideologies, notably that of the far-right

1 For the remainder of the article, I will use the Christian names of Syd Shelton and Ruth Gregory to reflect the familiar, collaborative nature of the project.

2 The RAR (London) Committee included: Clarence Baker, Chris Bolton, Pete Bruno, Andy Dark, Rick Fawcett, Robert Galvin, Darlajane Gilroy, Ruth Gregory, Jane Harrison, Roger Huddle, Bob Humm, Tom Robinson, Red Saunders, Syd Shelton, Sharon Spike, Kate Webb, David Widgery and Jo Wreford.

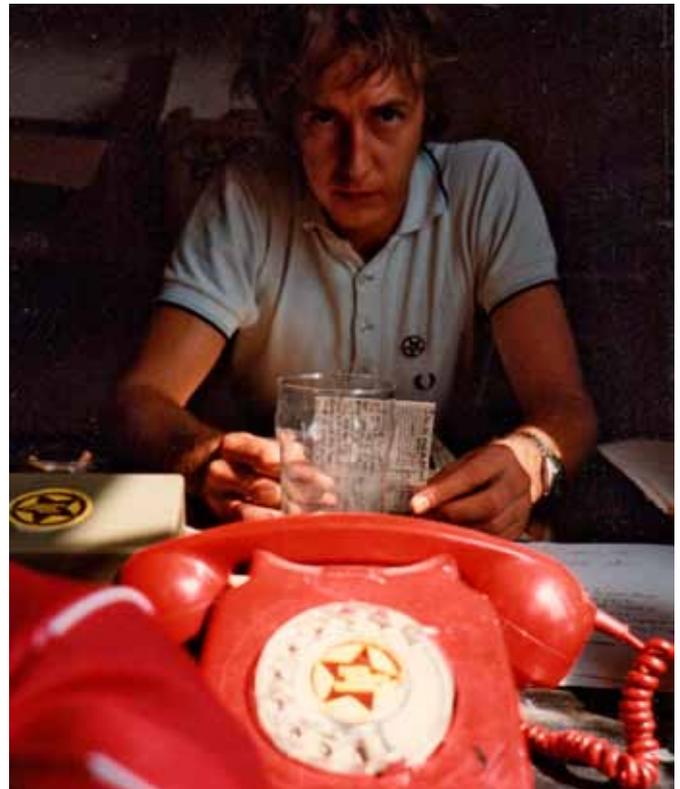


Figure 1.2.2: Syd Shelton 1978, Rock Against Racism (RAR) office, Finsbury Park, London. ©Photograph by Kate Webb.



Figure 1.2.3: *Temporary Hoarding* No. 5 Spring, 1978, Ruth Gregory (left) and Darla Jane Gilroy. © Syd Shelton and Ruth Gregory



Figure 1.2.4: Rock Against Racism logo designed by David King, 1976.

organisation the National Front (NF)³, through music and demonstrations, rallies and design in the streets, parks, town halls and pavilions across Britain. RAR was in-your-face activism, illustrative of what a collective creative engagement between designers, writers, actors, musicians, performers and supporters can achieve. The movement recognised that the chronic rise of racism in the 1970s was a legacy of British slavery, colonialism and imperialism, the tentacles of which still had a hold on African, Asian and Caribbean migrants and immigrants to Britain, and their descendants born in the country post-World

³ In 1971, the National Front changed its name to the National Party. This was seen by its critics as a bid for them to be seen as more 'respectable' and to 'appeal to moderate sections of public opinion' (Jones, 1971, p.9). The group's original name was still used by its opposers, as in RAR and the Anti-Apartheid Movement, see Edgar (1977).



Figure 1.2.5: Chelsea Space Gallery, London. © Donald Smith/ CHELSEA Space.



Figure 1.2.6: RAR Carnival Southall, London, 1979. © Photograph by Syd Shelton



Figure 1.2.7: Jubilee Street, Stepney, London, 1977. © Photograph by Syd Shelton

War II. RAR committee member David Widgery's activist thinking on the spectres of British colonialism and imperialism on 1970s Britain was that:

We whites must realise, before it is too late
 ... That they are here because we were there.
 That there is no Britain without blacks and that
 we could not keep our slaves out of our sight
 forever. That there is no such thing as pure
 English nationality or pure Scots, or Welsh but
 a mongrel mix of invaders and predators and
 settlers and émigrés and exiles and migrants.
 That there is no us without them.

(Widgery, 1986, p.122)

The racist murders of, for example, Altab Ali, Gurdip Singh Chagger, Kenneth Singh and Blair Peach alongside perpetual racial attacks of black people, regardless of gender, as well as overseas concerns such as the atrocities of apartheid in South Africa, fuelled this form of anti-racist thinking and activity. RAR was a definitive past/future juncture for black and white people at this time in Britain when, Stuart Hall argues, the 'fundamentally dialogic' tenants of multi-culturalism enabled translation (Hall and Scott, 2012, pp.300-2). RAR'S dogged activism attracted racist attacks against the London base. Kate Webb, who ran the RAR London

office full-time from 1978 to 1981, remembers 'we got a lot of nasty stuff through the mail, and a steady drip of hate letters from the NF' (Webb, 2014). This 'nasty stuff' included razor blades. Webb also recalls that it was the address 'Rock Against Racism Box M, c/o 6 Cotton Gardens London E2' that was fire bombed. This mailing address was also used by the Socialist Workers Party, so it was difficult to be sure who the target was (Webb, 2014). In light of these attacks RAR members adopted pseudonyms. For example, Webb became Irate Kate, Ruth was known as Ruth Shaked, and Syd had a couple of names Syd Cortina and THP3, based on the camera film he used to take photographs.

This article relates how a curatorial-telling of RAR can illustrate the power of agency from human, material and visual perspectives. It is a reflective text by me, the instigator of the exhibition idea, co-curator and collaborator, in order to convey the edge of reason that a curatorial-telling of activism can produce, that is, a space where different personal experiences, yet similar socio-political perspectives, connect. This text reconsiders the relevance of exhibition-making experimentation to chart the legacy of RAR through the RAR personal archive of Syd and Ruth. I use the term exhibition-making, which I see as an aspect of curating, but the term quantifies for me the collaborative nature of the project and the free reign

we were given over every aspect of the exhibition *A Riot of Our Own*: the narrative, context, design, text and publication—to *make* our own exhibition.

What follows is a complex account of this curatorial representation of RAR, an account that needs to acknowledge: the documentation of a movement and the history of an exhibition that acknowledged RAR's historical and political significance at a particular moment of British activism against, often violent, racism; the lived experiences and biographical connections that emerged because of the movement and its curatorial-telling; an exhibition that offers a new telling of RAR that acknowledges the auto/biographical tenets of the project; and why the need to engage in curatorial reflection, particularly when auto/biographical elements have impacted on the curatorial process. My use of the term auto/biographical draws on Linda Anderson's definition:

autobiographical and biographical narratives are related and to suggest how the boundary between them is fluid. This can be manifested in the way autobiographies may contain biographical information about the lives of others, or be read for the biographical information they contain about the subject. Biographies also may include personal revelations about their authors or a personal narrative of their own quest for information or their relation to the biographical subject.

(Anderson, 2011, p.140).

I have written '*A Riot of Our Own*: A reflection on agency' with a curatorial voice, that is, I am applying the curatorial process of assembling elements from connected realms to produce a new narrative, which is effectively my collage of RAR and its legacy. This article is constructed of three sections. Part I outlines the exhibition-making process of *A Riot of Our Own* at CHELSEA Space. Part II clarifies the need for curatorial reflection, to look back on how the exhibition-making process of this exhibition produced new forces—the need to exercise agency as a connecting thread between the impetus of experimentation, the concept of 'the edge' and exhibition-making as a liminal space. Part III relates the need to acknowledge what Mark Sealy calls 'the missing chapters' (Sealy, 2012) of anti-racist activism and how this has been recognised through the responses to the exhibition.

Part I: Exhibition-making

A Riot of Our Own exhibition at CHELSEA Space, London, 2 July to 3 August 2008

The exhibition *A Riot of Our Own* was a collaboration between Syd, Ruth and me, a collaboration that I call a curatorial interview. Throughout the exhibition-making process I asked them questions that encouraged Ruth and Syd to reassess the meaning of objects to them and RAR, for example, the contact sheets for Syd or Ruth's personal diaries, to making a new piece of work based on archival material such as Ruth's political badges. Through this curatorial interview, I wanted to pit Ruth and Syd's personal memories of that period of their lives against the 'storage memory' (von Bismarck, 2002, p.458) of their RAR archive, which was reflected in the intertextuality of the objects shown in *A Riot of Our Own*. I pushed this aspect of the exhibition-making process further in the published interviews I conducted with Syd and Ruth in the publication *A Riot of Our Own* (Tulloch, 2008).⁴

The exhibition consisted of photography, graphic design material, ephemera, personal items and published texts that had been kept, rather than collected, by Syd and Ruth. At the time of the project, these were held at Ruth and Syd's studio, Graphicsi, in Hackney, London.⁵ Syd took the lead on the design of the exhibition in discussion with me. He wanted a clean approach to allow the objects to 'do the talking' (Shelton, 2014a). An example of this was the unframed photographs and posters. This was done, Syd remembers, to produce an immediate, intimate connection with the image (Shelton, 2014d).

I am fortunate to be able to include here images of the complete exhibition installation, to 'authenticate' the exhibition content and narrative. Such documentary material is recognised as crucial evidence in the

4 For the publication *A Riot of Our Own* (2008) I devised a series of questions for Syd and Ruth. The first part of the interview focused on their individualised contributions to RAR. The questions in the second half of the interview were exactly the same for both in order to gauge how they thought about RAR in 2008. These were: What is your definition of the RAR movement? What contribution did graphic design make to the communication of the ideologies of RAR? What has been the role of graphic design in the 'self-archiving' process used to create this exhibition? Was it a conscious act to create the RAR archive? Working closely with the archive to produce the exhibition, did it challenge your memory of RAR? With regards to your sense of self, what has it meant to co-curate *A Riot of Our Own*? What do you hope to communicate to the viewer through the exhibition? Unsurprisingly their answers were different but connected.

5 Syd Shelton and Ruth Gregory's design partnership was dissolved in 2012. Syd still runs the Graphicsi studio, which has moved to Hove, East Sussex.



Figure 1.2.8: Layout plans of the exhibition *A Riot of Our Own* by Syd Shelton. © Syd Shelton.

reflection of exhibitions (Horsley, 2014b, p.172). Interestingly, looking back at the archival material around the exhibition-making of *A Riot of Our Own*, the exhibition plans bears false witness. They are true to Syd's desire for a 'clean approach', but objects are missing from these initial blue prints. For example, the 'TH RAR' lid for one of the RAR archival boxes. TH refers to the RAR publication *Temporary Hoarding*. There was disagreement over whether this item should be included. I wanted it in the exhibition as it represented active archival storage by Ruth and Syd. Whilst they saw it as having no relevance to RAR's activist or design profile. Donald Smith, director of CHELSEA Space, agreed with my argument and made the directorial decision to include the lid. What follows is a 'virtual tour' of *A Riot of Our Own* as it was displayed at CHELSEA Space in 2008.

The Lower Gallery of CHELSEA Space was the introduction to *A Riot of Our Own*. It housed contextual photographic material taken by Syd that informed RAR's political philosophy, such as the *Anti Anti-Mugging March* in Lewisham in 1977, alongside contact sheets of RAR gigs. Visitors could also view the *Beating Time* concrete poem in this space. This was displayed next to the 'TH RAR', archival box lid. The Lower Space featured two introductory panels to the exhibition, one was my statement on the contextual frame for the exhibition, the other was an explanation of what

RAR was and that comprised a quote from *Temporary Hoarding No.2* (and is the opening quote of this article).

Following on from the Lower gallery is The Ramp area that was dedicated to framed ephemera and original artwork. The Ramp began with a black and white flag made by Ruth on which to display the badges she wore as part of her anti-racist activism. The flag was inspired by Paul Gilroy's seminal text *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), a critical evaluation of post-World War II black presence in Britain, the antagonistic reactions to that presence, and methods used to redress contentions. Within the text, Gilroy counts RAR as a pivotal moment in recognition of a need for action against the intolerance of difference (1987a, pp.115-35). In 1987, I interviewed Gilroy about this publication and he summarised what RAR meant:

There were things about that period that were very positive. Things could have been learnt, in particular nationalism. RAR wasn't meant to be British, punks say there was no England anymore, we are not patriots. There was something about the spontaneity, about the use of culture. Their kind of understanding of putting pop and politics together, something that could be used today. The GLC [Greater London Council] could have looked at what made RAR successful ... one minute we had thousands of people marching the



Figure 1.2.9: Lower Space of CHELSEA Space, 2008. ©Photograph by Carol Tulloch.



Figure 1.2.10: RAR Archival Box Lid and *Beating Time* Screen, Lower Space, CHELSEA Space, 2008. © Donald Smith/CHELSEA Space.

'A Riot of Our Own' is an archival narrative on the Rock Against Racism (RAR) movement, 1976-1981. It is told through the personal archive of Ruth Gregory and Syd Shelton, who were RAR (London) committee members. Syd and Ruth's intuitive act of keeping, rather than collecting, this material is 'a form of self-historicisation'. Some belong to Syd, like the photographs taken by him, others such as the badges and diaries are Ruth's. Other material is jointly owned, as in the RAR paper 'Temporary Hoarding'. These are kept at their studio that was established in 1979 because of RAR and, as Ruth recalls, 'we needed the freedom to experiment'.

The exhibition has been inspired by the concept of 'self-archiving'— an exploration of one's own history through a re-acquaintance with, and re-assemblage of, the objects held in a personal archive. Here, it has been transformed into a series of visual quotes and personal statements about RAR, and the social tempo in Britain during the life of the movement.

Today, there are many versions of what RAR was and its legacy. The graphic design and photographic material shown here provides another aspect of that historical moment. Most of the items were produced by Syd, Ruth and other RAR members, therefore this archive is the residue of a collective engagement with the offensive of anti-racism and anti-fascism through creativity— from the design studio, to carnivals, to gigs, on tour, to demonstrations and back to the design studio.

Carol Tulloch

Figure 1.2.11: Introductory panel text to the exhibition *A Riot of Our Own*. 2008. © Carol Tulloch and Syd Shelton.

"RAR is a campaign. A political campaign. Its aims are:

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2. To build an anti-racist/fascist movement WITHIN Pop culture and use it to fight racism and fascism EVERYWHERE.

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Temporary Hoarding No.2

"RAR started in 1976 as a reaction to the rising racial abuse commonplace at bus stops, in shops, pubs and on the dance floor. David Widgery described it as "a jail break". It was something different—a consciously inclusive movement full of largely non-aligned lefties, who were as passionate about politics as they were about music and visual culture. Local RAR groups developed across the country. In 1979 RAR held a National Conference. The National Front was about to field 360 candidates in local elections and the British Movement was still attacking people and gigs. RAR's 'Militant Entertainment Tour', with a rhinoceros as its logo, did a rhino charge through Britain. This culminated in 22 gigs with major and local support bands. These events pushed our anti-fascist and anti-racist message out there, and empowered people in the process, which was what RAR was all about".

Ruth Gregory

"RAR was a collection of political activists, artists, graphic designers, photographers, actors, writers, fashion designers, musicians and fans who came together to pool their energies and talents in the fight against the growth of racism and the National Front. In many ways we had more in common with the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire than a political party. The collaboration between UK reggae and punk bands, RAR members took on the orthodoxy through five carnivals and some 500 gigs throughout Britain. During those five years the National Front went from a serious electoral threat into political oblivion. There is no doubt RAR played a significant part in that demise".

Syd Shelton

Figure 1.2.12: 'What was RAR?' A Riot of Our Own exhibition panel, 2008. © Ruth Gregory and Syd Shelton.



Figure 1.2.13: Ramp Display of *A Riot of Our Own*, CHELSEA Space, 2008. © Donald Smith/CHELSEA Space.

length and breadth of the land talking about how racism should be destroyed from this society if we are going to have any future at all, the next minute it is all forgotten. The Government changed, the Tories came in, yet for a lot of us, black and white, it was a very formative experience. There is a model there ... moving people to participate in something, not enticing them to become members with cards etc., something Red Wedge wasn't able to do ... I am talking about a form of politics which isn't tied to a party, something more serious than that.

(Gilroy, 1987b)

The remainder of The Ramp featured a RAR Roundel, the star of which was designed by David King in 1976, graphic material in different stages of completion such as, stickers, flyers, logo artwork for the 'Letter's Page' of *Temporary Hoarding* and a remnant of a poster for the *Edinburgh Carnival Against the Nazis* in 1978; Ruth's 1978 and 1979 diaries and a letter from Irish Republican prisoner Felim O'Hagan dated '19/3/1981'.

Posters for differing carnivals and gigs were displayed on a wall at the top of The Ramp and signalled the entrance to the Gallery. These large format works reflect some of the bombastic graphic design created in



Figure 1.2.14: Ruth Gregory's Diaries for 1978 and 1979. © Photograph by Carol Tulloch.



Figure 1.2.15: RAR Posters and photographs of RAR events displayed in the Ramp and Upper Gallery, CHELSEA Space, 2008. © Photograph by Syd Shelton.



Figure 1.2.16: Contextual images that informed the activism of RAR. From top left: Manchester; Lower Falls, Belfast 1979; Falls Road, Belfast 1979; Bagga of Matumbi, London, 1979. © Photograph by Carol Tulloch.



Figure 1.2.17: A series of RAR events between 1977 and 1981. Upper Space, CHELSEA Space, 2008.
© Photograph by Syd Shelton.



Figure 1.2.18: Portraits by Syd Shelton. *A Riot of Our Own*, CHELSEA Space, 2008. © Photograph by Syd Shelton.

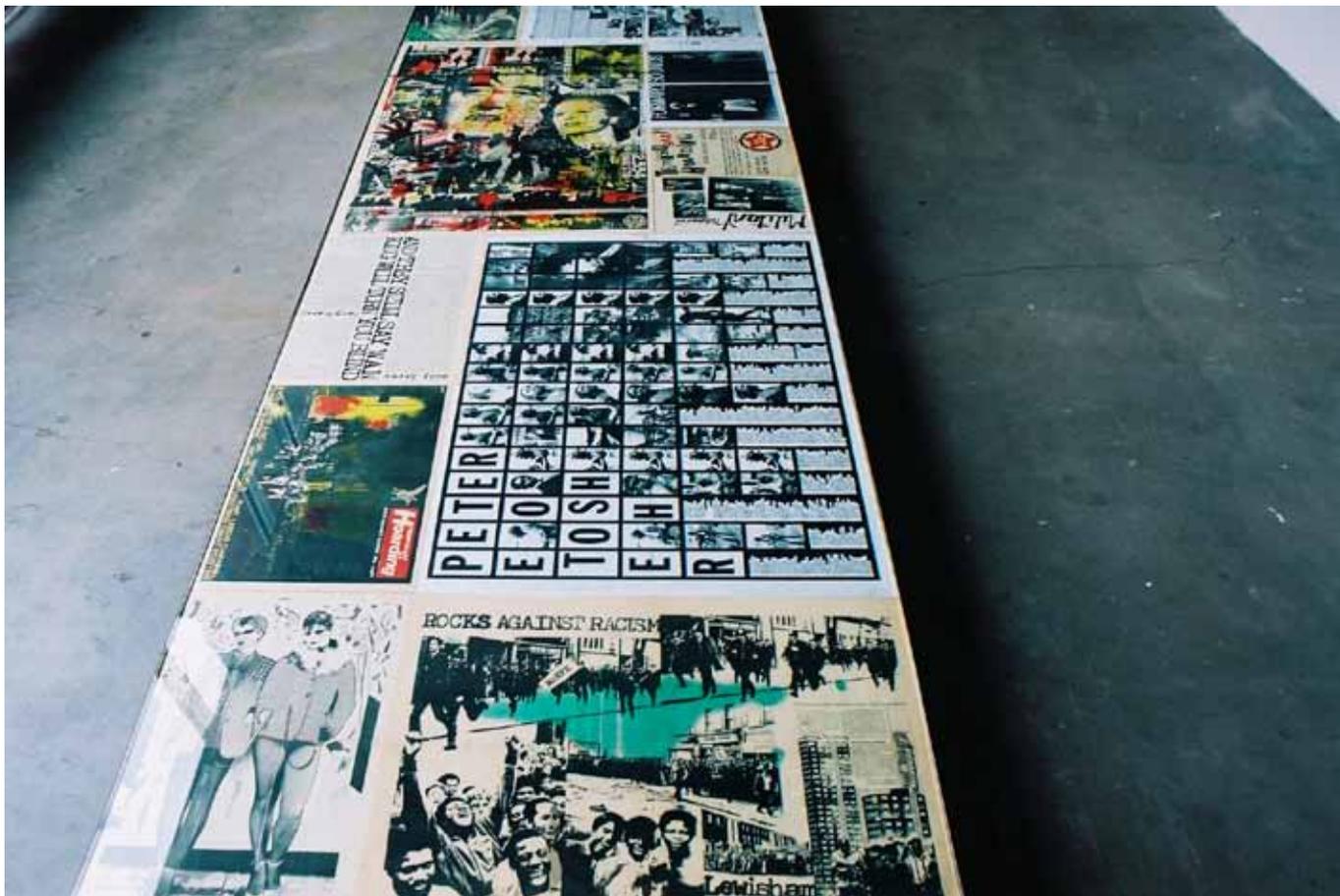


Figure 1.2.19: The TH Table. A montage of front and internal pages of *Temporary Hoarding*, RAR's paper, 2008. © Photograph by Syd Shelton.

studios, echoed by the other material on The Ramp. The posters bridge the world of the studio with the RAR carnivals and demonstrations, gigs and performances as different forms of effective activism, or 'activisms' as Ethel Brooks and Dorothy Hodgson prefer (2007),⁶ embodied and graphic, which were produced and/or performed in the face of racism.

On display in the Upper Gallery were the majority of the photographs taken by Syd of gigs, performers and the audience, demonstrations and street photographs of individuals and groups.

The centre of the gallery was dominated by what we called the 'TH Table'. An oblong, low, glass-covered table that displayed a selection of pages from *Temporary Hoarding* to create an unapologetic graphic montage of RAR. Its design was inspired by an educational studio visit I organised for Chelsea College of Arts students on the *MA Visual Arts: Theory and Practice of Transnational Art Course*. This was to introduce the students to

⁶ Ethel Brooks and Dorothy Hodgson suggest the consideration of the term 'activisms' to recognise the 'multiplicity of acts and actions in women's lives that are animated by the need to create change – social, political, artistic, cultural' (2007, p.10). This thinking is also relevant to the RAR of activities by women and men across the country, Europe and the USA.



Figure 1.2.20: Private View of *A Riot of Our Own*, CHELSEA Space, 2008. © Donald Smith/CHELSEA Space.



Figure 1.2.22: A Riot of Our Own exhibition leaflet, CHELSEA Space, 2008. © Syd Shelton and Carol Tulloch.

alternative, earlier forms of art and design practice, to illustrate my curatorial practice and gauge their response to the RAR archive. During conversations about the graphics, Syd laid works on the studio floor, which could be viewed from different angles by the group, and were encountered by walking around the object. We found this low-level viewing an effective way of seeing the work. Our decision to have the TH Table only 30cms off the floor reduced visual interference that encouraged concentrated study of *Temporary Hoarding*.

Syd wrote the text panel for the Upper Gallery. It elaborated on the importance of taking photographs as part of his politics of the 1970s and 1980s as being a 'graphic argument' that enabled him to be a subjective witness of the period that could hopefully contribute to social change. This practice began in 1972 with his photographic documentation of the social, cultural and political dynamics expressed by urban Australian Aboriginal communities and the working class on the streets of Sydney.⁷ Syd also commented on the meeting of the 'old technology' of the 1970s and 1980s that was used to produce RAR's graphic material and the contemporary systems of scanning and digital printing that reproduced his photographs of an earlier period into large format artworks.

The three exhibition panels were the only contextual texts in the gallery. A free leaflet was produced that featured an image of each exhibit, in order of

⁷ See Syd Shelton's first solo exhibition *Working Class Heroes*, Sydney Film-makers Cooperative, 1975.

Limited edition archival prints

All the photographs in the exhibition are archival Giclée prints printed on Hahnemühle acid free photo rag paper. They are available to purchase in a signed and numbered limited edition of 75, all uniform, at £250 each. T. 0207 739 5060. E. sydselton@graphicsci.com

All photographs © Syd Shelton 2008

T-shirts

A limited edition of 50 of each t-shirt in 3 different designs, available in medium and XL, £25 each.



Design 1 Punk girls



Design 2 Temporary Hoarding, 'Rocks Against Racism'



Design 3 Joe Shrummer, The Clash 1979

CHELSEA space

16 John Islip Street, London SW1P 4JU.
Director: Donald Smith, d.s.smith@chelseaarts.ac.uk
www.chelseaspace.org



appearance, with an accompanying caption. What is missing from this is the 'TH Lid', as explained above. This system was devised to enable visitors to engage with the objects closely and to read the additional information when it was right for them, whether in the gallery or after the visit to the exhibition.⁸

It all began with an open invitation

In 2007, Donald Smith, director of CHELSEA Space, extended an open invitation to me to curate an exhibition on anything I wanted to explore. Smith stressed that this was an opportunity to do something that I would not be able to undertake at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), where I have been a research fellow since 2003. By 2007, it had been three years since I last curated an exhibition, *Black British Style* at the V&A, which I co-curated with Shaun Cole. *Black British Style* focussed solely on black people, from different parts of the African diaspora, who lived in Britain and how, since 1947, they used their styled bodies to articulate their negotiation of difference and being in Britain. On reflection of the *Black British Style* exhibition (see Tulloch, 2005b), I wanted to extend my research investigations into inter- and cross-cultural connections, not only as a sphere of conflict due to difference, but difference as unity between black and white people. This partially stems from personal experience.

⁸ At the private view of *A Riot of Our Own* I noticed that many people, having viewed the exhibition, sat on the internal window benches of CHELSEA Space and read the exhibition leaflet there.

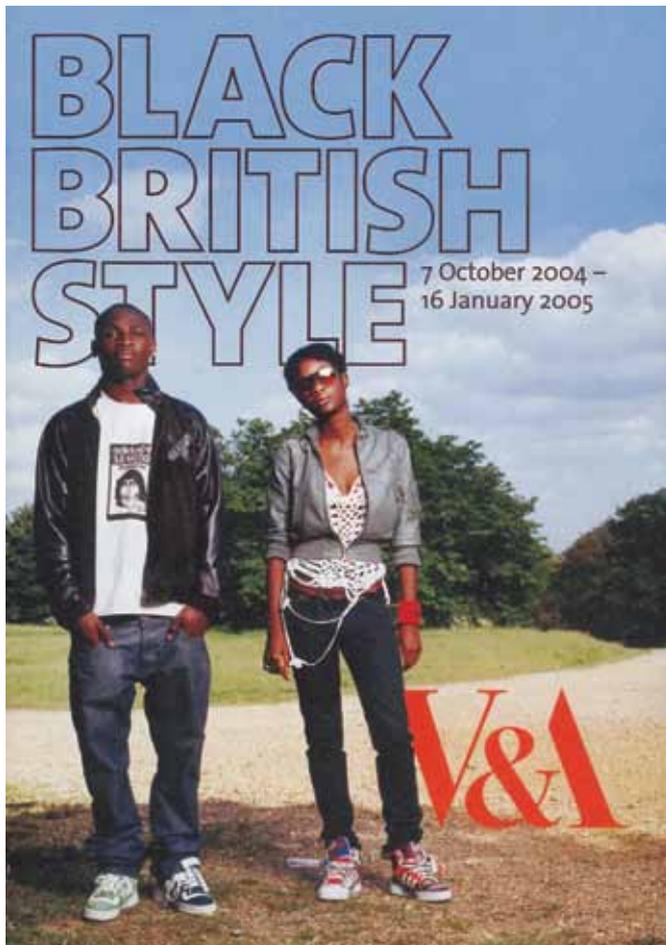


Figure 1.2.23: *Black British Style* exhibition poster, V&A Museum. ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photograph by Carol Tulloch.

I am a Black British woman born in Doncaster, South Yorkshire, England. My parents migrated from Jamaica to England in the 1950s, and were therefore colonial subjects. My father was a coal miner at Armthorpe Colliery, Doncaster. My mother worked at Crompton Parkinson Limited in the same town. They both experienced and witnessed racism from this period onwards. My parents had a number of close Caribbean friends, and as an antidote to the 'Colour Bar System',⁹ they socialised at weekends, they organised parties, visited each other in different towns and cities. Yet, they both experienced cultural and social connections with other cultural groups. My father was a member of Doncaster's Polish Club, my mother had 'white work-mates' who came to our home.

In my own lived experience, I have witnessed the sting of racism *and* the energy of unity through difference. As children, white friends had the run of our house on an equal footing with our black friends. At

⁹ The Colour Bar system was experienced across 'colour lines' by, for example, Asian, Caribbean and Irish people. It was not a government-imposed incentive, but an invidious means of keeping black people out of various forms of social and cultural worlds from employment, churches and night clubs.

my father's funeral in March 1971, there were a large number of white mourners. Later that year my mother and I attended an introductory evening to the grammar school I was to attend in September. We were the only black people in the large group of new pupils and their parents. My mother wanted to sit in the front row of the assembly hall so she could hear everything clearly. No one sat next to my mother and me, even though the hall was so full that people stood along the sides of the hall.¹⁰

RAR therefore mirrored my own experience of being born black in Britain. Brian Roberts reassures the researcher who wants to look at subjects connected with their own lives that

the research question derives from or is connected with the biographical experience of the researcher ...

(Roberts, 2007, p.23).

Underneath the general reflection on research experience is the deeper question for the researcher concerning what he or she 'values' in life and what is central to self and well-being—and how the various personal obligations, aspirations, and social relations can be harmonised.

(Roberts, 2007, p.133).

It is perhaps pertinent to state at this point that Syd is my husband. We are a black-and-white couple who have anti-racism, working class backgrounds and Yorkshire as our birthplace in common. Syd always kept his photographic archive at his studio, which was separate from our home. Not until the exhibition *A Riot of Our Own* did he believe that they were of any cultural or historical value.¹¹ This thinking coincides with Ian Goodyear's observation that following the end of RAR in 1981 it had 'a lengthy period in relative obscurity' and that it is only recently that 'RAR's leading role in the anti-racist mobilisations of the 1970s has become more widely recognised' (Goodyear, 2009, p.1).

It was not until 2004, while I was working on the *Black British Style* exhibition that I began to see the

¹⁰ The evening consisted of an introduction by the headmaster and a tour of the school within the forms the new pupils were assigned to. In my new class would be Christine Markham. She remarked at the beginning of term in 1971 that she noticed how no one had sat next to my mum and me that evening, and was determined to redress this once we met at school. We are still friends today.

¹¹ Following their use in Widgery's book *Beating Time* and a cropped image of Ranking Roger, of the Two-Tone band *The Beat*, featured on the front cover of Dick Hebdige's *Cut 'n' Mix*, Syd's RAR photographs had been kept in a filing cabinet since the mid-1980s.



Figure 1.2.24: RAR Carnival Against the Nazis, Leeds, 1981. ©Photograph by Syd Shelton.

range of Syd's photographs. I had used the odd image in the past, alongside some copies of *Temporary Hoarding*, but I had never seen the full catalogue, as Syd had not compiled this for himself. While working on the *Black British Style* exhibition, Syd sent me, by email and with no prompting from me, a photograph of an audience responding exuberantly to a performance by the Two-Tone band, *The Specials*, at the Leeds Carnival Against the Nazis event in 1981 to see whether I would be interested in it for *Black British Style*.

It is a heartening depiction of 'black youth' – a loaded term of the 1970s and 1980s, which translated at that time into the stereotyped connotation of 'menace'. Here were three black lads just *being* teenagers, completely immersed in the exhilaration of a performance and the energy around them. This was a transformative moment for my critical research practice at this time. The photograph was used in the 'New order' section of the *Black British Style* exhibition. It was placed next to the display of the tonic suit and pork pie hat that belonged to Jerry Dammers, the founder of the Two-Tone musical movement and the band *The Specials*.

Following on from this, I encouraged Syd to look at this period of his photographs anew. As a result of this, between 2005 and 2006 I approached photography galleries in London and Newcastle with some of Syd's photographs. As mentioned earlier these were

images of performers and the audience of RAR gigs and carnivals, as well as the contextual street images of 'everyday life' in England and Northern Ireland that informed RAR's political stance. Aspects that I wanted to show together. The response from the galleries was that these different areas of reference on RAR's activities would not work together in an exhibition, and were interested only in specific sections of Syd's RAR portfolio. Therefore, it became a research need for me to produce an exhibition on this photographic complexity.

CHELSEA Space is part of Chelsea College of Arts. The online explanation of the gallery's identity cements my acceptance of Smith's invitation:

CHELSEA Space is a public exhibiting space where invited art and design professionals are encouraged to work on experimental curatorial projects that may not otherwise be realised.

The programme is international and interdisciplinary covering art, design and popular culture. The emphasis is on curatorial experimentation, the exposure of process and ideas, and re-readings of artworks and archives and their re-presentation for contemporary audiences. CHELSEA Space is a platform for discussion and questions rather than definitive answers.

CHELSEA space's most dominant architectural feature is its large plate glass window. For this reason the exhibiting space will never be a 'white cube' but instead operates more as a vitrine or an animated screen. Even the installation of a show becomes a viewed event and visitors to exhibitions, seen from outside, become part of the show. The ethos at CHELSEA Space is welcoming – a meeting place where informal social networks can develop.

(Chelsea SPACE, n.d.)

This ethos has been meticulously adhered to over the fifty-five exhibitions that, at the time of writing, have taken place at the gallery. In Smith and CHELSEA Space, I witnessed what the African-American artist Fred Wilson has maintained: '[R]isk-taking tends to take place at small, more marginalised institutions.' (cited in Marstine, 2012, p.38).

Notably, it is Smith's commitment to the possibilities of working with archives, and in the case of *A Riot of Our Own* personal archives, how they can be interpreted and re-interpreted through curatorial processes, as well as the cultural need to develop and maintain archives.¹² I felt at the time that due to Smith's thinking for CHELSEA Space, he offered a safe place to explore a curatorial voice that I had not been able to express elsewhere. My usual experience had been for the identity of an institution to be foremost and my concern not to 'trip up' in those spaces.¹³ CHELSEA Space enabled experimentation with the different kinds of dialogue between black and white people in Britain of the 1970s and 1980s, and thereby the complex issues of those dialogues – the overarching politics – and the central role of the archival object to convey the entangled significance of social-cultural and historical relevance and personal meaning.

This confidence in Smith was cemented at our

12 On 16 March 2011, Donald Smith and I gave a joint talk on the relevance of archives to our respective curatorial practice. This was part of the Graduate Encounters lecture series organised by Dr. Hayley Newman at Chelsea College of Arts. We initially called the talk 'The raw and the cooked'. This was a reference to the idea that I would show intimate personal objects belonging to my family that had inspired large scale projects or had ended up as artefacts in museum shows (the Raw), whilst Donald showed ephemera from the CHELSEA space archive that had been left after an exhibition had closed and de-installed (the cooked). (For the blog of this event see: <http://www.chelseaspace.org/blog/archives/753>)

13 This was how curator and writer Omar Kholeif explained the need for curators to produce the right exhibition for an institution. He believes curators need experimental spaces where one need not worry about making mistakes (Kholeif, 2014).

first meeting where I proposed the exhibition idea in response to his open invitation. Syd and I took to CHELSEA Space the RAR photographic portfolio (of only some 20 images) with which we had approached galleries previously. We let Smith look at the images, without any commentary from us, to allow them 'to speak', this was a conscious decision by Syd and me. Smith made no comments either as he went through the work. When he reached the end of the portfolio, he simply said he had been to a number of the events Syd had recorded, and that his was a subject matter perfect for CHELSEA Space. Following this confirmation, I decided that the additional archival material of RAR should also be included in the exhibition.

RAR: from activism to archive

The curatorial interview process for *A Riot of Our Own* began 7 January 2008 when I made my first official studio visit to see the RAR Archive held by Syd and Ruth. In 1996, the fashion historian Christopher Breward gave me the best piece of advice about researching archives: 'let the archive speak to you'. I went partly armed with this mantra, and partly feeling confident I knew the material. As mentioned above, I had used items from their archive in the past. But as I asked Syd and Ruth to talk me through their involvement with RAR, they responded by talking and simultaneously showing me material, going to different parts of the studio delving into the plan chest, disappearing into the dark room, climbing up to the mezzanine floor, and rifling through filing cabinets, they bombarded me with a wealth of material. As they laid out the material in front of me, I quickly realised I did not know this RAR archive at all.

In 1979, Syd and Ruth established their first graphic design studio, *Hot Pink Heart/Red Wedge Graphics* in Hackney. Prior to this, the RAR graphic design material was produced at Feb-Edge Litho, also known as SW (Litho), in the same borough. Feb-Edge Litho was owned by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). From here Ruth, Syd and other RAR (London) committee members, produced graphic designs of the movement's associated material: posters and stickers, badges, illustrations and *Temporary Hoarding*. This took place in the evenings and often into the night to ensure the completion of the artwork. During the day, Feb-Edge had their own design commitments to meet, and it was where Syd, Ruth and Roger Huddle, another RAR committee member, worked full-time as graphic designers.¹⁴ In the evening the RAR designers had

14 Syd, Ruth and Roger Huddle produced graphic designs for publications such as *Private Eye*, *The Guitar*, *Film and Television Technician*, *The Catholic Tablet* and *Women's Voice* (Shelton, 2014c).



Figure 1.2.25: Feb-Edge Litho printing copies of *Temporary Hoarding* in the Late 1970s. © Photograph by Syd Shelton.

access to the space and equipment such as process cameras, the headliner and the photographic dark room.

For Ruth, the establishment of *Hot Pink Heart/Red Wedge Graphics* was significant to the communication of RAR's ideologies: 'we were hungry to develop a graphic language of our own as a means to engage with, and convey ideas. At the time graphic design was predominantly seen as decoration to the written word. We needed the freedom to experiment, and it seemed a natural progression to set up our own studio.' (Gregory, 2008).¹⁵ Both studio spaces marked the graphic identity of RAR that fed into the activist energy of the movement in personal and material forms that resulted in a cyclical network of activism: from the design studio, to carnivals, to gigs, on tour, to demonstrations and back to the design studio.

In light of the above, I refer to the objects kept by Syd and Ruth as a personal archive rather than a collection. They did not actively collect the items that constitute the archive. As mentioned above, many of the works were produced by Syd, Ruth and other RAR members as part of their political activism, and are

¹⁵ Feb-Edge Printers supported Syd and Ruth's new venture *Hot Pink Heart/Red Wedge Graphics* by providing them with freelance work from their catalogue of clients.

thereby visual and graphic markers of a certain point in their lives. Yet Ruth and Syd's intuitive act of keeping this material is, as the exhibition *A Riot of Our Own* tried to illustrate, 'a form of self-historicisation' (von Bismarck, 2002, p.458). Some of the objects belong specifically to one or the other – the photographs taken by Syd, the badges worn and diaries written by Ruth; others are jointly owned, such as the posters and *Temporary Hoarding*. Bearing this in mind, when one remembers that the word 'personal' pertains to the individual and also to the reciprocal action and/or relations between individuals, then for Syd and Ruth to pool their material together at their studio marked their integral partnership as designers, and as RAR activists, is undoubtedly personal.

The material kept by Syd and Ruth was overwhelming. For example, I did not expect to see original artwork. A case in point is the black and white illustration of two punk girls, their backs against a wall, not through fear but as a sturdy backdrop from which to project their feisty, barefaced exposure of 'kinkiness' which punk egged on. Ruth produced the work in 1979 for 'Page 3' of the Number 8, March/April, issue of *Temporary Hoarding*. It was in part a critical comment on the topless young women featured on Page 3 of *The Sun*. Ruth showed me the tear sheet of the printed

version of the illustration had been laminated. I said rhetorically: 'God, it would be amazing to have the original artwork.' Ruth casually went to the studio plan chest and produced it.

Syd and Ruth were themselves surprised how much material they had kept. And they were amazed at how excited I was about the range of items, such as a hurried, hand-drafted 'pen rough' proposal for the design of a RAR membership card. But why would this be of interest to exhibition visitors? Such evidence of creative immediacy (when shown alongside the published RAR graphics of posters and badges, photographs of gigs, demonstrations and backstage gatherings within an exhibition context), the visual relations between monochrome and vivid colour, and the undulating scale of giant posters and



Figure 1.2.26: 'Punk Girls' camera-ready artwork by Ruth Gregory for *Temporary Hoarding* No. 8, March/April 1979. Ruth Gregory made the image into a T-shirt that was on sale during the *A Riot of Our Own* exhibition at CHELSEA Space. The T-shirt was customised and worn by Donna Marris. © Photograph by Carol Tulloch.

minute fragments of artwork, illustrate how 'archives attached to a studio, therefore have connection with the "artistic activities" of the studio – a place of work and transformation' (Schaffner and Winzen, 1998, p.25). Undoubtedly this archive had what Sarat Maharaj (2012) calls 'the intellectual and physical touch' that emanate from the material: stains on photographic contact sheets, creases caused by Syd and Ruth folding posters for storage, missing pieces of type and straggling fragments of letaset. These 'touches' did not impair the authenticity of the archival material, rather they situated the items as part of the documentary record of a working studio in which these works were created. Indeed, these were the marks of existence.

Another strength of this RAR archive is the evocative marks of presence and the enduring trace of energetic participation made by individuals who contributed to RAR events. They are personal quotes of actually being there: black and white photographs of crowds at outdoor RAR carnivals resemble a textile design: an imprint of cohesive collectivity and activism – by imprint I mean its *Oxford English Dictionary* definition as 'a character impressed upon something, an attribute communicated by, and constituting evidence of some agency', the agency of RAR.

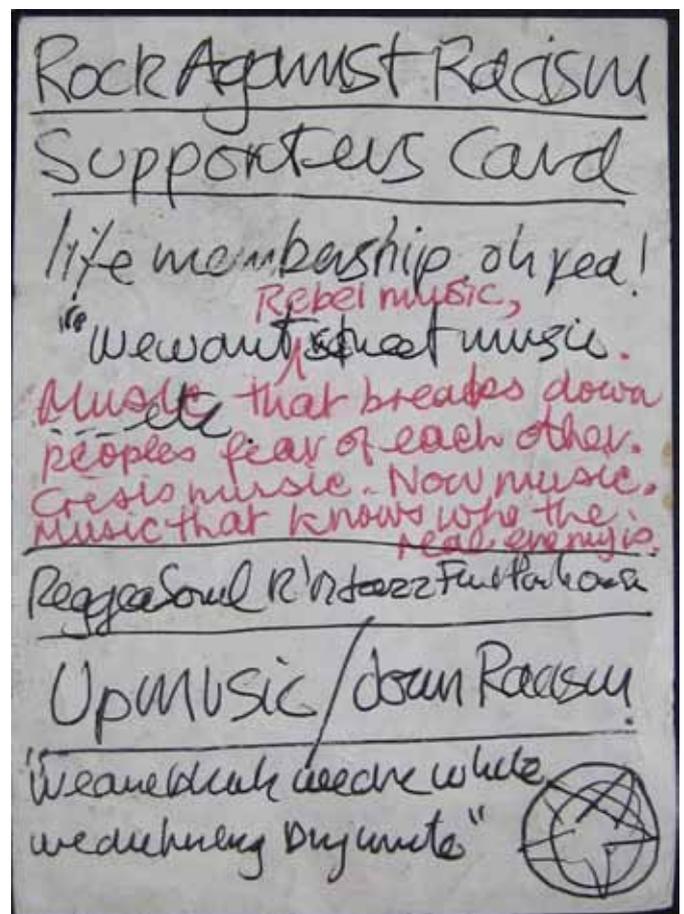


Figure 1.2.27: Rough design proposal for a RAR Membership Card. Date unknown. © Ruth Gregory and Syd Shelton.

Individuals made unique imprints that left marks on the space where they performed: John 'Segs' Jennings of *The Ruts* during a performance on 'The Militant Entertainment Tour' in 1979, his clothed body creating an imprint in the dry foam that covered a Bradford stage; the do-it-yourself customised clothes with handwritten text or added panels; the burlesque quality of fishnet tights in their rightful place on stage worn by a member of the audience at 'The Militant Entertainment Tour', West Runton Pavilion, Norfolk in 1979; the strength of subcultural character of what appears to be a Ben Sherman shirt against the common sense wearing of a key around a young black man's neck at 'Carnival Against the Nazis', Leeds 1981; Mick Jones and Paul Simonon, backstage at a London gig in 1977, swathed in a medley of cultural references that include Vivienne Westwood shirts designed with a nod to Jackson Pollock framed with studs, a Haile Selassie cloth badge, rough and ready Red Guard arm band, hair gel, dust and graffiti.

I mentioned earlier the letter from the Irish Republican Prisoner O'Hagan held at H-Block 4, Long Kesh, Northern Ireland. This object was a pivotal archival 'find' for me at that first curatorial interview in 2008. It was the signifier of the power of this RAR archive to marvel. Syd and Ruth handed the letter to

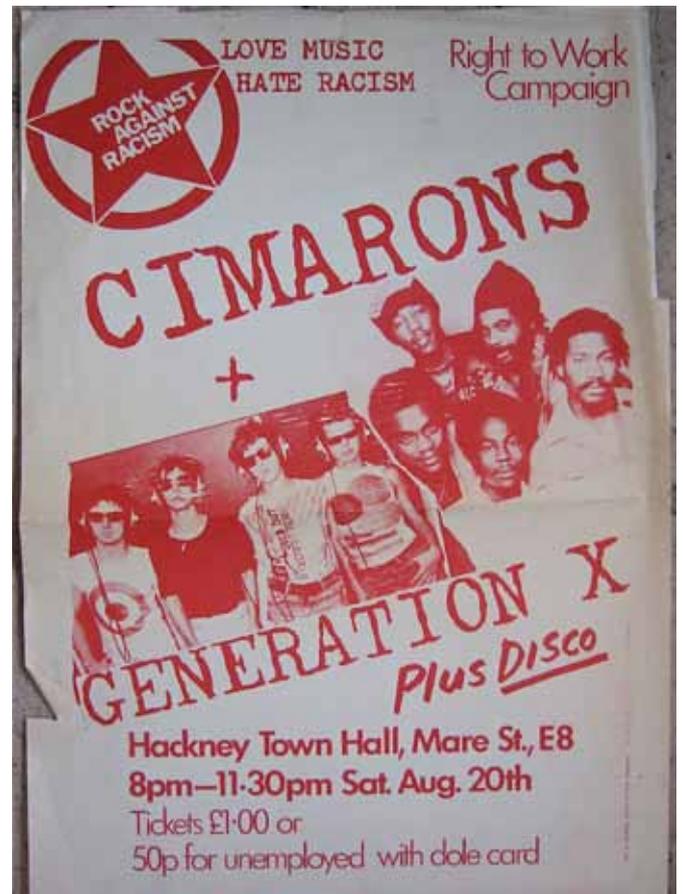


Figure 1.2.28: Rock Against Racism and Right to Work Campaign Benefit Gig, Hackney Town Hall, London, 1977. © Ruth Gregory and Syd Shelton.



Figure 1.2.29: RAR/Anti-Nazi League Carnival I, Victoria Park, 30 April 1978. © Photograph by Syd Shelton.



Figure 1.2.30: John 'Segs' Jennings of *The Ruts*, Bradford, 1979. © Photograph by Syd Shelton.



Figure 1.2.31: Militant Entertainment Tour, West Runton Pavilion, Cromer, Norfolk, 1979. © Photograph by Syd Shelton.



Figure 1.2.32: Militant Entertainment Tour, West Runton Pavilion, Cromer, Norfolk, 1979. © Photograph by Syd Shelton.



Figure 1.2.33: Mick Jones and Paul Simonon of *The Clash*, London, 1977. © Photograph by Syd Shelton.



Figure 1.2.34: Letter by Irish Republican prisoner Felim O'Hagan. Handwritten in pencil on a 70mm square cigarette paper. Sent to RAR on 19 March 1981. © Ruth Gregory and Syd Shelton.

me in a crumpled A4 plastic leaf that had been folded several times around the object to protect it. At first glance, it appeared to be just a tiny piece of paper with neat lines. On closer inspection, the neat lines were composed of minute words written in capital letters, in pencil, on both sides of a 70mm cigarette paper. The letter, dated '19/3/81', was produced by Felim O'Hagan, and sent to 'THE SECRETARY, ROCK AGAINST RACISM, 27 CLERKENWELL CLOSE, LONDON E.C.1.' It opens with the apology: 'EXCUSE THE UNORTHODOX WRITING PAPER BUT I'M SURE YOU'LL APPRECIATE THAT THE LIKES OF THIS LETTER HAVE LITTLE CHANCE OF PASSING THE CENSOR'.

O'Hagan outlined the 1976 protest started by Republican prisoners in H-Block, who had been classed political prisoners, rather than criminals, by the British Government. He refers to it, as it would later become widely known as: 'THE BLANKET PROTEST' – a refusal to wear prison clothes or undertake prison work. Disturbingly, O'Hagan closes the letter with a plea of help for Bobby Sands and Frank Hughes, who had been engaged in hunger strikes for eighteen and four days, respectively: 'THE STARK REALITY IS THAT UNLESS JUSTICE PREVAILS THEY WILL BE DEAD WITHIN A FEW SHORT WEEKS. PLEASE DON'T LET THEM DIE'.

The arresting quality of the object is its fragility. The visual impact of this micrographia – the thousands of regimented miniscule words arranged into a formation of precise rows that impart texture and the arrangement of similar constituent parts on

the cigarette paper – makes it resemble a precious embroidered sampler. Thus, the letter's size and beauty tempers its seemingly subversive content. According to Susan Stewart, the miniature can be a metaphor of containment ([1993] 2005, p.71). In reference to the content of this minute letter that outlines committed protest action from behind prison walls, is also a metaphor of confinement.

How were the final objects chosen from this rich material? On 14 April 2008 I edited the RAR archive. Syd and Ruth brought the archive to me at Chelsea College of Arts. I decided to do the initial edit without them as I felt an objective, yet 'embodied eye' (Sandino, 2012, p.95) of a curator with the experience to allow the visual and material to lead on the complex issues of difference and racism, and the counter-narratives of anti-racism. Essentially, I wanted to react intuitively to the archive in order to create the exhibition narrative. The plan was to create an initial selection of objects for discussions with Syd and Ruth when they returned at the end of the day, as the final decision on the object list had to be one of consensus.

In my workbook for the project, I made notes on how I responded to viewing the archive and collating it into possible ideas. For example, when I worked on Syd's photographic collection, I organised it into the sections: 'strong, not sure, talk me through this, repeats, skins [skinheads], dubious, dates, Ireland photos' (Tulloch, 2008). I then applied the 'strong, not sure, talk me through this' system to the other designed elements of the archive. Curiously, I found Ruth's diaries difficult to deal with. Ruth was present here in her handwritten notes of personal comments, RAR appointments and family birthdays. To wade through this material, I felt, would be too intrusive. The diaries are part of her past that she should remain in charge of. I wrote in my workbook: 'Uncomfortable going through Ruth's personal papers, did not look properly. Decided Ruth should choose diary exhibit pages' (Tulloch, 2008). Ruth felt that I should chose the pages for display, but I persuaded her to do this.

Another point I made in the journal concerned an issue I needed to raise with Syd, that of the contact sheets for his photographs, which were missing from the archival material he brought to Chelsea College of Arts. His response was that these were not significant to the visual history of RAR. After some discussion, I persuaded him to hand them over. In the process of gathering the contact sheets together they had a poignant impact on Syd; the memories of his personal life and political activism meshed and were pitted against the 'storage memory' of Syd's photographic archive of RAR. As part of the interview with Syd in the

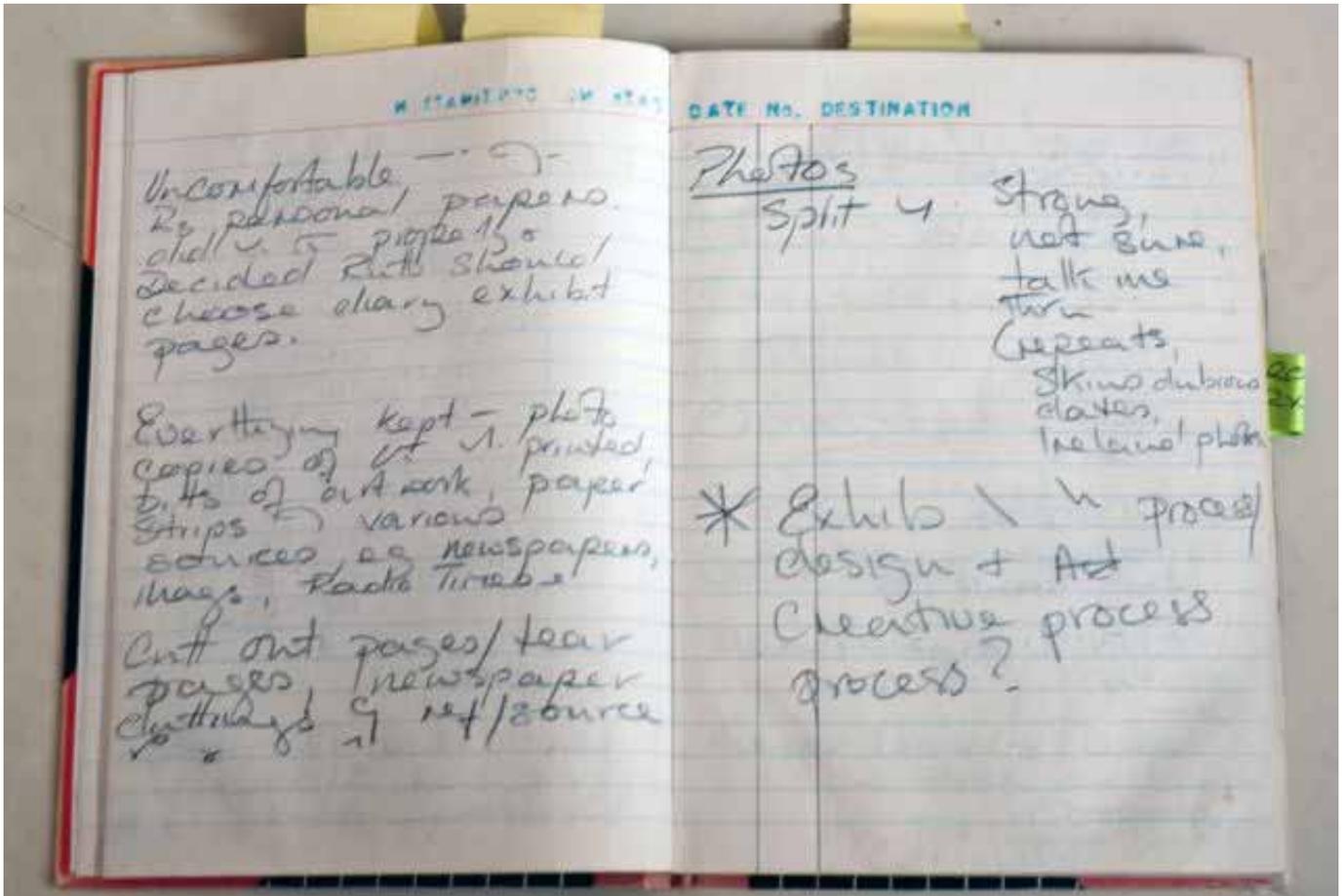


Figure 1.2.35: Carol Tulloch's workbook for *A Riot of Our Own* project. Some of the text is written in shorthand.
© Carol Tulloch.

publication *A Riot of our Own*, I asked him the question: 'Being reacquainted with the photographic contact sheets had a particular impact on you. Could you discuss this further?' (Tulloch, 2008). Syd answered with the following:

The original contact sheets are witness to how I selected which images to print. But they have assumed a new meaning, charged with 30 years of personal and political history. Many of the pictures chosen for the exhibition I did not see as significant in the 1970s, and have never been printed because, obviously, their historical resonance could not be known. For example, the significance of the clothes people wore and their body language could not have been estimated at the time; there was no time for distance, things were happening so fast.

It has been like photographic archaeology. The discovery of forgotten images on contact sheets that shed light on a forgotten moment, has been very exciting. It is this mixture of visual decisions made all those years ago that has provided me with a range of curatorial choices now, which gives this photographic archive its dynamic.

Looking at the original 'contacts' of the period reminds me how economical I used to be with film. I could only afford to buy a few rolls at time.

The contact sheets are further autobiographical proof of the different worlds I inhabited, as images of punks at West Runton Pavilion, Cromer, Norfolk sit next to snaps of my mother and baby daughter. It is a concern to me that with the move to digital photography, photographers edit as they go, discarding many images. I imagine that at least half of the pictures in the exhibition would have been deleted at the time they were taken had they been digital.

(Shelton, 2008).

A riot of our own: An auto/biographical curatorial voice

My curatorial decision to focus on only one archive was to enable the curatorial telling of the complex history of RAR as an achievable one. The exhibition could not be a definitive portrait of RAR when one considers, for example, that on 30 April 1978, around 100,000 people attended one of RAR's major anti-racist events, the *RAR/Anti-Nazi League Carnival against*



Figure 1.2.36: Darcus Howe speaking at the *Anti Anti-Mugging March*, Lewisham, 13 August 1977. © Photograph by Syd Shelton.

the Nazis. This consisted of a demonstration from Trafalgar Square to Victoria Park that featured fifteen lorries with bands performing on them. How does one represent the range of participants of that? Add to this, the central organising committee, based in London, consisted of a changing line-up, plus the regional RAR organisations, the performers, RAR activists-supporters in the UK, Europe and the USA, this was a movement that was made up of thousands of individuals.¹⁶ Taking the curatorial interview approach, which focussed only on Syd and Ruth, who played a central part in defining the graphic identity and political stance of RAR, lent this act of curatorial-telling an autobiographical authority.

In order to develop this aspect of the exhibition, I wanted to reacquaint the owners of this RAR archive with a part of their own history. As noted by Louisa Buck, 'by retracing the meaning of our past steps, we can cover new ground in the future' (Buck, 1994, p. 11). Therefore the exhibition-making process for

¹⁶ RAR organisations emerged across the United Kingdom. For example in 1979 the No.9, June/July, edition of *Temporary Hoarding* listed RAR regional offices in Birmingham, Brighton, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Launeston, Leicester, Manchester, Nottingham, Newcastle, Paisley, Stevenage and Tyneside. RAR was also active internationally. In No.10 of *Temporary Hoarding*, it listed RAR offices overseas in the USA, Holland, Germany, Norway, Belgium and Sweden.

A Riot of Our Own was developed along the lines of 'self-archiving' – an exploration of one's own history through a re-acquaintance with, and re-assemblage of the objects held in a personal archive; the opening up of archival narrative modes as they set functional and storage memory in relation to one another – thereby 'transforming the archive' (von Bismarck, 2002, p.456) into an exhibition of visual quotes as authoritative statements on the activist potency of RAR and simultaneously reflecting the social tempo in Britain between 1976 and 1981.

The retelling of RAR is a comment on the troubled past of Britain's inhabitants, of Britain's historical identity. The choice of pertinent references aids the significance of that telling. A case in point is the photograph taken by Syd of Darcus Howe speaking at the August 1977 Lewisham *Anti Anti-Mugging March* against the National Front. As indicated above this was placed in the 'Introduction' to the exhibition *A Riot of Our Own* to signify the intensity of opposition through a counter demonstration to the National Front's 'Anti-mugging March', which had demonised black youths as muggers. This had been fuelled by a police campaign to arrest young black people on the charge of a conspiracy to commit mugging. Howe is standing on a toilet block at Clifton Rise, flanked by a number of black and white fellow protestors. Coincidentally Don

McCullin, a photographic hero of Syd's, has published a similar photograph he took of Howe speaking at the same demonstration, at the same spot, but taken from a higher vantage point in his book *In England* (2007). Here is double visual evidence of the interest in pivotal anti-racist action that took place in Lewisham in 1977.

The concept of quotation is significant here. The exhibition *A Riot of Our Own* was a version of the history of RAR or 'versioning', according to Dick Hebdige (1987, p.12), where the use of quotation to create new versions produces fresh thinking on a subject, and provides 'room for improvisation' (Mackey, 1993, p.267), to be experimental:

That's what a quotation in a book or on a record is. It's an invocation of someone else's voice to help you want to say. In order to e-voke you have to be able to in-voke... That's the beauty of quotation. The original version takes on a new life and a new meaning in a fresh context... They're just different kinds of quotation.

(Hebdige, 1987, p.14)

In the case of the graphic quotations about RAR used in *A Riot of Our own* – the flyers, posters, banners, roundels, badges, stickers and *Temporary Hoarding* paper – these were the embodied actions of RAR contributor-participants. From the designer-makers of the range of RAR material, to the people who wore RAR badges, and the people who bought *Temporary Hoarding*, to those who carried and saw banners such as 'Gays Against the Nazis' at the *RAR/Anti-Nazi League Carnival in 1978* (Bragg, 2006, p.197). These were enmeshed forms of self-expression in opposition to the National Front. RAR's numerous forms of activism was indicative of Paul Ricoeur's observation that each contributor-participant to such activism "[is] entangled in stories", the action of each person (and of that person's history) is entangled not only with the physical course of things but with the social course of human activity' (Ricoeur, 1995, p.105). Consequently, this material is an example of embodied designed objects as activism. Such a critical framework enabled me to re-evaluate the agency of RAR, which I hoped was conveyed to visitors, as they engaged with the historical resonance, energy and personal impact of RAR.

This thinking is supported by the recent rise in the study of 'design activism' (Fry, 2011; Julier, 2013).¹⁷ Guy Julier has identified the 1970s as a notable decade for

¹⁷ See also the Design History Society Annual Conference, *Design Activism and Social Change*, 7-10 September 2011, Barcelona, Spain, convened by Guy Julier: <http://www.historiadeldisseny.org/congres>.

the consideration of the relationship between political movements and their use of design, as well as that '[d]esign activism is overtly material in that it grapples with the everyday stuff of life; it is also resolutely driven by ideas and understandings. It is a making of politics' (2013, p.146). A form of making illustrated by RAR. What *A Riot of Our Own* reiterated about the movement was the black and white connections, dialogues and contentions fuelling it, were channelled through the creative talent and imagination that made RAR's activism so dynamic.

Additionally, there have been a number of exhibitions on the visual and material aspects of activism such as *Art Turning Left: How Values Changed Making 1789-2013* at Tate Liverpool (8 November 2013 – 2 February 2014), the V&A exhibition *Disobedient Objects* (26 July 2014 – 1 February 2015) and *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* shown at the Brooklyn Museum, New York (7 March – 13 July 2014). The latter show is particularly interesting as it recounts the activist contributions made by artists of different cultural and social groups, 'black' and 'white', to the 1960s African-American civil rights movement.¹⁸

My curatorial decision, then, to let the overtly political anti-racist stance of this personal RAR archive 'speak' in the exhibition, through a strong presence of Syd and Ruth, was to reiterate the auto/biographical curatorial voice I wanted the exhibition to have. Through a curatorial-telling of RAR by the living activists, and through design and photographic experiences of Ruth and Syd, a biography of RAR, and by extension its myriad contributor/activists (some named, others not) were represented. This thinking for the exhibition was partly inspired by the artist Rose Garrard's exhibition and book *Archiving My Own History: Documentation of Works 1969-1994*. Garrard showed work from that period framed by published reviews of those works. Louisa Buck observed in relation to this project that 'the artist's voice appears as just ... one alternative rather than the definitive voice' and that 'Garrard does not see history as sacred ... but something to be tapped into, spliced with personal experience and, whenever necessary, reclaimed and re-written' (1994, p.9).

This aspect of *A Riot of Our Own* connects with the idea of curating as 'a form of self-portrait ... in which an exhibition's meaning is derived from the relationship between artistic positions as presented by the curator' (O'Neill, 2012, p.99). Jeff Horsley extends the curator-exhibition-making as self-portrait under his rubric of the 'fashion autobiography' exhibition: a work in which

¹⁸ For more details on this particular exhibition, see: http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/witness_civil_rights.

an individual relates their life-history through clothing-associated narratives (2014a, p.180). In the case of *A Riot of Our Own*, multiple self-portraits were being presented that reflected different versions of a shared lived experience. I was part of that auto/biographical aspect of *A Riot of Our Own*. As Liz Stanley and Deborah Ryan have pointed out, the research a researcher undertakes becomes part of their own autobiography, and in turn the autobiography of the researcher can impact on the research (Stanley, 1992, p.17; Ryan, 1999, p.161). Therefore the need to reflect on this moment of my curatorial practice is to mark the thinking around *A Riot of Our Own* and its impact on the collaboration between the exhibition-makers.

Part II: Reflection on a moment of curatorial exploration

The temporary curatorial process is always intense, and like its end product, is fugitive (Horsley, 2014b, p.171). For me, much of the curating takes place in my head, reacting intuitively to create the intertextual narrative of the material. In the case of the exhibition *A Riot of Our Own*, the curatorial approach was a way of finding alternative ways of approaching a troubled past and the actions against that past – then and now – through material and visual culture. But what drove the decisions? Reflection on curatorial practice is a necessary part of the process of that practice. I see this as a ‘moment of pause’ (Melanie Townsend cited in Thomas, 2002, p.viii), a way of catching up with oneself. The act of looking back, re-evaluating decisions, pulling together the collage that is exhibition-making in order to say something new about this process for interested parties and oneself.

The need to answer the above question was an impetus to produce a reflective text in response to the invitation to contribute to this themed issue of *Disturbing Pasts: Memories, Controversies and Creativity*. I have found this method of curatorial re-evaluation useful, on the one hand, to gauge how the curatorial experience has impacted on the development of my own practice of exhibition-making and the critical thinking that informs it; and on the other hand the reflective process gives value to the subject curated – RAR, anti-racist activism, the power of the personal archive, and agency within all these contexts – in order to give the movement and its contributors cultural and historical value. By embarking on a reflection of *A Riot of Our Own*, I want to contribute to the developing area of curatorial study, the detailed documentation of past exhibitions. This practice underpins curatorial publications such as *The Exhibitionist* (Hoffmann, 2010), *The Journal of Curatorial Studies* (Drobnick and Fisher,

2012), *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (O’Neill, 2012) and *Exhibiting Fashion: Before and After 1971* (Clark et al., 2014).

This need to reflect on curatorial practice is a recognised method of published evaluation for curators. In *The Edge of Everything: Reflections on Curatorial Practice* Caroline Thomas redressed the lack of ‘acknowledgement of the subjective nature of exhibition-making’ to get a sense of ‘the spaces in-between the processes (the edges) that inform curators and what they do’ (2002, pp.ix-x). The publication is made up of reflective essays by eleven curators. From these accounts Thomas came to the conclusion that:

Curators have become an active force, selecting, and inserting themselves within the realities in which they choose to engage ... curators are fuelled by, among other things: idiosyncracies, passions, intuition, energies, curiosity, childhood experiences, heritage, education, and political, social and spiritual beliefs. By affirming the personal dimensions of curating, and the complex web of occurrences that encompass it, the essays yield an understanding of the practice that is in keeping with one of the primary concerns of contemporary art: to challenge the belief that art and life exist in separate realms.

(2002, pp.x-xi)¹⁹

Constant change, new directions, ‘new possibilities’ and how they come about for the curator is at the heart of this investigation for Thomas (2002, p.xi). Reflection by curators is the means to think this through and share with others. Melanie Townsend encourages curators to reflect critically on their curatorial practice to circumvent ‘the all-too-often superficial and scholarly musings on why we do what we do’ (cited in Thomas, 2002, p.viii).

In *The Exhibitionist: Journal of Exhibition Making* the act of reflection has an established presence in the

¹⁹ I found the reflective essay ‘On weakness, or “You will become a friend of mud”’ by Anthony Kiendl particularly interesting. At the time of writing, Kiendl was the director of Visual Arts and the Walter Philips Gallery at the Banff Centre, Alberta, Canada. In 2013 he became the Chief Executive Officer of the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Saskatchewan, also in Canada. The text recounts his childhood experiences of visiting his family dentist and doctor, and viewing the art they chose to show in their respective waiting rooms. These had a profound impact on his curatorial interest, of what he calls ‘the immanence of the weak ... a “witnessing” or remembrance of weakness ... acknowledgement of the weak ... a responsibility to the weak, the provision of empathy and curative assistance ... the phrase recognizes art as a recuperative act’ (2002, p.9).

section 'Rear mirror'. The editors explain that 'close readings of exhibitions by those who make exhibitions only make us more accountable for the work we show and our motivations for showing it' (Hoffmann and McDowell, 2011, p.2). The writing in 'Rear mirror' is produced with a curatorial voice that has resulted in making the reflective writing on curatorial practice an art form in itself, a form of articulating the experiential, exploratory and expressive nature of curating.

To return to Roberts, his position on reflexivity is also useful here. He considers reflexivity to be a key part of the 'researcher experience', what he calls the "monitoring" of action in research – what does and can take place in the active research life of the researcher in relation to the material collected and the research context' (Roberts, 2007, p.3). For Roberts, reflexivity is an "assessment" of the research experience and process, of what "worked" in terms of procedure or interpretation, as well as "intimate" revelations of inner thoughts and feelings' (pp.36-7). A process that is equally relevant to the curatorial process.

As mentioned previously, I engage in this reflexive process constantly either informally through the workbooks I keep alongside my curatorial projects, or through published texts. For example, my reflexive account of my role as curator of the Archives and Museum of Black Heritage (AMBH) (2001-2) in 'Picture this: The 'black' curator' (Tulloch, 2005a) provided me with the most charged assessment on my practice to date. Here I identified my future curatorial thinking: that curating is agency. The essay was an opportunity for me to reflect on what had driven the exhibitions I curated at the Black Cultural Archives Gallery in Brixton, South London. AMBH was seen as a 'black organisation' that looked at black history and culture in Britain. This institutional definition placed AMBH as part of the cultural diversity and social inclusion agenda of New Labour policies that swept across the country. This was not the prime driver of my curatorial research, rather: 'My curatorial practice was primed ... by the idea of crossing thresholds into new spaces – be they "black" or "white" – to stimulate responses and develop relationships. The agency for me was in that' (Tulloch, 2005a, p.181). Since the publication of 'Picture this: The 'black' curator', my definition of curating as agency has extended beyond the curator's own practice to lend agency to the objects and includes individual contributors to the exhibition's narrative, as explored in *A Riot of Our Own*.

My reflection on *A Riot of Our Own* has enabled me to identify new areas of curatorial relevance: the agency of experimentation; the concept of 'the edge', where

exhibition-making can be a liminal space; and themes that have arisen from the RAR/A *Riot of Our Own* tangram.

The agency of experimentation

In trying to articulate the place of experimentation in *A Riot of Our Own*, I found the thinking behind experimental writing, notably that employed by black poets and novelists (Mackey, 1993; Lavender, 2002) useful, in the ways they have used the concept of collage, in the construction of their writing to tackle the issue of difference. Experimental writing provides '[u]nfettered improvisation ... accidental composition and hyper-rational design, free invention and obsessively faithful duplication, extreme conceptualism and extreme materiality' (Bray et al., 2012, p.1) which feeds into

raising fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself ... Experimental literature *unrepresses* these fundamental questions, and in doing so it lays everything open to challenge, reconceptualization and reconfiguration. Experimentation makes alternatives visible and conceivable, and some of these alternatives become the foundations for future developments, whole new ways of writing [and curating], some of which eventually filter into the mainstream itself. Experiment is one of the engines of literary change and renewal; it is literature's way of reinventing itself.

(Bray et al., 2012, p.1)

For Bill Lavender the experimental 'pushes at the boundary, that attempts to cover new ground, that transgresses stylistically, semantically, socially and politically' (2002, p.xi). These are all techniques and concerns that fuelled RAR, partly expressed in their experimental 'cut and paste' graphic design practice which was inspired by the constructivist and surrealist art movements, the artist John Heartfield and the graphics associated with the French student rising of May 1968 (Shelton, 2014b). A graphic ideology that, consciously and subconsciously, contributed to the critical and visual narrative of the exhibition *A Riot of Our Own* which, in turn, provided RAR with a new form of visual verbalisation.

Through reflective thinking on this aspect of the exhibition, I have re-evaluated my past curatorial practice. I have always maintained that my curatorial voice was not an experimental one. Experimentation was not the drive of my work on black identities, culture and history. The expansion of knowledge on, and the reiteration of, black presence were primary.

I now realise that regardless of the space in which I have curated exhibitions on black lives – in national museums, independent black organisations or an art gallery – they *have* been experimental through the choice of objects and their placement to formulate a particular curatorial discourse on this subject, what Judith Clark calls ‘empathy between objects’ (2014). These objects and their placement were making political statements about how the agency of black people, their ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault, 1988, p.18), acts as a comment on their sense of belonging,²⁰ and how crucial the recognition of them (and other groups) is to be part of Britain’s history, part of its national identity.

The edge and beyond

‘The edge’ has been identified as a liminal space in studies on curatorial reflection and experimental literature. Thomas explains that it is ‘the spaces in-between the processes (the edges) that inform curators and what they do’ (2002, p.x). Mackey contends that in experimental writing amongst black writers ‘the edge is where differences intersect, where we witness and take part in a traffic of partialities, where half-truths or partial wisdoms converse, contend, interlock ... To bring separation back into the picture is to observe that the edge is a cutting edge.’ (1993, p.260). For Mackey the acknowledgement of separation and unity enables one to understand the dynamics of the edge, that ‘one is profoundly and inescapably cut off and cut into by differences’ (1993, p.260).

This edge is what Homi Bhabha refers to as ‘the realm of the *beyond*’ (1994, p.1). A concept that encourages a ‘focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, *in the act* of defining the *idea* of society itself’ (1994, pp.1-2). Bhabha could well be referring to the aims and objectives of RAR. Similarly, his thinking (p.3) on the possibilities of social differences is that ‘[p]olitical empowerment ... are the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project – at once a vision

²⁰ I discussed these issues in ‘Take a researcher like me: Dress, black identities and the autobiographical/I’ at the one day event *Belonging in Britain. New Narratives/Old Stories: Race, Heritage and Cultural Identity*, organised by Dr. Fiona Hackney at Falmouth University, 2 June 2007. For further details, see <http://www.falmouth.ac.uk/content/belonging-britain-new-narrativesold-stories-race-heritage-and-cultural-identity>.

and construction – that takes you “beyond” yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction to the political *conditions* of the present.’ Bhabha further reassures that ‘*going beyond*’ is ‘to live somehow beyond the border of our times’ (p.4).

RAR’s black and white activists went beyond the racial tenets and established channels of mediation of the 1970s and 1980s to create new mediums of protest that articulated the possibilities of their time to produce a different kind of dialogue between black and white people, a dialogue that insisted on the recognition of the social presence of and cultural value of difference. The edge, then, was a liberating space that was present in, and defined by, the exhibition *A Riot of Our Own*.

In light of this thinking, and as part of this reflective process, I devised the chart *Curating Rock Against Racism: New Directions*.

It pinpoints themes that emerged during the exhibition process as being significant to the RAR/*A Riot of Our Own* tangram. This exercise consolidated for me the benefits of looking at the creative practices of anti-racist activism of the past to generate suggestions for future representations on such a subject.

By reflecting on the exhibition-making of *A Riot of Our Own* that itself reflected on an activist moment of British anti-racism, I have highlighted the intense layers and differing forms of disturbing pasts. Through this act of reflection, one can see how RAR operated on many levels: national-local, past-present, personal-collective. The exhibition *A Riot of Our Own* and this article have added to that layering, to include the individualised contributions to disturbing pasts through, and because of, RAR.

Part III: RAR insert here

I originally called this article ‘Insert here: Curating difference’.²¹ The impetus behind this title was the need for recognition of work produced around subjects that have low cultural value in order to redress that position. For me, RAR was one example. ‘Insert here’ is not to suggest simply slotting something in, rather, in the spirit of the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, as a substantive, to insert as an expression of existence, an addition in the ‘revised’ or final versions of a text. *A Riot of Our Own* argued for the relevance of the visual and material culture of RAR to future documentation of the histories of design activism and black presence in Britain, of the dynamic agency of black and white

²¹ ‘Insert Here: Curating Difference’ was the title of the paper I presented at the conference *Disturbing Past: Memories, Controversies and Creativity: Memories, Controversies and Creativity*, 20-22 November 2012, the Museum of Ethnology, Vienna.

Figure 1.2.37: Diagram: *Curating Rock Against Racism: New Directions*. Devised by Carol Tulloch. Designed by Syd Shelton.



entanglements, and that personal archives and their associated auto/biographies have an academic place. To date, the following has been realised:

- In 2009, Syd and I were invited to talk about RAR and the exhibition *A Riot of Our Own* as part of the six-part lecture series *Re/Positionierung-Critical Whiteness/Perspectives of Color*, which took place

between January and June at Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (NGBK) in Berlin. This talk was published in German and English in *Re/Positionierung* (Tulloch and Shelton, 2009).

- In 2010, *A Riot of Our Own* was invited to be the feature exhibition of the *East End Film Festival* on view at the Vibe Gallery, London, 22-30 April.



Figure 1.2.38: *A Riot of Our Own* exhibition, The Vibe Gallery, London. It was the feature exhibition of the *East End Film Festival*, 22-30 April 2010. © Photograph by Carol Tulloch.

- Eighty of Syd's RAR photographs were added to the Autograph ABP's Archive and Research Centre in 2012. The centre 'represents the UK's first permanent public print collection and digital resource dedicated to the preservation and promotion of culturally diverse photography' (Autograph, n.d.).
- Through Autograph's *Photograph of the Week* series, Syd's photograph of Bagga (Bevin Fagan) was featured in *The Guardian Weekend* 'Big Picture' photography series on 3 March 2012. Bagga was the lead singer of the British Reggae group Matumbi.
- The poster *Southall Kids are Innocent*, designed by Ruth and Syd, is included in *British Posters: Advertising, Art and Activism* (Flood, 2012, p.91). The poster also formed part of *Southall Story*, at The Hayward Gallery, London, 7 April - 11 May 2010.
- In 2012, the exhibition *A Riot of Our Own* was invited to be shown at Galerija Makina, Pula, Croatia 11-23 September. This was part of the 'We are Here 3' *International Festival of Visual Arts* organised by the Museum of Contemporary Art of Istria. Due to the lack of insurance support for the archival objects, only 41 of Syd's photographs were shown here. The exhibition was renamed *A Riot of Our Own: Photographs by Syd Shelton 1976-1981*. The

production of the photographs was supported by Hewlett Packard, who printed and mounted the photographs through sponsorship-in-kind using D.I.T. printers, Zagreb. Syd donated all these prints to the Museum of Contemporary Art of Istria.

- In 2013, the photography department of the Victoria and Albert Museum purchased three of Syd's RAR photographs: *Bagga*, 1979, *Darcus Howe, Anti Anti-mugging March*, Lewisham 1977 and *RAR Carnival Against the Nazis*, Leeds, 1981. This was as part of their *Staying Power* project researched in collaboration with the Black Cultural Archives, London.

I began writing this article in 2013, which is poignant. It was the year of Margaret Thatcher's death. She was Britain's first woman prime minister who came to office in 1979 as leader of the Conservative Party. In the wake of her death remarks were made that, according to Conservative Party member Anne Widdecombe, Thatcher saved 'ungovernable' Britain and 'made us proud' to be British again (Radio 4, 2013). Yet, RAR was trying to do this, albeit from a different perspective to the Conservatives. RAR wanted a Britain based on recognition and need for connection with a range of cultural groups, to harness their cultural talents and thinking to define a new Britain. This was



Figure 1.2.39: *A Riot of Our Own: Photographs by Syd Shelton 1976-1981*, Galerija Makina, Pula, Croatia, part of the *We are Here 3* International Festival of Visual Arts, 11-23 September 2013. © Photograph by Syd Shelton.

not about merely 'accepting difference' (Cottrell Boyce, 2013, p.7) but that this should just be. This was, perhaps, a very big ask during the heightened prominence of the far right in 1970s and '80s Britain, but something had to be done to confront the cruelty, the indignity of racism. Racism still exists. Violence in the name of abhorrence towards difference still occurs in Britain. Yet, as the exhibition *A Riot of Our Own* reminded us, between 1976 and 1981 RAR said that this cannot be tolerated. In the defiant language of RAR: 'It had a go'.

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