

**Coming into View:
Black British Artists and
Exhibition Cultures 1976-2010**

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Abstract

This study unites the burgeoning academic field of exhibition histories and the critiques of race-based exhibition practices that crystallised in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s. It concerns recent practices of presenting and contextualising black creativity in British publicly funded art museums and galleries that are part of a broader attempt to increase the diversity of histories and perspectives represented in public art collections and exhibitions. The research focuses on three concurrent 2010 exhibitions that aimed to offer a non-hegemonic reading of black creativity through the use of non-art-historical conceptual and alternative curatorial models: *Afro Modern* (Tate Liverpool), *Action* (The Bluecoat), and a retrospective of works by Chris Ofili (Tate Britain). Comparative exhibitions of the past were typically premised on concepts of difference that ultimately resulted in the notional separation of black artists from mainstream discourses on contemporary art and histories of British art. Through a close and critical textual analysis of these three recent exhibitions, which is informed by J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts (1955), the study considers whether, and to what extent the delimiting curatorial practices of the past have been successfully abandoned by public art museums and galleries, and furthermore, whether it has been possible for British art institutions to reject the entrenched, exclusive conceptions of British culture that negated black contributions to the canon and narratives of British art in the first place. The exhibition case studies are complemented and contextualised by an in-depth history of the Bluecoat's engagement with black creativity between 1976 and 2012, which provides a particular insight into the ways that debates about representation, difference and separatism have impacted the policies and practices of one culturally significant art gallery that is frequently overlooked in histories of black British art. With reference to the notion of legitimate coercion as defined by Zygmunt Bauman (2000), the study determines that long-standing hegemonic structures continue to inform the modes through which public art museums and galleries in Britain curate and control black creativity.

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1. Introduction

One of the major challenges faced by public art museums and galleries since the 1980s has been to find appropriate ways to respond to calls for better representation from cultural, ethnic, and sexual minorities. Just as audiences can be highly subversive in how they respond to permanent and temporary displays and exhibitions, they can also be utterly disempowered by omissions, oversights and generalities. If a group of people's contribution is omitted from what counts as history, whether that is the history of art or the history of any other field, they not only suffer from exclusion in the past but also in the present. If a section of a population is understood as having no share in the common heritage of the wider society in which they live, it undermines, devalues and negates their contribution to that society in the present. The consequences of this for their present reality may include preclusion from opportunities, such as inhibition of upward social mobility and even suppression of civil rights.¹ In the context of public art museums and galleries, the challenge has therefore been to respond to this issue and include a greater diversity of histories, voices and perspectives in their collections and exhibitions. 2010 was a significant year in Britain in this respect. Three exhibitions took place in the spring, all purporting to present and contextualise black creativity in new ways through the employment of alternative curatorial models that, unlike previous models, did not critically and historically position black artists in terms of cultural difference and otherness. This study is an examination of those exhibitions.²

In the British context, the term black is generally used to refer to people of African and Caribbean heritage, including people with mixed ancestry. Historically, the term has had several uses as a racial and political label, often including other non-European ethnic minority populations in Britain. The broader political usage signified a shared experience of racism and oppression, particularly amongst populations with heritages in former British colonies in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, which in turn fostered a sense of 'unity in adversity'. In the context of British art, the terms black and black artists/art have had varying applications. Individuals such as Rasheed Araeen adopted the broader usage in the late 1970s for the reasons described above and their relevance to the workings of British art institutions. There were others, however, that employed the term with sole

¹ One of the claims of this thesis is that the inclusion of black British artists in narratives of British art in the context of the state funded museum or gallery is tantamount to a civil right as a consequence of their nationality and financial contribution through payment of taxes.

² This study focuses on the issue of race and its influence on the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of black artistic practices in art museums and galleries. Although issues of class and gender have interweaved with that of race in the experience some black artists have had with art institutions (and indeed with other black artists), it has not been possible within the scope of the study to cover all three factors. Doctoral research by Ella Mills (University of Leeds) is one example of a contemporaneous study that focuses on the issue of gender in the same broad context and timeframe that is addressed in this thesis. The reader may also wish to consult the journal *Race and Class* (Sage Journals) for scholarly articles that consider the intersection of race and class in relation to art exhibitions and art institution practices.

reference to individuals of African and Caribbean descent, including Eddie Chambers.³ In this study, the terms black and black artists are used with reference to both the African and Asian diasporas in Britain, for although it is now extremely rare for British people of Asian descent to self-identify as black, this broader usage remains pertinent to the way British art institutions address inequalities; cultural policy relating to ethnic/racial equality typically employs the equivalent terms BME or BAME to all people of non-white descent (Black and Minority Ethnic or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic). I choose to write 'black' with a lower case b and this has been retained throughout, except in direct quotations in which the adjective 'Black' or 'black' has been left as it was originally written. I acknowledge, however, that the use of the term is highly complex and much contested, and that individuals mentioned in the forthcoming chapters may reject my designation, and indeed any other racial signifier.

This thesis takes the 2010 exhibitions *Afro Modern* (Tate Liverpool), *Action* (The Bluecoat), and a mid-career retrospective of paintings and drawings by Chris Ofili (Tate Britain) as indicative of the way in which British publicly funded art museums and galleries currently engage with black artists. Through a close analysis of each exhibition, it considers the extent to which their claims of employing new modes of historicisation and contextualisation have been successful. It discusses whether, and to what extent, these recent approaches offer new models for engaging with black creativity compared to those employed between the late 1970s and late 1990s, but particularly in the 1980s when there was an unprecedented proliferation of exhibitions in established, publicly funded art galleries in Britain displaying work by British-born black artists. During this time, black artists were frequently positioned as separate from their white contemporaries in race-based exhibitions, for which the primary selection criterion was the artist's race and which, in consequence, prioritised the fact of their race in the interpretation and contextualisation of their work. A notional separation also occurred through curatorial evocations of the supposed cultural difference of black artists from the mainstream of British society, which thus separated them from entering mainstream discourses on contemporary art and histories of British art. These approaches have since been heavily critiqued by black artists and cultural commentators of all ethnic backgrounds for their potential to delimit opportunities for black artists, who as British citizens had a right to be represented by state funded spaces for display and to be historically positioned in narratives and the canon of British art. However, that separatist and race-based practices persisted in public art institutions into the 1990s and 2000s, and particularly in spite of mounting criticism,

³ See Araeen, R., and Chambers, E., 1988-1989, 'Black Art: A Discussion' in *Third Text*, No. 5, pp. 50-77 for information on their opposing views on the term black art and its use. The preliminary note in Eddie Chambers' book *Things Done Change* (2012) provides a useful and broader consideration of the term black (particularly pages xv to xviii), and demonstrates that his views on its use have changed since the 1980s.

brings into question whether, and to what extent, it has been possible for those same institutions to abandon the deeply held, exclusive conceptions of British culture, and related curatorial practices, that negated the contributions of black artists to it in the first place.

To date, there have been no in-depth studies examining the critical and historical narratives presented in these particular, recent exhibitions. It has yet to be determined whether the new conceptual and historical devices employed in their curation did, in actuality, progress beyond the delimiting practices of the past by offering new frameworks through which to comprehend work by black artists. It is possible, therefore, that art museums and institutions such as Tate and galleries such as the Bluecoat continue to employ curatorial practices that position black artists in terms of difference and otherness (and thereby separate them from mainstream discourses on contemporary British art and its history), whilst alleging to do precisely the opposite. By interrogating and testing claims made on behalf of these recent exhibitions, this study provides a particular response to that gap in knowledge. Its close and critical examination of these exhibitions exposes underlying narratives and hierarchies that contextualised the works displayed in them. This subsequently facilitates a consideration of the extent to which the exhibitions met the aims of their curators, and by extension, discloses contemporary institutional attitudes towards black British artists.

The exhibitions are not analysed in terms of the works that were included, nor their physical arrangement and phenomenological impact on audiences, but instead in terms of assertions made within the accompanying interpretive texts; the wall captions and introductory panels, press releases, catalogue essays, and additionally, associated curators' talks and symposia. I take J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts as the starting point in this approach, and specifically, his suggestion that 'to say something is to do something [my emphasis]'.⁴ In *How to Do Things with Words* (1955), Austin stated that in the performance of speech, three acts occur. The first is the locutionary act, which is the simple act of saying something, for example, 'the curator said "Picasso was the founder of Cubism"'. The second is the illocutionary act, or the performance of an act in saying something/what a person does in saying something, for example 'the curator claimed or argued that Picasso was the founder of Cubism'. The third is the perlocutionary act, which is the consequential effects of saying something upon the thoughts, feelings or actions of the audience, for example, 'the curator convinced me that Picasso was the founder of Cubism' or 'the curator

⁴ Austin, 1962: 94 (*How to Do Things with Words* was a series of lectures originally delivered by Austin at Harvard University in 1955, but printed by Clarendon Press, Oxford in 1962).

challenged my view that Braque was the founder of Cubism' or 'the curator confirmed for me what I already thought about Picasso'.⁵

The experience of the visual is likely to have more impact on visitors to museums and galleries than the experience of the text, not only because they may choose not to read exhibition texts, but also because the visual experience is more open (and more difficult to discuss) than their response to a text. Visitors are also likely to make sense of exhibition texts in an unlimited number of ways that may diverge from those intended by the exhibition's curators. For example, visitors might actively resist or subvert the control imposed by curators by ignoring textual information, by refusing to follow exhibition plans/paths, and also by choosing to see their pre-existing assumptions confirmed in the arrangement of objects/artworks and in the objects/artworks themselves. This brings into question whether texts are an important part of the exhibition experience, and moreover, whether they have the power to facilitate understandings about art and its histories. However, because exhibition texts are created for the purpose of instructing our engagement with exhibitions, they provide an insight into the attitudes and underlying intentions of the individuals and institutions that produce them. Narratives and hierarchies are constructed in captions, wall texts and catalogues with the intention of shaping the way we understand, and indeed separate ourselves from others. In order to comprehend the intentions of art institutions, it is therefore imperative that we examine both what is expressed in exhibition texts (locutionary speech acts), and also *how* it is expressed (in order to consider its illocutionary dimension). An extended consideration of the perlocutionary consequences of these expressions can in turn reveal something of the museum's authority in constructing meaning and knowledge and its relationship to cultural hegemony (a concept and term derived from Marxist philosophy that describes the control of a culturally diverse society by those in power - governments, monarchies, the ruling class etc. - who manipulate the values, beliefs, perceptions and culture of that society to ensure that their worldview is accepted as the norm).

By focussing on the locutionary and illocutionary statements presented in the accompanying interpretive texts in *Afro Modern, Action*, and the Ofili retrospective, this study considers how those statements might work (intentionally and unintentionally, at a perlocutionary level) to historically and critically position the work of black artists. Unsurprisingly, the intended meaning or significance of a statement presented in an exhibition may differ greatly from the way it is understood by those engaging with it (another aspect of the perlocutionary level of speech). Austin explains that 'Since our acts are acts, we must always remember the distinction between producing effects or

⁵ See Austin, 1962: pp.94-107 for more information.

consequences which are intended or unintended...[that is,] when the speaker intends to produce an effect it may nevertheless not occur...[or] when he does not intend to produce it or intends not to produce it, it may nevertheless occur'.⁶ His logic can be applied when considering how exhibitions critically and historically position artists through displaying and contextualising their work; essentially, there can be a stark difference between what an exhibition purports to do and what it actually does, as a consequence of smaller perlocutionary acts taking place within it and often at a micro-level. The assertions about an artist or artwork presented in an interpretive caption, catalogue essay, curator's talk etc. may be offered with the intention of evoking in the mind of the reader a particular perspective on the works before them, but may instead induce an entirely different or even contrasting view. A textual analysis of *Afro Modern, Action* and the Ofili retrospective, and in particular, a consideration of their perlocutionary dimensions, not only provides a useful means of testing the claims of the exhibitions, but it also reveals the underlying perspectives and intentions of the curators that produce them, (and by extension the institutions they work for), which may indeed be at odds with their purported aims. By ascertaining whether there is a discrepancy between the aims of these exhibitions and the underlying perspectives of the curators/museums/galleries involved in their production, contemporary institutional attitudes towards black creativity are revealed.

The thesis is premised on an understanding of the public museum or art gallery as a key agent in the construction of knowledge, meaning and history, making it a site of great consequence for black artists seeking recognition for their contribution to the development of British culture. Although most museums openly state their role in educating, or offering knowledge to, the public in matters of art and culture, they rarely acknowledge their role in the biased *production* of knowledge.⁷ Knowledge production has, however, been a persistent feature of the museum's history and functions. Until the late twentieth century, objects, artefacts and artworks were ordered, juxtaposed and displayed in order to communicate 'knowledge' about the structures and hierarchies of the world, thus aiding the museum in its promotion and representation of monarchical, national and imperial power. Additionally, and particularly in nineteenth century museums, 'great' artworks were marshalled into visual narratives of the saga of human development, based on the conviction that exposure to the 'past' could facilitate social

⁶ Austin, 1962: 105. Please note that Austin argues that there is a difference between perlocutionary speech acts and insinuations; the former is the consequence of a speech act whether intended or unintended, whereas the latter are intended by the speaker.

⁷ For example, the overall mission for the four Tate galleries is 'to promote public understanding and enjoyment of British, modern and contemporary art' (<http://tate.org.uk/about/our-work/our-priorities>, accessed 07/06/2012), and the National Gallery asserts that its purpose is to encourage access to its collection 'for the education and enjoyment of the widest possible public' (http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/about-us/organisation/constitution/constitution/*/viewPage/2, accessed 07/06/2012).

improvement.⁸ The public museum's function in the civic apparatus combined with its role in promoting power has caused it to be construed by some, particularly in the field of institutional critique, as an instrument of social control and institutional oppression, and this perspective informs the final conclusions of this thesis.

In the final quarter of the twentieth century, the assumption that learning occurs simply by being exposed to objects was largely abandoned and museums and galleries developed education or learning programmes to operate in tandem with their displays and exhibitions. The role played by displays and exhibitions in the communication of knowledge was arguably transferred to these accompanying learning programmes, therefore. However, this study holds that the process of display (as the result of complex decision making processes and factors, including museum objectives, collecting policies, classification methods, display styles, object groupings and textual frameworks) remains highly significant, not only in the communication of knowledge (as not every visitor will take advantage of these accompanying programmes), but also in the mediation of knowledge. It is in the process of selecting objects and artworks for display that the cultural authority of the museum is employed, developed and projected, because it necessarily requires decisions to be taken about objects that constitute cultural heritage, that are worth preserving, and how they might be classified. Value judgements are made in these processes, increasing the potential for the museum to promote biased, elitist, imperial and even homophobic, racist or sexist understandings of culture. The public museum or gallery therefore retains a degree of agency in social control through the role its displays and exhibitions play in constructing and mediating knowledge about art, culture, and by extension, society. Their role in constructing interpretive frameworks for understanding social and cultural life, values and the formation of identities make displays and exhibitions powerful, subjective political tools. The concern of this study is the precise ways in which museums/galleries control the position of black artists, not only in art's histories, but also in the public's perception of British society, and moreover, to what end.

The museum's role in constructing knowledge and projecting cultural hegemony operates, and is revealed through, the reproduction of hegemonic narratives in its displays and exhibitions. Essential to this is the process of iterating and reiterating the same statements about art and its histories by recurrently bringing objects/artworks/artists together in the same formulations. Although some exhibitions appear to present new or alternative narratives and perspectives, closer inspection often reveals that established structures/relationships have merely been repackaged. It is perhaps the nature of exhibition/display making in itself that precludes the presentation of non-hegemonic

⁸ See Coombes, 1988: 61 and Abt, 2006:132 for information on the way public museums were established and called upon to shape the public in keeping with perceived political and social needs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

narratives and perspectives, for the ordering of objects necessitates the presentation of familiar statements, the suppression of new and unfamiliar statements, and thereby, the reconstruction of established hierarchies. The consequences of this for artists from minority populations can involve a suppression of their contributions, histories and perspectives, hence the focus in this study on the reproduction of familiar narratives, frameworks and hierarchies in the exhibitions selected for analysis.

The emphasis on exhibitions consequently positions this research within the burgeoning field of exhibition histories or exhibition studies that is taking shape through, for example, the *History of Exhibitions in the 20th Century* project taking place at the University of Paris 8 and the Centre Pompidou since 2011,⁹ and the Association of Art Historians conference *Thinking and Rethinking Exhibition Histories* (2013).¹⁰ This new trajectory of art historical enquiry is concerned with the issue of what it means to analyse art in the context of its public display and considers the significance of exhibitions as time-based, special entities that involve numerous actors, including artists, curators, and publics to name but a few. It examines the complexity of exhibition processes; the selection and display of art objects and information about those objects; the forms of exhibitions and their relation to social and political phenomena; the production, reception and documentation of exhibitions; the ways in which art institutions make use of exhibitions; and the historiography of exhibitions. The work presented in the forthcoming chapters, and particularly the attention given to interpretive texts as a means of revealing institutional attitudes, is characteristic of this new tranche of art historical enquiry. Although an analysis of the artworks displayed in *Afro Modern, Action* and the Ofilé retrospective and/or a consideration of the phenomenological experience of these exhibitions would also have had relevance in this broad, new field, they would have detracted from the focus of this study.

The research presented here is also positioned amongst, and stems from critiques of exhibition and institutional practices relating to black creativity that crystallised during the 1980s and 1990s. The assertions of artists and scholars such as Rasheed Araeen, Eddie Chambers, Kobena Mercer, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall were pivotal in shaping these critiques, which often centred on the evocation of cultural difference and the relations of representation within the space of the publicly funded gallery or museum. Although the positions of these individuals were diverse, they all similarly argued against the tendencies of publicly funded art institutions to separate the work of black artists from their white contemporaries. Their shared view on this was premised on an understanding that the intellectual separation of work by black British artists from work by white

⁹ <http://www.mela-project.eu/events/details/exhibitions-histories> [accessed 29/10/2013]

¹⁰ <http://www.aah.org.uk/annual-conference/2013-conference/session21> [accessed 29/10/2013]

British artists is both negative and dangerous because it excludes the former from established conceptions of British art and culture. This thesis is underpinned by the same understanding, and an outline and analysis of related developments within the public art sector, and responses to them by black artists and scholars, is provided in the forthcoming chapter. The cultural commentators noted above have since embarked on other lines of enquiry within their work, however, their insights and assertions, and the concepts and vocabularies they developed in the 1980s and 1990s, continue to provide a valuable framework for comprehending the practices revealed by my research of recent exhibitions. Their views developed in, and were informed by a context in which issues of race, right-wing politics and institutional indifference towards the issue of racial equality were prevalent, and although some thirty years have since passed, these issues remain significant, as evidenced by ongoing structural racism in a number of British institutions including the police force and the continued employment of positive discrimination initiatives in a variety of sectors. Although this research project does not posit that its findings are demonstrative of the kind of institutional racism that existed in 1980s, it does hold that the questioning of institutional practices vis-à-vis black creativity that occurred then remains a pertinent line of enquiry. Furthermore, by employing and taking inspiration from the aforementioned critiques, this study adds a contemporary element to them and challenges the notion that issues identified by Araeen, Chambers, Mercer et al in the 1980s and 1990s have since been resolved. As such, the study can be situated in relation to Richard Hylton's discussion of cultural diversity policies and associated art institution practices (presented in his book *The Nature of the Beast*, 2007). The research presented here similarly brings into question the extent of improvement/change that has occurred in the past three decades, but provides a deeper analysis of, and insight into, contemporary methods in curating black creativity than that offered by Hylton, thus reinvigorating debates about separatism and representation and encouraging further critical and interrogative enquiry into the approaches of art museums and mainstream galleries vis-à-vis their engagement with black artists.

There are five further chapters in the thesis. Chapter 2 provides an overview of exhibition practices and related perspectives that developed between the late 1970s and 2000s, focussing particularly on the 1980s as a moment of intense activity and debate. Its purpose is to offer a historical context for the recent exhibitions that are examined in Chapter 4 and also for the concepts and terms that frame my analysis of them. It describes how some black artists rejected mainstream gallery spaces during the early 1980s as a response to widespread institutional indifference, and how by the middle of the decade, public art institutions began to recognise black creativity via race-based curatorial formats and through a prism of difference. It also considers how the relations, politics and burden of representation became issues of concern for black artists into the 1990s and

examines how questions regarding the effectiveness of corrective inclusion (as opposed to self-reliance) crystallised in relation to the exhibition *The Other Story* (1989).

The overview provided in Chapter 2 is complemented in Chapter 3 by a consideration of one regional gallery's engagement with black artists during the same time frame. As part of this project I was invited to collaborate with the Bluecoat – a medium-sized centre for contemporary art in Liverpool city centre – by investigating the history and nature of its work with black artists. This has involved three years of researching the Bluecoat's archives and interviews with its Artistic Director, Bryan Biggs, who has held the same post at the gallery since 1976. The chapter provides a particular insight into the practices of one gallery and how debates about representation, difference and separatism impacted the policies and approaches it employed when engaging with black artists. Its 1985 exhibition *Black Skin/Bluecoat* and its challenging of the black survey curatorial model in the 1990s distinguished the Bluecoat from other publicly funded galleries, and a review of its work with black artists thus offers a context and point of comparison for comprehending the approaches employed in *Afro Modern, Action* and the Chris Ofili retrospective.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the precise strategies taken in each of these recent exhibitions to avoid the delimiting frameworks of ethnicity and difference that typified those employed in the 1980s. This will be discussed in terms of the locutionary and illocutionary speech acts occurring within the exhibitions' texts. A consideration of the perlocutionary statements presented by these texts, however, reveals the specific ways in which the three exhibitions cemented hegemonic conceptions of black creativity and thus failed to advance beyond the approaches taken by public museums/galleries three decades ago. This chapter and the overview of the Bluecoat's engagement with black artists in Chapter 3 together comprise this research project's original contribution to knowledge. As part of the *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme in 2010, and also to contextualise its exhibition *Action*, the Bluecoat displayed archive material evidencing the breadth of its work with black and other ethnic minority artists between the 1980s and the 2000s. However, Chapter 3 provides the first narrative inventory of exhibitions, practices and policies involving and/or relating to black artists at the Bluecoat, from which important reflections can be made to assist the gallery in its future work. Additionally, the case studies presented in Chapter 4 are the first to apply J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts to an analysis of *Afro Modern, Action* and the Ofili retrospective, and thus bring to light aspects of the exhibitions that other analyses might not – in particular, the impact, or consequences of otherwise unremarkable utterances in their accompanying texts – which, by extension, facilitates a unique route through which current institutional attitudes toward black creativity can be revealed.

Chapter 5 discusses the possible factors behind *Afro Modern, Action* and the Ofili retrospective's shared failure to consider black creativity without reverting to hegemonic interpretive frameworks. It takes into consideration the processes through which cultural hegemony operates and defends itself, the role curators play in those processes and how this is facilitated by their education in art history and training within the space of the museum/gallery. The broader implications for black British artists seeking representation by mainstream spaces for display are also reflected on. Chapter 6 presents the conclusions of the thesis by relating the research findings to the key issues raised by the earlier contextual chapters and the broader factors and implications addressed in Chapter 5, and suggests that the potential of *Afro Modern, Action*, and the 2010 Chris Ofili retrospective to improve the way black creativity is represented by art institutions was thwarted by broader, but entrenched hegemonic conceptions of British culture and society.

Central to this argument, and indeed the entire thesis, is the notion of legitimate coercion. Coercion, per se, is the act of force through intimidation, threat or other forms of aggressive pressure. However, legitimate coercion, as defined by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his essay 'Scene and Obscene: Another Hotly Contested Issue' (2000), is a more subtle and gentle form of coercion that is embedded in daily life and in the workings of institutions to the extent that it is barely noticed by its objects, appears as legitimate or valid, and which, most crucially, preserves established relationships and structures of power.¹¹ The root of (or perceived 'need' for) legitimate coercion, and the processes through which it operated in relation to black British creativity between the 1980s and 2000s are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, and its more recent manifestation in contemporary exhibitions is revealed by the findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5. The application of this idea to the exhibitions, curatorial models and institutional practices examined by this thesis facilitates an understanding of the precise modes through which art museums and galleries support cultural hegemony and undermine the notional equality black artists have secured in recent years, making this an invaluable piece of research for historians of black British art, and also, for those concerned with the maintenance and inhibition of equality through institutional practice.

¹¹ Bauman, 2000: 6-7

2. Black Artists and Legitimate Coercion: A Review of Ideas and Strategies 1976-2009

In the historicisation of black British art, the 1980s are frequently and popularly framed as something of a renaissance; a 'critical decade' for 'black Britishness' and the artistic practices and debates that arose from the forging of an identity that was particular to the first generation of black artists to be born and educated in Britain. Although conceptions that characterise the decade in terms of cohesive collective activity amongst black artists have been dismissed as a misinterpretation of a moment in British art that was, in fact, highly fractured, disjointed and contested, the 1980s nonetheless saw a proliferation of creative activity in relation to black artists – the organising of exhibitions as well as the production of artworks – and most significantly, the first major response by publicly funded museums and galleries to recognise the existence and activities of black artists.¹²

The purpose of this chapter is to review this moment in British art history, in terms of the developments taking place and positions held in relation to the activities of public art institutions and their engagement with black artists, and to provide a context, therefore, for the contemporary curatorial practices that are revealed and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. More specifically, this chapter addresses three particular issues that took shape during this time that remain pertinent to contemporary practices. The first issue is the strategy of separatism that was employed by black artists, municipal art galleries and funding bodies. As discussed in Chapter 1, this thesis holds that the intellectual and physical separation of work by black British artists from work by white British artists, particularly by art institutions that influence public opinion and define the ways in which art is historicised, is negative and dangerous. This particular form of separation inhibits the positioning of black artists within established understandings of British art and culture and its history, thus causing their efforts to become historically mute, and in possible consequence, hampering their careers. The second, related issue addressed by this chapter is the attitude of indifference towards the activities and concerns of black artists that operated within many of the nation's art institutions. This indifference was unjust, given that black British artists, as British citizens, should rightfully have been acknowledged by national art institutions whose responsibility was, and continues to be, to cater to and reflect the British population in its entirety. The final issue under consideration is that of the relations, politics and burden of representation that manifested as a major concern among black artists and academics as a result of the exhibitionary practices that developed during the 1980s. To be specific, this set of concerns regarded the rights of individuals to

¹² See Bailey, Baucom and Boyce (2005), Hall (2005); and Piper (2005).

provide representation for black artists, the modes through, and nature in which it was granted, and also the experiences of those who were afforded it.

These three practices/attitudes/concerns are significant, not simply because of the historical context they provide for today's curatorial approaches, but because of the impact they continue to have on the way artworks by black artists are (and are not) historicised and canonised. They manifested in varying ways, through many hands and, moreover, *throughout* the timeframe addressed by this chapter (primarily the 1980s, but also the four preceding years and the two decades that followed). This chapter is not, therefore, structured in terms of these issues in three large subsections, as to do so would incorrectly compartmentalise a complicated history. Instead, seven small subsections are provided, the first six of which address the activities and objectives of particular contingencies of artists and art institutions and the ways in which each of the issues of separatism, indifference and representation developed in their hands. Thus: section 1 examines the rejection of established gallery spaces by young black artists; section 2 considers the recognition of black artists by public institutions in terms of difference; the black survey curatorial approach is discussed in section 3; section 4 reflects on the attitudes of art institutions as revealed through cultural policy; section 5 reviews *The Other Story* exhibition and its strategy of correctively reconstructing histories and canons; and in section 6, the concern of black artists and academics over the relations, politics and burden of representation is explored. A final seventh section considers the legacies of these various developments in the 1990s and 2000s in terms of the emergence of cultural diversity initiatives, the notion and practice of new internationalism, and the worrying re-establishment of venues dedicated exclusively to the display of work by black artists.

There are two key texts that also offer a relevant history of the time-frame explored in this chapter. Richard Hylton's *The Nature of the Beast* (2007) largely explores the development of cultural policy in Britain between the late 1970s and late 2000s, although it also discusses some of the key exhibitions of the 1980s that displayed work by black artists. *Shades of Black* (2005, Eds. Bailey, Baucom and Boyce) is also a useful text in exploring this history, with essays produced by many of the key figures of the 1980s Black Arts Movement that reflect, in particular, on its successes and failures and also its historiography. Plotting and offering my own reflections on the emergence and development of some of the ideas and practices that are outlined by these key texts subsequently enables me to contextualise and situate the activities of the Bluecoat in Chapter 3, and the 2010 exhibitions that I examine in Chapters 4 and 5. More specifically, the work of this chapter is to enable me to ascertain the extent to which *Afro Modern, Action* and the Chris Ofili retrospective indicate a significant change in the way that black artists are critically and historically positioned by

publicly funded galleries and museums compared to approaches that were employed thirty years ago.

2.1 Black art and the rejection of mainstream gallery spaces

The attendance of black artists in British art schools was not unknown during the first part of the twentieth century. Several aspiring artists travelled to Britain from Commonwealth countries to advance their skills and practices at the nation's many institutions for art education, and often in a bid to take part in the development of modernism.¹³ However, of concern here, is the moment between the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the first generation of British-born black artists were attending and graduating from the nation's art schools. While preceding generations of black art school attendees were invariably considered to be foreign students, those attending art school in Britain in the late 1970s and early 1980s were British citizens by birth, and therefore presented a notional challenge to established understandings of British art, and more precisely, who contributed to it. Accordingly, there were those amongst this generation of artists who sought to have their work displayed in the nation's public galleries and contextualised, therefore, within the canon of British art (which I discuss later in this chapter). However, there was also a contingency of young black British artists, including Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper, who were opposed to such an endeavour, not simply as a defiant reaction against the long exclusion of black artists from established public art institutions, but because they deemed them inadequate for the task that they had set themselves.

Chambers and Piper were concerned with issues of racial injustice in Britain and across the world, and became convinced that as black art students, they could not simply pursue art for art's sake as many of their white contemporaries were. Instead, they felt an obligation to acknowledge and characterise the experience of black British people in their work, which they termed Black Art, and to display this work in contexts where black audiences were most likely to encounter it (see footnote for an outline of the various uses of this term).¹⁴ Chambers and Piper's primary objective

¹³ A notable example is the abstract expressionist Frank Bowling, who emigrated from Guyana to Britain in 1950 and attended Chelsea School of Art and the Royal College of Art. Similarly, Uzo Egonu moved to England from Nigeria as a teen and studied fine art from 1949 to 1956 at the Camberwell School of Fine Arts and Crafts in London. Another example is Rasheed Araeen, who arrived in Britain from Pakistan in 1964 to pursue a career as a minimalist artist, although he did not attend a British art school.

¹⁴ *The Pan Afrikan Connection* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1983: 1; Keith Piper (artist's personal statement) in *Black Art An' Done* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1981: 2; Eddie Chambers' personal statement in *Into the Open* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1984: 4. Although my concern here is with strategies and contexts for the display of work by black artists, it is useful to note that 'Black Art' was a highly contested term. For Chambers and the Blk Art Group, the term denoted a particular practice that was undertaken by artists of African-Caribbean descent and which specifically addressed issues that were pertinent to black communities both in Britain and abroad. For others, including Araeen, however, the notion that 'black art' was necessarily produced by artists of African and Caribbean ancestry was overly simplistic and negated the efforts of artists from other ethnic minority contingencies. He argued that an assertion of blackness was necessarily located within an

was to produce artwork that would aid in the rallying of black people around the world to struggle against, and 'liberate' themselves from, forces of oppression.¹⁵ Their concern was less about gaining access to Britain's publicly funded art galleries and museums, particularly as black people were not regular visitors to such spaces at the time, and more about addressing 'the black community' in their work, and displaying it specifically for black audiences in community settings.¹⁶ Under this rubric, Chambers and Piper were joined by artists Marlene Smith, Donald Rodney and Claudette Johnson to form the Blk Art Group, which staged several small scale exhibitions in the early 1980s. Although some took place in municipal art galleries despite the group's views on the inadequacy of them as contexts for addressing black audiences,¹⁷ many of the group's exhibitions took place in small-scale venues and community-settings, such as *The Pan Afrikan Connection* at 35 King Street in Bristol (1982).¹⁸

The Blk Art Group were not alone in their concern with addressing specifically black audiences; venues such as the Black Art Gallery in London were also established (1983) solely for this purpose.¹⁹ The significance of this is that, in staging exhibitions that displayed only the work of black artists, the Blk Art Group and the Black Art Gallery were developing a separatist, or race-based curatorial strategy (the selection of artists on the basis of their race). Because there had been little precedence of black British artists exhibiting alongside white artists in established spaces for the display of art, it was perhaps instinctive to exhibition organisers such as Chambers to limit the display work by black artists in the context of work by other black artists. It was, after all, a highly tense time in which issues of racist oppression were at the fore of political and social life in Britain. Staging black only exhibitions was part of the Blk Art Group's endeavour to make art about black

ongoing struggle against neo-colonial domination that was not confined to people of African-Caribbean descent. Furthermore, he claimed that people of Asian origin had played as significant a role in the development of black consciousness in the British context as those of African-Caribbean descent, and therefore, that the term 'black' could no longer be limited to the level of visible race or colour and should instead have been understood ideologically; in terms of an Afro-Asian unity (Araeen, 1984: 92, 97 and Araeen, 1988: 36-40). Meanwhile, as discussed in section 2.2, public institutions such as the Greater London Council and the Arts Council began to employ the term to describe all art forms produced by non-white artists, which was frequently contested by artists such as Araeen and Chambers. This issue remains unresolved.

¹⁵ See Eddie Chambers (artist's personal statement) in *Black Art An' Done* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1981: 4; and Keith Piper (artist's personal statement) in *The Pan Afrikan Connection* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1983: 8. See also Piper, 1988:47

¹⁶ See Chambers, 1986: 19-20; Araeen and Chambers, 2000: 240; Chambers (artist's personal statement) in *The Pan Afrikan Connection* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1983: 6; *Black Art An' Done* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1981: 1

¹⁷ These exhibitions included the aforementioned *Black Art an' Done* at Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 1981, and an exhibition of *Radical Black Art* at the Battersea Arts Centre in London, 1984.

¹⁸ *The Pan Afrikan Connection* was shown again at Herbert Art Gallery in Coventry in 1983. Similar venues were also used by black artists not involved in the Blk Art Group, including *Black Woman Time Now* at the Battersea Arts Centre (1983), *Five Black Women* at the Africa Centre in London (1983), and *Creation for Liberation* at St. Matthew's Meeting Place in London (1983).

¹⁹ Shakka Dedi, one of the founders of The Black Art Gallery, stated that 'the Black artist who is aware of the historical, social and political circumstances of his or her people – African people, will seek to serve the community' (personal statement in *Into the Open* Exhibition Catalogue, 1984: 4). Exhibitions such as *Heart in Exile* (1983) and *Creation for Liberation 2* (1984) were shown at the Black Art Gallery.

life for black audiences for the purposes of raising black consciousness amongst black communities.²⁰ A separatist, race-based approach to exhibition organising was, therefore, the most obvious strategy. However, Chambers was at the same time sceptical, alongside others such as the artist Rasheed Araeen, regarding the potential of dedicated spaces for the display of work by black artists, such as the Black Art Gallery, to improve opportunities for black artists. He observed that as long as established gallery spaces continued to be the preserve of a 'white art system', black art galleries would do little to alter the broader status quo for black artists, other than providing some exposure for them.²¹

There were other artists at the time, however, who were determined to make in-roads into the 'white art system' (as Chambers described it).²² Lubaina Himid argued, for example, that publically funded art institutions needed to be included among the contexts for displaying black artists' work, partly so that white audiences might become familiar with the issues their work addressed, and partly because they had a right, as British citizens, to access such spaces.²³ It was on this basis that she organised several exhibitions during the 1980s that displayed the work of black (mostly women) artists in established galleries, such as *The Thin Black Line* at the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA), London (1985). Aside from the issue that Himid was only offered the most peripheral of spaces within which to stage her exhibition at the ICA (a 20 x 2 metre corridor), her efforts marked another trajectory within the development of the separatist/race-based approach to displaying work by black artists. In this case, the purpose was to make the quantity and breadth of activity of black British artists known to white audiences. Indeed, prior to the 1980s there was arguably a state of ignorance within the art establishment regarding the existence of professional black British artists, prompting Araeen to assert in 1978 that 'It is important ... for the people to

²⁰ This was the Blk Art Group's definition of 'black art'.

²¹ Araeen and Chambers, 2000: 241, 251, 253, and 254. See also Araeen, 1988: 40. Some may consider his view a little short-sighted, given that he also adhered to a separatist approach in his organising of exhibitions of work by only black artists for only black audiences. However, it must be noted that Chambers' specific objective in employing a separatist curatorial strategy was not necessarily to provide exposure for otherwise unknown black artists – as it had been for others such as Lubaina Himid – but to communicate with black audiences regarding black life in Britain and to rally political consciousness and activity against racist oppression.

²² In this thesis I refer to the 'white art system' and also to the British canon in art with particular reference to the vocabularies and perceptions of black British artists as expressed in relevant writings of the 1980s and 1990s (many of which are listed in the bibliography). In these writings, the 'white art system' and British canon were generally described and understood as fiercely protected, impenetrable and exclusionary towards non-white artists and non-white artistic practices, and furthermore, as something that many black artists desperately sought inclusion within/from. This understanding of the institutions of British art may be considered as something of a myth, particularly by individuals that have witnessed the acceptance and promotion of black artists by established art museums and, indeed, the employment of black managers/organisers/curators within those institutions.

²³ Lubaina Himid in Nairne, 1987: 232, 240

know that black people ... have been contributing to the material prosperity of the country but also [that they] ... have been engaged in artistic and cultural activities'.²⁴

In Chambers' opinion, however, a demand for representation by publicly funded galleries by a small number of black artists such as Himid would do little to address the struggles faced by black artists and indeed the wider black community in Britain. From his perspective, the specific targeting of black audiences (who were not regularly visiting public art galleries) through the display of work in community settings was essential to his broader objective of empowering black communities to contest the forces of oppression in British society that had prevented their access to public institutions in the first place. But as Araeen astutely observed, black communities simply did not have the economic power to support black artists, and as a result, the established structures of the art world were the only viable outlet for artists, black or white, to survive financially.²⁵ Indeed, as discussed in the next section, changes were beginning to take place within the 'white art system' in the early 1980s that were, ostensibly, offering black artists increased opportunities for exposure.

2.2 Public art institutions and the recognition of black artists through the prism of difference

The issue of black artists' access to publicly funded art institutions was not limited to the debates (outlined above) that played out amongst black artists. Within the same time-frame that British-born black artists were attending and graduating from British art schools, the Arts Council commissioned a report that would be the first of its publications to attempt to acknowledge the artistic activities of Britain's ethnic minorities, and to suggest that these activities were not being given due recognition by, and support from, British funding bodies.²⁶ The report - *The Art Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain* - was researched and written by Naseem Khan in 1976, and its principal claim was that the artistic and cultural activities of Britain's ethnic minorities offered a considerable contribution to the cultural life of British society as a whole, but only if

²⁴ Araeen, 1984: 163. Similarly, Lubaina Himid commented, 'For a long time the stock answer was that there aren't any black artists, black people don't make pictures... A lot of us have managed to disprove that, but you know, fancy having got to 1986 and having to prove that you exist' (Lubaina Himid in Nairne, 1987: 237). Likewise, Keith Piper and Donald Rodney reflected, 'the lobbying for visibility was necessary when the existence of 'Black Art' was often questioned' (Piper and Rodney, 1988: 113).

²⁵ Araeen and Chambers, 2000: 241, 251, 253, and 254. See also Araeen, 1988: 40

²⁶ The report was commissioned by the Arts Council, the Community Relations Commission (which later became the Commission for Racial Equality, and more recently, the Equality and Human Rights Commission) and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to investigate the potential contribution of ethnic minorities to contemporary British culture. Although it is not explicitly stated in the report why the commissioning agencies felt it was necessary to have such research conducted, Guy Brett claimed eight years later, that the commissioning of the report was symptomatic of 'the establishment' feeling compelled 'to do something about the 'black problem'' (Guy Brett in Introduction to Araeen, 1984: 13-14). This may be in reference to the fact that 1976 was the year in which the Notting Hill Carnival ended in a riot between black youths and the police, and in which the Race Relations Act was updated (since its first incarnation in 1965), resulting in the formation of the Community Relations Committee.

adequately supported. One of the significant and perhaps radical aspects of the report (given the time and socio-political context) was Khan's use of the term 'new-British' in reference to British citizens who had migrated to the UK from ex-British colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and Asia, and her argument that Britain was not a homogenous, white society.²⁷ Her discussion of immigrant communities as being British ('new' or otherwise), and as making a contribution to the cultural life of the nation, brought to the fore the idea that Britain's publicly funded galleries now had a responsibility to exhibit work by artists from migrant backgrounds.

That the majority of Britain's art institutions had yet to engage with or exhibit work by black British artists in any significant way was attributed by those such as Araeen to the fact that many of those institutions had been founded in the late colonial era, when stark distinctions – often based on highly questionable hierarchies of race - were drawn between the peoples of the 'west' and the peoples of the rest of the world. Araeen claimed that a colonial perspective continued to underpin the philosophies and practices of Britain's art institutions in the late twentieth century, primarily causing their staff to view black British artists as 'foreign' and therefore not eligible for recognition by them, nor inclusion in exhibitions of British art.²⁸ As evidence of this, he drew attention to the assertion of an Arts Council representative that 'the Arts Council was a traditional British institution whose function was to support its *own* professional artists' [that is, not artists of immigrant heritages, emphasis added].²⁹ Indeed, even the Arts Council's Deputy Secretary General, Anthony Everitt, conceded ten years later that given the organisation's establishment at the height of the British Empire, it was not surprising its structures, philosophies and practices were 'not particularly well tailored to today's needs'.³⁰ As observed by Kwesi Owusu in his book *The Struggle for Black Arts in Britain* (1986), this state of affairs was particularly problematic for black British people seeking recognition as British artists (as opposed to 'foreign' artists), given the Arts Council's far-reaching power to conceptualise and identify on behalf of the nation what British art was through its provision of an overall arts policy framework for the majority of Britain's art charities, bodies and agencies.³¹

Khan's report, radical as it was at the time, failed to encourage the Arts Council to adjust its policies and practices in response to the changing demographics of British society. However, it did act as a

²⁷ Khan, 1976: 5-7

²⁸ Araeen, 1984: 89-90; Araeen, 1987: 7-8

²⁹ Ruth Marks (Arts Council representative) responding to a complaint from a black delegate regarding the failures of the Council to support work by black artists at the Third Regional M.A.A.S. Conference on Ethnic Arts in London on 19 June 1976 (cited in Araeen, 1984: 89).

³⁰ Cited in 'About the Action Plan: Some Responses'; N.D.; 3. One might argue that the British Empire was already in terminal decline by the 1940s (the Arts Council of Great Britain's charter was in 1946 - the year before Indian Independence).

³¹ Owusu, 1986: 67, 70

catalyst for change within other public institutions, particularly the Greater London Council (GLC). Specifically, the GLC began to engage in the question of whether or not arts/cultural practitioners from Britain's ethnic minorities had access to public funding, and by extension, whether or not they were to be represented by the publicly funded arts sector (the ramifications of which I discuss below). In this respect, the report was ground-breaking. However, the language used within it, in contrast, supported the Arts Council's established perspective on Britain's ethnic minorities, by promoting an understanding of them as culturally different and perpetually separate from the main body of 'authentically' British citizens. Khan's use of such terms as 'native-British' (vs 'new-British') and 'native venues' (vs 'ethnic venues'), suggested that there were some sections of British society, who through having been resident in the country for a longer period of time, were more 'legitimately British' than those who had settled in it more recently. This suggestion was strengthened through her use of such terms as a British 'host community', which implied that ethnic minorities continued to be 'guests' in Britain. The reinforcement of this view was exacerbated by the fact that the report did not attempt to consider how the artistic activities of ethnic minorities in Britain might actually have constituted a revised, but nonetheless authentic version of British culture, especially by virtue of the fact that many members of Britain's ethnic minorities had been born and raised in the country.³² The resulting implication was that although the cultural and artistic activities of Britain's ethnic minorities could be understood as contributing value and richness to the overall cultural life of Britain, members of those minorities, and their artistic forms/activities, would remain conceptually 'other', and in effect separate from the main body of 'authentic' British culture. As with the Arts Council's existing view of Britain's ethnic minorities as 'foreign', Khan's particular positioning of them presented a problem for the children and grandchildren of immigrants in Britain, who, having been born in the country, felt themselves to be 'legitimately' British. Furthermore, it presented a problem for British-born black artists who understood themselves as contributing to a British canon of art, or at the very least, as having the right to access, and be represented by, nationally owned and publicly funded art galleries.

Subsequent criticisms that the report was 'a recipe for cultural separatism',³³ were compounded by the fact that many of its recommendations involved separate funding provision for ethnic minorities and the establishment of separate initiatives such as black theatres and black dance companies, marking another trajectory within the separatist approach to dealing with the work of

³² Khan, 1976: 125, 127; 130. 'For members of the minorities themselves, their cultural traditions represent their *own* identity. Support for them by British institutions... recognises the fact that a section of British citizens now have *different* traditions, needs and tastes from the hitherto accepted norms' [emphasis added] (Khan, 1976: 133)

³³ Araeen, 1984: 91; 101

black artists that was becoming popular at the time.³⁴ However, key here is the marked distinction between the separatist approaches that developed in the hands of black artists, such as Chambers and Himid, and the approach that was proffered by Khan. The former was a political strategy that arose as a defiant response to the exclusion of black artists from established institutions of art, and was also employed for its effectiveness in making the existence of black artists known to an otherwise oblivious public. Khan's suggestion that a similar approach be adopted by the Arts Council and the organisations it funded would not only cause the strategy to become institutionalised and therefore de-radicalised, but would also cause the British public to consider the work of black artists as separate from their white contemporaries, and result in their continued exclusion from discourses on British art.

Despite the problematic nature of Khan's recommendations, they were eventually adopted in the early 1980s, not by the Arts Council, but by the GLC. During this time, the GLC began allocating funds towards art produced by ethnic minorities and targeted black artists in particular, partly as a response to debates prompted by Khan's report, but also in a bid to tackle the issue of racism that had been brought to the fore by uprisings in Brixton, Tottenham and a number of other inner-city areas around the country.³⁵ Between 1982 and 1986, the GLC organised and funded several exhibitions and showcase events, arguably making it the most prolific supporter of black artists in London in the early 1980s.³⁶ The majority of these events and exhibitions involved large numbers of black artists from a broad range of disciplines, and undoubtedly enabled several of them to attain a degree of visibility and to develop their experience of exhibiting publicly. However, the visibility attained by participating artists was not as beneficial to them as might be presumed. As part of its overarching campaign to combat racism in the city, the GLC employed an all-inclusive organising principle for supporting black artists in which the main criterion for inclusion was, to put it crudely, an artist's non-whiteness. This race-based approach to programming meant that the artists involved, and indeed their works, were positioned in terms of their non-white ethnicity, and that any degree of visibility they attained through their participation in GLC events and exhibitions was channelled through a prism of race, much like the differently motivated exhibitions that were being organised by black artists such as Chambers and Himid. In both cases, this approach to curating was

³⁴ Khan, 1976: 136-7

³⁵ On 28 May 1982 the GLC held a conference titled *Ethnic Minorities' Arts in London* and established within itself an Ethnic Minorities Committee. Following this, it established an Ethnic Arts Sub-Committee that provided funds for anti-racist cultural events, including those within its 'anti-racist year' in 1984, as well as a number of other events and exhibitions involving the work of artists from ethnic minorities.

³⁶ Among them were a series of seminars on black women and representation (1984), the exhibition *Reflections of a Different World* (1984), the *New Horizons* exhibition at the Royal Festival Hall (1985), an anti-racist mural project (1985), the establishment of the Black Visual Arts Forum (1985), *The Black Experience Arts Programme* (1986), and the *Colours of Black* exhibition at the GLC Conference Hall (1986).

highly problematic; by prioritising the factor of the artists' race above the style and content of the work it limited the ways in which it could be interpreted, contextualised and historicised. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that GLC-led exhibitions and programmes failed to address how black artists were contributing to long-standing traditions in art, and instead, emphasised perceived instances of cultural and ethnic difference in their work. For example, the catalogue for an exhibition it staged at the Royal Festival Hall in 1985, titled *New Horizons*, stated that the exhibition would show how the artists in it had 'drawn on and been inspired by traditional elements in their societies'.³⁷ As such, the exhibition critically framed and ring-fenced the work displayed in it in terms of the artists' ethnicity or cultural heritage and not in terms of their position within the development of British art. Furthermore, by claiming that these artists were *not* 'working in the Western tradition', the exhibition presented them as distinct and separate from their white counterparts, further cementing, therefore, their ghettoisation in the British art world.³⁸

Araeen determined that the principle difficulty with the GLC's support of black artists was its use of the term ethnic arts as initially conceived in Khan's 1976 report. While Khan had employed the term to refer to all the cultural activities of Britain's ethnic minorities (including white immigrants from countries such as Hungary and Poland), the GLC applied it to the cultural and artistic activities of non-white immigrants mainly from Commonwealth nations as well as their British-born descendants. In both cases, the term categorised the artistic activities of British-born artists with migrant heritages and recent immigrants together, and positioned them as separate from the main body of British society. For Araeen, this constituted a form of neo-colonialism, or a new primitivism. He claimed that activities funded under the term ethnic arts had not simply emerged to create 'space' for the cultural traditions of Britain's immigrants and their descendants, but to enable British authorities to closely observe neo-colonial relations. The crux of the matter, from his perspective, was that the notion of ethnic arts converted the real issue of resistance and discontent among the underprivileged in Britain into an unreal one of supposed cultural difference. In this process, the discontent expressed by those whom Khan described as 'new British' was erroneously attributed to their sense of being uprooted from their 'own' cultures and a resulting sense of alienation and frustration that was exacerbated by living in a complex technological society. Ethnic arts funding initiatives therefore presented a solution to this problem by enabling them to practice their so-called 'traditional cultures'. However, Araeen claimed that the promotion of the idea of cultural difference (the problematics of which are discussed below) through the use of the term ethnic arts was simply a reiteration of the idea of the colonial 'Other' and its related racial and

³⁷ Kevin Little (Chair of GLC Ethnic Arts Sub-Committee) in *New Horizons* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1985: 1

³⁸ Introduction in *New Horizons* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1985: 1

cultural stereotypes, which would fuel racist thinking in popular consciousness and in the work of Britain's institutions.³⁹

Araeen's argument regarding the neo-colonial undertones of the term ethnic arts certainly highlights how outmoded, yet deeply ingrained philosophies or ideologies can manifest in the generation of cultural policies and their concomitant terms. However, I suggest that it was the more general categorisation of black artists in terms of their race or ethnicity, rather than the use of this particular term and the resulting conceptualisation of black artists as being culturally different from the main body of British society, that was problematic about the GLC's engagement with black artists. Indeed, when black artists similarly categorised *themselves* in terms of their race through devising exhibitions that displayed only the works of black artists, they too positioned the factor of their race as the most significant aspect of their work, as opposed to its content, style and media, and thereby unwittingly contained the ways in which the work could be interpreted. This similarly occurred when the GLC exchanged the term ethnic arts with 'black art' in the mid-1980s to describe all work by non-white artists.⁴⁰ Before its employment by the GLC, the term 'black art' had referenced a shared history and experience of marginalisation and racism, and related practices that constituted a new politics of resistance in art. For many artists, the notion of 'black art' was steeped in and even vitalised by a particular history of colonialism, and denoted a creative response to neo-imperial inequalities in British society and the British art system.⁴¹ However, in the hands of the GLC, 'black art' referenced any practice of any content produced by any non-white artist, in the same way that ethnic arts had. In consequence, the GLC voided the term of its political potency, and moreover, by applying it to the already established practice of foregrounding race as significant in the interpretation of work by black artists, the GLC ring-fenced the ways their work might be positioned and historicised. That the term 'black art' had come to define and limit understandings of black artists' work in the same way that ethnic arts had done evidences that the problem was less to do with the precise terms in themselves, and more to do with the practices that were employed in association with them.

Despite these issues, the GLC did not struggle to recruit artists into its numerous projects on the basis of racial categorisation, which is unsurprising given the context of economic hardship and scarce opportunities in the early 1980s. There were artists, however, who were concerned that the GLC's use of the term 'black art' failed to acknowledge their struggle against the political and

³⁹ Araeen, 1987: 7, 14, 19, 20

⁴⁰ For example, see Parminder Vir (Head of the Race Equality Unit, GLC) in the Introduction to *The Black Experience Arts Programme*, 1986: 3; *The Black Experience Arts Programme*, 1986: 40 and 42; and *Reflections of the Black Experience* (exhibition leaflet), 1986: 1

⁴¹ Jantjes 1988: 44; Owusu, 1988: 1

cultural status quo, and moreover, that it implied that their work was, or should necessarily be, different from the mainstream of modern culture.⁴² Consequently, Chambers correctly observed that those wishing to attain success within established arenas for the discussion and display of art would do well to avoid being categorised as 'black artists' through an involvement with the GLC.⁴³ Unfortunately, however, separatist, race-based approaches to curating work by black artists were set to continue and become cemented in institutional practices through the 1980s as publicly funded galleries began to take a greater interest in their work.

2.3 Black survey exhibitions and the proliferation of race-based curating

As noted above, there had been a relative state of ignorance about the existence of professional black British artists within the art establishment prior to the 1980s, and it is for this reason that the activities of individuals such as Chambers and Himid were so important. The exhibitions they organised, and particularly the separatism and consequent emphasis on race employed in their curation, raised an awareness of black British artists amongst staff working in the nation's regional, publicly funded galleries.⁴⁴ In this specific context, therefore, a separatist, race-based approach to displaying the work of black artists had actually been beneficial to them in their struggle for recognition by established display spaces. However, the employment of this same curatorial strategy by publicly funded galleries, which manifested in what became known as the large-scale black survey exhibition, was, conversely, highly detrimental to black artists wishing to have their work contextualised and historicised within discourses on British art, the reasons for which I discuss below.

The first of these exhibitions to take place in, and be initiated by, a publicly funded British gallery was *Into the Open* at the Mappin Art Gallery in Sheffield in 1984. It was selected by Lubaina Himid and Pogus Caesar at the invitation of Sheffield City Arts Department and displayed work by twenty-two artists including Chambers, Piper and Sonia Boyce. Its premise, like many of the preceding exhibitions organised by black artists themselves, was to evidence the existence of British-born, contemporary black artists, for as Caesar stated, 'within this so-called equal society there are those

⁴² Araeen, 1988: 5-7

⁴³ Araeen and Chambers, 2000: 241-242

⁴⁴ For example, as noted in Chapter 3, Bryan Biggs has stated that it was upon seeing the exhibition *Black Art Now* at the Black Art Gallery in 1984 that he became aware of, and interested in, the work of black British artists, and in consequence began to organise the Bluecoat's first group exhibition of work by black British artists – *Black Skin/Bluecoat* – the following year (Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 3 – see Appendix 8.6). Similarly, Mike Tooby commented that he recognised some of the names of the artists who were to be shown in *Into the Open* as a result of having seen *The Pan Afrikan Connection* exhibition in Coventry in 1983 (Tooby, 2012).

who seek to deny our existence... [therefore] the only thread that runs throughout the exhibition is that all the artists are black, each making an individual statement, all crying out to be heard'.⁴⁵ A large survey exhibition was deemed the most suitable curatorial method for achieving this aim by the gallery, on the one hand, because it clearly demonstrated both the number and variety of black artists producing art at the time, and on the other, because it was already a popular approach among black artists themselves.⁴⁶

Several other survey exhibitions of work by black artists followed over the course of the mid 1980s, including, but not limited to, *Black Skin/Bluecoat* at the Bluecoat Gallery in Liverpool (1985) (discussed in Chapter 3), *The Thin Black Line* at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London (1985), *From Two Worlds* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London (1986), *The Image Employed* at the Cornerhouse in Manchester (1987), *The Essential Black Art* at The Chisenhale Gallery, London (1988), the touring exhibition *Black Art: Plotting the Course* at Oldham Art Gallery, Wolverhampton Art Gallery and the Bluecoat (1988-1989), and *The Other Story* at the Hayward Gallery in London (1989).⁴⁷ Undoubtedly, the sheer quantity of these exhibitions, all of which displayed works by a large number of artists, enabled an unprecedented degree of visibility for black British artists, in terms of having their work seen by both black and white audiences, and also in terms of having their work engaged with by critics for the first time thanks to their display in gallery settings (as opposed to community settings).

However, there were several problems with the large survey exhibition as a strategy for displaying the work of black artists. As noted above, at the start of the decade, the racial categorisation that is inherent to the approach had been essential to black artists who found that their existence alone required proving. However, once it had been evidenced by the relative surge of black survey shows that were staged in the mid-1980s, the format no longer served its former purpose. As with the

⁴⁵ Pogus Caesar in *Into the Open* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1984: 2 Similarly, Himid asserted that 'Our art...has a place and should not be made invisible. We will not be silenced any longer, as we have been in the past...We are here' (Lubaina Himid in *Into the Open* Exhibition Catalogue, 1984: 2).

⁴⁶ Julian Spalding, its then Director of Arts, stated in the catalogue's foreword that it was 'the first broad look at the work in this area [the work of black artists in Britain]' and that the selectors' aim was 'to give an indication of the range and richness of art made by contemporary Afro-Caribbean artists' (Foreword in *Into the Open* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1984: 1). During a presentation at a conference in 2012, Mike Tooby (currently Professor of Art and Design at Bath School of Art and Design) explained that, when he started his post as Keeper at the Mappin Gallery in 1984, he inherited the idea for the exhibition from the gallery's Director, which he claims he understood at the time was part of the gallery's civic role in reflecting and responding to wider developments in the world around it (Tooby, 2012). Although it is possible that Tooby, as an individual, understood the role of the gallery in this way, it is unlikely to have been the reason for its decision to organise the exhibition, given that, at the time, little pressure was being placed on galleries by bodies such as the Arts Council to represent the full breadth of artists in the country. In fact, as evidenced by letters exchanged between the Arts Council and Rasheed Araeen during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the prevailing attitude of the Arts Council at this time could at best be described as indifferent to the existence and plight of black British artists (For example, see letters exchanged between Rasheed Araeen and the Arts Council in 1979 in Araeen, 1984: 161-172).

⁴⁷ For a full list of black survey exhibitions that took place during this period, see Adelaide Bannerman's 'Timelines' in *Shades Of Black* (D.A. Bailey, S.Boyce and I. Baucom – Eds.), 2005, pp. 229-266.

race-based, separatist strategies that had been employed by black artists and by the GLC in the preceding years, it simply came to distinguish the work of black artists from their white contemporaries through its foregrounding of their ethnicity, and similarly de-emphasised the work's style and content, thus limiting the critical and historical frameworks within which it might otherwise have been positioned. As a curatorial strategy, it now exacerbated, rather than ameliorated, the problem of black artists' marginalisation within, and exclusion from, established discourses on British art.

A second issue with the black survey exhibition as a curatorial approach was that, as with all large survey exhibitions, it prevented each artist in it from exhibiting more than one or two of their works, thus denying audiences and critics the opportunity to gain a deep understanding of their individual practices, which were highly varied. This issue was more problematic, however, in a context where notions of racial and cultural difference were at play, and in which black artists were struggling to have their work considered as a legitimate and constitutive aspect of contemporary British art and culture. The crux of the matter was that the artists presented within black survey exhibitions were only being acknowledged as part of a black arts movement and not in terms of their placement as individual artists within the existing canon of British art. As such, the black survey model failed to present a challenge to prevailing attitudes towards black artists and their work in the British art system that oftentimes ignored their existence altogether, and at best ghettoised and excluded them from contemporary discourses on art. An additional, and perhaps more disconcerting issue in regard to showing so many black artists simultaneously was, as identified by Chambers, that many publicly funded galleries had policies of not showing the same artist between gaps of five or fewer years, meaning that once a black artist had exhibited within a black survey show, they would be unlikely to have another opportunity to exhibit in the same gallery for several years.⁴⁸ Thus, black artists were in fact worsening the situation of their invisibility by participating in black survey exhibitions.

⁴⁸ Chambers, 1986: 16, 18 and 19. As a result of these issues, there were instances of black artists declining to take part in black survey exhibitions in publicly funded galleries. For example, the organisers of *From Two Worlds* stated in the catalogue introduction that some of the artists they had approached for inclusion had declined the invitation 'perhaps fearing the imposition of an 'ethnic' label' (Jantjes and Serota, Introduction in *From Two Worlds* Exhibition Catalogue, 1986: 8). Similarly, Araeen acknowledged that there had been artists who had refused to take part in *The Other Story*, stating that 'Making an exhibition on the basis of racial origin is not something that comes easily to the art world. A number of important artists felt unable to participate, wary of such a context for reasons which are perhaps understandable' (Araeen, 1989: 8). One such artist was Anish Kapoor, who, when questioned about it, explained that 'I am an Indian and that's very important to me. But you could just as well have a show of left-handed artists, or artists over six foot' (Kapoor cited in Hall, J., 1989). While the organisers of *From Two Worlds* readily acknowledged that it was understandable that some artists were reluctant to take part in a black survey exhibition (Serota, N., Acknowledgements in *From Two Worlds* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1986: 4), Araeen (the organiser of *The Other Story*) defended the curatorial model, stating that the separateness that was inherent to the format already existed in British society, and was not the making of the black survey model. He concluded that there was no choice at that time for black artists except to assert

Given its many obvious shortcomings, some began to reflect on the reasons behind the continued employment of this curatorial approach by publicly funded galleries. For Chambers, it indicated an insidious possibility that 'the gallery system' was unable to acknowledge that black artists were equals to their white contemporaries,⁴⁹ while Sandy Nairne (the then Director of Visual Arts at the Arts Council), suggested that, in the context of the museum and gallery field having remained unchanged since the 1970s in terms of its stance towards black artists, the black survey model had become a way of containing black artists, or in other words, preventing their work from entering mainstream discourse.⁵⁰ Although Nairne did not discuss why gallery staff would wish to do this, I suggest that both he and Chambers were becoming aware of a phenomenon occurring within British art institutions that Araeen would later define as the legitimate coercion of black artists into accepting racist or neo-colonial structures and modes of perception that underpin the workings of British art institutions. As noted in Chapter 1, Zygmunt Bauman employed the term legitimate coercion to describe an elusive and non-aggressive form of coercion that is entrenched in everyday life and in institutional practice to the extent that its objects are largely unaware of it and the modes through which it operates, thus allowing it to become valid or legitimate in public consciousness, so that long-standing structures and relationships of power are preserved. Chapter 5 provides further discussion of legitimate coercion, but in short, 'legitimate coercive' practices relating to black creativity developed in the context of British art institutions in the 1980s in order to defend a hegemonic understanding of British cultural life (as definitively white) from the threat presented to it by the existence and practices of black British artists.⁵¹ By providing space and recognition for black creativity in mainstream art museums and galleries, black artists could be placated and the notional threat they represented to the status quo could thus be subdued. Key to this, however, was the fact that the frameworks through which they were recognised ensured that black creativity remained peripheral to mainstream discourses of art despite having a physical presence in mainstream spaces for display. In consequence, established conceptions of British culture could be preserved. The black survey exhibition format achieved this through its separation of black artists from their white contemporaries and through its emphasis of the former's ethnic and perceived cultural difference from the latter.

Perhaps in response to mounting criticisms of the black survey curatorial format, the Whitechapel Art Gallery staged a survey of work by black artists in 1986 titled *From Two Worlds*, which, its

their presence separately (Araeen, 1984: 163). This last claim was not entirely correct, however. As evidenced in Chapter 3, the Bluecoat was staging exhibitions at this time that included both black and white British artists, including an untitled small group exhibition in 1984 which displayed works by Tony Bevan, Glenys Johnson, Jefford Horrigan, and Jan Wandja, the last of whom was black.

⁴⁹ Chambers, 1986: 19

⁵⁰ Nairne, 1987: 237

⁵¹ In this thesis, the term 'legitimate coercive' is used as the adjective relating to the noun legitimate coercion.

organisers boldly asserted, represented a departure from other preceding and contemporaneous black survey shows through having been devised in accordance with a theme and not simply the artists' non-white ethnicity. The artist Gavin Jantjes and the then Director of the Gallery, Nicholas Serota, had selected the artists for inclusion in this exhibition because of the relationship of their work to the theme of 'cultural plurality' and the 'fusion of European and non-European visions'.⁵² They suggested that this theme had enabled them to focus on instances of cultural *synthesis*, as opposed to cultural *difference*, which other black survey shows had emphasised as a result of being devised in accordance with the limiting ethnic labels of 'Black', 'Asian' or 'African-Caribbean'. Had Jantjes and Serota's conception of cultural fusion or synthesis been presented as an expression of contemporary Britishness, *From Two Worlds* may well have avoided the tendencies of previous black survey exhibitions to 'other' black artists (and thereby marginalise them within established discourses on British art). This, however, was not their approach. Instead, they placed great importance on how the work on display synthesised the artists' 'non-Western cultural roots with those of Europe and Britain'.⁵³ Their emphasis on cultural roots located outside Britain positioned the artists precisely in the way the organisers claimed to be avoiding; as culturally different from their white (and thereby supposedly more legitimately British) counterparts. This theme therefore exacerbated the problems of racial categorization that *From Two Worlds* was already susceptible to as a black survey show. Furthermore, that Jantjes himself was a black artist, and that the artists who participated in the exhibition had done so willingly, legitimised this curatorial strategy and the exhibition's underlying message that black artists in Britain were not to be positioned in the existing canon of British art.

The continued proliferation of the black survey strategy, in spite of the failings of exhibitions such as *From Two Worlds*, caused several black artists to suggest other approaches that could improve their circumstances. Because of its widespread adoption by the mid-1980s, the black survey approach had successfully demonstrated the extent and variety of black artistic practice in Britain. The next appropriate move for publicly funded galleries was, therefore, to attempt a more substantial acknowledgement of the work of black artists by staging one-person exhibitions. In fact, Chambers later reported in his PhD thesis that he had been invited to a preliminary consultation meeting for *From Two Worlds* at the Whitechapel during which he argued that instead of producing yet another black survey exhibition, the gallery could devise an ongoing series of solo exhibitions.⁵⁴ His suggestion was, however, rejected and the gallery continued to pursue the survey show it had

⁵² Jantjes and Serota, Introduction in *From Two Worlds* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1986: 5 and 7

⁵³ Jantjes and Serota, Introduction in *From Two Worlds* (Exhibition Catalogue), 1986: 8

⁵⁴ Chambers, 1998: 241. Keith Piper made a similar appeal to the Bluecoat's Artistic Director, Bryan Biggs, in 1984, after having been approached to take part in a survey of works by black artists similar to *Into the Open*. This is discussed in Chapter 3.

planned, evidencing, as Hylton has observed, that although a small number of black artists were offered solo exhibitions during the decade (particularly at smaller, regional galleries such as the Bluecoat), the default position of most art institutions, especially those in London, was to stage large group exhibitions of work by black artists and only on a sporadic basis.⁵⁵ One of the few solo shows in the capital was Sonia Boyce's exhibition at the Whitechapel in 1988, titled *Sonia Boyce: Recent Work*.⁵⁶ A consideration of the precise nature of this exhibition's organisation discloses the fact that an attitude of indifference towards the activities and concerns of black artists continued to pervade the way many art institutions engaged with black creativity.

Boyce's relationship with the gallery had been initiated four years earlier, when its Community Education Organiser wrote to her requesting a meeting to discuss her possible involvement in 'any of the gallery's projects', as a result of having seen slides of Boyce's work at an exhibition that had been organised by Lubaina Himid (thus evidencing that black artists staging their own exhibitions had been vital in bringing their existence to the attention of publicly funded galleries).⁵⁷ Boyce subsequently became an artist in residence at the gallery in 1985, where her role was to conduct artist education work, and in the following year she took part in *From Two Worlds*.⁵⁸ It took over two years of involvement with the Whitechapel for the gallery to take interest in Boyce's work on an individual basis, however. In December 1987 the Whitechapel's director, Nicholas Serota, discussed with Boyce the possibility of her showing some of her recent works in a space within the building titled 'the New Gallery' between 13 May and 26 June the following year.⁵⁹ That this was only suggested to Boyce four months before the exhibition was due to take place, combined with the fact that Serota had discussed the precise dates and space for the exhibition in his preliminary discussion with her, indicates that she had not been approached because of the gallery's desire to engage more deeply with the work of some of the artists it had shown in *From Two Worlds*, but instead because the Whitechapel had a gap in its programme that required filling. One might claim that smaller and mid-sized galleries such as the Whitechapel occasionally devise their programmes on an ad hoc basis and that the decision to offer Boyce a solo show only four months in advance would not have been atypical. However, that an exhibition of works by artist Michael Sandle had already been arranged to take place in the Whitechapel's Upper and Lower main galleries at the time that Serota approached Boyce, suggests that her inclusion in the programme was merely an afterthought – a last-minute attempt to fill its smaller spaces.

⁵⁵ Hylton, 2007: 62

⁵⁶ Six works were shown in the exhibition: *Round Midnight – The Sweetest Taboo – Girl's Talk; The Greatest Romance – Disturbed; Mother and Child – Quiet Strom in an Interior Landscape; Hanging; Talking Presence; and Afro Acid* (all works 1988).

⁵⁷ Letter dated 1 November 1984 – Whitechapel Archive No. WAG/EDUC/19/10

⁵⁸ Whitechapel Archive No. WAG/EDUC/17/5

⁵⁹ Whitechapel Archive No. WAG/EDUC/2/397

What could at best be described as a loose engagement with Boyce's work (and at worst, an indifference to it), was also demonstrated by the exhibition's accompanying interpretive material. In a small catalogue, the text for which had been written by the artist Simone Alexander (based on an interview she had conducted with Boyce), it was asserted that Boyce wished for audiences to look beyond the decorative aspect of her work. It was stated that, in fact, her work was political in content and dealt with kinship between black women and the ways in which black women engaged in feminist dialogue in the private sphere.⁶⁰ However, in a separate sheet of information that was also produced to accompany the exhibition, it was stated that her paintings 'combine figurative and decorative elements [and] address issues relating to cultural identity'.⁶¹ This contradicted Boyce's description of her own work and demonstrated that the organisers of the exhibition had failed to engage with her practice, thus suggesting that the exhibition was hastily arranged and not as part of a substantial and considered attempt to explore the work of an individual black artist. It could be argued that this single example is insufficient evidence of the Whitechapel's entire engagement with black artists during the 1980s. However, that no other solo shows were offered to the artists that had exhibited in *From Two Worlds* at the Whitechapel, nor indeed *any* non-white artist, until Tariq Alvi's self-titled exhibition in 2001 - some thirteen years later - indicates the gallery's lack of interest in, or commitment to, displaying the work of black artists and provides an example of how many of the nation's publicly funded galleries only engaged with black creativity on a fleeting and cursory basis in the 1980s and 1990s.

2.4 Black artists and institutional indifference

The nature of the Whitechapel's engagement with black artists (or lack thereof) was symptomatic of the general attitude of indifference towards black creativity emanating from Arts Council policies in the 1980s and 1990s. The GLC had been dissolved by the Local Government Act of 1985, and its powers were devolved to the London boroughs and other entities. However, in 1986, the Arts Council (which, until this time, had not adopted any of the recommendations from Naseem Khan's 1976 report to any great degree) took over much of the GLC's work in terms of funding and promoting the activities of black artists, and it extended that work nationally because, unlike the GLC, the Arts Council was a national body. Although less emphasis was placed on anti-racism and on initiating art activity, a greater importance was placed on the potential contribution of the arts of ethnic minorities to the nation's cultural life and on its consequent need for more equitable treatment. Furthermore, the Arts Council provided funds for museums and galleries to initiate and support black art activity, and developed policies to encourage this. In 1986, it published an *Arts*

⁶⁰ *Sonia Boyce: Recent Works Catalogue*, 1984: 3 (this was echoed again in a Biography on page 7)

⁶¹ Whitechapel Archive No. WAG/EDUC/2/397

and *Ethnic Minorities Action Plan*, in which it was stipulated that within the forthcoming two years, 4% of the Arts Council's expenditure be spent on funding British artists of African-Caribbean and Asian descent (because 4% of Britain's population had this heritage at the time).⁶² Letters were sent to all the galleries and organisations it funded, asking them to adopt a parallel plan, although it was not an obligation. According to Hylton's research of correspondence received by the Arts Council in response to its request, many gallery directors reacted favourably (and were often keen to highlight the work they were already doing to address the inequalities referenced by the *Action Plan*), whilst there were others that took exception to being advised as to how to devise their programmes. However, there were also some galleries, including the Whitechapel that failed to respond to the *Action Plan* altogether, demonstrating either an apathy towards, or a wilful disregard of, the issues it raised. This was not only the result of the institutional attitudes of those galleries and individuals working within them, but also of the Arts Council itself. Indeed, that the Arts Council's approach towards galleries refusing to address ethnic inequality involved 'further encouragement' rather than penalisation is demonstrative of the prevailing attitude of indifference operating at all levels of the British publicly funded arts sector in the 1980s.⁶³

Other recommendations of the 1986 *Action Plan* demonstrated that the Arts Council had adopted a separatist approach to grappling with black creativity (just as black artists and municipal galleries had at the start of the decade). In particular, it recommended the continuation of the GLC's strategy of employing artists and administrators from ethnic minority backgrounds to assist in managing the implementation of its new policies vis-à-vis black artists.⁶⁴ A policy of employing black arts managers was perceived by some as a positive measure because of its potential to enable members of ethnic minorities to become more involved in all aspects of the arts (that is, not simply the production of art) and to accelerate decision making processes about the kinds of black creativity that merited funding (it was presumed that black managers would be more familiar with modes of black creativity than white managers and therefore better able to determine the quality of work produced by black artists).⁶⁵ The potential merits of this approach notwithstanding, by employing black managers to deal with black artists the Arts Council revived the questionable separatist strategies that had been used by the GLC and municipal galleries at the start of the decade, thus exacerbating the marginalisation black artists were experiencing. Unsurprisingly, the strategy was met with criticism by black cultural commentators. For example, Araeen claimed that the approach was a cosmetic exercise that, in actuality, cemented established power relations and

⁶² Towards Cultural Diversity, 1989: Appendix A

⁶³ Hylton, 2007: 60-62

⁶⁴ Towards Cultural Diversity, 1989: Appendix A

⁶⁵ Parminder Vir (Head of the Race Equality Unit, GLC) in the Introduction to The Black Experience Arts Programme, 1986: 4; Patricia Hilaire cited in 'About the Action Plan: Some Responses'; N.D.; 3

inequalities - a form of legitimate coercion (although Araeen would not employ Bauman's term in his assessment of institutional practices until 2000). Likening the strategy to those typically employed in the British colonial apparatus – when 'black functionaries' were appointed to act as a buffer between the colonial authorities and the colonised masses – he asserted that the Arts Council's presumption that black managers had specialised knowledge of the supposedly different needs and practices of black artists had led to its reproduction of colonial relations within the art sector, and furthermore, that the approach would eventually disenfranchise black artists from the dominant culture.⁶⁶ Despite the criticisms exemplified by Araeen's assertions, the strategy became more popular in the 1990s and 2000s through the establishment of traineeships for black arts administrators and curators (such as the Inspire initiative) and through the creation of positions in galleries for which facilitating the implementation of cultural diversity initiatives was a primary objective (such as Tate's curator of cross-cultural programmes).⁶⁷

2.5 *The Other Story*, corrective inclusion and self-reliance

In the context of Araeen's many objections to the efforts of the Arts Council, it is pertinent to reflect on the strategies he employed in his own work to address the marginalisation experienced by black artists. *The Other Story* – a large survey of work by black artists staged at the Hayward Gallery (London) in 1989 – has been his major contribution to this endeavour to date.⁶⁸ It was a landmark exhibition in the context of the history addressed by this chapter because unlike many of the other large scale surveys presented in publicly funded galleries in the 1980s, it was conceived and initiated by an artist. As demonstrated by letters exchanged between Araeen and the Arts Council that were published in his book *Making Myself Visible* (1984), he had been seeking to develop this exhibition with the Council's support for some ten years before it was finally staged at the Hayward. In his first approach to the Arts Council in October 1978 he suggested an exhibition surveying black creativity in Britain that would be preceded by, and based on, a study project examining work produced by black visual artists between the early 1950s and the late 1970s. The aim, as with many of the survey exhibitions initiated by black artists and publicly funded galleries in the early 1980s, was simply to investigate and make known the breadth of black artistic activity in Britain, and more importantly, to examine how black artists had been contributing to the material

⁶⁶ Araeen, 1987: 23-24

⁶⁷ Debates regarding the validity of this strategy in improving the status quo for black artists have naturally ensued, as evidenced, for example, by discussions that took place at the conference *New Ways of Seeing: Curation, Institutions and Cultural Memory* (organised by the Royal College of Art at Liverpool John Moores University, 2013 – see <http://autograph-abp.co.uk/events/new-ways-of-seeing-curation-institutions-cultural-memory>, accessed 11/04/2014, for more information).

⁶⁸ Although he is reported to be working on a project titled 'The Whole Story: Art in Postwar Britain', which re-examines and rewrites the history of post-war art in Britain, including artists from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds that have contributed to its development (see <http://thirdtext.org/rasheed-araeen>, accessed 24/02/2015).

prosperity of the country. It was seven months before he received a reply, in which it was stated that the proposal had been rejected on the basis that the artists he had mentioned 'were not lacking in exposure and that a more sensible thing to do would be to broaden the scope to include all foreign artists working and living in this country'.⁶⁹ The alternative approach suggested by the Arts Council in this letter had initially been recommended by Khan in her 1976 report and is indicative of the fact that British-born black artists were perceived by British art institutions as 'foreign', and not, therefore within the Council's remit for support, hence the Council's declaration that it had little interest in taking the idea of an exhibition of work by 'foreign' artists forward either. Araeen remained persistent in his endeavour to stage this exhibition, however. After several subsequent applications to the Arts Council had been rejected, and after art institutions had succumbed to the mounting pressure being placed on them to acknowledge and support black creativity throughout the 1980s, the Arts Council finally agreed to fund his show more than ten years later at the Hayward Gallery, between 29 November 1989 and 4 February 1990.

Critics of the exhibition noted that the Arts Council's change in attitude towards Araeen's proposal was not surprising given the fact that many of the nation's institutions had by the end of the 1980s embraced a philosophy of multiculturalism and were beginning to implement it in their policies.⁷⁰ A softer form of multiculturalist thinking had been present in Britain since the 1950s and 1960s and gained favour in the context of the popular racism and intolerance that was promoted by public figures such as Enoch Powell MP. It espoused the general view that the diversity of cultures present in Britain in the post-war period should be tolerated and given space to be practiced freely, and contested the view that British society was, and should remain, ethnically pure. This form of multiculturalism had therefore been essential for the survival of the nation's non-white communities and their cultures. However, by the 1980s, when there was a significant second generation of these non-white communities, multiculturalist thinking began to change. As discussed in section 2.1, the British-born members of these communities were dissatisfied with mere toleration by the society they rightfully claimed as their own, which, in combination with a re-surfacing of right-wing racism at the start of the decade, led to the development of a more radical politics among young black Britons, culminating in the inner-city uprisings against the police in

⁶⁹ Araeen, 1984: 163, 166

⁷⁰ Petrine Archer-Straw commented that this change in attitude by the Arts Council was due to 'the [then] current wave of pro-black liberal sentiment' (Archer-Straw, 1990: 14). Similarly, Michael Archer suggested at the time that 'The fact that it is taking place now, rather than in 1978, ...is as much a demonstration of current institutional thinking on the arts as anything else. The intervening years have seen much activity – talking, lobbying, teaching, curating, writing – not least by some of the artists here' (Archer, 1990: 14). James Hall also claimed that '*The Other Story* may be unprecedented, but its occurrence is not that surprising. Recent years have seen the collapse of the post-war order and the discrediting of many old, cold political masters. Two other symptomatic shows opened in prestigious commercial galleries in London last week' (Hall, J., 1989).

Brixton (London), Toxteth (Liverpool), St.Paul's (Bristol) and Tottenham (London) between 1981 and 1985 (and which also manifested in the assertions of the Blk Art Group). In response to this discord, a new institutionalised form of multiculturalism developed that positively promoted separate religious and ethnic identities. Black representatives were positioned throughout the state apparatus (as seen in the activities of the GLC) so that black culture could be taken off the streets, managed and celebrated, in order to preclude further racial conflict. There have since been many criticisms against the institutionalisation of multiculturalism, which are outlined later in this chapter. For now, however, the Arts Council's eventual decision to fund *The Other Story* can be contextualised within this broader development.

Given that many of Araeen's contemporaries had been petitioning galleries to abandon the separatist survey format in favour of solo exhibitions for black artists, it is significant that he did not attempt to reconfigure his plan for *The Other Story* (upon receipt of Arts Council funding) either in terms of staging a series of smaller exhibitions that would bring black and white artists together, or in terms of a series of solo exhibitions to be staged over a longer period of time. *The Other Story* remained as initially planned because it had been conceived in connection to Araeen's discomfort with two issues. The first, as he understood it, was that British art institutions continued to embody and represent the late colonial ideas and values that had informed their establishment, including a juxtaposition of the 'primitive' and the 'modern', which had been fundamental to the construction of western authority. The second was that a related, but erroneous association between cultural or ethnic difference (the 'primitive' in its contemporary guise) and the 'colonial other' was causing ex-colonial subjects and their descendants to be excluded from the canon of modernism. He therefore perceived subsequent institutional efforts to support black creativity as having taken shape in such a way that these fundamental values/ideas would remain intact (a process he would later define as legitimate coercion), and consequently argued that the struggle for black creativity in Britain was less to do with a lack of access to cultural resources (as Khan, the GLC and the Arts Council were claiming), and more to do with their exclusion from modernism.⁷¹ Araeen's task, as he understood it, was the corrective reconstruction of the western canon of modernism so that black artists could claim their rightful place within it.⁷² His employment of a separatist survey format in *The Other Story* was essential to that endeavour, in his view, and was symptomatic of the burden of representation (which is addressed in the next section).

The show encompassed the entire exhibition space at the Hayward Gallery and displayed the work of twenty-four artists of African, Caribbean or Asian descent that had practiced in Britain between

⁷¹ Araeen, 1988: 8, 22, 40

⁷² As noted above, this continues to be the focus of his work.

the 1950s and 1980s.⁷³ Araeen explained in the exhibition catalogue that *The Other Story* attempted to tell 'a story of those men and women who defied their 'otherness' and entered the modern space that was forbidden to them; not only to declare their historic claim on it but also to challenge the framework which defined and protected its boundaries'.⁷⁴ Unfortunately, the exhibition in and of itself could not achieve the grand aims that Araeen had set for himself as its curator, and he consequently conceded that what it presented was not the *only* story, and furthermore, that it could only act as an initial step towards improving conditions for black artists in terms of their relationships to art institutions and the history of British modernism.⁷⁵

One of the merits of *The Other Story* was that it provided an occasion for black artists, curators and academics to reflect on the development of black visual art in Britain, on its place in the story of British art, and in particular, on the way black creativity was represented by it and other similar black survey exhibitions.⁷⁶ That film-based works, photographic work, craft-based works, ceramics or fibre-art did not feature in *The Other Story*, combined with the fact that of the twenty-four artists in the show, only four were women (Mona Hatoum, Kumiko Shimizu, Lubaina Himid and Sonia Boyce) prompted critics to note its failure to represent the breadth of black creativity.⁷⁷ Some also commented that as a broad survey exhibition it perpetuated and reinforced the notion that there was a homogenised black community in Britain just as the term ethnic arts had at the start of the decade. For example, Lola Young complained that *The Other Story* validated the assembling of all non-white artists into a single category, thus encouraging art institutions to continue employing the delimiting race-based format and to continue practicing within the established order.⁷⁸ Others argued that it failed to represent black artists as part of the British art canon through its propagation of the concept of otherness. For example, Gilroy asserted that 'Our story is not the *other* story...but *the* story of England in the modern world' [emphasis added], demonstrating that the inherency of black creativity to the development of British culture had yet to be recognised.⁷⁹

⁷³ *The Other Story* was divided into four sections: *In The Citadel Of Modernism*, showing work by artists that had migrated to the UK from ex-British colonies to take part in modernist art practice in the 1950s and 60s; *Taking The Bull By The Horns*, presenting work that responded to social crises such as the Vietnam war and the emergence of black consciousness in the 1970s; *Confronting The System*, displaying the politically charged work of the 1980s; and *Recovering Cultural Metaphors*, which attempted to draw parallels between the three other sections.

⁷⁴ Araeen, 1989: 9;

⁷⁵ Araeen cited in Hall, J, 1989

⁷⁶ For an in-depth analysis of press reviews for *The Other Story* see my MA thesis (*In/Visible Artists*, 2006, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London).

⁷⁷ See Bhabha and Biswas, 1989; Keegan, 1989; and Mercer, 1994: 233-234.

⁷⁸ Young, 1990: 53-54

⁷⁹ Gilroy, 1990: 32

One of the most significant aspects of *The Other Story* was that it elicited from black artists, art historians and academics the opinion that self-reliance was the only method through which black artists could achieve financial success and critical recognition. Reflecting on the failings of the exhibition, Chambers argued that black artists and exhibition organisers who were attempting 'to make inroads into white galleries' were misdirecting their energies, and that instead, a strategy of reliance upon and within black communities and black-run cultural organisations would prove more effective than the strategy of corrective inclusion demonstrated by *The Other Story*.⁸⁰ Similarly, Mark Sealy asked, 'Why should we wish to be included in a European art tradition which has historically given [black] artists such a raw deal?'⁸¹ As discussed above, this separatist position had been popular at the start of the 1980s, when there had been a widespread indifference to the existence of black British artists and little to no precedence of them exhibiting in mainstream museums and galleries. However, that this position had persisted after several black artists had had the opportunity to display their work in large black survey exhibitions and, though less frequently, in solo exhibitions, was a testament to the failings of exhibitions such as *The Other Story* and the black survey curatorial model with its inherent problem of racial categorisation. However, as problematic as the black survey curatorial approach and strategies of corrective inclusion were, a retreat into the perceived safe haven offered by black communities and black-run organisations that Chambers and Sealy endorsed would only offer a short-term solution to the lack of exposure that black artists were experiencing at the time and furthermore, would not provide the exposure to a broader public that access to mainstream galleries could offer. An on-going strategy of self-reliance would, in fact, compound the marginalisation of black creativity; further support for black artists from black-run galleries and organisations would, in effect, absolve art institutions from their responsibility to represent and cater to the *entire* British public they existed to serve, subsequently cementing their exclusionary practices and long-held attitudes of indifference towards black creativity. However, black artists pursuing the alternative approach of seeking representation by mainstream galleries and museums found that their inclusion in these spaces was often conditional, highly political and in some cases, accompanied by a very particular burden.

2.6 The relations, politics and burden of representation

The issue of representation evolved in many ways over the course of the 1980s. At the start of the decade, when institutions such as the GLC began engaging with Khan's report *The Art Britain Ignores* and the notion of ethnic arts, black artists found themselves being encouraged to make work that was relevant to the 'communities' they were perceived as belonging to. For example,

⁸⁰ Chambers cited in Sebestyen, 1989: 17

⁸¹ Sealy, 1989

with the GLC's *Reflections of the Black Experience* exhibition and programme in 1986, black artists were required to work on projects that documented black cultural life in Britain, based on the presumption that such subject matter was their only field of expertise.⁸² Similarly, when Araeen was in discussion with the Ikon Gallery (Birmingham) regarding the possibility of doing a performance piece there in 1980, he was asked to present a particular work because there was 'a significant Muslim community' in the area. In Araeen's response, he demonstrated his resistance to having his work directed at specific religious or ethnic communities, arguing that although the issues addressed by his work often reflected the experiences of certain ethnic minority communities, the work was not addressed to them in particular.⁸³ This phenomenon of art institutions offering opportunities to black artists on the condition that their work represented their non-British cultural roots, and/or on the condition that it reflected and addressed non-white communities, was a clear indication to black artists that in the eyes of the art establishment, the British canon was not open to them.⁸⁴

The institutional control of the representation of black creativity as described above stimulated black artists to become concerned with reclaiming their right to represent themselves, in terms of the content of their work, and its context. Stuart Hall later described this as a concern over the relations of representation; the questioning of access to the rights to representation and the contestation of the fetishized nature of images of black people and black cultural life.⁸⁵ The role black artists played in devising black survey exhibitions in publicly funded galleries was a particular issue within this. For example, Chambers claimed that exhibitions such as *From Two Worlds* and *The Thin Black Line* had not been organised on black artists' terms, nor on the basis of an actual interest in the work, but instead on the terms of white art administrators whose approach was framed by the pressures of cultural policy, which as discussed above, typically foregrounded cultural difference and overlooked questions of style, content and media in relation to work by black artists.⁸⁶ While the role played by institutions in the organisation of black survey exhibitions stimulated concerns over the relations of representation, criticisms vis-à-vis the omission of artists in these exhibitions, as evidenced by the responses to *The Other Story*, demonstrated a concern regarding the politics of representation. Many of the criticisms made against *The Other Story* related to Araeen's right to make selections and to represent black creativity through those

⁸² *Reflections of the Black Experience* Exhibition Leaflet, 1986: 1 and 17

⁸³ Araeen, 1984: 136-137

⁸⁴ For example, Araeen reflected, 'Somehow I began to feel that the context or history of Modernism was not available to me, as I was often reminded by other people of the relationship of my work to my own Islamic tradition...Now I'm being told, both by the Right and the Left, that I belong to the 'Ethnic Minority' community and that my artistic responsibility lies within this categorisation' (Araeen, 1987: 10).

⁸⁵ Hall, 1996: 163-164

⁸⁶ Chambers, 1986: 16-17

selections.⁸⁷ Indeed, when opportunities to be represented are scarce, the issue of precisely *who* is granted that opportunity becomes especially significant. Consequently, and in a third trajectory relating to the issue of representation, black artists who were involved in organising large survey exhibitions, and black artists whose work was displayed in them, began to develop a sense of responsibility to represent all aspects of black creativity and life.⁸⁸

In the rare context of black artists being afforded the opportunity to exhibit alongside white artists in group exhibitions, this sense of responsibility strengthened. In addition to grappling with the issue of representation in terms of depiction (contesting black stereotypes, for example), the token black artist contended with the issue of representation in terms of substitution or delegation, whereby her/his role was similar to that of a public figure, speaking on behalf of a heterogeneous collectivity. In other words, in group exhibitions that featured only one black artist, that artist found that they and their artworks were critically and historically positioned as representative, or as speaking on behalf of all black artists, and in some cases, all black people. Cultural theorist Kobena Mercer described this predicament as the burden of representation.⁸⁹ He explained that, 'Where access and opportunities are rationed...[an artwork or artist] is burdened with an inordinate pressure to be 'representative' and to act, as a delegate does, as a statement that 'speaks' for the black community as a whole...if only *one* voice is given the 'right to speak', that voice will be heard, by the majority culture, as 'speaking for' the *many* who are excluded or marginalised from access to the means of representation'.⁹⁰ The burden of representation had developed as a consequence of the infrequency of exhibitions displaying work by black artists. Had exhibitions such as *The Other Story* been normalised within the British art landscape, and indeed group exhibitions featuring work by both black and white artists, this pressure to represent the full breadth of black British creativity would not have mounted for artists and exhibition organisers such as Araeen.⁹¹ This was arguably the defining experience for black artists exhibiting in mainstream art museums and galleries, and it is therefore unsurprising that some artists, such as Eddie Chambers, elected to disengage from the struggle to access these spaces. However, as is discussed in the following, final section, changes were afoot by the end of the decade that suggested that the experiences of black artists in mainstream display spaces and institutions were to improve.

⁸⁷ One commentator asked 'What and who does *The Other Story* represent?' (Sealy, 1989) and another advised that the exhibition was only 'one man's choice, and it should not be seen as the quintessential show of work by people of colour working in Britain' (Keegan, 1989). Similarly, Bhabha and Biswas argued that 'It might have better been titled 'Rasheed Araeen's Other Story'' (Bhabha and Biswas, 1989: 41).

⁸⁸ See Hall, 1996: 164-165 for more information.

⁸⁹ See Mercer, 1994: 233-253

⁹⁰ Julien and Mercer, 1996: 196-198

⁹¹ See Mercer, 1994: 234-235 for a discussion of Araeen's experience of the burden of representation in relation to *The Other Story*.

2.7 Legacies of the 1980s: cultural diversity, new internationalism, and the re-emergence of the black art venue

It was clear by the end of the 1980s to black artists and art institutions alike that an entirely new set of strategies from those that had previously been developed were required in order for art institutions to respond more effectively to the fact that the demographics of British society had significantly altered since their formation more than a century previously. Accordingly, a range of new terms, concepts and display practices were put to this test in the 1990s and 2000s that would ostensibly offer solutions to the problems of institutional indifference, the issues of representation, and the problematic separatist curatorial approaches that characterised the 1980s for black artists.

In 1989 the Arts Council published *Towards Cultural Diversity* – a revision of the 1986 *Ethnic Minorities Action Plan* with a new set of recommendations for supporting black creativity. It purported that the Arts Council had undergone a considerable change in attitude towards national culture since the 1960s and 1970s by asserting that ‘Britain’s national consciousness had insulated itself against “foreign intrusion” for too long, and claiming that the concept of a ‘broad heterogeneous national culture’ with a ‘make-up reflecting the diversity of cultural achievement issuing from contemporary society’ was now at the heart of the Arts Council’s philosophy.⁹² The report’s use of the term ethnic arts had been abandoned in favour of the term ‘cultural diversity’ and related expressions such as ‘diverse cultural practice’, which reflected the multiculturalist agenda that had taken centre stage by the end of the 1980s (discussed in section 2.5).⁹³

Among the recommendations of the *Towards Cultural Diversity* report was that places be found for black art organisations and groups within the existing art landscape and also that black artistic practice be incorporated into the Council’s existing funding categories.⁹⁴ This marked a departure from the recommendations of the *Ethnic Minorities Action Plan*, which had advocated separate funding provision for black British creativity. However, the 1989 report also recommended the dedication of buildings to black art practices, thus echoing the separatism that had been promoted by the Council three years previously.⁹⁵ Although black artists also continued to advocate separatist strategies through the work of black art organisations such as Autograph (the Association of Black Photographers), it was part of a strategy of self-reliance in a context where black artists were not well-supported by art institutions. Moreover, the separatism of these organisations did not define their work because they often collaborated with, and staged interventions within mainstream

⁹² *Towards Cultural Diversity*, 1989: 1, 2, 4 and *The Arts and Cultural Diversity Symposium Report*, 1989: 7.

⁹³ *Towards Cultural Diversity*, 1989: Front Cover, and 8

⁹⁴ Arts Council Press Release: ‘Arts Council Publishes ‘Towards Cultural Diversity’ The Report of the Ethnic Minority Arts Monitoring Committee’, 15 February 1989; *Towards Cultural Diversity*, 1989: 2

⁹⁵ *Towards Cultural Diversity*, 1989: 2 and 4; *The Arts and Cultural Diversity Symposium Report*, 1989: 9-10

venues, thus enabling black artists to access them. Conversely, by establishing and funding venues and organisations dedicated to black art practice, the Arts Council not only promoted, but institutionalised the notion that black art practice was inherently different from, and separate to, mainstream British art practices – a notion that had been presented in *The Art Britain Ignores*, some thirteen years previously.

This new official attitude, which combined the desires to celebrate and nurture the work of black artists and to acknowledge their presence within the diversity of cultural practices taking place in Britain, but which simultaneously continued to position black artists as culturally different from the mainstream, was echoed by John Patten MP in *The Arts and Cultural Diversity Symposium Report* (1989) in his assertion that ‘the government is keen for *people from other cultures* to play a full part in the mainstream of British life without losing *their own cultural roots and identity*’ [emphasis added].⁹⁶ With an emphasis on difference and the questionable notion that non-white Britons felt a sense of identity that was distinct from that of the majority population, this particular form of multiculturalist thinking supported an exclusion of black artists from discourses of British art and culture and exiled their practices within a parallel and peripheral sphere. As such, multiculturalism preserved the status quo and could not aid in improving conditions for black British artists.

Despite being highly problematic for black artists that understood themselves as British and as legitimately contributing to contemporary developments in British art, the notion of cultural difference continued to inform Arts Council thinking in the 1990s through its ongoing use of the term cultural diversity (as exemplified in the green paper *The Landscape of Fact: Towards a Policy for Cultural Diversity for the English Funding System*, 1997, and the *Cultural Diversity Action Plan*, 1998). However, other Arts Council initiatives were developed during the 1990s that promised to offer an entirely new set of parameters within which the black British creativity could be conceived. After the Council’s failed attempt to establish a black art venue at the Roundhouse (London) in the 1980s, funds for the project needed to be reallocated to an alternative initiative relating to the promotion and support of work by black artists. In 1992 these funds were directed towards the establishment of the Institute of New International Visual Art, or INIVA. Its focus was contemporary visual art from around the world and its mission was to emphasise art that had been neglected by official versions of art history due to gender, cultural difference or race, which would subsequently position black British creativity in a much wider, global context.⁹⁷ This particular approach was defined as ‘new internationalism’. In the organisation’s first year, two exhibition franchises were

⁹⁶ The Arts and Cultural Diversity Symposium Report, 1989: 5

⁹⁷ Gavin Jantjes, 2000: 270. The name of this organisation changed from INIVA (Institute of New International Visual Arts) to inIVA (Institute of International Visual Arts). See Hylton, 2007: 105-127 for a critical history of this organisation. For the sake of consistency, this thesis will use the title INIVA when referring to this organisation.

created (one led by Eddie Chambers and another by Sunil Gupta) that toured art by non-British artists to UK art venues, and it seemed, for a time, that the concept of new internationalism and the strategy of staging new internationalist exhibitions in mainstream galleries would create new routes for black British artists to access established spaces for display, whilst simultaneously enabling their work to be critically positioned within an international framework. This was indeed preferable to the differencing that inevitably occurred in the British only black survey shows of the 1980s.

The overall focus and strategy of INIVA had been informed by the international framework employed in exhibitions of the late 1980s and early 1990s, including *Magiciens de la Terre* (Pompidou Centre, Paris, 1989), *The Other Story* and the 1993 Whitney Biennial (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York). Mercer would later critique this strategy as a 'blockbuster model of multicultural inclusion' developed as a 'problem-solving response to criticisms of ethnocentric exclusion', demonstrating that the approach taken in these exhibitions, and by INIVA, was not considered an adequate solution to the marginalisation faced by black artists in Britain among some cultural commentators.⁹⁸ In reference to the 1992 international survey exhibition *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration* (National Gallery of Art, Washington), Homi Bhabha similarly commented that the popularity of the international or global art exhibition could be sourced to its capacity to reveal the supposed cultural differences of artists from 'elsewhere' and, thereby, its ability to quench the west's thirst for its own ethnicity. He concluded that the format inevitably supported the centrality of white western artists and the traditions of the western museum, and did little to ameliorate the exclusion of minority artists from mainstream perceptions of art and culture.⁹⁹ This assertion could be similarly applied to more recent exhibitions that are discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

In the context of such critical responses to the proliferation of the international blockbuster exhibition, it is unsurprising that the practical application of INIVA's new internationalist ethos was also met with a degree of scepticism. Eddie Chambers argued that its strategy of commissioning curators to select work by artists from around the world for exhibitions touring UK venues did little to challenge established power relations in the international art arena and furthermore, that it disempowered curators who were working outside the traditional western European and United States axis.¹⁰⁰ Particularly pertinent to the focus of this study (the relationship of black *British* artists to established galleries and art museums) is Chambers' additional criticism that the international

⁹⁸ Mercer, 1999: 54

⁹⁹ Bhabha, 1992: 88

¹⁰⁰ See Hylton, 2007: 109 for a more detailed discussion of Chambers' objections to INIVA's work.

approach generally privileged black artists from abroad over Britain's own black artists.¹⁰¹ Indeed, the new internationalist approach to staging exhibitions enabled art institutions to broaden their remit and thus claim to have addressed their exclusionary practices through an incorporation of non-white artists into their programmes, whilst simultaneously avoiding a more considered engagement with black British creativity that might unsettle the hegemonic philosophies underpinning art institutional practices. New internationalism was therefore a tool of legitimate coercion, and its consequent negative impact on black artists was quickly realised by some cultural commentators. For example, Jean Fisher noted that the term new internationalism had the potential to be appropriated into a buzz-word by the existing structures of power for the purposes of sustaining established, exclusive relations and positions.¹⁰² For Araeen, although INIVA's initiatives and exhibitions provided an opportunity for black artists to assert their presence, its international emphasis framed black creativity as separate and distinct from the mainstream of British art practices and culture, just as the black survey exhibitions of the early 1980s had through an emphasis on ethnic or cultural difference.¹⁰³ In this sense, therefore, INIVA had failed to offer a radically different approach to addressing black creativity than those developed in the previous decade.

The concerns exemplified by Chambers, Fisher and Araeen did not deter the Arts Council from continuing on a trajectory of separatism in its engagement with black artists. By the mid-2000s, it had established several venues dedicated to black creativity including the Bernie Grant Art Centre (London), New Art Exchange (Nottingham) and Rivington Place (London), the last of which was built to provide office space for INIVA and Autograph, but more significantly, to provide a dedicated display space for both organisations. Autograph and INIVA had been initially established as organisations that would broker opportunities for black artists in mainstream spaces, and although this remained part of both their missions, the establishment of Rivington Place marked a return to the separatist strategies adopted by the Arts Council some twenty years previously. The creation of spaces dedicated to the display of work by black artists arguably signalled to other established organisations and galleries that the task of engaging with black artists was no longer their responsibility, and that these new black art venues and the staff that ran them were more adequately equipped to deal with the needs of black artists and the issues raised by their work.

Conclusion

¹⁰¹ Chambers, 2000: 17

¹⁰² Fisher, 1994: xi

¹⁰³ Araeen, 1994: 10

This chapter has mapped the key ideas and practices relating to the display of work by black artists that took shape in the 1980s in order to provide a historical context for the contemporary curatorial practices that are revealed by this research project's exhibition case studies. The separatist and race-based curatorial strategies that characterised this moment positioned race as a defining factor of black creativity, and although the approach was initially beneficial to black artists in a context of widespread institutional indifference and general public ignorance, its subsequent institutionalisation by publicly funded galleries caused black creativity to be ring-fenced by notions of cultural difference, marginalised in popular understandings of the development of British art, and excluded from the British canon. These problematic issues are arguably familiar to contemporary curators in publicly funded galleries and museums as a result of the debates outlined in this chapter, and it is now rare for exhibitions to be devised on the sole basis of an artists' race/ethnicity. Instead, other organising principles purportedly underlie the selection processes of large-scale exhibitions that display work by primarily black artists. A key consideration for this thesis, however, is whether the exhibitions that are examined in Chapters 4 and 5 are, in actuality, premised on factors other than the artists' race, and demonstrate, therefore, a progression beyond the delimiting curatorial practices of the past. As the example of *From Two Worlds* has evidenced, curators have alleged (and may even have believed) that they had devised exhibitions displaying work by black artists according to non-racial themes, but had in fact prioritised race, ethnicity, or a perceived cultural difference in the interpretation and contextualisation of the work. Whether this continues to occur, either unwittingly, or intentionally, in contemporary exhibitions is a primary consideration in the forthcoming chapters.

Given the now well-documented problematics of the black survey curatorial format, it is not unreasonable to question its continued employment in recent exhibitions such as *Back to Black* (Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2005) and *Afro Modern*.¹⁰⁴ Its endurance is in small part the result of black artists having legitimised the format through their willingness to participate in black survey shows towards the end of the 1980s, after the model had been widely criticised.¹⁰⁵ However, the principal cause for the recurrence of the model in the contemporary programmes of Britain's major art galleries is its effectiveness in legitimate coercion. The threat black British artists present to established understandings of British culture (as definitively white) have been subdued by devices such as the black survey exhibition, the creation of separate funding streams for black art practice,

¹⁰⁴ Although these two exhibitions were premised on developments in black music and modernism in the Atlantic region (respectively), like *From Two Worlds* and *The Other Story*, they were nonetheless large-scale exhibitions displaying the work of only black, or primarily black, artists.

¹⁰⁵ I acknowledge that one might reasonably argue that this remained the only opportunity for black artists to have their work displayed in mainstream arenas and it was not through choice that they participated in survey shows that would severely limit the ways in which their work might be interpreted etc.

and the establishment of venues dedicated to black creativity. Their purpose has been to placate the dissatisfaction and opposition of black artists by providing carefully controlled spaces for acknowledging their work that are physically within, but notionally peripheral to the mainstream, so that underlying cultural hegemony remains fundamentally unchallenged. By employing curatorial strategies that separate black artists from white artists, municipal galleries have ostensibly corrected their exclusionary practices without significantly altering their existing programmes and the entrenched philosophies that inform them. Similarly, by addressing black creativity through separate funding streams in the 1980s and 1990s, the GLC and the Arts Council were alleviated from having to alter their existing funding structures, which were informed by, and defended an understanding of British culture as the preserve of white British people. Legitimate coercion also manifested through the conditions the GLC placed on black artists in the early 1980s. By stipulating that it would fund the production of artwork that related to and addressed black audiences, the GLC could foreground the ethnicity of London's black artists and thus emphasise their supposed difference from the main body of British society. Chapter 5 considers whether equivalent conditions are placed on black artists now and whether the remarkable successes of Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare are the result of the fact their work can be interpreted as an insignia of their blackness/ethnicity/non-whiteness. Indeed, their work arguably encourages the fetishization of the black image and black cultural life, unlike many of the artists of the previous generation whose work contested it.

Another significant consideration in the forthcoming chapters is whether the new concepts and curatorial methods offered by the contemporary exhibitions selected for analysis covertly operate as devices of legitimate coercion. Indeed, the seemingly progressive approach to framing black creativity that was offered by new internationalism proved to be an instrument of legitimate coercion because of the way in which it enabled the museums and galleries that employed it to sidestep a meaningful engagement with black *British* artists, which could subsequently undermine the hegemonic underpinnings of art institution practices. Thus, although the curators of *Afro Modern, Action* and the Ofili retrospective claim to have employed strategies that progress beyond the delimiting race-based curatorial and interpretive frameworks of the 1980s, they may nonetheless fail to challenge established conceptions of British art and culture that have marginalised the contributions of black artists. A further, related consideration is whether the relations, politics and burden of representation continue to be significant in connection with the practices revealed by this research. The modes through which representation was afforded to black artists, the rights of individuals to provide representation and the experiences of those that were given it were important topics of debate in the 1980s and 1990s and continue to have pertinence in

relation to the contemporary exhibitions examined by this thesis. The next chapter, however, provides a history and insight into the Bluecoat's approaches to engaging with and exhibiting work by black artists between the late 1970s and the late 2000s, and offers a deeper analysis of the particular practices of one culturally significant arts venue, and how those practices related to the broader developments discussed in this chapter.

3. Black Creativity and the Bluecoat 1976-2012

The Bluecoat is a historically and critically under-represented example of an independent arts centre with a bold and often innovative history of contemporary art that started with Roger Fry's seminal Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1911, featuring works by Picasso, Matisse and others, and saw experimental work by the likes of Mark Boyle, John Latham and Yoko Ono in the 1960s. Initially established as a charity school in 1717, the Bluecoat is the UK's oldest combined arts centre and has a fascinating and distinguished history.¹⁰⁶ Whilst its contribution to the cultural life of Liverpool has been acknowledged to some extent, the development of its exhibition programme has not been examined and the position of the Bluecoat as a serious arts venue in a wider art historical context remains little studied. This chapter on the Bluecoat's work with black artists between 1976 and 2012 sheds new light on the centre and its exhibitions and elucidates how the issues of representation, separatism and institutional indifference towards black creativity impacted the policies and curatorial approaches of a single gallery. As such, it offers a context and point of comparison for the strategies represented by *Afro Modern*, *Action* and the Chris Ofili retrospective, and the relationship black artists now have with British art institutions.

The research presented here is drawn from a study of the Bluecoat's unpublished but extensive archives (including records of meetings, programme brochures, policy documents and correspondence) and semi-structured interviews with Bryan Biggs, who was employed as a gallery director at the venue in late 1976 and continues today in his present role as artistic director. While an attempt has been made to acknowledge all relevant exhibitions in this history, this chapter does not claim to provide an exhaustive account of them; there will undoubtedly be inadvertent omissions. It nonetheless presents the first inventory of exhibitions at the Bluecoat that have included work by black artists, and offers a strong indication of their breadth. In-depth case studies of two significant exhibitions - *Black Skin/Bluecoat* (1985) and *Action* (2010) - have been conducted, the first of which is discussed in this chapter, and the second in Chapters 4 and 5. Both offer an in-depth insight into the Bluecoat's relationship and engagement with black creativity, particularly in terms of its critical and historical positioning of black artists.

¹⁰⁶ See <http://www.thebluecoat.org.uk/content/heritage> for more information.

That Biggs has been at the venue for such a long period is significant, for although the Bluecoat's work with black artists was influenced by broader socio-political developments, trends in thought and changes in the British art sector (especially imperatives imposed by the Arts Council and local government), this work was also shaped by Biggs' personal convictions and interests. Furthermore, because my research necessarily involved several interviews with Biggs (as the only member of staff to have been in post throughout the time-frame under review), it raised questions about my role as a historian navigating the space between archive and memory, and the difficulties this entails. During the research process, I encountered gaps in the archive for which I was dependent on Biggs' personal recollections. There were occasions when those recollections were mismatched with facts I had gleaned from archive material, and this brought into question the status of both sources. I do not suggest that Biggs' recollections were disingenuous, but rather, that his knowledge of the present and subsequent debates about the validity of race-based curatorial models may have distorted his memories of events that occurred, and decisions that were made, two decades previously.¹⁰⁷

Five chronological sections are presented below, the time-frames of which have been selected relating to significant shifts in approach the Bluecoat employed in its work with black artists. Section 3.1 addresses the period between the 1960s and 1983, during which a more contemporary range of practices and artists were gradually introduced into the programme, and also during which black artists began to be conceived and presented as British (as opposed to 'foreign'). 1984 and 1985 are the focus of section 3.2, when the Bluecoat first recognised the existence of black *British* artists through its first black group show. Section 3.3 considers the moment between 1986 and 1989, in the course of which a more substantial engagement with black artists took place at the gallery, primarily through the staging of large group exhibitions, and also during which important developments in national and regional cultural policy vis-à-vis black creativity occurred. The 1990s are examined in section 3.4, when black group exhibitions were largely replaced by shows that brought black and white artists together and exhibitions that were more international in scope. The final fifth section considers the period between 2000 and 2012, when the presence of black artists in the Bluecoat's programme declined. A significant revelation of this chapter is that although the Bluecoat made substantial advances in terms of employing and testing alternative and non-racial curatorial models that could enable black creativity to enter mainstream discourses, the practices and policies of other galleries/institutions have encouraged its continued use and promotion of separate, race-based curatorial and programming strategies.

¹⁰⁷ I make a similar observation about Mike Toobey's recollections about the exhibition *Into The Open* (1984) in the previous chapter.

3.1 1966-1983: Overhauling the Bluecoat's programme development

The presence of black artists (though not black British artists) predates the time-frame reviewed in this chapter, with three exhibitions of work by African artists. The first of these was a 1966 exhibition of contemporary African art from the Transcription Centre, possibly organised as part of *The First World Festival of Black Arts* (Dakar).¹⁰⁸ This was followed by a 1972 exhibition of etchings and lino cuts by the Nigerian artist, Bruce Onobrakpeya and the 1975 exhibition *Contemporary Art of Africa, the Caribbean and Liverpool*, which marked *The Second World Black and African Arts and Culture* festival in Lagos, that same year. That some of the artists in this third exhibition were not African (such as Ronald Moody) highlights that black artists were categorised as African or Caribbean, regardless of whether they had been born in, or had been resident in Britain for a significant amount of time.¹⁰⁹ There may have been other similar exhibitions in the 1960s and 1970s including work by black British artists, but who were not recorded in related documents as being British. As discussed in Chapter 2, it was not until the late 1970s after Khan's report *The Art Britain Ignores* was published, or even until the early 1980s when black artists began asserting their right to a British identity, that art institutions acknowledged them as such.

Biggs was appointed artistic director of the Bluecoat in 1976. He recalls that before this, the Bluecoat's overall programme reflected the individual tastes of his predecessor in its favouring of British artists of the 1960s generation. Despite its history of exhibiting artists that were part of the London avant-garde (such as John Latham, Barry Flanagan and Mark Boyle) and of hosting touring shows from the Commonwealth Institute or the Goethe Institut, Biggs states that by the time he began his post, the Bluecoat's outward looking approach had been replaced by a more local and parochial programme. As a person in his mid-20s, Biggs was eager to work with artists of his own generation.¹¹⁰ He consequently began making changes to the way the Bluecoat's programme was developed, which involved approaching more artists himself through visits to other galleries and artists' studios. He perceived this as a way of injecting a more contemporary range of artists and practices into the programme.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ The Transcription Centre was a London-based organization, primarily producing and distributing radio programmes for and about Africa, and a periodical, *Cultural Events in Africa*, carrying news items of cultural activities in Africa (<http://research.hrc.utexas.edu:8080/hrcxtf/view?docId=ead/00447.xml> - accessed 29 November 2012).

¹⁰⁹ Ronald Moody was born in Jamaica but moved to England at the age of twenty-three. Apart from a four year period living in France and Spain, Moody spent his entire adult life living and working in England, where he died at the age of eighty-four.

¹¹⁰ Bryan Biggs, 17 August 2012 Interview: response to question 2 – see Appendix 8.7

¹¹¹ In a letter to Marco Livingstone, the then Assistant Keeper of British Art at Merseyside Gallery, Biggs stated; 'I quite agree that we should be approaching more artists ourselves rather than relying for our programme on applications received. In fact as I get more time to actually go out and make studio/gallery visits, I am confident we will be able to build up a list of interesting artists from which to select forthcoming exhibition programmes' (367 BLU/4/3,

Having just graduated in Fine Art from Liverpool Polytechnic, Biggs was in contact with his former fellow students, some of whom were by this time furthering their education in London. Consequently, he made regular social visits to London where he was introduced to other emerging London-based artists and saw exhibitions at some of London's smaller galleries. This enabled him to start developing the Bluecoat's programme in less local directions and to engage with a younger generation of artists and practices. The gallery's general exhibition policy was accordingly updated in July 1981. It was agreed by the Bluecoat's Gallery Exhibition Committee that the scope of exhibitions should be widened to include less traditional forms of practice (such as performance art and installation art), that artists based or working in the Merseyside region should no longer be favoured, that the primary criterion for selecting an artist for inclusion in the programme would be the quality of their work, and that 'the Director should visit more artists around the country in order to be able to present proposals for a full and varied exhibition programme'.¹¹² Another related change to the programme involved an increase of thematic touring shows from other galleries, which enabled the Bluecoat to become part of a national network of galleries, and encouraged the development of its own touring exhibitions. It also led to collaborative exhibitions with other UK venues (see Fig.1).¹¹³

Correspondence 1978-1983, Letter from Bryan Biggs to Marco Livingstone, 18 December 1979). The Bluecoat's connection with Livingstone was, according to Biggs, vital in helping the gallery foster an engagement with emerging new art from London, which resulted in exhibitions by artists such as Stephen Farthing and Graham Crowley (Bryan Biggs, 17 August 2012 Interview: response to question 2 – see Appendix 8.7).

¹¹² 367 BLU/2/2, Minutes of Gallery Committee Meetings 1978-1984, Minutes of Gallery Committee Meeting 31 July 1981

¹¹³ Bryan Biggs, 17 August 2012 Interview: response to question 2 – see Appendix 8.7

Fig. 1

1978

- *The State of Clay*, which toured to the Bluecoat from Sunderland Arts Centre

1981

- *Women's Images Of Men*, which toured to the Bluecoat from the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London
- *Art and the Sea*, which was part of a national touring exhibition project initiated by the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London, and in which the Bluecoat was one of several coastal venues to contribute a show
- *Cover Version* - a Bluecoat touring exhibition that travelled to the ICA and Melkweg, Amsterdam
- *Michael Kenny: Sculpture and Drawings*— a Bluecoat touring exhibition

1982

- *Urban Kisses: 7 New York Artists*, which toured to the Bluecoat from the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London

1983

- *Past Imperfect* – a collaborative exhibition between the Bluecoat and Orchard Gallery in Derry and John Hansard Gallery in Southampton

1986

- *Peter Wilson: Paintings 1979-85* (1986), which toured to the Bluecoat from Third Eye in Glasgow

The expansion of the programme to include artists from outside the Merseyside region was aided by the proliferation of art magazines during the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as *Artscribe* and *Art Monthly* (both founded in 1976), and *Artists Newsletter* (founded in 1980). These magazines provided a greater dissemination of information about art that was being produced and discussed across the country and enabled Biggs and his colleagues to encounter artists and practices that were not being covered by more established magazines such as *Studio International* and *Art Review*.¹¹⁴ A concurrent development that similarly helped to broaden the scope of the Bluecoat's programme was the advent of the artists' slide; in the late 1970s and early 1980s artists started to be able to afford to distribute images of their work via slides, and as a result, the Bluecoat began to receive a greater number of unsolicited applications from artists whose work had not been known to Biggs and his colleagues previously.

Biggs claims that the less localised scope of the programme in the first few years of the 1980s caused the Bluecoat's national profile to grow. Although black British artists had yet to feature in its programme, he suggests that its growing profile, its support of younger emerging artists, the increase of touring shows in its programme, and most importantly, the inclusion of more issue-based work may have piqued the interest of British-born black artists by giving the impression that

¹¹⁴ Bryan Biggs, 17 August 2012 Interview: response to question 2 – see Appendix 8.7. However, at this point, even the newer magazines were not making their readership aware of the existence of black British artists.

the gallery would be open to showing their work.¹¹⁵ That Eddie Chambers submitted an exhibition proposal to the Bluecoat shortly after these developments had taken place (discussed below) may indeed evidence this. However, any claim that Chambers was alert to the particular nature of the Bluecoat's programme is questionable given that he was approaching almost every gallery in the country as part of his campaign to address their indifference towards black artists.

As discussed in Chapter 2, between 1976 and 1983 significant developments were occurring in terms of the art establishment's recognition of black British artists. Khan's report had foregrounded the idea that artists from Britain's ethnic minorities were contributing to the cultural wealth of the nation and the Greater London Council (GLC) was funding and staging a vast number of projects, events and exhibitions involving black British artists (albeit through a prism of cultural difference). My research of the Bluecoat's archives indicates that these developments were not being discussed by the gallery's exhibition committee and did not impact the Bluecoat's programming policies in the early 1980s. This is arguably understandable given that the GLC was the first municipal body to engage in the issues raised by Khan's report and also given that the GLC was a London-focused branch of government. Although other councils across the country, including Liverpool City Council and Merseyside County Council, will have been aware of the activities of the GLC, it was not until the Arts Council took over the GLC's functions in relation to art and culture in 1986 that debates and policies relating to black creativity began to impact other arts organisations, museums and galleries. That is not to say that black artists did not feature in the Bluecoat's programme during this time. In March 1982 there were music events that included black musicians, and in 1984 there was an untitled exhibition of works by four artists, one of whom was black (Jan Wandja). Biggs had encountered the work of these four artists at exhibitions in London and selected them on the basis that their individual practices dealt with media images, which provided the theme for the untitled exhibition. However, as Biggs notes, 'the Bluecoat's history of engaging with black British artists ... was very sporadic ... pre the mid-1980s' and before 1984, he had not been 'conscious that there was such a thing as a separate, or even an identifiable black British art'.¹¹⁶

3.2 1984-1985: *Black Skin/Bluecoat*

Biggs recalls that it was only when the now well-known black British artist Eddie Chambers initiated an exchange of correspondence with the Bluecoat in the autumn of 1983, including an application to exhibit at the gallery, that he became aware of the existence of a new generation of British-born

¹¹⁵ Bryan Biggs, 17 August 2012 Interview: response to question 2 – see Appendix 8.7

¹¹⁶ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 1 – see Appendix 8.6

black artists and a politically motivated practice that Chambers was describing as 'Black art'.¹¹⁷ Chambers' application was considered at a Gallery Committee meeting in early 1984, and although there is no record of the committee's response to the proposal, it was rejected on grounds that financial provision had not been secured for the forthcoming 1985 programme.¹¹⁸ However, only four months after Chambers' application was rejected, Biggs wrote to Keith Piper – Chambers' friend and collaborator - asking to discuss the possibility of an exhibition of 'black art' (as he described it) that could be shown at the Bluecoat in the spring of 1985. That Biggs was planning exhibitions for early 1985 contradicted the reason for the rejection of Chambers' proposal and Biggs has since conceded that, in addition, the Committee's perspective that Chambers' work was of poor quality had also been a factor.¹¹⁹ Piper's work, by contrast, was of interest to the gallery.

In the brief period between rejecting Chambers' proposal and contacting Piper, Biggs had visited the exhibition *Black Art Now* (1984) at the Black Art Gallery in London, which showcased new work by emerging black British artists that addressed the issue of racism and reflected an assertive and self-conscious black British identity. The show had made a strong impact on Biggs, prompting him to contact Piper about organising a similar exhibition at the Bluecoat. Whilst waiting for a reply, he also saw *Into the Open* at the Mappin Gallery in Sheffield, which as a first attempt by a municipal gallery to work with black British artists, equally inspired him.¹²⁰ Specifically, it was the relevance of the work to the socio-political milieu that interested Biggs. Unemployment, the collapse of industry, racial tension and the rise of the far right characterised early 1980s Britain for many, and Biggs recalls that in the aftermath of the 1981 Toxteth riots, these issues were particularly pertinent in Liverpool. On encountering the work in these exhibitions, therefore, he was struck by the way the content of the work resonated with the times and felt that it had a vitality, currency and urgency that could not be ignored by the Bluecoat.¹²¹ If the provocative and political nature of work produced by black artists in the early 1980s did indeed provide the impetus for Biggs to approach Piper, it brings into question his failure to challenge the Gallery Committee's decision to reject Chambers' exhibition proposal, for his work was also highly political and provocative. Works such as *Destruction of the National Front* (1979-1980) epitomised the content and style that was favoured by many of the black artists of his generation - an uncompromising contestation of racial oppression, use of collage and a combination of image and text that were also characteristics of

¹¹⁷ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 1 – see Appendix 8.6

¹¹⁸ A note in the 1 February 1983 Gallery Committee minutes (just over a year previously) that 'Until the gallery's funding for 1983-4 was known, it was decided not to plan the exhibition programme further', certainly indicates that programming decisions were being made in a very careful manner during this period (367 BLU/2/2, Minutes of Gallery Committee Meetings 1978-1984, Minutes of Gallery Committee Meeting 1 February 1983).

¹¹⁹ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 1 – see Appendix 8.6

¹²⁰ Bryan Biggs, 17 August 2012 Interview: response to question 1 – see Appendix 8.7

¹²¹ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 2 and response to question 4 – see Appendix 8.6

Piper's practice. The Bluecoat's rejection of Chambers' exhibition proposal and Biggs' interest in Piper's work are likely to have been influenced by a number of additional, and different factors.

As discussed in Chapter 2, institutional attitudes towards black creativity in the late 1970s and early 1980s were largely apathetic. This apathy, or indifference defended cultural hegemony by allowing art institutions to avoid creative practices and people (as a simple consequence of their existence) that undermined established power relations. At this time, institutions such as the Arts Council, which influenced the practices and policies of many of the nation's regional galleries, were rejecting proposals for exhibitions displaying work by black British artists on the questionable basis that 'foreign' artists were outside their remit for support (Araeen's proposal for *The Other Story*, for example). Although there is no archival evidence to support the idea that underlying institutional indifference towards black creativity had caused the Bluecoat's Gallery Committee to reject Chambers' proposal, it would not have been unusual in the context of Arts Council policy and practices if it had dismissed it on grounds that his work would be more appropriately handled by galleries specialising in African or Caribbean art, or by organisations such as the Commonwealth Institute.

Similarly, the relevance of Keith Piper's work to the socio-political milieu is unlikely to have been the only catalyst for Biggs' interest in it, only four months after rejecting Chambers' proposal. The exhibitions *Black Art Now* and *Into the Open*, in themselves, are also likely to have triggered his attraction to Piper's work and that of his contemporaries. The large group show format of both exhibitions evidenced an emerging movement centred on the notion of black British art (thus demonstrating the initial effectiveness of the race-based curatorial strategy for black artists). The novelty of this idea and its exemplification in the work of a large number of artists may have sparked Biggs' interest in a way that Chambers' work was not able to per se. Furthermore, that another municipal mainstream gallery had staged a large black survey exhibition endorsed both the format and the work, and may therefore have encouraged, or given Biggs the confidence, to do the same. As noted in Chapter 2, the large group and survey exhibitions that were staged by black artists themselves and subsequently by publicly funded galleries were vital in evidencing the existence of professional, British-born black artists and in garnering further opportunities for them to exhibit in mainstream spaces for the display of art.

Biggs thus wrote to Piper a second time, expressing his increased eagerness to show his work, as part of a group exhibition that might include other artists from *Into the Open* and *Black Art Now*. Piper responded positively to the idea of exhibiting at the Bluecoat, but not as part of a large survey of work by black artists:

'I was interested by your suggestion for organising a show along the lines of *Into the Open*. As an individual who has been committed to collective activity amongst like-minded Black artists through my activities with the Blk Art Group, I am very sympathetic to such a project. However I feel, and I'm sure that you will agree with me on this, that there is limited mileage in collectivising and exhibiting the work of individuals linked by no other factor beyond the colour of their skin. If *Into the Open* is to be seen as it is, an important first step, then once in the open, individual Black artists should be given access to the type of total control of a given exhibition space enjoyed by many of their white contemporaries. I do not feel that it should be out of the question for Black artists of the obvious strength and quality of many of the contributors to *Into the Open* (i.e. Sonia Boyce, Tom Joseph etc.) to all be offered solo shows both at your gallery and elsewhere, in a deliberate and systematic campaign to redress the balance of decades of exclusion from the gallery system which many worthy Black artists have suffered. I hope that all of this is not too off putting, but I really feel that development at this point is imperative'.¹²²

Piper's suggestion that the survey format proposed by Biggs be abandoned and replaced by a series of solo shows was typical of an emerging argument, which, as noted in Chapter 2, was gaining force as the number of large survey shows in publicly funded galleries increased. Many black artists were concerned that their repeated contextualisation with other black artists, which had initially been necessary to demonstrate their existence to an otherwise ignorant art world, was not only preventing an understanding and appreciation of their efforts and skills as individual artists, but delimiting them within a framework of ethnicity and at the expense of an understanding of their actual practice. Having exhibited in a number of group shows by this point, Piper felt that his work and that of several of his contemporaries had been sufficiently introduced to the gallery-going public, and was therefore keen for venues such as the Bluecoat to begin organising one-person shows, thus enabling a deeper engagement in the individual concerns and practices of each of the artists Biggs was interested in showing.

To stage a large survey show similar to that presented at the Mappin Gallery would indeed have been beneficial to the Bluecoat in terms of the impact of the format within the socio-political milieu. However, the gallery had neither the space nor the resources to stage an exhibition of that size. According to Biggs, the alternative of staging a series of one-person exhibitions for emerging black artists as suggested by Piper was not a viable option either because he had inherited a set of practices in which one-person shows were reserved for established artists that had produced a sufficient number of works to fill the entire gallery space, and moreover, that were already

¹²² Letter from Keith Piper to Bryan Biggs, 14 October 1984 – letter not held at Liverpool Records Office, but in the archive at the Bluecoat

positioned in existing discourses of contemporary art or art history.¹²³ He therefore replied by explaining:

'I agree with your suggestion that, rather than repeat at the Bluecoat a group show similar to *Into the Open*, with a large number of artists each represented by a small number of works, artists be invited to show individually. The nature of our space here makes it possible to feature in one exhibition a more substantial body of work by a number of artists, displayed separately in each of the four rooms...It would therefore be possible to show you, Tom Joseph, Sonia Boyce and perhaps another artist all at the same time'.¹²⁴

For Biggs, this format had several advantages. Firstly, showing four artists would allow him to fill the entire gallery space with works, which he felt would not have been possible if he were to show only one of the aforementioned artists. Secondly, displaying the work of each artist in separate rooms would allow for a greater appreciation of their individual practices, thereby offering a response to the challenge presented by *Into the Open* - that is, engaging with the work on a deeper level now that the artists were 'in the open'.¹²⁵ Thirdly, showing more than one artist would enable a dialogue to develop between the artists' work - an issue that Biggs was concerned about given that these artists had either only just graduated from or were still at art school.¹²⁶ Unfortunately the records do not indicate what Piper's response was. Presumably the discussion continued by phone and the format proposed by Biggs was agreed to, as the subsequent letter was an invitation to Chambers to be the fourth artist in the show, alongside Piper, Joseph and Boyce.

The exhibition took place between 4 April and 4 May 1985 and, as was typical at the Bluecoat where exhibitions were generally relatively short, was not accompanied by a catalogue. However, Chambers wrote the text for an accompanying leaflet that would clarify the premise for the show. As discussed in Chapter 2, Chambers and Piper had formed The Blk Art Group in 1980 for the purposes of supporting black artists whose work was produced for and shown in the black community as part of a collective struggle against racism. Although the Blk Art Group had disbanded by 1985, the leaflet text indicated that the group's objectives were central to the exhibition. Chambers asserted that the artists aspired 'to contribute to the vital process of consciousness-raising and politicisation' of black people through their work, and that the exhibition was 'an attempt to establish a positive and mutually beneficial dialogue between Liverpool's Black communities and one of the city's most important gallery spaces', for although the artists were

¹²³ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 4 - see Appendix 8.6

¹²⁴ Letter from Bryan Biggs to Keith Piper, 31 October 1984 - letter not held at Liverpool Records Office, but at the Bluecoat's on site archive.

¹²⁵ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 4 - se Appendix 8.6

¹²⁶ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 3 - see Appendix 8.6

based in London and Bristol, the problems of racism and oppression provided a common bond between themselves and black Liverpoolians. This was significant because it marked the first time a politically defined notion of black art was being presented at the Bluecoat.¹²⁷

The artists' aspirations prompted the Bluecoat to consider the nature of its relationship with local black audiences, or to be more specific, to address the fact that until this point, very few visitors to the gallery were black.¹²⁸ As Biggs has since commented, 'In those days...there was very little research into who the audience [for an exhibition] would be and how we were going to engage the [black] community'.¹²⁹ As a gallery that had had no black staff and perhaps, therefore, had not been forced to consider this issue, *Black Skin/Bluecoat* was the first exhibition at the Bluecoat that initiated a dialogue with the local black community.¹³⁰ Indeed, there were several responses in the visitors' book expressing that an exhibition of work by black artists was long overdue at the Bluecoat, indicating that the exhibition would be well received by local black audiences. However, a seminar that was held towards the end of the exhibition's four week-run proved otherwise. Biggs recalls that the audience, the majority of whom were black artists from the Liverpool area, were oppositional in response to the exhibition and offended that the Bluecoat's first major attempt to engage with black British creativity should be with artists based in London and Bristol, but not Liverpool. As Biggs has suggested, their antipathy towards the artists included in *Black Skin/Bluecoat* arose from the fact that their roots in Liverpool were traceable to the 1700s (if not earlier), thus distinguishing them from black British communities established in the post-war period. He reports that Chambers et al were surprised by this response, presumably because it challenged the idea of 'black art' as the members of the Blk Art Group had envisaged it.¹³¹ Biggs subsequently concluded that greater efforts were required to improve relations with local black artists and audiences.¹³² Until that could be achieved, the black quotient of the Bluecoat's programme for the forthcoming years necessarily involved artists based in other areas of the country.¹³³

3.3 1986-1989: A proliferation of black artists in the Bluecoat's exhibition programme

The importance of *Black Skin/Bluecoat* for the Bluecoat's exhibition programme cannot be underestimated, for it catalysed an increasing engagement with black artists and artists of other

¹²⁷ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 1 – see Appendix 8.6

¹²⁸ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 5 – see Appendix 8.6

¹²⁹ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 5 – see Appendix 8.6

¹³⁰ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 5 and response to question 8 – see Appendix 8.6

¹³¹ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 5 – see Appendix 8.6

¹³² 'A discussion session at the end of the exhibition highlighted the need for further debate on the issues raised, particularly in relation to the local community' (367 BLU/3/3, Annual Reports 1986-1993, Annual Report 1985-1986).

¹³³ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 8 – see Appendix 8.6

minority backgrounds at the gallery in the remaining years of the 1980s. The immediate impact occurred as a result of the relationships the exhibition had fostered between the Bluecoat and the artists in it, particularly Chambers. In 1989, Chambers took his touring exhibition *Black Art: Plotting the Course* to the Bluecoat, followed by *Let the Canvas Come to Life with Dark Faces* in 1990.

Biggs has suggested that *Black Skin/Bluecoat* had also been vital to the gallery's increased engagement with black creativity because it signalled to other black artists that the Bluecoat would be open to their exhibition proposals.¹³⁴ Although it is proposed above that the Bluecoat was largely indifferent to the work and plight of black artists prior to the 1980s as an underlying consequence of the way cultural hegemony operates, the dearth of exhibitions involving black artists prior to *Black Skin/Bluecoat* may also have been a consequence of the fact that Biggs had not encountered much black British creativity. Although Biggs was visiting other galleries in the years immediately preceding the exhibition (as part of his new approach to programming), he continued to rely on artists' proposals to a large extent when building the exhibition programme. In consequence, the possibility of encountering artists who would not think to, or who would not have the confidence to submit a proposal remained low. This approach to programming had undoubtedly limited the diversity of artists shown at the Bluecoat. However, in Biggs' words, after *Black Skin/Bluecoat*, 'it was like the floodgates were open. You can see that in the list of the shows that we did' (which are listed later in this section).¹³⁵ That *Black Skin/Bluecoat* had been essential to the Bluecoat's increase of exhibitions involving black artists demonstrates that the race-based curatorial format enabled black artists to initiate and develop relationships with mainstream galleries, creating possibilities for further and improved representation. Although the majority of publicly funded galleries continued to employ the format throughout the 1980s (primarily in black survey exhibitions) causing black creativity to be ring-fenced by questions of ethnic and cultural difference, the Bluecoat distinguished itself by offering a small number of solo exhibitions to black and other ethnic minority artists including Jagjit Chohan and Gavin Jantjes, who both exhibited there individually in 1986.

Meanwhile, the activities of the GLC (that were stimulated by *The Art Britain Ignores*) were being mirrored in the Merseyside region. The executive committee of Merseyside Arts (the regional branch of the Arts Council) agreed in the autumn of 1985 that there was a need for a full review and report on the status, provision and future requirements of 'Ethnic Minority Arts' in the region. The report was commissioned on the basis that Merseyside Arts' policies and practices (relating to the development of 'black arts', which was defined as 'African, Caribbean, South Asian, Chinese and

¹³⁴ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 8 – see Appendix 8.6

¹³⁵ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 8 – see Appendix 8.6

locally born Black communities’) required close and sensitive examination.¹³⁶ With funds from Merseyside Arts and the Gulbenkian Foundation, Gillian Clark and Nazreen Subhan (both researchers) were employed to undertake the review, which was published in 1986 under the title *Four Hundred Years – and now what?* (the title referenced the black presence in Liverpool stretching back four centuries). The scope of the report was comparable to *The Art Britain Ignores* in that it provided information on ‘black art activity’ in the region, the range of existing funding provision for this activity (or lack thereof) and it made recommendations about Merseyside Arts’ related practices and policies.¹³⁷ The report and its recommendations were also framed within the anti-racist approach employed by the GLC during the early 1980s. It asserted that ‘the arts, as much as any other area of activity participate in and are influenced by racism which ensures that structures, policies and practices are established which effectively exclude and marginalise Black people’ and that this was true, not only of Merseyside Arts, but also of the organisations it supported, thereby implicating the Bluecoat as one amongst a number of organisations in the region that needed to reform its practices vis-à-vis black artists and audiences.¹³⁸

Indeed, Clark and Subhan reported that during their consultation process they encountered much criticism of arts organisations in the area for failing to meet the needs of local black populations, and furthermore, for denying access to black people in terms of management, employment and incorporation in programming. Although Clark and Subhan noted that some organisations, particularly the Bluecoat, had begun to include a ‘black perspective’ in their programming, they asserted that changes in programming alone were not sufficient. It was recommended that organisations begin to address the make-up of their staff - from administrative to management levels - so that change could be influenced from within.¹³⁹ The recommendation thus aligned with the separatist practices endorsed by Khan in 1976, which were already being employed by the GLC through its employment of black administrators to manage activities involving black artists. Interestingly, Clark and Subhan expressed that Merseyside Arts’ separate budget for black art activity (established in response to requests from higher up in the Arts Council) and its target setting for employing black artists in its projects were *not* appropriate long term strategies for addressing issues of marginalisation and exclusion.¹⁴⁰ They stated that ‘Whilst targets, percentages and allocations can be a useful tool, it must be remembered that they do not actually fundamentally change the organisation and its relationship with those funded, and unless accompanied by alterations within the structure of Merseyside Arts will do little to remedy the

¹³⁶ Clark and Subhan, 1986: 2; inside cover.

¹³⁷ In fact, Khan’s report was listed as a source in this report.

¹³⁸ Clark and Subhan, 1986: 1

¹³⁹ Clark and Subhan, 1986: 14

¹⁴⁰ Clark and Subhan, 1986: 18

present situation'.¹⁴¹ Although this suggested an integrationist stance, Clark and Subhan also proposed several separatist strategies, including practical and financial assistance for existing community-based black arts organisations (as opposed to the integration of their work into mainstream projects and programmes) and the establishment of a separate Black Arts and Culture Centre for Merseyside.¹⁴²

The direct impact of Clark and Subhan's recommendations on the Bluecoat is unclear, primarily because it was not made explicit in gallery committee meeting and board meeting minutes. However, given that Merseyside Arts funded the Bluecoat, that its offices were based in the Bluecoat building, and that Biggs had been consulted in Clark and Subhan's research, he and his colleagues were undoubtedly aware of them. At a Gallery Committee meeting on 12 March 1987, the issues of marginalisation, representation and positive discrimination became a focus of intense debate. The committee members expressed a range of views reflecting the divergent positions that had developed as a consequence of new policies in the publicly funded arts sector. One member stated that the inequalities faced by black people were also faced by the white working class. Another claimed that black communities in Liverpool experienced a very distinct set of disadvantages, that the art world did indeed have racism in it, and that it was in established institutions that 'the history of art in particular was interpreted (through exhibitions and publications) to the exclusion of non-white developments'. One member asserted that the challenging of Eurocentrism in art institutions could only take place via 'a massive re-education' to bring about change in the entrenched attitudes of white people, and another argued that the needs of all minority ethnic groups needed to be considered. Finally, one member stated that positive action could not come about until this debate was extended to include black artists.¹⁴³ These varying assertions demonstrate that although debates taking place amongst black artists and decisions being made by institutions such as the Arts Council were yet to affect the practices of all publicly funded galleries by the mid to late 1980s, they were nonetheless beginning to affect their thinking.

Possibly as a result of Clark and Subhan's recommendations and certainly as a consequence of the 12 March 1987 debate, the Bluecoat considered the strategy of co-opting black artists onto its

¹⁴¹ Clark and Subhan, 1986: 19

¹⁴² Clark and Subhan, 1986: 32

¹⁴³ Minutes of Bluecoat Gallery Committee Meeting, 12 March 1987, Section 5: Black Art Discussion (minutes located in the Bluecoat's on site archive). The Bluecoat Gallery Committee was a small group with a range of expertise (mainly arts and business) that was set up before Biggs began work at the gallery to support the gallery director and assist in decision-making at a time when exhibitions were generally expected to sell. Over time, it became more of a sounding board for the programme Biggs was trying to develop, eventually becoming irrelevant in that capacity, though as this thesis reveals, the Committee did at times discuss policy issues in an informed and interesting way. Decisions were increasingly left to Biggs, with reports going to the full board once this sub-committee was disbanded.

committees, who might also provide links with minority communities in Liverpool for the purposes of audience development. It was decided that one of the members of the gallery committee (Brian Thompson of the Liverpool Anti-Racist and Community Art Association, or LARCAA, who later changed his name to Ibrahim Thompson) speak to local minority artists and organisations about ‘their perceptions and expectations of the Bluecoat’.¹⁴⁴ Biggs has explained that although a dialogue was had with Thompson’s connections at LARCAA, their agenda was too narrowly focussed on anti-racism and not sympathetic to the ironic nuances found in the work of artists such as Keith Piper and Donald Rodney, whom Biggs was already working with. As a result, the committee did not co-opt local black artists into it. In defence of this outcome, Biggs has explained that it would have been tokenistic to do so, and that the Gallery Committee was dissolved soon after, in any case.¹⁴⁵ This reflection is undoubtedly based on the benefit of hindsight. As discussed in Chapter 2, the co-opting of black administrators and artists onto the committees and boards of art institutions and galleries has since been criticised by those such as Araeen, not only for being tokenistic, but also for marginalising black creativity. Although positive action strategies may only have represented a symbolic effort to make changes within the gallery, the decision not to pursue it at board level may also have occurred because of the underlying challenge it would have presented to long-standing practices and philosophies at the Bluecoat. Even the most radical and forward-thinking institutions and organisations are subconsciously under pressure to maintain cultural hegemony by avoiding practices and people that could unsettle established relationships and structures of power.

Aside from a small number of solo exhibitions, the Bluecoat’s engagement with black creativity in the mid to late 1980s was characterised by the use of the black group exhibition format. *Black Skin/Bluecoat* was the first of these at the gallery, however, as discussed in Chapter 2, it had already been a popular curatorial approach amongst black artists and at other galleries. In keeping with this trend, the Bluecoat mounted several race-based group shows, such as the 1988 exhibition *Numaish Lalit Kala*, which featured works by eight artists of South Asian descent. Towards the end of the decade, however, Biggs began working with black artists more frequently on an individual basis. By this point, many of them had developed their practices and amassed a strong enough body of work to justify solo shows at the gallery. These became an increasing feature of the Bluecoat’s programme, and included Sokari Douglas-Camp’s 1988 sculpture show *Alali* and Keith Khan’s 1989 multi-media project *Soucouyan*. These exhibitions distinguished the Bluecoat from the practices of other galleries at the time. For example, the Whitechapel only staged its first survey of

¹⁴⁴ Minutes of Bluecoat Gallery Committee Meeting, 12 March 1987, Section 5: Black Art Discussion (these minutes were not held at Liverpool Records Office but at the Bluecoat’s archive).

¹⁴⁵ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 5 – see Appendix 8.6

work by non-white artists (*From Two Worlds*) in 1986 and its first solo show for a black artist (Sonia Boyce) in 1988, by which time the Bluecoat had already hosted and staged numerous black group and survey exhibitions and several solo shows. An additional distinction was that the Bluecoat's group shows were often much smaller than those staged at other galleries, thus enabling a deeper engagement in the individual practices of the artists included. By the end of the 1980s, the Bluecoat had organised several solo exhibitions for black artists, yet Sonia Boyce remained the only black artist to have been given a solo exhibition at the Whitechapel in twenty years (between the late 1970s and the end of the 1990s). In Biggs' opinion, the Bluecoat's comparative progressiveness was the result of the fact that the gallery heeded Piper's initial advice soon after *Black Skin/Bluecoat*. Biggs' work with Piper enabled him to gain an insight into the concerns and practices of black artists on an individual basis. Consequently, he and his colleagues were able to consider and develop non-racial ways of framing and conceptualising black creativity.¹⁴⁶ Perhaps utilising the benefit of hindsight, he explains that in the process of organising solo shows for black artists, the Bluecoat took the view that,

'An artist's self-definition is paramount. How an artist chooses to define what they are and what they do - that's what we as a gallery should respond to. So, when some black artists felt that defining themselves in such terms, often because funding structures had set definitions like 'black', 'ethnic minority', 'culturally diverse' etc., was both limiting and complicit with perpetual tokenism and rejected, for instance, the black group exhibition, we started to move away from those models'.¹⁴⁷

If this was indeed the Bluecoat's position, it was at odds with the general trend. Publicly funded galleries were still exhibiting black artists via the large group show format, and as discussed in Chapter 2, these were often instigated by black artists themselves. In fact, in the same year that the Arts Council published its report *Towards Cultural Diversity* (which endorsed separatist approaches to grappling with black creativity), Liverpool City Council's Black Arts Unit was established. No archival evidence of this unit exists in the city's Records Office, and my interviews with individuals who were employed as staff in the unit have not provided any clarity regarding the reasons for its establishment and the ethos behind its activities. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that it was inspired by the work the GLC had been doing in London in terms of funding black art activity. The unit had its own budget and it part funded events and programmes in several of the city's theatres and culture venues, whilst also playing a role as a grant-giving body to fund other activities around Liverpool. While no funds were given to support the Bluecoat's visual arts programme, the unit did

¹⁴⁶ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 8 – see Appendix 8.6

¹⁴⁷ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 5 – see Appendix 8.6

finance some of the live music and education events that took place there during the early 1990s.¹⁴⁸ The existence and activities of Liverpool City Council's Black Arts Unit were certainly reflective of the separatist strategies being promoted by the Arts Council, and it would not be unreasonable to presume, therefore, that this strategy and the Unit's funding of some of the Bluecoat's live programme would cause the gallery to adopt a similar separatist approach to devising its visual arts programme in the 1990s.

3.4 The internationalisation of the programme in the 1990s and challenging the black survey model

Contrary to the separatist approaches that were being advocated by local government and indeed, more generally across the publicly funded arts sector, the Bluecoat's approach to engaging with black creativity included an increasing number of exhibitions that included both black and white artists, thus prioritising the content, style and practice of the work rather than the ethnicity of the artists (see Fig. 2). Perhaps the most significant among these exhibitions was *Trophies of Empire* (1993). The idea for this large group show was initiated by Keith Piper, who had approached the Bluecoat the year before about conducting a research project on the history of slavery in Liverpool in the context of the impending Columbus Quincentenary in 1992, which would culminate in an exhibition of his work. Given its theme (of Britain's imperial and colonial legacies), the fact that it was instigated by a black artist and also that it was a large group show, *Trophies of Empire* may be popularly remembered as a black survey exhibition. However, this was not the case. The exhibition, which the Bluecoat commissioned with financial support from Liverpool City Council and an Arts Council Research and Development Award, was a series of interconnected shows in Liverpool, Bristol and Hull, featuring work by fifteen individual black *and* white artists and artist-groups.¹⁴⁹ An open call to *any* artists had been made (ethnic background was not mentioned), inviting proposals that addressed one of the various manifestations of Britain's imperial legacies on the present in the three cities. As such, *Trophies of Empire* was an innovative exhibition, and was comparable to *Black Skin/Bluecoat* in terms of advancing the gallery's engagement with black artists. While *Black Skin/Bluecoat* had evidenced that the gallery recognised the existence of black British artists in a

¹⁴⁸ An interview with David Abdullah was conducted for this research project. Abdullah (whose name had been David Wilkie during the 1980s and 1990s) was a founding member of the Liverpool Anti-Racist and Community Arts Association, and later became head of the city council's Black Arts Unit. Notes from this interview are included in the appendices, but because the interview was not particularly useful to the research, a full transcription has not been made. The notes summarise the main and relevant points of the discussion (see Appendix 8.1) and an audio recording of the interview is available upon request.

¹⁴⁹ Across the three cities, it included work by black and other ethnic minority artists such as Piper, Paul Clarkson, Sunil Gupta, Bandele Iyapo, Rita Keegan, Juginder Lamba, Shaheen Merali, Donald Rodney, Veena Stephenson, and Verbal Images, and work by the white artists Carole Drake, Edwina Fitzpatrick, South Atlantic Souvenirs & Trouble, and the Liverpool performance group Visual Stress, which comprised black and white members.

context where they and their concerns were largely overlooked, *Trophies of Empire* demonstrated that the gallery had been able to progress beyond limiting race-based curatorial formats that were being taken by the majority of the nation's art galleries. Even though the majority of the artists taking part in *Trophies of Empire* were black, ethnicity had not been a criterion for their inclusion.¹⁵⁰ It is useful, therefore, to consider how *Trophies of Empire* compared to the exhibition *From Two Worlds* (Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1986).

- Fig. 2
- 1989
- An exhibition of work by three Liverpool Polytechnic graduates in 1989 which included the black artist Dionne Sparks
- 1990
- *Approaches to Realism* – a group exhibition curated by John Roberts, showing work by seven artists including Sonia Boyce and Rasheed Araeen
 - *Interim Report* – a group exhibition featuring work by seven local artists including British-based Palestinian artist Bashir Makhoul
- 1991
- *New Art North West* - the Bluecoat hosted a regional survey show in collaboration with the Cornerhouse and Castlefield arts venues in Manchester which showed work by sixteen artists including the British Asian artist Bimla Dass and British Chinese artist Moses Lee
- 1992
- *A Pool of Signs 2* – group show of work by seven artists including the black artist Dionne Sparks

Both exhibitions challenged the black survey curatorial format, but in different ways. *From Two Worlds* only included work by black artists, which essentially made it a black survey exhibition. However, because it was organised in accordance with the theme of cultural synthesis, instances of which can be found in the practices of both black and white artists, its focus could be described as non-racial. *Trophies of Empire*, on the other hand, had not been conceived as a black survey show. Although its theme had the potential to favour black artists because they are arguably more invested in the topic of Britain's imperial legacies than white artists, it was not presumed that the theme was the preserve of black artists. In the resulting exhibitions, some of the works inevitably addressed the issue of race (such as Bandede Iyapo's *Footsteps of the Hummingbird*, 1993, and Donald Rodney's *Doublethink*, 1992 – though both were shown at the Arnolfini in Bristol and not the Bluecoat), but because it included both black and white artists, the former were not ring-fenced

¹⁵⁰ *Independent Practices* (1997) is one example of a subsequent project at the Bluecoat that followed this model. Like *Trophies of Empire*, it was initiated as a result of the passion of a single artist (Juginder Lamba) to address an upcoming 50th anniversary of India's Independence and the Partition of Pakistan in 1947, and similarly involved other venues in (many more) cities, new commissions selected through an open call to any artists (irrespective of ethnicity), and a follow-up discursive publication that went beyond a narrow 'black art' discourse.

by it. In contrast, because *From Two Worlds* only included works by black artists, its seemingly non-racial theme could not prevent them from being critically positioned according to their non-whiteness. No topic could have averted this problem because the underlying organising principle was race-based, and as discussed in Chapter 2, this manifested in the way the concept of cultural synthesis was presented. Instead of suggesting that it was a characteristic of contemporary Britishness, it was presented as evidence of the artists' non-British roots. The resulting exhibition was nothing if not an exercise in emphasising that the participating artists had non-British heritages and in highlighting supposed instances of their cultural difference from the main British population. As such, *From Two Worlds* failed to offer a radical challenge to the black survey format. By comparison, *Trophies of Empire* demonstrated a novel approach to displaying work by black artists. It did not attempt to downplay instances in which artworks dealt with the issue of race. Indeed, it could be argued that the theme encouraged this issue to surface within the works. However, the exhibition's inclusion of white artists enabled an emphasis to be placed on the works themselves rather than on the ethnic makeup of its participants. *Trophies of Empire* can therefore be considered an exemplar of good practice for curators and galleries wishing to stage exhibitions including works by several black artists, and merits further research within the burgeoning academic field of exhibition histories/exhibition studies.

Trophies of Empire was not only significant in terms of its curatorial approach but also because it enabled Biggs to build on the relationship he had started with Piper in 1985. As a consequence of already having worked together, their relationship during the development of *Trophies of Empire* became highly collaborative. Biggs took part in selecting artworks (alongside representatives from the other participating venues, including Piper), but his choices were informed by his ongoing dialogue with Piper. This approach to curating is arguably standard now, but it was highly innovative at the time, when working with, and showing the work of, black British artists was still relatively new territory for galleries such as the Bluecoat. Through necessity, Biggs relied on Piper to make suggestions about the content and format of the exhibition, and their working style became more relaxed and nuanced in the process. In fact, it could be claimed that this is what enabled them to produce an exhibition that moved beyond the factor of the artists' ethnicity and presented a deeper engagement in their practices and the content of the work.¹⁵¹

As discussed in Chapter 2, the early 1990s saw an increasing number of internationally-focussed exhibitions in the UK's publicly funded galleries, and in terms of its impact on black artists, the

¹⁵¹ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 8 – see Appendix 8.6. Piper's work was not presented at the Bluecoat, but at the arguably more resonant site of the Merseyside Maritime Museum, a venue that subsequently incorporated the Transatlantic Slavery Museum.

launch of INIVA and its promotion of new internationalism ostensibly offered a wider set of parameters within which black creativity could be contextualised and historicised. Reflecting on this moment, Biggs states that ‘new internationalism was helpful in challenging the old centres of art world power...It broadened the context for black British work and I think our programme started to reflect that bigger picture with more shows from abroad... you could see the work that had previously been seen very much on its own, [not] in the context of a wider international community. So from that point of view it was very positive and useful’.¹⁵² Indeed, there were a large number of exhibitions at the Bluecoat during the 1990s featuring both black British artists and artists from Africa, Asia and the Middle East (See Fig. 3).

Although the increasingly international scope of the Bluecoat’s programme was not unusual for the time, it had the dangerous potential of de-emphasising the idea of black *British* creativity within the Bluecoat’s programme. As discussed in Chapter 2, the positioning of black British artists alongside black artists from other nations did not necessarily broaden the scope within which their work was interpreted. It instead suggested that there was a relationship between black British artists and black artists from abroad because of their shared blackness. Although in some cases this may have been true, it nonetheless emphasised the artists’ race above the style and content of their work. Furthermore, it suggested that black British artists were more appropriately positioned alongside ‘foreign artists’ than white British artists, and by implication, that their work was not part of British developments in art. As such, the new internationalist approach was a tool of legitimate coercion – an acknowledgement of black creativity that allows established understandings of British culture to remain fundamentally unchallenged.

¹⁵² Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 8 – see Appendix 8.6

Fig. 3

1993

- *Al Hejara: Paintings and Installation* – a solo show by Bashir Makhoul, organised in collaboration with Huddersfield Art Gallery
- *A Critical Difference: Contemporary Art from India* - an Aberystwyth Arts Centre/ Showroom touring exhibition featuring work by Vivan Sundaram, N.N. Rimzon, Ravinder Reddy, Bhupen Khakhar, Nalini Malani, Gogi Saroj Pal, Madhvi Parekh, and V K Wanlchede

1994

- A solo exhibition of sculptures by Chintala Jagdish, on tour from the South London Gallery
- *Seen/Unseen* – a group show of work by artists of African descent who were living and working in Britain (Uzo Egonu, Lubaina Himid, Olu Oguibe, Folake Shoga and Yinka Shonibare) curated by Olu Oguibe
- *True Colours: Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Artists Raise the Flag* – an INIVA touring exhibition curated by Eddie Chambers

1995

- *Cross-Currents: New Art from Senegal* – a survey exhibition that was part of the nationwide *Africa 95* Festival and was adapted by the Bluecoat from a larger show at de Warande gallery in Turnhout, Belgium

1996

- *Tampered Surface: Six artists from Pakistan* - a group show on tour from Huddersfield and Oldham Art Galleries, curated by Richard Hylton and Alnoor Mitha, featuring work by Liaquat Ali, Akram Dost Baloch, Iftikhar Dadi, Sumaya Durrani, Durriya Kazi and Saminia Mansuri

1998

- *Karaoke* - a solo show by Lebanese artist Walid Sadek, who was the first artist in residence at the Centre for Art International Research (CAIR) at Liverpool John Moores University
- *Lines of Desire* - a drawing exhibition organised by Oldham Art Gallery and Liverpool John Moores University, featuring twenty-two artists from Britain, Europe and South Asia, including Folake Shoga

1999

- *The Order of Things* – a group exhibition featuring work by four artists including Bashir Makhoul and Algerian born Zineb Sedira
- *Trace* – a group show featuring work by six artists including Romauld Hazoumé (Benin) and Sutee Kunavichayanont (Thailand) which was part of the first Liverpool Biennial in 1999, curated by Antony Bond, Chief Curator of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Australia
- A solo exhibition by Malaysian artist Simryn Gill – an INIVA touring exhibition curated by Sunil Gupta

Although the increase of international exhibitions in the Bluecoat's programme had the potential to de-emphasise the idea of the black *British* artist, it did not result in fewer black British artists exhibiting there. On the contrary, the 1990s saw an increase in this respect (see Fig.4). Interestingly this did not occur as a result of black staff influencing the Bluecoat's artistic policy or the direction of its artistic programme. While my research of the gallery's archives has not revealed that it was an imperative imposed by the Arts Council or Merseyside Arts to have black representation on its boards/committees, there would undoubtedly have been some pressure for the Bluecoat to do so,

given that this frequently appeared as a recommendation in national and regional reports on cultural diversity.¹⁵³ Indeed, in 1991, Wes Wilkie became a Liverpool City Council observer on the Bluecoat's board, making him the first black person to sit (in any capacity, official or otherwise) on one of the Bluecoat's committees or boards. Although it was a statutory requirement for the Bluecoat, as a recipient of Liverpool City Council funding, to include a member of the Council on its Board in an observational capacity, it is arguably no coincidence that Wilkie was black and worked closely with the Council's Black Arts Unit, suggesting that there was some pressure to improve black representation at decision-making levels of the organisation.¹⁵⁴ The following year, the gallery's first equal opportunities policy was drafted, in which it was stated that targets should be set to ensure better representation of minority groups on the Bluecoat's governing bodies and advisory committees, demonstrating the influence of cultural policy on its own internal policies, and also the fact that adequate representation of ethnic minorities on its staff and board had yet to be achieved, the reasons for which I consider below.¹⁵⁵

Fig.4

1990

- *Let the Canvas Come to Light with Dark Faces* (African and Asian Self-Portraits) – a touring survey exhibition curated by Eddie Chambers in association with INIVA
- *Black Art: Plotting the Course* - a touring survey exhibition curated by Eddie Chambers in association with INIVA

1991

- *On Studies for a National Postage Stamp* – a solo show by Maud Sulter
- *Intimate Distance* – a touring group exhibition organised by the Photographer's Gallery, featuring work by Mona Hatoum, Zarina Bhimji, Ingrid Pollard, Maxine Walker, and Sutapa Biswas
- *A Table for Four* – a group show organised by the Bluecoat as part of the MILAP Indian Arts

¹⁵³ The 1986 *Arts and Ethnic Minorities Action Plan* stated that the Council reaffirmed its commitment to equal opportunities in employment and that it would be requesting supported organisations to propose policies appropriate to their own situations. In its 1989 report *Towards Cultural Diversity* it stated that the Council should 'increase its black representation on each of its panels, boards and committees to improve its decisions on all matters, particularly those related to monitoring diverse cultural development' (Arts Council, *Towards Cultural Diversity* Report, 1989, Principal Recommendations, No.7).

¹⁵⁴ Wilkie was eventually invited to be a full member of the Bluecoat's board when he left his post at Liverpool City Council, and he remained on the board until July 1999. However, it is not strictly true that Wilkie was the first black or ethnic minority person to sit on any of the Bluecoat's boards or committees. While Anish Kapoor was undertaking an artist's residency at Bridewell (an artists' studio complex in Liverpool that partnered with the Walker Art Gallery) in 1982, he was invited to attend the Bluecoat's Gallery Committee meetings, making him the actual first attendee of any of the Bluecoat's committees to be from an ethnic minority. However, minutes of the meetings that year indicate that Kapoor did not attend many of them (he gave apologies for meetings on 7 May 1982 and 27 July 1982, for example). Biggs has confirmed from memory that his contribution at the meetings was minimal, to say the least; 'I think his work was just starting to make waves, and as one of the new sculptors being promoted by the Lisson Gallery, he was in great demand. So we saw very little of him and he did not make a great deal of use of the studio' (Bryan Biggs, 17 August 2012 Interview: response to question 3 – see Appendix 8.7). Furthermore, given his well-known reluctance to enter into any debate regarding issues of representation and cultural diversity, his influence on the Bluecoat in terms of these issues would likely have been nil.

¹⁵⁵ 367 BLU/2/6 Minutes, Correspondence, Reports, Plans, Feasibility Study Merger c. 1992-1993, Bluecoat Society of Arts/Arts Centre: Draft Equal opportunities policy

<p>Festival including work by Nina Edge, Bhajan Hunjan, Tehmina Shah, and Veena Stephenson</p> <p>1992</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Rough</i> – a solo exhibition and performance by Delta Streete • <i>Mis(ed) Representations</i> – a group exhibition, organised in collaboration with Autograph ABP including work by Mumtaz Karimjee, Donald Rodney, Alistair Raphael, Dave Lewis, Maxine Walker and Franklyn Rodgers. A version of this exhibition, <i>Autographed</i>, then toured to BBK Gallery in Liverpool’s German twin city of Cologne with work by Keith Piper, Mumtaz Karimjee, Donald Rodney, Alistair Raphael, Dave Lewis and Maxine Walker <p>1993</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Jazz</i> – a solo exhibition by Liverpool-born artist Tony Phillips • <i>Two Rock Passage to Liverpool</i> – a solo exhibition by artist Bill Ming – artist in residence at the Centre for Art International Research (CAIR) at Liverpool John Moores University • <i>New Work</i> – a group show displaying work by black artists from Liverpool (Paul Clarkson, Karl Eversley, Ramzi Jabbur, Daniel Manyika and Leonora Walker) <p>1994</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Virtual Duality: A Migrant Song</i> - a solo show by Nina Edge • <i>Twin Studio</i> by Amrit and Rabindra Kaur Singh • <i>The City</i> – a solo show by Tony Phillips (a Bluecoat touring exhibition travelling to other venues in the UK in 1995/96). <p>1995</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>These Colours Run</i> – a touring solo show of work by Lesley Sanderson, curated by Eddie Chambers and organised by Wrexham Library Arts Centre for INIVA • <i>Video Positive</i> (a recurring digital art festival) including work by Keith Piper • <i>28 positions in 34 years...One more time</i> – a touring solo exhibition by Chila Burman (organised in collaboration with Camerawork, London) • <i>From the Wood</i> – a solo exhibition by Juginda Lamba • <i>Sold Down the River</i> – a participative performance by Nina Edge <p>1996</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cold Comfort</i> – a solo show by Perminder Kaur on tour from Ikon, Birmingham <p>1997</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Book of Independence</i> - a live art commission by Nina Edge • <i>Travels in a New World 2</i> - a solo exhibition by Mohini Chandra commissioned by the Bluecoat as part of the collaborative touring project <i>Independent Practices</i> marking the 50th anniversary of Indian Independence and the Partition of Pakistan, initiated by the Bluecoat and artist Juginder Lamba and involving venues in the North and Midlands of England <p>1998</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Photofit</i> - a group show including Jananne Al-Ani • <i>Cross Section</i> – a group exhibition which featured work by British Chinese artists Julie Fu and Dinu Li • <i>Revolution 98</i> – a programme of electronic art that included work by Keith Piper, organised by FACT <p>1999</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Countdown – Live Art Commissions</i> - featuring work by David Tse, Paul Clarkson, Muhammad Khalil and Kazuko Hohki

In 1996 the North West Arts Board (the regional branch of the Arts Council) initiated a two-year positive action traineeship at the Bluecoat, with funding from the Woo Foundation (a private Chinese fund). The traineeship was one of several designed to address the lack of opportunities for ‘culturally diverse’ curators in the region, and Carol Kwong (a British Chinese artist) was awarded

the Bluecoat-based traineeship. As part of her training in arts management, she organised a group show from the North West that included two Chinese British artists in 1998. However, she was not subsequently employed by the Bluecoat as there were no vacant positions on its staff at the time. Reflecting on this traineeship, Biggs has commented that Kwong's work with the Chinese community in Liverpool had brought a British Chinese perspective to the Bluecoat's programme for the first time, but that this relationship was not continued after the traineeship ended. From his perspective, this was due to Liverpool's Chinese community being 'quite self-contained', or in other words, being a hard to reach community.¹⁵⁶ Regardless of whether this was in fact the case, that it took having a Chinese British person on the Bluecoat's staff to enable the gallery to foster a relationship with the city's Chinese community is significant. It not only suggests that positive action initiatives were essential for its audience development, but it also indicates that the Bluecoat had yet to develop meaningful relationships with ethnic minority communities in the region, despite the fact that *Black Skin/Bluecoat* had evidenced a need for this in relation to Liverpool's black community some eleven years previously.¹⁵⁷ The Bluecoat's failure to develop strong relationships with local ethnic minority communities, in spite of its record of having made good connections with black artists based in other areas of the country, is intriguing and perhaps merits investigation by another research project.

Despite the emphasis placed on employing black staff by the Arts Council during the 1990s, the Bluecoat continued to struggle to appoint staff from 'traditionally marginalised groups', as was acknowledged in its 1997 business plan.¹⁵⁸ In defence of this, Biggs has commented that it was the issue of class, rather than race, that created a barrier to recruiting black and other ethnic minority staff; 'The majority of the black population [in Liverpool] would be described as working class and arts jobs in general, and by definition, are more likely to be eligible for higher educated, predominantly middle class people. I know that's a huge generalisation, but I don't think it's much to do with race. It was to do with class and it still is'.¹⁵⁹ That positive action initiatives were not therefore employed by the Bluecoat in order to seek out black applicants is curious, particularly given the approach's proven effectiveness as noted above, in breaking down barriers between the gallery and local ethnic minority communities. Again, this is perhaps worthy of further investigation in another research project, however, it raises the question of whether an underlying institutional indifference towards the concerns and activities of ethnic minority audiences and artists may have

¹⁵⁶ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 8 – see appendix 8.6

¹⁵⁷ The importance of having black staff was also demonstrated when Dinesh Allirajah joined the Bluecoat to run its live art programme in the mid-1990s, after his position within the council's Black Arts Unit was terminated as a result of the unit being dissolved. He brought a black presence into the live art programme with local showcase events such as *Oral and Black* and collaborations with the Black Arts Alliance in Manchester.

¹⁵⁸ 367 BLU/6/2, Business Plan 1997/8, 1998/9, 1999/2000, Business Plan 1997/8

¹⁵⁹ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 8 – see Appendix 8.6

been at play, operating on behalf of cultural hegemony so that established structures of power remained undisturbed.

Regardless of its potential causes, the Bluecoat's struggle to appoint staff from the local black community can be viewed from two different angles. On the one hand, it did not impact the breadth and frequency of exhibitions featuring black artists, as the list above attests to. This therefore challenges the notion that black staff are required for diverse and representative programmes to be developed. On the other hand, it is possible that the lack of representation from the local black community on the Bluecoat's programming staff was a factor in the Bluecoat's infrequent display of work by *local* black visual artists, especially compared to the much greater number of black visual artists that featured in the programme during this period who were based elsewhere in the UK. Biggs has explained that this was partly due to the fact that work by local black visual artists he encountered via the Bluecoat's relationship with LARCAA was simply not strong enough to warrant inclusion in the Bluecoat's programme.¹⁶⁰ An additional factor, as the *400 Years and Now What?* report indicated, may have been that venues including the Bluecoat continued to be perceived as 'white institutions' (despite the Bluecoat's increased frequency of exhibitions that included black artists).¹⁶¹ Artists holding this view may have felt discouraged to submit proposals to exhibit their work there. A black staff member with strong links to the local black community may therefore have assisted in breaking down this barrier, which in turn may have led to the development of more diverse audiences.

Audience development, in terms of increasing black visitors, was certainly an area of concern for the Bluecoat during the 1990s as a result of imperatives imposed by the Arts Council.¹⁶² Culture was beginning to be understood in terms of its supposed capacity to address social problems and arts services were also beginning to be seen in terms of providing value for the tax paying public that funded them. The impact of this was evidenced, for example, in a 1992 Bluecoat business plan in which it was stated that touring exhibitions from INIVA that offered non-Eurocentric perspectives would assist in providing 'a way in to' the Bluecoat's programme for Merseyside's black and Asian communities.¹⁶³ Accordingly, the development of the Bluecoat's programme came to be understood in terms of targeting specific audiences. For example, in the 1996 Business Plan, it

¹⁶⁰ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 5 – see Appendix 8.6. Local black artists engaged in music, dance and spoken word (as opposed to visual art) were, however, very well represented in the Bluecoat's programme during this time.

¹⁶¹ Clark and Subhan, 1986: 16-18

¹⁶² As Hylton notes, audience development in terms of increasing attendance at arts venues by black and other ethnic minority communities became a focus for funding bodies such as the Arts Council in the 1990s, as exemplified by reports such as 'A Tender for Research into attitudes among Black and Asian communities to attendance at arts and entertainment events' which was produced by the Harris Research Centre for the Arts Council in 1989 (Hylton, 2007: 95).

¹⁶³ 367 BLU/6/1, Business Plan 1992-1993, Section 5 The Plan, 5.2 Artistic Objectives (iv) Promoting Cultural Diversity

stated that visual and performing arts events were ‘targeted at many discrete markets, and collaborative events like *Oral & Black, On the Horizon* and the MILAP activities have shown the progress being made in developing culturally diverse audiences’.¹⁶⁴ This was significant in that it demonstrated a shift in emphasis away from ensuring adequate representation of black artists in the visual arts programme and instead towards increasing black audiences.

As with many other professionals in the museum and gallery sector during the 1990s, Biggs became concerned about the way an increased emphasis on audiences by funding bodies had begun to influence the Bluecoat’s approach to developing its programme. The requirement to set realistic targets for what the gallery could achieve in terms of reaching particular audiences was, he claimed, creating a tick-box culture, not only within the Bluecoat, but across the sector.¹⁶⁵ To what extent, therefore, was the proliferation of exhibitions featuring work by black artists at the Bluecoat during the 1990s symptomatic of external pressures to entice black audiences as opposed to a desire to give equal representation to black artists? Furthermore, can it be said that this shift away from giving fair representation to black artists to increasing black audiences caused the Bluecoat and other galleries to take less care over how they critically and historically positioned black artists in the forthcoming years? Biggs claims that by the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s, the Bluecoat programming staff became resistant to the idea of conducting audience development initiatives for the sake of ‘ticking boxes’, and began to place more importance on delivering meaningful experiences to small numbers of visitors than on the number of visitors from minority backgrounds entering the building.¹⁶⁶ This suggests that subsequent exhibitions featuring work by black artists would build on the progress made by *Trophies of Empire* to avoid positioning black artists in race-based frameworks. Indeed, this was the intention behind *Action*, the 2010 exhibition displaying work by four black British artists. However, as the next section discusses, a close examination of this particular exhibition’s accompanying interpretive texts reveals that adequate consideration of how the artists might be critically and historically positioned in non-racial frameworks, was not taken in its curation.

3.5 2000-2012: A decreasing presence of black artists in the Bluecoat’s programme

Two significant trajectories developed in the Bluecoat’s engagement with black creativity in the 2000s. First, there was a considerable reduction in the number of black artists included in

¹⁶⁴ 367 BLU/6/2, Bluecoat Arts Centre Business Plan 1997/8, 1998/9, 1999/2000 (Completed October 1996), Business Plan 1996-2000 Inc. Artistic Programme 1996/7, p.12, section 5.4.1 Current Marketing Situation

¹⁶⁵ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 8 – see Appendix 8.6. This concern was widely expressed in a debate on spiked-online.com that was sponsored by decibel (an Arts Council initiative) in 2003, and again in ‘*Boxed In*’ - a campaign launched by the *Manifesto Club* and its accompanying report *Boxed In: How Cultural Diversity Policies Constrict Black Artists* by Sonya Dyer (2007).

¹⁶⁶ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 8 – see Appendix 8.6

exhibitions presented in its programme compared to the 1990s – an average of four black artists per year compared to ten per year in the 1990s.¹⁶⁷ Second, only a little over 10% of these artists were British (see Fig. 5 for a full list of exhibitions that included work by black British and international black artists). As discussed in the previous section, a more international approach to staging exhibitions had become popular in the 1990s, not only in Britain but across much of the art world. It is possible, therefore, that black British artists found increasing opportunities to exhibit internationally, just as non-white international artists began to feature more regularly in the programmes of British art galleries. However, the overall decrease in exhibitions featuring black artists – British and international – requires consideration. This development may have been the result of the Bluecoat’s staff becoming less concerned with programming exhibitions involving black artists that were likely to entice ethnic minority audiences into the building, and more focussed on staging exhibitions that would create deeply meaningful experiences for visitors; a focus on individual artworks and their impact on people rather than on the ethnicity of the artists that produced them. However, because one of the major priorities of the Arts Council in the early 2000s was the opening up of the arts to increase the cultural and ethnic diversity of audiences, the Bluecoat would not have been able to disregard this imperative as Biggs suggested at interview, particularly given that the gallery was a recipient of Arts Council funding.¹⁶⁸

Audience development objectives were presented in the Arts Council’s *Framework for Change* report (2001), which stated that two key areas for address were the employment and training of ethnic minority personnel and breaking down barriers to attendance of ethnic minorities at the galleries and venues it funded. The resulting approach of separate development and ring-fenced funding that was exemplified in the establishment of Decibel, the Inspire Fellowships and Rivington Place meant that there was less focus on challenging the established employment and programming tendencies of galleries that had marginalised black British artists, and more emphasis on developing a separate support structure for black creativity. It was proposed in Chapter 2 that this approach was a signal to the nation’s mainstream galleries that they were being absolved from their responsibility to address black creativity within their programmes, as this imperative was now being handled by other venues and organisations. It is possible, therefore, that the decrease in

¹⁶⁷ According to my research, twenty-nine black artists (British and International) exhibited at the Bluecoat in the 2000s either in exhibitions initiated by the Bluecoat or in exhibitions that toured there from other galleries. Nineteen of these artists were in one exhibition (*The Veil*, an INIVA touring exhibition, 2003). Given that the gallery was closed between 2005 and 2008, this averages at four black artists per year. In the 1990s over one hundred black artists (British and International) exhibited at the Bluecoat (of which about sixty or seventy were in group exhibitions). The gallery was open throughout the 1990s so this averages at ten black artists per year.

¹⁶⁸ See *Framework for Change*, 2001: 1

exhibitions featuring black artists in the Bluecoat's programme was the consequence of this reduced pressure to represent black creativity.

Fig. 5

2000

- The Bluecoat presented an exhibition as part of the FACT-curated *Video Positive* that included work by Sonia Boyce

2001

- A three-person drawing show that included work by Pakistani artist Imran Qureshi
- *Beck's Futures 2* – a touring exhibition from the ICA, London, with work by eleven artists including Iranian artist Shanin Afrassiabi
- A touring exhibition of work by the Chinese-born, Paris-based artist Shen Yuan (organised by INIVA and the Arnolfini, Bristol)

2002

- *Upside Down House* – a presentation of a life size interactive inverted domestic space by London based Turkish Cypriot artist Sumer Ereğ
- *Shelf Life* - a touring group exhibition, curated by Deborah Smith and Kate Fowle, in collaboration with Gasworks Gallery (London) and Spike Island (Bristol), featuring work by twelve artists and collectives from Europe, Africa, and the Americas, including African-American artist Kerry James Marshall
- A touring exhibition of work by Malaysian artist Wong Hoy Cheong organised by the OVA (Organisation for Visual Arts, London)

2003

- *The Veil* – a touring exhibition by INIVA, including work by Faisal Abdu'Allah, Kourush Adim, AES art group, Jananne Al-Ani, Ghada Amer, Farah Bajull, Samta Benyahia, Gaëtan de Clérambault, Marc Garanger, Shadafarin Ghadirian, Ghazel, Emily Jacir, Ramesh Kalkur, Majida Khattari, Shirin Neshat, Harold Offeh, Gillo Pontecorvo, Zineb Sedira, Elin Strand, and Mitra Tabrizian

2004

- *X Cultural Codes* - one-person exhibition by German/Egyptian artist Susan Hefuna
- Works by Wong Hoy Cheong and Yeondoo Jung (South Korea) were displayed as part of the 2004 Liverpool Biennial

The gallery was then closed between 2005 and 2008 while the building underwent a major capital development.

The Bluecoat closed for a major capital development in 2005. As part of its re-opening in 2008 a group exhibition titled *Now Then* (2008) displayed newly commissioned work by five artists including Yoko Ono and Hew Locke. Later that year, Nina Edge, The Singh Twins, Kai-Oi Joyce Yung and Paul Clarkson were among the thirty-five Liverpool-based artists to exhibit work in *Next Up* – the Bluecoat's showcase exhibition of local talent as part of Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture (2008). The two exhibitions ostensibly demonstrated the gallery's ongoing commitment to rejecting race-based curatorial formats by staging small and large group exhibitions that included

work by artists of any ethnicity. However, that same year *New Ends, Old Beginnings* – a group exhibition devised by invited curator November Paynter that examined ‘the varied and complex cultures across the cities of the Arab region’ – evidenced that problematic race-specific group shows remained part of the Bluecoat’s programme after its reopening.¹⁶⁹ In the following year, Sonia Boyce was invited to work on a collaborative project with the Bluecoat, resulting in a new multi-media installation titled *Like Love Part Two* that would expand on work she had produced in collaboration with Spike Island (Bristol) and the Meriton School for Young Parents (also Bristol) in 2009 that was titled *Like Love Part One*. At the time, plans were underway at Tate Liverpool for the exhibition *Afro Modern*, which would explore the relationship between black creativity, black culture and the development of modernism in the Atlantic region. As part of this, a city-wide programme of events and exhibitions was to be devised to contextualise *Afro Modern* and to involve the city’s other arts and cultural organizations. In consequence, the Bluecoat invited Boyce to expand her exhibition so that it would encompass the entire gallery, either by including a selection of older works, by staging an additional exhibition including work by Chambers, Piper and Joseph in order to revisit *Black Skin/Bluecoat*, or by curating an additional exhibition that would provide a platform for emerging black artists. Boyce elected to stage the last of these three options, resulting in *Action* (2010), which is discussed in detail in Chapters 4 and 5. For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is important to note here that significant efforts were made by the Bluecoat to assert within the exhibition’s accompanying texts (interpretive text panels, captions and press release) that Boyce and the *Action* artists should not be positioned within, and delimited by, debates about race and cultural identity. This demonstrated that staff at the Bluecoat remained acutely aware of the dangers of the black group show in terms of its potential to exclude black artists from mainstream discourses on art, and furthermore, that they were uncomfortable with devising an exhibition in this way, particularly as the gallery had made important advances in challenging this separatist, race-based curatorial format through exhibitions such as *Trophies of Empire*.

However, as is discussed in the forthcoming chapters, a closer reading of the text panels in *Action* revealed that the curators were not entirely successful in their attempt to challenge this curatorial approach, which was framed by the exhibition’s link with *Afro Modern*. Much of the information given about Boyce foregrounded her ethnicity and the subject of race and representation in relation to her work, and did not explain how her recent projects have involved new concerns that

¹⁶⁹ <http://www.thebluecoat.org.uk/events/view/events/106> (accessed 09/04/2015). A similar race-based exhibition was staged in 2010; *Arabicity* was curated by Rose Issa and introduced ‘six contemporary artists from the Arab World who explore their cultural heritage from unique perspectives’ (<http://www.thebluecoat.org.uk/events/view/exhibitions/750>, accessed 09/04/2015).

move beyond issues of race and ethnicity. The *Action* artists were similarly positioned in a way that foregrounded their ethnicity, but this occurred inadvertently, and at a perlocutionary level, in the repeated articulation that they and their works were *not* confined by issues of race and representation. This was exacerbated by the fact that the exhibition contained little discussion of the art works themselves and very little indication of the possible non-racial critical and historical frameworks in which the works could be positioned. This is intriguing given the Bluecoat's history of challenging race-based curatorial formats. As proposed in Chapter 4, a likely cause was Tate Liverpool's employment of the black survey model in its curation of *Afro Modern*.¹⁷⁰ Had Tate not been devising an exhibition displaying work by more than sixty black artists, and moreover, inviting nearby galleries and organisations to participate in a related programme of events and exhibitions, the Bluecoat staff may not have felt compelled to raise the issues of race and ethnicity in their staging of *Action*, and furthermore, may not have staged the exhibition at all (choosing instead to present Boyce's *Like Love Two*, which had no relation to these issues). That the exhibition *did* take place, and that an emphasis on race (albeit in terms of its inappropriateness as a critical framework) emerged in the accompanying interpretive texts, together demonstrate the powerful influence larger, national art institutions have on smaller, regional galleries in terms of the curatorial models they employ.

The next black artist to feature in the Bluecoat's programme marked a return to the gallery's usual, more considered and nuanced approach to engaging with black practitioners. As part of the 2012 Liverpool Biennial, the Bluecoat hosted the premiere screening of John Akomfrah's *The Unfinished Conversation* – a biographic film about the early life of Stuart Hall, commissioned and produced by Autograph ABP.¹⁷¹ Although it was briefly noted in the accompanying text that the film examined 'the nature of the visual as triggered across the individual's memory landscape with particular reference to identity and race', it was not marketed as a film by a black film-maker about a black cultural theorist.¹⁷² Reflecting on this, Biggs states,

'I think the landscape has changed ... [it is no] longer necessary to articulate a relationship to black British artists when there seems very little 'self definition' as such. I'm seeing a lot less of

¹⁷⁰ Although a small number of white artists were included in *Afro Modern*, the exhibition was initially conceived as a black survey show, which is why the large majority of artists in the final exhibition were black. See Chapter 4 for more details.

¹⁷¹ Autograph ABP's director, Mark Sealy, targeted the Bluecoat specifically to be the first venue to screen the film, and Biggs suggested the Biennial would provide an appropriate context for it.

¹⁷² <http://liverpoolbiennial.co.uk/programmes/festivals/whatson/42/4/2012/557/the-unfinished-conversation-2012/> (accessed 12/01/2013).

it now...So when we have been working with John Akomfrah on the film about Stuart Hall, we don't think 'this is a black project'. It's just John Akomfrah, he is a filmmaker'.¹⁷³

The curatorial approach taken in *Action* contrasts with that taken in the marketing of *The Unfinished Conversation*. In both cases the intention was to emphasise the content of the work and the nature of the practices employed in them, and while this was not achieved in the curation of *Action*, it was in the staging of Akomfrah's film, demonstrating that the Bluecoat's approach to devising its visual arts programme has, over the period under review, become more tightly focussed on the case of each exhibition. Artists are largely treated on an individual basis and thoughts about potential audiences are now led by the nature and content of the exhibition, rather than a general, overarching audience development strategy imposed by funders.¹⁷⁴

Conclusion

This historical account of the Bluecoat's engagement with black artists between 1976 and 2012 has provided particular evidence of the ways in which issues of separatism, representation and institutional indifference towards black creativity impacted the policies and curatorial approaches of a single gallery. It has revealed that the Bluecoat's considerable recognition of black artists in the 1980s and 1990s did not simply result from the pressures of national and regional cultural policy that were initiated through *The Arts Britain Ignores* in the late 1970s. A set of additional but equally significant factors were also involved. First, the Artistic Director's personal concerns and interests played a pivotal role in the process of introducing black British artists into the Bluecoat's programme. It was Biggs' desire to incorporate a more contemporary set of practices and concerns that led him to explore exhibitions that were being staged at other municipal and community galleries across the country, including those organised by and displaying work by black artists. His perception that works by Piper et al were powerful, provocative and highly pertinent to the socio-political context of early 1980s Britain not only highlights his agency in the process, but also the agency of those artists, the initial merit of race-based curatorial models, and the importance of broader social, cultural and political contexts in encouraging gallery staff to take an interest in certain artists and artistic practices. The decision taken by black artists to devise their own exhibitions in spaces outside of the established art museum or gallery, and the decision not to include white artists in these initial exhibitions were crucial in raising the profile of a particular black British creativity to an otherwise ignorant public. That the work often addressed issues of racial oppression and cultural identity, and that those issues were highly significant in the context

¹⁷³ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 8 – see Appendix 8.6

¹⁷⁴ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 8 – see Appendix 8.6

of recent and local social uprisings, were also critical to the introduction of black British creativity in the Bluecoat's programme.

Many of the works displayed in *Black Art Now* and *Into the Open*, where Biggs first encountered work by black British artists, melded politics with aesthetics as part of a rejection of the modernist idea of 'art for art's sake'. They could easily have been understood, therefore, as part of the modernist avant-garde and as similar to work by groups such as Art and Language, who questioned the claims made in high modernism about art's autonomy. A contextualisation of this nature was not, however, made in the curation of *Black Skin/Bluecoat*, or in other similar exhibitions of the period such as *From Two Worlds* and *Into the Open*. As Biggs stated at interview, it was the relevance of the work to the socio-political milieu that had piqued his interest, rather than the relationship of the work to what were then current debates about art. That curators and directors looked to discourses beyond art and its histories for reasons to champion the work of black artists, and furthermore, that they could (or would) not make sense of it as part of an ongoing history of art, is an issue that remains pertinent in contemporary curatorial practice, as the forthcoming exhibition case studies evidence. A consideration regarding past and present curatorial and institutional practice, therefore, is whether this approach to engaging with black creativity results from a compulsion (unconscious or otherwise) to exclude black artists from established discourses and categories of art, in order to preserve existing cultural hegemony.

An underlying pressure to defend the status quo, combined with the fact that other galleries were staging black survey exhibitions, may have informed Biggs' decision to suggest a black survey exhibition to Piper in his initial correspondence with him in 1984 despite having staged a small group show combining work by both black and white artists that same year. That the Bluecoat was largely unsuccessful in co-opting black artists onto its boards and/or committees in the 1980s and 1990s may similarly have occurred as a consequence of this compulsion. Although initial attempts to make connections with Liverpool's black community in 1985 backfired as a result of local tensions and particularities, subsequent decisions not to appoint local black artists onto the Bluecoat's committees were made on the basis that they were overly focussed on anti-racist activism and not receptive to the nuanced approach of artists such as Piper. It is possible that this decision was informed by a subconscious desire to maintain hegemonic practices and philosophies by excluding individuals and groups that might challenge those practices and philosophies from the gallery's decision-making core.

In other aspects, however, the Bluecoat demonstrated a willingness to disrupt established practices and attitudes. By offering several black artists opportunities to exhibit on an individual basis in the

1980s, which facilitated a deeper engagement in their work, the gallery created opportunities for black creativity to enter discourses of British and contemporary art. Indeed, subsequent mixed ethnicity exhibitions in the 1990s, such as *Trophies of Empire*, evidenced a progressive approach to engaging with black creativity that distinguished the Bluecoat from other galleries at the time. Further progression was, however, inhibited by an increase of exhibitions in its programme that engaged with the new internationalist agenda, which dissociated black British artists from the British canon by linking them with black artists from abroad. The 2010 exhibition *Action*, with its focus on four black British artists, thus presented an opportunity to reverse this trend. By emphasising their individual practices, it could aid in framing the artworks in relation to contemporary international and British practices, rather than questions of race and identity politics. By displaying each artist on an individual basis, the former was achieved. However, because no attempt was made in the accompanying interpretive materials to suggest what other broader debates and art historical contexts might be pertinent to the works on display, the latter was not realised. Indeed, Biggs' comment at interview that it was 'actually quite a challenge' to conceive of an alternative way of presenting the work (that is, without reverting to flawed yet established frameworks of race, identity and difference) indicates the degree to which hegemonic concepts and practices relating to the representation of black creativity are entrenched in the work of British museums and galleries.¹⁷⁵ As the next chapter reveals, *Afro Modern* and the Ofili retrospective were similarly supportive of cultural hegemony, despite contrary claims made on their behalf.

¹⁷⁵ Bryan Biggs, 25 July 2012 Interview: response to question 8 – see Appendix 8.6

4. Back in Black: Race-Based Curatorial and Conceptual Models and their Recurrence in 2010

Established art historical approaches to arranging exhibitions – according to chronology, national school, and movement, for example - condense and simplify complex histories into single, unified narratives that habitually prioritise the dominant viewpoint of the white, male, western elite. This has been largely acknowledged by art museums and galleries in Britain and exhibitions now typically focus on the oeuvre of one artist or select artists in accordance with a more general theme. However, because museum/gallery directors, curators and collecting staff (who are responsible for aesthetic policy) are often trained as art historians, they absorb and work in compliance with its doctrines, causing western and patriarchal perspectives to perpetuate in the exhibitions they produce. The act of selecting and ordering objects/artworks for display, in itself, exacerbates this problem, because it necessitates the presentation of familiar statements and the suppression of new and unfamiliar statements, causing established hierarchies and hegemonic perspectives to manifest in exhibitions. To address this issue, many galleries are now employing new narrative strategies and engaging with alternative discourses on art and history in the hope that they might give visibility to individuals, peoples and artistic practices that have traditionally been marginalised by western-derived universal narratives. Symptomatic of this trend, the 2010 exhibitions *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic* (Tate Liverpool), *Action* (the Bluecoat) and the Chris Ofili retrospective (Tate Britain) each attempted to offer new readings of work by black artists by employing novel, non-art historical and non-racial models of curation. Criticisms of race-based curatorial strategies that developed in the 1980s undoubtedly informed the approaches taken in these three exhibitions. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to examine the particular measures that were taken in these contemporary exhibitions, and to consider the extent to which they offer new and non-hegemonic understandings of black creativity compared to those typically employed in the 1980s and 1990s.

As noted in the introduction of the thesis, the focus of this analysis is not the overall experience of the exhibitions, but the statements presented in their accompanying interpretive texts (including associated curators' talks and symposia), which have the capacity to disclose curatorial intent and institutional attitudes. Based on J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts this chapter examines what was stated in these texts (locutionary speech acts), considers what the curators' intended to communicate to their audiences in making these statements (illocutionary speech acts), and most importantly, the effect of these statements on those reading them (perlocutionary speech acts). As Austin observes, the consequences - or producing effects - of our statements may differ greatly

from the intentions behind our statements.¹⁷⁶ In the context of exhibitions, there can also be a stark difference between what an exhibition purports to do and what it actually does, as a consequence of statements presented at a micro-level in interpretive captions, catalogue essays or curators' talks, at a macro-level in the narratives that develop from the accumulation of those statements, and their combined – perlocutionary - effect on visitors. This chapter's close and rigorous analysis of the accompanying interpretive texts in *Afro Modern, Action* and the Ofili retrospective facilitates a consideration of their perlocutionary dimensions, which as is revealed below, did not correspond with their alleged, shared curatorial aim of presenting black artists in non-racial and non-hegemonic frameworks.

The sections of this chapter address each exhibition separately in order to unearth and examine the particular underlying narratives and statements presented in them.¹⁷⁷ Where relevant, their curatorial strategies and associated limitations are related to exhibitions of the 1980s that were introduced in Chapter 2, thus elucidating the perpetuation and entrenchment of race-based curatorial, critical and narrative strategies within Britain's publicly funded galleries. The third section addressing the Ofili retrospective examines press responses to the exhibition in addition to curatorial models and interpretive materials, thus distinguishing it from the first two sections. Critical responses to *Afro Modern* and *Action* generally corresponded with the central, locutionary and illocutionary assertions of the exhibitions, whereas the opposite was true in the critical responses to the Ofili exhibition. As discussed below, this indicates that the exhibition's main argument was unconvincing, and even spurious, thus raising important questions regarding curatorial intent, hence the additional analysis of critical responses in this third case study. All three exhibition case studies reveal, however, that despite their best efforts, gallery curators, art historians and critics are equally incapable of considering the work of black artists without reference to issues of race, representation and identity politics.

4.1 *Afro Modern* and its subordination of black creativity

Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic (29 January – 25 April 2010) comprised seven sections and encompassed Tate Liverpool's entire fourth floor. This survey exhibition pledged to introduce 'new and challenging narratives in our perception of modernism and modernity' and to

¹⁷⁶ Austin, 1962: 105

¹⁷⁷ The section dealing with *Afro Modern* is necessarily longer than the other sections, given the exhibition's scale and the quantity of its accompanying interpretive texts.

illustrate the role played by black cultures in the development of modern art.¹⁷⁸ The two curators, Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschlüter, included works dating from the early twentieth century through to the early 2000s by sixty-six artists from the numerous countries surrounding the North and South Atlantic. Over half of the artists shown were black. The inclusion of so many black artists from around the world in a single exhibition was unprecedented at Tate. Neither Tate Liverpool nor the main Tate Gallery in London (now Tate Britain) participated in the proliferation of black survey shows during the 1980s, arguably making *Afro Modern* a belated contribution to debates about black creativity and modernism that crystallised through exhibitions such as *The Other Story* (1989). By employing the notion of cultural hybridity and by seeking to elucidate interconnections between the nations and regions surrounding the North and South Atlantic, *Afro Modern* had taken Paul Gilroy's seminal text, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), as its conceptual inspiration and point of departure. According to its organisers, the exhibition traced 'both real and imagined routes taken across the Atlantic' in order to explore 'an alternative transatlantic reading of modernism', compared to standard, Eurocentric versions in art history.¹⁷⁹ In setting the exhibition's parameters for inclusion according to Gilroy's theoretic and geographic formulation of the Black Atlantic region – comprising Europe, Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean - the curators attempted to develop an alternative curatorial model to those offered by traditional art historical approaches. Uniting the fields of sociology, postcolonialism and cultural theory, Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic was not structured on and constrained by hierarchies of race and geography often found in the discipline of art history and could therefore enable the curators of *Afro Modern* to reveal the interconnected and transnational nature of cultural practices that had assisted in the development of twentieth century modernism, thereby challenging established narratives that have marginalised black creativity.¹⁸⁰

The notion of modernity has been equated with Europe or 'the West' since its inception as part of Europe's encounter with the world outside it. This was cemented in the eighteenth century when non-European societies were considered examples of more archaic or elemental modes of being and living and used, therefore, as points of comparison when imagining ways to reform and enable progression in Europe.¹⁸¹ Established notions of modernity are consequently criticised for denying the participation of peoples from outside the West, and even black people living *in* the West, in the development of the modern world and modern cultural forms. The notion of modernity and the modernist canon in art thus require negotiation and appropriation so that black contributions to

¹⁷⁸ Grunenberg and Nixon, 2010: 7

¹⁷⁹ Grunenberg and Nixon, 2010: 6

¹⁸⁰ See Barson, 2010: 8-9 and 23 for her discussion of the merits of this approach.

¹⁸¹ Bennet et al, 2005: 221

world history and culture can be acknowledged.¹⁸² *Afro Modern* was arguably catalysed and informed by these criticisms and it is therefore unsurprising that Gilroy's theorisations were chosen for the exhibition's conceptual framework.¹⁸³ One of his principal arguments is that the modernist notion of the nation state - as an ethnically homogenous and culturally cohesive entity - has been responsible for the exclusion of black people in established understandings of modernity (and by extension, modernism). He suggests therefore, that if the region comprising Europe, Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean is taken as a single unit of analysis in our comprehension of the modern world (the Black Atlantic), it could be used to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective that is more useful in comprehending the hybrid and multiplicitous cultural history of black people than the notion of the nation state, and furthermore, enables black cultural history to be correctly included in our understanding of the development of modernity and modernism.¹⁸⁴

On entering *Afro Modern*, visitors met two conceptual signposting devices. The first was a map that appeared to show a single land mass or peninsula. Upon closer inspection, however, it became evident that the land mass was the Atlantic Ocean, and that what had initially appeared to be seas were in fact the continents surrounding the Atlantic, referencing the concept of the Black Atlantic and signalling that the exhibition had been devised in relation to Gilroy's suggestions. The second signposting device was the explanatory header for the show: '*Afro Modern* explores the impact of different black cultures from around the Atlantic world on art from the early twentieth century to today'.¹⁸⁵ A closer reading of this introductory sentence, however, discloses an underlying hegemonic perspective that pervaded the first half of the exhibition's other wall texts and captions.

Given the western European context for the exhibition and that the word 'art' was not accompanied by a definition, it is reasonable to conclude that visitors were presumed to have a shared, western European understanding of art. On this basis, the precise construction of the sentence 'the impact of ... black cultures ... on art' [emphasis added] is significant. It implies that the art in question (western European modernist art) had already formed in Europe before it experienced the impact of Black Atlantic cultures. The hierarchical relationship between the continents surrounding the Atlantic suggested by this sentence was objectionable in an exhibition that purported to prioritise black creativity through a meaningful engagement with Gilroy's

¹⁸² See Doy, 2003: 21-23 for further discussion.

¹⁸³ Chapter 6 discusses other possible motivations for the exhibition, specifically, legitimate coercion.

¹⁸⁴ See the introductory chapter of Gilroy (1993) for a summary of his argument.

¹⁸⁵ From the introductory wall text to the exhibition.

theorisations and assertions, the most significant being his argument that black cultures have been integral to the conception of modernity.

In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy suggests that the transatlantic slave trade, and the people willingly and unwillingly implicated in it, were responsible for the notional and actual development of modernity. The processes of industrialisation and modernisation resulting from the slave trade established and moderated a sense of western civilization, which, together with the relationship with outsiders that was facilitated by the slave trade, enabled the notion of modernity to take shape. As Gilroy suggests, an appreciation of these developments provides a different sense of where modernity itself began. Furthermore, he proposes that the corresponding amalgamation of ideas, cultures and languages that occurred on slave ships were also *constitutive* of modernity.¹⁸⁶ He thus urges for a reconsideration of ‘the recent history of blacks, as people *in* but not necessarily *of* the modern, western world’ [emphasis added], asserting that black people have been part of modernity, not simply because racial slavery enabled modern western civilization to develop, but because they have been active participants in its very development.¹⁸⁷ There could be no better set of assertions and theorisations upon which to base an exhibition attempting to present a novel and challenging narrative of modernism and modernity.

Had the explanatory header for *Afro Modern* been structured differently – for example, ‘the *involvement* of black cultures *in the development* of art’ - it would have signified a different, non-hegemonic relationship of influence between the continents surrounding the Atlantic, and aligned with Gilroy’s assertions. However, the wording and structure that *was* used in this introductory sentence disclosed the fact that the exhibition’s curators had not been able to disinherit the conviction that modernism was a European project that was subsequently exported to, absorbed and then influenced by non-European cultures. Below, I reveal how this hegemonic conception of modernism developed in the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary statements in the exhibition’s accompanying interpretive texts.

Transatlantic connections provided the thematic framework for the first room, *Black Atlantic Avant-Gardes*. The largest of the seven sections, it displayed artworks produced in the first forty years of the twentieth century by artists of the Harlem Renaissance, European modernists that were inspired by African forms or fascinated with black culture, and white Brazilian artists who developed a modernist practice with a specifically Brazilian content. The overall locutionary and

¹⁸⁶ Gilroy, 1993: 4, 16, 17

¹⁸⁷ Gilroy, 1993: ix, x, 6 and 29

illocutionary narrative was that while white European modernists developed a fascination with Africa and the black cultures of the United States, black Americans were developing a genre that combined modernist formal techniques with content relating to a sense of black modernity and pride, and Brazilian modernists did likewise, but with the aim of developing a sense of nationalism that was steeped with pride for their cultural specificity (as opposed to imitating European constructions of nationalism). By placing these geographically disparate practices together, the curators were not only able to illustrate transnational and intercultural connections, but also the contemporaneity of African-American artists working in the 1920s and 1930s with white European artists that are typically perceived as the 'fathers' of modernism. By prioritising black creativity in a room within the exhibition that also displayed work by white artists, *Afro Modern* was distinguishable from, and arguably improved on black survey exhibitions of the 1980s such as *The Other Story*, which physically separated black creativity from other developments. This merit was, however, cancelled out by the fact that the accompanying captions and wall texts of the first room contradicted Gilroy's central proposition regarding the involvement of black creativity in the inception of modernity and modernist cultural practices at a perlocutionary level.

By stating that the first room 'examines the convergence of modernism and the Black Atlantic in early twentieth century art', the exhibition presented modernism as already having emerged in Europe in order for this subsequent convergence with black cultures of the Atlantic to occur.¹⁸⁸ A similar narrative emerged in the wall texts and captions for room 3. Titled *Black Orpheus: Négritude, Creolisation, Natural Synthesis*, this section traced the impact of Négritude in the visual arts of the Black Atlantic region, and the forms of modernism that developed from it in work by artists such as Jacob Lawrence and Wilfredo Lam.¹⁸⁹ The introductory wall text for this third room explained that as part of the influence of Négritude in Africa, the Nigerian movement of Natural Synthesis fused European modernism with 'local African aesthetic influences', as seen in works by artists such as Uche Okeke.¹⁹⁰ Wilfredo Lam was similarly described as combining 'European modernism with references to Afro-Caribbean culture'.¹⁹¹ While these assertions highlighted instances of cultural hybridity (thus employing Gilroy's approach to reconsidering the development of modernism), they also reinforced the idea that modernism had already been formed in Europe before these subsequent developments occurred, and therefore, that these artists had developed a separate and derivative of modernism.

¹⁸⁸ Room 1, Black Atlantic Avant-Gardes, Introductory wall panel.

¹⁸⁹ Négritude was an ideological movement that was developed by francophone black intellectuals in West Africa, Paris and the Caribbean, but which primarily flowered in Senegal in the 1930s during President Leopold Senghor's rule.

¹⁹⁰ Introductory text for room 3

¹⁹¹ Caption for Wilfredo Lam, *The Murmur* (1943), shown in room 3.

A hierarchical relationship between Europe and the other regions of the Atlantic also took shape through room 1's interpretation of works by Man Ray, Brancusi, Picasso and Modigliani. The work of these white European artists was contextualised by the cultural phenomenon of *Negrophilia*; a fascination among white populations in North America and France with black culture and the cultural forms of Africa. For example, one caption explained that 'enthusiasm for non-European arts had emerged in Picasso's circle, demonstrating a rejection of artistic conventions and an admiration for the expressive power of such cultures'.¹⁹² In the presentation of this tranche of modernism, Europe's relationship with black cultures was (rightly, in this case) described as consumptive; a European interest *in* black cultures, rather than an active, *mutual* engagement *between* Europe and black creativity in other regions. Despite its validity, the presentation of this particular development within modernism caused Europe to be positioned in the narrative of the exhibition as the principal locus for modernism, with black creativity taking a subordinate position. This hierarchy also emerged through the exhibition's emphasis on Black Atlantic artists being influenced by, or simply using, European modernist styles. For example, in room 1, Lasar Segal was described as having used a visual language 'drawn from European 'primitivist' Cubism and Expressionism',¹⁹³ and it was suggested that Norman Lewis and Walker Evans were influenced by the German realist movement *Neue Sachlichkeit*.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, in room 3 it was stated that Agustín Cárdenas had been influenced by Brancusi and Henry Moore,¹⁹⁵ while Wilfredo Lam was described as being influenced by Picasso,¹⁹⁶ and 'strongly influenced by the language of 'primitivist' European modernism' in his production of *The Murmur* (1943).¹⁹⁷

The fusion of European modernism with other practices in the Black Atlantic, the absorption of black cultural forms into European modernism and the influence of European modernist styles on black creativity in other regions all undoubtedly occurred, and even simultaneously as part of the diverse and multifarious evolution of modernism. However, their repeated articulation in the exhibition's wall texts and captions without reference to the notion that black artists actively participated in the conception of modernism at the start of the twentieth century served to reinforce a hegemonic understanding of modernism, in which Europe dominates and all other

¹⁹² Caption for Pablo Picasso, *Bust of a Woman* (1909), shown in room 1. Room 2 was dedicated to screening Maya Deren's ethnographic film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti 1947-51* (1977), which can arguably be contextualised with *Negrophilia* due to its focus on dance and possession in Haitian vodou. According to the exhibition catalogue, the film was included because it illustrated 'the messy boundaries between European modernism' and ethnography and long after artists such as Picasso and Man Ray blended art making with ethnography (Barson, 2010: 13).

¹⁹³ Caption for Lasar Segal, *Banana Plantation* (1927), shown in room 1.

¹⁹⁴ Caption for Norman Lewis, *Guru Head (handle)* (1935), shown in room 1.

¹⁹⁵ Caption for Augustin Cardenas, *Untitled* (1960), shown in room 3.

¹⁹⁶ Caption for Wilfredo Lam, *Light in the Forest, The Big Jungle* (1942), shown in room 3.

¹⁹⁷ Caption for Wilfredo Lam, *The Murmur* (1943), shown in room 3.

contributions are subsequent, subordinate trajectories. That the interpretive texts also described Black Atlantic artists as developing separate and different forms of modernism to that produced in Europe, only exacerbated this problem. For example, the introductory wall panel for room 1 stated that 'Artists from the United States, the Caribbean and South America responded to and challenged this European art, developing *their own* distinctive *forms of* modernism' [emphasis added].¹⁹⁸ This questionable distinction was similarly made in its description of Aaron Douglas as 'a foundational figure of Black Atlantic modernism', as opposed to modernism per se,¹⁹⁹ and also in room 3, with the suggestion that Wilfredo Lam had 'created a *new* modernist art from the combination of indigenous Caribbean and West African influences' [emphasis added],²⁰⁰ and that Felix Idubor's sculptures evidenced '*new forms of modernism* being developed in Nigeria' [emphasis added].²⁰¹ By articulating a separation between European forms of modernism and Black Atlantic forms of modernism, and by failing to elucidate how black artists were involved in the formation of modernism, the first half of the exhibition disregarded Gilroy's principal argument, and cemented a hegemonic understanding of modernism in the process, rather than challenging it. Although it provided a platform for black creativity, it did little to counter the marginalisation of black artists in established art historical narratives.

The second half of the exhibition addressed works from the 1960s to the 2000s. Gilroy's ideas were considerably less apparent in its curation particularly because the conceptual frameworks of transnationalism and cultural hybridity had been discarded. Rooms 4 to 7 were not arranged in a strict chronology, but according to themes that have been addressed by black artists.²⁰² Although ethnicity was not the primary organising principle for these sections, the change in curatorial approach steered *Afro Modern* into the questionable territory of the black survey show. As demonstrated by *From Two Worlds* (1986), the application of one or several themes to black survey and black group exhibitions does little to offset the impact of the initial racial selection criterion on the interpretation and contextualisation of the artworks in it, because the themes that are selected are typically inapplicable to the practices of non-black artists, thus encouraging the works in these exhibitions to be presented through a prism of difference. In *From Two Worlds* the themes of 'cultural plurality' and the 'fusion of European and non-European visions' emphasised the artists'

¹⁹⁸ Room 1, Black Atlantic Avant-Gardes, Introductory wall panel.

¹⁹⁹ Room 1, Black Atlantic Avant-Gardes, Introductory wall panel.

²⁰⁰ Caption for Wilfredo Lam, *The Murmur* (1943), shown in room 3.

²⁰¹ Caption for Felix Idubor, *Cement Sculpture* (dates unknown), shown in room 3.

²⁰² Peter Gorschlüter, one of the exhibition's two curators, defended this change of tack, explaining that 'in the first part we were able to kind of follow it in a chronological overview...maybe because we have a bigger distance to it...But then after the '60s it's really difficult...we made a decision to structure the exhibition more thematically'(Peter Gorschlüter Interview: response to question 6 – see Appendix 8.13).

ethnicity, thus exacerbating the problems of racial categorization and cultural differencing that the exhibition was already susceptible to as a black survey show. To avoid this same problem, therefore, the curators of *Afro Modern* needed to ensure that they elucidated how the works in the second half of the exhibition related to modernism - its broader, non-racial theme.

The introductory wall text for room 4 - titled *Dissident Identities: Radicalism, Resistance and Marginality* – claimed that hybrid and transnational practices declined in the Black Atlantic in the 1960s and 1970s, giving way to more political concerns such as racial segregation and oppression, as evidenced in work by David Hammonds and Pirkle Jones. By noting that some of the artists shown in this room had also developed a practice of challenging or critiquing modernism in their work, the interpretive text made a link with the overall theme of the exhibition. For example, it was stated that Romare Bearden’s work ‘commented on modernism and its use of African sculpture’, and that Helio Oiticica ‘challenged modernism through an engagement with Afro-Brazilian culture’.²⁰³ It is significant, however, that only two of the ten works in this room were accompanied by captions that attempted to elucidate this connection with modernism. In the caption for Bearden’s *Blue Shade* (1972) it was stated that the work referenced Matisse’s *Blue Nude* (1907), and that the work demonstrated his interest in the representation of the black female body in modern art and art history. However, no explanation as to how the work might thus challenge or critique modernist representations of black women was offered. Instead, the caption inanely compared Bearden’s and Matisse’s works by stating that the former ‘is surrounded by less exotic vegetation of seeds and fruit’.²⁰⁴ A similarly insufficient link with modernism was presented in the caption for Bearden’s mixed-media work *Sermons: The Walls of Jericho* (1964). Instead of clarifying how references to the significance of African cultural forms in the conception of modernism enabled the work to challenge Eurocentric understandings of modernism, the caption simply stated that African sculpture and its use in modern art were among its references.²⁰⁵

No further connections were made between the remaining works in room 4 and modernism, arguably because there were no significant links. Indeed, as the caption for Norman Lewis’ *American Totem* (1960) explained, in order to express a more political content in his work, Lewis had had to depart from ‘pure abstraction to a hybrid and politicized variation’.²⁰⁶ Although the work did not challenge or critique modernism, that the artist had been compelled to abandon a traditionally modernist practice and to replace it with a different approach is nonetheless part of

²⁰³ Introductory text for room 4, *Dissident Identities*.

²⁰⁴ Caption for Romare Bearden, *Blue Shade* (1972), shown in room 4.

²⁰⁵ Caption for Romare Bearden, *Sermons: The Walls of Jericho* (1964), shown in room 4.

²⁰⁶ Caption for Norman Lewis, *American Totem* (1960), shown in room 4.

the narrative of modernism's evolution in the context of the Black Atlantic (its employment and subsequent abandonment). This, however, was not explored in the accompanying caption. It is not clear, therefore, why the curators had included *American Totem* in the exhibition, and indeed the other remaining works that were apparently unconnected to modernist developments in art. Room 4 was less about the development of modernism through the work of black artists and more about their increased concern with racial politics.

In room 5, titled *Reconstructing the Middle Passage: Diaspora and Memory*, works addressing the transatlantic journey of slaves from Africa to the Americas and Caribbean were presented, thus linking to Gilroy's focus on the slave ship as the means by which the Black Atlantic regions became linked. Although Gilroy proposes that the slave trade was pivotal in the development of modernity and subsequent syncretic and modernist cultural practices, this was not noted in the accompanying interpretive texts. Instead, history (both real and imagined) and historical recovery provided the theme. It was stated that Ellen Gallagher's *Bird in Hand* (2006) presented an 'alternative cartography of the middle passage' and the idea that there is a 'mythical underwater world' providing a home for 'souls thrown overboard during the transatlantic journey'.²⁰⁷ Similarly, it was explained that Renee Cox's *Queen Nanny of the Maroons* (2004) 'constructs a new vision of the historic leader as a symbol of black female struggle and empowerment'.²⁰⁸ The strategy of revising and recovering history from the point of view of the present was identified in Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon's contribution to the exhibition's catalogue as a populist form of modernism that is specific to black cultural practice as part of a critical reappropriation of modernity.²⁰⁹ However, this was neither discussed nor alluded to in the captions in room 5. Without reference to this critical relationship to modernism, room 5 had little connection with the curatorial premise and overarching theme of the exhibition. As with room 4, it was essentially curated in accordance with a theme that only, or at least primarily, black artists address – a race-based curatorial approach.

A race-based approach was also employed in the curation of room 6, *Exhibiting Bodies: Racism, Rationalism and Pseudo-Science*. The introductory wall text continued the claim made in room 4 that for a period of the twentieth century, hybrid cultural formations in the Black Atlantic region

²⁰⁷ Caption for Ellen Gallagher, *Bird in Hand* (2006), shown in room 5.

²⁰⁸ Caption for Renee Cox, *Queen Nanny of the Maroons* (2004), shown in room 5.

²⁰⁹ Golden in Copeland, 2010: 78. This perspective was first put forward by Gilane Tawadros in her 1996 paper, 'Beyond the Boundary: The Work of Three Black Women Artists in Britain', in which she argues that 'the 'populist modernism' of black cultural practice...signals a critical reappropriation of modernity which stems from an assertion of history and historical processes...In opposition to the theoretical structures of postmodernism, black cultural politics insists upon the ascendancy of a broader aesthetic and political project which redefines the agenda of modernity through a critical interrogation of the past and according to the political imperatives of the present' (Tawadros, 1996: 274).

had been replaced by a concern with addressing issues of racism, oppression and stereotyping. It stated that the works on display explored 'how the black body has been positioned and represented in colonial imagery, modernist art and the mass media', and a particular concern amongst them was how pseudo-scientific classifications had provided the basis for nineteenth-century depictions of the black body.²¹⁰ Tracey Rose and Carrie Mae Weems were among the artists shown in this room whose works addressed the racist practices and attitudes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that had helped to foster a sense of modernity in Europe, and as such, the exhibition highlighted once more that black artists had not only contributed to the development of modernism, but had also critiqued it and its origins in the notion of modernity. However, as with rooms 4 and 5, this was not explored through the captions, and as a result, the curatorial basis for room 6 was another theme that primarily black artists have addressed.

From Postmodernism to Post-Black: Appropriation, Black Humour and Double Negatives was the seventh, concluding section of the exhibition and the accompanying captions and wall texts highlighted three aspects about the works on display. The first was that many of the works continued the practice of addressing real, imagined and untold histories that room 6 had brought to light. For example, the caption accompanying work by Adler Guerrier stated that his 'imaginary Miami-based black artists' collective paid homage to the anonymous heroes of the civil rights movement'.²¹¹ Similarly, Chris Ofili's Captain Shit character was described as a symbol of black superstardom, and that the black stars in his 1997 work *Double Captain Shit and the Legend of the Black Stars* referred to 'untold stories of fame in black history'.²¹² In terms of lost histories, it was noted that Coco Fusco explores the experiences of women falsely identified as black activist Angela Davis,²¹³ and that Lorna Simpson's work concerns the way that 'history has forgotten the individuals who posed for the found photo-booth portraits in her work'.²¹⁴ However, as with the accompanying texts for room 5, the practice of revising, recovering or re-imagining history was not discussed in the captions and wall texts in room 7 as a modernist practice.

The second aspect to be highlighted about the works displayed in this final room was their relationship to Gilroy's definition of Black Atlantic cultural practices as polyphonic and multiplex.²¹⁵

²¹⁰ Introductory text panel for room 6.

²¹¹ Caption for Adler Guerrier, *Untitled (BLCK – We Wear the Mask)* (2008), shown in room 7.

²¹² Caption for Chris Ofili, *Double Captain Shit and the Legend of the Black Stars* (1997), shown in room 7. It was also stated that Kara Walker had staged 'alternative creation myths based on the physical and psychological abuse experienced by slaves in the American South', in her film *8 Possible Beginnings* (Caption for Kara Walker, *8 Possible Beginnings* (2005), shown in room 7).

²¹³ Caption for Coco Fusco, *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert* (2004), shown in room 7.

²¹⁴ Caption for Lorna Simpson, *Photobooth* (2008), shown in room 7.

²¹⁵ See Gilroy, 1993: 32

As with rooms 4, 5 and 6, the themes of cultural hybridity, transnational practices and modernism were not addressed by the accompanying wall texts, but, by drawing attention to this younger generation's use of appropriation, repetition, sampling, and recycling, a link was made to Gilroy's text.²¹⁶ For example, Ofili's Captain Shit character was described as a combined appropriation of the Marvel comic character Luke Cage and Andy Warhol's double portrait of Elvis,²¹⁷ and Glenn Ligon's sampling of the colours of the Pan-African flag was noted.²¹⁸ Similarly, Gallagher was described as recycling and appropriating adverts for African-American beauty treatments.²¹⁹ That the curators defined these practices as Post-Black – the third aspect/framework – was highly problematic, however, for it prioritised the fact of the artists' race above their practices.

The introductory text explained that the term Post-Black is descriptive of a younger generation of artists who are interested in redefining notions of blackness but refuse to be labelled as 'black artists', and furthermore, whose work, unlike the previous generation, is not rooted in identity politics. Although it was not made explicit in the wall texts and captions, the term alludes to the problem of black artists being pigeon-holed by critical and historical frameworks that emphasise their race and subsequent efforts being taken to avoid this. However, the decidedly ill-advised selection and grouping of the artists shown in this final section primarily on the basis of their race and only secondarily on the basis of their attitudes and practices, contradicted this so-called Post-Black stance. It also conflicted with the term's initial conception by curator Thelma Golden and artist Glenn Ligon. Golden has stated that the term does not, in fact, denote a particular artistic strategy or technique and was not developed in order to categorise younger black artists, as *Afro Modern* did, but instead, refers to an attitude.²²⁰ The misuse of the term within the exhibition, however, offered a means through which the curators could connect the contemporary works in the final room of the exhibition with Gilroy's theorisations and the overarching conceptual framework for the show, and thereby avoid creating a section that was purely race-based. However, because the term was used erroneously, this link with Gilroy's understanding of Black Atlantic cultural practices was both unfitting and spurious. This, combined with the fact that the captions and wall texts did not clarify how a focus on so-called Post-Black practices might foster a new and challenging understanding of modernism, or even how the works displayed related to modernism at all, resulted in a final section that was, at its core, curated on racial grounds.

²¹⁶ Barson, 2010: 9

²¹⁷ Caption for Chris Ofili, *Double Captain Shit and the Legend of the Black Stars* (1997), shown in room 7.

²¹⁸ Caption for Glenn Ligon, *African-American Flag* (1990), shown in room 7.

²¹⁹ Caption for Ellen Gallagher, *DeLuxe* (2004-5), shown in room 7.

²²⁰ Golden in Copeland, 2010: 78; Golden in Evans et al, 2005: 15; 17

The contrast between the essentially race-based curation of the second half of *Afro Modern* and the first half, which included white artists, resulted in an exhibition that had a complicated, confusing and contradictory set of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary statements and narratives. Reflecting on the curatorial approach employed in the first part of the show, Barson explained,

‘We have this narrative of modernism and all the people in the middle of it, the core of it is Picasso, Matisse etc., and you can plot that. And then on the margins are these other figures. Now if you cut that up the middle and flip it over, you bring the marginal figures into the centre and you make the central figures the marginal ones...[from this] I suppose you could plot a different narrative’.²²¹

Indeed, *Afro Modern*’s emphasis on black creativity certainly did offer a broader, more diverse and thereby *different* narrative of modernism than those traditionally presented by major art museums and galleries. As such, the exhibition is comparable to *The Other Story* (1989). Both sought to prioritise the contributions of black artists in the development of modernism. However, a key distinction is that *The Other Story* did so through a simple black survey format, while *Afro Modern* brought the work of black and white artists together, thus increasing the potential for black creativity to enter mainstream discourse. Although this was also Araeen’s aim in staging *The Other Story*, his exclusion of white artists from the exhibition, and consequent separation of black creativity from what were perceived as mainstream practices, prevented it. By elucidating the contemporaneity of black artistic practices in North and South America with white artists in Europe in the first four decades of the twentieth century, *Afro Modern* could challenge established art historical narratives of modernism and its inherent hierarchies of race and geography that have marginalised black creativity. However, as this analysis had revealed, a mixed-ethnic curatorial approach did not prevent the curators from positioning white European artists as the principal protagonists of modernism nor from locating modernism’s conception and development in Europe at a perlocutionary level in the first half of the exhibition.²²²

²²¹ Tanya Barson Interview: response to question 1 – see Appendix 8.3

²²² *Afro Modern* is also comparable to the 1993 exhibition *Trophies of Empire*, both in terms of its inclusion of work by white artists and its employment of an ostensibly racial theme. Although the focus for *Afro Modern* was modernism and the involvement of black artists in its development, its title did not make clear that white artists were also included. Visitors may therefore have presumed that it would be a black survey exhibition. While, in this sense, it does not mark a radical departure from the curatorial approaches being trialled in the 1980s and 1990s, it nonetheless demonstrates a progression beyond the simple black survey format.

In order to draw links between black creativity and modernism, the notion of cultural hybridity/synthesis/syncretism – as presented in Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* - provided the conceptual framework for the exhibition. These concepts were also utilised in the 1986 exhibition *From Two Worlds*, but for different ends. In *From Two Worlds*, they provided the entire focus for the exhibition and served to exclude the participating artists from discourses of British art through its emphasis on their supposedly non-British ethnic and cultural roots. In contrast, these notions were employed in *Afro Modern* to consider how modernism developed through transnational cultural practices and moreover, to foreground black contributions to it. However, as this study has evidenced, these concepts did not facilitate a sufficient deconstruction of Eurocentric readings of time and space in the Atlantic region so that black artists could be repositioned as equal to white artists in the conception and development of modernism. Instead, the notion of hybridity simply aided in the creation of a narrative in which Black Atlantic artists were presented as having developed derivative and separate *branches* of modernism. Consequently, the first three rooms of *Afro Modern* did nothing to unsettle established understandings of modernism, apart from inserting the efforts of lesser known black artists into its existing structure.

Although the second half of the exhibition was similarly unsuccessful because of the underlying racial grounds for its curation, its historical positioning of contemporary black artists in a modernist lineage provided an opportunity to extend the narrative of modernism into the present. By presenting modernism as an ongoing field of enquiry, rather than one that ended in the mid-twentieth century, the exhibition could offer a different formulation of modernism than those offered in established histories of art, whilst simultaneously providing a platform for black creativity. However, this investigation has demonstrated that opportunities to relate contemporary black practices to modernism were not taken in the accompanying interpretive materials. Instead, the works presented in the second half of *Afro Modern* were selected and arranged according to themes that only black artists have addressed. In failing to acknowledge (let alone discuss) instances of black artists renegotiating the tenets of modernism, the hierarchies of race and geography found in established narratives of modernism remained unchallenged within the exhibition.

At interview, both Barson and Gorschlüter demonstrated a reasonable awareness of Gilroy's central arguments, and there was undoubtedly enough capacity in the interpretive texts for his ideas to be fully explored.²²³ Ignorance and lack of caption space cannot, therefore, be blamed for their failure

²²³ See Barson and Gorschlüter's responses to question 1 – Appendices 8.3 and 8.13

to engage the exhibition in Gilroy's most crucial assertion that colonialism, slavery and black cultural practices resulting from them had been 'the decisive moment in modern art and modernity', as Courtney J. Martin summarised in her catalogue essay.²²⁴ One possible explanation is that they were compelled - at a subconscious level - to reproduce a hegemonic understanding of modernism in their work, rather than challenge it. As the next chapter proposes, hegemonic narratives of art's histories can become entrenched in the minds of those educated in, and as a consequence of their education in the discipline of art history, to the extent that it may seem counterintuitive to oppose them. This was arguably revealed by Barson's comment that, 'as a curator, what I usually do is stick really close to art history...when I see myself getting a little too much on my soap box I have to shift myself back and think about the art history, because it's what I know'.²²⁵ Furthermore, presenting a narrative of modernism that questions its European origins would be a relatively radical act in the context of an art institution such as Tate, given its late colonial foundations and ongoing role in promoting and preserving Eurocentric, hegemonic notions of modernity and modernism, which could thus deter its staff from engaging in such acts.²²⁶

An additional explanation for the failings revealed above is that the objective of challenging conventional narratives of modernism was not a consideration when the exhibition was first conceived. At interview, Gorschlüter explained that the contemporary section of *Afro Modern*, particularly room 7, had been 'the source of inspiration for the whole exhibition' and that he and Barson had had a particular interest in exploring how the themes of hybridisation and diversification are being addressed by contemporary black artists.²²⁷ He confirmed that it was on this initial basis that the subsequent decision to explore the possible predecessors of contemporary black artistic practices was made.²²⁸ This was indeed a sensible decision; a simple survey of the latest offerings from contemporary black artists would have made the exhibition susceptible to the many shortcomings associated with race-based curatorial format (discussed in the previous chapters). The inclusion of works by black artists from preceding generations provided an art historical rationale for the exhibition, which, despite being racially confined, differentiated the exhibition from many of the black survey shows of the past that were typically lateral and ahistorical. It was after this decision was made that the additional idea of reconsidering modernism

²²⁴ Martin, 2010:49

²²⁵ Tanya Barson Interview Response to Question 12. - see Appendix 8.3

²²⁶ Tate Liverpool was established in 1988. However it operates under the umbrella of Tate; the four Tate galleries together. The first of the four galleries, which is now known as Tate Britain, was established in 1897, and the central operations of the network of galleries continues to be run there. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/who-we-are/history-of-tate> for more information [accessed 12/07/2014].

²²⁷ Peter Gorschlüter Interview: response to Question 8 - see Appendix 8.13

²²⁸ Peter Gorschlüter Interview: response to Question 2 - see Appendix 8.13

in relation to the works that would be displayed was developed. As Barson explained, 'I was thinking how by thinking an exhibition through the work of certain contemporary practitioners you could come at a different narrative of modernism'.²²⁹ It is highly probable, therefore, that the idea of employing Gilroy's concept of Black Atlantic in the intellectual framework of the exhibition only arose at a much later point. While it is perfectly acceptable that curators arrive at their ideas for exhibitions in this way, the manner in which Barson and Gorschlüter reached the decision to challenge narratives of modernism vis-à-vis the work of black artists is significant. Their initial desire to stage what in effect would have been a standard black survey show prevented the exhibition from offering a novel perspective on modernism; its initial conception as a survey of work by contemporary black artists remained at the intellectual heart of the exhibition, and this manifested in the perlocutionary statements presented in its accompanying texts. The result was a large survey of work by (mostly) black artists, with references to modernism at its start that adhered to the hierarchies of race and geography found in established narratives of modernism, which consequently rendered black contributions to the conception and development of modernism both marginal and subordinate.

Meanwhile, a small group exhibition of work by early career black British artists was being staged half a mile away at the Bluecoat. It sought to challenge the separatist curatorial approaches to exhibiting work by black artists that had become common place in previous decades, whilst simultaneously creating a dialogue with the final section of *Afro Modern* on contemporary black artistic practices. The following section reveals how race-based selection strategies similarly impacted the critical and historical frameworks that were presented in it.

4.2 Action, subversion and the problems of contextualisation

The Bluecoat was closed between 2005 and 2008 for a capital development project. It was not long after its reopening, however, that plans to stage an exhibition of work by a black British artist were underway. Sonia Boyce was to expand a collaborative project with young parents that she had begun at Spike Island in Bristol by working with the Blue Room - a group of adults with learning disabilities who discuss and make art at the Bluecoat. Boyce had exhibited at the Bluecoat on several occasions during the 1980s and 1990s and this new project would enable the gallery to maintain its relationship with her and engage with her current practice. Shortly after this project and resulting exhibition (*Like Love Part Two*) were agreed, the Bluecoat's staff became aware of

²²⁹ Tanya Barson Interview: response to Question 1 – see Appendix 8.3

Tate Liverpool's intention to develop a contextual, partnership programme for *Afro Modern* in the spring of 2010 that would involve the city's other arts and cultural venues. Contributing to this programme would provide an opportunity for the Bluecoat to engage with new audiences and increase its profile through an association with Tate Liverpool. Given that Boyce's exhibition was scheduled to take place during this time and the fact that one of her early works was to be included in *Afro Modern (From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born 'Native' Considers her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and her Roots in Reconstruction, 1987)*, the Bluecoat chose to contribute to this city-wide programme by inviting Boyce to co-curate an additional exhibition that would be staged alongside *Like Love Part Two*.

In terms of what this other exhibition would involve, the influence of the overarching theme of the contextual programme for *Afro Modern* cannot be underestimated. Titled *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic*, it was claimed that the programme would explore connections between the continents and cultures of the Atlantic region.²³⁰ Whilst this did not necessitate that contributions to it involve black artists, its title and the inclusion of a large number of black artists in *Afro Modern* certainly encouraged contributions to be made through a prism of race and ethnicity. The majority of them involved black artists or addressed black cultural practices, and some of the city's organisations interpreted the staging of *Afro Modern* as a more general opportunity to present events that related to any aspect of black life; an exhibition of portrait photographs at the International Slavery Museum celebrated the achievements of black people in contemporary Britain and Darcus Howe's talk at the Kuumba Imaani Millennium Centre addressed the negative impact of social change on Britain's black communities.²³¹ For the Bluecoat, however, this was an opportunity to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Black Skin/Bluecoat (1985)*, which as discussed in Chapter 3, was the first exhibition at the gallery to display work by artists who self-identified as black and British and the first to include work by Boyce. It was therefore decided that for the 2010 *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme Boyce would devise a similar small group exhibition of work by early-career black British artists. She was asked to compile a list of black artists whose work she had encountered through her own networks, and after she, Bryan Biggs (the Artistic Director) and Sara-Jayne Parsons (the Exhibitions Curator) had made several studio visits, four artists were selected; Beverley Bennett, Appau Boakye-Yiadom, Robin Deacon and Grace Ndiritu. A secondary rationale for their selection was subsequently developed, which was articulated in terms of the artists all

²³⁰ <http://www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/afromodernism/around-liverpool.shtm>, accessed 22 May 2011

²³¹ Flow Motion performed a piece at FACT that addressed the migrant experience, there was an installation by Leo Asemota at Metal that was informed by the British Empire's invasion of the city of Benin in Nigeria, a retrospective of works by Guyanese painter Aubrey Williams at the Walker Art Gallery sought to raise his profile as an international artist, and Lubaina Himid's installation of jelly moulds at Sudley House explored the challenges of commemorating and celebrating black contribution's to Liverpool's history and culture.

demonstrating a 'performative' approach to their practice (hence the exhibition's title *Action*). To an extent, this served to mask the fact that their ethnicity had been the initial criterion for their selection – a problematic approach that the gallery had contested in the 1990s through exhibitions such as *Trophies of Empire*, and one with which Biggs and Parsons were therefore ill at ease.²³²

Action was staged between 30 January and 28 March 2010. As a consequence of the curators' lack of confidence in the exhibition's initial motivation and racial basis, several measures were taken in its curation to detract from and subvert the fact that it was a black group exhibition.²³³ As with *Black Skin/Bluecoat*, each artist was shown in a separate room as if they had their own discrete exhibition. In both shows, this was in order to present the artists as individual practitioners and to prevent them from being easily compared on the basis of their ethnicity - a particular problem of race-based exhibitions. *Action* was, however, distinguished from *Black Skin/Bluecoat* by the fact that it was not labelled or marketed as a black group exhibition, and also by the fact that the press release or exhibition text panels did not note the artists' ethnicities. Additionally, possible references to issues of race and representation in the work were not highlighted in the wall texts.²³⁴ Instead, they emphasised the particular concerns of each artist as expressed in the works, such as travel (Ndiritu), the performance artist Stuart Sherman (Deacon), mark-making (Bennett) and the use of readymade objects (Boakye-Yiadom).²³⁵ *Action* is therefore comparable to *Afro Modern* in that both exhibitions attempted to challenge approaches to curating that have marginalised black creativity in established histories of art. In *Afro Modern*, conceptual frameworks from other disciplines were employed in order to prioritise black contributions to modernism that are typically suppressed by hierarchies of race and geography often found in established art-historical narratives. Race-based curatorial models were developed in order to counter these suppressions, but as Chapter 2 discussed, they ultimately ghettoised black artistic practices and perpetuated their exclusion from broader debates in contemporary art. *Action* therefore sought to challenge some of the problems of these models by displaying the artists in separate rooms and avoiding references to race and ethnicity in its accompanying interpretive materials.

²³² See Sara-Jayne Parsons' Response to Question 4 (Appendix 8.17), Sonia Boyce's response to question 6 (Appendix 8.9) and Bryan Biggs' response to question 9 (13 April 2011 interview – Appendix 8.5).

²³³ Boyce was the principal curator and Biggs and Parsons assisted in the organisation of the exhibition.

²³⁴ The last three of these four measures were not employed in the staging of *Black Skin/Bluecoat* because issues of race and representation were central to the works and the objectives of the participating artists at the time.

²³⁵ Ndiritu was described as making performance-based video art and as performing Inuit throat singing in the soundtrack for her video installation, Deacon was described as re-enacting Stuart Sherman's performance works, attention was drawn to 'the performative movement of the creation of the line' in Bennett's work, and Boakye-Yiadom was described as using 'readymade objects as a catalyst for performative situations' (Individual interpretation panels for each of the artists).

The primary locutionary statement, as presented across the various exhibition texts and press release, was that the artworks in *Action* were not cemented in issues of race, cultural identity and national belonging, unlike the works that were presented in *Black Skin/Bluecoat*.²³⁶ As discussed in Chapter 2, exhibitions of the past typically framed black creativity through prisms of race, difference and identity politics, and given that the Bluecoat had contested this practice in the 1990s, it is unsurprising that efforts were made in *Action* to prevent the four artists from being ring-fenced by these same issues as a consequence of the exhibition's contextualisation by its association with *Black Skin/Bluecoat* and the *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme. It was instead suggested, therefore, that the work presented in the exhibition could 'be contextualised through... recent debates about the emergence of black artists whose works move beyond perceived boundaries of race and representation' and that 'the artists selected by Boyce present works that are not ring-fenced by questions of cultural identity'.²³⁷ This was articulated in terms of the younger generation 'drawing on a [more] diverse range of reference points [compared to their predecessors], and increasingly making it less obvious who the 'maker' is, choosing to emphasise instead something about the work itself which is much more open-ended [than the approaches that were typically taken by black artists in the 1980s]'.²³⁸

In making these assertions, the curators initiated an illocutionary dialogue with the final section of *Afro Modern*, which suggested that so-called Post-Black artists are 'adamant about not being labelled as "black"'.²³⁹ By developing an association with the idea of Post-Black attitudes and practices (as presented in *Afro Modern*) the curators could intimate (at a perlocutionary level) that the *Action* artists were not, and should not be positioned in, and delimited by, critical and historical frameworks of race and ethnicity. To underscore this point, and arguably to divert attention away from the fact of the artists' ethnicity, it was repeatedly asserted within the exhibition's interpretive panels that the artists shared a 'performative' approach to art-making, and furthermore, that this had informed their selection. For example, the introductory text panel for the exhibition stated that 'much of Boyce's recent work has involved what she calls 'improvised collaborations'...[which] often

²³⁶ See *Like Love Parts One and Two* and *Action* Press Release, 2010: 2

²³⁷ *Action* interpretation panel

²³⁸ Boyce quoted in the *Action* interpretation panel. This point was emphasised in the press release, where, regarding Ndiritu's work, it was explained that 'Pointing the camera north, south, east and west, the artist is pivotal, yet unseen'. Similarly, Bennett's artworks were described as 'evidence of her interaction with the medium of drawing', as opposed to an interaction with questions of race and identity (*Like Love Parts One and Two* and *Action* Press Release, 2010: 2). The same argument was also made in relation to Boyce. In a quote in the press release, she stated, 'I am [also] no longer the central attention in the work I make' (*Like Love Parts One and Two* and *Action* Press Release, 2010: 2), and this shift was articulated in terms of her move towards a more collaborative or participatory practice, as exemplified by her *Like Love Part Two* project (About the Artist interpretation panel).

²³⁹ Interpretation panel for Room 7 of *Afro Modern*. This connection was presented at an illocutionary level because the term Post-Black did not appear in the exhibition's interpretive texts.

involve performing, and it is this interest in the 'performative' that has drawn her to these emerging artists'.²⁴⁰ Despite these efforts, however, the exhibition failed to offer a non-racial reading of the works displayed. Just as *Afro Modern's* aim of offering a new understanding of modernism was unwittingly undermined by contradictory statements presented in its wall texts and captions, a closer analysis of *Action's* accompanying interpretive texts reveals that race-based critical and historical frameworks were not challenged by the exhibition, but reinforced.

In contrast with the repeated suggestion in the exhibition's accompanying interpretive texts that the four participating artists and its curator, Sonia Boyce, were and should not be ring-fenced by questions of race and identity politics, much of the information given *about* Boyce foregrounded her ethnicity and the subject of race and representation in relation to her work. In an 'About the artist' interpretation panel that accompanied Boyce's *Like Love Part Two* exhibition (which was staged alongside *Action*), the first piece of information given about her was that she is 'a British African-Caribbean artist'. This was immediately followed by an explanation that her early works addressed 'issues of race, ethnicity...and question[ed] racial stereotypes'.²⁴¹ Although these two assertions were true, their presentation at the start of the text served, at a perlocutionary level, to provide the framework through which both Boyce's past and present works would be understood by those reading it. They encouraged the works on display (including those in the associated *Action* exhibition) to be perceived in relation to, or through a prism of race and ethnicity.²⁴² The text then noted that Boyce's more recent works have 'shifted' in terms of media (pastel drawings to video, for example) and also in terms of her development of a more collaborative practice. However, it did not elucidate that changes in her work have also involved a broadening of interests beyond issues of race and ethnicity, as demonstrated in the *Like Love* works (had it done so, it may have offset the racial frameworks described above). Instead, the concluding statement of the 'About the artist' text panel was that her recent works demonstrate 'how cultural difference might be articulated, mediated and celebrated'.²⁴³ As is discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, cultural difference is a highly problematic idea that has been questioned and critiqued in the fields of art and art history because of its detrimental effects on black artists in terms of their inclusion in established histories of art. However, this was not clarified or acknowledged in the text panel. Thus, visitors not versed in critical debates about the notion of cultural difference would read her works, and by extension the works she had selected for *Action*, as demonstrative of the artists' cultural difference from the

²⁴⁰ Introductory text panel. Similarly, another interpretation panel stated that the selection of the artists 'highlight[ed] Boyce's interest in the object-based nature of performance in contemporary art' (*Action* interpretation panel).

²⁴¹ *Like Love Part Two*, About the Artist text panel

²⁴² N.B. Perlocutionary speech acts are what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something – the consequences of an assertion that are either intended or unintended by the speaker.

²⁴³ *Like Love Part Two*, About the Artist text panel

white mainstream (the perlocutionary consequence).

The accompanying interpretive texts in *Action* similarly foregrounded the ethnicity of the four artists in it. However, in this case, it occurred inadvertently in the repeated articulation that they and their works were *not* confined by issues of race and representation. As noted above, the interpretation panel for *Action* suggested that the works could be contextualised by the emergence of black artistic practices that move beyond questions of race and representation and were not, therefore contained by cultural and identity politics.²⁴⁴ Although these statements were made in order to direct perceptions of the work away from these delimiting frameworks (an illocutionary consequence), precisely the opposite was achieved at a perlocutionary level. Because these suggestions occupied more than three quarters of the text panel, questions of race, representation etc. would be foregrounded in the mind of the reader. This would be exacerbated by the fact that they were not accompanied by a discussion of the artworks themselves (in terms of media, content and practice), nor any suggestion of possible alternative frameworks through which the work could be understood (such as histories of film-making, live art, drawing, sculpture). At a perlocutionary level, this undermined assertions in the exhibition that the artists should not be ring-fenced by their ethnicity, and simultaneously weakened the claim that the exhibition was premised on 'performative' practices. Visitors would consequently presume that ethnicity was the primary link between the four artists. Indeed, no comments in the visitors' book acknowledged the *Action* artists' shared 'performative' practice, and only one press review noted a 'performative element' running across the works.²⁴⁵ In fact, that several reviews claimed that some of the *Action* artists did demonstrate a concern with issues of race and representation indicates that the purported premise of the exhibition had been unconvincing, and furthermore, that an unwitting production of racial frameworks in the accompanying interpretive texts impacted the reception of the exhibition.²⁴⁶

The exhibition's press release undoubtedly influenced this particular interpretation in the press. The text's subtitle described Boyce as 'a pioneer in the Black British cultural renaissance of the 1980s'.²⁴⁷ Although it is likely that this statement was made in order to clarify the exhibition's connection with *Afro Modern* and the *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme, its placement at

²⁴⁴ *Action* interpretation panel

²⁴⁵ Sexton simply notes that 'The performative element [found in Boyce's *Like Love Part Two*] is carried on through the rest of the Bluecoat's gallery space in the work of three young artists selected by Boyce' (Sexton, 2010).

²⁴⁶ For example, Sebestyen stated that one of Boakye-Yiadom's works 'shows how symbols of race subordination can be played with all over again in a different time' (Sebestyen, 2010: 56). Another review stated that under the surface of Boakye-Yiadom's 'elegant portrayals of objects performing...lie references to black culture' (<http://www.artinliverpool.com/?p=16443>, accessed 06/09/2014).

²⁴⁷ *Like Love Parts One and Two* and *Action* Press Release, 2010: 1

the top of the document, in bold lettering, provided a key sound bite for journalists reviewing or writing listings for the Bluecoat exhibition, and by extension, provided the framework through which journalists unfamiliar with Boyce's work would subsequently position her in their reviews.²⁴⁸ The ill-considered assertion in the press release that Boakye-Yiadom's references to 'black culture' evidence that 'the "*Afro Modern*" is complex, alive and kicking', not only implied that he is concerned with issues of race and representation, which he may indeed be, but it also erroneously suggested that the term '*Afro Modern*' can be applied to a particular style or practice in art.²⁴⁹ In the context of the *Afro Modern* exhibition, the term '*Afro Modern*' specifically referred to the exhibition's attempt to expose the impact of black creativity on modernism. It was not used as a descriptor of certain artworks, artists or practices. Yet in the press release for *Action*, the term was used as if it was a category in which to place contemporary black artists whose works reference issues of race, representation, or indeed, black culture. By describing Boakye-Yiadom's work as such, the press release not only misused the term '*Afro Modern*', but it also presented his work through a prism of race and ethnicity, thus contradicting the exhibition's locutionary and illocutionary statements. Critics thus responded to the work accordingly. For example, without discussion or explanation, Amanda Sebestyen claimed that one of Boakye-Yiadom's works 'shows how symbols of race subordination can be played with all over again in a different time', demonstrating that her comprehension of his work had been informed by the exhibition's press release.²⁵⁰

External contextualisation of the exhibition was also highly significant in provoking responses to the works that were channelled through questions of race, representation and identity politics. The broader context of the *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme, which incorporated events and exhibitions that recognised and celebrated black achievement, echoed the objectives of Black History Month. This annual, month-long observance for the remembrance of important people and events in the history of the African diaspora typically takes place through the staging of events, exhibitions and performances, and its objectives are to 'promote knowledge of black history, culture and heritage' and to 'disseminate information on positive black contributions to British

²⁴⁸ For example, at the start of his review, Ed Sexton described Boyce as a 'British black cultural pioneer' (<http://www.culture24.org.uk/art/art76268>, accessed 30/04/2011). Similarly, in her review, Amanda Sebestyen labelled the artist-curator; 'Sonia Boyce of the pioneering 1980s Black British Art Movement' (Sebestyen, 2010, 56). In Catherine Jones' review, she stated in the second sentence that 'Boyce was a pioneer in the Black British cultural renaissance of the 1980s' (Jones, 2010).

²⁴⁹ *Love Parts One and Two* and *Action* Press Release, 2010: 3. Boakye-Yiadom's use of wooden carvings and watermelons are not, in fact, references to black culture, but rather, references to icons in racist black stereotyping.

²⁵⁰ Sebestyen, 2010: 56

society'.²⁵¹ The event is widely criticised for ghettoizing the recognition of significant black figures to just one month per year, thus preventing a broader and more consistent engagement in black history and promoting an understanding of the histories of black people as separate from other histories. As a one-off festival, *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* was similarly problematic. Furthermore, its race-based approach - of grouping together a variety of events and exhibitions that bore little to no relation to each other besides their reference to or involvement of black people/artists - served to encourage visitors to the Bluecoat to view its contribution to the programme through a prism of race.

This was also the case with the Bluecoat's own contextual events programme, produced to coincide with the *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme. It included *Migration Songs II* - an all-day event comprising a screening of Jamaican crime film *The Harder They Come* (1972), a show by poet and broadcaster Lemn Sissay exploring the issue of race, and *Liverpool Liming* which was a spoken word and music event featuring a number of well-known black artists such as Charlie Dark and Levi Tafari. The programme also included an event on the history of the Blues, music from Justin Adams and Juldeh Camara ('a Musical narrative' combining hip-hop and a four-piece band 'that charts the progress of the blues') and dance performances from black choreographers Melanie Demers and Laila Diallo. As with the broader *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme, the range of performances in the Bluecoat's own programme bore no relation to each other besides their featuring of black artists, and therefore, it similarly undermined the arguments within *Action* that the works should not be critically positioned in terms of the ethnicities of their makers.²⁵²

An additional method of contextualisation for *Action* was provided in the Bluecoat's 'Hub' foyer area - a display of archival material from exhibitions that had either taken place at the Bluecoat, or had been organised in association with the Bluecoat at other venues. Leaflets and catalogues were selected to demonstrate the breadth of the Bluecoat's engagement with black and other 'minority ethnic' artists since the 1980s. With leaflets from over fifty exhibitions and events, the display demonstrated the gallery's commitment to showcasing work by black artists. However, by extracting these exhibitions from the Bluecoat's wider, diverse history of programmes, and inserting them into a separate, black narrative within that history, the archive display promoted an understanding of the participating artists, and the exhibitions in which their work was displayed, as

²⁵¹ http://www.black-history-month.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=223&Itemid=57, accessed 23 May 2011

²⁵² It could be argued that all the featured artists were connected in various ways to different geographical points around the Black Atlantic, thus addressing the theme of the programme without reference to race. However, none of their works explored connections between these points or demonstrated the impact of these connections on modernist art, music or film-making.

distinct or separate from the rest of the Bluecoat's programme.²⁵³ As such, the archive display served as a 'black survey' of the Bluecoat's programme history, and was therefore susceptible to the problems of ghettoization that are associated with this approach. Whilst it would not have been possible for the Bluecoat to demonstrate in the small space of its foyer the way these exhibitions and events had peppered and punctuated its broader programme since the 1980s, the contextualisation of *Action* in this way encouraged visitors to position the works/practices/artists presented in it as separate from their white counterparts, not only within the Bluecoat's programme, but also within broader understandings of contemporary art. Indeed, comments left in the visitors' book stating that the exhibition had been 'very non-white', and that it had been 'good to see an utmost darker form of art', despite the fact that the works themselves did not indicate the races of the artists nor depict anything to suggest that the artists were not white, indicated that the interpretive material had provoked a consideration of the works in relation to the issue of race.²⁵⁴

That *Action* largely failed to offer a non-racial reading of work by black British artists in its accompanying interpretive texts resulted from its initial impetus and selection process, and secondarily, from the exhibition's contextualisation. The *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme and its association with *Afro Modern* made it relatively impossible for participating organisations to devise their contributions to it without reference to race. As discussed in Chapter 2, race-based approaches to selecting and curating exhibitions, and indeed, devising programmes, necessitate that artists are positioned in such a way that their ethnicity is foregrounded, causing other possible readings to become secondary or disregarded altogether. Thus, although the curators of *Action* stated that questions of race, representation and identity politics had no significance to the works on display, an emphasis on ethnicity nonetheless occurred through the repetition of this assertion - at locutionary and illocutionary levels - resulting in the same outcome as the race-based exhibitionary format itself. In the following chapter, consideration is given to the likely causes for the continued employment of this curatorial strategy, despite widespread and well-known criticisms of it, and why curators in established art museums and galleries rarely take the opportunity to position black creativity in broader historical and critical contexts.

The next section of this chapter addresses Tate Britain's concurrent retrospective of paintings and drawings by Chris Ofili - one of Britain's best-known black artists. The exhibition can be similarly

²⁵³ Admittedly, I have also produced such a narrative in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

²⁵⁴ Bluecoat visitor's book, Responses to *Like Love Parts One and Two* and *Action* exhibitions: pages 2; 4 and 7.

understood as attempting to contest established, yet problematic curatorial strategies for exhibiting work by black artists and of testing new approaches that critically and historically position black artists in more meaningful and inclusive ways. As a solo exhibition, it could focus on the artist's contribution to his medium, rather than his engagement with issues of race, identity and representation, and moreover, on his placement in British histories of art.

4.3 An appetite for difference and an aversion towards polemics in the Ofili retrospective

That black survey shows precluded a deep engagement in the work of individual black artists was quickly recognised by the mid-1980s, such that by the end of the decade some public museums and galleries had begun to create opportunities for black artists to exhibit on a solo basis. However, questions of race, identity and representation continued to frame the practices of black artists in many of these early one-person exhibitions. For example, as Chapter 2 revealed, the issue of cultural identity was foregrounded in the interpretation of Boyce's works in her 1988 solo show at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, despite her own assertion that issues of kinship and feminist politics were the prominent features of her work. This approach to addressing black creativity arguably remained in place throughout the 1990s and 2000s under the influence of multiculturalist cultural policy.²⁵⁵ In this context, Tate Britain's 2010 exhibition of Chris Ofili's paintings and drawings was a landmark exhibition. Taking place between 27 January and 16 May, the show displayed over forty-five of his works across seven rooms, making it the most substantial exhibition of his work to date. Given its location in a major national gallery and the fact that he was only forty-two years of age, the large-scale one-person survey was a testament to Ofili's success and prominence.²⁵⁶ The most significant aspect of this exhibition, however, was its focus on his practice as a painter and, like *Action*, its dismissal of his ethnicity as an influence on his work.

Arranged in a simple chronological order, the exhibition displayed works Ofili had produced as a student in the late 1980s, concluding with paintings he created after his move from Britain to Trinidad in 2005. Little interpretation material was presented on the exhibition's walls compared to that typically offered in many of Tate's 'blockbuster' exhibitions; there were no introductory text panels at the start of each section and the captions against each work contained only factual information (titles, dates, and materials). The curator, Judith Nesbitt, explained that this was

²⁵⁵ Hylton notes that a common curatorial strategy during the 1990s amongst municipal galleries was to offer solo shows to black and Asian artists in relation to the ethnicities of the local audiences they wished to attract, and argues that the gearing of these one-person exhibitions towards particular ethnic constituencies forced the works within the exhibitions to be viewed through ethnic vitrines (see Hylton, 2007: 87-89 for examples).

²⁵⁶ The fact that Ofili was on Tate's Board of Trustees between 2000 and 2005 is a similar testament to his prominence within the art establishment at the time and may also have been a factor in Tate's decision to offer him a solo exhibition.

because Ofili 'didn't want words on the wall', and that he preferred 'the visitor to encounter the paintings in a very direct, unmediated way'. She suggested that although Ofili 'would accept that there is a whole lot of discussion ... that, at another level, sits beside the work', both he and Tate wished for visitors to 'have to deal with the paintings as material things', implying therefore, that previous readings of his work had either been erroneous or had been limited to a single theme.²⁵⁷ Indeed, critical responses to Ofili's work had typically focussed on his use of unusual materials including elephant dung and clippings from pornographic magazines and his overt and stylised references to black culture. As a result of the latter, Ofili had been critically positioned as a 'black artist' – an artist with African or Caribbean heritage whose assertions or works primarily engage in the politicised issues of race, racial representation and race-based identity politics, and furthermore, who takes a stance on these issues. In this context, the exhibition not only provided an opportunity to review the breadth and quality of Ofili's work, but also a chance to critically and historically reposition him, particularly in terms of his contribution to the medium of painting. Thus, although little interpretation was provided within the exhibition itself, several interpretive tools were offered in tandem with it that guided visitors towards an alternative conception of Ofili's oeuvre and a new understanding of him as an artist.

Before entering the exhibition visitors were presented with a short introductory text panel, and once inside, they were given a leaflet that provided information about form, content and the artist's influences. Punctuated with quotes from Ofili, Nesbitt and art historians/cultural theorists such as Okwui Enwezor and Stuart Hall, the leaflet provided the primary means through which visitors could be directed towards a new perception of Ofili and his works. An exhibition catalogue offered a secondary, though more detailed means through which the visitor could interpret the works presented, and it included a foreword by Tate Director, Nicholas Serota, an introductory essay by Nesbitt, an essay by Enwezor, and an interview with Ofili by Ekow Eshun (writer, journalist and former Artistic Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in London). Another interpretive tool took the form of a film that was shown in an adjacent room. Titled *Chris Ofili: Exploding the Crystal* (2010), the Tate-produced film showed the artist at work in his studio in Trinidad, or driving/walking around the island and only his voice was heard in the commentary. Although it featured no audible narration or visible interviewer, Ofili's comments were responses to questions posed by the producer, who, like the curators of an exhibition, could mould and extend an understanding of the artist and his works through posing particular questions and also through developing a narrative within the film.

²⁵⁷ Interview with Judith Nesbitt: response to question 2 – see Appendix 8.16

The final interpretive tool was a public talk by Nesbitt, given on 25 February 2010. In this, she outlined the deciding factors in organising the exhibition; the ‘extent of public interest’ in Ofili, ‘the sense of timeliness in the development of the artist’s work’ and, most importantly, how an exhibition at this moment in his career could ‘extend an understanding of the artist’s work’ – clarifying that this was indeed her objective for the exhibition.²⁵⁸ In reference to the aforementioned way that Ofili has been critically framed by the press, she added that she hoped the exhibition would be a ‘corrective to glib assessments’, ‘an opportunity to rethink assumptions and fixed opinions and be an opening up of the critical space within which the work can be considered’.²⁵⁹ As with *Afro Modern* and *Action*, the exhibition’s illocutionary assertion was that questions of race and representation that have typically informed interpretations of black creativity were not applicable in this exhibition. My close reading of the interpretive materials provided by the Ofili retrospective reveals two main illocutionary propositions relating to how Ofili and his works might be reconceived.

The first proposition was that because the characteristics of Ofili’s works changed dramatically after his move to Trinidad, his career can be conceived in two parts (before and after that move), and, moreover, that his earlier works require reassessing in light of recent changes in his practice. Although this assertion was made explicit in the exhibition leaflet and curator’s talk at a locutionary level, a series of indirect and more nuanced efforts were made in the curation of the exhibition at an illocutionary level to underscore it.²⁶⁰ First, the chronological arrangement elucidated the change in style and media that had occurred in his works since 2005; they were no longer embellished with decorative materials such as glitter, beads and magazine clippings nor propped against walls on top of dung balls, but were instead focused on colour and hung on walls.²⁶¹ Secondly, an emphasis was placed on Ofili’s most recent paintings in the interpretive material. For example, having been shot solely at Ofili’s studio in Trinidad, the film privileged the latter stage of his practice over earlier stages, and for much of it, attention was drawn to the Trinidadian motifs and characters explored by his latest works. A prioritisation of Ofili’s more recent efforts similarly occurred in Eshun’s interview with him in the exhibition catalogue – in fact, Eshun steered the

²⁵⁸ Chris Ofili Curator’s Talk, 2010: 02:00 minutes into the recording

²⁵⁹ Chris Ofili Curator’s Talk, 2010: 09:20 minutes into the recording

²⁶⁰ ‘These celebrated works can now be reconsidered alongside the artist’s recent paintings’ (Exhibition Guide, Page 1); the exhibition is an ‘opportunity to rethink assumptions’ about earlier works (Chris Ofili Curator’s Talk, 2010: 09:20 minutes into the recording). Nesbitt also reiterated this point at interview; his body of work ‘seemed to us ready for a reassessment’ (Interview with Judith Nesbitt, response to question 1 – see Appendix 8.16); ‘you want to allow an artist’s practice to come to the fore and for that to be quite importantly shaped by the artist’s current practice...you look at what comes before through the lens of where the artist is now’ (Interview with Judith Nesbitt: response to question 2 – see Appendix 8.16).

²⁶¹ This was also noted in the exhibition leaflet (Chris Ofili Exhibition Guide, 2010: 10-11).

conversation so that a discussion of the artist's earlier works was avoided.²⁶² By drawing attention to his most recent works, the shift that had occurred in the content of Ofili's works could also be made clear; the themes of hip-hop, black culture and issues of race and representation that had characterised his works until the early 2000s had been replaced by a focus on Trinidad's natural and cultural environment.

These changes in style and content were not simply emphasised because they were intriguing, but because they evidenced, as Nesbitt put it, that Ofili 'has continually shifted his painting practice in relation to the environment, both cultural and physical, in which he has positioned himself'.²⁶³ This observation was significant for Nesbitt because Ofili's early works could be reinterpreted as a consequence of it; it complicated existing narratives about his practice and problematised the critical frameworks that have developed around his work. The illocutionary implication was that his earlier works – which addressed issues of race and cultural representation – can now be understood as a mere engagement with, and reflection of his working environment, and not as an indication of his personal and political stance on these issues. Accordingly, Nesbitt claimed in her curator's talk that 'it has been central to his sense of himself and his work that he has resisted all proprieties and that includes his resistance to being claimed as a "black artist" who might pursue a particular political agenda'.²⁶⁴ She acknowledged that 'viewers versed in cultural theories of representation and identity politics' may read Ofili's works as 'statements about visibility and blackness', but insisted that 'Ofili's starting point was his own experience'.²⁶⁵ As evidence of this, the introductory text for room 1 clarified that Ofili's use of dots and elephant dung in his earlier paintings had been informed by a British Council funded visit to Zimbabwe, rather than an expression of his African heritage. Similarly, in the film, Ofili explained that just as having a studio in London's Kings Cross – an area where the sex trade was highly visible at the time – had resulted in pornographic images entering his work, the issue of race only entered his work as a reflection of his being raised in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s when racism and the activities of the National

²⁶² He began the interview by asking Ofili for the reason behind his move to Trinidad, and after asserting that 'Trinidad arrives in the work in a number of different ways', he asked Ofili to explain what, in his practice and in the content of his works, he took from his Trinidadian environment (Eshun, 2010:96). There was a brief discussion of the importance of religion to Ofili's oeuvre, however, Eshun steered the conversation back to what he intended to be its main focus by declaring that Ofili has a fascination with, and fidelity to the island, and by asking Ofili how Trinidad has taken 'a strong presence' in his imagination (Eshun, 2010: 102). Where Ofili occasionally became vague in his answers, Eshun asked him to discuss specific aspects of his Trinidadian environment that have impacted his practice since moving there, such as the island's atmosphere at night (Eshun, 2010: 103).

²⁶³ Chris Ofili Curator's Talk, 2010: 08:09 minutes into the recording

²⁶⁴ Chris Ofili Curator's Talk, 2010: 32:15 minutes into the recording. To reinforce this point and deter the audience from considering his work along political lines, she also referenced a comment in which Ofili explained that, 'a lot of black art that came before me was set up to critique the system and I thought that was boring. Basically you would have to be right all the time... I just wanted to try to be who I am' (this quote was taken from Younge, G., 2010).

²⁶⁵ Nesbitt, 2010: 9

Front made headline news on a regular basis.²⁶⁶ For Nesbitt, when Ofili did address issues of race and representation it was 'not programmatic or polemical, but quizzical'.²⁶⁷ She continued, 'far from feeling constrained by the polemics and theorisations of blackness, Ofili was opening up his paintings to the cultural fodder he was drawn to, responding to the cut and paste mentality of the hip-hop generation'. On this, she concluded that references to black culture are simply part of Ofili's 'permissive engagement' in all kinds of culture.²⁶⁸ To summarise, the principal proposition of the exhibition was that the themes of race, representation and identity that were present in his earlier works may now be reconceived as a mere reflection of his environment and as demonstrative of his absorptive approach to art-making. The perlocutionary statement issuing from this proposition was that Ofili is not particularly engaged in the politicised issues of race, racial representation and race-based identity politics, and does not take a stance on these issues.

With his newest works evidencing a new approach to painting, the second overall proposition of the exhibition was that Ofili can now be considered an exemplary painter, who has explored and challenged the medium's conventional boundaries. Thus, the exhibition leaflet stated that the range of works on display 'demonstrates Ofili's continual experimentation with painting'.²⁶⁹ Additionally, Nesbitt asserted that 'Chris Ofili's project is first of all and above all about painting',²⁷⁰ and that painting had become a way for the artist to be himself,²⁷¹ while Serota commented that Ofili is both 'ambitious for the voice of painting in contemporary culture',²⁷² and that he has an 'ambitious approach to painting'.²⁷³ By emphasising Ofili's engagement with painting, the exhibition could offer a new conception of the artist and his works, thus liberating him from the delimiting frameworks of race, representation and identity politics that have typically been

²⁶⁶ Nesbitt, 2010: 9. However, Ofili's comment that 'Being a young black male in an art school that wasn't full of young black males gave me an intense awareness of the differences between what I would represent and what others might represent...There was no one else painting black people or black life, so to speak, within my peer group at art school' contradicts this argument. This is discussed later in this section.

²⁶⁷ Nesbitt, 2010: 9

²⁶⁸ Nesbitt, 2010:15. In support of this argument, efforts were made elsewhere in the exhibition to evidence that Ofili's approach to painting was more meandering and explorative than purposeful, and therefore that if particular works addressed political issues, they were likely to have done so by accident. For example, in reference to *The Upper Room* (1999-2002), Ofili remarked in his interview with Eshun that 'I didn't begin thinking 'Okay I'm gonna make a version of the Upper Room'. I just started working on a six-by-four painting...I had one then I had three...eventually I thought I could run with it...I really cannot remember at what point the monkeys became representations for the elements of the Last Supper. But they did' (Eshun, 2010: 97). Similarly, the accompanying film opened with a comment from Ofili in which he explained that his personal experiences provide the baseline for content, upon which related, but more commonly known themes, issues or narratives are layered: 'What I do in work is often to do with my own experiences...I can translate them into more universal ideas...and that can sometimes lean on established narratives from the bible, folklore, myth, hearsay. One thing can lead to another' (*Chris Ofili: Exploding the Crystal*, 2010: 00:30 minutes into the film).

²⁶⁹ Chris Ofili Exhibition Guide, 2010: 1

²⁷⁰ Chris Ofili Curator's Talk, 2010: 55:00 minutes into the recording

²⁷¹ Nesbitt, 2010: 8

²⁷² Serota, 2010: 6

²⁷³ Serota, 2010: 6

employed in public and critical responses to his work. However, that critical responses to the exhibition, and even responses to it in Tate Britain's own related events programme, were generally divergent from its main locutionary and illocutionary propositions is significant because it indicates that the exhibition's propositions were unconvincing and reveals how cultural hegemony operates in Britain (the latter is addressed in more detail in the next chapter).

As part of the public programme for the exhibition, a panel discussion was held at Tate Britain on 7 April 2010, titled *Ofili in Focus*. It was chaired by Anthony Downey (Programme Director of contemporary art at Sotheby's Institute), and involved playwright Bonnie Greer, artist Gayle Chong Kwan and art historian Leon Wainwright. In contrast to the exhibition guide, curator's talk and introductory catalogue essay, the focus of this discussion was Ofili's possible engagement in identity politics and his position in black British, African diasporic and Caribbean art histories (but importantly, not a broader history of British art or painting). Kwan expressed that Ofili's earlier works had been 'overloaded with clichés and stereotypes', evidencing that 'identities can be fostered on you as an artist'.²⁷⁴ Although she asserted that 'there are much more interesting questions about his work that don't relate to identity', she conceded that his works had helped her to consider the 'problematics of focusing on identity as an artist' and, therefore, that 'he still has a position within that [discussions about identity] and that is something interesting to talk about even if that is not the interesting thing about his work'.²⁷⁵ Thus, despite acknowledging that the issue of identity politics was no longer present in his works and that it was not a particularly interesting aspect of his practice (one of the illocutionary assertions of the exhibition), she was nonetheless compelled to discuss this issue in relation to the exhibition. Similarly, although Downey asserted that 'we don't want to get bogged down in issues of identity, it seems counter-productive', in the same breath he conceded that 'it does feature as a theme in Chris Ofili's work, particularly in terms of stereotyping'.²⁷⁶ In agreement, Kwan argued that although Ofili's works themselves have progressed beyond issues of identity and racial stereotyping, 'it is still interesting to think about how his earlier work was seen and how it is still seen', demonstrating the group's struggle to avoid considering his work without reference to issues of identity, blackness, stereotyping and pigeon-holing (the reasons for which are discussed in the following chapter).²⁷⁷

The possible presence of identity politics within Ofili's work led to a discussion regarding its significance in relation to black Britishness. Echoing the illocutionary proposition of the exhibition,

²⁷⁴ *Ofili in Focus*, 2010: 18:00 minutes into the recording.

²⁷⁵ *Ofili in Focus*, 2010: 09:00 and 19:40 minutes into the recording.

²⁷⁶ *Ofili in Focus*, 2010: 20:22 minutes into the recording.

²⁷⁷ *Ofili in Focus*, 2010: 40:00 minutes into the recording.

Wainwright stated that he was ‘interested in separating Ofili out from these weighty issues’ because although it may be argued that he once stood ‘on the shoulders’ of the black British artists of the 1980s, he has not been as invested in the issues of ‘self-determination’ and ‘visibility’ as those artists were. On this, Wainwright concluded that Ofili ‘did not quite fit in the black British story’ of art despite being ‘the foremost black British artist of our generation’.²⁷⁸ However, instead of attempting to position Ofili amongst other contemporary and historic British painters, Wainwright pursued a discussion of Ofili’s work in relation to a specifically Caribbean art history. He explained that in his recent works, Ofili references instantly recognisable features of the Trinidadian landscape, such as the Northern Range, which is a prominent theme amongst many Trinidadian artists’ work.²⁷⁹ The possible relevance of this art historical context aside, Wainwright’s comments reflect a personal desire to position Ofili in a context with which he is highly familiar (much of Wainwright’s research in the past ten years has taken place in, and focussed on the Caribbean), and moreover, a subconscious compulsion to position the artist in any context other than a British one. This urge was also evidenced in Greer’s reflection that Ofili can be placed in an African pantheon as a consequence of his trickster-like approach to engaging with the art world (he has ‘appeared not to go along with the mainstream’ in spite of being ‘very much a part of what was happening on a very profound level’).²⁸⁰ By adding that the trickster’s ‘ability to change expectations and wit’ had been ‘the only way people of African descent could survive the Middle Passage’, she positioned Ofili in a history of African diasporic cultural practices – a context that was avoided in, and discouraged by the exhibition.²⁸¹ The difficulty to discuss Ofili and his works without reference to race, representation and identity politics and the subconscious desire to position the artist in non-British contemporary and art-historical contexts demonstrated by the *Ofili in Focus* panellists were also significant aspects of critical responses to the exhibition in the press.

Art critics typically take press releases issued by galleries and museums as their starting point for their reviews and often use statements made within them to pad out their reviews. Tate’s press release for the Ofili retrospective emphasised that the artist’s oeuvre could be ‘reconsidered in the light of current developments in [his] practice following his move from London to Trinidad in 2005’, implying that previously held understandings of Ofili as being preoccupied with, and polemical about race and identity politics would now dissolve. This proposition, however, did not impact and was not echoed in the reviews of the exhibition. An analysis of original opinions (as opposed to statements lifted directly from the press release) expressed in forty-two exhibition reviews in the

²⁷⁸ *Ofili in Focus*, 2010: 07:35 minutes into the recording.

²⁷⁹ *Ofili in Focus*, 2010: 32:12 minutes into the recording.

²⁸⁰ *Ofili in Focus*, 2010: 13:45 minutes into the recording.

²⁸¹ *Ofili in Focus*, 2010: 21:00 minutes into the recording.

printed and online press (published during the first three months of the exhibition) reveals that approximately two thirds of them focussed on the influence and presence of issues of race in Ofili's work. The Financial Times review claimed that 'Being black is as essential to Ofili's art as being Jewish was to Chagall's, or being gay is to Hockney's'.²⁸² Similarly, Tom Lubbock stated that 'Ofili is black. His material is black', while Adrian Searle highlighted Ofili's practice of 'playing' with 'stereotypes of blackness', and Eliza Williams noted that although 'there is much humour in [his] early works ... Ofili didn't shy away from the politics of race at the time'.²⁸³ Contradicting Nesbitt's assertion that Ofili's recent works have developed beyond issues of race and instead focus on the physical elements of his new Trinidadian surroundings, Emily Hawes argued that 'race [was] perhaps the only constant throughout the exhibition'²⁸⁴

Several reviewers also claimed that Ofili's practice has centred on representing the black experience in Britain, or on challenging 'the stereotypical representation of black culture'.²⁸⁵ One argued that Ofili's aim has been to combine his experience 'of his life in Britain with some wider sense of a non-European historical narrative', while another ill-informed reviewer claimed that Ofili's work refers 'in particular to the struggle of black workers in a racist culture' which, they argued, 'ensures that black culture images and perception attains its rightful place in major British galleries [sic]'.²⁸⁶ Gary Younge suggested that the artist's depictions of black British life or culture are symptomatic of a particular moment in recent British history, 'when racial and ethnic difference was openly celebrated'.²⁸⁷ Jackie Wullschlager similarly stated that Ofili 'devised a visual aesthetic for a key moment in the 1990s when black culture became visible and assertive', demonstrating the third major theme in the press responses; the perception that Ofili developed a distinctly 'black aesthetic'.²⁸⁸ Wullschlager claimed that being black has been essential in Ofili's development of 'a new visual language for that experience', that his being black 'permitted him to challenge' the medium of painting 'by forging his own iconography, incorporating ethnicity', thus entering a territory that 'no white male artist would have dared take ... at the turn of the 20th/21st

²⁸² Wullschlager, 2010(b): 13

²⁸³ Lubbock, 2010: 12; Searle, 2010(a); Williams, 2010. Additionally, Tim Adams quoted Stuart Hall in his review, stating that 'Chris was really seriously engaged at a profound level with questions of blackness' (Adams, 2010:46-47).

²⁸⁴ Hawes, 2010. Also, see Nesbitt's catalogue essay and curator's talk.

²⁸⁵ 'Ofili's elephant dung (and all the rest) refreshed my mind', 2010,

<http://www.arslifelondon.com/dettaglio2/2010/3/ed-blog-ofili-refreshing-dung.htm>. Goldstein stated that 'As one of the few black men attending the Chelsea School of Art in the late 1980s, Ofili aimed to represent the black experience in his paintings' (Goldstein, 2010) and another review insisted that Ofili 'was the right man at the right time to express the experience of young black Britain' (Chris Ofili Exhibition Review, 2010, www.globalnewsbox.com).

²⁸⁶ Adams, 2010:46-47; Chris Ofili Exhibition Review, 2010, The New Line

²⁸⁷ Younge, 2010

²⁸⁸ Wullschlager, 2010(b): 13

centuries'.²⁸⁹ In a separate review she clarified that this involved the merging of 'modernist figuration with identity politics', and explained that 'the lush multimedia surfaces [in his earlier works] ... are beguiling yet serious in staking a place for a black aesthetic'.²⁹⁰ Alice Correia similarly stated that he has used 'diverse painterly possibilities to address contemporary issues of ... racism ... and identity politics'.²⁹¹

A fourth commonality in the reviews was the perception that Ofili's black identity is central to his practice. Michael Glover asked, 'how has Ofili defined his own experience of being alive and succeeding in establishing his own black cultural identity through his art?', claiming that 'these are the most important issues in Ofili's art'. Unlike Nesbitt, who proposed that Ofili's relocation to Trinidad has enabled his work to progress beyond questions of blackness and identity, Glover pondered whether the move to the Caribbean will allow the artist to 'contemplate the nature of his own blackness without being regarded as a precious, token talent' – that questions of blackness and identity might take on new, and more profound significances for him in this different environment.²⁹² Correspondingly, Charles Darwent observed that 'the idea of a black British painter of African descent exploring the culture of an ex-British West Indian colony suggests all kinds of tensions', implying that issues of race could still impact the development of Ofili's practice, despite his relocation.²⁹³

Although some reviews echoed the exhibition's illocutionary appeal that understandings of Ofili's work must not be ring-fenced by issues of race, representation and identity politics, they were in the minority.²⁹⁴ That the majority of original comments made across forty-two press reviews argued precisely the opposite, combined with the fact that some even argued that the exhibition had not explored the impact of those issues on Ofili's practice *enough*, demonstrates two crucial points.²⁹⁵ First, it indicates an appetite for evidence of Ofili's otherness or cultural difference from

²⁸⁹ Wullschlager, 2010(b): 13

²⁹⁰ Wullschlager, 2010(a)

²⁹¹ Correia, 2010

²⁹² Glover, 2010: 4

²⁹³ Darwent, 2010

²⁹⁴ Darwent argued that to define Ofili's earlier works as 'black art' 'is to underplay all the other things that they are and do' (Darwent, 2010:57-59). Similarly, Adams quoted Stuart Hall, who stated that 'Chris was extremely reluctant to be recruited into the 'black art' thing' (Adams, 2010:46-47 - quoting Stuart Hall with no reference, however this is from *Chris Ofili: Within Reach; British Pavilion 50th Venice Biennale, 15 June to 2 November 2003. vol. 1, London : Victoria Miro Gallery, 2003*). Gary Younge echoed Nesbitt by stating that Ofili has always 'steered clear of the polemical' (Younge, 2010).

²⁹⁵ For example, referring to room 5 of the exhibition, (which showed *Triple Beam Dreamer*, 2001-2002, *Afro Love and Unity*, 2002, and *Afro Sunrise*, 2002-2003), Correia commented that Nesbitt 'could have made more of [the fact that] these paintings were presented within such an overtly nationalistic setting at the Venice Biennale [and that this] could have been a central point for discussion, challenging as they do, racist desires for a specifically white Britain' (Correia, 2010).

the mainstream. Just as the *Ofilo in Focus* panellists failed to consider Ofili and his works in relation to British histories of art, and instead located him in African and Caribbean cultural contexts, reviewers in the press were compelled to position Ofili in non-British historical and cultural frameworks (the reasons for which are discussed in the next chapter). Second, it suggests that the exhibition's proposition that Ofili has significantly contributed to British painting had either been weakly made, or, that it had been unconvincing. Indeed, less than a tenth of original comments in the press reviews related to changes in form and content in Ofili's work since his move to Trinidad, despite the fact that one of the objectives of the exhibition was to highlight this.²⁹⁶

That the exhibition's propositions were weak or unconvincing is the result of three issues. First, insufficient effort was made in the accompanying interpretive texts to suggest other critical and historical frameworks Ofili's work might be located in besides those of race, representation and identity politics. Although a degree of emphasis was placed on Ofili as an exemplar of contemporary painting, and two cursory remarks in the introductory catalogue essay loosely associated him with Blake and Hogarth, there was no further discussion of his possible relationship to these artists, nor any suggestion as to how he might be understood as part of a lineage of British painters.²⁹⁷ There was similarly no discussion of Ofili's contribution to the British canon, despite Ofili's participation in exhibitions in the 1990s that aimed to present the best of British contemporary art such as *The British Art Show* (1995).²⁹⁸ Furthermore, the opportunity to associate Ofili with the Young British Artist (YBA) phenomenon as a result of his inclusion in *Sensation* (1997) was not taken and, in fact, dismissed by Nesbitt as an inappropriate context for his work because he 'wasn't in that crowd' and because he is not a Goldsmiths alumnus (the majority of the YBA artists trained at Goldsmiths).²⁹⁹ While it is arguably inappropriate to position Ofili amongst the YBAs, a more considered and expanded discussion of his relationship to them, or indeed to his other British contemporaries, would have aided in placing the artist within a specifically British history of art.

The exhibition's failure to address Ofili's contribution to the British canon and to position him in a lineage of British painters is arguably symptomatic of a transnational approach to considering

²⁹⁶ See Higgins, 2010; Darwent, 2010: 57-59; and Williams, 2010.

²⁹⁷ Nesbitt and Serota related Ofili to two pillars of British painting, by noting William Blake as one of his sources and by describing him as 'turning a Hogarthian eye on the contemporary vogue for Afro-celebration' (Nesbitt, 2010: 15)

²⁹⁸ This is particularly curious given that Nesbitt included *The British Art Show* in her list of exhibitions that Ofili had participated in, in her catalogue essay (see Nesbitt, 2010: 14).

²⁹⁹ Interview with Judith Nesbitt: response to question 7 – see Appendix 816. Enwezor also asserts that Ofili was detached from the YBA group, but explains that this was because he took a self-consciously distinct position as one of the few black artists associated with the phenomenon (Enwezor, 2010: 65).

contemporary art that was pledged in Tate's 2015 Vision.³⁰⁰ Indeed, Serota commented in the foreword for the exhibition's catalogue that 'great art often emerges when cultures cross boundaries or migration brings ideas and values into sharp conflict', and Nesbitt asserted that Ofili's migratory heritage and his recent move from Britain to Trinidad relates conversely to a history of artists migrating to Europe to develop their practices.³⁰¹ While there is a degree of validity in positioning Ofili in this way, these particular remarks are also highly problematic and reminiscent of the critical and historical frameworks employed in the black survey exhibitions of the 1980s. As *From Two Worlds* (1986) demonstrated, an emphasis on migration and cross-cultural practices in exhibitions displaying work by black British artists invariably encourages the notions of cultural difference and otherness to be applied in the interpretation of the work, thus dissociating black British artists from their white British contemporaries and from established histories of British art. Serota and Nesbitt's emphasis on migratory and cross-cultural practices thus weakened the exhibition's proposition that issues of race, representation and identity politics are largely irrelevant to an understanding of Ofili and his work, and it is therefore unsurprising that reviewers referenced these issues in their critical responses to the exhibition.

A third explanation for these responses to the exhibition relates to the rarity of prominent and successful black British artists that are regularly exhibited in major art museums and galleries such as Tate. As one of only a few internationally recognised, contemporary black British artists (the others being Yinka Shonibare and artist-turned-filmmaker Steve McQueen), Ofili has been subjected to the burden of representation; the pressure to represent the full breadth of black creativity resulting from the dearth of black artists gaining visibility on the world stage.³⁰² As long as Ofili remains a token representative of black British artists he will, almost necessarily, be positioned within these limiting frameworks. If a larger number of black British artists were afforded the success and support Ofili has experienced, his ethnicity would no longer be considered the unique feature about him or the most interesting influence upon his work. His status as a black artist would become normalised, more significance would be attached to his engagement with his medium and the relationship of his work to non-racial art historical contexts. In such a situation, there would be

³⁰⁰ Tate's 2015 Vision included the pledge to 'be more international by connecting the UK to the world' (<http://www.tate.org.uk/about/our-work/our-priorities>, accessed 12/03/2015).

³⁰¹ Serota, 2010: 6; Interview with Judith Nesbitt: response to question 7 – see Appendix 8.16

³⁰² See Chapter 2, section 2.6 for a discussion of this term and its implication for black artists. That only three black British artists have attained significant international recognition is likely to change after the 2015 Venice Biennale, which is set to include more than thirty-five black artists, four of whom are British; Sonia Boyce, Isaac Julien, Chris Ofili, and Steve McQueen.

little obligation for him to address themes of race, representation and identity politics in his work, if at all, resulting in his development of a different style and a different set of concerns.³⁰³

That Tate's efforts to dispel perceptions that Ofili consciously engages with, and assumes a polemical position in relation to discourses of race, representation and identity politics had little impact on those viewing the exhibition is concerning because it suggests that black artists will continue to be pigeon-holed by their ethnicity, despite attempts by museums and galleries to reposition them in non-racial critical and historical discourses. However, a subconscious desire to 'other' black artists and the underlying perlocutionary statements in the exhibition are not the only factors affecting this response. It is also a consequence of the fact that Ofili *positions himself* as engaged in, and polemical about race etc. This occurs through the content of his works and also through his own comments about them. In Nesbitt's introductory catalogue essay, she dismissed interpretations of Ofili's works as 'statements about visuality and blackness', insisting instead that his works are simply reflections of his personal experiences.³⁰⁴ To evidence this, she included a quote, in which Ofili explains,

'Being a young black male in an art school that wasn't full of young black males gave me an intense awareness of the differences between what I would represent and what others might represent ... There was no one else painting black people or black life, so to speak, within my peer group at art school'.³⁰⁵

While this comment indeed demonstrated that personal experiences have provided the point of departure for Ofili's works, it also revealed that when issues of blackness and representation entered them, they did so as a consequence of his consciousness of being one of only a few black male artists entering the London art scene and a sense of the responsibility towards representing black people that this position might entail. The quote therefore contradicts Nesbitt's assertion and elucidates why his works have been interpreted as 'statements about visuality and blackness'. An additional quote included in Nesbitt's catalogue essay in which Ofili states, 'you had to decide whether you were going to join the party or not, and for me there was no choice [referencing his inclusion of black cultural references in his earlier works]' similarly evidences his commitment to

³⁰³ Ofili has noted that his position as the only black artist in his art school prompted him to address themes such as racial stereotyping in his work (Nesbitt, 2010: 9).

³⁰⁴ Nesbitt, 2010: 9

³⁰⁵ Ofili cited in Nesbitt, 2010: 9

issues of blackness and representation, rather than disproving it.³⁰⁶ On the basis of Ofili's own comments, therefore, Nesbitt's claim is incorrect, which subsequently brings into question why she would deliberately de-emphasise Ofili's active and critical engagement in issues of race and representation. By extension, it also calls into question why the exhibition failed to note the importance of his being the first black artist to win the Turner Prize and the similar significance of his contribution to the 2003 Venice Biennale - *Within Reach* (2003) has obvious references to Pan-Africanism and black unity and its display in the British pavilion undoubtedly challenged traditional notions of British identity and British art history.³⁰⁷

Unlike the other two exhibitions in this study, the Chris Ofili retrospective was not at risk of the problems of ghettoization that are associated with black survey shows. Its solo show format fostered a deep engagement in the artist's practice as a painter and enabled the curators to suggest how his work might be reconceived in relation to recent changes in his style and content. As with *Afro Modern* and *Action*, therefore, the exhibition presented a challenge to conventional but detrimental approaches to curating work by black British artists that were cemented in public art institutions in the 1980s and 1990s. Its proposition that readings of Ofili's work must not be ring-fenced by questions of race and representation ostensibly offered a fresh critical and historical perspective on black creativity compared to those typically offered in past exhibitions. However, its failure to articulate how Ofili might be positioned in a lineage of British painters, or as part of recent developments in British art, and its underlying emphasis on migratory and cross-cultural practices, prevented the exhibition from positioning the artist in mainstream discourses on British art and broader developments in contemporary art. Thus, although the exhibition is easily distinguishable from race-based exhibitions of the past, it did not succeed where those exhibitions failed in terms of its contextualisation of Ofili's work. Furthermore, and as the next chapter proposes, the exhibition's effective denial of Ofili's political and oftentimes oppositional stance (in relation to issues of race, representation and identity politics) was not reflective of the curator's (and by extension, the institution's) earnest desire to free the artist from associations and

³⁰⁶ Nesbitt, 2010:13. Although the burden of representation may have caused him to feel obliged to engage with these issues, his engagement was nonetheless intended. That Enwezor similarly contradicted Nesbitt's argument that Ofili's engagement with blackness has merely been 'a permissive engagement in all kinds of culture' in his catalogue essay, casts further doubt on the exhibition's central proposition. Enwezor contradicted the exhibition's claim by stating that Ofili's approach to painting is not simply an experimentation with form and colour. He suggested that the artist's use of unconventional materials and unusual display methods are a response to traditional associations of painting with white European artists and therefore an effort to reformulate the medium from his position as a black artist (Enwezor, 2010: 66 and 74).

³⁰⁷ The fact that Ofili won the Turner Prize was given a cursory mention in the introductory catalogue essay (Nesbitt, 2010: 16).

frameworks that might pigeon-hole him. Instead, it signals the exhibition's, the curator's and the institution's complicity in preserving cultural hegemony.

Conclusion

The exhibitions examined in this chapter have provided three particular examples of the ways in which publicly funded art galleries have responded to criticisms that their approaches to staging exhibitions – which are typically premised on art historical modes of categorization and display – both favour and reinforce prevailing white, male, western and elite perspectives. *Afro Modern*, *Action* and the Ofilé retrospective represent a particular endeavour within this broader phenomenon, in that they each attempted to offer non-hegemonic readings of work by black artists and thereby address their exclusion from art history's master narratives. *Afro Modern's* use of non-art historical concepts to prioritise black modernists demonstrated a progression beyond the simple black survey format. Its inclusion of white artists elucidated the contemporaneity of the work of black artists with those traditionally considered to be the pioneers of modernism and the exhibition therefore offered an ostensible challenge to established art historical narratives of modernism. *Action*, however, attempted to subvert the race-based group show format that it had initially been devised in accordance with, so that the chosen media and practices of the participating artists could provide the emphasis for the exhibition, and not their ethnicity. It was hoped this would be achieved through the display of each artist in separate rooms (preventing race-based comparisons) and through the repeated assertion in the accompanying interpretive texts that perceived boundaries of race, representation and cultural identity were not applicable to the works on display. The strategy employed by the Ofilé retrospective also involved an emphasis on the artist's engagement with his medium as opposed to his ethnicity. However, its solo show format provided a particular opportunity for Tate to undertake a more comprehensive examination of his work and the development of his practice, to reconceive and reposition him in terms of his contribution to the medium of painting, and thereby challenge many of the racial narratives and myths that have developed around his work. The primary strategy, in this case, was to completely avoid any discussion of the influence of his ethnic background on his work, as well as his potential relationship with other black artists, within the accompanying interpretive texts.

As this chapter has revealed, when examined at a perlocutionary level, the accompanying interpretive texts presented within and alongside exhibitions (captions, wall panels, catalogue essays, curator's talks etc.) oftentimes disclose curatorial and institutional attitudes and objectives that contradict the purported aims and locutionary/illocutionary assertions of an exhibition. As

opposed to challenging the hierarchies of race and geography found in established histories of modernism, the assertions presented in the wall texts and captions in the first half of *Afro Modern* supported and reinforced them. The utterances uncovered in section 1 of this chapter revealed that, in contradiction to the stated aims of the exhibition, its curators had not disinherited the long-held art historical conviction that modernism originated in Europe and, moreover, that any influence upon it by non-European cultures had occurred secondarily. In this narrative, the contributions of black artists to modernism become mere tributaries to its development. Their efforts were presented as subordinate to those of the better-known protagonists Picasso, Man Ray, Brancusi etc. Because the black artists were positioned as marginal, the established narrative and structure of modernism remained intact within the exhibition. The more thematic approach employed in the second half of the exhibition served only to exacerbate this problem. By focussing on concerns that only black artists have addressed, and failing to suggest within the accompanying captions how these particular concerns relate and contribute to the development of modernism, the final four rooms of the exhibition were indistinguishable from the flawed black survey model. They did nothing to alter established narratives of modernism or position black artists in a lineage of modernist practices. Their purpose, it would seem, was simply to prioritise black artistic practices. This in itself was not disadvantageous, but it posed no challenge to their ghettoization within traditional conceptions of modernism.

Action was similarly without impact. Although no assertions emerged within the accompanying wall captions and introductory wall texts relating to the ethnicity of the participating artists, by stressing that the works could not be confined by questions of race, identity and representation, the curators underscored the fact of the artists' ethnicity, thus bringing these issues to fore of the mind of the reader. As revealed in section 2, comments in the visitor's book evidenced the influence of this unwitting framework on the perceptions of those viewing the exhibition.

Although, as with *Action*, locutionary assertions were made in the curator's catalogue essay and public talk that Ofili's ethnicity is of no particular consequence to his painterly practice, it did not cause the artist to be inadvertently positioned in relation to issues of race, identity and representation. Indeed, when examined in isolation from the critical responses to it, the exhibition successfully emphasised Ofili's engagement with paint and his practice of exploring its possibilities as a medium. However, as section 3 demonstrated, those responding to the exhibition overwhelmingly did so by focussing on the presence of the aforementioned issues in his work and by placing him in non-British cultural contexts. A lack of significant discussion within the captions

or catalogue essays regarding the artist's contribution to the canon of British painting, combined with the use of critical frameworks relating to migratory and cross-cultural practices caused the exhibition to present Ofili as having no place in contemporary and historic British art. As such, it did not succeed in repositioning him and challenging established perceptions of his work that have typically 'othered' him.

That *Afro Modern* and *Action* did not succeed in their attempts to position the participating artists in non-racial critical and historical contexts resulted from their use of race-based selection and curation methods. Although *Afro Modern* included white artists and was devised in accordance with a sociological theme, its initial conception as a survey of work by contemporary black artists remained at its intellectual core and manifested in the accompanying captions. Similarly, with *Action*, the artists had been initially selected on the basis of their race, and in consequence, the curators struggled to present their work without reference to issues of race and representation, even if those references were made in order to denounce the relevancy of such issues to the work. As discussed in Chapter 2, race-based curatorial models, by their nature, require artists to be positioned and understood within frameworks that foreground their ethnicity (at the expense of other readings), making it impossible for those using the model to employ other critical frameworks. Indeed, as Biggs noted, 'we didn't want to be explicit about the artists' cultural/ethnic origin but if we didn't reference it or ignored it all together, there would have been no rationale for being part of the *Black Atlantic* programme [a race-based programme]'.³⁰⁸ However, that the same inability to consider Ofili's practice without reference to race, identity politics and representation occurred in the critical responses to the exhibition, despite the fact that it had not been curated through a race-based model, indicates that curatorial strategies alone are not responsible for this disturbing phenomenon.

This chapter has ultimately revealed a compulsion amongst gallery curators, art historians and critics alike, to consider the work of black artists in relation to issues of race, representation and identity politics, despite their best efforts and despite a widespread condemnation of this by black artists (who are often themselves complicit in perpetuating problematic conceptions of black creativity as Boyce's involvement in *Action* has evidenced). In Chapter 6, this compulsion, the continued employment of the much criticised approach of race-based curating, and also the curious denial of Ofili's polemic concern with racial politics are discussed as troubling manifestations of cultural hegemony and its protection through legitimate coercion. This next chapter also considers

³⁰⁸ Bryan Biggs Interview, 13 April 2011: response to Question 5 – see Appendix 8.5

how the potential to develop and present fresh critical and art historical perspectives on black creativity are impacted by curators (particularly in terms of their education and training), and reflects on the unspoken conditions that are placed on black artists by mainstream art institutions.

5. Same Difference: Progressive Methods in Curating Black Art and the Triumph of Cultural Hegemony

In Britain, race-based curating (the practice of devising exhibitions in relation to the ethnicity of the participating artists) was initially employed by black artists in the 1980s to make their collective presence known to the UK's galleries and gallery-going public. It was subsequently employed by art museums and galleries – primarily through the black survey exhibition format - as part of a response to criticisms of ethnocentric exclusion and as a demonstration of a progressive attitude towards black creativity. In this new context, however, race-based curatorial approaches legitimised the marginalisation of black artists. Widespread criticism of the method ensued, and in consequence the large-scale black group or survey show has ceased being the customary platform for black creativity that it once was. Exhibitions are seldom openly devised on the sole basis of an artist's race. However, the exhibition case studies presented within the previous chapter demonstrate that race-based selecting and curating methods continue to operate within exhibitions displaying work by black artists in publicly funded galleries, and moreover, that hierarchies of race and geography continue to inform the way curators interpret and present work by black artists. A curious characteristic of *Afro Modern*, and *Action* in particular was that both exhibitions acknowledged the negative impact that race-based curating and programming has had on perceptions of black creativity and its historicisation, whilst simultaneously employing a race-based curatorial approach and/or failing to place black artists in non-racial critical contexts.

An arguable explanation for the persistent employment of problematic race-based curatorial methods - and especially the black survey format - is that they allow large numbers of minority artists to be recorded as having exhibited in a museum as the result of a single exhibition and therefore, need only be staged sporadically in order to reasonably contest claims of exclusion from minority artists. Furthermore, the crude and perfunctory method ostensibly absolves curators and other museum staff from the arduous task of interrogating and making significant changes to established programming practices, and more specifically, from reconceiving art-historical approaches to curating so that style, content and practice are prioritised in the presentation of all artworks, regardless of the ethnicity of their makers. This explanation, however, does not account for the programming of small, race-based group shows such as *Action*, which, due to their scale, cannot remedy the dearth of black artists in a gallery's overall programme as speedily and numerously as a large-scale survey. The principal claim of this chapter is that black survey exhibitions and small race-based group shows both persist as a consequence of their function in legitimate coercion, which as is discussed below, is the process through which established relationships and structures of power are preserved. It is also in service of legitimate coercion that

black artists continue to be critically and historically positioned in racial contexts – either through the exhibitions their work is displayed in or by individuals responding to their work - even in cases where such a context is inappropriate and irrelevant.

Section 1 considers the causes for legitimate coercion in relation to the marginalisation of black artists in, or exclusion from, established narratives in British art, and discusses the modes through which the process occurs in the context of British art museums and galleries. The education, training and agency of the curator in legitimate coercion provides the focus for Section 2, which also positions the art museum and the discipline of art history as equally complicit in the defence of exclusionary conceptual and curatorial practices. Finally, Section 3 addresses the unspoken conditions that are placed on black artists wishing to attain success within mainstream art institutions, and in relation to this, the art museum strategy of distinguishing aesthetics from politics that disempowers work by black artists for the purposes of legitimate coercion. Options for artists whose work does not correspond with the tacit requirements of existing cultural hegemony described in this chapter are indeed severely limited.

5.1 British culture, legitimate coercion and race-based curatorial practices

British culture is nothing if not a culmination of centuries of human migration to and from the British Isles, and black people born in Britain prior to World War Two undoubtedly had an impact on it. This, however, went largely unrecognised, arguably because the British-born black demographic remained relatively small until the late 1940s, when a more considerable migration to the United Kingdom from ex-colonies in the Caribbean occurred (and indeed South Asia and East Africa in the decades that followed). By the late 1970s, the first significant generation of black people to be born in Britain as a result of post-war migration were reaching adulthood and staking a claim to a British identity.³⁰⁹ Given that British national identity had until that time been largely accepted as unified and homogeneously white, the mere existence of a significant population of British-born black people presented a challenge to the status quo. Until that time, black people in Britain had remained conceptually ‘foreign’, ‘other’, and fundamentally ‘not British’. The entrenchment of this perception is evidenced in Naseem Khan’s *The Art Britain Ignores* (1976). Despite being the first significant attempt in cultural policy to suggest that immigrant communities were contributing to British cultural life, black and other ethnic minority British citizens were framed within the report by terms such as ‘new-British’ (vs ‘native-British’) as if black Britons were

³⁰⁹ This is evidenced in works by artists such as Sonia Boyce (for example ‘From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born ‘Native’ Considers her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and her Roots in Reconstruction’, 1987 and ‘She Ain’t Holding Them Up, She’s Holding On (Some English Rose)’, 1986).

not legitimately British compared to white citizens (see Chapter 2 for a discussion on Khan's report). In such a context, a generation of black people staking a claim to a British cultural identity (an altogether different thing from British citizenship) represented a highly provocative act. Not only did it challenge the existing perception of British cultural identity as inherently white, but it also contested the exclusive hierarchies of race and geography that underpinned that perception. By rejecting the notion that they were 'foreign' and embracing an (albeit reconceived) British cultural identity, this new generation of black British citizens opposed the existing relations of power that had hitherto caused their participation in the constitution of contemporary British culture to be ignored. It was, in essence, a power struggle.

In Zygmunt Bauman's essay 'Scene and Obscene: Another Hotly Contested Opposition' (2000), power struggles are defined as the contestation of the distribution of power and its capacity to enable and disable individuals, groups, processes, progress etc. Bauman describes how power struggles are invariably waged in the form of 'legitimacy wars' in which the other side must be coerced, or forced, into obedience. Force is rendered inoperative if its legitimacy is rejected – it saps the resolve of those in power, and becomes reclassified as violence. He suggests, therefore, that those in power, or those seeking to maintain their power, do not aim to win a 'legitimacy war', but rather, seek to preclude a 'war' by creating the impression that opposition is irrelevant to their legitimacy. According to Bauman, this 'situation is reached when coerciveness of power has been successfully institutionalized; when it is no more noticed by its objects; when it is inseparable from the daily, habitualized routine and lived through as a part and parcel of "things as they are"'.³¹⁰ When force, or coercion, is subtly embedded into the 'every day' and through institutions it can appear legitimate to potential challengers, eventually becoming undetectable and impervious to opposition. Indeed, the threat to, or in Bauman's words, the notional 'war' being waged against an established conception of British culture (as homogenous, unified and definitively white) that has resulted from black people staking their claim to a British identity has been carefully managed through the coercive power of the nation's cultural institutions. Specifically, it has been managed through safeguarding the conceptual borders between the centre and periphery of British culture.

The border between the centre and the periphery cannot, however, be maintained through an outright exclusion of threats from the centre. As Bauman states, overt force can be perceived as violence, deemed illegitimate and therefore contested. Instead, carefully controlled spaces for the otherwise marginal are created within the centre (otherwise known as co-option). When these

³¹⁰ Bauman, 2000: 6-7

spaces are controlled in such a way that that control is undetectable or deemed legitimate, potential opposition is subdued and the existing border between centre and periphery is maintained. In consequence, existing relationships of power remain unchallenged. The threat that black British artists represent to long-held understandings of British culture can thus be subdued through occasional exhibitions displaying their work in mainstream art museums and galleries – the small spaces created within the centre. Race-based curatorial models and critical and historical devices that emphasise cultural difference, however, are the devices that keep these spaces discrete. As a result, their impact on the centre is negligible, and the overall boundary between the centre (the domain of the white artist in this case) and the periphery (the preserve of the black artist, and other minority contingencies) is unchanged.

Co-option - a form of legitimate coercion - is an essential operational feature of cultural hegemony (the manipulation of values and beliefs in a society so that one social group can establish dominance over another, and which can justify the status quo of that domination). In the words of Griselda Pollock, 'the potency of hegemony is not pure domination and absolute exclusion'; 'All hegemonic systems depend for their survival on some degree of pliability ... Certain activities or positions may be incorporated better to protect the underlying interests by concession and innovation. [In the case of art history] A bit of newness and controversy may actually keep the discipline alive and so will be permitted, but always at the margins'.³¹¹ The black survey exhibitions of the 1980s were a manifestation of this particular process of power. Numerous black artists were afforded opportunities to exhibit in mainstream art museums and galleries such as the Hayward Gallery and the Whitechapel Art Gallery through their inclusion in race-based shows. However, the curatorial format and its emphasis on the so-called cultural difference of black artists (and separation) from white artists functioned to position them - both critically and historically - as peripheral to the mainstream of British art. In this process, a state of equilibrium was maintained between the centre and the periphery, or the dominant and the dominated. However, as Rasheed Araeen explains, the state of equilibrium is not necessarily static: 'A movement is allowed so long as it is within the system's ideological framework, so long as its fundamental ideas, values, attitudes etc. are not threatened'.³¹² Indeed, spaces are provided in mainstream museums and galleries for work by black artists, but a conception of British art and culture as definitively white is invariably preserved, often in a subtle way, through the curation of the exhibition or display.³¹³

³¹¹ Pollock, 1994: 11-12

³¹² Araeen, 1988: 40

³¹³ That legitimate coercion occurs in exhibitions devised by even the most liberal and radical-thinking curators (such as the curators of *Action*, who demonstrated a strong awareness that black artists have experienced exclusion from

Separatism is the primary mode through which legitimate coercion occurs in the publicly-funded arts in terms of managing the perceived threat to British cultural life that is presented by the nation's black artists. As discussed in Chapter 2, it is employed in the creation of cultural policies that provide discrete opportunities and funding specifically for black artists, resulting in a separate 'black arts sector'. The manifestation of legitimate coercion in the development of cultural policy is not only problematic for black artists because it distinguishes them from their white counterparts (and thereby from established understandings of British art and culture), but also because it, in itself, produces another perceived 'need' for containing black creativity. This additional need results from the erroneous conception of 'cultural diversity' that is held by policy makers. Instead of conceiving of diversity as a condition that is inherent *within* all cultures, policy makers have focussed on the notion of British culture being differentiated by outside influences. As Richard Appignanesi observes, in arts administration the notion of cultural diversity is understood in relation to 'strains of separation between cultures' and the idea that 'strains of disquieting difference come from the 'ethnic minority' cultures'. From this perspective, diversity is a disruption to the status quo that must be 'governed so that the mainstream culture can function undisturbed by any threat of 'difference' from the inside'.³¹⁴ In other words, British cultural policy makers perceive cultural diversity in terms of it presenting a challenge to the established order of cultural life in Britain, rather than a naturally occurring aspect within British cultural life. A strategy of separatism is therefore employed in order to protect the status quo – in service of legitimate coercion.

Separatism manifests in the form of raced-based approaches to curating, resulting in small black group shows and larger black survey exhibitions. As noted above and in the preceding chapters, although this curatorial model briefly functioned to create awareness about the existence of black British artists in the early 1980s, it was soon rebuked for its tendency to delimit the critical and historical contexts in which black creativity could be positioned – for being a pathway for black artists to enter an 'ethnic ghetto' within the British art system. Its persistence in recent exhibitions is a consequence of its effectiveness in legitimate coercion; the black survey exhibition provides a platform for black creativity that does not fundamentally alter the hegemonic structures that cause black artists to be excluded from the canons of art history and established understandings of British culture. Despite the ostensible rejection of race-based curating in favour of new internationalist

mainstream art museums and established canons of art, and one of whom was a black artist herself) is evidence of hegemonic forces operating in spite of an individual's beliefs and intentions. Processes of legitimate coercion are not always consciously produced by curators and other art museum/gallery staff, but are produced by them nonetheless as a consequence of their relationship to other agents of hegemony, including academic disciplines and cultural institutions. This is discussed further in the next section.

³¹⁴ Appignanesi, 2010(a): 5

approaches to staging exhibitions in the 1990s, the compulsion to preserve the status quo and contain black creativity remained at the core of curatorial practice. New internationalist conceptual and curatorial models (or 'International non-white exhibitions' as Eddie Chambers has described them) ostensibly offered a broader context for the display of work by black artists (compared to the separatist and race-based exhibitions of the 1980s) and had obvious merits for black artists wishing to have their work positioned in global discourses on art. However, new internationalism did not manifest in Britain as part of an attempt to ameliorate the ghettoization of black artists, but rather, for the purposes of cementing it. By displaying the work of black British artists alongside that of black artists from elsewhere (primarily postcolonial nations in Africa and the Caribbean), international non-white exhibitions promoted the dissociation of black British artists with their white British counterparts. This enabled the museums and galleries that staged them to avoid an engagement with black British artistic practice, and by extension, avoid having to position black British artists in the British canon and the disturbance to the status quo that that would entail.³¹⁵ New internationalist curatorial strategies are thus 'legitimate coercive'; they are outwardly progressive (in that they create spaces for the marginal within the centre) but in fact defend a conception of British culture as unified and homogeneously white (and thus preserve existing cultural hegemony).

Afro Modern is entirely consistent with the new internationalist curatorial model. With its broad international scope, the 2010 exhibition represented an apparent departure from the standard black survey format. However, because the majority of works on display were by black artists (particularly in the second half of the exhibition) there was more emphasis on the relationships between different modes of black creativity within the Atlantic region than on the importance of the work on display to the development of art in the artists' respective countries. The curators would argue that this emphasis was the precise aim of the exhibition – that their objective had

³¹⁵ Chambers, 2000: 16-17. The extent to which cultural institutions rely on the international curatorial framework in their handling of black creativity is demonstrated in Dewdney et al's examination of Tate's history. In *Post-Critical Museology* (2013) it is claimed that Tate was only prepared to engage with the issues expressed in work by black and other ethnic minority British artists from the 2000s onwards, once thoughts about migrational subjectivity had been repositioned in an international context, and also once black artists were participating in international agendas (as a consequence of the efflorescence of the international art biennial in the 1990s). Palestinian-born Mona Hatoum was one of the first non-white artists Tate began to engage with (she was the first artist to display work in Tate Britain's Duveen Galleries in a series of sculpture displays in 2000), and Dewdney et al claim that this was because her work 'encapsulated the subject position with which Tate could deal, as regards the attention it could bring to the issue of cultural difference. Hatoum's work provided a politics of difference that could be firmly located elsewhere – Palestine' (Dewdney et al, 2013: 110). Tate's decision to feature Hatoum's work may not have been based on this aspect of her work alone. However, that work by other black sculptors such as Veronica Ryan, Perminder Kaur or Rasheed Araeen (whose work is less relatable to 'foreign' contexts) have yet to garner the same degree of support from Tate indicates that it is likely to have been a significant factor in their decision to feature her work in the most prominent section of the gallery. The renowned sculptor Anish Kapoor, who is favoured by Tate, also produces work that does not reference his ethnicity and which is just as easily positioned in British contexts as it is in foreign ones. However, as an artist born in India, and moreover, who has resolutely avoided the issues of ethnicity and identity politics (both in his works and in debates surrounding his work), British cultural institutions have a partiality for his work, for reasons that are discussed in section 6.3.

been to elucidate the syncretic, interconnected and transnational nature of cultures in the African diaspora. This was undoubtedly achieved within *Afro Modern*, however, the objective itself was arguably selected/developed because of its expediency in legitimate coercion. By suggesting that the concept of black creativity or that black diasporic cultures are incompatible with the notion of the nation state (which may indeed be true), the Tate Liverpool exhibition could present work by black British artists such as Sonia Boyce, Keith Piper and Chris Ofili without having to consider how that work might relate or contribute to British developments in art.

The reinstatement of the international non-white curatorial format through exhibitions such as *Afro Modern* is not the only route through which the race-based and separatist practices of the 1980s have persisted into the present. 'Legitimate coercive' processes in relation to black artistic practice are also thriving through the re-establishment of black art venues such as Rivington Place in London, New Art Exchange in Nottingham, and other similar projects in the fields of music and theatre such as the Bernie Grant Arts Centre (London). As discussed in Chapter 2, a small number of black art venues were established in the 1980s by black artists in order to create spaces to display their work (as opposed to fighting for space in established art museums and galleries that had invariably ignored black creativity). Many of these venues closed by the end of the 1980s, for various reasons, and they were arguably no longer necessary, given that institutions such as the Arts Council were encouraging the mainstream galleries they funded to devote funds and programming space to the work of black artists through cultural diversity policy. Furthermore, the establishment of INIVA in 1994 arguably heralded the beginning of a more integrated approach to engaging with black creativity, causing the black art venue to become purposeless and irrelevant (INIVA's remit was not only to devise exhibitions that would place black artists in international contexts, but also to intervene in and collaborate with the nation's larger publicly funded galleries so that black artists, both British and international, would feature in their programmes). This, however, was not the case. The establishment of Rivington Place and New Art Exchange signalled to mainstream galleries that the pressure to engage with and exhibit work by black artists had lessened (because these dedicated black art venues would now be charged with that responsibility).³¹⁶ The visibility provided to black artists by these new black art venues is balanced by the 'benevolent cultural apartheid' (as Araeen describes it) that has been created through their existence, the function of which is to protect the racial and geographical hierarchies upon which the British art system is based.³¹⁷ As tools of legitimate coercion, black art venues create a carefully managed and discrete space for that which poses a challenge to the status quo (black artists versus

³¹⁶ Indeed, this may explain the failings of *Afro Modern* in its attempt to offer a radical new narrative of modernism that would place black artists at its centre.

³¹⁷ Araeen, 2001: 52 and 2008: 126

understandings of British culture as unified, homogenous and white) within, but at the edge of the centre (the Arts Council funds these venues and is a mainstream cultural institution). The efforts of black art venues have little impact on the activities and functions of the actual centre (indeed, whilst working at Tate I became aware that larger, mainstream galleries have little knowledge of the activities of black art venues, let alone experience their impact).

In tandem with the reinstatement of separate black art venues in the British art system, the Arts Council has continued its practice of addressing a perceived need for more black curatorial staff in the nation's major museums and galleries through the development of dedicated training programmes for aspiring black curators. Similar schemes were established in the 1980s and 1990s by a variety of funding bodies and organisations, including but not limited to the Arts Council, but increased funding was given to this form of separate development in the 2000s through two Arts Council initiatives; the Decibel Curatorial Traineeships, and most recently, the Inspire Curatorial Fellowships, which subsequently led to a new master's degree in curating at the Royal College of Art that was specifically for ethnic minority students. Based on the presumption that the presence of black curators in art institutions can ameliorate the invisibility of black artists in their programmes, the approach of these separate schemes has been to provide training, work experience and mentoring for non-white curators and to insert them directly into otherwise hard-fought-for curatorial positions in the museum and gallery sector. Despite asserting that separate curatorial training schemes are based on a reductive and possibly erroneous notion that black curators are somehow more able to exhibit the work of black artists than white curators, Eddie Chambers (whose life's work has been to develop exhibitions displaying the work of black artists) concedes that, 'historically, it has often been the independent Black curator or project organizer who has facilitated the showing of Black artists' work'.³¹⁸ Indeed, the creation of the Curator of Cross-Cultural Programmes post at Tate Britain in 2005 and the subsequent increase in events, education programmes and displays relating to black artistic practice (including, but not limited to, a temporary display titled *Thin Black Line(s)*, 22 August 2011 – 23 April 2012, and *Afrodizzia*, an evening event relating to the Ofili retrospective, 5 February 2010) demonstrates the correlation between the employment of black curators in cultural diversity posts and an improved representation of black creativity within the space of the museum.³¹⁹

³¹⁸ Chambers, 2012: 231

³¹⁹ Note that the objective of the post-holder had never explicitly been to address black creativity. Rather, it was to realign relationships with potential new audiences through a reframing 'of the terms of reference in which cultural diversity was understood and to shift the knowledge-base in relation to both cultural production and reception' (Dewdney et al, 2013: 66). It is important to acknowledge that this post was created within Tate's Interpretation and Education department, rather than its Curatorial department, and therefore symptomatic of an institutional separation of the aesthetic from the political, whereby curatorial departments are understood as dealing with the aesthetic and

The actual impact of black curatorial training schemes on black artists is, however, more questionable. Whether black curators in mainstream art institutions are able to critically and historically position black artists in British histories of art and significantly challenge the hierarchies of race and geography upon which those institutions are built is dependent on the relationship of the curator, regardless of their ethnicity, to the discipline of art history and their training within the museum/gallery (discussed in section 6.2). However, targeted initiatives to train and insert black curators in mainstream institutions for the purpose of addressing black creativity, in themselves, support the status quo by promoting a parallel, but separate system of support and by emphasising ethnic and cultural difference. They fail to challenge the programming and employment practices of mainstream art museums and galleries that have excluded ethnic minority artists, and therefore, as with all agents of legitimate coercion, preserve the existing hegemonic structures upon which those practices are based.³²⁰ As Pollock explains, ‘However strategically necessary the new privileging of the Other certainly is in a world so radically imbalanced in favour of the “privileged male of the white race”, there is still a binary opposition in place which cannot ever relieve the Other of being *other* to a dominant norm’.³²¹ As with all separatist approaches (that serve legitimate coercion), when a black curator is employed as part of a thinly-veiled, cultural diversity initiative, they and their efforts are differentiated from the rest of the gallery/museum and its work, and cannot therefore, challenge the underlying status quo of the cultural institution.

Afro Modern and *Action* were manifestations of the race-based, separatist approach to arts programming. As a site for the promotion and defence of the discipline of art history, Tate created a space for a critique (or re-conception) of the modernist canon within its programme through its staging of *Afro Modern*. However, the perlocutionary statements presented within the exhibition’s accompanying interpretive materials supported an established, exclusionary conception of modernism, thus ensuring that the traditional Eurocentric canon was preserved. In service of legitimate coercion, *Afro Modern’s* underlying function was to preclude any significant, notional disturbance black creativity poses to the existing modernist canon. This same subtle function was also observable in *Action*. By emphasising the ethnicity, or cultural difference, of its curator Sonia Boyce, and not suggesting how the work displayed might be positioned in British or international developments in contemporary art, *Action* maintained the notion that work by black British artists

educational and administrative sections within the museum are responsible for the political. This issue is addressed in section 6.3. The reader may refer to the interview with Paul Goodwin (and in particular his response to question 7) for an insight into the role of the Curator of Cross-Cultural Programmes at Tate. See Appendix 8.12.

³²⁰ See Dewdney et al (2013: 49), Dyer (2007: 1) and Hylton (2007: 103) for more criticisms of black curatorial traineeships.

³²¹ Pollock, 1994: 5

is distinguishable from that of white British artists, thus upholding established understandings of British art and culture as definitively white.

Having been in use in the publicly funded arts sector for over three decades, race-based and separatist approaches to engaging with black creativity have become normalised in the cultural apparatus. Indeed, although there are artists, academics and curators that critique these practices, there are arguably more that have succumbed to them because they are for the majority of black artists (and others in related professions) the only route through which any degree of career progression can be achieved, and also through which funding can be sought. Exhausted by years of lobbying art institutions for the introduction of a less reductive approach to engaging with and supporting black creativity, but without success, numerous artists have resigned themselves to these circumstances and now operate almost exclusively through separate, race-based initiatives. The slow but insidious establishment of a state of affairs in which there is no option but to surrender to the status quo is a defining feature of legitimate coercion, as Bauman defines it. Separatist, race-based curatorial and programming strategies have become so deeply embedded in the way cultural institutions in Britain engage with black creativity that they can even be found (as this study has evidenced) at a barely discernible micro-level in exhibition captions. An acceptance of the status quo delegitimises attempts to resist cultural hegemony, and in the process, individuals become increasingly less capable of thinking and operating counter to the status quo, evidence of which manifested in the way the curators of *Action* and the Ofili retrospective were unable to position the artists participating in their respective exhibitions within British histories of art. Indeed, as the next section discusses, curators as individuals are just as instrumental in maintaining existing cultural hegemony as race-based and separatist museum practices are.

5.2 The agency, education and training of curators

Paul Gilroy's influential theorisations on the Black Atlantic provided the conceptual starting point for *Afro Modern* and the exhibition's curators claimed that in adopting such an approach, they intended the exhibition to reposition black creativity at the centre of historical discourse on modernism. Had they made a significant attempt to suggest within the exhibition's accompanying interpretive materials that black artistic and cultural practice had been essential to the conception of modernity and inherent to the development of modernism, their aim may have been achieved. Instead, and in contrast to Gilroy's thesis, the exhibition advocated an established, Eurocentric reading of modernism in its interpretation of work by black artists. A similar discrepancy between curatorial intention and the actual assertions of an exhibition occurred in *Action*. Although the curators of the 2010 Bluecoat exhibition acknowledged the negative impact race-based curatorial

frameworks can have on the critical reception of black creativity,³²² they nonetheless employed a race-based selection process when devising the exhibition, and failed to suggest in its accompanying texts how the participating artists might be positioned (or position themselves) in narratives of British art.³²³ That such a significant disjuncture could occur between the curators' intentions and the final assertions presented within both of these exhibitions demonstrates the degree to which individual curators feel compelled (consciously or subconsciously) to produce exhibitions in alliance with legitimate coercion, and in spite of their ordinarily radical or progressive dispositions. In this section, consideration is given to the mechanisms or avenues through which this compulsion is cultivated in the minds of individual curators and more generally within the field of curating, and the agency of curators in legitimate coercion is compared to that of the art museum.

One route through which hegemonic forces control the actions of curators (and compel them to devise 'legitimate coercive' exhibitions) is the pedagogic function commonly associated with the profession. At a conference on curating in Philadelphia in 2001, Tate Director Nicholas Serota described the educational responsibility of the curator as follows;

'I make no apology for continuing to believe that the curator represents and is, indeed, the brain within the museum ... [Their role is] to give structure to the experience [of going to a gallery/exhibition], and to take responsibility ... for creating the frame through which the public will see and experience the artwork ... Very often, one goes to exhibitions ... where you encounter a single room given over to a group of a single artist's work, and adjacent to that, another room given over to another artist's work ... Such displays are not, in my view, museums; they do not place an intellectual construct over a range of objects. The responsibility of the curator is to make readings, to rethink history, and to show his or her hand ... No one objects to a directorial viewpoint in the theatre ... it's not a question of the curator being top dog, but it is a question of the curator having his or her own view ... The role of the curator...is to create a frame that will give confidence to the audience, confidence to follow their own judgements ... The curator has to try and mediate this work in a manner that reveals knowledge but does not

³²² See Bryan Biggs Interview, 13 April 2011: response to question 9 – Appendix 8.5.

³²³ It may not have been the Bluecoat's objective to attempt to position the artworks/practices displayed in *Action* within any particular narratives or canons. Furthermore, one might argue that, in reality, most artists exist outside of the small number of successful artists that might constitute a canon, regardless of ethnicity, and therefore, that the four artists in *Action* are no different from other emerging artists the Bluecoat would exhibit who would also be far away from entering a canon. However, the exhibition's emphasis on a shared 'performative' element across the works was nonetheless an opportunity to suggest how the artists were contributing to, or developing new trajectories in relation to, performance/live art in Britain.

intimidate. It's a matter ... of using language in a way that ... tries to evoke associations in the mind of the viewer'.³²⁴

In Serota's understanding, which is by no means limited to Tate but widely accepted across the nation's art institutions, the construction of knowledge is the cornerstone of curatorial work. Knowledge constructed through curatorial work is not objective, however. Curators reproduce in the exhibitions they devise forms of knowledge received through their art historical education. The structures they employ and the frameworks they create to mediate the public's experience of an artwork are typically sourced from the discipline of art history, which is highly problematic given that it largely remains a gendered and ethnocentric field of study – the contributions of female and non-white artists are often marginalised in art historical curricula, if not ignored entirely.³²⁵ As such, an education in art history is likely to delimit the potential for curators to 'rethink history' (as Serota states) vis-à-vis the artistic practices of ethnic minority contingencies.³²⁶ Although it may be possible for a curator to subsequently learn of artists and practices not included in their art historical education, a deep internalisation of the discipline's exclusive doctrines may impede it. The hierarchies of race and geography embedded within established art historical narratives can become deeply entrenched in an individual's thinking (or subconscious) to the extent that even if they wish to challenge or subvert them, these hierarchies nevertheless manifest in the exhibitions they produce, as was the case in *Afro Modern*. Despite purporting to present a new and challenging narrative of modernism, the exhibition's accompanying interpretive materials supported an established and exclusive perspective by privileging white European 'masters'.³²⁷

The canonical nature of the discipline of art history provides the means through which curators become indoctrinated in the racial and geographical hierarchies of established art historical narratives. In *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (1994), Griselda Pollock helpfully identifies the 'psycho-symbolic' dimension of the canon and its resultant hold over individuals and communities as a key element in this process of indoctrination. The

³²⁴ Serota, 2001: 84-86

³²⁵ Araeen claims that 'It is common knowledge that what is being taught as art history in Britain is racially constructed in favour of the white race', and highlights that there have been several non-white artists in Britain who have been at the centre of significant developments in post-war art, including Abstract Expressionism, Kineticism, Minimalism and Conceptualism, but have yet to be included in these developments as narrated in official British art history (Araeen, 2010: 31-32). Similarly, Richard Appignanesi has asserted that 'what is glaringly missing in the institutions of art and art teaching is a mainstream history that recognises how and why the work of Asian, African Caribbean and African artists has contributed to that history' (Appignanesi, 2010(b): 124).

³²⁶ It may be argued that curators educated in the so-called 'new art history' do not reproduce the racial and geographical hierarchies found in established art historical narratives in the exhibitions they organise due to the critical or revisionist nature of more recent approaches to the field in academia. However, as is discussed below, curators that have had an alternative education are unlikely to be employed by established art institutions such as Tate.

³²⁷ At interview, *Afro Modern* curator, Tanya Barson, demonstrated an uncritical attitude towards the discipline of art history, by commenting, 'when I see myself getting a little too much on my soap box I have to shift myself back and think about the art history, because it's what I know' (Tanya Barson Interview: response to question 12 – see Appendix 8.3).

beloved stories and heroes that form canons evoke a sense of desire and a pleasure at an individual level that operates in a similar way to myths (which is more psychologically profound than that of the social or ideological level).³²⁸ As ascertained in the theorisations of Roland Barthes, time and history are ostensibly irrelevant to myths, thus allowing them to function as a form of depoliticised speech.³²⁹ As such, the narrative structures and characters contained within them (and with whom individuals self-identify – the psycho-symbolic dimension) are impervious to political challenge or change. As Pollock suggests, myths and art historical canons operate in a similar way; they both evoke a deep self-identification and sense of pleasure and desire in the individuals that engage with them as a consequence of having no apparent political significance. Indeed, the familiarity fostered through the reiteration of a narrative over time (and through the perpetual positioning of particular characters as central protagonists within it) engenders both a fondness and a sense of removal from the specificities of politics and history. To critique and challenge it therefore seems counterintuitive. It is the art historical canon's mythic nature, therefore, that gives it its potency. In Pollock's words, the mythic structures contained within art historical canons 'draw us in so as to construct an effective self-identification with the hegemonic forms'.³³⁰ As such, the discipline of art history is an agent of legitimate coercion. Curators may therefore continue to subscribe to art historical canons even in instances where they recognise that their own communities are absent from, or marginal within them. Indeed, in Araeen's staging of *The Other Story* (1989), his approach was to privilege the contributions of black artists to the development of modernism, rather than to denounce the canon of modernism altogether for its inherent exclusion of black creativity.

Given the hold of the canon over individuals as described above, to be an art historian and to work in opposition to, or contestation of, the canonical nature of art history may be close to unfeasible, for as Pollock states, to be an art historian (and other related professions including curating) is in itself to 'imply self-identification with the hegemonic tradition embodied in institutionalised art history'.³³¹ In the context of the average art museum or gallery, where curators are typically educated in art history (and where such an education is often a requirement), the display of work by black artists is thus inevitably constrained by an art historical approach to museum work. A possible solution may be for museums and galleries to employ curators that have not been educated in art history, but instead in other relevant disciplines in the arts and humanities. Injecting a multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives may rejuvenate the practice of exhibition-making and even be preferable to the segregation that has been reproduced in exhibitions derived from sub-

³²⁸ Pollock, 1994: 13-22

³²⁹ See Barthes, 1972: 142-145

³³⁰ Pollock, 1994: 8-9

³³¹ Pollock, 1994: 11

disciplinary formations that attempt to acknowledge and grapple with hitherto marginalised or excluded populations such as 'Black Studies' or 'Diaspora Studies'. However, an interdisciplinary approach would not prevent established hierarchies of race and geography from informing the way exhibitions involving black artists are devised.³³² Indeed, a 'polylogue' approach (an interplay of many and varied voices) was arguably employed in *Afro Modern*, where a range of individuals from non-art historical fields were invited to write copy for a small number of complementary captions that were positioned amongst the standard interpretive texts on the exhibition's walls.³³³ Yet, as this study has evidenced, the impact of this gesture was negligible in the context of the overarching narrative that emerged in the interpretive materials of the exhibition.

An art historical education and the hold of the canon over an individual's thinking are, however, but two factors preventing curators from producing exhibitions that explore the absent histories and protagonists in established narratives of art. An individual's training in the context of art institutions is another significant limitation in this endeavour, for the art museum itself has a deep and complicated relationship with the discipline of art history. When the current formation of the art museum was established in the nineteenth-century, artworks were purposefully displayed in ways that would demonstrate relationships between them and thereby the central tenets of the discipline of art history. As such, it was, at least in part, a product of the academic field of art history. Although new modes of display have recently begun to be employed (for example, in 2005 the collection displays at Tate Modern were rehung according to theme, as opposed to movement etc.), Albert Levi correctly notes that the art museum's relationship with the discipline of art history has continued into the present as a result of the fact that the majority of senior employees in art museums – the directors, curators and collecting staff who are responsible for the direction of art museum aesthetic policy - have been trained as art historians and, as is discussed above, have subconsciously absorbed the doctrines of the discipline, which subsequently manifests in their approaches to museum work.³³⁴

³³² In the specific context of the museum and gallery sector and its defence of the art historical canon, interdisciplinary practices may present a solution to some of the problems outlined above. However, an interdisciplinary approach in the *teaching* of art history may in fact be creating yet another separate sphere within which the practices of black artists can be ghettoised, leaving unchallenged the art historical methods and theories upon which much gallery work is based. This is addressed in section 6.3.

³³³ For example, Bryan Biggs, Artistic Director of the Bluecoat, was invited to write the text for one of the captions regarding work produced by black artists in the 1980s.

³³⁴ Levi, 1985: 37. There are others who have conversely argued that the curatorial act of representing art history in museum display has constituted many of the intellectual approaches and practices used in art history, demonstrating that whichever position one takes, the relationship between the art museum and art history as a discipline is complex and often problematic (Mansfield, 2002: 2; Preziosi, 2002: 29 and Whitehead, 2007: 48). As Donald Preziosi asserts, 'art history is not satisfactorily reduced to being the 'theory' to the museum's 'practice', nor the ghost in the museum's machinery. Nor is the museum simply – if at all – the exemplification or application of art history, or merely the staging or

A curator's internalisation of the orthodoxies of the art institution in which they work is also highly significant in influencing their production of exhibitions, and indeed in delimiting their potential to devise exhibitions that address hitherto ignored histories and artists. Training in the museum environment encourages an absorption of its conceptual models and modes of perception, which are in themselves entangled in the discipline of art history. The process of absorption - or indoctrination - does not necessarily occur as a simple, inadvertent consequence of working in the museum environment, however. Research conducted into Tate's curatorial practices and policies by Dewdney et al reveals that the institution intentionally cultivates a workforce that is removed from the latest research so that established modes of curatorial knowledge-production are protected (which, by extension, allows Tate to defend its relationship to the discipline of art history). To quote Dewdney et al, 'leading curators at Tate spoke ... of the tendency not to appoint people who held doctorates to the Curatorial department. The entry level preferred was Masters level... it was preferred that research training should be undertaken within the museum so that curatorial knowledge-production could be formed according to the needs of the museum itself - rather than in concert with the latest prevailing academic trends'.³³⁵ In this context, critical and revisionist perspectives or practices emanating from the so-called 'new art history' will have little impact upon the curatorial approaches employed by Tate and other art institutions adopting a similar approach to staffing. Furthermore, that this particular recruitment method involves a relatively overt defence of the art museum's internal status quo is significant for it provides a point of distinction between the art museum and the discipline of art history in terms of their agency in legitimate coercion. By utilising the beguiling power of the canon, art history surreptitiously entices individuals to defend the structures of power upon which the discipline is based, and is therefore an agent of legitimate coercion. In contrast, by excluding individuals educated in anything other than a traditional approach to art history the art museum freely discloses itself as a guardian of the hegemony upon which it was founded and continues to operate.

In spite of the employment strategies described above, there will nonetheless be curators working within established art galleries and museums who are engaged in the latest academic critiques and trends and who wish to devise exhibitions that explore traditionally marginalised/ignored narratives and practices. To work in complete opposition to institutional orthodoxy is unlikely to be an option for these individuals. Instead, a gentler, self-reflexive approach has offered a means through which curating can be acknowledged as an institutional function that has the power to construct meaning, knowledge and history. Established constructions can be subsequently

stagecraft of the dramaturgies of art historical analysis and synthesis. If anything, their relations are anamorphic - each transforming the other' (Preziosi, 2005: 50-51).

³³⁵ Dewdney et al, 2013: 104

unpicked so that suppressed narratives and practices can be uncovered.³³⁶ As part of this more self-reflexive approach, curators are employing new narrative strategies in response to, and contestation of, the constraints imposed by traditional art historical approaches to museum work. Such strategies frequently engage with alternative discourses on art and history, or alternative conceptual frameworks for the purpose of uncovering practices that were once subsumed and hidden within grand universal narratives. Key examples of alternative conceptual and narrative strategies being utilised to this end are the 1993 Whitney Biennial, the exhibition *Migrations: Journeys into British Art*, which was organised by Tate Britain in 2012, and of course, *Afro Modern*. However, as is discussed below, the new narrative/curatorial strategies employed in these three exhibitions were largely unsuccessful in terms of positioning work by traditionally marginalised artists in mainstream developments in art.

In the years preceding the 1993 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, it was determined that its goals as an institution would be to dismiss the notion of a homogenous national culture in the US, to place the notion of American art in a more 'global' context, and finally, to achieve these goals through an examination of international 'influences'. Accordingly, the organising concept selected for the '93 biennial was 'border culture' or *mestizaje* (Spanish American people with mixed Native American and European ancestry). The resulting exhibition was the first of the Whitney biennials to include a significant number of sexual and racial minorities (causing commentators to dub it the 'Multicultural Biennial'). However, very few Latino artists were shown in the final exhibition, despite the fact that *mestizaje* (a Latino cultural classification) had provided the organising principle for it. In Chon Noriega's analysis of the exhibition, he claims that it failed to challenge the myth of a homogenous American culture, not simply because of the dearth of Latino artists within it, but because of its reliance on the concept of hybridity. As he correctly notes, the notion of hybridity depends on the idea of there being discrete categories in order to postulate that one affects the other.³³⁷ In effect, the idea of the hybrid reinforces the idea of

³³⁶ This new self-reflexivity is discussed by Paul O'Neill in 'The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse' (2007). He explains that during the 1960s the focus of critique began to turn away from artworks to the exhibition as a critical space and also to the role of curators in the production of knowledge, histories and also in the production of the notion of art itself. Curators reacted to this new form of criticism by becoming more self-reflexive and self-critical vis-à-vis the authority implied by their roles and also by extending the parameters of the exhibition form to incorporate more open and discursive practices. Consequently, curating became a more dynamic process, and increasing emphasis was placed on curators' individual practices (as not necessarily tied to art museums), first-person narratives in exhibitions and the self-positioning of curators via personal statements. O'Neill notes the relatively recent emergence of the verb 'to curate' as an indication of this changing field. By the 1990s, the perception of the curator had changed from one of an administrative or caring role to one in which s/he plays a much more active and creative role in the processes of art production, display and reception, therefore likening the role to a form of artistic practice in itself. He states that the artist and the curator have now become understood as equal agents in the production of artworks' meanings, as does Emma Barker when she asserts that, 'The artistry of the curator has been foregrounded over the course of the last century' (O'Neill, 2007: 13-15, 21; Barker, 1999:13).

³³⁷ Noriega, 1999: 69-71

cultural separation, which in turn prevents minorities from being understood as contributing, or having contributed to, mainstream cultural developments. Rather than demonstrating how a range of internal and external influences had produced a unified, but heterogeneous national culture, the 1993 Whitney Biennial prioritised 'American' influences on other national arts.

A reliance on the concept of hybridity caused a similar problem in *Afro Modern*. As is discussed in the previous chapter, the exhibition attempted to explore the liminal spaces of culture and art production in the Atlantic region and to present a conception of modernism as having nodes beyond Europe, in the United States, the Caribbean, South America and in Africa. *Afro Modern* succeeded in terms of bringing to light less well-known art works and histories of art and contextualising them in the history of modernism. This in itself did not, however, present a significant challenge to the exclusive master narratives that rendered those histories and individuals invisible in the first place. As with the 1993 Whitney Biennial, an emphasis on hybrid cultural practices (as a result of the exhibition's attempted engagement with Paul Gilroy's theorizations on the Black Atlantic) encouraged the curators to determine what the relationships of influence might have been in the region. Previously absorbed structures of cultural hegemony consequently manifested in the way relationships of influence were presented within the exhibition; *Afro Modern's* interpretive wall texts and captions repeatedly suggested that work produced in non-European regions of the Black Atlantic were derivative of the 'great masters' of European modernism, thus reinforcing the established master narrative of modernism as a principally European phenomenon, rather than challenging it.

In Tate Britain's 2012 exhibition *Migrations*, the notion of hybridity was employed in terms of an exploration of 'external' influences that have shaped what is now commonly understood as British art. Specifically, the objective of the exhibition was to expose the many ways that migrants from around the globe have contributed to the development of the British canon of art, from the sixteenth century to the present.³³⁸ It was without doubt a ground-breaking exhibition in that it was the first at Tate to acknowledge that artists of migrant backgrounds working in Britain had legitimately contributed to the conception and development of practices and styles that are now synonymous with the British canon. In doing so, the exhibition challenged established understandings of British art as having developed solely in the hands of white British-born artists.

³³⁸ Rooms were arranged thematically: the influence of sixteenth century Netherlandish artists on British portraiture; the impact of Italian Neoclassicism within the Royal Academy; the influence of French artists in the nineteenth century; the contributions of Jewish artists to modernism and the avant-garde; the work of World War Two refugees exiled in the UK; the pursuit of a universal language of art by artists migrating to Britain from the commonwealth in the 1950s and 60s; the evolution of conceptualism in the hands of artists from ex-British colonies in the 1960s; the questioning of national identity in the work of artists from first or second generation immigrant backgrounds in the 1980s; and finally, the use of digital technology to express ideas about migration.

Furthermore, unlike the 1993 Whitney Biennial and *Afro Modern*, both of which reinforced established narratives and understandings of art's histories, the concept of hybridity was utilised successfully in *Migrations* to disturb conventional understandings of British art. However, this success was arguably neutralised by the fact that *Migrations* was a one-off exhibition and not part of an ongoing programming strategy. By presenting the work of British artists with migrant backgrounds in a separate survey exhibition, and furthermore, in failing to contextualise it alongside the work of white British artists, *Migrations* was complicit in the perpetual separation of non-white and other immigrant communities from the established canon of British art. The premise and successes of *Migrations* demonstrate that a progressive attitude towards black creativity - in terms of its inherency to the development of a legitimately British culture - exists within Tate as an institution, and despite any indoctrination in cultural hegemony that might occur in the education and training of its staff. Yet, the defaulting to separate curating (though in this case, not race-based) that the exhibition is undoubtedly an example of demonstrates that the forces of legitimate coercion continue to have hold over its employees.

The failure of *Afro Modern* and the 1993 Whitney Biennial to reposition black creativity within mainstream developments in art's histories is not simply the result of the two exhibition's reliance on the problematic notion of cultural hybridity in itself. An additional factor may be the popularity of the concept of cultural hybridity within postcolonial discourse. In the fields of cultural studies and postcolonial studies, the notion of cultural hybridity has been popular as a result of its potential to expose and disrupt the erroneous idea of discrete national cultures. Despite this advantage, the strong association between the idea of cultural hybridity and postcolonial debate precludes an effective employment of it within the context of an established art museum, for a significant engagement with postcolonial discourse in the context of the art museum would be equivalent to a contestation of its late colonial foundations. Thus, although postcolonial debate frequently enters the space of the art museum through contextual learning programmes, it has yet to make a significant impact on curatorial discourse and practice - the cornerstone of the art museum. Indeed, a postcolonial curatorial approach was tentatively trialled at Tate in the mid-1990s, but was ultimately rejected, as Dewdney et al reveal in *Post-Critical Museology* (2013). The value of Tate's collection as the representation of British art, culture and identity became open to critique in the late 1980s and 90s during the efflorescence of cultural studies and postcolonial studies. In an attempt to appease academic debate and demonstrate the gallery's openness to new revisionist art history, the institution invited Paul Gilroy to select and curate works from its collection for an exhibition titled *Picturing Blackness in British Art* (1996). The exhibition received much criticism from the national press, with the general grievance being that the institution had betrayed its duty

by lifting works out of the national story and canon of British art and repositioning them in 'the imperial and subsumed past of Britain's history abroad'.³³⁹ *Picturing Blackness in British Art* thus entered into Tate's organisational memory as an ill-advised experiment. An attempt to engage in postcolonial debate at a curatorial level was not attempted again for several years.³⁴⁰

A later attempt to engage with postcolonial discourse was made at Tate in the 2000s when debates relating to multiculturalism were revived in connection with New Labour policies. The gallery at Millbank had been rebranded as Tate Britain after the opening of Tate Modern in 2000, and as a result the national collection of British art was being rehung thematically – an altogether more radical and contemporary curatorial approach than the chronological and linear displays of the past. The thematic approach enabled the curators to juxtapose works from different historical periods and thereby offer novel readings that would challenge the orthodoxies of traditional art historical discourse that are based on artist, genre, or medium. One of the displays, titled *Artists Abroad* juxtaposed works by artists such as Zanzibar-born contemporary painter Lubaina Himid with nineteenth century British artists such as Richard Dadd and Philip Wilson Steer. In doing so the display demonstrated the gallery's attempt to offer a notion of Britain as rooted beyond the geographical confines of the British Isles and an attempt, therefore, to acknowledge the multicultural rhetoric of an inclusive Britain. However, much like *Picturing Blackness in British Art*, the exercise in postcolonial curating drew critical attention, but not from the national press. On this occasion, it was academics that found fault with it. A particular grievance was the way that the act of travel – as the organising principle for the display - was conceived from a geopolitical positioning of Britain at the centre, with the 'visitor' travelling towards it from the periphery. Indeed, the flow of influence between cultures was not presented as two way and equal (and therefore in accordance with postcolonial discourse) but instead, in alliance with a hierarchy rooted in British colonial ideology. Given the institution's foundation in the late colonial era and the underlying (or even subconscious) pressure experienced by its employees to defend internal institutional practices that arose from those foundations, it is not surprising that such a hierarchy manifested in the curation of this display. As Dewdney et al shrewdly observe, if Tate were to effectively engage in postcolonial discourse by renegotiating Britain's historical past in relation to contemporary perceptions of a multicultural Britain, it would require a considerable renegotiation its own institutional identity, which is deeply invested in maintaining its long-held position as an exemplar of nationalist heritage.³⁴¹ To do so, moreover, would necessitate a dedicated and wilful resistance against the entrenched compulsion to preserve existing hegemony. Such a resistance was proven

³³⁹ Dewdney et al, 2013: 51

³⁴⁰ Dewdney et al, 2013: 50-54

³⁴¹ Dewdney et al, 2013: 50-54

impossible in the cases of *Afro Modern* and *Migrations*. The notion of cultural hybridity was effectively misused in *Afro Modern* in order to dilute, and even annul, any challenge presented by it – as a postcolonial concept - to the hegemony residing deep within the practical and conceptual orthodoxies of the institution. Separate curating was employed in *Migrations* for the same end; to neutralise the exhibition's successful postcolonial presentation of cultural hybridity and to undermine its argument that migration to Britain has been essential to the development of the canon of British art.

Afro Modern and *Migrations* thus demonstrate that although curators are complicit in legitimate coercion as a result of their education in the academic discipline of art history (an agent of cultural hegemony), it is the art institutions that curators operate within, or in alliance with, that play the biggest role excluding black artists and black creativity from the centre of discourse on art. Not only do art museums and galleries indoctrinate curators in 'legitimate coercive' practices and provide spaces for those practices to be executed, but they also develop strategies to exclude philosophies and practices that are critical of existing cultural hegemony. In some cases the strategies are overt; human resourcing policies are established in order to prevent individuals engaged in critical debates about museology from gaining employment within curatorial departments. In other cases, the strategies are more concealed, often duplicitous, and thus 'legitimate coercive'; postcolonial discourse ostensibly informed the curation of *Afro Modern* and Tate Britain's *Artists Abroad* display, but established hierarchies of race and geography were embedded within both so that their potential to challenge existing cultural hegemony was nullified. In the next section, consideration is given to the art museum convention of distinguishing aesthetics from politics, for it is a particularly furtive and complex 'legitimate coercive' strategy that disempowers work by black artists within the space of the art museum.

5.3 Black artists and the conditions for their success

Thus far, this chapter has focussed on *Afro Modern* and *Action*, and has claimed that race-based curating methods were employed in each exhibition for the purposes of legitimate coercion. In contrast, the issues of race and ethnicity were not prioritised in the curation of the Chris Ofili retrospective – the third exhibition case study. This was not a simple, unplanned consequence of the solo show format of the exhibition (which is certainly less susceptible to the problems of racial ghettoization associated with black group and black survey shows), but a deliberate approach taken by the exhibition's curators. Unlike previous exhibitions of Ofili's work, Tate Britain's 2010 retrospective downplayed any influence being black might have on his practice. The notion that issues of race and ethnicity are not central to the artist's work may seem absurd given that the

majority of his paintings and drawings prior to his move to Trinidad in 2005 consistently included highly stylised depictions of the black form that undoubtedly reference issues of racial stereotyping. Nonetheless, this was one of the primary assertions of the exhibition, and its potential absurdity was moderated by the way in which it was presented. The suggestion – presented at a locutionary and illocutionary level within the accompanying interpretive texts – was that Ofili does not engage in the political when producing his works, but rather, that he allows his works to permissively reflect his cultural, physical and political environment. The perlocutionary purpose of this suggestion was to de-emphasise Ofili's active engagement in, or his political stance towards, issues of race and representation. However, this was unwittingly contradicted by quotes (also included in the exhibition's accompanying texts) in which the artist himself confirmed the importance of racial politics to his practice and that his artworks in turn reflect his position in relation to issues of race and representation.³⁴² The contradiction between Ofili's comments and the curators' assertions is highly significant, for it reveals the extent to which Tate wishes to alter the public perception of Ofili, even if that perception will be at odds with the truth. The institution's attempt to critically reframe Britain's best-known black artist so that he is no longer associated with racial politics, and moreover, so that he and his works are reconceived as non-oppositional is not symptomatic of an earnest desire to free the artist from associations and critical frameworks that have pigeon-holed him, however.³⁴³ As is discussed below, it is the result of two factors, the first being a conceptual distinction between aesthetics and politics within the context of the art museum that exists for the purposes of legitimate coercion.

A tendency to distinguish the aesthetic from the political is identified in research conducted by Dewdney et al as being cemented in the work of Tate's curatorial departments. It was found that curatorial knowledge was perceived as being produced through the curators' relations to art objects and, in consequence, curators who had 'non-political' expertise in particular histories of art were held in high regard. A good curator was understood as being 'independent'; free from any 'outside' influence, particularly politics. Furthermore, any calls to engage with politics were diverted to spaces in the organisation thought to be responsible for policy-making, governance and the organisation's strategic direction. The desire to remove the political from the sphere of the

³⁴² See chapter 5, section 3.

³⁴³ Such a desire would be understandable given that, as Divya Tolia-Kelly and Andy Morris note, 'Despite his high acclaim, limited critical attention has been paid to the artistic value of his paintings. The artist remains the object of our attention. Ofili has successfully won the support of the art establishment...In the yBa's world, Ofili stands proud alongside other artists from Goldsmiths College. However, unlike other artists within this yBa community, Ofili's race, ethnicity, and the origins of his aesthetics are key to the debate about his art' (Tolia-Kelly and Morris, 2004: 159). Ofili did not in fact attend Goldsmiths University, as suggested by Tolia-Kelly and Morris, but Chelsea School of Art from 1988 to 1991, followed by the Royal College of Art from 1991 to 1993.

aesthetic in the context of museum work is the result of several factors, one being the likening of so-called autonomous curatorial knowledge to the notion of the autonomous art object or practice. Although the notion that art is separated from everyday life has been heavily critiqued, the equivalent notion of independent curatorial knowledge has remained prevalent in many art museums. This is reflected in Tate's preference for employing curators who are not immersed in new or critical museology, which has arguably resulted, on the one hand, in its assignment of policy-related issues to the organisation's directors, and on the other, its assignment of theoretical or academic debates to its interpretation and education departments.³⁴⁴ The dissociation between theory, politics and art production, as exemplified in Tate's curatorial approach, may be partly responsible for the failure of many of the nation's art museums to recognise the work of black artists as being located in mainstream developments in art and in established canons of art history. Indeed, many of the black British artists who emerged in the 1980s produced work that was committed to the melding of aesthetics with political discourse and to engaging with the social experiences of migration, identity and racism, yet the autonomous aesthetic space of the art museum could not open itself up to the work at the time.³⁴⁵ An additional cause for this has been the development of cultural diversity policies. Although cultural diversity policies are ostensibly established in order to address the poor representation of minorities at all levels of cultural institutions, the act of making policy causes the issues that policies address to become understood as political issues, even in cases where those issues are rooted in a number of additional arenas, including the cultural and the aesthetic. Indeed, as noted above, Dewdney et al found that cultural diversity policies were understood across most of Tate's departments as the responsibility of those involved in organisational strategy, rather than a duty of every individual within the institution.³⁴⁶ The potential for cultural diversity policy to conceptually bind black creativity to the sphere of politics and thereby demarcate it from the sphere of the aesthetic is not limited to the context of the art museum. It has similarly impacted academia.

As discussed in Chapter 2, cultural diversity initiatives in the 1980s led to the establishment of black arts organisations and venues, and also encouraged mainstream art institutions to create roles that specifically addressed the arts of ethnic minorities (including numerous roles within the Arts

³⁴⁴ Dewdney et al, 2013: 101-103. For a critique on the notion that art is separated from everyday life, see: Burger (1992) and Gretton (1986). For concrete examples of how the phenomenon of distinguishing aesthetics from politics has played out in Tate's work, see Dewdney et al's description of Tate Britain's 2008 exhibition, *Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting* (2013, pp.104-105).

³⁴⁵ Smaller, regional art galleries such as the Bluecoat did, of course, engage with the socio-political agenda of work by black British artists in the 1980s, arguably because of their relative freedom to engage with local communities and local politics, and the absence of pressure placed on them to defend existing cultural hegemony compared to larger, national art museums.

³⁴⁶ Dewdney et al, 2013: 101-102. Whilst working at Tate, I witnessed first-hand an avoidance of responsibility relating to the issue of cultural diversity amongst the institution's curatorial staff.

Council). Individuals working within these organisations/venues/roles have subsequently formed professional identities as 'experts' in black creativity.³⁴⁷ As Leon Wainwright discusses in his essay 'Art (School) Education and Art History' (2010), this development has been mirrored in the academic environment with the creation of research and teaching roles that also specifically address black creativity (a recent example is the creation of two professorships in black art and design at the University of the Arts, London). In addition to making teaching and research on black and other minority artists appear as external to the mainstream art historical interest (and thus to be treated on separatist terms),³⁴⁸ the creation of these roles causes academics who do not feel a sense of affiliation with black artists to begin to dismiss their own potential as agents for change in the teaching of art history.³⁴⁹ The outcome of this is an increased perception that global or 'diverse' topics are someone else's domain and that they ought to be taught by 'experts' - that is, people with research specialisms in fields identified with 'diversity' and minority arts that are equivalent to those found in the field of cultural policy, the subsequent result of which is a near total disengagement with black creativity and issues related to cultural diversity among white academics.³⁵⁰

The long-standing notion that good curatorial practice should be detached from politics that has in turn fostered a more general distinction between aesthetics and politics within the space of the art museum, together with the erroneous perception that black creativity is necessarily political (that has resulted from the creation of cultural diversity policies), prompted Tate's peculiar take on, or presentation of, Ofili's work as apolitical and non-oppositional. It could either stage an exhibition that prioritised the political nature of Ofili's work, or it could offer a serious consideration of the aesthetic aspects of Ofili's oeuvre, but it could not do both in equal measure within a single show. To do so would have been to reject art museum orthodoxy vis-à-vis black creativity, and thus

³⁴⁷ Araeen would describe these individuals as 'black functionaries' (see Araeen, 1987: 23-24).

³⁴⁸ For example, I was invited to teach a 'one-off' session regarding the work of African diasporic artists in the Americas and the UK as part of an Association of Art Historians project to develop a new syllabus for A-Level art history in state schools. This was suggested to me after and despite my insistence for a more integrated teaching syllabus, in which the works and practices of black artists are included in the same histories as those of white artists.

³⁴⁹ Wainwright, 2010: 96-97

³⁵⁰ This was an actual finding of research conducted by GLAADH - Globalising Art, Architecture and Design History - a national project in curriculum change (Wainwright, 2010: 96-97). Specialist fields or sub-disciplinary formations within academia that attempt to acknowledge and grapple with hitherto marginalised or excluded populations typically adopt terms such as 'diaspora' and 'cultural hybridity' from other disciplines such as postcolonial studies based on the presumption that doing so will aid in developing an interdisciplinary space that enriches all of its participant disciplines. However, as Wainwright astutely observes, a reliance on concepts and models from other disciplines unwittingly reproduces the very segregation these minority studies aim to challenge; it creates a separate field of inquiry that is isolated from art historical theories and methods, allowing the latter to remain fundamentally unchallenged (Wainwright, 2010: 97-98, 100). As discussed in the previous section of this chapter, the divided art history curriculum that is offered in most higher education institutions is structured as such for the purposes of legitimate coercion. It not only perpetuates the conceptual exclusion of black artists from established understandings of mainstream developments in art, but it also encourages an actual separation of black artists from white (mainstream) artists in art museum exhibitions as a result of curators having been indoctrinated in this mode of perception through their art historical education.

destabilise the status quo. By insisting that Ofili's artworks are the result of a placid reflection of his environment, and by simultaneously focussing the visitor's attention on his practice as a painter, Tate could de-emphasise or deny the artist's political stance towards issues of race and representation, and thus satisfy an institutional need to distinguish the aesthetic from the political. The purpose of positioning Ofili as such was to suppress the inherent provocations in his work, and thereby delegitimise its threat to the status quo of the institution, the ideological foundations upon which it is built, and the hegemonic structures it exists to defend.³⁵¹ By denying the extent of Ofili's engagement with, and position-taking in relation to issues of race and representation, Tate could render his work politically impotent, quelling the threat his practice presents to the dominant culture.

That there are many black artists whose work addresses issues of race and representation and/or is oppositional in style and content – as a consequence of their experiences of exclusionary practices in established art institutions and life in Britain in general – presents a problem for the nation's art institutions. To exclude black artists altogether would provoke mass and even violent opposition (see the overview of Bauman's assertions in section 6.1). A 'legitimate coercive' solution is thus required. One such solution, as seen in the case of the 2010 Ofili exhibition, is to deny/subdue the oppositional nature of a black artist's work. More common solutions are, however, to either favour black artists whose work is in fact non-oppositional, or to include black artists in events/projects in which opposition is impossible. For example, there have been occasions when black British artists have been invited to undertake decorative projects at Tate Britain, such as the display of Ofili's 'Union Black' flag (2003) from its flagpole at the front of the building in 2010, Shonibare's commission to decorate its statue of Britannia in 2001 and the display of Hew Locke's 'King Creole' (2004) across the façade of the building. These three projects ostensibly gesture towards diversity or present a liberal attitude because they each signify an association between blackness and Britishness, or at least point towards the institution's engagement in debates that challenge established perceptions of British culture as definitively white. However, as Eddie Chambers notes, the notion of difference was not characterised in these projects as oppositional in the way that the work of the previous generation had been, but as a cheery signifier of multicultural inclusiveness.³⁵²

³⁵¹ The inherent provocations in Ofili's work result from his use of materials associated with low art (elephant dung, glitter, beads, pornography) in the high art space of the art museum, his challenging of high modernist display methods by having his work propped against exhibition walls on top of dung balls, his references to hip-hop (which as an art form is inherently oppositional, or was in the 1980s and 1990s), his depiction of the Virgin Mary as a black woman (that challenges established religious perceptions), all of which sits uncomfortably against his identity as a British man (born and raised in Manchester) who has been educated in the nation's most prestigious art institutions (Chelsea College of Art and the Royal College of Art) and the references to British 'masters' such as William Blake that can also be found in his work.

³⁵² Chambers, 2012: 125 and 189-193.

Compare, for example, Chambers' 'Destruction of the National Front' (1981), comprising a torn Union Jack flag presented in the shape of the Nazi Swastika, with Ofili's 'Union Black' flag which incorporated the Pan-African colours into the Union Jack. The latter ostensibly references cultural amalgamation and an integrational philosophy, whereas the former presented an outright rejection of British culture (as it was in 1981). Furthermore, as collage on canvas, Chambers' work could only have been displayed on the walls of a gallery, thereby presenting a hostility towards the British art establishment. By contrast, Ofili's flag could be presented outside the gallery, above its roof at a height almost out of view to the unobservant visitor, thus reducing the challenge it presented to the hegemony Tate exists to protect.

The difference between work produced by the 1980s generation of black British artists and that by Ofili is significant in his success. The work of Chambers and Piper et al was invariably characterised by art critics as 'angry' and as 'making an issue' of race. Although such a perspective arguably resulted from a misreading of the work, artists including Piper and Sonia Boyce frequently deployed the black image in order to raise powerful and provocative questions about British society and the place of black citizens within it.³⁵³ It is understandable that in comparison to the previous generation of black British artists, Ofili's work is interpreted as humorous and reflective, rather than challenging. Although the black image has similarly been at the centre of Ofili's practice (until his move to Trinidad), its presence has not been part of an overtly oppositional or confrontational stance. As proposed above, the 'blackness' represented within Ofili's works (his stereotypical depiction of black physicality, his references to black popular music and culture etc.) operates as part of a more subtle provocation against existing hegemony. For Chambers, however, Ofili's particular approach to representing blackness is highly questionable. In his view, Ofili exploits the problematic way in which white audiences regard and engage with black people. Indeed, his oeuvre involves a use of vivid colours that evoke associations with the 'exotic' and might erroneously be equated with African cultural forms such as the tourist-oriented Tinga Tinga painting style in East Africa. His use of repetitive dots of paint is reminiscent of indigenous Australian styles of painting, thus fostering an association with so-called 'primitive' or 'naïve' art. One might even consider his stylised and caricature-like depiction of the black figure as suggestive of the African sculptural forms favoured by primitivists, thus indulging an appetite for stereotypical and even racist imagery among white audiences.³⁵⁴ Tolia-Kelly and Morris' observation that Ofili's work rarely appears in

³⁵³ For example, see Keith Piper's 'The Body Politic' (1983) and Sonia Boyce's 'She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)' (1986).

³⁵⁴ Tolia-Kelly and Morris have made a similar observation about Ofili's style; his work 'represents a bioaesthetic that is marketable, palatable, and successful in an art world renowned for using ethnicity as a classification of the work of black artists. Ofili does not defy the dominant discourse of 'primitivism'; instead he uses its legacy to win the prize...Ofili's

venues targeted at black audiences may support Chambers' claim that Ofili produces 'black art for white audiences' in other words, artwork that appeals to white racist sensibilities.³⁵⁵ However, the mainstream contexts in which Ofili's work is typically displayed is more likely to be a consequence of his success, which enables him to exhibit in large, national and international venues. Black art venues are generally small and located in community contexts, and moreover, cannot offer significant financial benefits and publicity to the artists who exhibit in them.³⁵⁶

Although Ofili's particular approach to painting as described above has certainly been critical to his popularity within the art establishment, there are other equally, if not more, significant factors in his success in mainstream, publicly funded art museums. One is his success in the commercial art world. The generation of black British artists that graduated from art school in the late 1970s and early 1980s were largely dependent on state funding, and as discussed in Chapter 2, found their careers being constrained as a result of the fact that publicly funded art had been tasked with ameliorating the nation's social problems. By contrast, black artists graduating from art schools in the 1990s began their careers at a time when the commercial art sector was becoming just as prominent as the publicly funded sector, if not more so. Representation by a commercial gallery was fast becoming an important criterion for assessing an artist's worth, and at the same time, commercial gallerists were becoming just as important and as trusted in the international art arena as curators once were. One consequence of this was that the purposes for state arts funding were further delimited to social uplift and addressing social inequalities.³⁵⁷ Another consequence was that the market began to play a greater role in distributing opportunities to minority artists. As Kobena Mercer has observed, most commercial galleries represented at least one or two black or ethnic minority artists by the end of the 1990s, to the extent that those artists' visibility in the art world was no longer 'special', but normal. In this process, which he describes as 'multicultural normalisation', the notion of cultural difference had become integrated into the mainstream and made visible to the extent that it was no longer deemed an issue for debate, particularly in the commercial sphere.³⁵⁸ In this environment, black artists who managed to secure representation by a commercial gallery, such as Ofili, Yinka Shonibare and Steve McQueen, were able to attain a degree of career success that would have been impossible for black artists of the previous

success is based on a palatable postcolonial primitivism where the mark of ethnicity is within the art, as an over-defined, sensualised, and benign black roots culture which is saleable and collectable' (Tolia-Kelly and Morris, 2004: 160).

³⁵⁵ Tolia-Kelly and Morris, 2004: 162; Chambers, 2012: 136-137 and 169

³⁵⁶ I concede, however, that his success in itself may be due to his production of 'black art for white audiences', as Chambers proposes.

³⁵⁷ See Chambers, 2012: 99-100 for further discussion of this development.

³⁵⁸ Mercer, 1999: 55-56. Similarly, Jean Fisher has commented that by the end of the 1990s, 'cultural marginality [was] no longer a problem of invisibility but one of excess visibility in terms of a reading of cultural difference that is too easily marketable' (Fisher, 1996: 35).

generation, and their success created an illusion that black artists in general had 'made it', when in fact, the majority of practicing black British artists continued to struggle to attain recognition in either the commercial or publicly funded sector, and could only have their work patronised in association cultural diversity initiatives.³⁵⁹ Ofili, Shonibare and McQueen were comparatively free to explore whichever artistic avenues they wished as a consequence of their success through the commercial route.

However, the artistic freedom experienced by Ofili et al has been superficial. Success in the commercial sector (and subsequently in public art institutions, because the state art sector is responsive to what the commercial sector deems worthy of recognition) is generally bestowed on black artists on the tacit condition that they refrain from placing an emphasis on the issues of race, representation and cultural difference when discussing their work.³⁶⁰ To do so would cause a two-pronged disturbance to the status quo; it would challenge the multicultural normalisation that had enabled their success whilst also conflicting with the art museum orthodoxy of distinguishing the aesthetic from the political (because, as discussed above, issues of race and ethnicity are perceived as belonging to the domain of the political). In this set of circumstances it is unsurprising that Ofili has been reluctant to cite the preceding generation of black British artists among his influences (another factor in his success) and reticent to encourage an association with them, given the nature of their work and their comparative lack of success.³⁶¹ To allow his work to be historicised in such a way would implicate his work in oppositional, politically engaged artistic practices, which, by

³⁵⁹ Ofili is represented by Victoria Miro, Yinka Shonibare by Stephen Friedman and Steve McQueen by Thomas Dane. Of the 1980s generation of black British artists, only Sonia Boyce achieved a degree of commercial success ('Missionary Position II', 1985 and 'From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born 'Native' Considers her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and her Roots in Reconstruction', 1985, were both acquired by Tate in 1987). Contemporaries of hers such as Keith Piper and Eddie Chambers have only recently been admitted to such important national collections (Piper's 'Go West Young Man', 1987, was acquired by Tate in 2008 and Chambers' 'Destruction of the National Front', 1979-1980, was acquired by Tate in 2013). To date there is little knowledge about which works by black British artists are held in national collections and the dates these works were acquired. However, a new research project at University of the Arts London and Middlesex University titled *Black Artists and Modernism* is due to commence in mid-2015 and one of its objectives is to produce a database detailing this information.

³⁶⁰ Eddie Chambers has observed how multicultural normalisation has also impacted the way that Tate relates to black British artists; he explains that there is 'a distinct reticence on the part of official Tate narratives and Tate spokespeople to acknowledge its alleged historical discriminatory or perhaps exclusionary tendencies'. For example, nothing is mentioned in Tate's Turner Prize related publications and website about how black artists have or have not figured in the history of the prize, even though the variety of materials and media that have featured in its history and the number of women that have been awarded (and have been involved in the awarding of) the prize are openly noted. Nor is it noted that Anish Kapoor was the first non-British born artist to win the prize, nor that Ofili was the first black artist to win it (Chambers, 2012: 187-189). As discussed in the previous chapter, this was also the case in Tate's Ofili retrospective exhibition, where his being the first black artist to win the Turner prize was only briefly noted in the accompanying interpretive leaflet and catalogue essays. Furthermore, there was no discussion as to the significance of Ofili's Turner Prize win vis-à-vis his relationship to the British canon of art or his international prominence. Tate's silence regarding its engagement with black artists is indeed symptomatic of multicultural normalisation.

³⁶¹ As noted in the previous chapter, Ofili has been resistant to being claimed as a 'Black artist' who might pursue a particular political agenda, explaining that 'a lot of black art that came before me was set up to critique the system and I thought that was boring. Basically you would have to be right all the time... I just wanted to try to be who I am' (Ofili cited in Younge, 2010).

extension would present a challenge to the status quo of the commercial and publicly funded art sectors, thereby causing him to lose their favour and jeopardise his success. Compliantly evading questions of race and ethnicity when discussing his work and adopting an apolitical facade has thus enabled Ofili to maintain his position as Britain's most successful black artist.

Avoiding discussions of race and feigning a non-oppositional stance are not the only tacit requirements imposed on black artists seeking approval from public art museums. In curious contradiction, a successful black artist is obliged to produce work that reveals their non-white ethnicity, and thereby, their supposed cultural difference from the white mainstream.³⁶² As discussed above, Ofili has developed an approach to painting that adheres to this condition, and it is no coincidence that Yinka Shonibare's work also incorporates a particular combination of characteristics that allow it to be interpreted by art professionals and the general public as constituting a supposedly non-British aesthetic. Shonibare's paintings, sculptures and installations are similarly humorous, rich in colour and seemingly redolent of 'exotic' African cultural forms, enabling him to gain the partiality of Britain's art institutions, and making him another (if not the *only* other) highly celebrated contemporary black artist in Britain. His work is widely acknowledged as gently problematizing or mocking notions of authenticity and identity in relation to Britain's colonial past. However, like Ofili, Shonibare may also be accused of producing 'black art for white audiences' as a consequence of his use of African 'fancy prints'. These textiles are frequently mistaken as 'authentically African', enabling curators/critics/historians to position his work in relation to his Nigerian heritage, and thereby, to distinguish his work from that produced by white British artists.³⁶³

Admittedly, part of the attraction towards both Shonibare and Ofili's work is its considerable sensual appeal. Their use of intense colours, decorative motifs/patterns and unusual juxtaposition of materials can arguably charm even those with no interest in the content of the work. By displaying it, art museums and galleries are able to entice large audiences whilst at the same time refute accusations of racism or ethnocentrism by virtue of having shown work by a black artist. However, it is the extent to which Shonibare and Ofili's work demonstrates their ethnicity that provides the primary motivation for displaying it in the art museum. The mark of ethnicity that characterises the work allows the art establishment to evidence the supposed cultural difference of

³⁶² That critics and the public frequently find 'marks' of ethnicity in the work of black artists, even when it is not there, or not particularly significant to the work, not only evidences that the importance of this 'requirement', but also that it exists outside public and commercial institutions of art. For examples, see the analysis of press and public responses to the Ofili and *Action* exhibitions, provided in the previous chapter.

³⁶³ See Picton (1994) for a history of African 'fancy prints'. It is interesting to note that Shonibare's 'African' textile paintings were selected by Olu Oguibe for the Bluecoat's *Seen/Unseen* exhibition (1994) when Oguibe contextualised them politically in relation to debates about the exoticisation of African culture.

black British artists from the mainstream of British culture, and to displace black creativity from the centre of discourse on British art. Furthermore, by conforming to the conditions the art establishment assigns to black artists, Ofili and Shonibare contribute to absolving art institutions from altering their exclusionary practices, and are therefore complicit in preserving existing cultural hegemony. As Araeen astutely observes, the aesthetic developed within the work of Ofili and Shonibare is a triumph of the system; they have been coerced 'into playing predetermined stereotypical roles' that do 'not threaten the centre and its exclusive white privilege', therefore allowing the system 'to reinforce and maintain its Eurocentric ideology'.³⁶⁴ Their work, and indeed their success, is the result of 'legitimate coercive' conditions. Multicultural normalisation, the distinguishing of aesthetics from politics in the art museum, and the obligation to produce 'black art for white audiences' together create spaces for black artists within the centre/mainstream that give the illusion of racial equality within the British art establishment. In reality, however, these spaces are discrete, serving to preserve the status quo and defend the existing border between centre and periphery.³⁶⁵

Conclusion

³⁶⁴ Araeen, 2000: 58-63

³⁶⁵ In 2007 the National Gallery commissioned Yinka Shonibare to stage an 'intervention' in its collection, resulting in an installation featuring two headless mannequins dressed in Georgian wear (made with African 'fancy print' fabric), aiming muskets at a suspended pheasant. Titled 'Colonel Tarleton and Mrs Oswald Shooting' (2007), the installation was displayed in the Barry Room, where the two paintings that inspired the work had originally been positioned - Johann Zoffany's 'Mrs Oswald' (1763-4) and Sir Joshua Reynolds' 'Colonel Tarleton' (1782). Zoffany and Reynolds' paintings were relocated to an adjacent room and displayed alongside another work of Shonibare's titled 'Colonel Tarleton's Hat' (2007), and were accompanied by wall texts, maps and archival materials that served to contextualise the role that the transatlantic slave trade had played in the lives of the two sitters. Together, the two rooms comprised the exhibition *Scratch the Surface* – the National Gallery's commemoration of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade act. As with many of Shonibare's works, his installation employed humour to approach political content. In this case, a sense of the ridiculous was evoked by the two figures, who despite being headless, continued to enjoy the hunt. The work referenced the mindlessness of the British aristocracy, in terms of their ability to disconnect from the abuse and exploitation that funded their luxurious lifestyles. As such, it may be argued, that by commissioning this deeply critical engagement with the works in its collection, the National Gallery acknowledged that revisionist wall texts are insufficient when addressing certain episodes of history, and demonstrated, therefore, a progressive approach to museum work and curating. However, that this exhibition was staged as part of the bicentenary commemorations (which for all intents and purposes functioned in much the same way as Black History Month in terms of profiling black creativity through a prism of race) and was curated by Jonah Albert on temporary placement at the gallery through positive discrimination (the Inspire Curatorial Fellowship programme) casts doubt over whether such a critical and progressive approach would have been employed within the gallery's normal programme and by its permanent staff. Indeed, in Miranda Stearn's discussion of *Scratch the Surface*, she suggests that when museums and galleries invite artists to stage interventions, the practice of critique is delegated to an artist precisely because of their externality to the institution, which thus enables the museum to avoid taking curatorial responsibility for the act of critiquing their own collections and the histories of the works contained within them. Criticism of an art institution's collections, and indeed practices, can be more easily undertaken by individuals that do not hold a permanent position within the institution and thus, the 'risk element', as she describes it, is transferred to, and even contained within, a location that is external to it (legitimate coercion). Indeed, Stearn's research reveals that the intervention staged by Shonibare had little impact on the National Gallery's interpretation and representation of the works he had responded to. For example, the information provided in the gallery's online catalogue relating to Reynolds' 'Colonel Tarleton' was not amended after the exhibition to mention the sitter's firm support of the slave trade (see Stearn, 2014: 109).

Never have so many black British artists concurrently exhibited in publicly funded art museums and galleries in Britain than in the spring of 2010 (Black History Month notwithstanding). It was a critical moment for black artists and indeed those concerned with black British art history, for it signified the beginnings of a paradigm shift within the nation's art institutions in terms of the way they engaged with and represented black artists. Not only did *Afro Modern, Action*, and the Chris Ofili retrospective (and arguably some of the other exhibitions devised as part of the *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme) shine a rare spotlight on black creativity, but they also trialled new curatorial strategies for displaying work by black artists compared to those typically employed by public art venues in the past. By utilising non-art historical narrative and conceptual models and by prioritising the individual practices of black artists, the apparent shared aim of these exhibitions was to critically and historically position the participating artists in contexts other than those of race, representation and identity politics. This apparently progressive curatorial agenda in turn promised a change in prospect for succeeding generations of black artists, who might experience genuine equality with their white contemporaries. The exhibition analyses in this study were thus conducted in order to ascertain the current conditions for black artists within the publicly funded museum and gallery sector vis-à-vis their historicisation in established canons and their placement in discourses of contemporary art. Although two of the three exhibitions were staged by one institution (Tate) and are therefore not indicative of the approaches of every public museum and gallery, they are, nonetheless, highly revealing. The rigorous examination of the exhibitions' accompanying interpretive texts presented in the previous chapter disclosed an entrenched reliance on, and allegiance to, established hierarchies of race and geography and race-based curatorial methods within the respective museums/galleries. This chapter has proposed that these ghettoising methods have endured despite widespread criticism as a consequence of their effectiveness in legitimate coercion - the subtle process through which established relationships and structures of power are protected from contestation by powerless factions.

'Legitimate coercive' practices vis-à-vis black creativity have developed in relation to an erroneous but established perception of British culture as definitively white, and more specifically, the threat black British people present to it simply as a result of their existence. The nation's cultural institutions manage this threat by defending the notional boundary between the centre and periphery of British culture. Occasional exhibitions displaying work by black artists in mainstream museums/galleries enable them to preclude accusations of outright exclusion, but race-based curatorial methods and a subtle emphasis on cultural and ethnic difference within exhibitions do the vital work of containing black creativity so that it cannot impact the established understanding

of British culture. 'Legitimate coercive' practices and process have primarily manifested in the form of ethnic separatism (the black survey show, the small black group exhibition, the international non-white exhibition, the black art venue, and the creation of jobs for black curators through positive discrimination), and are now cemented within the cultural apparatus to the extent that they are widely accepted by black artists as the only route through which a career can be developed. In consequence, existing cultural hegemony is preserved. That race-based curatorial methods are employed by curators who ordinarily demonstrate a progressive attitude towards black creativity and its relationship to British culture is partly a consequence of their education in the discipline of art history, which as an ethnocentric field of study prevents individuals from challenging established hierarchies of race and geography and thus from producing exhibitions that position black artists within established canons. It is also a consequence of their training within the space of the art museum or gallery, which in itself is inextricably linked to the discipline of art history, and moreover, excludes philosophies and practices that are critical of existing cultural hegemony. One way in which cultural institutions protect existing hegemony from the 'threat' represented by populations that are both black and British is to favour artists whose work is non-oppositional (or whose work can be erroneously presented as such) over those whose work is overtly oppositional. In this context, artists such as Ofili and Shonibare have developed artistic styles that can easily be interpreted within the space of the museum as permissive, humorous, and unthreatening, thus allowing them to gain the partiality of the art establishment. Equally crucial to their success within the mainstream, however, has been the mark of ethnicity within their work that has allowed art institutions to verify the supposed cultural difference of black British artists from the mainstream of British culture, and to displace black creativity from the centre of discourse on British art.

Black British artists are thus in a curious bind; in order to attain the patronisation and partiality of the nation's cultural institutions, their work must be non-oppositional and demonstrative of their ethnic and cultural difference from the white mainstream, but a public admission of the political significance of being black and British is taboo. The remaining options for artists that resist these conditions (as demonstrated in *Action* and the final sections of *Afro Modern*) are inclusion in race-based survey or group exhibitions that by default prioritise their ethnicity above the style and content of their work, that position them as other to the mainstream and displace them from discourses of British art. In the concluding chapter, final reflections are offered regarding the extent of change that has occurred since the 1980s - in terms of art museum and curatorial practice relating to black creativity and in terms of the current and future prospects of black artists - and

possible strategies for resisting the limited conditions for black artists that are described above are considered.

6. Conclusion

Publicly funded art museums and galleries are commonly understood as sites where a society's past is remembered and contested. However, they also play a vital role in reproducing the contemporary attitudes, practices and conflicts of the societies they exist in, for the way in which we choose to understand and represent our past is a direct consequence of our relationship to, and understanding of, the present. Thus, recent developments in curating exhibitions that display work by black British artists not only reveal contemporary attitudes towards black creativity, but they also disclose current perceptions and memories of, and contestations over, their position in British society and culture. Through a rigorous examination of three exhibitions that were staged in 2010, and an analysis of one gallery's history of engaging with black artists, this study has sought to ascertain whether, and to what extent, recent curatorial approaches offer new modes of engaging with black artists compared to those employed in the 1980s, and by extension, whether institutional attitudes and practices relating to black creativity have changed between 1976 and 2010.

In the 1980s, the concerns and activities of black artists were typically omitted from narratives of British art history as a consequence of the way temporary exhibitions in publicly funded galleries critically and historically positioned them as culturally different from the white mainstream. This act invalidated their share in Britain's heritage and their contributions to contemporary British society. Its effect was thoroughly demoralising and disempowering, particularly because, as British citizens, they had a civil right to representation by state funded art institutions and, thereby, to inclusion in official narratives of all relevant aspects of the nation's history. One of the concerns of this study, therefore, has been to ascertain whether the curatorial approaches employed in contemporary exhibitions successfully facilitate the inclusion of black artists in British art history, and by extension, to establish whether exclusionary institutional practices relating to black creativity have been abandoned or preserved. By interrogating and testing claims made on behalf of the three exhibitions selected for analysis, the research has evidenced that despite the use of supposedly alternative conceptual and historical devices in curating, art museums/galleries have not sufficiently progressed beyond the delimiting practices of the past.

The approach employed in this study is premised on an understanding of temporary exhibitions as the primary mode through which museums/galleries construct and convey knowledge and also through which they project cultural authority. Although these communications are not limited to an exhibition's captions, wall texts and catalogue essays, the narratives presented in accompanying interpretive texts often reproduce hierarchies and perceived relationships of influence that compellingly shape the way we engage with artworks. A thorough critical analysis of the narratives developed through the interpretive texts in *Afro Modern, Action* and the Ofili retrospective was therefore conducted in order to expose how British museums engage with black creativity, and to disclose contemporary institutional attitudes towards black artists. To comprehend these complex communications, the study employed J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts to consider *what* was said in these texts, and also *how* it was said. Particular importance was placed on perlocutionary speech acts (that which is intentionally and unintentionally achieved through making a statement) allowing the study to reveal critical differences between the purported and actual achievements of the exhibitions. As such, a textual analysis not only yielded an insight into current institutional attitudes towards black British artists, but it also revealed the impact of narrative production within exhibitions.

The research has been informed by debates about separatism, the evocation of cultural difference and the relations of representation relating to black creativity that took place during the 1980s and 1990s, and which were framed by artists and scholars such as Rasheed Araeen, Eddie Chambers, Kobena Mercer and Paul Gilroy. Their insights and assertions, and the concepts and vocabularies they developed have provided the starting point for the study and have influenced my understanding of the practices revealed by my research. Whilst the study therefore builds on these past debates, it is also positioned within the burgeoning field of exhibition histories or exhibition studies, in terms of the emphasis this new tranche of art historical enquiry places on what it means to analyse art in the context of its public display and the ways in which art institutions make use of exhibitions. In this concluding chapter, I offer a synthesis of my research findings, the key issues raised by them and a final response to the questions posed in the introduction. The broader implications and impacts of these conclusions for existing knowledge and future research on the historicisation of black creativity through its representation by public art museums and galleries is also considered, along with avenues for further related study.

The use of separate, race-based curatorial, programming and staffing strategies has been an evolving yet persistent, and thus defining feature of the way publicly funded art museums and galleries have engaged with black artists in the period under review. In an initial context of

widespread institutional indifference towards black creativity (a consequence of the fact that black populations in Britain had invariably been defined as 'foreign', including black communities in Liverpool that had been established some four hundred years previously) the employment of race-based approaches to devising exhibitions by black artists in the late 1970s and early 1980s was invaluable in generating an awareness of the breadth of contemporary black creativity, which in turn prompted several mainstream institutions to engage with black artists for the first time.³⁶⁶ The institutionalisation of the race-based curatorial format through its subsequent and extensive adoption by mainstream art museums and galleries, however, brought to the surface its inherent disadvantages; specifically, it framed black artists as separate and culturally different from their white British contemporaries and accordingly excluded their work from discourses of British art. Indeed, during the 1980s, it was typical for curators and directors in public galleries to look to non-art historical discourses for reasons to champion black creativity, rather than contemporary debates about art.³⁶⁷ Although race-based formats continue to be employed by public museums and galleries, recent exhibitions, particularly those discussed in this thesis, appear to prioritise genre, medium and content in their curation: *Afro Modern* highlighted the contributions black artists have made to modernism; in *Action* the artists' shared performative practice was emphasised; and Ofili's exploration of the medium of paint provided the focus for his 2010 retrospective. Thus, conditions for black artists have ostensibly improved since the 1980s in the context of mainstream art museums/galleries. However, the textual analysis in this study has evidenced that an emphasis on cultural difference continues to be made in contemporary exhibitions displaying work by black artists, but at a less-perceptible level than in the exhibitions of the 1980s, demonstrating by extension that the circumstances of representation have not significantly advanced for black artists within the time-frame examined.

The representation of black creativity by British art institutions and specifically the right of institutions to exercise control over the nature of its representation became a concern and issue for debate among black artists and academics in the 1980s, when it was common for funding bodies and museums to encourage black artists to make work that was relevant to their 'communities' (see Chapter 2, section 6). Although black artists are no longer explicitly encouraged to create works reflecting their ethnicity, this study has discussed how it remains a tacit condition for their success. The particularities of the Ofili retrospective demonstrate that black artists seeking representation by the nation's largest cultural institutions are required to produce work that is

³⁶⁶ Indeed, as Bryan Biggs has stated, it was as a consequence of exhibitions such as *Black Art Now* (1984) that he first encountered work by artists of the late 1970s/early 1980s generation of black artists, prompting him to initiate a long-standing relationship with artists such as Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce.

³⁶⁷ See discussions about the exhibitions *From Two Worlds* (1986), *Into the Open* (1984) and *Black Skin/Bluecoat* (1985) in Chapters 2 and 3.

evidential of their ethnic/cultural difference. In the 1980s, artists such as Keith Piper, and commentators including Rasheed Araeen vehemently contested the fetishization of the black image, yet it is now accepted and even celebrated in the work of Ofili, possibly as a result of the indirect cementing of this condition within the cultural apparatus through separate funding and positive discriminative initiatives. In turn, the validation of Ofili's questionable depiction of black subjectivity and the black form by the establishment suppresses opposition to it, even by other black artists. Indeed, as the case studies in this thesis indicate, black artists are likely to be represented in relation to their ethnicity in an exhibition's interpretive texts, regardless of their resistance and opposition to this condition.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, questions of representation were also raised in relation to the fact that mixed ethnicity exhibitions in mainstream art museums/galleries would typically only include one black artist (at best), who would subsequently experience pressure to speak on behalf of, or to represent all black creativity. Given that the context within which black artists operate has vastly changed since the 1980s, this burden of representation (as Mercer described it) is now arguably reduced.³⁶⁸ The increased prominence of the commercial sector and the efflorescence of the international art fair and biennial have generated new avenues for exposure for black artists, and mixed ethnicity shows are now commonplace in both the public and commercial spheres. However, an increased visibility of a small number of black British artists (or hypervisibility in the case of Ofili and Shonibare) has not necessarily corresponded with inclusion in the British canon, as the exhibition case studies in this thesis evidence. Indeed, Ofili's well-documented resistance to being compared to other black artists suggests that his international recognition has little bearing on the fact that as the only black British artist of his standing, he is burdened with representing all black creativity.

One of the claims of this thesis is that although the inclusion of black artists in international exhibitions and fairs has been vital in increasing their visibility and positioning their work in global contexts, it has also aided in defending an established perception of British art and culture as definitely white, rather than challenging it. An emphasis on the contributions of black artists to global developments in contemporary art serves as a distraction, or a diversion, from their exclusion from the British canon, thus enabling the status quo to remain intact. That race-based curatorial selecting and curating methods have sustained their popularity within the space of the public art museum/gallery despite widespread criticism serves the same purpose, as do the tacit

³⁶⁸ Indeed, my interviews with the four emerging artists in *Action* revealed that they were not particularly concerned with their relationship to other black artists and the responsibilities that relationship might entail. Transcripts of interviews with Beverley Bennett, Appau Boakye-Yiadom, Robin Deacon and Grace Ndiritu are located in the appendices (see Appendices 8.4, 8.8, 8.11 and 8.15).

conditions that are imposed on black artists seeking representation by art museums. With reference to Zygmunt Bauman's definition of legitimate coercion, this study has claimed that, and explained how, these phenomena provide modes (or spaces) through which the activities of black artists can be acknowledged within the centre or mainstream (in order to ameliorate discontent that has resulted from exclusionary institutional practices), but which nonetheless contain black creativity in general so that established relationships of power remain fundamentally unchallenged. The causal root of 'legitimate coercive' practices vis-à-vis black creativity is the largely unchanged conception of British culture that exists at an underlying ideological level within the majority of Britain's cultural institutions. Their establishment in the late colonial era, and moreover, the fact that they were founded in order to support the ideology of the time has meant that the philosophies underpinning their work have not been significantly impacted by the proliferation of multicultural policies and rhetoric since the 1980s. The notion that there are artists legitimately contributing to British culture who are also black is at odds with colonial (and neo-colonial) thinking and threatens the relationships of power that were established through it. In consequence, black creativity is invariably framed in relation to cultural and ethnic difference and/or positioned in non-British contexts, so that the notional boundary between the centre of British culture (as a definitively white space) and its periphery is preserved.

Perlocutionary statements presented in the accompanying interpretive texts of *Afro Modern*, *Action* and the 2010 Ofilé retrospective revealed that 'legitimate coercive' devices were present in these contemporary exhibitions despite their use of alternative concepts and curatorial/narrative strategies, which were deployed precisely to address the exclusion of black artists from art history's canons and master narratives. In *Afro Modern*, a conceptual model from outside the field of art history was employed in order to reimagine the development of modernism in art so that the contributions of black artists to it could be acknowledged. However, utterances uncovered in my analysis revealed that, in contradiction to the stated aims of the exhibition, its curators had not disinherited the long-held art historical conviction that modernism originated in Europe and that contributions from black artists have been mere tributaries to its development. In this structure black artists remained marginal to mainstream developments. In *Action* a different approach was taken. By emphasising the individual practices of each artist and asserting that questions of race and identity were not relevant to the works displayed, the exhibition posed an indirect challenge to separatist/race-based curatorial practices. As with *Afro Modern*, this endeavour was thwarted – at a perlocutionary level - by the assertions presented in the accompanying interpretive texts; an inadvertent emphasis on the artists' shared blackness combined with a failure to position them in

contemporary developments and histories of British art, served to exclude them from the British canon. A similar problem occurred in the Ofili retrospective. Despite emphasising his development as a painter for the purpose of challenging racial narratives that have circumscribed his work, the exhibition's employment of critical frameworks relating to migratory and cross-cultural practices in conjunction with its failure to prioritise his contribution to British painting, served to position him as external to the British canon.

Although a combination of race-based selection and curation methods and perlocutionary statements relating to discourses of ethnicity, racial identity politics and cultural difference caused *Afro Modern*, *Action* and the Ofili retrospective to exclude the participating artists from established understandings of British art and thus be 'legitimate coercive', they are not equal to the 'legitimate coercive' exhibitions of the 1980s (some of which are discussed in Chapter 2). Just as a total institutional indifference towards black creativity would now be completely inadmissible, separatism and race-based approaches to curating and programming cannot occur in the easily observable way they did thirty years ago. Indeed, it is extremely rare for an art museum/gallery to stage a simple black group or survey exhibition. Instead, as *Afro Modern* and *Action* evidenced, an additional theme is now typically employed in its curation in order to divert attention away from its initial impetus and race-based selection process. Moreover, these additional themes rarely involve a significant consideration of the position of black artists in the British canon because of the inherent challenge it would pose to established hierarchies of race and geography that underpin cultural hegemony. Instead, themes that position black British artists as external to the centre of British developments in art are employed, as seen in *From Two Worlds* (see Chapter 2), *Artists Abroad* (which was a display - see Chapter 6), and *Afro Modern*.

That curatorial practices relating to black creativity have remained largely unchanged since the 1980s – in terms of the way they critically position and historicise black artists – is not simply the result of an increased intolerance towards total institutional indifference. It is also the result of the re-establishment of black – or 'culturally specific' - art venues. In venues such as Rivington Place and New Art Exchange, it is a given that artists are black (or other minority ethnicities), thus enabling a focus on style, media and content as opposed to the fact of their ethnicity and its possible influence on their work. As such, black art venues arguably have merit within the current cultural landscape. However, they also indicate to mainstream museums/galleries/venues that their responsibility towards black artists are reduced or removed altogether.³⁶⁹ In a context where

³⁶⁹ This may explain the reduced presence of black artists in the Bluecoat's programme in the 2000s.

black art venues are ostensibly tasked with addressing the complex exclusionary structures of the established British canon, mainstream museums and galleries need not confront their existing modes of conception and practices of display in a substantial way. *Afro Modern* could thus flirt with concepts explored by Paul Gilroy without overturning an established Eurocentric understanding of modernism; *Action* could reject frameworks of race and identity politics without considering the contribution of emerging black artists to British art; and the Ofili retrospective could champion the artist's painterly endeavours without engaging in the importance of black subjectivity to the British canon.

A key revelation of this study has been that *Afro Modern*, *Action* and the Ofili retrospective were complicit in legitimate coercion despite the progressive attitudes and/or intentions of their curators. Their apparent compulsion to reference issues of race, representation and identity politics when curating work by black artists, despite their acknowledgement of the limitations of such an approach, is partly a consequence of their relationship to the discipline of art history. As discussed in Chapter 6, the canonical nature of art history (and particularly the psycho-symbolic dimension of the canon) facilitates an absorption of established hierarchies of race and geography, making it difficult for those immersed in the discipline to present a significant challenge to cultural hegemony in their exhibitions. Employing staff educated in other disciplines does not, however, provide an adequate solution. Training within the space of the museum/gallery indoctrinates individuals in institutional orthodoxy which itself is often inextricably linked to the discipline of art history. In any case, as research by Dewdney et al has evidenced, staffing policies that exclude individuals engaged in institutional critique are being implemented in some art museums in order to preserve established practices, which by extension safeguards existing hegemony. The art museum/gallery is thus the primary agent in defending the status quo and in instigating 'legitimate coercive' practices relating to black creativity. Race-based curatorial methods and international exhibitions are not the only routes through which legitimate coercion occurs, however. As the analysis and discussion of the Ofili retrospective revealed, it also occurs through the favouring of black artists whose work is evidential of their non-white ethnicity, and moreover, whose work can be presented as non-oppositional. By prioritising work that adheres to these conditions, art institutions are able to verify the supposed cultural difference of black British artists from the mainstream of British culture, and to displace black creativity from the centre of discourse on British art.

That 'legitimate coercive' processes/acts were present in *Afro Modern*, *Action* and the Ofili retrospective evidences that the supposedly alternative, but albeit different, curatorial and

narrative strategies that were trialled in them do not offer new modes for engaging with black creativity compared to those developed in the 1980s. An equivalent conclusion was made by Eddie Chambers in his 2012 book, *Things Done Change*. With reference to the current state of affairs for black artists, he asserted that, 'Outside of the favoured artists such as Ofili et al., and outside of projects such as Rivington Place and New Art Exchange, what substantial projects there have been involving Black artists have tended to reflect racial or political initiatives, such as Black History Month or Abolition 200. With rare exceptions, the only 'choice' for Black artists in Britain more recently has been the quarantined initiative taking place within galleries or contexts that are heavily coded to prevalent social notions of 'racial', 'cultural', or 'ethnic' 'difference' or 'signification'.³⁷⁰ Although this study has examined different exhibitions to those considered by Chambers, it is significant that the same broad conclusion has been drawn. Chambers' reflections support the claims of this study, and the particular findings of this research project evidence his observations. As such, this thesis sits alongside his recent work, as a worthwhile and timely contribution to the development of a thorough and comprehensive history of British art, institutional practices and black creativity.³⁷¹

Given that the recently trialled curatorial strategies examined in this study did not significantly progress beyond the delimiting approaches of the 1980s, an extended conclusion of this research project is that broader institutional attitudes relating to black creativity have fundamentally remained the same in the period under review, particularly vis-à-vis the relationship of black artists to British art and its history. In 2000, Rasheed Araeen posited that 'art institutional power... still follows the linear trajectory that began under colonialism and incorporated racial views about the colonised ... it affects the reception, recognition and evaluation of the contemporary artwork of those who are today no longer colonial subjects... the structural base of this power has not shifted; its perception of the colonised as the 'other' or 'different' is still applied, in particular to Asian and African artists living in the west'.³⁷² The research presented here not only supports Araeen's assertion, but demonstrates that the circumstances he observed ten years before this study began have largely persisted. Chambers' recent, despondent reflection regarding this state of affairs was that, 'Given the Britishness of so many artists involved in this story ... we might have expected an altogether different 'trajectory' for Black artists in Britain'.³⁷³ A radically different course to that evidenced by this study has, however, been impossible, given that the propagation of neo-colonial

³⁷⁰ Chambers, 2012: 233-234

³⁷¹ By presenting the first narrative inventory of exhibitions at the Bluecoat that have included work by black artists, this thesis also offers relevant and particular evidence of institutional practices in one gallery.

³⁷² Araeen, 2000: 57-58

³⁷³ Chambers, 2012: 234

assessments of black creativity in British art institutions is rooted in the highly protected and almost impenetrable ideological structures of British society, and furthermore, that its art institutions were initially founded in association with those ideologies. The persistent division between the dominant white mainstream and the work of black artists in British art institutions (that has impeded the development of 'new trajectories' for the latter) will not cease without an identification and confrontation of the entrenched ideological resistance in art institutions to major change. By elucidating the precise modes through which recent exhibitions reinforce hegemonic perspectives, the research presented here is a contribution to that endeavour.³⁷⁴

The avenues and processes through which art institutions relate to cultural hegemony are well-addressed in the field of institutional critique and it has been beyond the scope of this study to consider how institutional resistance to change can be productively confronted so that conditions for black artists are meaningfully improved. In circumstances where individuals immersed in institutional critique are excluded from curatorial departments through employment policy and/or critical practices have lost their potency through co-option by institutions, novel and even radical strategies are clearly required.³⁷⁵ Doctoral research on black artists and institutional frameworks by Zoe Whitley (currently in progress at the University of Central Lancashire) may bring to light curatorial practices and other strategies that are at the vanguard of this endeavour. Individuals seeking to pursue this new line of research may also wish to consult Leon Wainwright's article *New Provincialisms: Curating Art of the African Diaspora*, which considers whether exhibitions designed to mobilise the African diaspora in order to reverse its traditional exclusion from art history and public memory are in fact creating new margins for black creativity.³⁷⁶ Of similar relevance are the discussions held during a one day symposium on 16 November 2012 at the Victoria and Albert Museum titled *Curating the Black Diaspora*, where models for collaborative and inclusive

³⁷⁴ One might argue that more contemporary visual art spaces that are of significance to art world influence and the building of artists' reputations, such as The Whitechapel Art Gallery or the Hayward Gallery, were not founded in the context of Empire and therefore not founded in association with its ideologies. Indeed, the Whitechapel, for example, has an 'independent' history that is connected to its East End location in London and was initially supported by émigré Jewish artists. However, that the Whitechapel later became dislocated from the cultural mix of its neighbourhood in terms of its exhibitions programme's tokenistic inclusion of black artists in the period under discussion indicates that even the more contemporary spaces for display have been influenced by broader, long-standing conceptions of British culture as definitively white and also by the philosophies and practices of the older and more dominant institutions such as the National Gallery and Tate. Indeed, it was as a consequence (at least partially) of Tate Liverpool's decision to present *Afro Modern* (essentially a black survey exhibition) that Sonia Boyce and the Bluecoat (a black artist and a more contemporary and independent venue that is comparable to the Whitechapel) took the joint decision to stage *Action*, which for all intents and purposes was a race-based exhibition.

³⁷⁵ The reader may be interested to consult Victoria Preston's PhD thesis (Birkbeck, University of London, 2014), titled *From outside to inside: Changing strategies and practices of institutional critique 1960-2014*, which contests the canonisation of institutional critique by positing that there has been a change in the agents of critique, and which also argues against the supposed futility of institutional critique by drawing on Foucault to consider critique in particular instances rather than in general.

³⁷⁶ First published in *Radical History Review*, Issue 103, Winter 2009, pp.203-213.

art/curatorial practices were explored. Despite having been filmed in 2005, a video on Tate's website that presents perspectives on curating the black diaspora may also be useful, given that it includes insights by Thelma Golden, who has made significant contributions to changing the ways in which art of the black diaspora is seen and shown.³⁷⁷ It would certainly be interesting to compare Golden's perspectives with the approaches taken in the forthcoming exhibition *No Colour Bar – Black British Art in Action (1960-1990)*. Having recently been awarded a Heritage Lottery Grant, the exhibition is to be staged at the Guildhall Art Gallery (London) in the autumn of 2015, and will explore black contributions to British culture in the twentieth century.³⁷⁸

While advances in curating are undoubtedly being explored by the individuals and research noted above, the revelations of this study strongly indicate that testing novel and radical methods within the space of the established art museum/gallery is, in general, a fruitless endeavour, for institutions are by their very nature incapable of responding to societal developments as rapidly and effectively as those visiting them, and indeed exhibiting in them, require. Radical practices relating to black creativity are invariably moderated through 'legitimate coercive' processes as a consequence of the museum's relationship with cultural hegemony. Susan Oberhardt's questioning of the perceived centrality and authority of the museum/gallery in shaping human agency is thus valuable in considering further avenues for research. In *Frames Within Frames: The Art Museum as Cultural Artifact* (2001), Oberhardt argues that the perceived cultural authority of the museum is not determined by its being, but by people talking it into being and investing it with authority.³⁷⁹ Rather than viewing the museum as a socially manipulative and politically oppressive institution of culture (as this study has), she considers the 'tangled skein of complicitous human interactions that promote the cultural authority of the art museum' as the root of the problems identified by this study.³⁸⁰ One of her principal assertions is that whilst the museum has enjoyed a privileged position in academic discourses such as art history, its importance in popular culture has been much less, to the extent that people have by-passed the museum and constructed their own version of it in popular culture; the art documentary on television, the department store window, the display of film posters in cinema foyers, the reproduction of artworks on everyday objects and clothing etc., and of course, the internet. In Oberhardt's view, the greater importance that popular culture now

³⁷⁷ <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/three-perspectives-curating-black-diaspora> (accessed 07/02/2015)

³⁷⁸ The project is being managed by the Friends of the Huntley Archives at London Metropolitan Archives and will display a selection of work from a range of visual artists, including paintings, sculpture, pottery and photographs, as well as original documents, letters, images, and press cuttings to highlight the work of the iconic bookshop and publishing house Bogle L'Ouverture Press, which became a cultural hub for black creative between the 1960s and 1990s (<http://www.voice-online.co.uk/article/exhibition-explores-art-and-diversity-20th-century-london>, accessed 12/02/2015).

³⁷⁹ Oberhardt, 2001: 2; 12-13

³⁸⁰ Oberhardt, 2001: 26

plays in constructing identities, meaning and knowledge – and in exploring the significance of black creativity in British culture – renders efforts to address traditionally marginalised groups within the museum field entirely unnecessary. While her assertions are problematic in that they absolve museums from their responsibility to represent the entire public they exist to serve, rejecting the museum’s importance in presenting and representing art may indeed benefit the development of new methods in curating black creativity.

Despite their inability to respond quickly to societal changes and despite the possibly greater role played by popular culture in producing knowledge and meaning, art museums and galleries are not anachronistic in terms of their influence on contemporary understandings of British art and culture. Museums are important drivers for tourism to Britain and are also visited by just over half of the nation’s own adult population, making them powerful agents in affecting conceptions of British culture, both abroad and at home.³⁸¹ Equal representation for all British artists has never been more important and the role played by museums/galleries in challenging (and indeed cementing) exclusive understandings of British art within the public consciousness cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, and as the findings of this project demonstrate, the issues identified by critiques of exhibition practices in the 1980s have remained largely unresolved, thus increasing their relevance and urgency. This study therefore reinvigorates the debates initiated thirty years ago and encourages further critical and interrogative enquiry into the approaches taken within established art institutions.

Exhibition texts have provided the focus for this research because of their capacity to reveal institutional attitudes. In consequence, there have been few opportunities in this thesis to consider the artworks displayed in *Afro Modern, Action* and the Ofili retrospective, nor the phenomenological dimension of these exhibitions. Although such analyses would undoubtedly have provided much richness and variety to my reflections and claims, they would detract from the focus of the research presented here. My intention in future research is to consider how I, as an art historian, can engage with and write about the work of black artists without reverting to critical and historical models that locate black creativity in accordance with cultural heritages in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean (when such references are largely irrelevant), that emphasise cultural difference and that position black artists as separate from their white contemporaries. The aim of this further research is to produce a series of article-length texts/essays that firmly position the work of black artists within the British canon, and to seek publication of these texts in journals and art magazines

³⁸¹ According to the National Museum Directors Council, tourism is the fifth largest industry in the United Kingdom with eight of the top ten most popular attractions being national museums. 51.3% of UK adults visited a museum or gallery in 2012. (http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/what-we-do/encouraging_investment/tourism/, accessed 07/02/2015).

not relating to minority interests in order to normalise the presence of black artists in mainstream discourses on contemporary British art and its histories. The self-reflexive approach required for this work will allow me to test claims made in this thesis regarding the agency of those immersed in art history in legitimate coercion. My personal ability to develop non-hegemonic models for curating and programming black creativity will undoubtedly be improved should I succeed in resisting the influence of the psycho-symbolic dimension of art history's canons in my own work.

The staging of *Afro Modern, Action*, and the 2010 Chris Ofili retrospective marked a critical moment for the reception and representation of black creativity. The trialling of new curatorial strategies in these exhibitions ostensibly heralded the beginning of a paradigm shift vis-à-vis institutional attitudes towards black British artists. By providing a rigorous analysis of these exhibitions, and considering the extent of their success in avoiding the limitations of established, but flawed models in curating black creativity, the research presented here is vital for those concerned with black British art history. It has revealed that, in 2010, conditions for black artists within the publicly funded museum and gallery sector had not significantly altered since the 1980s in terms of their placement in discourses of contemporary art and their historicisation in the British canon. This indicates a fundamental struggle, or unwillingness, in public art museums/galleries to provide equal representation of Britain's minority populations. The omission of black artists from what counts as British history negates their share in British heritage and invalidates their contributions to the ongoing development of British culture, making it an act of absolute disempowerment. Therefore, the findings of this study are not only significant for those concerned with the representation of black creativity within the space of the public art museum/gallery, but also for those interested in the role institutional practices play in maintaining - and inhibiting - equality. The lack of progression in both aspects disclosed through this study is a consequence of the fact that conceptions of British culture have not significantly altered in the period under review, particularly at an underlying ideological level within institutions. Change is unlikely to occur without a broader upheaval that enables British society in general to cease perceiving and defining its black populations as 'foreign'.

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8. Appendices: Interview Transcripts

Appendix 8.1

Notes from interview with David Abdullah (formerly known as David Wilkie)

13 December 2012 at Toxteth TV, 37-45 Windsor Street, Liverpool L8 1XE

*Much of the discussion was not relevant to my research. In consequence, this appendix contains only relevant notes from the interview as opposed to a full transcription. A copy of the recording of the interview is available on request.

Minutes into recording

- 00:05:30 Brian Thompson and David Wilkie were both teachers in early 1980s and Thompson approached Wilkie about setting up a group which would later become Liverpool Anti Racist and Community Art Association (LARCAA). Vehicle for engaging black artists and addressing issue of racism in schools through the arts.
- 00:06:10 They were both also on Merseyside Racial Equality Council, and they set up a sub committee, which became relatively powerful because it was attended by two senior members of the council; Keith Hackett (Chair of Finance and Strategy) and a senior officer from Merseyside Arts. Hackett was interested in the arts and the arts were being seen as a vehicle for regeneration.
- 00:07:50 The city council had an arts and culture unit. They recruited two black arts officers; one for black literature, and can't remember what the other one was. The literature officer was based in Africa Arts Collective Source Books (which Adam Hussein was also involved in). Discussions and decisions about what these two officers should be doing came to the Merseyside Racial Equality Council. They ended up changing it and setting up a Black Arts Unit.
- 00:08:55 David Abdullah/Wilkie applied for a job in this unit.
- 00:10:30 David Abdullah/Wilkie ended up becoming the head of the Black Arts Unit. The job that had been advertised changed in the process and he became head of the unit – the Cultural Industries Development Officer within the Arts and Culture Unit in 1989.
- 00:11:10 There was the Arts and Culture Unit, and within that; the Black Arts Unit, the Film Office (not sure which other units were in it). It happened at a fortuitous time because powerful people like Keith Hackett happened to be interested in the arts, and someone else was very committed to equal opportunities.
- 00:15:40 The Black Arts Unit had its own budget. The mainstream budget which funded the likes of the Bluecoat, the Playhouse, the Everyman, - the Black Arts Unit could influence their programmes too, in order to get them to address equal opportunities.
- 00:16:40 They were also a grant giving body so they could influence change by writing the criteria for grants they were awarding.
- 00:17:58 The Black Arts Unit funded some of the events at the Bluecoat, such as *Trophies of Empire* in 1992, and education events at the Bluecoat that were organised to be part of Chambers' touring exhibition *Let the Canvas Come to Life with Dark Faces*.
- 00:20:00 The Black Arts Unit had a music officer (Wes Wilkie), a literature officer (Phil Taylor – white English), and a Media Officer (Abdullah Badwi – Yemeni).

- 00:25:25 Factors in the winding down of the unit - Changes within the Labour Party, nationally, which eventually led to the appointment of Tony Blair as leader. Some of the councillors that had supported the unit, such as Keith Hackett, Julia Herzog etc., left the Labour Party.
- 00:27:30 There were also internal politics within the black community, e.g. David was from L1 and L8 folk felt he couldn't represent them or wasn't giving enough representation to them.
- 00:28:30 In terms of changing the agenda, the Black Arts Unit were putting black artists in residence into Liverpool institutions such as Liverpool University, Tate Liverpool, and the Bluecoat.
- 00:30:00 Peak of activity was in early 1990s, as exemplified by the awards they gave out in 1993.
- 00:32:00 But changes began to take place on a number of levels. Councillors who had been very supportive of the Black Arts Unit's work were beginning to leave the Labour Party. There was also a new Labour Party leader for Liverpool was, although supportive of equal opportunities, was much less effective than his predecessor. There was also a change in the structure of the council – a change from 'departments' to 'directorates', which involved a merger between libraries and sports with arts. New senior directors were brought in. John Davis was the new one for this new directorate. Some staff became marginalised in the process (including David, who operated as a 'black arts officer' rather than a mainstream officer).
- 00:38:15 When the time came for cuts to be made, the grants went first. This meant that the Black Arts Unit was able to do less and less.
- 00:39:00 Also, the more personal style of working in the council, whereby personal relationships between councillors and officers were built up making for easy communications – these were strongly discouraged after the new structures were put in place, and officers were only allowed to communicate with senior staff through official channels. Also, if people left their jobs, they would not be replaced. The head of the Art and Culture Unit left, and instead of replacing them, they took the film office and floated that off separately, and David became the new head of Art and Culture, and that was the end of the Black Arts Unit because it became incorporated into Arts and Culture, rather than being its own unit within that. So black visual arts officers became just visual arts officers. It meant that if anyone left the job, it could be more easily refilled, rather than having to recruit a black arts officer.
- 00:41:00 David found that he had to go part time in order to become a carer, and because his focus was on caring, the impetus on providing equal opportunities at work was gone. He also became a Muslim and decided, also partly because of the internal politics of the black community, that he would focus on doing things for the Muslim community instead.
- 00:45:30 David thinks that around 1995 the Black Arts Unit wound down, but he can't remember for certain.

Appendix 8.2

Interview with Barby Asante, Lucy Davies and Francoise Dupré

16 March 2012 at 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning, 198 Railton Road, London SE24 OJT

Question 1:

Could you tell me how the *Brixton Calling Project* came about? Who initiated it and why? (00:00:41 minutes into the recording)

BA: I was archiving my emails, and my first email about it went back to 2009.

FD: Yes. I think it started about five or six years ago, but I would have to check the dates. Andrew Herman, who was one of the founding members of the Brixton Art Gallery and the Brixton Artists Collective with me and a core group of other artists, like *Stefan Szczelkun* and *Rita Keegan* and *Teri Bullen*. He designed his own website, called *Brixton 50* [brixton50.co.uk] which mapped out the first fifty exhibitions which took place at the Brixton Art Gallery between 1983 and 1986. That was the time that he was involved with the gallery. He was an artist but he was also our accountant, so he looked after the money side. He called on us to write and send images. From then, there was an anniversary, it was 2003, or 2006, I can't remember, at Tate restaurant. A few of us got together and the idea came up that we should be telling the story of the gallery. By that time, I think it was felt that there was a need to tell a story that was being forgotten. Then we started developing the idea of how we would do that, and we contacted 198. I think that's how we started. Lucy [Davies] and I started developing the project, around how it would fit the two main funding institutions that we thought would fund us; the Arts Council and Heritage Lottery. It think it worked really well in the sense that we were interested in history but also in contemporary Brixton. The idea was that, parallel to the archiving of the 1980s, there would be some kind of contemporary engagement with local communities and younger artists.

LD: That's right.

FD: I think the Brixton Artists Collective, the little group that became BACA – Brixton Artists Collective Archive – it was very important to be based in Brixton, even though the gallery doesn't exist anymore. 198 fitted totally the context, because it opened in 1986.

LD: 1988.

FD: It still has that same spirit about being engaged with the local communities. So, it was an ideal partnership.

BA: But there was this thing already, between us [pointing to herself and LD] that we should do something about the Brixton Art Gallery.

LD: Yes, people would bring it up at private views. Artists would come, who had been involved, and say, 'Something really needs to be done about Brixton Art Gallery'. And then we came across the link to Brixton 50. I can't remember how we originally came across that link. Perhaps you sent it to us [looking at FD]. But when we saw it, it was the primary motivation to start thinking that we could actually do something with the group. And we were in touch with BACA, and took it from there, as Francoise said, with regards to trying to work out a fundraising strategy and how the project could actually take place, and also doing something that was more than just an exhibition, but to turn

it into a longer project that would have different facets to it. So, we developed this very complex...

FD: Yes, it was massively complex. I'm amazed we achieved it.

BA: It was very ambitious, but also very solid in what it did and how many people it engaged and the outcomes of that engagement.

Question 2:

How did Tate Archive then become involved? (00:06:21 minutes into the recording)

FD: One of my colleagues at Birmingham – we have archives at Birmingham City University School of Art – and my colleague at the time had contact with Tate Archive. So I just contacted them and we built up that contact. They became very interested in the content of our personal archives. They [Tate] are developing their community archiving so it very much fitted their remit at the time. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] It was also important for us to think about what happened at the Brixton Art Gallery as part of British art, and that it should be archived somewhere. So, that was really important. The other archive that is involved with us is the Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths. Many of the women artists from the gallery were members of the Women's Art Library, which actually started at the same time in 1982, or sometime around then. So we worked with them. A lot of the research on the women artists and the black women artists who were involved with the gallery were done through the Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths because we have a lot of our slides there. At the end we had a symposium on feminism in the 80s at Goldsmiths in December [2011]. That was a really important archive. The Lambeth Archive as well for the overall cultural and local context of Brixton, and Guy Burch who curated a lot of the lesbian and gay shows at Brixton Art Gallery and who is also part of BACA has contact with the London School of Economics which has an archive of lesbian and gay art and history. So, it suddenly branched out.

Question 3:

What were the objectives of the *Brixton Calling* Project? (00:09:26 minutes into the recording)

LD: I would have to look back at what we wrote.

BA: I suppose it's activating it – activating the work. But it was also about revisiting it and thinking about it in the contemporary context. The point was to engage with communities. It was about looking at things, seeing the similarities, the changes, the differences. One of the things with the young people was that inter-generational conversation about histories.

FD: The main aim was to create installations and artworks. It had a really strong, creative aim to it. That was obviously really important to the Arts Council; that we were making art work.

BA: Yes, I suppose those two together...

FD: And the archive installations were artworks, if you like, because archiving is now considered as one of many contemporary approaches to art-making. So, the idea was to

create art work which engaged with the archives. But also, the outcomes were about conversation, as Barby said, between BACA and a new generation of artists and community groups. So, in the exhibition you had that visual dialogue between the archive installations as well as the outcome of the community projects, such as the women's textile group, the London Underground workers artists group. So there were all these kinds of conversations that were happening in the gallery which had been generated and grown through a year-long project. So it was important that it was perceived as an art project as well as an archiving one.

Question 4:

Were there any separate, different or additional objectives to those you've just outlined, that you were hoping to achieve with the show at 198? (00:11:56 minutes into the recording)

BA: I think there were things that came out; there was the symposium at Goldsmiths that led to the potential of having more symposia at Goldsmiths, and also relationships that were created with certain organisations.

FD: Looking back, for me, one of the two main community projects, which were quite amazing, but which I was not quite as involved in, the oral history project had – and Lucy would know more about that – it had an impact on the young people that worked on it.

LD: It did.

FD: It was so lovely to get to know the young people here. There was an amazing and very genuine relationship that flourished on lots of different levels - Guy talking about t-shirt designs – lots of different levels. Also, London Underground working with David Nevin, who leads a small group of London Underground employees who also happen to be artists. As you know, London Underground – it's people from all over the world and from lots of different backgrounds. It said in the evaluation that it gave him such a huge boost to be involved with us and to be able to go back to London Underground and have a status, in a way, and be approached by directors...

LD: Because they visited the exhibition. He also had some involvement with Rita [Keegan] and Guy [Burch], going to the Underground Equalities and Diversities Review.

FD: So, in a way, learning how the gallery worked – an umbrella organisation working with all kinds of different people; young, old, trained, untrained, black, white, in-between, gay, straight – it was a very a very multicultural organisation - David [Nevin] realised that London Underground is a bit like that. You also have all these different interest groups. So Rita [Keegan] went to speak to...

LD: It was during Black History Month.

FD: And Guy [Burch] did something as well?

BA: Yes, a lesbian and gay group as well.

FD: Also, I will be going to visit a Women's group too. So, that was totally beyond our expectations. It was mirroring what the Brixton Art Gallery did. We had an impact on so many people, who came and went, and went on to do lots of other stuff. So the gallery was just one of those many steps that they took to become artists or curators and so on.

I am who I am because of the gallery. So we, in a way, did that too. It was such a great thing. It more than just for ourselves – more than just being recognised for what we did.

BA: It was also continuing the relationship that we had, with the women who were ... the sewing group. They are still here and they still have a continuing relationship with the artists – Teri, Rita and yourself [referring to FD].

FD: But also Andy Martin.

LD: Some of the people were involved as volunteers – they developed a lot of additional skills as a result of being involved in the project. So, for example, Andy Martin was already interested in film for his own practice, and he really got the opportunity to work on the oral history film and working with the editor, who is a professional, he was able to develop those skills and be fully involved. Now, he has continued his involvement and is working on other film projects with us. So those were real outcomes for people who were volunteering on the project.

Question 5:

I wasn't able to attend the talk you had on 10th December 2010, and I have been trying to get hold of a recording of it. Do you think you might be able to help me out? (00:17:56 minutes into recording)

BA: I didn't record it, but it was filmed. Let me chase that for you. I'm sure we can get you a rough cut.

FD: It was like we were back at Brixton Art Gallery, with all this shouting and very emotional...

BA: I chaired it and I did write a very...well it was very similar to some of your research questions in terms of looking at the past and the present...and I'm quite happy to send that to you. I wasn't there [in the days of Brixton Art Gallery] but it was like we were there [when the 10/12/2012 talk happened].

FD: It was very emotional. In terms of what came out of it, I think what some of us knew would happen, was that debate about the role that black artists had within the Brixton Art Gallery, and because we were this umbrella group, there were black artists who were part of the core, who were directors and collective members and were very involved for a very long time, like Rita Keegan and Rotimi Fani-Kayode. But it's a very different kind of history of black art in the 80s. For me, it was really important to tell it because it's very similar to what happened with feminism and women artists. You get one narrative, but there are a lot of different narratives. I think it was really important to make sure that... there were lots of different kinds of organisations in London and in the UK, at the time, where black artists were involved. So, I totally reject the idea of the 'them and us'. I was really angry with Paul Goodwin at the *Thin Black Lines* evening talk at the Tate. He presented this very 'them and us' context, as if there were black artists and all these really horrible white institutions. Excuse me, that's not the way it was. So, I think it was really important to bring the Brixton Art Gallery out, if you like, to show that history is very complex. It was really important to say that.

BA: And we did have that point of ...Stefan's question about why weren't any black male

artists involved. But I think that really depends on the position that you are coming from. Maybe there were black men involved, and maybe there were different wranglings going on at the time, and different situations that people found themselves positioned in. It is more complex than 'them and us'. Having recently looked at Keith Piper's 'Go West Young Man' piece that is in *Migrations* [exhibition at Tate Britain in 2012], there may have been situations where it was very confrontational for white men to see that. I remember some of thing I experienced when I was at college in the early 1990s. The things people said to you; 'bring out more blackness', 'it's too confrontational', 'I don't want to see that', 'ooh, the pain of slavery', all these kinds of thing around the work. So, I think the positioning, or where you find yourself depending on your background or particular experiences is part of it. We also found that where a lot of the shows came in, they were not part of a collective, they were part of the shows that were...well, they weren't selected really...

FD: No, people applied. Many artists applied individually, and then were supported to formulate and develop an exhibition. But also, sometimes other organisations or collectives applied and had a show with us. So Rasheed Araeen, pre *The Other Story*, was with us at the Brixton Art Gallery. There were other black art shows that came to us, already formed, like *Creation for Liberation*, *The Black Experience*, we had a major photography show to coincide with the GLC *Black Experience* festival. It is amazing, thinking about it now. Monica Baker was a photographer who curated that photography show, and it was housed at the Brixton Art Gallery. But, Barby I think you are absolutely right, there were different strategies. If you think about Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper; they had a very different strategy. They were had no location. They were artists and curators and they moved across Britain with their shows and actually worked with white institutions, in Wolverhampton, Coventry, in the Midlands, the Ikon Gallery. So they moved across and they also moved to the Brixton Art Gallery. Their strategy was quite different from the black women group at the Brixton Art Gallery which was very linked to the women artists group. That was also a loose group, with permanent members like Rita Keegan and Paula Williams and others, who also contributed to other shows in other galleries. So there were different crowds of people. Some just came and went and hovered, and others were there [at the Brixton Art Gallery] and actually made sure the place was working. It was a very different strategy. You have a nomadic strategy, and the other one is to have a space to open for ourselves but also for others. I think all these strategies of the 1980s are really important to recognise and they were all very valid.

BA: They all had a voice.

Question 6:

Going back to the talk that happened on 10th December 2011, what kinds of debates were had on that day? (00:26:22 minutes into recording)

BA: We tried to chair it and to keep it all together so we could think about the overall project of *Brixton Calling* and to reflect that through the dialogue. So we would look at the context of what was happening in the 1980s; the things that were around, the creation of the work, the relationships that were happening, the time and the political atmosphere, the general things that created the context, and then to take it towards the contemporary – so asking questions about certain strategies and institutional things that have been put in place, such as Decibel that Monica Baker – who was on the panel – was involved with as well. She was quite instrumental in the Decibel awards. So talking

about those strategies and big exhibitions that have come subsequently come and where we find ourselves now. So it was a real journey, and a difficult journey, and a difficult thing to manage. I think what is difficult about it is that there are still traces of things that are not talked about but which are very emotive to people about the 80s, and not just about the art world but also around the political position of things. I suppose you're never going to talk about everything, but once you open a Pandora's box like that, it becomes very emotive. Things come out. The nature of the show, *Brixton Calling*, the whole thing...although it's very difficult to have a big emotional thing...I think it was probably reflective of the Brixton Art Gallery, because the emotion was allowed. I'm not sure that it would have happened in the same way in other places. I can't say that anything was resolved, but at the end of the dialogue, once everybody had got lots of stuff out, it was quite a nice atmosphere. So, I think it was quite cathartic. And I think that that was what was important about the project. There are certain things that are not spoken about still.

ADC: What would you say those are?

BA: I thought that it was interesting that this question came up – this confrontation between black male and white male – Guy Burch brought a lot of these issues up. I think they had a gay and lesbian group and also a black gay and lesbian group. There were these tensions around positionings of people within those. They also had issues around positioning women artists. Those kinds of things. And the idea around professionalism and what is quality and what is not, because the gallery was not selective in the same way as big institutions might be. So you had conflicts around that. People's political positions about things as well.

FD: And the recognition of the position of being white and working class. Why wasn't that more recognised than being an artist and being black, for example. There were a few working class artists at the Brixton Art Gallery, including myself. There was something really refreshing about going back to the 1980s, when we were very confrontational. Issues of racism and sexism were out there, in the front. Looking back through my archives, I found a copy of a letter that I wrote to the Brixton Artists Collective, asking for an extremely offensive and sexist piece of work to be removed from the gallery. And we had an entire process through which we could have work removed because it was racist, sexist or promoting animal cruelty. It reflects a time when we all had really raw skin. Anything that was thrown at us, we threw back. So, there was a huge amount of questioning and confrontational arguments, which I think is really healthy, but which doesn't happen anymore. We talked about racism and sexism. I think what's interesting about questions of 'visibility' is - which was also brought up in the conversation [on 10/12/2012], and other conversations which came about through meeting people in the *Brixton Calling* project – that everything became problematic once we stopped saying words like racism, homophobia or sexism, and instead we started talking about 'identity'. Everything became very blurry, and now we don't confront any more. We don't confront the racism and sexism of institutions, which is major. I think we have lost something.

BA: There has been a loss of dialogue. I grew up in the 1980s and went to college in the 1990s, and the National Front used to camp out outside of my school and give out leaflets. So we used to be able to talk about racism and you knew that that person was racist, and you had a conversation with them. You would find out why and they would justify their position. I think racists were more open to having a conversation about it;

you would end up having a conversation with them about it because they would want to bang home their point. But now I think certain dialogues just don't happen.

LD: People are a lot more careful these days. It's a culture of not being too in your face. That's across the board.

BA: It's a PC thing. There's a veneer that everything is alright.

LD: Yes, it's a politeness.

BA: There's no actual dialogue about...

FD: I think in the 1990s with New Labour, there was a time, to paraphrase Araeen, the doors of the citadel [of modernism] opened and you had a right to be a 'black artist' or a 'woman artist' to get jobs in academia and so on. But now, it's shut again. I was reading the Diane Abbot article a couple of weeks ago in the Guardian, where she was talking about black male youth unemployment, which is massive but hasn't been recognised. So, this is already happening.

BA: I'm not convinced that anything has changed, actually from the 1980s and 1990s.

FD: Well, I think there was a time when there was a little bit allowed. You have the Chris Ofili at Tate which would not have happened...

BA: I think that example is really interesting. It's what's known. I wrote about him in my MA thesis. I wrote about 'Captain Shit and The Legend of Black Stars' and the analogy that...Captain Shit was actually quite autobiographical. He knew he was a black star artist...If you go through college in the 1990s...I was at college in the 1990s and I was asked to 'show up my blackness', and they would show you Basquiat, and they would always expect a bit more tribalism out of you. And he [Ofili] gave them everything. He gave them everything they needed; porn, overt black sexuality, blaxploitation, tribalism, elephant shit – he gave them everything. When you read a lot of the reviews of his Tate show...he has become an older man, he is middle aged, he has gone to live with his family in Trinidad, he's got a much more sober...he is a painter and he wants to paint something different. And they [art critics] are like, 'What is this?'

FD: But his new work is absolutely fantastic. But what was interesting about that show [his retrospective exhibition at Tate Britain in 2010], is that the year it was on, I was teaching critical theory at Birmingham, and we have a solid minority of students from African, Asian and Caribbean backgrounds. They all went to review the show and were doing a presentation about it, and suddenly there was a revelation that there was a black artist doing that stuff. And they were unpicking the whole thing and I had to stop them and say, 'look how good a painter he is, go beyond the subject matter, look at how he handles his paint'. I think this is quite different from the 1980s strategy, which was much more about the politics and the content of the work than the aesthetic. It is really interesting how that has changed. It's not just about the tribal stuff [for Ofili]; it's also about being a bloody good painter. I do agree with what you [BA] that it [Ofili's work] does have that Frantz Fanon thing about 'I'm going to give you what you see'...

BA: *Black Skins, White Masks* [1952]. Whether this is conscious or unconscious, I think he

had a definite awareness at that time. I know him and I know the people that he is around, and he was surrounded by that hip hop thing. It was prevalent. That black male thing was going on. So, it is interesting. I recall when he had the Serpentine show, and I went with my daughter, and I saw an old tutor of mine there. I pretended that I didn't remember him, but he remembered me and was trying to engage me in conversation. But I remembered him being one of those tutors who would say 'where is the African in your work?'. I do get that sort of thing where people ask 'Where are you from' and I say 'I am British' because that's the truth. I know there is an African side to me but it's not something that I can say 'This is me!'. So, anyway, I remember avoiding him, because he was very keen on engaging me in some sort of ethnography, some sort of exoticness in my work. I think Chris [Ofili] must, retrospectively, be aware of what people want.

FD: I think, on the other hand, we have *Thin Black Lines*. I think it was really interesting to have that display – it's not an exhibition, it's a display which is quite difficult to find – to find out that there was only one work from that display which is owned by the Tate. All the other works in the display are still owned by the artists. I thought that was absolutely appalling. So visibility...I think the black women artists from the 1980s...it's kind of a double whammy – race and gender. I find that quite shocking. But I thought it was interesting when Lubaina Himid was talking about the strategies that she put in place with the Elbow Room. Here was a really interesting moment in her talk, and Keith Piper also talked about it, a seminal moment in a conference in Wolverhampton [*The First National Black Art Convention, 1982*], where there was a sudden split; the women went off because they wanted to talk about art, and the men wanted to talk about politics. That's the way Lubaina Himid and Claudette Johnson talked about it. So, there were different strategies and agendas, which goes back to my argument that this is really complex and there are lots of different types of stories.

Question 7:

You were talking about how in the 1980s, it was an environment in which you could have dialogues and be confrontational, and come into contact with important issues in a raw and powerful way. This is something I have been thinking about when looking at *Brixton Calling* and *Thin Black Lines* and also the BLK Art Group show which is on in Sheffield. With that in mind, what do you feel the relationship is between these three shows and displays? They all reflect back on key activities involving black artists that happened in the 1980s. Do you think it possibly indicates a mourning for a more political or radical time, or a time when activism was much more prevalent, especially compared to the current moment. Stuart Hall has recently remarked that a real left-wing politics no longer exists. Would you agree that these shows are symptomatic of a mourning for a more radical and political moment, or a longing for that sort of approach now? (00:43:13 Minutes into recording)

LD: I think it's more to do with people recognising that there is a need for a resurgence of something in relation to the time now. So, I don't know whether it's a mourning for it, or even wanting it to be the same, but just a feeling that something is needed, that that time had.

BA: I think there's also a discourse now, of depoliticising art. I think from the late 1980s and into the 1990s, you had more artists saying that their work was not political. Going back to talking about Chris Ofili's work, it was overly political. Across the board, not just in art, there's a disassociation with politics. Politicians have done a very good job of PR-ing...of distancing...33% of the population vote, so they've done a very good job of keeping themselves in a position of two-party politics. They've made everybody really

disinterested with no cause. No one goes out and demonstrates. Everybody is sitting at home thinking that it's good that there are these people demonstrating outside of St.Pauls, but not many people will go out there and support them. So it kind of eroded and it has eroded in the art world as well. I don't think it's a mourning. I think it's a call to arms. A lot of it is happening in various different ways; not just in exhibitions. There's things like...of artist collective ways...artists have to think about their practices now. So, they are reflecting a lot. There's a lot of other books that are coming out that are looking at...not just of practices of the 80s, but also of the 60s. They're reflecting on these ways in which artists had agency over their work and their practices and the way their practices were distributed. We're different in the sense that we are not a huge gallery. Sheffield is different because it's a library. Tate is a different entity when it comes to showing *Thin Black Lines*. Obviously they [Tate] can't be left behind, if that's the general conversation that is happening. But you've got things like Adhocracy last year with New Work Network and the artists who campaigned outside Tate against BP sponsorship. So there is a lot of underlying stuff that's happening which is also reminiscent of artists going, 'Actually...'

- LD: I think things are deteriorating, and the more that they deteriorate, people are slowly thinking that they need to take a stronger stand.
- FD: I think each generation will find a way of protesting and doing things. Among my students there is a core little group who are totally frustrated and desperate, and they are engaged. They are engaged in occupy Birmingham, they have alternative schools, there's all sorts of stuff going on out there. But what the main problem is that they...what I have found, compared to who I was when I was eighteen years old, is that there is no sense of history. They're not being taught history any more. There's no dialectic tool. There's no sense of cause and effect and how things are working. So, it's very difficult for this generation to articulate how everything works together. I think that's maybe why we had the summer riots [London Riots 2011] because there is a total frustration there. I remember at the Brixton Art Gallery, the group I was most involved with was the women's group, and we had older feminist artists with us, who were very involved in the 1960s and 1970s. They used to tell us to not reinvent the wheel. And we were aware of what had happened before. There was a sense of passing on a particular knowledge and a particular way working which was that we adapt into our own context. I think that that link has been severed. So I think there is a major problem. I think it's all well-intentioned. And what's really tragic, with postmodernism, it was totally supported and started with feminism and Postcolonialism and then it was totally sold off. It was a neo-con theory. The fact that we accepted, for many years, that there was no history, that history was dead, authorship was dead, is just total....We've created this very late postmodernist context where it is very hard to make sense of stuff. I remember colleagues saying to me, 'Things are really complex now', meaning that you can no longer have these confrontational things. Bollocks! It's not complex. There are things which are not complex. I'm sorry, racism is not complex!
- BA: That's like one of the curatorial lecturers that I worked with at Central St.Martins [School of Art] whispered to me, 'Identity – that's so passé'. So the kind of post-post-, which is something Sonia [Boyce] and I were talking about the other day, the 'post-black' ...it's not 'post'. Young people are taught history. My daughter does history.
- FD: Really? What have they been teaching them then? When I say 1968, they [students at Birmingham City University] all look at me like...'What happened?'

BA: The problem is that you can reject it [the subject of history, at school] very early age thirteen or fourteen. And, of course, it depends on who is teaching you the history. My daughter is currently doing the Russian Revolution, and she has learnt a lot about that and I think it has changed her whole perspective on lots of stuff. But it [history as a subject at school] is selected and it is selected in particular ways. I think that one of things that is really special about working with young people, in terms of working on this project and what Francoise was saying, in terms of joining the dots, was the dialogues. In the oral history project [as part of *Brixton Calling*], the dialogues that the young people had with Francoise and Guy [Burch] they actually started to have a sense of something that came before. I also had an experience when leading the project which was about the anti-apartheid movement. The group of girls, they had an awareness of this – some of them were doing history [at school] – but they didn't have the kind of awareness of this that I had when I was growing up. But when we took them to look at the papers of the anti-apartheid movement, and when they got into a dialogue with Teri [Bullen] about working with the Zamani sisters, when they actually heard testimony from Eugene [Skeef] about what it was like to be Steve Biko's driver...It's all well and good having these exhibitions in these places, but it's what you do with them that is important.

LD: Yes, it's the personal impact, isn't it?

BA: Yes. I was back at Tate on Sunday to see *Migrations* and *Thin Black Lines* is still there, and that's fine. It's going to be on display for people, mostly tourists who visit Tate, and people will see that and they will go to *Migrations*. But it is what you do around it. My practice has always been about involving people. That's the key. It's all well and good to stick it up on the wall. That's the difference between this project and Tate. I don't know much about the BLK Art Group show. But certainly with *Brixton Calling*, we thought it was really important to activate it. And context is really important, for so many reasons. I was also thinking about how young people are going to make their own art work. We did workshops with them about printing techniques, and using photocopiers, and they were like, 'What? No computer?'. All of those kinds of things; the understanding of the lineage of things. Like you were saying, you can change things, you can adapt it and make it work faster, more refined...I think the other problem is that when you do have a big institution doing something like that, they sometimes miss the other things that were going on. It's in the big institution, and if that's going to be the place that most people are going to see something, then they'll think, 'Oh, maybe this is history'. It's kind of stuck in history unless you do a whole bunch of work around it. That's something that I'm confronted with, personally, with my project [South London Black Music Archive] going to Tate and having those dialogues with them. But it can just be an aspect. Another thing that we were considering when we were talking about archiving was that it could just be in boxes. And the history is there. But how do you activate it? How do you make it become something and actually mean something?

FD: I think Barby is right, but it is also about...the BACA people, most of us are still practicing artists. I think what was tragic about *Thin Black Lines* was...I wanted to see some of Claudette Johnson's...

All: New work!

FD: So I think that the problem with the idea of something that's just archival. It's, as you

said [to BA], it's history. It's going in a box. And that's actually really nice, because boxes don't shout back at you, or 'we can keep this' or 'keep it away'. Think that was the really important stuff; that it [*Brixton Calling*] was also talking about today.

BA: We [pointing to herself and LD] went to see *Afro Modern* [at Tate Liverpool, 2010] after we had gone to Nottingham to see Harminder Singh Judge's exhibition [at New Art Exchange]. So we got on the train, for four hours, from Nottingham to Liverpool...

LD: It seemed like a good idea at the time.

BA: It was a good idea at the time, but when we got into the show [*Afro Modern*], it was one of those shows where it was amazing to see all the work, but it was also one of those shows that was so disappointing because you need...I also feel the same about *Migrations* – you can't just do it in three hours. You need to be able to go back. It feels like, whenever a show is done like that, it's done like it's expected to... 'Ooh we've done it! We have to panic! We've got to do this really big black show. Let's get everything in it!'...so, there were so many pieces that I had never seen before, I needed time to reflect. I've done a lot of work with Guillermo Gómez-Peña and – 'The Year of the White Bear' [1992] – I had never seen it before, it's mythic to me. I'd spoken to him about it, but by the time I had got to the end of the exhibition [where this work was located], we had a train to catch. So you can't sit there and spend half an hour watching a video.

LD: I remember thinking that it should have been a series of exhibitions, or that it should have been on at all the Tates at the same time with different rotating parts of it, because that tried to put everything...it was as if they had just decided to do it all, in one place and at one time. It was an impossible task.

BA: Also, once it's been at Tate Liverpool it won't come to London.

LD: Why not expand that, and use it as an opportunity to look at the various different themes that they were trying to draw on, and do it in a different way that would give it the depth that it really required? It was a bit frustrating.

Question 8:

We've been talking for an hour now, so perhaps we should draw this interview to a close. Was there anything else you wanted to add before we finish? (00:59:33 minutes into recording)

BA: [To ADC] I think you should talk to Aisha Richards at Central St.Martins, because she is doing research around students from black and ethnic minority backgrounds in the University of the Arts. She has data on where they are going. I think that's a really important area now, in terms of visibility, and in terms of how these institutions widen participation. This misses off certain things like...for example, you can talk about widening participation, but one of the young people I was working with at Tate couldn't go on a widening participation programme because his mum had got a degree. His mum got her degree and became a teacher because she had become a single mother. And because of that, he can't go on this programme because his family is too educated! There's a real problem in these kinds of things.

LD: And when you have a whole bag of degrees if you come here from Nigeria or somewhere, they're worth nothing! It's like it can count or it can't count, depending on the context, so you can never win.

BA: So, she [Aisha Richards] has been doing this research and has found that lots of them are leaving with 2:2s and class 3 degrees and are still getting a lot of confrontational stuff about identity. Anyway, look her up. Her project is called *Shades of Noir*.

FD:

[REDACTED] So it's still happening. It's becoming very complex because you have students coming from all over the world. Some of them come from privileged backgrounds, and some of them are tearing their hair out because they don't know where their money is going to come from. So although the universities are opening up...students are paying more fees...and they are coming from very different backgrounds. How do we, as teachers, deal with all this?

BA: I've worked with a Japanese curator and I would say that when she got her MA there was a lot of neglect. I've spoken to people who work in universities who would say, 'We're supposed to neglect their use of English'. So, they [international students] think they're getting something really good. But often they're not, because of the economics that are going on. So we've got that and we also have the whole bunch of new people that are coming. How are they going to access and how are they going to find their way within an art system that is inherently racist, sexist and homophobic? How do you find a voice? One of my students is exploring her father's Hassidic Jewish roots. And he has left her, so she is having to find it in a really quite dangerous way. But this is seen [by her tutors?] as too confrontational or scary work. So, there's lots of different identities here. I think it is interesting to unpick it.

FD: But, to bring it back to the *Brixton Calling* project, one of the things that we hoped to ...was to talk about how artists can come together and form a collective. To create a space for themselves and for others to show, which was not part of any institutions. That goes back to what Barby was saying – you leave art school, and what on earth are you going to do? Though it's not about repeating what we did, it's just offering different kinds of possibilities. You don't wait for things to happen. You just do it yourself. But it's also a very different model from the one that students in the last ten years have been exposed to, which is the YBA.

LD: The emphasis is now on the individual.

FD: the individual making lots of money and becoming really famous etc. But I think students are beginning to realise that 'That's never going to happen to me'. And then, looking back at earlier models that were very important and much more political.

BA: But artist collectives have always been going on. The Tate Modern ten year anniversary, 'No Soul for Sale' celebrated artist-run spaces and collectives, and they were invited from all over the world, but had to self-fund to get there. So it was like a big trade show of artist-run spaces in the Turbine Hall. It was very disturbing, but at the same time it was interesting to know that there are people like Auto Italia and all these other young organisations out there trying to do things, in a kind of self-help, desperate, doing these projects. One thing that I would say, going back to black artists, is that histories are difficult to access. I remember spending the whole second year of my degree

researching black artists because I needed to find the 'visibility of myself' in the work. If you've got that to do, plus also studying the collective- putting yourself in...understanding those historic...I do fear that there are younger black artists who are missing that part, or artists from that kind of background missing that part. Also you need a certain amount of privilege, especially today when everything is so expensive and you can't just go on the dole like in the 1980s...or was it something else?

LD and FD: The enterprise allowance.

BA: You can't do that now, and if you come from a particular kind of background or a family where there is a pressure to get working, the artist collective might not be that open to artists from diverse cultural backgrounds.

FD: Going back to Aisha Richards, and her research on what happens to students from ethnic minorities when they leave art school, I've seen the pattern with my students...



There's all these aspects that allow less freedom. The problem is, if we think about learning and teaching, if we take your [BA's] experience... Did you have any black teachers at art school?

BA: No.

FD: How many black artists are now working in art institutions compared to twenty years ago?

BA: When I was guest lecturing at Wimbledon [School of Art], I was surprised that all of the students turned up. I suppose for them, it's like a different voice. It's quite exciting.

Appendix 8.3

Interview with Tanya Barson

17 May 2010 at Tate Modern, Bankside, London SE1 9TG

Question 1:

How did the idea for the exhibition come about and why did Tate decide to do it? (00:00:36 Minutes into the recording)

TB: The idea for the exhibition came about because I'd been doing a lot of thinking around certain artists' work. I mean, I have a background in studying issues around cultural diversity and display in exhibitions and they're not so diverse in terms of the way that certain modernist artists were looking art from beyond Europe, so Matisse in particular. In a way I was thinking about how by thinking an exhibition through the work of certain contemporary practitioners you come at a different narrative of modernism. I had done an exhibition in 2006 called *Making History: Art and Documentary in Britain, from 1929 to now*, which had been, in a way, an attempt to create a sort of alternative narrative of modernism in Britain around the realist and documentary trope. So I'm interested in looking at overlooked narratives or constructing alternative narratives of modernism that include things that might not necessarily be classed as classically modernist, like realist or documentary art, which is often seen as 'well that's not really modernism, this is not Malevich or Mondrian or Picasso'. But I thought this is what modernism was in Britain, so let's create a narrative out of that. And in a way, with *Afro Modern*, what I was trying to do, by thinking through the work of certain contemporary artists, how one could think through their aesthetic universe, as it were, people like Chris Ofili or Kara Walker, and look back and see how, you know, Chris' work goes right back to Matisse and Picasso, particularly Matisse I think is a reference for him. But I think his work also incorporates aspects Nigerian modernism from the mid-century and the quality of line that he has in his drawing and I think that's something Okwui Enwezor has pointed out as well. I think there's also Romare Bearden there, there's David Hammons. So there are certain kinds of key references in his work. And with Kara Walker you can see her going back to the early twentieth century with someone like Aaron Douglas. And somehow by thinking through that contemporary work you can see that there was already in existence and operating in their work a whole different narrative of what we might think of as modernism and certainly a narrative that we just really don't tell at Tate because we don't have a representation of certain artists like Aaron Douglas or Jacob Lawrence or Romare Bearden within the collection. So it was a way of creating another narrative out of modernism.

So at the same time I came across Paul Gilroy's book, *The Black Atlantic*, or I had been aware of it. I started thinking much more specifically about that and thinking that the argument that he comes up with, although he doesn't really doesn't discuss the visual arts. There are some mentions of visual artists and some passages on it, but he doesn't really think through the argument in terms of visual arts or visual modernism. That this was missing from the book and the theory that he had come up with around cultural hybridity, the sort of possibilities arising out of the history of the Diaspora and also issues around double consciousness, was incredibly useful if we brought that concept together with the concept of modernism. So, as I called my introduction 'Modernism and the Black Atlantic', which was the working title for the show, that was... what I was trying to do was to bring these two concepts together. So there is the theory of the *Black Atlantic* and what we do at Tate which is to investigate and study this

phenomenon called modernism in art, and to see how one could bring those two together alongside also thinking through the contemporary - how artists think and reference the histories in the twentieth century. And then from there to create some kind of coherent narrative, but not a definitive one, out of those concepts. So, beginning in the early twentieth century with European primitivism and juxtaposing that with Harlem Renaissance work and also some South American work, and thinking around artists' trajectories as well, at that time, that could, from what I had known about certain artists and also practitioners and figures such as Josephine Baker, how mobile artists were in the early twentieth century. It seemed to me to reflect some of what Paul Gilroy was talking about in terms of black Atlantic mobility and the exchange of ideas and the importance that culture derived from Africa had for the formation of modernism in Europe and then the story after that. So I was thinking about all of these things and how one could come up with an exhibition that gave an alternate view, but one that could be seen as being extremely important nonetheless, but would privilege other practitioners.

And then I sort of thought around this thought experiment of... well we have this narrative of modernism and all the people in the middle of it, the core of it is Picasso, Matisse etc. and you can plot that. And then on the margins are these other figures. Now if you cut that up the middle and flip it over, you bring the marginal figures into the centre and you make the central figures the marginal ones so Picasso and Matisse and people like that, although Matisse didn't end up being in the exhibition, we had Modigliani and some German Expressionists. I'd have loved to have had a painting like 'The Blue Nude (Souvenir of Biskra)' by Matisse alongside Ofili's 'Triple Beam Dreamer'. Those two paintings I think have a very close relationship. So, I was thinking that those canonical European figures could somehow be seen as having a very partial engagement with African art and the way that they used it, but that other figures had a much more interesting or profound one, like Aaron Douglas or Norman Lewis, but also thinking around some of the problematics of Negrophilia and Josephine Baker and I suppose one could begin to plot a different narrative.

ADC: Do you think this exhibition could have happened at Tate Modern?

TB: It certainly could have done but really the reason why it happened in Liverpool I think some of the ideas came to the fore because I was living in Liverpool and the context is very potent for the Black Atlantic. The notion of the Black Atlantic resonates in Liverpool because of the history of the city. I was based up there between 2004 and 2007 and that's when I began thinking about this exhibition and first proposed the exhibition. And then there was a bit of a hiatus when I moved down to London to Tate Modern and Tate Liverpool were thinking 'Tanya's gone but do we still want to do the show?', and because of Tate having the structure that it does being four museums in one, there was a possibility of that happening. But at the same time Tate Modern were aware of the exhibition and were also very keen. But it just seemed to me more respectful to honour that initial commitment in the context of which I began thinking in a more focussed way about the exhibition in Liverpool and the context resonating so well. That being a city that has that history but also that has a strong connection with abolitionism because Frederick Douglas came through Liverpool on his tours of Britain. And also it has an ongoing connection to South America through trade and shipping that still exists in a very small form. It seemed it was a very good place for it to be but it wasn't that Tate Modern didn't want to do it that it didn't happen here. It was because I felt that I should

honour a prior commitment and give Tate Liverpool a first option, but they did say very strongly that they would also like to have it down here as well.

ADC: Do you think that it is significant or important that Tate was the first to deal with this particular alternative reading of modernism?

TB: I'm not sure we can really claim that we were the first. I was thinking through the exhibition about joining up the dots of other exhibitions, which had been very influential. So things like *Rhapsodies in Black* at the Hayward, or right up to the contemporary, I was thinking about the trilogy of shows that Thelma Golden had done at the Studio Museum, this might refer to some of your later questions, like *Freestyle*, *Frequency* and *Flow* which were the exhibitions where she was thinking through issues around Post-Blackness and also the final one around the wider African Diaspora as it features in the US - this notion of Afropolitanism or whatever. So I think the history exists and I think Tate joined up the dots and this exhibition brought those existing statements together somehow. I think it is indebted to a lot of things that have happened before. Also the books that INIVA have published, that Kobena Mercer edited, those have been incredibly influential in my thinking through the themes and areas to be touched on or privileged by the exhibition. There was certainly a lot more material there that could have been in the exhibition that wasn't in the end because of having to edit. And by doing this century-long narrative from 1909 to 2009, we had to be... it had to necessarily be a non-definitive, or non-comprehensive, but somehow setting out the idea of a narrative.

Question 2:

Why was the concept developed at this time and not earlier, given that Gilroy's book has been around for over fifteen years? (00:13:42 minutes into the recording)

TB: It has been dealt with before. Part of the other reason I was thinking about doing the exhibition is that I was aware that there was another show in Germany, in Berlin, in the early 2000s, in 2003 or 2004 at the House of World Culture in Berlin, which was a very interesting interdisciplinary show. It wasn't just visual arts but featured the work of a small group of contemporary artist. And that was one response in terms of making a show around these ideas. But it did seem to me that it was a bit of a neglected text in the visual arts. This show had happened, a few other people have discussed it, there has been writing, it wasn't that no one was taking any notice, but it did seem to me that institutions had failed to think around this text. And in a way, this is a really key text of cultural history in the way that *Orientalism* by Edward Said is, but similarly contentious but nonetheless really interesting and useful, I thought, to think through some of the ideas I was having around why don't we question this history of modernism a bit more than we do and why don't we challenge it more than we do, and that's what I think Kobena Mercer was doing in his books. There's more scope for playing around with these things.

Question 3:

What do you think the relationship is between Tate's Vision for 2015 and Priorities to 2012 and the *Afro Modern* exhibition? (00:15:57 minutes into the recording)

TB: I don't think I've seen those.

ADC: I think certainly the overall vision for 2015 is to be more open, more diverse, more international etc. And then within that the priorities for 2012 included, well, exactly as you've done in the exhibition – having alternative narratives and international frameworks. So that immediately makes me think of the exhibition, and I was wondering, but I guess from your response that that there's not really a relationship that you were aware of.

TB: There has been a shift in the culture of Tate since I started and that was thirteen years ago, there's been a really dramatic shift. But I'm not sure we've shifted far enough and I think that there was a certain aspect in the genesis of the exhibition that I was thinking around making an institutional intervention. That something needed to happen at Tate to push us further forward than we had been and that doing a show like this could really help us do that. Within the acquisitions programme we have been making quite a few strides in terms of bringing contemporary practice and contemporary figures of a different nature into the collection. Not only from Latin America but the Far East, the Asia Pacific region, the Middle East and we're beginning to think around continental Africa for how to bring this work into the collection but also African-American artists which is also a very glaring absence in the collection and that representation still resides around contemporary figures: David Hammons; Glenn Ligon; Lorna Simpson; a few others. But they have come into the collection fairly late in the day and then also sort of diasporic arts in the UK. So there has been a lot of work done in the last 10 years, but it has been very slow and incremental. I'm not sure the exhibition programme is quite as advanced and it needs to be a lot more advanced than it is, and coming from a background where in the 80s and 90s this was being studied quite a lot in the US, and I arrived at Tate in 1997 thinking 'hmm, this is a little bit behind the times for the national collection'. Other collections in the country, other institutions were in advance of Tate, like the Arts Council. The Arts Council is much more able to represent the 1980s in Britain in the diversity of practices that were happening in Britain because they were collecting at the time whereas Tate was not. So there was a certain aspect – I knew the institution was changing but that I wanted to kind of poke it a bit.

Question 4:

What were your aims for the exhibition? (00:20:18 minutes into the recording)

TB: I had a lot of personal aims as well which also happens with exhibitions. I wanted to make a show that was enjoyable to see as well as intellectually rewarding, interesting and doing all of these other activities to intervene in the cultural politics of the country. But I did also want to make a show, and I think it's really important, that was full of really gorgeous objects and fantastic art, and I think that's one of things that I'm proudest about. That the show looked really gorgeous. Aaron Douglas' paintings are extraordinary; David Hammons' weird objects I wanted desperately to include and we got a really great early one, to pieces by Ellen Gallagher, to Chris Cozier's pieces, and then Chris Ofili and other people. So I wanted to create something that was really interesting but that also looked great. I guess it was also an opportunity to see a lot of work that I personally hadn't seen in this country that is surprisingly rare to see in this country. So that was another aim, to bring things to this country that are rarely shown.

ADC: It was fantastic for me as my MA covered all of what you covered in the show, so to see it was like seeing all my MA course material laid out pictorially, and it was fantastic, years later, to see these pieces for the first time.

TB: It makes such a difference when you're looking at things in books to then see the actual object. I think it was really important to do that and generate some interesting responses as well.

Question 5:

Were there any particular concepts or narratives that you were trying to put forward in the exhibition? (00:23:00 minutes into the recording)

ADC: For example, having read your introduction quite a few times and looked at a lot of the other texts in the catalogue and having looked in quite a lot of detail at the captions, I felt that some of the themes were hybridity, transnationalism, those sorts of things, but I was wondering if those were ideas that you really wanted to put out there?

TB: What I was trying to do, in terms of transnationalism, was to show there was mobility, that there were connections, both real physical connections, people travelling from one place to another, and transmitting ideas. I think that is something that is really central to Paul's book. He puts it in this very intellectual language - the ship as chronotope etc. But yes, on boats, people were put on boats from Africa as slaves, from different tribes, different backgrounds, and the exchange that happened on that boat created something. But also, the journeys of artists and practitioners during the twentieth century has also contributed to that mobility of ideas. And then there are also aesthetic ideas that exchanged. People didn't necessarily meet one another but they nevertheless knew about their work. It was important to track some of those actual journeys, so there is a basis of this notion of transnationalism in actual lived experience of peoples and artists. So Josephine Baker coming from The States to Europe and then going down to Brazil and she spends her time on the boat with Le Corbusier. These are the sorts of fantastic narratives that are somehow relegated to a footnote in history, but actually could be considered as a crucial contribution to modernism. Similarly, Tarsila do Amaral coming from Brazil to study with Leger in Europe, and that having a completely transformatory impact on her work, she then takes European modernism, primitivism, back to Brazil and the return in itself also has a transformationary effect on her work and it becomes something else, it becomes Anthropofagia. So those ideas that transnationalism, if we call it transnationalism, or whatever, there is this mobility that has an actual impact and it isn't limited to this nation state view of what modernity is. I don't think modernism can be limited to national interests, but certainly modernity has been constructed around a narrative that has been pinned to the history of the nation state. But hybridity - I was thinking about this in a very particular way as well, and that was Gilroy's notion of polyphony and multiple voices. So although there was some abstraction in the exhibition, I privileged certain kinds of abstraction and I privileged much more a kind of figurative practice. In a way what I was trying to do was privilege aesthetic polyphony, so that where one had multiple things going on in a single work of art, multiple voices, I think that's true of Aaron Douglas, Maya Deren, it's more apparent in someone like Romare Bearden, that you get this very syncretic aesthetic. So I always kept in my head this notion of polyphony, of multiple voices, of a dialog, and that's what I wanted to reflect in the exhibition.

Question 6:

How was the related book offer part of your considerations when organising the exhibition? (00:27:45 minutes into the recording)

ADC: On my last visit to the exhibition, I looked at the book offer for the exhibition, and I noticed some unusual books, including one placed next to the Chris Ofili catalogue called 'How to talk to your children about world art'. One of things I'm looking at is the kinds of messages that filter out from the exhibition, not only the ones from the exhibition itself, but from the related programmes, and partnerships etc. And I was thinking if I was a visitor to the exhibition and wasn't particularly familiar with the artists shown and then went to the bookshop after, and saw Ofili next to that book, I was thinking about what kind of messages that gives. I know that wasn't your intention, but I was wondering how much the related book offer is part of your practice of putting an exhibition together?

TB: It tends not to be at all. In reality, *occasionally*, I had time to send a message to the retail manager of the book shops at Tate Modern or in Tate Liverpool to say 'get these'. But often they don't have any time to. I guess our thinking around books, it was more done more with Maria Percival in the Interpretation Department in Tate Liverpool and she brought in a lot of books to be in the exhibition itself and that was much more reflective of my reading material, but even then it was Maria's thing. So there were a lot of books that I had referenced in those ventures but there were also some that I hadn't seen. But for some of the artists in the show, I have to say, there is a serious lack literature and that also is reflective. I did notice that Tate Liverpool had a couple of good books, Paul Gilroy's latest book around the black Atlantic, they also had the recent Aaron Douglas monograph which is a very recent one, and very good and long overdue. They had an interesting book done during the Dakar biennial on David Hammons and a couple of other artists which is very good but very academic. I think they have a limited space as well.

ADC: I was just thinking things just happen like that when you're just trying to get books on the shelf before the shop opens. But it was an interesting juxtaposition.

TB: It seems very meaningful, and I think a lot of institutions don't think as much as they ought to about that and also the meanings that are built into marketing campaigns that are often unintended but which will be studied and atomised and people will think 'well why did they do that?', and you just think well, it was done because it was done quickly by someone who was doing their best but is not an expert in the area, so it happens. But these things become a subject of study so we should be aware of that and I'm not sure we're as aware of that as we ought to be. It tends not to be a curatorial...well, you get a little bit of input into that process but not very much.

Question 7:

Why did you choose to have a section based around the idea of Post-Black? (00:33:23 minutes into the recording)

TB: Well, this is interesting because this was a section that I wanted to put in there in a way because, I guess it didn't come out of Gilroy's book, but in a way, some of the issues that Thelma [Golden] and Glenn [Ligon] were thinking around when they came up with this notion of post-blackness are implied by Paul's book rather than actually being there. So I thought the show has to deal with where we are now. Also we need to think through the generational shift that's happening at the moment. From this generation of artists like Ellen [Gallagher], Glenn [Ligon], Kara Walker, Lorna Simpson, Chris Ofili who are looking back at people like David Hammons, but David Hammons is still here and very much in the current scene, as much as he wants himself or allows himself to be in the

current scene, he negotiates his position or his visibility in the current scene very, very rigorously in a very sophisticated way. This younger generation of artists that Thelma was thinking about and I think Glenn was thinking about in relation to his own work and looking at younger artists coming through. He is always very generous with younger artists and always wants to show alongside younger artists because often that can help their career and it's also very interesting for him to dialogue with ideas that are current, so it's a sort of give and take relationship. He's always very generous talking to people as well. I thought it was an interesting way to conclude the exhibition. Not necessarily to pin down the notion of what is or what is not post-black art too much, but to have the question mark there, to raise the issue of 'this is where we are at', 'these are the ideas that we are thinking through', 'a lot of these ideas are coming from the US, but what does that mean?' as well. There was a review that said all of the artists in the last room are African-American, which they are not, because there was Chris Ofili and an artist from Brazil, there was a Haitian artist, who nevertheless does work in Miami. I thought this was an interesting way of ending the exhibition, of negotiating the shift from what we might call the post-modern or the 90s generation of identity-based artists to a new generation who are thinking through certain issues but in a way they are dealing with the archive and with history much more. So someone like Adam Pendleton, I thought his work was so clever and so smart, and in a way also helps to create this elliptical relationship with the first room of the exhibition. So his 'Systems of Display' works hark back to Picasso, So not only was Kara Walker creating that ellipse or Chris Ofili was creating that ellipse, but Adam was as well and that was very interesting. So this circularity of ideas and this interest in dissecting modernism is there, despite a generational shift, in a subtly different way. There were a lot of things to deal with in that final room but to me that seemed like a way of concluding without putting some sort of definitive, 'this is where we are now and this is what I think', and closing it all down.

ADC: Without putting a full stop at the end.

TB: No full stops. A question mark. Without closing it down, just ending on those issues and being really honest about that.

Question 8:

Of the ten artists shown in that section six are from the US, and only one is British. So to what extent do you think the idea of Post-Black is applicable to the British context?? (00:38:10 minutes into the recording)

TB: I think it plays differently here but I think it is relevant and I think, probably, it's relevant to the artists that Sonia Boyce chose for The Bluecoat show. I was really happy to see what she was doing for her show there because it was impossible for me to include everything in the show. With the book [The Black Atlantic] being written from a British perspective, by a British academic, I did also want to lay a challenge at the door of US art. But also the idea that Liverpool, London - big cosmopolitan cities - we ought to be thinking about art in more global way. So that's why there was a Brazilian artist in there, a Haitian artist, and someone like Coco Fusco, who is Cuban-American, but also had an incredibly interesting and ongoing dialogue with the British context. So although it wasn't done numerically through British artists I thought that I was dealing with that nonetheless. Ellen Gallagher conversely being an American artist who nonetheless lives in Rotterdam. So we're living in a different circumstance but I think that maybe an exhibition like the last in that trilogy, Flow [at the Studio Museum Harlem], the one that

Thelma had done, and thinking about a diasporic art. I thought that one could think of artists from Africa who could be in that section as well. But I needed another floor. In a way I went with a more conventional rendition of that transition that I was trying to express. Maybe not more conventional, but I went for clarity from the 90s generation to the now generation for the sake of the fact that this was after all a show for the Tate audience who are not necessarily familiar with any of this. I guess Tate hasn't helped that because we don't show this kind of narrative necessarily. I thought I cannot possibly achieve everything in one show. But I do think this notion of post-black art does play within the British context but it plays differently. I'm not sure I have all of the answers for that but there are artists who are thinking through these issues. What I thought was interesting about the artists that Sonia chose [for *Action* at The Bluecoat], is that in contrast to a lot of the artists that I chose for the show [*Afro Modern*], none of them featured themselves in their work. There was an absence of the figure of the body in that work and I think that has an aspect of the post-black about it, that it no longer is necessary for the figure of the artist to feature so prominently.

Question 9:

I felt that room 7 in the exhibition identified a number of strategies that the artists shown use and suggests that these are characteristic of a post-black practice in art, such as polyphony, sampling and recycling. Would you agree with that? (00:42:25 minutes into the recording)

TB: I would identify certain aspects with a 90s, postmodernist, identity-based art, and sampling and those characteristics that I listed in the catalogue. I was thinking about Chris Ofili and Ellen Gallagher and people like that. When it came to someone like Adam Pendleton, I was thinking that this is sampling in way, but it's much more to do with dissecting the archive, dissecting history. So I think that they are subtly different, they're doing different things and maybe that needed a bit more clarity. And someone like Adler Guerrier, as well, is playing with the history in a way that's very self-conscious and very clever and very smart but it's directed in a particular way, at showing the historical archive to be fallible and the history to be mutable, in a way. I thought those two artists played off quite nicely against one another. And of course the preceding generation of artists are not old and sometimes you get into a trap of not seeming to express that, and are continuing to make work and shift their work as well. So, in a way, as I was saying with Glenn Ligon, there is a give and take, there is a conversation. So the reason I was putting in the same room was that I think there is a conversation going on there. There are aspects of what might call a post black aesthetic but I don't think one can be definitive about that. In a way, it's like, what are aesthetic characteristics of Brit Art and it's more about a sort of generational, socio....coming from a particular generational moment in time, sharing a place in history and an attitude, rather than an aesthetic.

Question 10:

To what do you understand black British artists to be referring when they discuss their visibility in the mainstream? (00:46:19 minutes into the recording)

TB: I think that's a huge topic. I think that black British artists have faced a huge visibility issue or problem, and it can be on multiple levels although, certain venues like the ICA or the Hayward Gallery have been very good, and to a certain extent the Whitechapel, and INIVA, now that they have their own space. In fact, INIVA sponsored shows before they had that space and collaborated on shows that probably had more impact than maybe what they have done in the space since it's opened. I think that they were involved in 'The Other Story'. But certainly also shows at the ICA also had INIVA

collaborations. But having said that, the exposure of very important black British artists has been very limited, For instance, Keith Piper hasn't had major survey show in this country, Isaac Julien hasn't. There have been great group shows, like 'The Thin Black Line', 'Picturing Blackness', 'Mirage' that Franz Fanon show at the ICA. So, there has been a certain amount of visibility but it hasn't been in terms exhibitions, in terms of publications, in terms of group shows and solo shows and the balance between those shows, in terms of institutions in this country collecting the work of these artists. So I think it's on multiple levels and I think there is a lot of work still to do. The 80s generation very important but there are generations after that. I think that the '90s generation have been better served but not massively. Artists like Chris Ofili and Steve McQueen, they have had a huge amount of prominence but they are among very few. Chris' show at Tate Britain was fantastic and it was the right moment to do that show, not really because of the institution but because of where he is in his career. I think it's an interesting moment to assess his career, so I thought that show was really great. Steve had a solo show at the ICA, but I think he is overdue a big solo show. So even if you're at the pinnacle, there are a lot of artists who are clambering for big solo shows and who deserve big solo shows, in fact. I think that there is a long way to go.

Question 11:

Do you think that there is still the same sense of urgency or importance around this issue that there was ten or twenty years ago? (00:49:58 minutes into the recording)

TB: I think it has changed radically and you can't have same conversation you were having twenty or so years ago. I think things have changed massively. I think some artists are just not necessarily interested in having the conversation either or don't think about their practice in that way, and they don't want to have positive discrimination or to be privileged purely on basis of ethnic identity which is absolutely fair enough. But on the other hand, there is still a disproportion. I think that the art world in Britain, whilst being a very open and very tolerant place, still has work to do. I think we are very lucky in British because we have the history of multiculturalism and I think that has enriched British society massively, but I think we have a lot to be proud of. Certainly when we go to The States, the discussions around these issues, even now, are much more vehement and vigorous. But on other hand you can also see a level of sophistication in The US that we don't necessarily have here. If you go to Brazil it's a whole other matter. In the Caribbean there are massively complex issues. What I did find surprising in doing the exhibition was to discover that people like Chris Cozier have never had major presentation of his work in this country. No museum had ever shown his work, and he's a senior Caribbean artist from the Anglophone Caribbean. So there is a lot still to be done, but not just British artists, but from around the Commonwealth and from further afield as well.

Question 12:

In what ways do you think developments in this debate relate to cultural policy or understandings of contemporary British art? (00:52:51 minutes into the recording)

ADC: I'm wondering where changes in these debates will lead us in terms of ideas about British art or about how policy is developed in the arts. So for example you were talking about artists who don't want to be positioned in a certain way or are not so interested in engaging in discussions about it.

TB: I guess what they are concerned about is being co-opted for certain bureaucratic reasons or having their work instrumentalised by a certain process. I think that's absolutely true. So as a curator what I usually do is stick really close to art history and the work of the artist which is why I thought it was really important to do a show which thought through the aesthetic universe of a particular artist. That keeps you close to what the work is about and what the artist is thinking about. I think that helps. At the same time I do think we need to shift the cultural politics in this country, which is why a book like Paul's operates on so many levels and obviously it has its limitations but it also is incredibly important. Not only does it intervene in cultural history, it intervenes in art history, or it can do, but it can also be applied to the wider context of cultural policy. I think whilst we have probably moved on from it somewhat, I think it presents argument which has a certain level of sophistication that ought to be duplicated when we're thinking through things on a bureaucratic and institutional basis. We shouldn't just be thinking about quotas and statistics and things like that. We should be thinking in a really meaningful way about how we are presenting certain artists' work and how we're incorporating them, what kind of level of experience we're giving them. The nuances need to be thought about. I don't know if that really answers your question.

ADC: It doesn't matter. It's more about ideas and letting them unfold.

TB: I'm thinking about the way that contemporary art can shift debates. I think it is about the rigourousness of the work. The privileging of the work is a means to an end and it is the end as well. I always want to...well, when I see myself getting a little bit too much on my soap box I have to shift myself back and think about the art history because that's what I know.

Appendix 8.4

Interview with Beverley Bennett

20 April 2011 at her studio in New Cross

Question 1:

Could you tell me how you were approached about being involved in *Action*?

(00:05:20 minutes into recording)

BB: It was during the time that I was finishing my MA at Middlesex. And then I got an email from Sara [Sara-Jayne Parsons] who basically told me about an exhibition that Sonia was doing at the Bluecoat. Sonia had asked me to send her some images and a statement during the summer. I thought nothing of it. I actually asked her if she wanted some of the other MA students to do it as well! She said 'No. Just you'. So it was quite nice. It was really cool and informal. It was via Facebook. I didn't understand the seriousness of it, so I was just sending small Jpegs and little snippets, but she wanted more information. I spoke to Sara and she gave me the brief and how long I had – the deadline was really short. And then Sonia came to my studio. At the time I was in Dalston, so it was a bit of a trek and it was in the winter. She looked at everything. So it was quite an informal chat, but then I realised the seriousness of it. That's it.

Question 2:

Did you know Sonia already? (00:06:53 minutes into recording)

BB: Yes. Funnily enough, I did. It was due to my working at the National Portrait Gallery. [artist Charley Peters, who shares Beverley's studio space, explains to me that Beverley assisted Eddie Otchere (Charley's partner) who was an Inspire Fellow at the National Portrait Gallery, with curating an exhibition of Sonia Boyce's work '*Devotional*' (2007)] I got to know her through that. And I was then reintroduced to her during my MA – she was an associate professor at Middlesex. So that was the first time I got in contact with Sonia. And we've kept in contact since. I asked her for crits and things like that, being quite cheeky. She came to the studio, she got to know my work. I guess she really liked it so she gave me an opportunity to be in her exhibition.

Question 3:

How did you feel about exhibiting at the Bluecoat? Had you heard of it before? (00:08:49 minutes into recording)

BB: [Laughing]

ADC: Don't worry if you hadn't!

BB: To be fair, I hadn't really. But then I realised that it was a big deal. It was quite scary. I did a bit of research, and seeing the exhibitions that they had there. Then I eventually got introduced. They forked out tickets and we got to see the spaces. That was quite overwhelming, to be involved in such a big institution like that. You know, I'd just finished my MA!

ADC: So was it your first big exhibition?

BB: Yeah, pretty much.

Question 4:

How did you feel about being in an exhibition that was curated by Sonia, who is a well-known artist, with an established, international career? (00:09:47 minutes into recording)

BB: It's funny, knowing that side of her, but also knowing her as an individual. It felt a bit different. It was like being in an exhibition curated by a friend. So I didn't feel that overwhelmed by that. Because she's really nice and genuine and sincere, it was really quite relaxed. She was very positive and she helped you develop. At the time I had a series of works. One piece that I showed at the MA called 'Scar' that consisted of pins. At that time there was only one. She wanted to see more so they could be in the exhibition. That was just before Christmas, and then after Christmas I created more. So she really wanted me to develop a bit more, with regards to that one. So, she is a really lovely woman.

Question 5:

What do you think connected your work to the work of the other three artists in the show? (00:11:30 minutes into recording)

BB: I could see my relationship with Junior's [Appau Boakye-Yiadom] work. Obviously, the whole premise was about performance. My work – I consider it quite performative. But other than that link... Me and Junior being quite young artists, I related to him more, personally. Other than it being Sonia's interest in what people are doing now...

ADC: Did you feel any connection between your work and Grace's [Ndiritu] work or Robin's [Deacon] work?

BB: Erm...

ADC: Or, if you felt a connection with Junior's work, what do you think it was?

BB: Well, mine and Junior's work, they can appear quite sculptural. Especially Junior's handlebars with the tar, and then mine with the pins and the raked pieces. They're quite sculptural in appearing as objects. That's probably what I would say for our connection. I'm not sure with myself and Grace and Robin, but I could see their connections with each other.

Question 6:

What did you understand to be the rationale of the show? (00:13: 20 minutes into recording)

BB: Kind of promoting what new artists are doing at this moment in time, with regard to elements of performativity in their work. Also, Sonia being a kid in a sweet shop, choosing what she'd like to have, and what she'd like to promote or endorse in some way.

ADC: So it was a mix between Sonia wanting to show artists she was personally interested in, but who also shared her interest in the performative nature of their practice?

BB: Yeah.

Question 7:

Did you have any concerns or reservations about being involved in the show? (00:14:19 minutes into recording)

BB: To begin with, I guess I did. You know, first and foremost you are an artist. Secondly, there's quite a few tiers that I hadn't personally thought about, with regard to me as an individual and what I'm trying to do with my work. Like when you have to do artist talks, or when people ask you to explain certain things. Sometimes I just don't want to. I want to leave it up to them. I don't want to give anyone an agenda. I guess I just wanted the work to talk for itself, as opposed to being a female artist, as opposed to being a black artist, as opposed to being a woman who comes from West Brom! I wanted the work to stand up for itself.

Question 8:

So in that case, how did you feel about *Action* being linked to the *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme and especially to *Afro Modern*? (00:15:36 minutes into recording)

BB: Well, with the artists in the other show, you can't really frown at them. They're amazing people, who have accomplished so much. I made numerous visits to the *Afro Modern* exhibition, myself. I really love Chris Ofili's work, Kara Walker's work, how charged it is but quite cheeky at the same time. It's quite nice to be with that level of individuals. I wouldn't say it's a good thing or a bad thing. It's a good accolade, really.

Question 9:

What would you say to someone who might describe *Action* as another black survey show? (00:17:06 minutes into recording)

BB: *Another* black survey show? Gosh.

ADC: Ok, perhaps less emphasis on 'another', but if someone were to say, 'isn't this a black survey show?'. What would you say to that? Or how would you feel about that even if you didn't say anything?

BB: I probably wouldn't say anything. It's funny, because a woman purchased a piece of my work from the show.

ADC: Were they for sale? I didn't know that.

BB: Well they weren't but she contacted me afterwards, which was quite sweet. And then when it came to meeting, she came to the studio and was like, 'Oh! I didn't realise that you were a woman, and I didn't realise that you were black!'. So, to go to that show, and not really...

ADC: That's very interesting!

BB: Yeah, so I would probably throw that out.

ADC: Good answer.

Question 10:

There was a suggestion from the text panels in the exhibition that you, along with the other three artists, could be described as being 'Post-Black'. The texts didn't use that actual term but it said that your works 'move beyond perceived boundaries of race and representation', which is one of the things that Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon described as characteristic of a new generation of 'Post Black' artists. That idea was also raised in the final room of *Afro Modern*, and some might describe *Action* as having a dialogue with that last room. What do you think about that? (00:18:49 minutes into recording)

BB: I'm happy with that statement. I think it's something that sits really easily with me. It's definitely something that I feel comfortable with. It breaks down certain stereotypes or preconceived notions. Hopefully when people are looking at the work, they're able to come at it through their own experiences as opposed to something that's been labelled onto them. That's what I try and do with my work.

ADC: Do you feel that the term 'Post-Black' is also a label or a signifier that might also pigeon-hole an artist?

BB: If Joe Bloggs came across that word, 'Post-Black', without knowing what it means, then they would still pigeon-hole you. Hmm. I'll have to think about that one.

ADC: It's uncomfortable for me, asking you these questions, because by asking you them, instead of asking you about your work, I'm pigeon-holing you myself in a way. I unfortunately label you by asking you to discuss your work and practice within those sorts of frameworks.

BB: No, it's good, because I don't often get opportunities to have these kinds of discussions. I don't know whether that's because I try and shy away from them or ...yeah, it's good.

Question 11:

To what extent do you feel you might have more or less access to exhibiting in large, well-known galleries as an artist who happens to be black? Do you feel that your being black would hinder you access to those galleries? (00:22:30 minutes into recording)

BB: No I don't think so. That would be the long and short of it. Hopefully someone would see the work and be engaged in it or would feel that it would fit in a contextual theme, would want to talk to me about it. I don't think it would hinder me in any way. I would *hope* that it wouldn't!

Question 12:

Do you ever worry about being labelled or pigeon-holed by any term, as an artist? (00:23:50 minutes into recording)

BB: No, not really. Sometimes I consider myself still a baby, and I haven't really had those kinds of experiences where I'd be a bit nervous about it. I just try and live day by day and come into the studio as much as possible and carry on working.

Appendix 8.5

Interview with Bryan Biggs

13 April 2011 at the Bluecoat, School Lane, Liverpool, Merseyside L1 3BX

Question 1:

Could you tell me how you first got to know about the *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme and how the Bluecoat came to be involved? (00:01:38 minutes into recording)

BB: The *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme was, as you know, an idea of the Tate's and the Tate approached us, the Bluecoat, along with other venues and organisations in the city, to see if we felt there was some mileage in pooling programmes and seeing if there were things that we were doing that could link into what they were doing, because as you know they were keen that it shouldn't just be an exhibition on its own, it should have a contextual programme around it to connect to audiences and a debate. So I think it was probably Lindsay [Fryer] who contacted us – not just on our own, but us and other organisations, and said 'Do you want to be involved?' and we said 'Yes'. And that's it and then we went to the first meeting.

ADC: What drew you to being involved?

BB: It would have been foolish not to given the history of this organisation in showing the work of artists, some of whom I knew from talking to Lindsay were being proposed for the show, so I said 'Absolutely, we'd like to be involved'.

ADC: So you had an idea beforehand who was going to be in the *Afro Modern* show?

BB: Only that Tanya Barson had done a PowerPoint which she sent round, actually before she got to delivering the PowerPoint she had sent round a document that said that these are the categories, and there seemed to be an awful lot of categories, and then within each category, these are the artists. And then later on we saw Sonia's [Boyce] name and Keith's [Piper] name. They were the names of people we had worked with. I was thinking, 'It's an interesting looking show but there's obviously a lot of gaps', in terms of people who could have made a contribution such as Gavin Jantjes, who wasn't included in there. He had done work which I thought was absolutely within that discourse. But I wasn't being critical at that time. I thought it sounded like an interesting looking show so let's go and talk to them about it.

ADC: Did you have any knowledge of what the other participants might be doing, like the Walker or FACT?

BB: No. Not at that stage. I think that was revealed when we all got together. I can't remember when it was but there were certainly quite a few meetings. I remember being at a very large meeting with loads of people and everyone around the table was saying what they were planning. That was the first time that we saw the extent of the possibilities.

Question 2:

So how did Sonia Boyce come to be involved? (00:04:35 minutes into recording)

BB: I think Sara [Parsons] might correct me on this when you talk to her, but I think we had agreed to do the show with Sonia before we even knew about the Black Atlantic.

Because Sara has a good relationship developing with Spike Island, and we're always looking for new partners for programmes and she had already had a strong interest in Sonia's work. Obviously, you know, we had shown her here a long time ago, and a couple of times since that first show. I think Spike Island approached us to say 'We're doing this show with Sonia and she wants to do it in three parts, and we're very keen for you to be the second stage of it' and that's how it came about. First off, it was Like Love, we committed to doing that show. Then the Black Atlantic idea was proposed, and we thought 'Well let's just talk to Sonia because she might not want to be part of this. So the first conversation we had was when we invited Sonia here and said 'we really want you to do the show, and there is this other opportunity'. We knew that the Spike Island show was not going to be that big. So we said 'We've got this whole space. Do you want to think about showing your new work but also doing something that relates to Black Atlantic? If you don't want to do it that's fine'. But she went away and thought about it and said 'Actually, I do. I think it'll be a really good opportunity'. And that's when the dialogue began. I don't think we found out about the Black Atlantic and then talked to Sonia about doing a show. I think it was the other way around. I think we were already doing a show with Sonia lined up [sic] and the dates looked like we could tie them in together.

Question 3:

How did the idea for working with the Blue Room come about? (00:06:34 minutes into recording)

BB: It was after that initial conversation with Sonia who said 'The work I've done in Bristol is working with young mums and on the next stage I want to work with a different group'. We thought, 'Who might that group be?'. It was probably because we discussed it with Bec Fearon who is our Head of Participation. She said 'What about the Blue Room?'. So we put that to Sonia because they are a really interesting group and we have this very good relationship with them. They come every week, three days a week. The Blue Room is in the building, in this room, making work, discussing the art at every exhibition. So it made absolute sense that they would be doing a piece of work about *Like Love* when it came here so why don't they become the group that actually makes Like Love. So that's how it came about. And Sonia met them. We arranged for her to come up and spend an hour or so with them. And she thought they were great. And they liked her. So that's how it came about.

ADC: And what about *Action*? How did the idea for that come about?

BB: Well, the *Action* thing, this was the bit that developed once we had introduced the idea of tying into the Tate show. I remember we met in the garden here, me and Sara and Sonia, and said 'this is what their show is. Do you think this would work if we did a show... we asked you to curate a show that could either be', we said, 'it's up to you what it is but some ideas might be that you did a mini retrospective, if you like, so you would actually have a piece of work from that first show [at the Bluecoat] all those years before and selected other works so it became a sort of mini retrospective, which would link in nicely to the Tate show'. So that anyone interested in the Tate show could then come and see our show. We discussed various options and that was one. The other idea would be to curate a show and we left it to her and she came back and said 'Well, I'd like to curate a show of artists that I'm interested in, who are all black artists, but they are not artists that are making work...they're making work for today, they're not making work because they're black...about that experience'. And in a way it would show how that distance of twenty-five years...what had changed over that period for young artists.

Because these are artists who are about the same age as her when she first showed here. So she had long list, and we said 'That sounds really great, it's a really good idea, it's a bit like what we did at the time, when we did *Black Skin/Bluecoat*'. You know, these were unknown artists, pretty much, with not much profile, but something sort of held them together. And she said 'Well, I'd like to do that and I need to find out who those artists are'. And she rattled off a few names. And she had quite a long list and it ended up being four of those artists. She had probably double that, maybe slightly more than that, ten maybe. Artists that she was interested in. So it was quite nice because it was not that prescriptive. I mean it had a context which waswell we can talk about that later in terms of 'Post-Black'. But she had no idea how it would work as a show and neither did we until we got it together. We thought, 'Does this work as a show?' And then we, perhaps, can talk about that in a minute as to whether it worked. But it was nice going back to that period, in a way, of taking risks with younger artists. Obviously twenty-five years ago, thirty years ago, we were showing a lot of artists who weren't known, who didn't have a profile, but seemed to somehow sort of work in the context of group shows. Sonia was very generous with it. She could have said 'No, I'll just do *Like Love* and that's it', or 'Thank you very much I'll do my own work and that's fine'. But she wanted to do this idea of her as a curator which was quite different.

ADC: I actually don't know of any other times where she has been a curator.

BB: No. But she proved really good and articulated it really well and started to see connections. It was basically quite intuitive, like a lot of these things are and... 'These are the artists I like and I'm going to show them' and it was as simple as that. But then the more she articulated her selection, the more we teased a rationale for the show out of her. There was quite a lot of things connecting the artists other than that they were young British-born, black artists.

ADC: So do you think that's how it kind of came together with the...she had these artists who happened to all be black, so that linked, and the fact that they were emerging, that was a dialogue with *Afro Modern* and some of the issues raised in the final room there. But the connection between the artists and the fact that you don't see the maker in the work very much – did those links then come in later?

BB: I think they did as she started to articulate what it was she thought was interesting in their work and it came through as this notion of the *performative*. That's where the word 'Action' (the title of the show) comes from. All art is an *Action*, to make something you have to act, you make it, you consciously do something physical. But I think when we started to tie the threads together, the notion of a performance became quite strong I think. Obviously Robin's [Deacon] work was very much a performance and it was about trying to find another performance artist and trying to evoke his work. And then Junior's [Appau Boakye-Yiadam] work was produced through a performative *Action*. All those pieces were made by setting something in motion. Grace's [Ndiritu] work was the act of travel. It was a performative piece. It was about her going to a place and not just making a film as a sort of passive onlooker but actually the fact of her going to the place was a performance and her documentation or mediation through sort of poetic means of her as the exoticised other going to exotic places as a tourist. So that was quite interesting. And then, Beverley's [Bennett] work, again it's physical, like Junior's work - it's very physical work in terms of making it and they're quite obsessive gestural actions that she does. So, you know, at first, I thought 'I can't quite see how this is going to work together'. But I think Sonia was very astute in the way she articulated

that as *Action*. But whether it was at the beginning, that's something you'd have to ask...I suspect it was more, 'I just like this work, because it's sort of interesting. They're doing curious things and there's something that I like about these artists'.

Question 4:

What did you hope to achieve through staging the two exhibitions? Did you have any particular aspirations for them? (00:14:27 minutes into recording)

BB: I suppose with the Bluecoat having been open for a couple of years since the re-development, and with its long history of working with diverse artists, or whatever you want to call them, that this seemed to have lost its visibility since re-opening. You know, that may have been a good thing, in that it didn't need to be as visible because this work had become more mainstream. That's something we can perhaps talk about later on. So I thought this was a good opportunity and I think Sara did too, to connect to that legacy, that history. But to do it in a way that was not backward looking. The only retrospective thing was that Sonia had had a show here all those years ago and that was a reference point. And we could have done that. One idea we did think about was to go to the four artists in *Black Skin/Bluecoat* and say 'Do something new'. Because we had Sonia's work – she had *Like Love*. We could go to Keith [Piper] and Eddie [Chambers] and Tam [Joseph] and say 'Do something new'. But I don't think she would have liked doing something like that. I don't think Sonia was quite keen on that. And it was her show, so it was really her call. So it wasn't a case of saying 'Aren't we clever' showing these key artists at a seminal moment in the evolution of the Black Art Movement', it was 'Where is this work now? We've supported a lot of this area of practice over nearly three decades so we'll do a little archive display in glass cases, but actually what was more important was to reflect where this work is now, not where these artists are now'. So we knew it was going to be problematic, particularly when you connect our show to *Afro Modern*, because there is an expectation, which we did get a lot of ... we did some audience research (which would be useful for you to actually see. You haven't seen it yet because we've only just got the results) of people's expectations. You know, 'This wasn't what I thought it was going to be', 'Where's the black art?'. And we did get some of that. And in a way that was part of the reason for doing the show – to say 'This is about challenging those expectations - as an audience, and indeed, as other artists'. So I suppose that was how we envisaged the show. That it was going to be problematic in terms of those audience reactions to it, how it might be misinterpreted. But we were very excited about working with Sonia again, in a new context. Because she was coming as an artist we had worked with before, but someone now with a very different role. Both as a curator and as an artist whose practice had moved considerably on from when we'd previously shown her. Although that's not strictly true because she had shown here in one of the Video Positive festivals where she had worked with a group of local women, the Liverpool Black Sisters, on making a film. So she had actually been working in that collaborative way for quite a long time. But for her to work with the Blue Room was quite a new departure. So we were just very excited to do the show, see what happened. We didn't have a huge expectation that it was going to change the world! We knew it was going to be a difficult one to market. And that came through in our internal discussions in the team here. Marketing found it very difficult to arrive at a single message because there were multiple messages and it was quite difficult in that respect. And I think you'll recognise that from the audience response we got, which was generally, all right but there was quite a lot of negative responses, like 'I didn't get the show at all', 'I don't understand what it's trying to do'.

ADC: I'd be really interested to see that for this case study.

BB: Well you can have that. It's called an Intrinsic Impact Study, which the Bluecoat did as part of a LARC-wide project. And it's an American market research company who were brought in to look at the impact of art on the viewer, on the visitor, in-depth. You know, 'Did your life change? Did you have a spiritual experience? Did it change the way you think about your culture?'. They were quite, sort of, profound questions rather than 'Did you like it? Was the exhibition easy to find? Was the interpretation good?'. I think they researched *Like Love/Action* and the Biennial show and the *Arabicity* show in the summer, I think; and *Like Love* show came out worst in the sense of people's enjoyment of it. I'm not being judgmental, I'm saying this is how people responded to it and you can see the results for yourself. Some people who filled in the questionnaire were confused by it. So there was a real marketing issue there. The professionals got it. You know, if you read the Arts Council assessments - you had asked for them before - they were much more thoughtful, considered and positive.

ADC: You did and you got back to me saying that I couldn't.

BB: Well we contacted them and they said you couldn't use them but I've asked our officer since and she said that you can't publish them, but if the person who wrote it is happy and you undertake not to publish it, you can still use it, you can see it. So it's a question of you see it and then you can't use it!

ADC: Well I'd be grateful to see it.

BB: Yes. Because that was really positive. They were from arts professionals, and the one that was especially insightful was from another curator and an artist, who understands all the issues. And he got it, absolutely. But you compare that to the people who filled in the Intrinsic Impact surveys and there was definitely not universal approval. They said 'Don't get it. What's it all about? Why's that there and what's that doing there?' And the work with the Blue Room, one person in particular was critical.

ADC: It was going to happen.

BB: Yeah. So in that sense, for me, it was a successful show because it provoked a response and it did show people's perceptions, preconceptions and prejudices pretty well, I think.

ADC: I think that's part of the work isn't it?

BB: Yeah.

Question 5:

How did you feel the two exhibitions were contextualised by *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic*, and in particular, by *Afro Modern* ? (00:21:23 minutes into recording)

BB: I don't think the Tate show helped necessarily in people's appreciation of the show, other than in a historic sense. People could say 'Well, I've seen Sonia's work at the Tate and I see what she was doing fifteen years or twenty years ago, and that's very interesting but I can't see how it relates to what she is doing now'. So I don't think there was necessarily a context, or connection there (ADD: and I feel that more could have been made at the Tate in terms of signposting - in the gallery itself, next to the work - to

Sonia's new work on show concurrently at the Bluecoat). I think it was probably more interesting for the *Action* show in that you could say 'well maybe the Tate show should have finished up like *Action*', that the final room could have gone much further, you know. This is where artists of the Black Atlantic, if you want to define them as such, are now. Maybe more could have been made of that perhaps in a discursive way through a seminar or whatever. Because, in a way, it should have connected. But I think because in our show the artists weren't explicit, and the work wasn't explicitly about their identity, it was hard to make that connection. If you tagged it as such or if you branded it as such...

ADC: If you had branded it as such, and even if you had said...you didn't use the term 'Post-Black' in any of the text panels, but if you had it would have been a very different strategy.

BB: Yeah. Absolutely. And when you talk to Sonia, you can ask her about that because I know there was at least one artist who we wanted in the *Action* show and she said she didn't want to be in it because she was uncomfortable with it being connected to the 'Post-Black' debate and, by implication, to the Tate show. And again, ask the other artists what they felt. It was like we didn't want to be explicit about the artists' cultural/ethnic origin but if we didn't reference it or ignored it all together, there would have been no rationale for being part of the Black Atlantic programme ... it's a tricky situation. But that's where we are now. It's where the world is. You know, if you choose to be categorised, you're constrained, in a sense. That self-categorization can limit your capacity to be an artist who can move wherever they want.

Question 6:

The text panels, press release and archive display in the foyer contextualised the two exhibitions against the *Black Skin/Bluecoat* exhibition. Why did you choose to do that and why did you feel it was important to do that? (00:24:12 minutes into recording)

BB: I think I chose to do the archive display in the Hub [the Bluecoat's foyer space] partly because we had made reference in the publicity that this was Sonia's show following one she did twenty-five years before. So inevitably people would say, you know, 'Why was that significant, what she did twenty-five years ago?'. So I felt we needed to tell people why that was significant, because of what it led to. You know, twenty-five years of shows with artists who were engaged with a similar debate to those four artists in *Black Skin/Bluecoat*, even though the debate has moved on, as has the Bluecoat's relationship to that area of work. So, it was really a history lesson, I suppose. We wanted to show that this is important historically ...because a lot of the work from that period is very marginal, it doesn't get into the history books. Not that us doing a small foyer display is going to change the world! But it's important, I think, that that stuff isn't just forgotten about even in histories of those movements. A lot of the shows we and other galleries did aren't referenced. So it was a way of reclaiming a bit of history, for us, to give a bit of background to Sonia, as an artist and where she started in the context of her work at that time, the politics of period, and, I suppose, as a way of linking to the Black Atlantic season. With the Bluecoat also presenting a broader live and discursive programme for Black Atlantic, we felt it made sense to have an interesting backdrop so people could sort of browse the display and identify an exhibition or event and say 'That was interesting, I didn't know that happened then'.

ADC: The reason why I was thinking about that was because I was listening to your talk with Keith and Sonia that happened at the Tate. What I noticed was that every question that you asked was about *Black Skin/Bluecoat*. The talk was about that show and their memories of it. That was supposed to be a starting point. And Sonia answered your questions but Keith, in typical fashion, would veer off and would always steer the discussion to the present and talk about the *Afro Modern* exhibition. Perhaps you weren't aware of it, but every time you responded to him, you would bring the discussion back to *Black Skin/Bluecoat*. It was almost as if Keith didn't want to talk about it. That was the impression that I got. So it felt, to me, that you really wanted to bring *Black Skin/Bluecoat* to the fore and for it to be remembered.

BB: Yeah, no, I wasn't aware of that on the day. I can't remember, actually, what I said. I was insistent probably because *Black Skin/Bluecoat* was what the Tate asked me to talk about.

ADC: I think you were just trying to keep things on track.

Question 7:

I think you've already covered this, but what do you think the public response was? (00:27:56 minutes into recording)

BB: Yeah we have.

ADC: Yes. But what we didn't cover was press responses.

BB: No, we didn't get much.

ADC: Well, I've done a scan of the press responses. What I've done for my other exhibition case studies, is go through and identify anything in the press responses which is an original comment, which isn't taken directly from the press release, and categorise them thematically, or according to what the assertion or opinion is. By doing that you get to see what the most common assertions are about an exhibition. I haven't done this properly, yet, for the Boyce shows, but the most common comments were that the artists in *Action* were black, which wasn't mentioned in the press release, so that's interesting. Another common theme in the press responses is where they compare what the artists in *Action* are doing to what Sonia and the others were doing in *Black Skin/Bluecoat*, which was mentioned in the press release but not to a great degree, so it's interesting that that came through, a bit. And also a common assertion in the press responses was that Sonia was part of the Black Arts Movement, which is also not discussed in the press release or in the exhibition text panels. It would be better if there had been more press responses because I could perhaps make more out of that.

BB: You did that with the Chris Ofili, and that was very revealing I think.

ADC: Yeah. But I'll develop that further.

BB: Yeah, do, I think it'll be really interesting.

Question 8:

How do you feel that issues and questions of 'difference' were addressed by both exhibitions? (00:30:25 minutes into recording)

BB: Well certainly within *Like Love* it was very apparent in terms of disability, which is a 'difference'. It was the work itself – the film on the beach, the filmed interviews and the graphic works - that addressed this difference and I think that was the most problematic aspect of it for some people. Not everybody appreciated the work for what it was, feeling there was an exploitation of the Blue Room participants, that the artist was somehow manipulating this group. It's a fair comment, but it's wrong, because as I think Sonia will tell you, the group were absolutely on the ball and they knew what they were doing. They're adults with learning disabilities, so you could say they're at a disadvantage in that whatever you do there will always be an unequal relationship between you as an artist and them as the group. There is also the issue of *Like Love* being Sonia's show. It wasn't 'branded' as a piece *with* them, the Blue Room, *as authors*. So I still think there's something in there to talk to her about. I have no particular view on it, but one could argue that if it is that collaborative then shouldn't it be Sonia Boyce *and* the Blue Room (as in the work of Tim Rollins and KOS [the Kids of Survival])? But it's entirely up to her in a way how she chooses to 'author' the work and reflect the collaboration. The fact was that the Blue Room participants were very happy to be credited in some way and to be the subject of the work. I just thought it was a very powerful and enabling film that represented learning-disabled adults in a very positive and sympathetic way. So it did address this particular 'difference' and the issue of how we respond, in a patronising, or otherwise way, to adults with learning disabilities. Once you represent them in that way almost unmediated way (it was very much a case of their voices and choices being to the fore) a lot of questions get asked about who is making the representation and how much is this is the participants' own decision. I'm not saying we got the interpretation right but I think it was done in a very sensitive way and a very powerful way. But not everybody saw that as you'll see from some of the comments, and from one person in particular. You should look at the visitors book. I think there's some comments in there, you know, that we're exploiting these people. I thought it was a great piece of work and quite moving actually, particularly some of the interviews. And if you know those people, you know they weren't being exploited. So I think that's how we addressed an issue of difference. We used the Blue Room group, and for them it was a perfectly natural thing to do. It wasn't unusual. And they'll carry on creating work on their own and with artists. They've done things before with David Blandy for instance. So it's not like it's a one off. I think it's probably part of a bigger debate we need to have about working with disabled people.

ADC: One thing I was thinking about when reading through the interpretative texts and panels is that 'difference' isn't discussed in the texts, but in the 'About the artist' panel, it said that 'her creative process demonstrates how cultural difference might be articulated, mediated and celebrated'. So the idea of 'difference' is introduced, but not really followed through elsewhere, which I'm not saying is a good thing or a bad thing. And then when we look at the interpretation panel for *Like Love* part one, it said that it 'explores universal concerns surrounding community cohesion and the concept of care'. I was interested in the use of the word 'universal' there, but I guess that text was produced by Spike Island so I'll ask Sonia about that. But, similarly, for *Like Love* part two, it says that in the conversations they [the Blue Room participants] 'explored their own ideas of love and care'. I'm interested in the use of the words 'their own' here, as it didn't explain who else's ideas of love and care they might have discussed first before discussing their own, if at all. Perhaps there was a conversation where they discussed universal ideas of love and care and then their own ideas about that. Obviously I can ask Sonia about that. But it's not explained in the exhibition texts. It's left ambiguous and so

it's then open to the interpretation of the reader. Might it suggest that their [the Blue Room participants] ideas of love and care are different from everyone else's or different from people who are not learning-disabled?

BB: Well, in terms of an audience response to 'difference', they'd go into that space and see that these people are disabled, they look 'different'. A lot of them have mental disabilities and their difference is visible. Whereas in the other show, *Action*, apart from Robin [Deacon], whom you actually see in his film, you would not necessarily know what the artists looked like – you might get a sense from Junior's [Appau Boakye-Yiadom] work just by the choice of objects.

ADC: Or even his name.

BB: His name, obviously. But Beverley Bennett? You wouldn't know. And Grace you'd know, by the name. That's in contrast to the *Black Skin/Bluecoat* period where the artists' work would have spoken for itself. It would have announced the artists' identity. Whereas a disabled artist, you wouldn't necessarily know the artist was disabled. So our show sort of turned it on its head, in a way. Not deliberately. But when I look back on it.... And that's when you get these quite strong opinions... 'How dare you exploit these poor disabled people', which is an incredibly patronising thing to say, but is obviously made from a very well-meaning point of view. The person thought, 'they've got enough on their plate without having to be subjected to ...to having to dance on the beach!'. That's a complete misreading of the participants' lives, which are very rich. That's a reason for us keeping on with the Blue Room project, because the process is continually evolving and is rewarding - the group are having such a great time, its an essential part of their daily life. And they're really producing some great work which can stand up on its own. You know, we – the Bluecoat, the carers and artists involved - learn a lot too, it's not one-way traffic.

Question 9:

To what extent would you describe *Action* as a black survey show and was this a consideration? (00:38:25 minutes into recording)

BB: Yes it was a consideration because, it's like I said before, we didn't want to announce it as that. But actually the fact that you do it, the fact that it's selected by Sonia, the fact that they are all black, and even some of the names suggest that, it means that we could be criticised for doing a 'black survey show'. We could criticise ourselves for actually doing it and we did have that conversation about ... you know, 'Aren't we doing just another black survey show, even though it's not that in name?'. It is actually. It's curated by a black artist, it's selected from black artists, in the context of a city-wide project around black art. So...it was.

ADC: So what was the nature of those conversations?

BB: You sort of skirt around it. It's a tricky one. We had conversations with Sonia, but I don't think there was a point at which we said to her, or perhaps we did – you'll have to ask her - you know, 'just select a show, it could be anybody, it's your gig, you do what you want'. We may have had that conversation. I can't remember. But certainly she wanted to do a show that was supportive of younger artists, who perhaps had similar interests to her and were at a similar stage in their career to her when she first started exhibiting. And she still sees that there is an invisibility of a lot of the work. You know, it's not as

crude as saying these artists are doubly disadvantaged just because they're black. I don't think it's that. But there's still a sense of those artists not being part of the mainstream. They're generally not privileged artists. And class seems to be a more significant factor today in terms of success. With the increase in student fees, you've got to be pretty well off to attend art school, whereas traditionally the art school was characterised by students from a wide range of social backgrounds. And I think the art education landscape will change as a result of that. Sorry, I've lost my way a bit now. I'm trying to remember whether we had a discussion about 'is this a black survey show?'. Because you're quite right. For all intents and purposes it is.

ADC: Did you feel worried about that?

BB: No. I think we've passed that point about worrying about those things! There had been a point at which we said 'We can't keep doing these shows because it becomes almost patronising'. It's framing those black artists in such a way that they can only show in those types of shows. But then we *do* shows of Arabic art. And you could say 'why are you doing a show with artists who are only selected because they're from the Middle East?' And that is a continuing concern, well not a concern but a consideration. There's no hard and fast rule however. You can't say, 'we've got to the point where we can't do those shows anymore', you know, because geographically-specific shows have no currency. I think there's points in time in which they do. So for the Arabic arts festival, when that's on, it makes sense to do an exhibition that is also geographically-specific. But I wouldn't do a show now and call it *Black Skin/Bluecoat* or *Plotting the Course*. It might be interesting to look at where...if there's a strong body of artists who are making work around issues around identity, around whatever, who all happen to be black, that could make a really interesting show. But I think it would be an issue-based show rather than one about ethnicity. If you look at when South Africa became free of apartheid it raised a lot of interesting questions about what it was to be a South African artist. The most interesting shows that were coming out of South Africa at the time were shows that were predominantly by white artists because black artists in South Africa had been so long disadvantaged and had little visibility or presence in the art world. They hadn't come through the system. That's now changing. That's why in the last [Liverpool] Biennial we had a young black artist from South Africa, Nicholas Hlobo.. But previously the artists that had a reputation in South Africa were predominantly white South Africans. That immediately opened up a whole ...not a can of worms, but a whole area of consideration about ethnicity and nationality and about how you frame things. So it was perhaps quite odd to present *Like Love* and *Action* as a 'black' show (though not 'branded' as such) - not Sonia solo show but *Action*, in the context of *Afro Modern*. I did think at the time, 'Should we be doing this, because aren't we just falling into the trap of pigeon-holing artists?'. That's why I think we were being quite perverse, in the sense that we had this show that *didn't* proclaim that the artists in it were all black, yet they were. I don't think I've answered your question but I've told you the dilemma and all of us were in it. I mean, Sonia, you have to ask her what she feels. But I think all of us felt, 'If we don't do it, we've missed a trick, an opportunity to problematise issues around identity and difference through an exhibition that hopefully confounds expectations. At the same time, if we do do it, we're being slightly devious because we're doing a black art show at a time when we don't 'do' them anymore'. It was a concern, but ultimately, it was down to whether we would have a quality show or not, and if you're working with a good artist like Sonia who is very thoughtful and understands the – in this case especially complex - context, you have to trust that the experiment will work.

ADC: It was her decision.

BB: It was her decision. We could have gone either way and done a more 'black' show, or we could have said 'We're just going to do a show of Sonia's work and that's it. We're not going to link ourselves to *Afro Modern*'.

ADC: I felt that even if you had only had Like Love, there would still have been a link, in terms of how issues of 'difference' have developed, and in terms of how Sonia's practice has developed. So there would still have been a link.

BB: Yes.

ADC: Anyway, I guess it added another dimension.

BB: It did.

Question 10:

To what extent do you think the notion of the 'Post-Black' artists was addressed by both the exhibitions? (00: 45: 30 minutes into recording)

BB: Well I think probably *Afro Modern* didn't. I didn't do enough reading around it. The final room had some of those artists in it that are talked about in that context. But it didn't seem to be very explicit.

ADC: Well, they didn't go as far with it as perhaps they could have. But from talking to Peter [Gorschlüter] about it, he said that it was very much a question mark for them. They weren't willing to put themselves forward as defining what 'Post-Black' is.

BB: No. And I think it's very hard for the Tate, they always have this problem with those types of shows. I'm not being critical but they do these types of shows that have a thesis but invariably encounter problems finishing it. It may be because they're confident with the history, but less comfortable with the present. And it's that museological perspective where things have to be - like in academia I guess - peer reviewed. The work has to be framed and curatorial decisions made in a theoretical context for them to have validity and certainty. And I think that's the difference between independent contemporary galleries and museums like the Tate where there needs to be that art historical certainty. There needs to be that passage of time to reflect on contemporary work. And I've seen it in shows like the photo documentary show that they did. It didn't seem to know how to finish, it sort of fizzled out. It's understandable. Perhaps they should say 'We stop at that point and we don't try and contextualise it up to the present'. The new stuff is still part of a discourse that's evolving (not that the past should be immune from re-contextualisation) and still hasn't been closed off and that's how it should be.

ADC: I think that's what they were trying to say. 'For anyone who doesn't know, this is being discussed now and here are some artists that you might want to associate with that'.

BB: I think the extent to which we addressed it in our show was a problem because we didn't want to 'brand' it as such. In conversation we talked about it and Sonia had a few problems when she talked to artists.

ADC: The term 'Post-Black' isn't used but there's a sentence in the press release that says that '*Afro Modern* contextualises *Action* in light of recent debates about the emergence of black artists whose work moves beyond perceived boundaries of race and representation'. So you hinted at it but without using the term itself.

BB: Yeah. And I think we didn't really use it because I think the artists were nervous and certainly, one, maybe two, of the invited artists said they didn't want to be part of the show because they were nervous about that. Sonia can tell you more, who they were and what their rationale was. But it was something like 'We've taken all these years to be free of that and now we're being brought back in because we're 'Post-Black'. We used to be black and now we're 'Post-Black' and we just want to be *artists*'. And we get that with lots of artists in lots of contexts. So with the Liverpool Arabic Arts Festival where we have done shows... we've done three or four shows around the festival. On a couple of occasions there's been artists that have said 'I don't want to be a part of it' or 'Yes, I'm from Lebanon but that has got nothing to do with my work, you know, I just make work'. And I think any curator has to honour that. That's ultimately what it's about - how the artists choose to define themselves. And we have the same debates now with disability arts. It's at a very interesting stage. The last DaDaFest event here raised a lot of those issues and we're going to do a show next DaDaFest in 2012 with a curator called Ine Gevers from Holland who does this show called *Niet Normaal – Not Normal*, and we're going to do a version of that here. And we're going to work with Garry Robson who was the director of last year's DaDaFest who wanted to engage with the show because he thought it was a very powerful show when he saw it in Amsterdam but that it was very flawed because it didn't have enough disabled artists in it. It was about bodies and not being 'normal'. But a lot of the artists in it weren't disabled. So we're going to address that issue of, you know, can you make a work about disability without being disabled? What if you're a disabled artist who doesn't want to be known as being disabled. So all those questions that black artists were tackling quite a few years ago, and still are to a degree, are very much at the forefront of disability arts. The fact that it's called 'disability arts' means that it's already being defined. And an artist like Yinka Shonibare plays it very cleverly because sometimes... Well, I'd never known him to be part of a disability arts show, but he did for DaDaFest. He sent the festival a piece in the knowledge that it would be branded as a disabled artist's piece of work. So in this instance he's 'dealing' with disability in his work. Sometimes he reveals his disabled identity and sometimes he conceals it, just as he chooses to do so as a black artist. I find some of the most interesting artists are those who are in such a position to move between these discourses and do it cleverly and by mixing codes up they problematise issues in a subtle and challenging way. Nina Edge would be another artist who's done that very successfully I think. Another artist who likes to get in there and mix it up and not give the gallery, the audience, the media what they want or expect.

Question 11:

How do you think the issue of black artists' visibility relates to these two exhibitions? (00:52:15 minutes into recording)

BB: Curators will have an interest in particular artists and their work because they fit a particular argument that they're trying to make through an exhibition. But ultimately they have to respect how an artist wants to have their work framed. You shouldn't assume anything. I think that's maybe one reason why there aren't so many of these group shows anymore. It's just so problematic to do the sorts of shows which the

Bluecoat did and many other galleries did in the 80s and 90s when it was necessary, just in terms of invisibility. I think now it's a whole new set of considerations.

ADC: In your conversations with Sonia did she discuss the issue of artists being visible or invisible?

BB: Absolutely. That was the reason why she wanted to show these artists. Apart from Robin who probably has a bit of a profile within the live art sector, they weren't well known. I mean, Grace is doing well now, but she's hardly a household name. So she [Sonia] wanted to show artists that weren't that visible.

ADC: But do you think that's to do with them being emerging artists, rather than them being marginalised by structures of power and so on?

BB: It's probably a bit of both I think. But you can see with someone like Grace, she's going to do develop her international profile. And you could say she's getting interest from galleries because she's engaged with discourses that have a currency in a global context. I think she's an astute artist who can actually articulate her work and is making work that's very - well, all four of them are making work - that is pertinent, but I think, her work particularly in this broader, global context, can travel quite comfortably, you know, geographically and across disciplines. Equally Beverley's work which you could say is the quietest and the least sort of strident work, I think there are some very interesting concerns in there. I'm interested in drawing, personally, in mark-making as a private activity that can nonetheless be very immediate and accessible, and can reveal complex concerns in a very direct way. And Beverley's drawing practice does this.

Appendix 8.6

Interview with Bryan Biggs

25 July 2012 at the Bluecoat, School Lane, Liverpool, Merseyside L1 3BX

Question 1:

How would you describe the Bluecoat's history of engaging with black British artists prior to *Black Skin/Bluecoat*? (00:00:07minutes into recording)

BB: The first thing that you were interested in finding out was how I would describe the Bluecoat's history of engaging with black British artists prior to *Black Skin/Bluecoat*. So, I did a little bit of research to look back at any evidence that there were shows. And of course there were shows, but I don't think there was a conscious engagement. It was very sporadic. I don't think at the time – pre mid 1980s – I don't think the organisation would have been conscious that there was such a thing as a separate, or even an identifiable black British art. And you look at Rasheed Araeen's show at the Hayward [*The Other Story*, 1989] to see that actually, there was, but they weren't necessarily very well-known artists. I don't think it was on the agenda. They were very sporadic, the history was very sporadic, and I don't think it was a conscious part of our programme. But, having said that, when I look into the archive, I notice there was this show called *Contemporary Art of Africa* in 1973, which had Uzo Egonu, who of course appeared in *Seen/Unseen* many years later, and Errol Lloyd, who I think was in quite a few of Eddie Chambers' group shows. This was in 1973 – long before I came here. Also, I think Ronald Moody, who was the Caribbean sculptor - I think it's interesting that they had a Caribbean artist in a show that was called *Contemporary Art of Africa*.

ADC: I wonder if that was part of *FESTAC* [*Festival of African Culture*, 1977], which was a big, international festival of African art.

BB: I don't know. It could have been. In 1973?

ADC: It was some time in the 1970s.

BB: I think there was maybe another show that might have come from the Commonwealth Institute. I went further back and found that in 1966 there was another show of contemporary African art from a gallery called the Transcription Centre. And in 1972, we had the Bruce Onobrakpeya print exhibition. And I came across his work much later when I was doing some research for *Africa 95*. But he had been around for many years as a fine printmaker. It was probably because the guy who was running the gallery at that time was a printmaker himself – he had a passion for printmaking. So, if you look at those shows, I don't think there's anything...well, there was another one, but we'll come back to that later. But that pre *Black Skin/Bluecoat* period, there were certainly shows, but I don't think there was any sense of them being a conscious engagement with that discourse. They were just shows that you did!

ADC: Did people approach the gallery with exhibition proposals?

BB: Since I started....

ADC: Did you start in 1977?

BB: Well, technically I started in 1976, but I had inherited a programme. So I actually didn't

start programming until 1977 or even 1978. But yes, we got loads of applications. But the first time I became aware of there being such a thing as black British art was when I got a letter from Eddie Chambers in 1984.

ADC: And that application was rejected?

BB: Yes. But when I looked at the programme [archive] I noticed that in 1984, we did a show with four artists, one of whom was Jan Wandja. That was not a 'black show'. It was a show of four artists that I thought were dealing with some interesting shared concerns around media images. A lot of work from that show was taken from media imagery. It was echoing what was happening in New York in the early 1980s. So Tony Bevan and Glenys Johnson, his partner – I knew both their work. I had been on a studio visit. I liked what they were doing. They were both taking, particularly Glenys, images from a terrorist attack somewhere, or shooting in some country. It was a very grainy image that she would make even more grainy. And they were rendered in beautiful pastels on canvas, and they became these, sort of, religious, iconic paintings, but they were based on these harrowing images from the press. So she was using media imagery. Tony Bevan was using media stereotypes. At that time, many portraits were of young men on the streets, drunk, looking depressed, out of work. They were victims, but based on media images that you would see. So they had a pop quality – cartoonish. There was also Jefford Horrigan, who would take the physical newspapers and push them into these clay sculptures, including a big hand – about six foot tall, and when you went up to it, the knuckle was actually made of lots of tiny little heads. So there was a crowd within this symbol. And Jan's work – she was doing these big, powerful drawings about sportsmen, the main being Sebastian Coe crossing the finishing line where he becomes this Christ-like figure, and always set against the Union Jack. So it was about nationalism and patriotism. I hadn't really thought about her being the first of that group of young, black, British artists, but she was. I don't think she aligned herself with the Black Art Group.

ADC: When was that?

BB: 1984.

ADC: So before *Black Skin/Bluecoat*.

BB: Yes. But she wasn't selected because she was part of any group. It was because her work seemed to fit this theme I had, of artists using media imagery.

ADC: And the other artists, they were white?

BB: Yes. It was more the politics of what they were doing that was interesting, and I think it was a very strong show. I had seen a show at the ICA the year before called *Before It Hits The Floor*, and two of those artists – Tony and Glenys – were in that, with Eric Bainbridge and a few other people. I liked that show so I selected those two from that, and I saw Jan's work at the Riverside Studios, and Jefford had done something somewhere else, and I thought those four together would make an interesting show. I wish I had done a publication with it. It was one of our most important shows. I thought "I've got it", you know, curatorially, it works. But the disappointing thing was that we couldn't think of a title for it. I don't know why. I couldn't think of one and they couldn't

think of one. And it made it less memorable, because it's four names to remember, rather than for example, *Before It Hits The Floor*.

Question 2:

Who approached whom about the exhibition that would become *Black Skin/Bluecoat*? Did you initiate it or did one of the artists submit a proposal first? (00:09:00 minutes into the recording)

BB: So, coming back to that first question, about our engagement with black British artists pre *Black Skin/Bluecoat*, that was just before. But at the time, I didn't see Jan as part of a movement. I was getting these letters from Eddie Chambers, sending me these things and telling me what he was doing and saying "I would like to apply for a show". Going back through the records, I notice that we had rejected him for a solo show because I don't think we felt that it [his work] was strong enough for the whole gallery. I had an interest in his work however.

ADC: Did you already know about his work?

BB: Yes, I had been to *Into The Open* [Mappin Gallery, Sheffield, 1984]. I think all four of the artists in *Black Skin/Bluecoat* had been in *Into The Open*. Going back through the correspondence to verify this, it was actually on seeing Keith's [Piper] show [*Black Art Now*] at the Black Art Gallery, I thought his work was the most powerful, and so I really wanted to do a show with Keith. And so, I had this correspondence with Keith. So you have to look at these two things in tandem; I was corresponding with Eddie, saying "we didn't accept you for a one person show but let's keep in touch", and at the same time (and we need to check the dates as I might have the chronology wrong, but I think it was around the same time) I had this letter from Keith. I had said to Keith "I'd like to take some artists from the Sheffield show, particularly you". And he wrote that very interesting letter back where he makes the argument that "you shouldn't be repeating that, we need to move on from that and do one person shows". So then I write back to him and say "we can do four small one-person shows because we have four rooms". And actually, the nature of the gallery, because it is quite domestic, you can create these different spaces. So it would be one show but you each get your own space". So that's how the show came about. It was an application form Eddie to show his work, us saying no it doesn't work on your own, seeing *Into The Open* and finding four artists there who I thought worked together in the context of here [the Bluecoat]. But it was only when I went back to the letters that I was reminded that that was how it came about. For some reason I had thought that it was Eddie being insistent. And of course, he was insistent, but the correspondence shows that it was actually Keith's work that helped shape where it was going.

Question 3:

You went to see the exhibition *Black Art Now* in January 1984 and following that, you approached Keith Piper about seeing more of his work. Can you recall what inspired your interest in his work? You also went to see the exhibition *Into the Open* in Sheffield in 1985 and stated in a letter to Keith Piper that you would be interested in showing his work along with some of the other artists in that show. Can you recall what it was about *Into the Open* that inspired you? (00:12:24 minutes into the recording)

ADC: So that answers the question of who approached whom. So I was then wondering how

the thesis for the exhibition came about, because obviously you were interested in what you had seen at *Into The Open* and *Black Art Now* and you were interested in the work. But in terms of a thesis for the show, how did that evolve and what do you think it was?

BB: You wanted to know what inspired my interest in their work, so perhaps we can talk about that first, and come to that after?

ADC: Yes, let's follow your notes.

BB: The thing for me was the politics. Personally, I had an interest in artists that were doing stuff that related to political situations. The political environment at that time was very acute, in the sense of...around race. And Keith was really tackling it head on. I thought "This is work for today. It's really current and people need to see it". It was the power of his work, and the formal power – he had a great graphic ingenuity that made the work very direct. Yet there was a great subtlety involved too. It wasn't propaganda, although you could read it on a superficial level as being propagandistic. But you just had to read some of his text and you could understand where he was coming from. There was a whole politics, and it was obvious a lot of reading was behind the work. . It was much more complex than 'black is good, white is bad' but it still had the directness of the best propagandist art. It reminded me of people like John Hartfield, that early photomontage art in Germany in the 1920s. So I think that's what inspired me. It seemed to be dealing with something that was current but in a way that was very direct. Not that there weren't other artists doing that in different ways. Peter Kennard was doing a lot of photomontage. There were plenty of artists doing Agitprop type work. There was a lot of that work happening in London around political movements, and artists doing things aligned to various struggles. You'd see a lot of feminist art that was propagandistic but always backed up with a theoretical understanding of the political situation. I suppose that's why I was drawn to Keith. If we then move on to me going to see the *Into The Open* show – you asked what was it that inspired you. I think for that whole show, not just Keith's work, it was the fact that this work was unseen and the title gave it away. Nobody knew about this work before. It was under the radar. And when you see work like that, it's immediately fresh. You think, "God, this is really interesting. I've never seen this stuff before". I might have seen bits of it before, but to see it all together, and these names you had never heard of, and there was an urgency to it. Most of the work was about the political, it was also about the personal, but it was political at its heart. And it was a survey show. I think that was perhaps where we did something different. Ours was not a survey show. And for that type of opportunity...it had to be got out. It might have had imperfections as a show as there always are in those big group shows. "Let's get it out and show it". It's only when you show it in that way that you realise that actually some of the work is not that good, and maybe the selection could have been different. But as the first attempt to survey [the work of young, black British artists]...it was very important. So that is why I was very interested in that. [In terms of why it was a small group show and not a similar survey to *Into The Open*] One, because we did not have the resources to do a big survey show, two, why would we want to repeat it? It (*Into the Open*) wasn't a touring show, so we couldn't bring it here. We could do our own version of it. But we were a much smaller a gallery, with little resources. So I thought "what we're good at doing...we've got these four rooms; let's do four artists". I'm trying to think how it ended up. I've got a feeling it was possibly Keith and Tom in the big room. I think they did share. I can't remember. We would have to look at the slides.

ADC: Actually, that is something I'd like to look at.

BB: Sure. So that's the answer to the question about what inspired me to do the show. And I wanted to have a more in-depth look at four artists, rather than try and do twenty artists' work. Keith had suggested himself and Sonia Boyce in his letter, or maybe Tom Joseph and Sonia. So, in a sense, I was being led by Keith. I did like the work. I thought Tom's was particularly interesting in tackling issues head on.

ADC: Did Keith suggest them in the letters?

BB: I think so. We'd have to check in the letters. But not Eddie. You can read that how you will. But I was already in discussion with Eddie. He had sent stuff, and we had said we were interested but we couldn't do a one man show. So, then I went down to see Keith at the Royal College of Art where he was doing his MA – interactive media I think, it was an odd course, but Peter Kennard was running it so it had a photo base, but it wasn't entirely photography. And I think it was there that we discussed the names because the next letter you see is me writing to everybody saying "I'm showing these four artists". So I think Keith was leading it by suggesting Sonia and Tom, and I liked their work, or maybe I had had it in the back of my mind that I wanted to show them. I don't know. We haven't got that record. But it was the process of me seeing a small amount of their work and then through a conversation with Keith, coming up with what I thought, or what he thought, well, what we both thought together, and we presented that back to Eddie. And then Eddie sort of takes over as the person that we...

ADC: Was Eddie in Bristol at that time?

BB: Yes. I don't know whether I went to see him. But I had seen his work in a small gallery in London – possibly in *Black Art Now*. But I had seen all their work in *Into The Open*.

Question 4:

What do you recall the initial premise of *Black Skin/Bluecoat* as being? To what extent do you think the views and objectives of the Blk Art Group were part of the premise for *Black Skin/Bluecoat*? (00:20:37 minutes into the recording)

BB: I think the premise of the show was to take up the challenge of *Into The Open*, which seemed to be saying this work is going open. Artists like Keith were saying "now that it is in the open we need to do something more with it. It can't just be survey shows". That's why he was critical of me when I first suggested a group show. He said "why don't you do one-person shows?". But to go from nowhere, without any track record or discourse around this work within the Bluecoat...to go for one artist on their own knowing that there wouldn't be another one-person show for quite a long time, partly because they take longer to organise, the artist needs to make a lot more work to fill up the whole gallery. I offered a middle ground. I could have gone for a big group show, but I didn't think that was right. I could have gone for a one-person show, but I wasn't convinced that one person could hold all of our space because it is a big space, and these were young artists. If you look at the shows we were doing at the time, there weren't any one-person shows by emerging artists. There were one-person shows but they were by quite senior, established artists. So it made sense to do four artists, and broadly, to split them into different rooms.

ADC: After you propose that in your letter, there isn't a response from Keith. Can you remember what he thought about it?

BB: I think the response was...well, if you look at it, Tom never replied to anything, at least by letter. He might have phoned me. Neither did Sonia. But having proposed the four of them, I think Eddie probably galvanised them and said "let's all go to Liverpool". That's the next thing – the four of them came. We had the meeting in the room over there. And that was interesting because I had never met them before, apart from Keith. They wanted to do the show. It was a challenge because I had never done a show like that before, particularly a show that was about...well it wasn't *about* race, but they were four black artists who were quite invisible in terms of their profile. Obviously, there was an agenda for the Bluecoat to do that show, and to allow Eddie, to invite him to write the text, and it was a provocative text. We were in uncharted territory which made it quite exciting. I thought "This could be terrible!". Of course I knew it wasn't going to be terrible because I knew the work was good, but in the sense that it might not work. I also had no idea how the Liverpool audience would react. There was that sort of history but not...it becomes a different thing when you do it, when the artists are there and they are helping you shape the show. So I think that was it; to take up the challenge of *Into The Open*, to have a more in-depth look at four of the artists that were in that show. The work was now 'in the open' so we said "let's do something with it". Also I wanted...probably not consciously...but I thought that we had to do this. There was a political imperative to do it. The work couldn't be ignored.

ADC: Do you mean there was that general sense at the time?

BB: Yes. If you think about that period, it was four years after the Toxteth riots in Liverpool, issues around race were still incredibly raw. It would have been great if there had been Liverpool artists to do a show with, but there weren't. So, I just thought we couldn't ignore it. The political situation was very volatile. As I said, it was still quite raw quite a few years after Toxteth, and those issues weren't being addressed. The Merseyside arts report '400 Years' – we need to check the date of exactly when that was written and whether it was immediately after Toxteth or five years after (it was, in 1986), I'm not sure. But it will be interesting to find out the date of that report and how a funding organisation was thinking about those issues and what they were doing to give visibility to black artists. So it wasn't just a case of doing it [the exhibition] because the work was very strong. There was this other imperative to do it. My own political conviction meant that I couldn't just ignore all that stuff. If you read the art magazines at that time, that work was not discussed. If you spoke to people, anecdotally, they would say "the colour of someone's skin doesn't really matter. It is the art that matters". And of course it has never been as simple as that. I got a lot of criticism later on when...you've seen the shows we then did and there was a very large proportion of shows by black artists here and people would say "When are you going to show some white artists?". So it did have an agenda that went beyond the art. It wasn't a time for keeping art in a vacuum. If you read magazines like *Artscribe*, it was all about the art. It was all about process and theory about a practice that was essentially being discussed within a framework of classic modernism, much of it drawing on the latest developments in New York painting. And yet the world had moved on and there was all this other interesting stuff happening...video art, installation art, community activism, mural art. All this other stuff was going on. And you couldn't ignore that, especially in a city like Liverpool that was bearing the brunt of a lot of those Thatcherite policies. So, in a way, it was the most vital work. It wasn't a patronising sort of "we'd better do it". We were doing it because it was

there and it was real and it meant something and if we didn't show it it would look like we were a bit out of touch. It was important.

Question 5:

What was the reasoning behind the related seminar and events programme for *Blac Skin/Bluecoat*? (00:27:03 minutes into the recording)

ADC: In the text that is on the leaflet there is a sense of the artists wanting to make a connection with Liverpool's black community. Perhaps you could talk about the seminar that was organised as part of the show?

BB: Sure, but there was another question before that about whether the objectives of the Blk Art group were part of the premise for *Black Skin/Bluecoat*. I think it was, very much so. There was a political agenda around combating racism, to affect change through an art of resistance, to express black culture. I also recognised that our audience would be predominantly white. So, I took on board a lot of the agenda of the Blk Art Group, but...

ADC: Although, I think by that time the Blk Art Group were no longer working together under that name, but the group's objectives remind at the heart of much of what Eddie did throughout the 1980s.

BB: No and it wasn't a Blk Art Group show. But you're right, that ethos was still there. The show was mindful of Eddie's position, and also the wider political context, so it chimed with what they were doing and also what we thought the values of art were, which was that instrumentalist thing, which isn't a very fashionable thing to say now. But, you know, to combat racism, to raise awareness about black culture. That was something we very much wanted to do. But I also recognised that most of the audience would be a white audience. But that was another good reason for doing it. Then that brings us to the issue of how did local black artists engage with it through the seminar. If we did it now we would do it differently. In those days you just did these things – an artist's talk or something. There was very little research into who the audience would be and how we were going to engage the community. We just did it. And you would have to check in the minutes of the meetings from around that time, but we had Brian Thompson, who became Ibrahim Thompson, he would have been involved in this event. I think at the time he probably wasn't on the Bluecoat Gallery Committee. But we were certainly talking to him and his organisation, which was called LARCAA – the Liverpool Anti Racist Community Arts Association – I think. They were a predominantly black organisation based in L8. It was through my involvement with him and that group of artists that we did this event. I seem to remember that it was a LARCAA audience. There were a lot of young artists and it was quite antagonistic. I wish we had recorded it. That's why that review [referring to the Black Marks review] is quite interesting, because it was written by two women who came to that event. So there is maybe something you can tease out from what they have said. But I do recall at the time that, when it finished, Sonia said "God, that was hard". She thought there would be a lot of sympathy and empathy between the audience and the artists. She thought they'd think "At Last, we've got some black artists showing in a gallery setting". But instead there was almost a sense of "What are *you* doing here? You're from London". It's a very complex situation and history. There's that book I think I have mentioned by Jacqueline Nassy Brown called *Dropping Anchor Setting Sail [: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool, 2005, Princeton University Press]*. She is an African American academic who did this book about race politics in Liverpool. It's an American publisher and it came out a couple of years ago. It's like a

PhD thesis as a book, and it was very hard to read. There's a lot of repetition of stuff. But it struck a nerve because she tried to get to the heart of the issues around the black community in Liverpool and this notion of the 'LBB' - the Liverpool-Born Black. It's quite a distinct category from any other groups in Liverpool. They're the original black community because they go back four hundred years. They're the descendents of African seamen who married white women and established a community here. It's hard to explain unless you've done that research or encountered it, but it is a very different position from other black British communities in other parts of the country. It's particularly protective towards its heritage.

ADC: It's a much longer history than Windrush.

BB: Yes. So I think Sonia was a bit taken aback by that. "What's going on here? Shouldn't there be solidarity? Shouldn't we all be friends? They should like what we're doing". They weren't attacking the work. They were saying "We should be showing here". So, there was a real Scouse nationalist thing coming through, rather than a black thing. It was actually about it being Liverpool and it being their territory. So the seminar wasn't as productive as we all naively thought it would be. In fact, in many other cities it probably would have been very productive. These were artists leading the way in anti-racist struggle, the work was great, and people might have aspired to be like Keith Piper, but instead it was like "What's *he* doing here?". So, we learnt a lesson in doing it. Race in Britain is a very complex thing, and race in Liverpool was very multi-layered and fractured. The Toxteth riots really built up over a very long time. It wasn't just about having a go at the police because they had been harassing local black kids. This was about four hundred years of history coming up. But it was really important that we did it [the seminar]. If we hadn't done it, the show would have existed but it wouldn't have had those resonances. Certainly with LARCAA, they really respected people like Keith because he was really doing the business, it was so powerful, his work was so strong. But they became...they sort of imploded into their own politics. I wish we had recorded it. It will be interesting to see, if you manage to talk to Keith or Sonia or Eddie – I think all four of them came, maybe not Tom – to get their opinions. I vaguely recall the artists saying "God, you've got to put up with that lot all the time?" (as a postscript to this – and to correct the impression that I appear to have given that the event was entirely negative - I should point out that we did subsequently work with local black artists (and showed probably all of the really the interesting black artists working in the city at that time), some connected to LARCAA, others working independently of any organisation, and that we did continue a dialogue with LARCAA; and with Ibrahim joining the exhibitions committee, the anti-racist agenda remained and I felt made a valuable contribution to our internal discourse around black art and identity politics, feeding into what eventually became prominent cultural diversity debates.

ADC: I'm going to try to talk to Eddie. Keith always says I should contact him.

BB: Yes. He may not recall all of this, but it would be very interesting to know....Keith did some research on Liverpool and slavery when he did *Trophies of Empire*. We paid him some money to do some initial research with a guy called Abdullah Badawi who works for the city council in Liverpool and Janice Cheddie who was his partner. They did some research into Liverpool and slavery, and I think from that he got more of a sense of the complex nature of the black community in Liverpool. But for outsiders it's quite difficult, quite impenetrable. I'm sure other places have their own localised politics. But here, it seemed particularly complicated. The line was "this is the original black community in

Britain. We go back to Africa. It's not about '50s immigration". It's a curious thing because there's Liverpool pride there, and Liverpool was the slave port. So, it's strange and very complicated. But it was good that the artists encountered that – in a place like Liverpool, because Eddie was based in Bristol and the other three were in London. So that covers the seminar. Also, Trevor Coombes (who later worked for us at the gallery) in one of the reviews talks about the seminar as well because he came to it.

ADC: Were there any other events?

BB: No. It was a short exhibition – though all our shows were short then. It wasn't shorter than any of the others. They were traditionally three to four weeks, and *Black Skin/Bluecoat* was a four week show. We also had very little resources to do anything else. If we did that type of show now there would be more talks and tours of the exhibition and so on. But given that it was our first attempt to open up a dialogue with the black community, that was probably about as much as we could achieve at that time. I felt a bit bruised at the end of it. I thought "where do we go from here?", because we had tried to open up a dialogue and it I felt it was quite negative. And because we knew LARCAA, we could go and talk to them, but it wasn't very easy to talk to them because they saw us as a white institution, even though the guy who ran it, Brian Thompson, was white. But he became a Muslim. He became Ibrahim Thompson. But we could at least go and talk to them, and then he became a member of our committee. So it was a way to a particular aspect of activist art. But unfortunately the work that was coming out of that group was not very interesting. It was only when somebody like Paul Clarkson came along that...he wasn't part of LARCAA. He went to art school in Preston and came back to his hometown of Liverpool. It's only then when we started to see some interesting work, I think. Certainly nobody of the calibre of those four [Piper, Boyce, Chambers and Joseph].

Question 6:

In the correspondence between Keith Piper and yourself, about *Black Skin/Bluecoat* and how it might take shape, you both discussed the merits of abandoning the black survey show format. KP suggested a number of solo shows, and in response you suggested that the nature of the space at the Bluecoat would allow a small number of artists to show a larger number of their works, unlike *Into the Open* which showed a large number of artists and only one or two of their works each. Can you recall why the suggestion of a series of solo shows was not taken up at the time? Would you describe the format that *Black Skin/Bluecoat* took in the end (small number of artists & larger number of works) as a compromise, and if so, why? (00:39:27 minutes into the recording)

ADC: Ok. So, the next question was about the survey show versus smaller group shows versus solo shows, which you have already talked about.

BB: Yes and I think it wasn't a compromise, which you suggested – that it might have been seen as a compromise because we didn't do the large show and we didn't do the one-person shows. It was pragmatic and in retrospect, it set out our stall. I think if we had done a one-person show and if it hadn't been well-received or if the artist hadn't risen to the challenge, it might have been seen as interesting but there wouldn't have been a legacy or dialogue with other art. Whereas, if you put four together...They were all very different artists. One might think that it was a homogenous group but there were a lot of differences. Two were working in very traditional media; Sonia and Tom were essentially doing paintings and drawings. Keith was also doing drawings, but what he showed here was collage and these sculptural pieces, and Eddie was doing photo-

collage. But it certainly wasn't a homogenous group (in terms of their formal practice). To have that, you could then start a dialogue between the works, like "let's look at different modes of representation. Let's look at the traditional pastel drawing that Sonia is doing against Tom's rather caricature paintings, or Keith's sculptural torsos with texts", and Eddie would use texts in a more typographic sense. So you could make connections and interesting comparisons. Whereas if you had done a one-person show, that would have been it. What would you have...It would have been in isolation. Unless you had done another show straight after to create a dialogue. But I think that's why we did it. And, in time, we did do solo shows. That's why I think it [*Black Skin/Bluecoat*] was an important show; because it led to other things. If it had been a one-person show, say Keith on his own, it would have been much more difficult. It led to more of those types of shows, with four to six artists. We then did solo shows. We started to co-curate; we worked with Eddie on what would become his Iniva franchise. So those shows that he started doing – he then had the confidence to bring us in as a partner, like with *Plotting the Course*. That was a new way for us to work, which was great. And then from that came commissions leading to the big project which was *Trophies of Empire*. There was also touring work. I think this show [*Black Skin/Bluecoat*] was going to go to Leeds. I don't know whether it ever did. Gerald Deslandes – he ran this gallery in Leeds, but I can't remember what it was called. We discussed it but I'm not sure if it ever came off. But when you look at that show, and we've worked with three of those artists as curators, and two of them as artists in their own right again. Tom was the only one we never really did anything with again.

ADC: But he was less active.

BB: Yes, he was less active. So, for us, it was a really important show. Not just to put down a marker, but to start a relationship and a dialogue with those artists.

Question 7:

Can you recall the visitor response to *Black Skin/Bluecoat*, and also the critical response (in your correspondence with the artists you stated that two critics from London papers had been to Liverpool to review the show)? (00:44:14 minutes into the recording)

ADC: OK. So, the next question was about the response to the exhibition, which you have already spoken about, so unless you want to add anything else...

BB: I struggled with this because I couldn't remember. I remember the comments I mentioned just before, and later on when we were doing more of those kinds of shows we would get accused of not having a very balanced programme [i.e. more exhibitions of black artists' work, and other ethnic minorities, than white artists]. But you've got the visitor's book, and just having a quick look through it now, it seems very positive. I think it certainly was one of those memorable shows, people still say it was a great show. It was not exactly life changing, but people do remember it. Other artists were saying it was important that we did that show – not particularly black artists but artists in Liverpool. So, it did have an impact. Maybe you could look at what we were doing at that time and look at other shows, like the show with Jan Wandja and Tony Bevan. That had the same feel to it, as something new and immediate. It was about the now, and then these artists were going to do something else and go on. It had that feeling about it that it was a bit of a first step into something that was going to become a much bigger and important issue. So it would be interesting to look at what was around it and how

distinctive it must have looked. I can't remember what was on before and after it, but we can look that up.

Question 8:

In your opinion, what was the significance of *Black Skin/Bluecoat* to the way the Bluecoat engaged with and exhibited black British artists? (00:46:10 minutes into the recording)

ADC: OK. We have a little bit of time left. Perhaps you could talk about the legacy of *Black Skin/Bluecoat* a little more. It was one of the questions that came up in the conversation you had with Sonia and Keith at the *Afro Modern* conference.

BB: In terms of how we then engaged with the work of black British artists, curatorial development was important – not just for the institution – in other words, me – but for the artists that we were working with. It was a collaboration. Obviously I selected the work, but it was based on what they were suggesting to me. So if you look at the letter from Keith, he was the one who put forward Sonia and Tom, not me. So, curatorial development; you as the curator establishing a dialogue and a working relationship with the artists was really important. I think that was probably how we carried on doing it [i.e. working with the *Black Skin/Bluecoat* artists enabled the Bluecoat to continue organising exhibitions of work by black and other ethnic minority artists]. There were very few shows that I would just go and select without any discussion. It was always a process...“I think this would work, but what do you think”, sort of thing. In terms of the engagement with the local black community and local black artists, it was more problematic. There was an antagonism towards the Bluecoat because some saw it as a white institution, and furthermore, the building had a history with the slave trade. One of the people who founded the original charity school that occupied the building was a slave ship owner. So it had a negative symbolic presence in the city. And when the Tate came, that was also seen as this white, colonial imposition. To make it worse, Henry Tate and his sugar plantations, all that history of colonialism and “you want us to come and accept a white art gallery” sort of thing. So, that was in the air very much, at that time. Tate came in 1988, and *Black Skin/Bluecoat* was a few years before that, but obviously it had been announced that they were coming. There was a lot of debate about it, a lot of “What do we need this for? We’ve just had the Toxteth riots. The place is a mess and racism is still rife. What are we going to do about it?” So, for us, as what was seen as a white institution - which it essentially was; no black people worked here, or at least very few had – the exhibition programme, which you have seen... *Black Skin/Bluecoat* was the first effort to really do something. It was problematic. It was actually easier for us to work with black artists from London or Bristol than to work with black artists from Liverpool. So that was one of the things we learnt in the process. But it gave people like Paul Clarkson and other artists that have followed him, it gave them a confidence of “I’ve shown in this gallery”. I think in terms of how we then worked with black British artists...I think we wanted to move away from the big group shows. Well, we didn’t entirely, because if you look at some of the shows we have done, like *Numaish Lalit Kala* [1988], which was a South Asian exhibition – that was a group of eight artists and they were pulled together by the fact that they were all South Asian. So we were still doing those types of shows. But the ones which worked best were where we did...like the Lesley Sanderson solo show, or other artists that came later who had built a strong enough body of work. So I think we learnt a lot from doing that show about the *types* of shows we could do. I suppose it directly led to the more thematic shows, of which, the next stage would be *Trophies of Empire*. So we start with *Black Skin/Bluecoat* and we do a series of shows by individual artists, small group shows, solo shows, and then we get

back to the essence of this stuff, which is the politics of it, in a show like *Trophies of Empire*. I thought it was...not more significant, because *Black Skin/Bluecoat* was more significant by being the first one, but I thought it was more significant in the sense that it was trying to break away from a lot of those stereotypes that black artists are in that particular frame and that's the only way we can show them. This show [*Trophies of Empire*] was actually for any artist, and in fact, Keith was the person that throughout this whole period has been really critical – although we worked more with Eddie, who tended to come to us with ideas for shows, which were pretty much already packaged, so we collaborated on *Let the Canvas Come to Life with Dark Faces* [1990], or one of those shows. With Keith, there was more of a sense that there was a politics in here which is much more problematic. So, when we did *Trophies of Empire*, one of the questions that came up was “We’re going to select these artists, how are we going to do it? Should they all be black?” and Keith said “No. It’s a historical issue about race, but it doesn’t mean that the artists that are going to have a view on it are necessarily going to be black”. So *Trophies of Empire* ended up being a really strong show, across three cities, over several months, by artists from whatever their background was. It happened, obviously, that most of the artists were black, because the experience that they were talking about was one of an experience of racism. But it didn’t stop some of the best pieces of work being by South Atlantic Souvenirs and Trouble or by Edwina Fitzpatrick. And that really did problematise things, particularly for the black community here [in Liverpool], we did involve them in various talks through a local black community college. That was very difficult. We didn’t show Donald Rodney’s work, but he was shown in Bristol. We had images of his work, the Trophies piece [*Doublethink*, 1992], and he had put on these texts about black culture, which were wrong – they were stereotypes, like ‘black men are good at sport’ - and they [the Liverpool Black Community] thought he was taking the piss out of them, and we had to explain that he was being ironic. That show would have been very difficult to do back in 1985, but that was the distance that we had travelled through the dialogue we had with Keith. How do we engage with black artists? I think it changed enormously over that period, from being almost receptive – Eddie bangs on the door and I’ve got this interest in what Keith’s doing and we make a show out of it - but we didn’t have the language and framework to really think it through, we just did it because it looked like it was going to be a really interesting show. But over time it [our engagement with black British artists] became more nuanced and as an institution we could work more, or work more at ease with Eddie or Keith as curators. But early on that would have been really difficult – that really relaxed way of working which we had afterwards. That’s why *Black Skin/Bluecoat* was so important.

ADC: It cemented your relationship with them.

BB: Yes. And the fact that they couldn’t walk away...At the time Eddie wrote to every single gallery in the country, or at least a lot of them, and he was very proud when he got a rejection letter. It was almost an antagonism; proving how racist the art system was. Once you actually open the door and you start to do something with them and you establish a dialogue...it was like the floodgates were open. You can see that in the list of the shows that we did – not immediately, there was nothing much for about a year, but after that you’ll see a lot of shows by other artists who had obviously seen what we had done and thought “the Bluecoat sounds alright, so I’ll have a go and approach them” or I would go and find interesting work.

ADC: Ok, I’ve think you’ve covered everything [and then a few irrelevant comments].

- BB: The only thing we didn't mentioned was the title of the show, which I'm pretty sure was Eddie' idea. I wasn't very comfortable with it, but he said "No, we like it".
- ADC: You raised the title in your conversation with Sonia and Keith at the *Afro Modern* conference.
- BB: Did I? Well, I was uncomfortable because it felt a bit flippant. I thought some people would think "Oh, what a terrible title, I bet some white curator has come up with that!" But it was Eddie, or the group. We have always struggled with titles.
- ADC: In the conversation with Sonia and Keith you say "Can we talk about the relationship between the title *Black Skin/Bluecoat* and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952].
- BB: Well, I wouldn't have got that because I wouldn't have been aware of Fanon. I suppose it was actually a very clever title, but at the time I thought people would take it the wrong way and that people would find it slightly offensive.
- ADC: Ok. And then Keith says, "Until you mentioned the Bluecoat as a place where African orphans were kept I had no idea about it. At the time, yes, there was the referencing of the Fanon text, but I think it was more of a play on 'Blue-Coat'. We could have used the link with Fanon more, and in a more interesting way". Sonia doesn't really talk about the title, so I think you're right about the title not being either Keith or Sonia' idea. (Note: African orphans were not kept at the Bluecoat)
- BB: Yes, I think it came from Eddie.

Appendix 8.7

Interview with Bryan Biggs

17 August 2012 at the Bluecoat, School Lane, Liverpool, Merseyside L1 3BX

Question 1:

By the time you came into post and were able to start programming yourself in 1979, you seemed to want to change the Bluecoat's approach to programming by placing slightly less emphasis on proposals submitted to the gallery by artists and slightly more emphasis on you making visits to artists' studios and galleries and then approaching artists whose work you thought was interesting. Would you agree that this was the case, and if so, how do you feel this change in approach impacted the kinds of exhibitions that took place at the Bluecoat? How do you think it might have impacted your own awareness of what black British artists were doing at the time, and consequently, those artists' representation by the Bluecoat? (00:01:26 minutes into recording)

BB: I actually started in late 1976 and inherited a programme that ran for the first year or so and with existing long term commitments to various regular artists it took a while to really introduce my ideas and move away from a focus on selling shows by regional artists to a broader, less commercial programme. This was however quite useful as, to be honest, I was very green, just out of college and would have struggled to devise year-round programmes starting afresh. So the changes that I brought in were gradual, which actually helped develop what I felt was a less formulaic, more diverse and varied programme from what I'd inherited in terms of the artists' careers (so I could have artists that were recent graduates or emerging artists) and also types of work: it still included established local 'favourites' but shown alongside recent graduates, whilst more traditional media were being presented next to more experimental works. So having that period – I was very young and straight out of college. I had done a year here at the Bluecoat and suddenly I was curating a whole programme. It was quite daunting!

ADC: So, how old were you?

BB: I was twenty-four when I started. But it was a completely different landscape then. The word 'curating' didn't exist. You just organised shows.

ADC: Yes, and I was thinking more about the early 1980s as I know at that time you were starting to make visits to shows such as *Into the Open* and exhibitions at the Black Art Gallery. So as opposed to you sitting here and waiting for proposals to be submitted, you were going out and seeing what was going on out there.

BB: Yes, and I was open to new work especially by artists of my generation. The artists the Bluecoat were showing at that time were of an older generation. It was more that 60s generation like Adrian Henri and Maurice Cockrill. And there was this gradual disappearance of the imperative to sell meant that we didn't have to make much money – not that we made much money through commission anyway. It was almost irrelevant – the fact that we had to sell. There was a very small coterie of people who would buy work and who supported the Bluecoat in that way. I obviously wanted to move away from that, because I thought that was just one aspect of contemporary art. I thought there was a lot more interesting stuff out there. So, I became aware of what black artists were doing mainly through visiting other shows: *Into the Open*, and the various solo shows by Eddie and Keith, as already discussed; investigating small, relatively marginal venues like the 198 or Black Art Gallery in London. I don't recall there being much in the way of critical coverage of this work in the arts press. Significantly it was through direct

approaches from artists like Eddie that I found out about the existence of the Black Art Group. He was persistent and would send us a lot of information.

ADC: So you wouldn't come across those kinds of shows though word of mouth or from colleagues at other galleries?

BB: Not really. I'm trying to think who else was showing that work at that time. There were these specialist galleries like the Black Art Gallery. But I was quite new to all this and I had a small network of national galleries that I would talk to, but it wasn't extensive. The bigger galleries just weren't showing it. The Whitechapel only picked up on it much later with *From Two Worlds*.

ADC: Did places like the Black Art Gallery send you information on what they were doing?

BB: To be honest, I don't know. This was the days before the internet so you relied on people sending you things through the post. I could well have got stuff from them. There were also listings. Art Monthly did a listing, the new exhibitions of contemporary art listing. So those galleries probably would have been in listings.

ADC: So was your technique to trawl through the listings and select a handful of shows that you were interested in seeing?

BB: Yes, but I'll come to that in a minute. I was going to London quite a lot and that is how I was finding out about a lot of stuff. But you wanted to know about what you saw as a change in policy...

Question 2:

In 1981, there was a change in the Bluecoat's general exhibition policy, in which it was stipulated that the scope of work being shown should be widened from the Merseyside locale to artists based all over the UK. Could you tell me a little more about why this broadening of scope took place? (00:08:00 minutes into recording)

BB: I recall that by the early 80s I had demonstrated that a less parochial approach was sustainable: not that the gallery had been exclusively a gallery for local artists – far from it when you look at the late 60s/early 70s programmes that included artists from the London avant-garde like John Latham, Derek Boshier, Barry Flanagan, Mark Boyle, Yoko Ono, or the touring shows from Commonwealth Institute or the Goethe Institut. All that suggests that it was quite an internationalist outlook; it wasn't just parochial and local. But certainly, when I came, that outward looking thing had gone. The shows were more local. They had gone back to being more local. And the ones from outside weren't that interesting.

ADC: Do you think it had returned to that more local emphasis because of financial concerns?

BB: It's always down to people. If you do a bit of research into who was here, those artists I mentioned just now (John Latham, Derek Boshier, Barry Flanagan, Mark Boyle, Yoko Ono)...I know Yoko Ono was promoted by a young tutor who had just started at the art school, and he just came to the Bluecoat to put this on, so it wasn't actually a Bluecoat show. But the other artists were curated by the Bluecoat Arts Forum, by Wendy Harpe who then went on to found the Black-E. It wasn't the Bluecoat, it was called the Bluecoat Arts Forum because they met here but it wasn't actually the Bluecoat. [Biggs

has subsequently researched this history and has discovered that the Blucoat Arts Forum was a sub-committee of the Bluecoat] So you had the old Sandon artists who were the old guard and who were probably quite resistant to this new work. So it's down to individuals. There were individuals here, like Wendy Harpe, and the guy who put on the Yoko Ono show. There were four curators before, since 1968, before I started, and they had their own interests. So, Barbara Putt who was here just before me – she was interested in art history and early twentieth century British art, so she did a couple of really good historical shows, showing people like Henry Moore and Stanley Spencer and Paul Nash. So it depends on who is running the gallery at the time. I don't think we had policies at that time. It was more about the passions of the curators, and what links they had. Lucy Cullen put on the *Captain Beefheart* show because she had seen *Captain Beefheart* in the Old Grey Whistle Test which was a music programme on TV. So these things happen because of the people that are in post. I think it's different now. We have to have policies. Whereas, then, it was all done on very little money.

But also, at that time, some of my art school contemporaries were doing postgrad at the RCA at the time and I was visiting London frequently to see them, they were introducing me to other artists, and I was getting to know the London art scene a bit, seeing shows and making connections with venues like the ICA – we felt an affinity with the ICA because it was multi art form, not just visual arts. We were also starting to receive more applications from artists - the age of the artists' slides had arrived, so we were then starting to get a lot of applications. So while you went out and found work, a lot of artists would be sending you stuff so that you could see quite quickly whether you were interested or not. Also, art magazines were increasing - you'd have to check but possibly Artists Newsletter, Aspects and later Artscribe. Once we started getting those magazines we started finding out about what's under the radar. Not for black artists though. I have to say, something like Artscribe didn't really cover the work of black artists. There were also the old magazines like Studio International and the more middle of the road Art Review. So in the early 1980s there was greater dissemination about art happening across the country and I was aware of strong regional scenes in for instance Newcastle. Anyway, that's partly why the gallery became slightly less focussed on just showing local artists, although that was a really important thing to carry on doing.

I was programming more challenging work too that by and large was coming from artists outside the region such as a project called Phoenix, in which Kate Walker and other women artists took over the space for a durational installation with a strong feminist focus – politically and formally quite radical when you consider the rest of the gallery programme that year (1979), so more consciously issue based work was starting to find a place in the programme. I guess this helped prepare the ground for working with Keith Piper and Eddie Chambers.

Around this time Marco Livingstone arrived in the city to work as curator at the Walker and we soon got him onto the gallery advisory committee where he was very instrumental in connecting us to emerging new art from London, resulting in shows here by painters like Stephen Farthing, Graham Crowley and later a drawing retrospective by Boshier. So Marco was very important – not in relation to black art - but in relation to connecting us, as a regional gallery, to what was happening at the heart of the London arts scene.

Looking at the programme from that period too we were already becoming part of national networks of galleries through taking part in thematic touring shows like *The*

State of Clay, Artists Postcards (from New York) and *Art & The Sea* (eventually devising our own tours, some in collaboration with other UK venues) – venues like Sunderland Arts Centre, ICA, Third Eye in Glasgow, Orchard in Derry, John Hansard in Southampton. I think it's important to understand that it was in this period that all this networking was going on outside of London. So, for example, when Eddie Chambers started to tour his shows, he had a network of sympathetic venues across the country.

ADC: How do you think it [the broadening of scope] impacted the Bluecoat, especially in terms of working with black British artists?

BB: So how did it affect the gallery in terms of having a less localised...? I think it gave us a higher national profile, especially for taking significant touring shows like *Women's Images Of Men* in 1981 or *Urban Kisses: 7 New York Artists* (inc Cindy Sherman and Keith Haring) from ICA the following year. I don't know if we were especially on the radar for black artists then as there was no apparent presence by black artists in our programme. But I think the fact that we had got more of a national profile probably meant that people like Eddie Chambers would think that we were doing interesting stuff. I think the combination however of significant touring shows, support for new and emerging artists, inclusion of issue based work, and the, in retrospect, quite eccentric mix of shows. Robert Clarke's review in the Guardian – he wrote a really nice review of one of our shows saying that 'some galleries do this and some do that, but the Bluecoat does all of these things, and that's what makes them interesting'. So I was quite chuffed that we got that because it was an eccentric mix but it sort of worked. So all of that combined maybe gave out the signal that we were open to the sort of work that Sonia, Keith, Eddie and others – as marginal, engaged, unknown artists - were doing. They perhaps thought that the Bluecoat was doing that as well as doing Cindy Sherman. I don't know. You would have to ask them why we were on their radar.

ADC: But that's your instinct.

Question 3:

Anish Kapoor was the artist in residence at Bridewell in 1982, and as with all artists in residence there, he was invited to attend the Bluecoat's Gallery Committee meetings that dealt with exhibition programming. What was Bridewell? (00:18:06 minutes into recording)

BB: It was an artists' studio complex in Liverpool in an old police station. They partnered with the Walker to host a four or five year residency scheme. I don't know who funded it.

ADC: Was Anish Kapoor the first non-white artist to undertake this residency?

BB: He was I think the second or third artist to do the scheme and the first non-white one.

ADC: Was he the first attendee of those meetings to be from an ethnic minority?

BB: Yes.

ADC: It seems from the minutes that he didn't attend very many of those meetings, but can you remember what his contribution was, if any, and/or what the impact of his attending might have been, if at all?

- BB: Correct. It's interesting to compare him to the first residency artist, Ian McKeever, who was very active, attended meetings, was a critical friend and just what we needed in terms of challenging what could be regarded as the insularity of the Liverpool art scene at the time. But Anish's contribution was minimal. I think his work was just starting to make waves, and as one of the new sculptors being promoted by the Lisson then (Cragg, Woodrow etc) he was in great demand. So we saw very little of him and he did not make a great deal of use of the studio. It would have been great to have developed a dialogue with him at this interesting stage of his career and when the Bluecoat too was traveling in exciting new directions, but it was not to be.
- ADC: The reason I asked was to try and piece together a timeline in my own mind of when various ethnic minority artists started getting involved with the Bluecoat, in what capacity and what the consequences for the Bluecoat might have been. I also realise that Kapoor is quite different from the kinds of artists that were involved in the Blk Art Group, for example.
- BB: Yes. He had made it quite clear that he did not want to be part of that sort of agenda.
- ADC: Yes, and he was also born and raised in India so he had a different experience and perspective from those artists.
- BB: Yes, he wasn't part of that discourse at all. But I do wish he had been here more so we could have had a chance to develop a relationship, especially considering where he is now in his career. It would have been helpful, wouldn't it?

Question 4:

In the early 1980s, the Bluecoat started to take into greater consideration how its programme might appeal to commercial sponsors. It states in the minutes of a gallery committee meeting in 1982 that 'It was generally felt that only specific shows might appeal to potential sponsors - for example, prestige shows by nationally or internationally known artists, or exhibitions that would generate a large audience'. Then, in early 1983, there seemed to be a lot of uncertainty about the Bluecoat's funding for the year 83-84, and as a result, it was decided not to make any plans for the gallery's programme beyond that period. A year later, plans were being made for the 84-85 programme, and given the financial difficulties being faced by the Bluecoat, the kinds of exhibitions being proposed at gallery committee meetings were those that were thought to have good sales potential, such as small-scale paintings. To summarise, as a consequence of the financial uncertainties of the early 1980s, it seems that more consideration was given by the gallery committee to what kinds of exhibitions might draw sponsorship from the commercial sector, what kinds of work might draw the largest possible audiences, and also what kinds of exhibitions might generate more profit via sales. How do you feel this impacted the Bluecoat's programme, especially in terms of exhibiting work by Britain's ethnic minority artists? Was work by Britain's ethnic minority artists thought to be less appealing to commercial sponsors and to the Bluecoat's audiences? (00:22:22 minutes into recording)

- BB: I would not read too much into the minutes. The argument you make reflects some voices on the committee who felt we could attract serious sponsors (which was never a reality – I don't think the sponsors were there) and rekindle the gallery's role as a selling gallery (which again was economically never going to work given the weakness of the art market in the city and the direction we were headed in terms of attracting greater public subsidy). These voices were a minority and essentially I was supported for my curatorial choices as we generally were attracting decent audiences and good critical

feedback. Remember this was a fraught political and social period in the country and especially in urban centres like Liverpool. To 'retreat' into a programme that would appeal to (non-existent) sponsors was not at the forefront of my thinking.

As for financial uncertainty, this was an ongoing problem. I do not recall this period being any more acute than any other but I would have to revisit the minutes. But there was a Labour councillor called Keith Hackett and he was the head of the culture committee. He really put culture on the map. He argued within the council that they should fund the Bluecoat. The only way that he could get it to go through was to fund it through jobs. So the city council took on five of our salaries. So the grant we got from the city council for quite a number of years came through our salaries. It was a very astute move because if it had been a grant, it could have gone. With a grant, from one year to another you wouldn't know if you would be getting it. But they had a policy of not cutting jobs. It was a Labour administration during the Thatcher years. So doing it through our salaries was much more secure. After his influence waned and after that whole group of GLC-inspired councillors had gone, the Militant lot came in and culture was not on their agenda, it was all about jobs and housing. Culture was seen as a luxury. It was an elitist thing. So if we had had a normal grant, we would have been chopped, I'm sure. So getting our funding through salaries was very important.

Question 5:

We have already discussed the exhibition *Black Skin/Bluecoat (1985)*, and what you feel the impact of this show was on the Bluecoat's programme and engagement with black British artists. To what extent were the financial issues that were experienced by the gallery in the couple of years preceding *Black Skin/Bluecoat* a consideration for you when deciding to put on this show? (00:27:05 minutes into recording)

BB: I don't think it was.

ADC: Yes, and now that you've explained how the minutes might have been misleading, that makes sense. *Black Skin/Bluecoat* highlighted the need for the Bluecoat to foster greater engagement with Liverpool's local black community and black artists. How did this new priority for the gallery fit (or not fit) with the priorities noted in question 4, vis-à-vis commercial sponsorship, sales potential, and increasing audiences?

BB: I would say that that show very much chimed with audience development aspirations. We knew we had to connect because we weren't connecting with those audiences at all. Sponsorship was never an option here but of course as ACE started to recognise and support black art then touring shows as developed by Eddie, Sunil Gupta and others under the INIVA franchise ...

ADC: It's after 1986 that the Arts Council develop their first ethnic minority action plan when they took over from what the GLC had been doing when the GLC dissolved that year.

BB: Yes, so big commission projects we did like *Trophies of Empire* were then possible because the Arts Council had these funds that were dedicated to that sort of work.

Question 5:

In a 1987 Gallery Committee meeting, there was a discussion on criticisms that had been made by black artists on funding provision for their work. I will summarise the varying points as we go. My question about each of them is: How did these various positions that were held by the gallery

committee play out in terms of what the Bluecoat did in the years that followed? The first argument was that inequalities faced by black people were also faced by white working class. (00:29:04 minutes into recording)

BB: This point is still unaddressed, the elephant in the room. Of course we have worked with white working class artists but never branded a show in these terms. It's just as pertinent today to revisit this issue, given the alienation of the white working class especially by the Labour Party - its traditional ally. The issue hasn't gone away.

ADC: The second argument was that black communities in Liverpool experienced a very distinct set of disadvantages, and that the art world did have racism in it, and that it was in established institutions 'where the history of art in particular was interpreted (through exhibitions and publications) to the exclusion of non-white developments'.

BB: I think we did successfully present alternative narratives to those reflecting the dominant white experience, not just through supporting British-born/based black artists (and a lot of the shows in the 80s/90s included work about identity, family stories and postcolonial histories), but also by shows from countries outside the European-American art world hierarchies: solo exhibitions by Simryn Gill, Wong Hoy Cheong, Susan Hefuna; group shows from India, Pakistan, Aboriginal Australia, China, Japan; the CAIR residency shows; a focus on Arab artists, etc. All of those were giving a different take on art history. I think it was raised very early on that we should be doing that and I think we did it.

ADC: The third argument was that the challenging of Eurocentrism in art institutions could only take place via 'a massive re-education' to bring about change in entrenched attitudes of white people.

BB: The visitors' books perhaps reflect the impact of our programmes on the white population though the massive re-education is beyond our resources!

ADC: The fourth argument was that the needs of all minority ethnic groups needed to be considered.

BB: The Bluecoat programmes – exhibitions and the live programme – attempted to reflect the local demographic, e.g. our long-standing work with the local Arabic communities (LAAF etc), early support for Indian arts promoters MILAP, and other projects with Chinese and black communities. We have however failed to engage in a meaningful way the relatively large and largely ignored Somali community. It's the one area where we've failed to make any inroads.

ADC: I think because they are a comparatively newer group to the UK, compared to various Asian communities and Caribbean communities, it must make things harder.

BB: Yes, and I think there are a lot of internal politics within the Somali community too. I think there is something like twelve different Somali cultural groups, and if you deal with one of them, the other groups won't talk to you. So, it's a fraught problem, and through the Arabic Arts Festival we have tried to engage with them. Technically they are part of the Arab League, but culturally, they are not Arabic. And even between the north and south they are very different cultures, so it is a tricky one. A long-term approach is the only way to develop a meaningful relationship with a particular community (and in

Liverpool, as anywhere else, it is never simply a single homogenous community) as we have shown with the LAAF project which is now after 10 or so years an independent Arab-led cultural organisation.

ADC: One member of the committee 'feared that by identifying Black Art in a distinct category, we would be in danger of separatism and tokenism, and that multiculturalism in the arts should be our goal'.

BB: Our belief has always been that an artist's self-definition is paramount. How an artist chooses to define what they are and what they do, that's what we as a gallery should respond to. So, when some black artists felt that defining themselves in such terms (often because funding structures had set definitions like Black, ethnic minority, culturally diverse etc) was both limiting and complicit with perpetual tokenism, and rejected for instance the black group exhibition, we started to move away from those models, which had been necessary 10 or so years earlier in order to create a voice and visibility for the work and to develop a discourse. In doing this we arrived at the position that Keith had argued for in 1984/5 (for substantial solo shows) but for a period before that the group show was an important strategy, one that Eddie in particular used well to explore themes within the wider concept of black art. I felt that these shows kept the discourse alive, gave opportunities to newer, emerging artists, and generally strengthened the network of black practice. And importantly they reflected diversity *within* the broad brushstroke term 'black art'. But certainly we were aware of the dangers of this road leading to separatism, which is why issue-based rather than race-based shows like *Trophies of Empire* were important. We did arrive at a multiculturalism but we probably need to have a fuller discussion about that another time.

ADC: Another member 'felt it was important to separate out Black Art in order for it to be debated as widely as possible'.

BB: I think we have already covered this.

ADC: Yes. Another argument was that positive action could not come about until this debate was extended to include black artists.

BB: This was a very pertinent point that highlighted the exclusively white nature of the committee, however the debate *was* extended to black artists who had of course been instrumental from the start - see the telling correspondence, then discussions, with Eddie and Keith. The dialogue continued with key players like Keith, Eddie, Juginder Lamba, Bashir Makhoul, Nina Edge, Keith Khan, Alnoor Mitha, Lubaina Himid, Lesley Sanderson all shaping the venue's thinking about its engagement with black art and its transformation through debates around multiculturalism and diversity.

ADC: As a result of the last comment, the committee discussed co-opting black and other minority ethnic artists onto their committees, who might also be able to provide links with minority communities in Liverpool for the purposes of audience development. It was decided that one of the members (Brian Thompson from LARCAA who later became Ibrahim Thompson) speak to local minority artists and organisations about 'their perceptions and expectations of the Bluecoat'. What was the outcome of this decision? Were any ethnic minority artists co-opted onto any of the Bluecoat's committees, and if so, which ones, and what was the outcome?

BB: Ibrahim's agenda was very much framed by his role within the anti-racist educational/cultural group LARCAA, and we had a lot of dialogue with them but ultimately we did not cement a relationship with that group, whose agenda was too narrowly focused and did not 'get' ironic work like Donald Rodney's trophies piece. I think had we invited one of the artists they were connected with to our committee it would have been tokenistic. I'm not sure when the committee was wound up but there came a point when it had become superfluous and the organisation of course had a Board to which its staff were accountable. The debate, stimulated by me and Ibrahim and supported by our chair Dave King (was he chair then?), an anti-apartheid white South African scientist, did percolate through the organisation, the Board becoming more culturally diverse (Wes Wilkie, another LARCAA member but disillusioned by then with its somewhat Stalinist culture).

ADC: Also during this discussion, you expressed that you were keen 'to develop the gallery's role as a stimulus to local black artists by bringing to Liverpool the work of key figures such as Gavin Jantjes and Keith Piper, and by working with other artists such as Eddie Chambers in curating thematic exhibitions'. To what extent do you feel the numerous exhibitions showing work by black artists (that took place at the Bluecoat in the years that followed this discussion) did stimulate local black artists?

BB: I think it did stimulate local black artists and it was always a priority for us to show the work of such artists when different opportunities arose: commissioning Paul Clarkson, a very talented recent graduate, to do a series of paintings for Trophies of Empire; group shows that included work by Dionne Sparks, Leonora Walker, Jack Wilkie, Nina Edge (who later moved to Liverpool), Karl Eversley, Daniel Manyika. One disappointment was that apart from Nina, few went on to develop a profile outside the city, but that was the case with many artists we gave early support to! Was there anything else about this you wanted to ask before we move onto the Black Arts Unit?

ADC: No, but just to say it was very interesting reading that discussion on black art because the various positions expressed by those having that discussion actually echo and reflect the full range of positions that were then had during the rest of the 1980s and into the 1990s on the issue of black artists and their visibility in publicly funded galleries in the UK. It's an indication that the Bluecoat was thinking quite deeply and broadly about these issues.

BB: Yes, and that's why me preparing for this interview has been really good because it has forced me to look back at the minutes of some of our meetings and read some of this stuff that we have just discussed. There was an awful lot of discussion. It wasn't just me thinking 'I like that artist and I'm going to show them'. Anyway, shall we move on to the Black Arts Unit? You asked...

Question 6:

Liverpool City Council had a Black Arts Unit which seems to have been active during the early 1990s, according to the dates it is noted in the Bluecoat's various meeting minutes and annual reports. Can you tell me anything you remember about the Black Arts Unit? When was it set up and why? What were its objectives? Was it influenced (directly/indirectly) by Arts Council policy and other government initiatives? What was its impact on the Bluecoat, in terms of the funding it offered and the outputs it expected? What do you feel its broader impact was on the Bluecoat's programme, not only during the years the unit existed, but also in the years beyond? (00:45:21 minutes into recording)

BB: The Unit was important in the post-Toxteth environment and in the wake of reports like '400 Years'. I understand it came out of Labour city councillor Keith Hackett's Cultural Industries Strategy for Liverpool. Talk to the head of the Unit, David Abdullah. At one point it had four staff within a small arts unit, but gradually was cut back and eventually abolished as arts took a back seat and the North Liverpool councillors dominated the council and the progressive, GLC-styled policies of Hackett and 'the Sainsbury set' waned).

ADC: Do you know when it was dissolved?

BB: No. Sorry, I have no idea. But the arts slipped off the agenda when this group called the Sainsbury Set – I think it was because they all shopped at Sainsbury's – they had these GLC style policies which were inspired by what Ken Livingstone was doing in London and all his anti-racist and ethnic minority work. They were very inspired by that and they tried to bring those kinds of policies into Liverpool and for a brief time it was fantastic. They set up these various units and then it was all swept away. I'm not sure we ever got funds directly from it as Liverpool City Council was already funding as a revenue client through paying 5 salaries, but it provided supportive environment e.g. linking our Trophies project to the local programme of the 500 years of resistance campaign in 1992.

ADC: I did see in some minutes that they had given the Bluecoat two or three thousand pounds for something.

BB: Yes, but it might have been more on the music side of things. I think it was probably for performing arts. I think Wes Wilkie was the visual arts person in the Black Arts Unit and we did have a good relationship with them, but it seemed to be more performing arts and literature that they funded. Abdullah Badwi was at the council covering visual arts and he replaced Wes. I'm also sure he helped Keith Piper with research for Trophies of Empire. The background to that show was that Keith wanted to do some research on Liverpool and slavery which fed into the publication we did for the exhibition. So Keith and his partner, Janice Cheddie, came up and worked with Abdullah and Abdullah was on our board, if not then he was certainly an observer – he had a background in photography.

So the impact/legacy was around its staff, whom we worked with even after the Unit was abolished: Wes joined our Board in an individual capacity. Dinesh Allirajah was part of the literature team of the arts unit and actually ended up working as the Bluecoat's live programmer, complementing the black art focus in the gallery with strong programmes of diverse music, dance, live art and literature - both local showcases like Oral and Black and cross-artform performance groups like Asian Voices Asian Lives which he was also involved in as a practitioner, and bringing in national touring work, collaborating with SuAndi's Black Arts Alliance in Manchester. So Dinesh was an important catalyst for the performing arts programme. So I do think it had a big impact on what we did, but because it never had much money I would say its impact was more in terms of the legacy of the people who had worked for it, who we then worked more closely with.

We could also have some further discussion, perhaps outside the scope of your current research, on black performance work. We did some really interesting work with Keith

Khan, Nina Edge, Visual Stress, Delta Streete and other live art commissions, Ronnie FM, Lemn Sissay, Hittite Empire, David Tse. They all did important performance work here in the area of live art, which at the time had more of a base in visual arts than it did in performing arts. So all this other stuff was going on at the same time.

Question 7:

In 1992, an equal opportunities policy was drafted. The measures suggested were:

- Recommendations regarding management structure - 'A set of targets should be established in relation to the balance of sexes and the representation of minority groups on the governing bodies of both organisations'.
- Recommendations regarding arts programming
 - The Bluecoat's programme advisory committees should seek to promote equal opportunities through proper balance and representation on their committees including adequate representation of minority groups.
 - The programme advisory committees should consider the establishment of targets relating to the proportion of work involving minority groups. Such consideration should include the relationship of such activity to the prevailing artistic philosophy (to avoid 'tokenism') and means of promoting and funding such activities.
 - Good and productive relations between the artistic directors and local community groups may well help foster equality of access and improved artistic opportunities for minority groups both directly and indirectly. Such contact between the artistic directors and local community groups should be encouraged within the context of the Bluecoat's prevailing artistic philosophy and be included as an 'essential quality' in any future job descriptions for this position.

Was this the first equal opportunities policy to be drafted that took into account minority access and outreach (I didn't come across any earlier policies like this during my archival research)? What prompted the drafting of this policy? Which of the measures were met and in what way? (00:52:45 minutes into recording)

BB: I would have thought we had an equal opportunities policy before then but would have to dig further. Maybe this was first specific reference to outreach and access. This would be policy for the organisation as a whole, not relating just to the gallery so its background would be in the minutes etc relating to the Bluecoat Board.

ADC: If they're located at the Records Office then I would have seen those.

BB: I suspect they might be here. But it depends on how much detail you want to go into.

ADC: I'll so how I go with what I have for the time being and then if this particular point becomes very important then I can come and have a look.

BB: OK. But obviously we had a genuine commitment to Equal Opportunity policies in the organisation there was also an imperative from the funders especially ACE for organisations to adopt such policies and support for training to help design and deliver on them. So obviously with the Arts Council it was part of the funding agreement, but we were doing it any way. Measures relating to a diverse programme were met, and probably exceeded, actually. Although I don't think we ever had targets for how many black artists we should work with. But, certainly, we had a very rich programme. Employment measures were less successful. But we're going to talk about that a bit later on.

Question 8:

In a 1992 Business Plan, it stated that 'The principle of equal access is one of the fundamentals of the Bluecoat's philosophy. Access is therefore available as an integral part of the main programme, rather than in a separate 'marginalised' or 'minority' section'. However, it then states that the Bluecoat had 'worked closely with the Liverpool City Council Black Arts Unit to develop and promote a regular music programme which prioritises black artists', which sounds like a separatist initiative. At that time, what was the Bluecoat's view on separatist vs integrationist forms of programming that involves black artists? How do you perceive the Bluecoat's efforts and history of programmes in terms of this? (00:54:50 minutes into recording)

BB: Delivery of a black music programme might have been a Liverpool City Council Arts Unit priority but we would not have done this to the exclusion of other music strands e.g. folk. Nor did we separate out black work, e.g. through marketing it differently. If you look at the brochures from this period, we were not saying 'this is mainstream stuff and this is the other stuff'. It was very much integrated into the overall programme.

ADC: Yes, that's right. Can you recall some of the group shows that included black artists but were selected according to theme or media (apart from *Trophies of Empire*)?

BB: Actually, I did a list of shows up until *Trophies of Empire* that did that, which is interesting because I didn't think there was much of that history.

ADC: Yes, I have come across a couple but was wondering if you could recall any others that I might not have been able to identify when looking through the archives.

BB: Yes. Ok, so this is the list:

- The four person show with Jan Wandja in 1984
- *New Contemporaries*, 1986, included Keith Piper
- Second Site sculpture/poetry project about the urban environment working with schools, including local black poet Leroy Cooper (his arrest sparked the Toxteth Riots) and Rabia Thomas I'm not sure if she was black or if she was a white Rastafarian), 1987
- Xmas Mix - five North West artists including local sculptor Gerald Beserekumo, 1988
- *North by North West* show in Cologne, five artists including Lesley Sanderson, 1989
- Liverpool Polytechnic graduates, three artists including Dionne Sparks, 1989
- *Approaches to Realism* curated by John Roberts, 7 artists including Sonia Boyce and Rasheed Araeen, 1990
- *Interim Report*, local show by eight artists including Bashir Makhoul (does he count as black in terms of Arts Council England definitions?) 1990
- *New Art North West*, regional survey show with Cornerhouse and Castlefield in Manchester. At Bluecoat sixteen artists including Bimla Dass (British Asian) and Moses Lee (British Chinese), 1991
- A Pool of Signs 2, seven artists including Dionne Sparks, 1992

All of these were before *Trophies of Empire* in 1992. So it's interesting to think of that happening, and the artists weren't selected because they were black. They were selected because they were interesting. You could go beyond that period but I only went up to *Trophies of Empire*.

Question 9:

Also in the 1992 Business Plan, it states that 'Collaborations with other curators/venues are being explored to facilitate our aims within the area of cultural diversity... Local audience development is a key factor here too, as activities offering non-Eurocentric perspectives will help to provide a way in to our programme for the region's Black and Asian communities'. Could you describe some of the programmes and engagement techniques that were used? How successful do you feel they were? (01:01:37minutes into recording)

BB: Trophies was a good example of national venue & artist/curator Collaboration because we involved a curator, which was Keith Piper, and two other cities, which were Bristol and Hull. So that was a really good example of a national collaboration. Around this time we also started a relationship with Autograph on the Mis(sed) Representations show which also went to Cologne in 1992. I became an advisor to LJMU Art School's new CARE initiative, with solo shows at end of year-long residencies by Bill Ming, Juginder Lamba and Nina Edge, between 1992 and 1995. Another independent curator we worked with was Olu Oguibe on an 'African' show called Seen Unseen, which was a response to an 'African' show at Tate Liverpool in 1994.

ADC: Was that Susan Vogel's show?

BB: Yes. And then there were collaborations with other venues e.g. the South London Art Gallery for Indian artist C Jagdish, and Huddersfield Art Gallery on Bashir Makhoul's solo show, working with Alnoor Mitha. So just with those examples you can see that what we do what we set out to do in the business plan, and they were quite successful.

In terms of engaging with local audiences, as much as possible we included local work alongside national/international shows. So when the artist C. Jagdish was showing, we gave one space over to the Twin Studio (Arit & Rabindra Kaur Singh), which I think was their first show. When Bill Ming was on, he had two or three gallery spaces and we gave the other spaces over to five emerging black Liverpool artists. Earlier, alongside Gavin Jantjes' 1986 solo show of paintings called Korabra about slavery & the African diaspora, that was when we exhibited this series of shows showing a documentary display from the Institute of Race Relations, From Resistance to Rebellion, Pieces of 8 – photos of the Toxteth Uprising by the L8 Black Media Group, local sculptor Jack Wilkie, and a small Caribbean Focus exhibition.

So I think to connect with local audiences, that was one way of doing it – working with local artists, who would bring along their friends. And I suppose, in a sense, going back to Black Skin/Bluecoat debate when local artists were saying 'when are we going to get our chance?', this is how it happened; through those types of shows.

But also, I think it is important that we don't see these shows in isolation from the live programme where vibrant music, dance, literature and live art programmes by local black artists attracted good local diverse audiences, e.g. Sokari Douglas Camp show was on during the same week that Visual Stress did a performance in the front courtyard the week that Tate Liverpool opened (1988). So there was an activist, cultural black audience who were supporting the Visual Stress thing and who were critical of the Tate opening. It all sort of came together in that week; there was a one person show by a British-based African artist that was completely against, well, not completely against, but it was in contrast to what the Tate was doing, because it opened with Surrealism and a show called Starlit Waters, which was a very high-end, modernist show. But there

we were showing Sokari Douglas Camp and the Visual Stress performance group. There weren't massive audiences from black communities, but certainly activist ones that understood the history. They saw this as a place that supported what they were doing. So even just a couple of years after Black Skin/Bluecoat, we had gained the confidence of interesting artists from the black community.

Question 10:

Also in the 1992 Business Plan, it states that 'At the heart of our programme policy is an understanding of the increasing importance of cultural diversity. We therefore envisage strengthening our commitment to this area, reflecting a broader representation of the cultural map of Britain, through our exhibitions and events. We are also seeking opportunities to work with artists whose perspectives are from outside the traditionally European and American-dominated art world'. It seems here that reflecting diversity was not just about showing work by ethnic minority artists but also artists of any colour who expressed a different world view, much like Iniva's early mission statements that were influenced by New Internationalism. What was the Bluecoat's view on New Internationalism and to what extent do you feel that the Bluecoat's programmes engaged with this emerging approach? (01:07:17 minutes into recording)

BB: New Internationalism was helpful in challenging the old centres of art world power and presaged the explosion in Biennials around the world that became a feature of increasing globalisation. It broadened the context for black British work and I think our programme started to reflect that bigger picture with more shows from abroad. So we worked with INIVA franchise curators. Eddie Chambers brought in an Aboriginal show and there was Sunil Gupta's show with Malaysian artist Simryn Gill, which was her first UK solo show. At the same time we were still staging shows with British based artists. I think what it did was to...you could see the work that had previously been seen very much on its own, in the context of a wider international community. So from that point of view it was very positive and useful.

At the same time there was concern amongst some artists that this focus on broader non-Eurocentric perspectives provided an excuse for diminishing support for black artists in Britain. This was reflected in the termination of the INIVA franchises and the consolidation of what had previously been 'black art funding' into a new institute that quickly alienated many of the artists who had achieved some prominence as a result of the older ACE funding structures. There was a lot of disquiet around that time, and Gavin Jantjes was very respected and he gave a very powerful speech at the launch of INIVA. That aside, I think a lot of artists felt that they had been betrayed. Perhaps that's too strong a word. But it had to change. It had become a black art ghetto of funding.

Our attempts to engage with INIVA were not successful until the Veil exhibition much later. It was the first time we were able to work with them. Though we had dialogue with Gilane Tawadros who, before INIVA, wrote for our *Trophies of Empire* publication and participated in a public debate. It was one of those situations where we always talked about doing a project together but we never did.

ADC: Would you want to now?

BB: Yes. Well, I don't know. Something changed, didn't it? The word 'Institute' probably gives it away. In general I think we did engage with the New Internationalism agenda even if the 'institutionalisation' of the black art discourse we had been involved in had the effect of excluding the productive relationships that we and other venues *across the*

UK had built up with a large number of artists. So there was a real energy and network that we and others had helped to build up. And I think INIVA either ignored it or felt that it was too parochial. You know, 'We're international. London's an international city'. That's how it seemed from outside. It should have been called the London Institute of International Arts, I think. It was international in scope, but it didn't feel inclusive in terms of being about the whole of the diversity of Britain.

We wanted to remain flexible, again very much responding to the changing way that artists were defining their practice and reacting to the more rigid 'ethnic minority' categorisations of the Arts Council's funding structures. Nina Edge talked a lot about 'playing the diversity card', and being this chameleon ...you know, sort of, 'How black do you want me to be?'. That was her response to the Arts Council, because it would put them on the spot. She was supposed to be 'diverse' but she thought 'why should I be making work about that when I'm a born and bred Gloucestershire girl. It just happens that one of my parents is black'. So the problematics of the cultural diversity agenda that the Arts Council was driving was being challenged by artists like Nina. Other artists obviously went along with it, and that's their decision.

Apart from Trophies, the commission series Independent Thoughts (which evolved through a conference into the publication Independent Practices), responding to the 50th anniversary of the independence of India and Pakistan's partition, took a theme which artists were selected for based on their proposals irrespective of their ethnicity. For example, Tim Brennan was a white artist, he showed at Bradford, and the publication included an essay about women artists in Eastern Europe. So that's an example of the New Internationalism agenda. The live art commissions that accompanied it were more broadly about independence, rather than just about the Indian sub-continent. We worked with Mem Morrison, Asian Voices Asian Lives, Nina Edge – they all did work that was not particularly about India.

Question 11:

In 1996, a positive action trainee was brought in to gain experience in arts administration and to work on programme and audience development aimed at specific local communities (the Liverpool Chinese community?). How did this come about and why? How common was this approach at the time? How did it affect the Bluecoat? What changes took place as a result of this scheme? Which communities were being targeted and how were they being engaged with? Was the trainee subsequently employed by the Bluecoat in a permanent post? (01:13:45 minutes into recording)

BB: Carol Kwong was the person who selected, she was British-Chinese. I don't know what her background was, but I think she was trained as an artist. She was interested in being a curator and getting involved in arts management. She wasn't a visual arts specialist. The North West Arts Board – it was their initiative with funding from a private Chinese fund called the Woo Foundation. It was designed to address the lack of opportunities for diverse curators working in the region, and we were one of several venues. The Cornerhouse was another, I think. But Carol was less a visual arts specialist and was more interested in performing arts but with curatorial help from us she pulled off a strong show. It was a North West group show which included Dinu Li – a really good Chinese photographer based in Manchester. The whole project was very well resourced with lots of training for Carol, lots of evaluation, and we got a lot of support to do it.

In terms of the impact on us, I think it brought a new British Chinese perspective to our work, which we hadn't had before, through projects she was working on which targeted

the Chinese community and was relatively successful but this was not a community that we continued to have a close relationship with, in the same way we did with the Yemeni community, which continues today with the Arabic Arts Festival. That might be down to the particular nature of a community that is very difficult to work with. I don't know about other cities but the Chinese community in Liverpool is quite self-contained. Having said that, we did some good projects with them. Carol was not employed by us at the end. It would have been great if we could have done it, but we couldn't. I don't know what she is doing now.

Question 12:

In the 1996 Business Plan, it was stated that 'Visual and performing arts events are targeted at many discrete markets, and collaborative events like Oral & Black, On the Horizon and the MILAP activities have shown the progress being made in developing culturally diverse audiences'. Was this emphasis on gearing programmes towards diversifying audiences partly a result of targets imposed by your funders? (01:17:13 minutes into recording)

BB: No we were doing it anyway but the funders' conditions contributed to us having to develop a more coherent articulation about what we could achieve in this area of audience development. Actually it made us be more realistic about it, because when you've got targets you starting thinking about whether you can actually do it. Whereas before, it was more of a 'wouldn't it be nice if we could reach these audiences'.

ADC: I was thinking about the changes in policies during that period from the early 1980s when there was that 4% rule brought in by the Arts Council and it was much more to do with how many artists you were engaging with rather than the types of audiences you were attracting. But in the 1990s it became much more focused on audience development and outreach to minority communities.

BB: Yes, and I think it make us be more systematic about it, actually. It's that tick-box culture, which I know isn't really the way you should do it, but...We've always been a little bit resistant to doing these things for the sake of ticking a box. But it did make you think about what was realistic to achieve, and about not setting ridiculous targets. I think with the participation work that it was particularly important with that that we recognised ... to really deliver an experience for a small number of people...you know, to try and change two lives rather than to get fifty kids to come and see an exhibition. That's still the philosophy of much of the participation programme, although, having said that we do want to get bigger audiences and large numbers of school visits. But it's that real engagement and changing peoples' lives which you can't do in massive numbers.

ADC: I wonder whether the audience targets imposed by such funding bodies at the Arts Council and local government meant that art galleries necessarily became more focussed on exhibiting the work of black and other minority artists for the purpose of diversifying audiences rather than simply for the purpose of giving fair representation to minority artists (and what those artists' needs were, how those artists were critically and historically positioned through exhibitions etc). What is your opinion on this?

BB: Probably. But this funding-led imperative to prove you were engaging with diverse artists and targeting diverse audiences came ironically at a time when many venues were ahead of the game and were responding more subtly to the complexities of multiculturalism and issues around identity, globalisation etc. Decibel seemed to

exemplify this somewhat clumsy and paternalistic Arts Council approach to cultural diversity - maybe that's a bit unfair - though I am sure it benefited lots of black British creativity. But I just felt it was too...it's putting it in a box.

Question 13:

In the 1997 Business Plan it was noted that although the equal opportunities policy was used when recruiting staff, the Bluecoat had not been successful in appointing staff from traditionally marginalised groups. Why do you think this was? (01:21:46 minutes into recording)

BB: It was class rather than race that was the issue. The majority of black population would be described as working class and arts jobs in general, and by definition, are more likely to be eligible for higher educated, predominantly middle class people. I know that's a huge generalisation, but I don't think it's much to do with race. It was to do with class and it still is. That's my opinion.

ADC: Did the Bluecoat become more successful in this respect in following years, particularly in terms of the programming staff and at board level? If so, what changes took place as a result?

BB: Dinesh Alirajah ran the live programme for several years, with another person, whose name I have forgotten, but who was his assistant, and she went on to work for Arts Council in London. There were none in gallery, as far as I can remember. But, obviously, festival staff for Liverpool Arabic Arts Festival, which we managed for many years, and most of the time it has been run by a non-white person. The Board, yes, and partly because the Arts Council were saying 'Where's your diversity on the board?'. But it has fluctuated because you select people for the skills you need. At the moment we have a very diverse board, in terms of gender and ethnicity. But, for a long time during and after the recent development it was not very diverse but this year has recruited two black members and has a good gender balance.

Question 14:

I'd like to finish by talking about the Bluecoat's current policy in relation to programming and what you feel the current approach is to exhibiting and representing black British artists. Are there any recent Business Plans, policy documents you could show me that might help me to develop a picture of current approaches to 'cultural diversity' at the Bluecoat? (01:24:00 minutes into recording)

BB: Artistic policy is in transition to reflect recent cuts to the live programme but you're welcome to look at it. But we can talk about how I think the landscape has changed in black arts and is it any longer necessary to articulate a relationship to black British artists when there seems very little 'self definition' as such. I'm seeing a lot less of it now compared to the period we have been talking about. So when we have been working with John Akomfrah on the film about Stuart Hall, we don't think this is black project. It's just John Akomfrah, he is a filmmaker. The subject is obviously about diversity, Hall's life, work and thinking, so inevitably, it will cover a lot of the agenda we're talking about. But do we have to articulate that in the policy? I don't know. I'm uncertain. Perhaps if you found an earlier arts policy it will be very explicit. Whereas, I don't think it's very explicit now. I think 'diversity' is a more useful term. So yes, our policy is in transition at the moment and this is why our conversation now is really useful – about being explicit as an organisation about how you work with a particular group of artists who perhaps don't exist in the way that the terminology framed them

before. I don't know what other arts organisations do. I also need to refresh my mind on what the Arts Council currently do, because Decibel has gone.

One thing that comes through in our current thinking, we're coming to that point where we're reflecting on the history of the organisation, partly because we have just done a development and partly because we're going to be three hundred years old – the building – in five years time. We're framing a lot of our thinking about what's appropriate to do in the programme through being specific to here. What can we do that nobody else can do? We're in a very distinctive building with a very particular history, in the city, but also in terms of artists. When we work with artists we want them to think about that. Not every artist needs to know the background to everything we've done, obviously. But, for example, the Democratic Promenade exhibition we did last year, or the Honky Tonk show which was about Liverpool and Country and Western music – a lot of the exhibition we are doing are focussing very much on the specifics of the Bluecoat, and its history and legacy. Part of that legacy is the work that you're doing – our history of engaging with black artists. So, we're not going to wash our hands of it as if it doesn't matter any more. In fact probably more so, we're going to engage with that history. But it is how you articulate that without it being too prescriptive. I'm not sure how we're going to reflect that in our future policies. But we have thought a lot about it...if you put down in an artistic policy 'We do these shows because...', what is the because? What are the reasons? So, Sara [-Jayne Parsons] and I have had a lot of conversations about what is it that makes it interesting. As ever, it's about artist and audience and I think it has to be the two key things; who is the artist and who are the audience? So we very much think that through. We have a general audience and within that we have a very specific audience that come particularly because they like what we do. But we are a fairly open sort of space. People do wander in off the street, whereas the FACT audience is quiet specific – they have a particular interest in a particular art form. So we have to think broadly about audience. We have to look at what artists are doing. We are like a broker between the artist and the audience. We do it in a particular space with a particular history and with a particular relationship to other artists in the building. You could have an artistic policy that says 'we work with good artists. Full stop'. But you can't do that these days. The funders want to know why you do certain shows. If you look at the Arts Council's assessment forms, it's very much about the quality of the work, you know, is it a well-installed exhibition, does it make a coherent argument, is the interpretation good etc. It's also about good customer care, how does the venue work and how does it relate to what the rest of the organisation does etc. So, you can't treat exhibitions in isolation.

When we re-opened in 2008 it was a bit of a rollercoaster and we didn't really have the time to sit back and look so much at the programme, which we are having to do now. We're five years into it. That's why when we did the Sonia Boyce thing, it was like 'Oh god, we need to do some conceptual thinking around this. This is actually quite a challenge'. If the Tate show hadn't come along, if *Afro Modern* hadn't come along, I don't know what we would have done. I suppose we would have done Like Love and something else would have happened. But that show really forced us to think about 'Where are we in our relationship...?'

Appendix 8.8

Interview with Appau Boakye-Yiadom

5 May 2011 at his studio (38-40 Glasshill St, Southwark, London, SE1 0QR)

Question 1:

Perhaps you could start by telling me how you first got involved in the Action exhibition and how you were approached. (00:01:13 minutes into recording)

ABY: Ok. Sonia [Boyce] was my tutor. I studied at Winchester. I was doing my BA there. Sonia was my first year tutor there. She was just there for the year because she was covering one of the first year tutor's maternity leave. So I knew her from then. I got in contact with her about a show I had, and then randomly at a trip to Ikea, Sonia was there. I explained what I was doing and that I had a show opening. She went to see it and then talked about what she had planned for the Bluecoat show. She said "You came into our mind from that contact" and said that I could work within that show.

ADC: Did anyone from the Bluecoat then get in touch with you?

ABY: Her and Bryan [Biggs] came to the studio and saw the work and just took it from there.

ADC: And what did they tell you about the show?

ABY: They explained that it was going to be a show in which Sonia was there twenty five years ago [sic] and that it was showing the 'then and now', in terms of the ideas she was bringing to the exhibition, or the ideas she was dealing with at the time, or how relevant the issues she was dealing with in her work were prominent in younger black artists' work.

ADC: And what were those ideas she was dealing with?

ABY: It was all about the political aspects in which being a black artist...that's what was explained, and how relevant that is today, and almost a departure from that in younger artists of today.

ADC: And how did you feel that you related to that...the 'then and now'?

ABY: It was almost like, in some respects, it could have been seen as maybe that wasn't so relevant in terms of discussions within the work of younger artists. I was thinking that there is that aspect within my own practice in which it short circuited in that understanding of ideas. But that was there somewhere. Those same ideas were there somewhere in the work but not so prominent.

ADC: Ok. And had you heard of the Bluecoat before?

ABY: Yeah. I had been there before. Also I work at Thomas Dane Gallery and Anya Gallaccio is one of their artists, and she worked with the Bluecoat at some point, a few years ago. So it was something that I knew of and I knew of their position within the Liverpool arts scene.

Question 2:

How did you feel about being in an exhibition that was curated by Sonia? (00:05:17 minutes into recording)

ABY: I thought it was a good idea. It was nice to be working with artists I hadn't heard of. I had heard of Grace [Ndiritu] and Robin [Deacon] briefly. It was nice to meet other artists that were in a similar situation as myself and also to work with Sonia. My contact with her before was just as a tutor. So it was nice to see that 'artist at work' side of it.

ADC: How much did you know about her having been a reasonably prominent emerging artist twenty-five years ago?

ABY: When we were studying we were really aware of that. I think she was quite recognisable. You go to the Tate Modern and you see one of Sonia's works there and you're nineteen and going to art school in Winchelsea, you're like "Wow! That's one of our tutors!". It felt quite good at the time. Anyway I was really aware of the work she was doing. I also remember when I was on a GNVQ course before that they mentioned her work in an art history lesson that we had and we had to study some of her work.

ADC: So what did you learn about her work?

ABY: I knew about the political aspects of it, in terms of being a black, female artist and how that's transcribed...how to transcribe these sorts of things visually. We looked at her early paintings and moved on to the silk screen paintings – the one that's in the Tate with the faces along with the imagery of a black person, animated [*From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born 'Native' Considers her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and her Roots in Reconstruction*, 1987].

Question 3:

What did you feel connected your work the other three artists in the Action show? (00:08:10 minutes into recording)

ABY: I don't know. I suppose it was ...these sorts of issues, it wasn't such a statement. It felt like everybody's work had that aspect to it where they had an angle where they were talking as a black artist but it wasn't at the forefront of what was going on visually. That's how I saw it. That's how I felt it was connected. It was a lot more subtle but it was there.

ADC: Could you describe for me how you feel that idea relates to your practice?

ABY: I suppose with my practice, the objects I use are very...they can be related to iconography in relation to black society. Classic ideas of things. Like the work I did which was in the Bluecoat with the watermelon and the bowling ball [*Melon n Ball*, 2009], the transformation of these two objects, acting as a duo, one transforming into the other. It's usually with objects, and the same with the boxing glove at the moment and nooses. I'm thinking about how classic images are formed in terms of colour and photography and what these mediums bring to identify an object.

ADC: Ok. And what about the other three artists?

ABY: Well I don't know if she would agree with me, but Beverley and her use of sketching and drawing, it almost has this temperament, this mood, and I suppose that's similar in the sense that it's always the same medium of pencil juxtaposed on this white background. There's always this mood of *Action* being applied onto the surface. It almost brings it to life. It makes it quite human, in the sense that I read them as different humanistic moods. It's a very humanistic action. And how that's put against the materials being used and how that can be read as being positioned as something relating to being a black artist. Something like that.

ADC: And what about the other two? Grace and Robin?

ABY: I liked the fact that Robin's work was more archival. I'm not sure how much I can say about it. But I found that that was what related to what I was doing in terms of archive. I can make a relation there.

Question 4:

What did you feel was the rationale for the show? (00:13:40 minutes into recording)

ABY: I would say it was to show different aspects in which an artist starting off in the 80s...how black artists of that time had more of a political stance due to the time and the shift to today and how and if that still has relevance.

Question 5:

Did you have any concerns or reservations about being involved in *Action*? (00:14:37 minutes into recording)

ABY: No, not all. On a simple level it was just quite nice to be in a show in which you're positioned with other black artists, that I suppose, in any normal circumstance you wouldn't come across. Under normal circumstances that wouldn't have been drawn for an exhibition. So I was quite glad actually.

ADC: You didn't have any worries that...

ABY: If I was just going to be seen that way?

ADC: Well, the reason why I ask is because when I spoke to Bryan he mentioned that a couple of the artists they also approached about being in the show had declined because they didn't want to be in a show of only black artists or a show that was linked to the *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme. So I was wondering if the four of you had any similar concerns at all, or perhaps it wasn't a concern for you?

ABY: I don't think it was. It was early days in my career as an artist. It was something to look into and something to explore.

Question 6:

How did you feel about *Action* being linked to *Afro Modern*? Or did you feel that it was linked? (00:17:08 minutes into recording)

ABY: I made some links within my work. There were some links there. I liked the idea that it was linked to that whole...it leaves you open to think about something about you or your work or something's happening in your work, to not shy away from it or just

understand it. But that was just one aspect of the things that were happening for me in my work that allow me to think and play on.

ADC: And in what way do you think *Action* linked with *Afro Modern*?

ABY: I suppose it was showing a timeline, and I suppose that's how it was linked. We were right at the end of that timeline, we're the next to come.

ADC: I was wondering if you all felt, in the end, that your exhibition was in dialogue with that last room of *Afro Modern* which presented the idea of there being 'Post Black' artists.

ABY: Yeah, I suppose it was, because it was open-ended. It wasn't set out to define.

ADC: *Afro Modern* or *Action*?

ABY: *Action*. Because although there were some relations, if you really have to think about relations being made between the artists, I felt it was made by bringing these four different artists together. By having these four separate rooms it explained that. I think it was more that question mark. Saying "These are 'Post Black' artists, these are some of the different things that go on with them".

ADC: Could you tell me more about there being four separate rooms in *Action*? What was the significance of there being four separate rooms?

ABY: It was just a clear line between the different artists. It was almost four separate exhibitions.

ADC: So it was trying to avoid drawing too many links between the four of you?

ABY: Yeah, to not link us up too much. It was "take them as separate artists".

ADC: Would there have been a different message if you had all shown only one or two pieces each but in one big room?

ABY: I think the message would have been the same. I don't think it would have been too much of a different message – only in the fact of opening up the rooms. You sort of make that relation. It's like having a two man show. You might just want to show two artists because you want a contrast but whatever you do somebody's always going to try to draw similarities.

Question 7:

If someone were to say that *Action* was a black survey show, what would your response be? (00:23:45 minutes into recording)

ABY: In what way?

ADC: I had this discussion with Grace, and she said that a survey show, by definition, has a lot of artists in it, giving a comprehensive overview of something, many of the artists would be well-known, with some key pieces of work that would be the highlights of the show. So from that point of view she felt that *Action* could never be described as a black survey show. But what I was getting at was the use of the term 'black survey show'

being used to describe an exhibition where the artists have been selected mostly because they happen to be black, rather than that there is a shared medium or theme across their works. The only real link between them is because they are all black. So Grace felt that *Afro Modern* could be described as a black survey show, but she thought that with only four artists, *Action* couldn't be described as one.

ABY: I guess it's really not a survey show, but *Afro Modern* really was. That Frank Bowling piece with the pan-African colours, [*Who's Afraid of Barney Newman*, 1968] and that was a surprise to me because I didn't know he did that kind of work. Other works that I'm aware that he made weren't really like that. So, I suppose, to draw that relation, it's a survey to some extent, drawing on some of the most iconic black work that he has made and putting it in there. Anyway, I wouldn't say *Action* was a survey show. As to how it was drawn together, the artists, I'm not sure. I don't know that it has to be so defined in terms of the artists' relation to each other.

ADC: So if there wasn't that strong a link between you and the other three artists, and as you said you thought the premise was to compare what emerging black artists were doing twenty-five years ago to what emerging black artists are doing now...if there's no real link between your works, then what is it?

ABY: Yeah. I see what you mean. Then it falls into being a black survey show.

ADC: If you're going to be 'either/or' about it, which I'm not being. But the reason I bring it up is because I asked Bryan and Sara at the Bluecoat the same question and they said that it had been something they thought about when pulling the show together. They said it did cross their minds that they may be accused of putting on an exhibition of only black artists to link in with *Afro Modern*. Bryan and Sara tried to tease out of Sonia what it was that she liked about the artists she had selected to find a thread to link you all up, which in the end was the performative nature of all of your practices. But having spoke to you, you didn't really mention that performative element that much. So then I was wondering how strong that thread really is.

ABY: I think it's definitely... I think it's such a part of each of our work. But I wouldn't be surprised if that was dismissed. It's such a part of the making of our work, it goes without saying.

ADC: So if someone were to say that *Action* was a black survey show, what would your response be?

ABY: I wouldn't be able to make a great argument saying that it wasn't. But having talked to you about it and now having talked about the performative aspect, there is that. And I suppose that's quite interesting, because it's quite common with black artists to have that performative side of things. It's quite prominent to have that in black artists' practices to have that performative side to things. It's something that I've always been aware of in making my work is to not be the performer because of that reason. I didn't want it to be related to, you know, "You've got a black guy doing something weird with a bowling ball". I suppose that's the reason for me being out of the performance and just letting the objects do the performing.

ADC: That was another thread, that none of you feature in your work in the way that Sonia, Keith [Piper], and the others did in their work.

ABY: Yeah probably. If I think about it maybe it's just to do with [word unclear – sounds like 'sampling'] through Sonia and Keith and that sort of time and maybe them doing it...it's sort of understood now. I think it's also quite easy. Sometimes you feel it's quite easy to be labelled when you're in a minority creating work. If you were a female performer you would probably have the same issue. It brings things to the forefront that might miss the point in some respects.

Question 8:

In the introductory text panel for *Action* it says that *Afro Modern* contextualises *Action* because your work moves beyond perceived boundaries of race and representation. And that's sort of what it says in the text panel for the last room of *Afro Modern* – the 'Post Black' room. So in saying that perhaps the curators of *Action* are linking your work with the idea of artists being 'Post Black'. How do you feel about that? (00:36:48 minutes into recording)

ABY: So *Action* is moving away...?

ADC: 'Post Black' is the idea that the work of a black artist might be informed by his or her experience of being black, but that it doesn't necessarily feature in the work. So the text panels for *Action* suggested that the four of you might be considered as 'Post Black'. What do you think about that?

ABY: Ok. Yeah I think so, definitely. I didn't realise it said that. Or maybe I had just forgotten.

ADC: [shows ABY the press release and the sentences where this suggestion is made]

ABY: Yeah, ok, I would say that it was ['Post Black'].

ADC: Have you come across that term before?

ABY: Yeah, briefly, and I know that it had been something mentioned by Glenn Ligon. Maybe it's something to do with...the more people put themselves out there and talk about their position in society, and the more...let's not say acceptance, but the more awareness that brings it then creates a new line in which something can be labelled. And I think the way you're maybe branching out of that. I think maybe we're just the next generation that's aware of that. Whereas the time before, the black artists before, and maybe while making work not being aware of what line to draw to stop that, what line to draw to stop being so direct. So it's not that constant re-evaluation, so you've got to go back and re-evaluate to be [muffled word] forefront. So it must be something to do with the time... I don't know. It's like the more you get...the more awareness or the more acceptance into the mainstream of culture the less that comment has to be so...the less people hear, the less people listen. So you just have to find new ways of going around it. I'm just talking for myself.

ADC: Would you be happy to be described as a 'Post Black' artist?

ABY: I suppose there are aspects in which that's relevant. But, I don't know. I'm not really someone that thinks about anything in labels. If it's there, it's there. If you're going to do it, don't make it the only thing. But yeah, I suppose that's what's going on. That is what I am, in some respects. But personally I have no...I'm not bogged down in labelling just due to the fact of what it means now. It makes people's lives easier, just to say

“That’s that so I’ll take it like that, or approach it in this way”. I guess it’s just another way of that happening.

ADC: So you don’t mind it?

ABY: It’s something that’s going to happen. I’m not sure if I do mind it. I’m just not sure. It’s something I’m going to have to think about.

ADC: When I asked Beverley this she said that she hasn’t had enough experiences to be worried about these sorts of things.

ABY: Yeah. I wouldn’t want to be worrying about those sorts of things because it’s still stuff I’m trying to get my head around myself.

ADC: Yeah. Grace said to me that she doesn’t feel that ‘Post Black’ couldn’t possibly apply to the British context because it came from a specifically American context where people are perhaps more happy to be identified as being a ‘Black artist’ in the first place, and now a ‘Post Black artist’. She feels that it’s not the same here.

ABY: Yeah, it does have that different effect, I think. In America, it seems to me that they like to be a bit more grounded, people like to think they’re part of something.

ADC: Like being an *Irish-American* or an *Italian-American*.

ABY: Yeah. I know I’m from Ghana but I was born in England. The evidence is in my name, but...

ADC: But you don’t need to define yourself by it?

ABY: Yeah.

Question 9:

Do you ever worry about being labelled in a particular way or about being pigeon-holed? (00:46:08 minutes into recording)

ABY: Yeah, I find it quite frustrating. Like I said, I think it’s a bit lazy. Labelling is always going to be there, but it’s a bit lazy. It’s like saying...it stops people from exploring what else could be there. So I am getting slightly frustrated by that.

ADC: What’s happened to make you feel frustrated?

ABY: As an artist, when you go to competitions and you get to know people. There’s been a couple of prizes and shows that I’ve applied for and I’ve had to go to interviews for. I remember one guy said, “So, you’re from Ghana, tell us a little bit about that”. I was like, “There’s not much I can tell you”. It’s just a clear relation which he wants me to go on and rant about – how everything relates to this one part of me. It’s just another thing in society which makes people’s lives easier. It makes everything tick over and you don’t have to explore.

ADC: So do you try to resist it?

- ABY: I don't think I try and resist it. I'm just myself. I don't think anyone is that simple to be labelled.
- ADC: So in that situation where the guy asked you to talk about your links with Ghana, what did you say to that?
- ABY: I just said "I don't think it's worth me talking about in the context of this competition". It had no link to what I had applied for.

Question 10:

Do you ever feel that you might have less access to opportunities to exhibit in the galleries that you want to? (00:49:08 minutes into recording)

- ABY: [Long silence]...I'm not sure. Sometimes it's something that I think about. But I'm not sure.
- ADC: Ok. Twenty or thirty years ago, let's say Sonia's generation, some of those black artists really felt they were being sidelined. So I'm trying to find out what young black artists feel now.
- ABY: I think in terms of showing, I'm not sure. But in terms of culture or society, or in the art world, in some respects I would say so.
- ADC: You'd say what?
- ABY: It doesn't seem as if everything is on the same level.
- ADC: Grace said to me that Chris Ofili's retrospective at Tate Britain last year was the first time ever that a Black artist has had a major retrospective of his work at a major gallery.
- ABY: Yeah. And it's quite interesting how many people I spoke to that didn't like his new work because it wasn't like his old work. It goes back to ideas of reaffirmation. It's because he was talking as a black man and you know he is a black man and you like that position. Because that's a clear sign in which he is approaching his work. I don't think it is particularly there in all his works but that's how a lot of people will approach it. It creates this distance that you can be comfortable with. But where he is not talking in that voice, it's ignored. A lot of people would be quite happy if he just continued to do the same kind of work forever. He's the voice of something different. It's a bit like that.
- ADC: It's difficult because by asking you these questions today, I'm also labelling you or positioning you, instead of just asking you to tell me about your work.
- ABY: But it's quite interesting in terms of popular artists like Chris Ofili or Yinka Shonibare. From the UK you have those two and ...
- ADC: Steve McQueen? Although he steers well clear of anything that might position him in that way.
- ABY: Yeah he does. But when he had that *Deadpan* piece [1997] that's how people wanted to

relate to him. That's how people wanted to discuss him. But it's interesting because I can't think of anyone today. I mean they're from the 90s. I can't think of anyone today that has taken that stance.

ADC: Maybe no one is. I didn't know anything about you or your work before the exhibition, but I was interested in how in the press reviews and in the text panels yours was the only work that was described as vaguely dealing with issues of race and representation. But when I saw the *Melon n Ball* piece, I didn't see it in that way. I didn't make any links with issues of race and representation. So I was interested in whether for you, there is that link?

ABY: There is a link there but from doing a performance...well, I suppose it's a construction with which you're trying to make a piece of art, it's very straightforward. It is what you see. So everything comes back to form. So it is a watermelon that's trying to transform into this thing. But because the action is right in front of you it then becomes read very clearly. It's the same with that sculpture with the pipe and the Tate and Lyle [*Piped*, 2010] and that shipping from Liverpool but at the same time its form is still working sculpturally. It's still working as a sculpture. The paint has to go through these handle bars to land into these tins which is happening from behind. So all these ideas come back to form. So it almost relates to that *Deadpan* piece of work, in that it's not trying to be clever. It's supposed to be clear and direct.

Follow up by email on 19 May 2011:

Appau Junior <[REDACTED]>
To: Anjalie Dalal-Clayton <[REDACTED]>

19 May 2011

Hi Anjalie,

Hope you are well,

Once again sorry for the delayed response.

I have Managed to read through the interview, I think it sounds fine, It would be good to add a couple of things:

I hope it reads well as I do have the tendency to rant in my writing.

Question2 when asked 'How much you knew about Sonia being a prominent emerging artist....?'

Instead of 'Wow!' what was meant by it was coming from previous study(foundation etc) where the tutors where not established artists within society it was exciting.

Question: what did you feel connected your work to the other three'And what about the two others Grace and Robin?

I could also add that they both in previous work had made Shown signs of explore ideas around race, for some people (myself included) race is one part of your day to day So it is no surprise that as a black artist this is sometimes highlighted, as an artist can only speak of through there own voice. What was interesting was both artist were not as visible in person as in there previous works which relating to me and Beverley who are never visible

within our presented works.

Please let me know if there are any problems or if you would like a more detailed explanation.

Thanks for the advice on the zoom h2, I bought it off the internet last week. It's been treating me well.

All the best

Junior

Appendix 8.9

Interview with Sonia Boyce

6 May 2011 at Central Saint Martins, Archway Campus, 2 Elthorne Road, London N19 4AG

*3 recordings were made during the interview

RECORDING 1

Question 1:

How did the idea of working with the Blue Room come about? (00:01:05 minutes into recording)

SB: I'd been doing a project with Spike Island and was involved in their Spike and the City programme where I was working in a school called Meriton School for Young Parents. When we were thinking about expanding the project or touring the project I said if we were going to tour I wanted to go to specific places and work within those contexts. So we had a meeting. Marie-Anne McQuay and I went up to Liverpool. They were one of the people that said they would like to partner with this project as part of the touring programme. We met with Bryan [Biggs] and with Sara [Jayne Parsons]. They mentioned a number of possible groups that they have already had a long-established relationship with. I really liked the idea of the Blue Room group because they had been working with artists for quite a while and had been interpreting exhibitions already and making work. So it seemed like a really good direction for the project to go in. So the suggestion came from the Bluecoat about that particular group but there were other groups that I could have worked with. I was just very happy to be working with a group that were already working with the exhibition programme.

Question 2:

What did you hope to achieve with Like Love part 2? (00:02:58 minutes into recording)

SB: A lot of the things that I do, because the work is always about collaboration and participation, that there would be a sense in which the group themselves would see themselves in the gallery. That they were the active agents in making the work. That they would see themselves somehow mirrored in the gallery space. So that was the main objective.

ADC: Why was that important to you?

SB: I think because much of my work is about how one gets represented, having a voice. So I was very keen for that to happen.

ADC: And with that particular group, was it around their disability that the issue of representation came up for you?

SB: It was more the subject of love, or perceptions of them as having love lives. Trying to gain from the group their own sense of themselves as potential ...the experiences they've had to date but also the experiences they might go on to have. As a subject it's not one that one often sees in the public realm.

ADC: What struck me when I was reading the Like Love book that was produced after the three exhibitions was where one of the Blue Room members said that someone had asked her if she and her partner had sex, and she told them to mind their own business.

SB:I thought it was great. It was a great response.

Question 3:

What about the list of artists you had developed for the Action exhibition? How and why did you develop that list and what was it about those artists that interested you? (00:05:21 minutes into recording)

SB: The reason why I developed that list was because I was asked to by the Bluecoat. There were a number of things that were coming together at the same time. The fact that it was twenty-five years since I had shown the first time at the Bluecoat. So wanting to mark that moment. But also because Tate Liverpool were doing the *Afro Modern* show and that there were a number of other arts organisation in Liverpool looking to address the question of an *Afro Modern* perspective in terms of their arts programmes. And the Bluecoat wanted to do something. So they asked me whether I could bridge those two spaces between commemorating having worked with them for twenty-five years. So that artists list that was developed of artists that were emerging because when I showed twenty-five years ago I was an emerging artist. They took me on at quite a young age. So the idea of replicating that was important. But also me wanting to address some of the underlying issues that are a part of my practice, which is about the performative and the performative body but not necessarily *me* as the performer or on *me* being represented in the work, but the performative *Actions* of others and whether that's seen or not seen - the performance that takes place and the artist within that – whether that takes place or whether that's seen. That was the main impetus for putting together that show. It was to identify works that...where the visibility of the maker was constantly shifting, in a way.

Question 4:

What were you hoping to offer those artists? (00:08:13 minutes into recording)

SB: To be part of what was quite a major series of works and exhibitions that were happening in Liverpool at that moment and the kind of exposure that that would then offer them. I think it was a big deal actually. The Tate doing for the first time a show that acknowledged the impact of African diasporic practices on modernism. So under the auspices of all of that, and also the Bluecoat being a major space, I thought it was a really important doorway, a good platform.

Question 5:

How would you articulate the relationship between Action and also Like Love 2 and *Afro Modern*, and in particular that last room on 'Post Black' artists? (00:09:21 minutes into recording)

SB: If I was going to discuss the last room then I would say that actually, I felt the last room didn't quite do what it set out to do. The original discussion about 'Post Black' between Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon was really trying to talk about the work of mainly African-American artists, who, when you look at their work, you would necessarily know that they were black. And then they termed it 'Post Black'. Whereas the last room of the *Afro Modern* show was all about representations of blackness and the black body. So it kind of tripped over itself in that it hadn't really got to grips with practices where you couldn't necessarily identify the maker. It kind of fell back in on itself. So *Action* was me trying to address the question of the context of what Glenn and Thelma had been talking about where you might not know who the maker was by the nature of the work.

- ADC: At the time that you were coming up with the idea for *Action* did you know what was going to be in *Afro Modern*?
- SB: No. But I had been to see the exhibition at which the discussion between Thelma and Glenn arose.
- ADC: Freestyle?
- SB: Yes. It was at the Studio Museum. I had seen the exhibition and I had also read the catalogue. So I understood what they were talking about in terms of the work that they were showing, and also the wider context of the discussion that they were having in that interview.
- ADC: So that was very much in your mind?
- SB: That was my mind in terms of...in a way, 'Post Black' has become this really unfortunate term, because it now seems like a refusal of blackness rather than a question that opens...it seems more like a closure than an opening up. So it has been taken up in, I think, quite perverse ways. It's almost seen as a refusal or denial of one's heritage, so to speak. Whereas its starting point wasn't really that.
- ADC: So did it work out as a coincidence that then the final room of *Afro Modern* was engaged in that idea, even if they got it a bit wrong?
- SB: No. This had been a discussion within Tate already and I had been aware of that. The previous year there had been a discussion at Tate Britain with Thelma about the term 'Post Black'. So it wasn't that I didn't know that this was going to arise. I knew this would be part of the debate of the *Afro Modern* show. I didn't know exactly how they were going to talk about it but I knew that it was going to emerge.

RECORDING 2

Question 6:

At your talk with Bryan Biggs and Keith Piper that was part of the *Afro Modern* conference, you discussed the problem of black artists continually being introduced through survey shows of black artists. Were you concerned about the issue of *Action* being perceived as a 'black survey show'? (00:00:06 minutes into recording)

- SB: Yeah, definitely. To a certain extent that was one of the reasons why each person had their own room and there were groups of works or single works. It was like four mini exhibitions, mini solo shows. So there was that issue rather than having just one work by which the artist would be represented. It was the idea that each one was a discrete exhibition in and of itself, rather than having everything thrown in together. Of course there were problems in terms of getting people to sign up to doing the show anyway. We went through a longer list of people and there were people who said no. They didn't want their work identified within that kind of context, even though anyone unfamiliar with those debates wouldn't necessarily have known who the maker was. It seemed really impossible to get some artists to think that that was an interesting proposition. They just didn't want to be labelled as being part of a black caucus of artists.

- ADC: I would be interested to talk to the artists who declined to be part of the show to find out what their position is, for my research. Do you think they would be willing to speak to me?
- SB: I doubt that they would. I don't think they would want to have that conversation. I think that conversation is just too difficult for them. One of the artists that I had invited, I said to them "we should go for a coffee and talk about it". I haven't heard from them since and that was two years ago! So I think you would have real difficulty getting anyone to speak to you about it.
- ADC: Can you describe the sorts of opinions they were expressing about it?
- SB: It was much more a refusal to be taken down that road. I've got opinions as to why that position is being held. But they really didn't talk about it very much. I've been trying to find ways to entice people into that discussion about it. It's like how some women artists might say "No, I'm not going to be in a woman only show", or "I'm not going to be on a panel of just women".
- ADC: If you don't want to be positioned in a certain way than to even enter into a discussion about it means that you position yourself in it.
- SB: I do have some thoughts as to why. If one looks at the...particularly since the 80s and that groundswell of activity between African and Asian artists. It petered out really quickly by the 90s and was replaced quite quickly by the YBA where there were a few...Chris Ofili, Steve McQueen and subsequently people like Yinka Shonibare. They've gone down this route where they've walked on this tightrope about clearly they're black but they don't talk about it. It's not openly discussed in the work. It *is in* the work but it's *not openly discussed* in the work. The wider art market and art industry has really pushed that position commercially. So all of those artists are very well-known, they're very well-represented internationally. So if one takes a step backwards and looks at what was happening in the 80s, and the vast majority of who were out there and making work and being very active have nowhere near reached the level of international renown that those who have been taken up by the commercial world have. It seems to me very telling. What model you might choose to go down [sic]. What might be perceived as a political stand can be seen as quite a punitive *Action* from the art market because it's not going to push that kind of work. And museums are following in the trail of commercial galleries. The whole debate in the 90s about the way in which commercial galleries and public museums were suddenly becoming hand-in-hand, in terms of what they were showing. The spaces for those who work outside of the margins or that particular nexus...it's shrunk considerably. So in terms of those who are emerging and seeing what routes and models are out there for them...the commercially successful route keeps on this tightrope between saying and not saying. You're visibly black but not within the work. This seems to provide much more of an opportunity than the other route where one speaks very directly, not necessarily in a very didactic way but in a very clear and present way, that it's engaged in some of those political ideas about art practice.
- ADC: I've been trying to get the *Action* artists to talk to me about these issues. With Beverley [Bennett] and Junior [Appau Boakye-Yiadom], it doesn't seem that these issues are on their radar. It'll be interesting to see what they feel about it in five years' time.

SB: David Dibosa was saying that in his discussions with emerging artists is that they feel that those 80s and 90s generation colonised a specific discussion. So the emerging artists have to find a new terrain. So there's also that at play as well.

RECORDING 3

Discussion from Question 6 in Recording 2 continued (00:00:06 minutes into recording)

SB: I think there's a lot of that at play – that question of if there are artists who have filled up a particular space, what space is there left for emerging artists. And maybe it's too close, time-wise, to revisit the 80s and the work that was being made in that moment. A distance needs to be created for another generation somewhere down the line to excavate it and recoup some of the debates that were going on in that work. So I think that's the other side of the coin as well.

Appendix 8.10

Interview with Phil Bridges (Bluecoat Press Officer)

4 May 2011 at the Bluecoat, School Lane, Liverpool, Merseyside L1 3BX

Question 1:

Bryan Biggs said that it was difficult to put out a single message for the Sonia Boyce shows, partly because there were three parts to the exhibition, but also with Action and the fact that all the artists in it were black but you didn't draw attention to this explicitly in the press release. Can you recall the meetings you had about marketing the exhibition and how you decided to go about marketing it? (00:00:05 minutes into recording)

PB: The main thing was that Sonia was returning to the Bluecoat twenty-five years after exhibiting. So that stood out for me because the press love their numbers. It's quite a monumental thing, so that was communicated at the top of the press release. And there was obviously the other angle, as you said, that she was showcasing the work of these four up and coming artists. That was a key message as well. But there was also the joint message – the fact that she was working with our Blue Room who are a group of people with learning disabilities who come to the Bluecoat three times a week all year round. So that was also an important message. So yeah, I agree, there were conflicting messages in there but I guess that's the same with any show, to a degree. It's just deciding what's the most important. Well, perhaps not the most important, but the most newsworthy angles, really.

ADC: What were the most newsworthy angles?

PB: Well, possibly the fact that she was returning after twenty-five years since showing at the Bluecoat. For the newsy kind of press I would say that was the most important angle.

Question 2:

Were you told that the press release needed to mention that the Action exhibition linked up with the *Afro Modern* exhibition at Tate Liverpool and if so were you asked not to state that it was an exhibition of black artists? (00:02:00 minutes into recording)

PB: No. That wasn't really spelt out at all.

Question 3:

Could you describe the process of how you normally put together a press release? (00:02:36 minutes into recording)

PB: Generally, I'll have a meeting with the Exhibitions Curator [Sara-Jayne Parsons] and the Artistic Director [Bryan Biggs] and find out what they feel are the key messages, and then I balance them with what I think will make an interesting story.

ADC: And do they give you all the bumf that they have written for the exhibition, like the wall texts, to help you?

PB: Often I'll be fortunate in the respect that we'll have a lot of literature already for the brochure. So I'll just go off that. But that would be dryer, a bit more of a straightforward explanation. Whereas, I'll have to spin it into a more newsy kind of style.

Question 4:

Do you ever get calls from newspapers or arts websites to speak to you about exhibitions?
(00:03:33 minutes into recording)

PB: Yeah. What happened with this show, because as you say, *Afro Modern* was happening up at the Tate, so we were quite strategic. We actually went up to their private view and we sort of courted some of the journalists who were there and told them about our show and brought some of their journalists down here.

ADC: Is that something that you would regularly do?

PB: Not really, but in this instance, it was a relevant show. So it made sense to do that. And obviously the Tate is a big draw for the likes of these London journalists. Because you've got the Tate in London but they might not know about the Bluecoat so sometimes you just have to do those kinds of things to get people down here.

ADC: So would you say the Bluecoat struggles to get major press attention?

PB: Yeah, most certainly. We're not massively well-known, nationally. But we're trying to change that. We had our *Bed-In* [2010] recently, and it's those kinds of big wow-moments that do attract the press. But yeah, it's difficult to get them. To be honest, recently, with the Liverpool Biennial [2010], we did a press launch in London, and even then it was on a doorstep. And that was quiet. So it goes to show it's really difficult to get them out.

Question 5:

In the press release, for Action it doesn't say that it's a show of four black artists and it also doesn't say that Sonia Boyce was part of a black art movement in the 80s. But in the press responses those two things crop up quite frequently. Where do you think they might have got that from? (00:05:10 minutes into recording)

PB: I suppose she has a relatively high profile with those kinds of journalists, maybe? Maybe the very fact that they wrote about her means that they had an interest in her? But we did say in the press release that she was a pioneer in the black British cultural renaissance in the 80s as well [reading from the press release in his hand].

ADC: Oh! The press release that I was given doesn't have that in it at all!

PB: Right, well, this is the final one.

ADC: Oh, ok. That makes a difference to things. Could you send me what you have?

PB: Yes.

ADC: Great, because that will change my analysis of the exhibition.

Follow up by email with Phil Olsen (Marketing and Audience Development Officer) on 16 May 2011:

Hi Anjalie,

Thanks for your email and sorry for the confusion over the multiple Phils! It was actually Phil Bridges, our Communications Officer, who you interviewed about the Sonia Boyce exhibition in the end (Martha and Sara had asked me to meet with you, but I was in another meeting when you were here).

Anyway, Phil Bridges (copied in here) is better placed to talk about the Press stuff, so that's great that you got to cover that, and I'm sure he can clarify anything unclear in the transcript and sign it off (he doesn't work Mondays but will be back in the office tomorrow).

While I'm here though, I'd just like to add something about the joined-up marketing with Tate Liverpool's *Afro Modern* exhibition and the city-wide 'Liverpool and the Black Atlantic' programme...

I think from this transcript there is an implication that our *Like Love + Action* exhibition was unconnected to Tate Liverpool's *Afro Modern* exhibition (eg "we went up to their private view... and told them about our show"), whereas actually the Marketing teams worked together to do a joint preview with staggered opening times (with both the Bluecoat and Tate Liverpool preview cards inviting guests to start at the Bluecoat and then head down to Tate Liverpool).

Our *Like Love* exhibition banners, brochures, interpretation panels etc, also made mention of Sonia Boyce having work on display in *Afro Modern*.

I'm not sure how much you know about the way we work with partner organisations in Liverpool, but the Bluecoat is a member of LARC (Liverpool Arts Regeneration Consortium) <http://www.larc.uk.com/> and VAIL (Visual Arts in Liverpool) <http://www.visualartsinliverpool.info/>

And through both of these, we work with Press & Marketing colleagues from other Liverpool arts venues to join up on events and exhibitions wherever we can (Liverpool has a relatively small population, especially compared to its large number of galleries, museums, theatres etc, so we're all happy to share our arts audiences rather than fight over them!)

So working with partner organisations, we came up with "a city-wide series of exhibitions and events that explores connections between cultures and continents" that sat under the umbrella title of 'Liverpool and the Black Atlantic'. Sonia Boyce and *Afro Modern* both sat under this umbrella. With the Bluecoat being a multi-arts venue (covering music, dance, literature and live art as well as the visual art in the galleries), we put together a Liverpool and the Black Atlantic events programme (with an accompanying six-page leaflet that I can give you, if useful). It included an all day 'Migration Songs' music & literature event, headlined by Lemn Sissay, as well as music by Justin Adams & Juldeh Camara, and dance from Melanie Demers & Laila Diallo. Wanting to cross-promote art forms as much as possible, we also included a page on the Sonia Boyce *Like Love + Action* exhibition, and used the same graphic design across the pieces of print. One page of our Liverpool and the Black Atlantic leaflet was dedicated to related events elsewhere around the city, where we

listed *Afro Modern* at Tate Liverpool, Aubrey Williams at the Walker Art Gallery, Leo Asemota: *The Handmaiden at Metal*, *Black Britannia* at the International Slavery Museum, *African Soul Rebels 2010* at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, and *Afromodernisms 1: Re-encounters with the French and Anglo-Atlantic Worlds 1907-61* at the University of Liverpool.

As for not being explicit about the artists involved being black, I think this was partly by request of Sonia Boyce (who saw herself as curating four up and coming artists in *Action*, as opposed to four up and coming black artists). The 'Liverpool and the Black Atlantic' umbrella programme title was a help in terms of marketing with a more implicit message, as opposed to explicit. Indeed Sonia Boyce herself was considered a black artist 25 years ago, when she first appeared in a group show at the Bluecoat, but now would be referred to as simply an artist.

In terms of difficulties encountered with sending out a single coherent message about a show with three parts (as Bryan Biggs mentioned), we saw this as being a challenge quite early on and so decided to tackle a lot of it in the design. The first difficulty we foresaw was in the fact that *Like Love* was coming to us as the second incarnation of a touring show. Starting life at Bristol's Spike Island as '*Sonia Boyce: Like Love Part One*', the idea was that we would present '*Sonia Boyce: Like Love Part Two*', and then finally the Potteries Museum in Stoke would show '*Sonia Boyce: Like Love Part Three*'. However, we didn't want to confuse audiences into thinking that our show was a sequel to something they hadn't seen (and in the process perhaps put them off). So we decided to call our show *Sonia Boyce: Like Love Parts One & Two* (which also made sense as we were including most of the works that had been shown at Spike Island as well as the new works produced with members of Blue Room at the Bluecoat).

The second difficulty was tying in the 'Action' show, which was to be curated by Sonia Boyce, but wouldn't include work of her own... And this is where our graphic designer was put to the test! We decided that with so many titles, sub-titles, and now four additional artist names, we would create a family tree graphic, which all sat under the programme banner of 'Liverpool and the Black Atlantic'. A curly bracket and a dotted line would then lead you from 'Like Love' to chevron symbols and '+ Action', and then Action would branch off into more curly brackets above the four featured artists. The whole pairing of exhibitions became colour coded too. Everything that was *Like Love* was a cobalt/aqua blue, and everything that was *Action* was a bright orange. The preview card was blue on one side and orange on the reverse. The walls that ran along the first two galleries (which featured the Action artists) were painted a matching orange, and the walls at the end of the gallery and up the stairs to where *Like Love* was being exhibited, were painted a matching blue. So that way we were able to distinguish between the shows but also group them together. Blue curly brackets and orange chevrons were also cut as window vinyls and stuck around the building (on the gallery windows as well as in our central Hub space and the Upstairs bistro).

I hope this additional information is useful, and if you are around on Wednesday, you're welcome to take away any of the aforementioned marketing print materials with you along with Phil B's Press Releases etc.

Kind regards,
Phil Olsen

Appendix 8.11

Interview with Robin Deacon

6 May 2011 at London South Bank University, 103 Borough Road, London SE1 0AA

Question 1:

How were you approached about taking part in *Action*? (00:00:05 minutes into recording)

RD: Sonia [Boyce] and I have had an interesting, ongoing dialogue for the past few years. She came around to see me years ago when I lived in Tooting in south London and I remember showing her videos of my stuff.

ADC: How did you first come across each other?

RD: I'm not sure. I knew who Sonia Boyce was, in the sense of being aware of her work and also because I worked at Tate Modern for a few years and I remember seeing her work in the collection. So I knew her that way. But I can't remember the original point that we met. It was probably going further back for an event at Camden Art Centre. I can't remember what it was in conjunction with but it was a one evening event and I remember showing some sort of re-edited documentation of one of my performances. It was my performance about Colin Powell. So I guess we're in the same kind of orbit. But I think one thing that is important to point out is that things like the show at the Bluecoat were quite unusual for me in terms of them [my works] as gallery pieces. Although I have a background as an artist – I trained as an artist, I did a fine art degree – I rarely show my work in galleries. And so generally, working with Sonia at the Camden Art Centre and at the Bluecoat, those were, relatively speaking, for my work, quite unusual contexts. But certainly, in terms of conversation, there was a shared dialogue, just in terms of the content of the work. But I would say in terms of the form, it was quite an unusual context for me, which was great and fascinating because it was interesting for me to see my work in that format. But generally my work is shown as performance, and I guess the work that I showed was *about* performance, but it wasn't the performance in and of itself.

ADC: So who approached you first about the show at the Bluecoat?

RD: That was definitely Sonia, and she seemed to have the particular work I showed, from what I remember, in mind. She seemed to be interested in that piece [A Portrait of Stuart Sherman]. I remember we met up here [London South Bank University] and we went through some footage. I showed her a performance I did with my father. And then we came to looking at the rough edit that I had of the Stuart Sherman film. What was really stimulating about that conversation was that it was an artist understanding how the film that I had made was about influence and about artistic influence from one generation to another. I think sometimes that that's missed, in terms of when the work is seen in other contexts. So it was good to have a sense that Sonia understood that. So I was happy to do whatever in terms of the project.

ADC: That links quite well with something that came through in some of the wall texts about Sonia wanting to give an opportunity to the next generation of artists.

RD: For me this question has come up quite a lot, in terms of what the basis is for grouping a set of artists or what is viewed as a generation of artists. I kind of knew Grace [Ndiritu] and with the other artists I wasn't so familiar with their work. I didn't necessarily equate

myself with them, generationally speaking, in the sense that there are a handful of performance artists and filmmakers who I *would* roughly equate my work with. It wasn't something that I spent too much time thinking about but I was aware that I was seeing my work not only in a different context in terms of being shown in a gallery, but also in a different context in terms of *who I was shown with*. I think that's one of the frustrating things, if you talk to any performance artist, very quickly you start to see the limits of a particular circuit or a particular festival. The same people are showing work. So as much as anything else, it was a refreshing experience, in terms of showing in a gallery. The thing as well, which I had no real point of reference for, but which I found quite enjoyable was people saying 'We're going to install your work. How do you want it?'. When I do a performance, I have to be there, I have to set it up and I have to do sound checks. So it was such a simple process. 'Here's the DVD. Run it on a loop. Acoustically, we have to make sure the sound is clear because it's a very text driven piece of film. There you go!'. It was weirdly quite hands-off. I know other artists had gone up and helped with the installation which, in hindsight, maybe I should have done because I think I gave a slightly degraded version of the DVD. There were sections of it which were shot in HD but were not being projected in HD and I needed to have seen that and I could have burned another copy. But that's by the by. So the whole thing of installing the work and not seeing it until I got there, and seeing people watching my work, which as a performer you don't have the privilege to do because you're too busy performing to notice the audience. I thought that was really interesting.

Question 2:

What did you understand to be the premise of the show? (00:07:20 minutes into recording)

RD: Very much as you communicated it, in terms of a new...relative to Sonia's exhibition...I mean Sonia's a more established artist than I am and any of the other people [in *Action*], so clearly there's a ...I didn't view it as a mentoring thing. As artists we are all fairly far along the path. I understood it in that context...you know, what have we all got in common? We're all black. Sometimes that sounds really blunt when you say it that way but I guess it's true. In some respects you will have a set of people who may or may not have a shared perspective or shared experience of what it means to be a black artist and whether or not one defines oneself in that way. I'm fine with that. I've no particular issue with it, in terms of what that represents. But that said, that's from a curatorial perspective. That's someone else saying 'I'm grouping these people together because it makes sense for the curatorial rationale for what I'm doing'. As an artist, you generally don't question that because I want to show my work. I want to have opportunities and contexts within which to show my work and it seemed like a sympathetic context. I didn't really think about it relative to what people were doing. I guess I never do. The difference is, in a gallery exhibition, you have that simultaneity, you pass from room to room to room, and you see the work as a whole. You have that flow from looking at one person's work of art to the next. Whereas if I'm doing a performance at a festival, one night it'll be me and another night it'll be somebody else, and it might be a completely different audience. In a performance festival, in my experience, you don't have that sense of theme or continuity in the same way that you do in a gallery exhibition because it's all there and you're experiencing it all in the same time and space. So when I started to look around the Bluecoat, to me, it hung together, without thinking, necessarily, about a shared cultural overlap or a sense that we have this or that in common. It was just there and it was an exhibition and I enjoyed it. I read afterwards that some people struggled to make connections between the works - a couple of the reviews that I read and my work was cited in the reviews as well. The film, because it was an extract from a

bigger project, I was conscious of showing something that was out of context. But at the same time it was really nice to see that within a gallery relative to where I've usually shown it which is in talks or sometimes it precedes a live performance that I do where I re-enact Stuart Sherman's performance. So it was nice to think about seeing it...well 'Could this work in a gallery?'. I'm not sure it did. I don't know. Maybe I needed to spend more time with it. I remember at the private view it was really noisy and I was conscious of that. I was in there and thought 'if you turn up the volume it'll be uncomfortable in there', and I didn't want it to be a war between the people outside and the people listening. So maybe if I'd seen it when the private view wasn't on...I'm sure it was fine. But that was my experience. I remember thinking 'God, it's loud here!'. But then people don't go to private views to look at art.

Question 3:

What did you think the link was between your work and the other three artists in the show?
(00:12:14 minutes into recording)

RD: I suppose there's several ways. Mine and Grace's work both dealt with projection and video. But she had gone to film in quite an extreme environment...was it the Arctic? So in a loose sense you could suggest that my [muffled word] on Stuart Sherman as an unsung artist relates to the idea of an unknown landscape in her work. That's a bit tenuous. With the other pieces, they're all working with objects, drawing which, maybe, I sometimes don't feel I have a vocabulary. I'm terrible. I can't draw. I did a fine art degree and I'm the worst drawer. So in galleries I can't necessarily make the connection on that formal level, because I'm not...I'm interested in visual art and art objects. But at the same time I felt like 'I can see what it is, I can see what it's suggesting, what it's getting at'. But I don't go to galleries that much. My work isn't shown much in galleries. It's the same with my attitude to seeing other people's work, whether I am having my work displayed with them or not. I don't like a lot of stuff that I see. I am always quite open and on the record about this. I get disappointed. I go and see stuff and either I'm disappointed by it or jealous of it and neither is an experience that I really want. Often I'll recoil at something I like because I wish that I had done it myself. I'm admitting that now! I can't remember what the question was.

ADC: It was about what you thought the premise for the show was and other than the fact that you're all black, what was the thread that linked the artists' work.

RD: Well, what was perhaps interesting as well, maybe just in terms of my own work, was, if we are talking about this in terms of influence or a generation of artists...say, Sonia as one generation and us as a generation coming behind, what mine was about influence and how another artist had interested me. Stuart Sherman is from a completely different generation, he's American, he's a very different person to me, but he has influenced me more than any black artist I could mention. So that sense of connectedness with what he did – that's what that film was about. But as I said, I don't question the rationale of a curator unless I feel as though 'Oh that's crap' or 'That's just cheesy' or 'That really doesn't make sense'. To me it didn't stick out as 'Hang on, why are they there, why are they displaying their work'. It's not something I would question.

ADC: The reason why I ask is because Sonia, Bryan and Sara told me that one of their concerns was whether the show would be perceived as a black survey show, in the sense that the artists were only selected to be in the show because they are all black. Also one or two of the artists that they had approached about being in the exhibition

had declined because they didn't want to be positioned as a 'black artist' by being in a show of only black artists that was contextualised by *Afro Modern* and the *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme.

RD: Yeah, it's difficult. There are scenarios where the context for showing a work has to be correct. But at the same time I would seek to deny or transcend instances which, in some respects, people would say it would be quite convenient to position yourself in that way, whether that's financially or ... This is a good example. I did a decibel exhibition [Decibel is an Arts Council England performing arts showcase which promotes 'diverse practice in the performing arts sector' and particularly from 'black and minority ethnic backgrounds, disabled people or any other artist who may have had limited opportunities to participate in the arts' (<http://www.decibelpas.com/press-room/what-is-decibel/>, accessed 15 May 2011).] I did my Colin Powell performance. And that felt uncomfortable. Although, I think I chose the perfect piece to do as part of it. In a lot of respects that piece of work was exactly about the queasiness of that thing. I remember in that performance I used to do this really bad break-dance routine. It was really awful. A lot of the other people on the programme at decibel were serious break-dance troupes. I got the sense, second hand from other people, that they thought I was taking the piss out of them, that I was, in some way, being disrespectful. There were also a few points in the text that I know were quite deliberately confrontational, and groans went up at various points and I know that was the only time that that happened – when I showed it in that context. Everything seemed heightened. I didn't get any bookings off it because essentially decibel is a trade fair. No. I got one booking I think! One person wanted the piece of work. I didn't care. I thought it was hilarious. But I wouldn't do that again. The difference here is that Sonia is someone I know and respect. So for me it was a show that Sonia was curating and I don't think I went into denial about other people doing it. It's interesting. If you are an artist whose work is in the Tate collection, and the Tate decided to put a room together where they had black British artists from the 1980s. I don't know to what degree you would be in a position to object to how your work is displayed. If it's in someone else's collection, that's quite an interesting question. If the artist is involved in the exhibition or is alive and doing stuff, then there's a discussion to be had with the artist. But if the artist's work is owned by somebody else then the context in which that work is displayed is out of the artist's hands. I remember this because when I started working at the Tate there was the whole thing about chronological display or a move away from chronological display and a move towards thematic display. That was really geared up for that kind of thing, and not a timeline but a sense of 'we could talk about this bunch of artists together'. I'd be intrigued to know who the artists were that...I'll ask Sonia next time!

ADC: Yeah. She said to me that even if she could give the names she didn't think they would be willing to talk about it, because to talk about it would be to engage in it and position themselves in that context.

RD: It's interesting because one of the things that I've been conscious about is, and this is what motivated doing the whole Stuart Sherman project, was...sometimes I don't think I'm in a position to pick and choose because I'm conscious that within the marginal field of performance art, I'm, relatively speaking, quite marginal. I don't believe it's because I'm black. It's because of the nature of my work and the way that I work. I think another reasoning behind this is this sense of 'if I were to decline this then that's me written out of another show or history or whatever else'. I did this other thing, the Live Art Development Agency, the Documenting Live thing. David A Bailey wrote an essay, I think

they interviewed Sonia for that as well, and they had a round-table artists discussion with myself, Barby Asante, Harminder Singh Judge, a few other people. And I was more conscious there of that being a slightly contrived scenario. I remember asking more questions about that. That isn't to say that I don't turn down work – I do. But I think some things are worth doing for your own reasons. I wanted to see what the Stuart Sherman thing would look like in a gallery and I had no other real opportunity at that time to do that. So I figured, yeah, why not?

Question 4:

How do you think *Action* was contextualised by the *Afro Modern* show? (00:24:16 minutes into recording)

RD: I didn't see the *Afro Modern* show, so I really couldn't say.

ADC: Were you aware that there was a link with *Afro Modern*?

RD: I knew it was going on. I can't remember what the circumstances were. I might have been in the thick of another project. I usually have about two or three things going on. I remember I came up on the train for the private view, hung out for that and then went back home.

ADC: Did Sonia or the Bluecoat tell you that the reason why *Action* was being organised was because the Bluecoat were being asked to take part in the *Liverpool and the Black Atlantic* programme which was initiated by *Afro Modern*?

RD: I understood it was in that context, vaguely. But it wasn't something that I particularly entered into. I just did it because it was there. And also because of knowing Sonia, rather than some random person phoning me up and saying 'I'm doing this show'...I couldn't think of a reason to say no.

Question 5:

Going back to the question of *Action* being perceived as a 'black survey show', how do you feel about that? (00:26:30 minutes into recording)

RD: I think that there are certain sets of people, whether it's culturally, ethnically, through religious faith, gender, sexual orientation, who may have a shared experience or a shared perspective. People can say as much as they like that we are all the same. We're not. People are different and people have different perspectives, different experiences. I think that can be reflected in terms of how work is shown. I've no particular issue with it. What I would say I do have an issue with is artists who trade on it, in the sense that they trade on work and use the notion of...I'm saying this but I can't think of anyone off the top of my head who I would accuse of doing this, but... who would use that to trade off a piece of work that isn't very good. It becomes a mitigating thing. Maybe there's a danger of that. I think artists have to have a range of narratives in terms of understanding their work. So I'm not going to say that race doesn't matter in my work because it has done in terms of the subject matter of it. It matters in the sense of I'm of mixed race. I've said this in other interviews I've done about the 'Catch 22' I felt as a younger artist – not so much now, I don't really give it much thought – but the idea that much of my work in the early days completely ignored the question of race. And oftentimes people would say, 'Why aren't you talking about race?'. So it became this paradox. This thing that if you do start talking about it you get 'Oh god, he's banging on

about it now!'. So you get caught between that. But if you look at any work that I've done, you could lump it together with a group of works that talk about memory, or narrative, or artists who were operating in the mid 90s in the UK across three different performance art departments across the UK, all of which are closed now and that was a snapshot of some really interesting people; people who came out of ... I studied at Cardiff, I also put myself together with several artists who came out of there, like Kira O'Reilly, Richard Dedomenici, Rebecca French, all these people who studied at the same place. So I feel there's an affinity there as well. I certainly have more of an affinity to them than anyone I displayed with at the Bluecoat. But I wasn't curating that show. Someone else was curating it so that's a link someone else is making. I'm not saying an artist has to always submit to that. An artist can, of course, question that. But I wasn't that interested in questioning it. That wasn't because I was desperate to show my work. I was just interested to see my work shown in a different context.

Question 6:

[After explaining the premise of *Afro Modern* and the works that were included in it and the use of the term 'Post Black' in the final room of the show] The press release for *Action* explained that the Sonia was responding to *Afro Modern* with *Action* and that *Afro Modern* contextualised *Action* because the work of the artists in *Action* 'moves beyond perceived boundaries of race and representation'. How do you feel about being associated with the term 'Post Black'? (00:33:30 minutes into recording)

RD: I guess in terms of the work...I'm trying to remember...my work was the only one in which you would see the body of the artist. So I can't get away from that. It's categories again, isn't it? Categories aren't helpful sometimes, in terms of working out what's really going on or how you group things. I'm trying to think of the point in which, in my work as an artist, I became less concerned about how I was perceived, racially speaking, and whether or not that ...or the degree to which that became less important in terms of understanding what it was I was doing. I remember as a younger artist I used to think about it a lot. I'm wondering whether I just decided 'I'm not engaging with that anymore' or I just buried it somewhere and years later it will come spewing back out again. For me to properly answer that question, I feel I would have to be more familiar with the other artists' work. I vaguely remember things. First and foremost, the categories for my work tend to relate to the form of it, it's always a form of performance. I wouldn't go around saying 'I'm a black artist' or 'I'm a black performance artist'. I wouldn't consciously do that. I've talked about race in my work and sometimes it bubbles up. But in terms of 'Post Black'? Would you say that 'Post Black' is a point of arrival, whereby issues that would have excised people in the past... 'We've resolved that now. Obama's president so we're cool!?'

ADC: Some people might view it that way. My understanding of the term is that it refers to practices having moved on from a time when the black experience was very much a part of certain black artists' practices or when they often featured in their work as part of a comment on their experience as a black person.

RD: Right. For me, that's a really key thing. The thing with visibility, which came up in the initial email that you sent me, and that sense of presence within the work, how do you know the artist's gender, for example? In my teaching it comes up a lot. We do a lot of writing exercises and things with anonymous writing. Sometimes we get into discussions about what appears to be a feminine or a very masculine piece of writing. That's not just in terms of the content but also the form, the handwriting. 'That's really girly

handwriting' or when someone reads something out it appears to have a really feminine voice when in fact it has been written by a male. And we have these discussions about where that comes from. Where does that way of making sense of things originate from? It's certainly something to be questioned. The issue I would have with a term like 'Post Black' is that it seems to presume that we're beyond something. And I don't think we are. Maybe this is from my experience as a *person*, not just as an artist. I do a joke – part of my Colin Powell monologue – where I talk about the idea that as a school-child I was never racially abused. The only time was when someone called me a 'Paki', and I say that I didn't consider that a racist comment because it was a case of mistaken identity, and that was the only recollection I had of being racially abused. So maybe race has maybe been less of an issue in the time that I grew up and the scenario that I grew up in and maybe I've just been lucky. I've avoided being on the wrong end of that sort of thing. So I feel it would be dishonest of me to say that that has been more of an issue in my life than it has been. So what I try and do in my own work is work as a quite detached observer of these things or try and push people's buttons in terms of what I say, which might involve taking on a completely different persona – of the abuser rather than the victim. Those sorts of things interest me. I'm going off a bit now.

ADC: Well, that leads me into the next question!

Question 7:

Do you ever feel that you've been labelled in a way that you were uncomfortable with? (00:40:44 minutes into recording)

RD: Yeah. I think there's two aspects to it. There's the compromises you might have to make as a young artist who wants to get their work shown. I'm not such a young artist now! The reason why I am one of the few artists who feels that a teaching job isn't a bad thing, because in the seven years I've worked here [London South Bank University] I've actually been able to turn down stuff that I didn't want to do. I have an income that doesn't rely on me making art and saying 'I've got to do that because I need the bloody money!' and it might mean having your work presented in a really horrible fashion. But at the same time I don't want to become self-righteous about it. I have put myself in positions that I've felt ambivalent about. It's more ambivalent rather than uncomfortable. So decibel was a case in point. I wouldn't do decibel again, even though I felt I came out of that with my own sense of self intact. With *Action*, I didn't give it a great deal of thought. My mind was elsewhere. But I could sort of see where it was coming from and it was Sonia. I like Sonia and I trust her. In terms of other scenarios, it's been quite subtle things really, in terms of how journalists have written about my work. Sometimes I feel that the work has been quite misunderstood. Or there's a kind of laziness. Sometimes you can pick up on, when talking about aspects of my work, there was a strand of race that was maybe run explicitly through four or five pieces of work. But overall, I've written a huge amount of performance which doesn't particularly cover it, unless just the fact of me being a performer of this hue is an issue by default, whether I like it or not. I can't say I'm not responsible and that every artist is responsible for how their work is understood and depicted. You do what you can but oftentimes if you give something to ...if you write copy and copy gets edited and changed, or if you're interviewed by a journalist and they misrepresent what you've said – and that's happened to me – it's difficult. But it's not something that's defined me. The thing to remember with me and the thing that I'm always quite adamant to remind people about is that I am of mixed race! I have a white father and a black mother. So I feel that a lot of these issues just work at a level of language and semantics. If you want to define

yourself for a journalist or someone doing a PhD, there is a form of shorthand. You know, 'Define yourself as an artist in three words', and whatever the words, the word 'black' would be in there? I doubt it would be. But in other cases I can understand why someone would filter my work through that, and maybe the works in question are the ones that are known are the ones that relate to that. It's funny because I think my best work has come way after that. My favourite performances have nothing to do with that. But it's subtle and I guess sometimes things are just read beyond your intention. I want to believe in the power of the singular author who puts over what they want and the audience understands what their intention was. But as it is the audience will think whatever they want, whatever your intention was. I know there have been scenarios where...I remember after the Colin Powell thing someone said I was a self-hating black person! Someone thought I was a misogynist from certain things I have done. I'm neither of these. But maybe I am! I don't know myself. No one knows themselves fully. That sense of definition, whether it's coming from me or whether it's coming from people seeing my work, that's the great mystery. People sometimes say nice things about what I do, but sometimes it's not everyone's cup of tea.

ADC: You were saying about how people filter your work through a race lens sometimes, and I was wondering whether by associating your work with the notion of 'Post Black', *Action* has done that?

RD: Well, why not that lens? In fact, what's funny is that I'm incredibly aware of generally when I show my work it's mostly in a context where all the other artists are white and the audience is white, western European. So maybe this is me reaching out to my people! I don't know!

ADC: So it's a refreshing new framework?

RD: Maybe. Maybe my work does have a context or a way of being read that's particular to being shown with those other artists. But as I said, a lot of the decisions I make as an artist are quite pragmatic. I think there are things worth going to war about in terms of how your work is shown. If I have an opportunity to show what I like then that's fine. If someone is trying to tamper with the work in and of itself then that's another question. There's an argument to be had. But within the context of a curated exhibition that's the responsibility of the curator. I guess it's my responsibility whether or not I give permission. I can feel uncomfortable or ambivalent but in a sense it's neither here nor there. It's not a huge deal. I'm making a terrible generalisation here, and maybe I'm really talking about myself in the past, but maybe there is a sense that I will want to be seen as a black artist when it's convenient for me and when I don't I wouldn't want to be. The context shifts and I think sometimes, if there is money involved, I think if people are giving out money on the basis of someone being black, people are going to be less ambivalent about that. But maybe that's my cynicism about human nature.

Appendix 8.12

Interview with Paul Goodwin

29 March 2012 at Tate Modern, Bankside, London SE1 9TG

Question 1:

What was your role in the curation of *Afro Modern*? (00:00:20 minutes into recording)

PG: My role in *Afro Modern* was two-fold. Firstly, I was drafted into the curatorial team and my official role was as a consultant curator. And what I did was to help to develop the thesis that Tanya [Barson] had already formed by becoming involved in the project. It was very much Tanya's project. Peter [Gorschlüter] was obviously the project curator at Tate Liverpool. But Tanya had already written quite a detailed draft of the various [muffled word] of this exhibition, the main thesis of the exhibition and suggestions of artists, when I became involved. So it was really about helping to develop those ideas around Paul Gilroy's work, because I've worked with Paul Gilroy, I know him quite well. Also, as part of the curatorial team, we decided to do a number of seminars and meetings with various artists and curators and practitioners, including Paul Gilroy, to get a sounding on the thesis of the exhibition. And I helped to organise those events. So, for example, I organised an event with Thelma Golden at Tate Britain which was part of my programme. I got her to come along to a seminar about *Afro Modern* and to speak about it. The choice of artists were Tanya's – Tanya and Peter, but Tanya mainly – and the thesis was very much Tanya's idea. I think what I did was to bounce some of her ideas off and to broaden the discussion around the European and American geographical remit. We talked quite a lot about expanding it in a broader sense. I suggested some Lusophone artists but it didn't quite come off.

The second role that I played was to help organise the public programme around *Afro Modern*. I think the public programme for *Afro Modern* was quite significant, within the exhibition, and I think it really helped to contextualise the exhibition, and it helped to locate the exhibition within Liverpool. Obviously, it was an exhibition about black artists in a city which was really synonymous with the slave trade and with the whole historical constitution of the Black Atlantic. So it was quite important to contextualise that exhibition in the broadest possible sense. So, for example, I organised and co-chaired the symposium which was called Global Exhibitions, with Michael Asbury from TrAIN [The University of the Arts Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation]. I was also involved in a collaboration with a local community group called the Kuumba Imani Millennium Centre. We did an event with them during the opening week, when some of the artists came over, and we got some of the artists to come – Christopher Cozier, and someone else, I can't remember, and some of the artists involved in Sonia Boyce's show [Action at the Bluecoat] – it was at the Kuumba Imani Millennium Centre and members of the local community, to try and include them, to try and get them to come to the show and get them interested. That was a mixed success because there was a small turn out for that. But I think it was worth doing, just to make contact with the local community, to spread that message and try and get people to come down. But I think that one of the things that came out of that is that a lot of local black communities – African, Caribbean and Asian – don't feel included within the exhibitions at Tate Liverpool. They seem to be quite isolated, in some respects. Anyway, that was the idea behind that particular event, which was of mixed success.

The other thing that I feel was really great was that we had a number of meetings, that were galvanised by Lindsay Fryer – the Head of Education at Tate Liverpool – with

various institutions – FACT, Bluecoat, Metal, and a few others – to programme exhibitions and events around the theme of Liverpool and the Black Atlantic. We worked together to put together that programme. It included an exhibition at Metal with Leo Asemota, the exhibitions that Sonia [Boyce] did at Bluecoat, there was a performance event with Dub Morphology at FACT, and there were various other events. We invited community groups from Liverpool and beyond Liverpool to come to those events and discussions. I think that was an unprecedented effort to locate the exhibition within the broader cultural context of the city, particularly around black art. That's the first time that I am aware, that there has been a city-wide series of themes specifically around black visual art. That's never been done before, in my experience. Even today, I'm still surprised that that hasn't been followed up. I suggested that this could become an annual or bi-annual event and to develop it as a way of linking or getting local communities involved in contemporary art. That hasn't been followed up. I intend to follow it up myself and to perhaps approach Liverpool Biennial or Lindsay Fryer about. To me it was a really great effort. I think it did contextualise...I'll give you a concrete example of the usefulness of it. I was at a conference in Seville last week about coloniality and curating contemporary art. There were students there from the Royal College of Art curating course – the Inspire one. One of them, who lives in Spain, asked Tanya Barson, who was presenting there, and she mentioned that *Afro Modern* was presented in Spain, in Santiago de Compostela. And one of the students had seen it there – they hadn't seen it in Liverpool. The question they asked was, 'why wasn't there a contextual programme in Spain, because it was really necessary'. He felt that the exhibition wasn't really understood by the local community there because there was no context for it and because of these discussions around postcolonialism and cultural diversity, which are probably more advanced in the UK, so there was a much more sympathetic context in the UK than there was in Spain. I don't think there was a big public programme there, though I know there was a conference. So, I think that just highlights that exhibitions such as *Afro Modern*, which relates to some of your questions about Tate's motivation behind the show, where there is an element of trying to broaden audiences, of trying to develop an area of art that is underdeveloped – in this case, the work of Black Atlantic or black diasporic artists – and when you are trying to do that, it really does help to have a strong contextual programme, to make connections with the various local audiences and to have a strong education programme. I think that did take place in Liverpool. What the follow up to that has been, I don't know.

ADC: Why do you think there may not have been much follow up?

PG: I have no idea. But as I said, it was, in my opinion, an unprecedented level of collaboration between nearly all of the major art institutions in Liverpool around the issue of black diasporic arts. The only other thing I can think of is something like Africa '95 or Africa '05 which were big festivals of contemporary African art in London which was obviously much bigger than what we did in Liverpool. But, certainly, around African diasporic art, I hadn't seen that before. So, I did raise it in meetings as something that we should follow up. There was some follow up, in the sense that there was a PhD student at Tate Liverpool and Liverpool University who set up a research forum...

ADC: Yes, Wendy Asquith. She set up an online resource for information sharing and she communicates a lot of that stuff through twitter.

PG: Yes, and that was linked to the *Afro Modern* website with a resource timeline. So, that, for me, was the only sort of follow up. Beyond the institutions and the broader cultural

context of Liverpool, I don't see...for example, I know the Kuumba Imani Millennium Centre have not been involved in anything since then. I think that's disappointing. It's a missed opportunity.

ADC: I know you recently went to a conference in Toronto about Black History Month, and I don't know what your views are on Black History Month or what discussions were had there. But if I were to say that the contextual programme for *Afro Modern*, which happened across the city, had a similarity to Black History Month, in the sense that most of the events bore no relation each other, other than that they involved...not even black visual artists but just involved black cultural practitioners or were vaguely about black people, what would you say to that?

PG: I wouldn't entirely agree with that, because we did have discussions...one of the people involved in that...some of the events and shows had been programmed before *Afro Modern* and before the idea of linking it all together had emerged. So it wasn't planned. It was more a case of linking already existing events. I can see your point, and there was varying quality, and they didn't all address the idea of black art and modernism. But I think it would be very ambitious to do a city wide programme about black art and modernism, to varying audiences. Having said that there were limitations to it, I think the fact that the Tate show was the link between various other events and shows that related to black creativity in a much broader sense, is a positive thing. One of the reasons I would have liked to have developed it further, is to address precisely what you are saying; to address a really strongly themed and curated series of events that are bespoke to this – not just an opportunist bringing together of disparate event just because they are black. I mean, you and I have had many discussions about this before. I am very clear about what I think about Black History Month. I can send you some of the stuff I have written about it. You mentioned Black History Month in Canada. The whole idea of that show [*Afro Modern*] was to challenge Black History Month. The origins of Black History Month are very positive. It was due to a particular lack of any kind of educational or cultural history around black culture, especially in The States. 1930s I think it was, Carter G Woodson, you know the story. But the way it has been transplanted to Britain, in my opinion, again, has been a positive thing, and to be fair, and this is a point I made at the conference [in Toronto], on a local level – i.e. in local public libraries and small events around the country...apparently there are over 4,500 events in that month – I would rather that be there than not. In the bigger picture, however, I believe that the whole notion has served to marginalise black artists. That's the only month of the year that most of these institutions and councils do anything on black culture. That's negative, right? I've talked about the idea of having a Black History Season or a year-round programme of events, rather than just having a month. As you know, I am very keen to do-link black artists' practice from redundant and narrow discussions around cultural diversity in an instrumental sense, which is the sense that most institutions have adopted. 'Cultural diversity' is highly problematic. The whole aim of the cross-cultural programme [at Tate Britain] was to de-link that and to bring cultural difference within the ambit of artistic practice as opposed to bureaucratic cultural diversity initiatives. That's my soapbox!

Question 2:

You were saying that *Afro Modern* was very much Tanya Barson's project. Do you know why she was interested in doing it, what her motivations were and so on? (00:16:00 minutes into recording)

PG: Did you ask her about that?

ADC: I did, and she earnestly said that it was a topic she had been interested in for a long time, that 'cultural diversity' was an issue she had worked around for a while and that she had seen that show in Germany [the exhibition *Der Black Atlantic* which took place at the House of World Cultures in Berlin in 2004] and she felt that the subject needed to be explored further. Perhaps this is a bit unfair, but when I interviewed her, I felt that her knowledge of Gilroy's text [The Black Atlantic, 1993] and his theorizations were fairly limited. I know that several different people were involved in putting the show [*Afro Modern*] together and in writing the exhibition texts and captions, but perhaps her arguably limited understanding of Gilroy's text meant that a different sort of message came through in the final exhibition, in my opinion.

PG: Ok, I'll respond to that by saying...just a slight mitigation about what she was intending. I don't think it was meant to be a slavish interpretation of Gilroy's text. I think she was using the text as a starting point to make an argument about visual art which Gilroy hadn't made. So the idea was to talk about the idea of the Black Atlantic as an intercultural space where various cross-cultural dialogues took place, which then shaped the formation of modernism. And that you can really clearly see, particularly in the early rooms of the exhibition where you had some of the early modernist works by Picasso, Brancusi, Leger and so on, alongside works by Tarsila do Amaral, Josephine Baker and Aaron Douglas. So, I think the argument was quite well made, particularly in the early room about cross-cultural exchanges. I think as the exhibition progressed, that link became less obvious, particularly as you came to the more contemporary work. But, Tanya is not a sociologist; she came from art history. I think partly the reason why I was brought on board was because I come from that background – social research and also I know Gilroy's text quite well. So I would say that as a first attempt to translate the general idea of Gilroy's work into visual art I think it worked quite well. In terms of the disparity between the original curatorial thesis and the production of the texts, I think that's partly due to the vagaries of exhibition and institutional practice. Some of the work – and I'm suggesting this but I can't verify this – some of the captions may have been generated from the Tate collection captions that have been on the catalogue for a while. I don't know whether they were rewritten with the thesis in mind. So, for example, the captions for the Picasso works may have been the same as you see them on the Tate website. I don't know though. Maybe she [Tanya Barson] did write every single text. But it is an interesting point that you're making about how text panels can somehow not capture, or may differ from the main curatorial line. I know, for example, for me, with *Migrations*, there were different deadlines for writing the texts, and sometimes you were rushed, and sometimes you had to get things in and you don't necessarily link them up. Now, this is me admitting a weakness here, but in my *Migrations* room [New Diasporic Voices], I wrote the wall panel, but looking at it after the show had opened, I felt that it didn't quite match what I wanted it to do. It didn't fully explain...because you're limited to two hundred words. So, there is so much that you have to leave out. So that could be partly mitigating and explaining what you're saying. But I haven't done a study of the texts on the wall panels, so I take your point.

ADC: I think that you are right in that the show took Gilroy's text as starting point and expanded on it into areas which he hadn't covered. I was very happy that the show happened. I was able to see works that I would never have been able to see otherwise. It was everything from my master's degree in one exhibition. I really liked the idea of it and was happy to see an exhibition that was hoping to challenge established narratives of modernism in art. But when I did read through all of the captions, a lot of them

implied that the works by the black artists in show were derivative of the great white male European masters of modernism. So I felt that the show was tripping itself up in that respect. And when I interviewed Tanya - she is Courtauld [Institute] educated, which is a very traditional education – and something interesting that she said right at the end of my interview with her, which I can more or less quote, was, ‘As soon as I catch myself getting on my soap box, I stop myself and go back to the art history, because that’s what I know’. Although I’m aware that she wasn’t the only one working on the show, and certainly other people were involved in writing the captions, I’m sure she played a role in overseeing the production of those texts. And it rang true for me when she said that; that she was treading into waters that she didn’t know that well and so she would come back to the art history that she had been trained in. And it really came through in the captions. And I guess this brings up the issue of what kinds of curators we are employing in publicly funded galleries, and the kinds of educations that they have had, and therefore the kinds of stories that they are able to tell. This is one of my conclusions from having done that case study.

PG: I completely agree with you. Presumably, my appointment at Tate was partly about addressing that, about addressing the kinds of disciplinary backgrounds of curators at Tate, although I was appointed to the learning team. But even the learning curators have art history backgrounds. I know that with the post of cross-cultural programmes, it was felt, explicitly by Felicity Allen and the other people who were part of it, that it [the role] was about addressing areas of knowledge in the museum which were not being addressed by art history. So my background in cultural theory and cultural studies and urban studies was thought to be a useful addition to that. In that sense, it was quite progressive. It would be interesting, now that the curatorial teams at both Tate Modern and Tate Britain are going through a review, where there will be new people brought in and old people let go, it will be interesting to see what kinds of backgrounds the new curators will be drawn from, or whether there will continue to be a limited pool of Courtauld educated in the tradition of Tate or whether they will broaden it out to a wider remit. I don’t expect them to point to many urbanists or critical geographers, but it will be interesting to see whether they broaden it out to cultural studies or contextual studies that are related to art history in a more critical way. Or even different institutions; not just the Courtauld.

ADC: The kind of art history you learn at Goldsmiths is different from the kind you learn at the Courtauld.

PG: Yes, and I don’t know whether there are any curators from Goldsmiths at Tate’s curatorial departments. I know there are a few from the RCA [Royal College of Art] curating course. But anyway, I think that’s a good point about curatorial education and how that may or should change.

Question 3:

What do you think the objectives were for Tate, rather than the individual curators, in staging *Afro Modern*? (00:27:00 minutes into recording)

ADC: I’ve read Tate’s strategy to 2015 and there’s a lot in there about the use of multiple voices...

PG: Being open and so on. There are a number of key words that come from that document; being more open, being more diverse, being more global.

- ADC: Yes and I felt that *Afro Modern* very much fitted those overall objectives. I suppose I am answering my own question, but do you want to comment on that?
- PG: One of the things that I think will come out of this interview, in your question about why all of these black art events are happening now, and we talked about this briefly when we were in Sheffield, is that...from my experience of being on the inside of an institution like Tate, from the outside, it looks as though the institution is acting with intention to do these things. But from what I can see, and I don't know whether it was just an interest of Tanya's which she pushed through, or whether it was discussed within the senior management programming team – 'we need an exhibition on black art. Tanya, can you go and do it?' – I don't know. My understanding was that it was Tanya's idea, initially when she was at Tate Liverpool, because, as you have said, she saw the show in Germany, and Liverpool has a particular context, and maybe she had this idea that she wanted to push through.
- ADC: Maybe this is unfair, but I just don't buy that.
- PG: So, you think it's an institutional thing?
- ADC: Having spoken to her about her other interests, I just can't see how Gilroy's text could have been an interest for her, and how she felt so passionately about it that she just had to push this exhibition through.
- PG: Well, put it this way, I can't imagine that Tate management team said, 'Let's do an exhibition about Gilroy'. Most of them won't even know who he is. There's no doubt about that. Where Tanya's interest comes from, I don't know. As you said, it may just have been from seeing that show in Germany which was about Gilroy and the Black Atlantic, and she started wondering how that relates to art.
- ADC: Yes.
- PG: There were a number of people at the time – senior practitioners – who were surprised that Tate was doing this show, and were surprised that they hadn't appointed a curator who had more experience and expertise in working with black art. There are a number of curators who have got that. So, it was a surprise that Tanya, who is a Latin American specialist, was now curating a major show on black art. So it gives this sense that the institution is intentionally doing this. But in my experience, the institution, half the time, is often just reacting to things. And then it packages it through the press machine as if it is something that Tate wanted to do. I don't know whether really wanted to do it. That's a question for Tanya. And I would really like to know, because having just said that – about the serendipitous nature of things – , on the other hand, nothing really passes at Tate without Nick [Serota] or the senior management team knowing about it. So it would definitely have been approved at a high level, and then made a part of Tate's objectives. But whether there was an institutional interest in promoting the work of black artists, as you know, is a mute question. It is a question which is debatable. The fact that there has been – and this has been acknowledged – an institutional indifference or slowness to work with black artists and to do this kind of show. So why now, or why in 2010, is a good question [referring to one of the later interview questions], especially when it hasn't been done before and there have been plenty of opportunities to do that. So I can understand why you would ask. First there's *Afro*

Modern, and there's Chris Ofili. I don't know whether it was all planned. From the inside, and from going to meetings, it didn't feel planned. Judith [Nesbitt, the then Chief Curator of Tate Britain and curator of the Chris Ofili retrospective exhibition in 2010] wasn't involved in the discussions about *Afro Modern* at all. They were two separate shows. The fact that I was in post in Cross-Cultural and dealing with some of these issues and working with the public programme of both those exhibitions gave it an external link that they didn't really have at a curatorial level. I worked on the public programme for Chris Ofili and *Afro Modern* at around the same time. So, externally, it gave the appearance of a seamless programme that Tate were dealing with cross-cultural black issues. But actually, from the hierarchy downwards, that was not the case, from my perspective. But that's just my feeling. You may find out that someone said 'We need to do a couple of black shows this year'. That may be the case, but there's no meeting that I went to that expressed that.

ADC: It's a mystery and it will remain one. I've been at high level meetings when I worked at Tate where senior curators would say to their teams that black artists needed to be more involved in the project I was working on, and members of those teams would just look at the ground awkwardly, perhaps because none of them had any knowledge or expertise on the work of black artists and so were not willing to engage in that discussion. But those discussions don't get recorded, and I sometimes wonder whether I am the only one who remembers that that suggestion ever came up. These things get lost, and you never really know how exhibitions like *Afro Modern* begin and what conversations are had about them.

PG: Yes. And I'm sure it could be said that Tate have had many external proposals for shows involving black artists over the years. If they wanted to do a show, and they do this with many other areas that they don't have expertise on, they hire in an external curator. So the fact that many internal staff feel that they don't have the expertise is not an excuse. The expertise does exist to do that kind of work. So there are other reasons why.

ADC: If someone doesn't have a real sense of personal motivation to push an idea forward then it won't happen. And if you don't have a special interest in the work of black artists then you won't push that forward.

PG: My feeling is that it is partly related to this 'cultural diversity' thing and the whole 'cultural diversity' issue has sometimes clouded it, because black art is sometimes seen as being about 'cultural diversity', which is overloaded with instrumental requirements and necessities, which curators feel is an extra burden that they don't feel qualified to take on. The beauty of *Afro Modern* and why it passed through was because it was presented as a cogent intellectual argument about modernism, which is what Tate's real interest is and where its real expertise lies. So, from that sense, it was very much aligned with the institution and it's very easy to understand why it absorbed that particular show; because it related very much to Tate's collection, its historic mandate around modernism and so on. I hope the legacy of that show will be to move that debate on, and away from this sense of unease, guilt and anxiety – the 'how do we curate this without upsetting this and without upsetting that'. Part of the reason for hiring 'diversity' staff who are black or Asian is to try and mediate that. So you get one or two people in the institution who become burdened with the responsibility of interpreting 'diversity' for a wider audience. It's a complete disaster and something which I have no interest in doing. Now don't get me wrong. Let me be clear; 'cultural diversity' is important, although I find the concept of 'cultural diversity' to be quite woolly and not

very well-defined. The notion of opening up the institutional perspective to 'difference' – and I prefer the term 'cultural difference' - is important. And these exhibitions can play a role in that. But that cannot be the determining motive for curating these exhibitions. The work of black artists and the work of international artists are important because they have artistic merit in their own right. They are an important part of the history of British art, the history of black global art and so on. That's the footing in which institutions like Tate should be programming these shows; not as a reactive gesture to Black History Month or to the need to broaden audiences. Although those things are also important.

Question 4:

Could you tell me how the *Thin Black Lines* display came about? (00:38:38 minutes into recording)

PG: I am sure Lubaina [Himid] has told you her version. From my perspective, when I was in the Tate Britain education department, Chris Stevens [Curator of Modern British Art] got together a group curators, including Jenny [Jennifer Batchelor, Interpretation Curator], Gina [Koutsika, formerly Head of Interpretation, Tate] and myself to come up with a series of new displays for 2011-2013 which is during the period that the gallery [Tate Britain] is undergoing building works. So they wanted to take that opportunity to programme a new series of displays according to Penelope's [Curtis, Director, Tate Britain] expressed wish to experiment. Those displays were seen to be more focussed displays, some of which were research-oriented and thematic. Being part of that group, the whole group was asked to come up with some ideas for new displays. Now, whether I was intended to come up with ideas, being in the education department or not, I thought, 'Well, I am actually part of the group, so I will come up with some ideas', and I did. Initially I thought about doing something around...I wanted to do something involving black artists but I didn't want to do a one-room black art display, which is getting everything out of the Tate collection around black art and putting it on display in one room, and which Tate have done before. I wanted to do something about black women artists. I discussed it with Mark Miller [the then Curator of Young People's Programmes at Tate Britain] and Indie Choudhury [the then Curator of Visual Dialogues, Tate Britain], initially. And when I met with Lubaina at the *Afro Modern* dinner in Liverpool, we talked about the show, we talked about her work. I had not met her before, but of course I knew about her work. So I told her about the display idea and I thought that this was [muffled word, sounds like 'intrinsic'] to do that, so why don't we collaborate? So, that is how it initially came into being. So, again, this was not a decision by Tate to do a show about black art. It absolutely wasn't. It was because I wanted to integrate that into the programme, but also do an area which I felt had not been done before, which is around black women artists. Now, for me, the value of doing it with Lubaina was...I mean I could have done it without Lubaina, but having her on board would definitely involve her in the show, because her work is central to that, but also because she curated a number of key exhibitions around that area. So we had discussions about it and agreed to base the show on her curatorial practice, because I think that was a really key moment in the 1980s when a particular idea of black women's art and practice came onto the stage. So, that's basically how the idea for *Thin Black Lines* came about. So it wasn't as if Tate was responding to what Sheffield was doing because we didn't know what they were doing [referring to the BLK Art Group exhibition at Graves Gallery in Sheffield, 2011-12, which similarly reflected on the work of key black British artists in the 1980s].

Question 5:

When I spoke to Lubaina Himid about how *Thin Black Lines* came about, she suggested that Penelope Curtis was part of it because she [Curtis] has been interested in initiating exhibitions and displays which might interrogate or challenge the Tate collection. Would you agree with Lubaina on that? Or were some of these ideas already developing before Curtis came on board? (00:42:40 minutes into recording)

PG: In terms of a more interrogative approach to the collection, that was definitely Penelope's idea. She brought in this idea of interrogating the collection through conceptual or thematic work. I also believe that she has been the driving force behind displays that are much more research-based and which draw on already existing research. Penelope is a scholar. She comes from a research background. But what I would say that she is not responsible for is bring in a 'diversity' perspective to that. So, *Migrations* [the exhibition at Tate Britain, 2012] was just one concept of a number of ideas about interrogating the collection from various angles that she is interested in. So there's going to be a show on Iconoclasm, which I think will have loans as well as works in the collection. So, *Thin Black Lines* was nothing to do with Penelope, although she encouraged it. When I initially proposed the display, it got slowed down, partly because of my own position at the Tate being negotiated, but when it eventually got to her, she gave it the green light. Once it was confirmed that I was leaving Tate she was supportive of bringing me into the curatorial department to complete that display and work on the *Migrations* show. So, in that sense she has been very supportive, but she didn't initiate it. *Afro Modern* and Chris Ofili had created a context where some of these issues were being looked at, in some respects. But as I said, I think it was a lot more haphazard.

ADC: The reason why I ask is because I'm interested in the importance of certain individuals and certain roles in terms of the impact they can have in relation to exhibiting black artists, versus the impact that institutional objectives can have.

PG: I think it's a combination of both. But definitely, without the contribution of individuals with their own ideas and different ways of thinking, and also with a certain amount of bravery, these shows wouldn't have happened. In terms of Penelope, my sense is that she is someone who wants to do things differently and I think you can see that with what she did with the Modern British Sculpture show [at the Royal Academy of Art in 2011] which she curated with Keith Wilson. It definitely wasn't the kind of show that I think the Royal Academy thought it was going to be; a big blockbuster show with all the big names. It had some works which challenged what sculpture was about and I think it pissed off a lot of people. So I think Penelope is not someone who is afraid of going against the consensus. So, I think she has created a context in the curatorial department of allowing individual initiative, such as my work on *Thin Black Lines* and bringing Lubaina in to do...the idea of bringing Lubaina in was also about the fact that she is also a researcher as well as an artist. So, it was about drawing on her research in this area as well. That's an important part. The way that Penelope read that, and the way that I promoted it was that it was a research oriented display. A lot of the material that we used in the documentary part of the display came from Lubaina's collection as part of her research. So it was a research oriented display. Through this concept of research and through this idea of critically interrogating the collection it enables a number of issues to emerge. So, to answer your question, I think individuals have been important, and I would say, modestly, that I have played a bit of a role myself at Tate, as have people like Victoria Walsh [former Head of Adult Programmes, Tate Britain] with her Tate Encounters project, which as you know, has been an important part of

contextualising some of this work. In fact, the role of the Cross-Cultural Curator partly came out of the Tate Encounters initial discussions. It was felt that there was a need for a role within the programming team to support some of the work that was being done by Tate Encounters. Also, people like Mark Miller, Indie Choudhury, Felicity Allen [former Head of Education at Tate Britain] who made some key appointments – myself, Mark and Indie, who are the only black curators were all appointed by Felicity. She did that deliberately to diversify the workforce, but also to bring in new ideas. I think all three of those appointments, if I may say so, have been very successful. The fact that only one of them is now still at Tate [since the Education department restructure in 2010] is another story.

Question 5:

What do you feel the significance is of shows/displays such as *Thin Black Lines*, The BLK Art Group and Brixton Calling? Why do you think these shows/displays are happening now, and what are the broader implications vis-a-vis the relationship of black British artists to the UK's publicly funded art galleries?(00:51:27 minutes into recording)

ADC: Some people have suggested to me that it signifies a sense of mourning for a more politically active and radical time and a more collectivist approach. People are comparing the present moment with the early 1980s, especially since the recession and the riots last year [2011], and since the Conservative government has come back in. I have been wondering if that is what it is, or whether, as Lubaina suggested to me, it is more to do with the fact the curators who are coming of age and establishing themselves are of the age where the early 1980s were of their time but they were much too young to be able to engage in what was happening at that time, and so now have an interest in revisiting that moment through exhibitions and displays, or whether, as you and Mike Tooby suggested when we discussed this in Sheffield, that this is more to do with how institutional practices work – their cyclical nature, and you recommended that I look at Foucault's idea of 'epistemes'.

PG: What I meant by 'epistemes' was that there are a number of discourses and practices that seem to be coalescing around similar sorts of themes, which in some sense are 'epistemic' in that they represent a structure of feeling or thought about our current predicament. For example, I just bought a catalogue when I was in New York there's a huge show at ...I can't remember where it is [possibly *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston] but it was a huge show about the art of the 1980s and it re-evaluated the art of the 1980s. I was surprised to read in the catalogue foreword that this was the first major museum retrospective of the art of the 1980s. So, I think there is a general sense in which the art of the 1980s is being re-evaluated, and that's partly, as you said, because of a mourning for a kind of radicality; it was a moment of openness, of social movements, and of radical positions. Although, at the same time, there was a lot of commercial, capitalist appropriation going on as well. But it was a moment when black artists, in Britain and in America were...there was a sort of multicultural market where repressed voices came onto the scene. So at that time, I think when they first came out onto the scene, it was dismissed in some respects. There was a lot of institutional neglect of that work, at the time. There was a misreading of the work, I believe; that it was overly political or that it was not aesthetically interesting. But this time around, the new reassessment is looking at it...Going back to the question about art history, because art history was the primary mode of understanding art at that time, the capacity to understand these works was not there. These works were not purely addressing art history. There were art historical

components to them, but they were also addressing issues which were outside of art history. So, now, as you say, a younger generation of curators are coming through who are more aware of some of those debates and are now able to look at these works in a different light. So this moment is what I call 'the museumification of black art'. Until now, black art has never really been properly assessed by public institutions, in my opinion. But now this is the moment that that is happening. Going back to the notion of 'epistemes', there are certain reasons and discourses, historically, and political and economic circumstances which would support that kind of re-evaluation, such as the 2011 riots. The exhibitions may have been conceived before the riots, but the context of the problem of young people, black people, their continued exclusion, concerns around multiculturalism...all of these things mean that an assessment of that work...they [the work of black artists in the 1980s] can become more relevant...they speak of this moment that we are in, in terms of multiculturalism. So, I think this is now the museum moment for reflection. But at the same time, within the institution, I still don't believe it was a deliberate strategy of the institution. I still don't believe that the institution came together and said, 'right, we need to look at black art of the 1980s'. As you say, this is where individuals came in. This is where someone like myself, who has been involved in these issues for a long time, and who managed to be a part of the machine, helped to push this through. It's not only myself; other people have too. Did you speak to the curator from Sheffield as to why she organised the show?

ADC: Yes, she answered my question to the panel at the end of the symposium.

PG: Where did she get the idea from?

ADC: She said that she had only recently come into the role, and when she did she was invited to explore the gallery's archives to familiarise herself with its history, and in doing that she came across the work of the BLK Art Group and she became interested in it. She's about my age – in her early 30s. But I have to follow this up with her soon.

PG: Yes, it will be interesting to find out. I imagine she was also influenced by broader issues. She was involved in the Great British Art Debate which I was also involved in at Tate Britain. She came to some meetings and I remember her mentioning to me then that she was planning something. It will be interesting to find out what the broader context for her involvement was. But for me personally, my own involvement in it, I've been wanting to do something like this since I started at Tate, as you know. My objective was to try and get some of this work on the walls.

ADC: I remember us having that exact conversation.

PG: Exactly. And the story I have already told but I'll keep telling it, about Rasheed Araeen telling me his work was in cold storage [in Tate's storage facility]. He told me to go and see his work in the Store. He said that his work along with work by all the black artists of the 1980s was in cold storage, and it's true. So, it has been my motivation from day one to get that work on the wall. The reason why I could make it happen is because I managed to make myself relevant to the curatorial concerns of the department. I pushed it. But it was not just me. There were a number of people in the institution that were pushing it. I think *Afro Modern*, Chris Ofili and other events like the Chris Ofili Late at Tate event that we did. 10,500 people came to that event. It was unprecedented. So with things like that, the institution has to sit up and take notice. But there was a lot of resistance to these kinds of things instead. The institutional response to the fact that

vast numbers attended that event was quite negative because of the health and safety aspect. People outside the institution saw it as a really important event. But internally, and this is me reading between the lines, it caused anxiety to have that many people, particularly that many black people in the museum at the same time. The institution says it wants to have more diverse audiences, but it doesn't want too many. No body actually said they didn't want too many black people in the gallery. And of course it was quite a mixed audience. But I do think there was an anxiety about populism. Now this goes beyond race. It's also about class and about the role of art galleries. I think there is a fear about things being a bit too popular, and about being able to control the flow of people. I think there is an anxiety in the museum about otherness and difference and I think that was evident in the responses I had to that event.

ADC: Do you think they were anxious because the fact that so many non-white people attended the Ofili event drew attention to the fact that very few of Tate's exhibitions attract non-white audiences?

PG: I think it's more to do with not knowing the audience. This was a very different audience to what they normally have. They probably don't know how to deal with that audience. But maybe you're right. Maybe it does then force them to question how they can sustain it through their programming and fears about raising certain expectations about that. But you would have thought that having those kinds of numbers would be a cause for a sense of achievement. But that didn't really happen. Instead it seemed there was a fear about people being perilously close to the artworks. I read that as a general anxiety about it not being the usual Tate Britain crowd.

Question 7:

Could you share with me your thoughts on the importance of your role as/the role of the cross-cultural curator to Tate's programme?(01:06:43 minutes into recording)

ADC: We have talked about this before. In my opinion, if you had not been in that specific role you would not have been able to do much of the good work that you did at Tate. However, the role itself is of course very problematic. Why can't that work be shared by all curators at Tate?

PG: I completely agree. I've said the same on many occasions. But, one of the things that I always try to correct, and I've made the mistake myself, and that's calling me the 'Cross-Cultural Curator' when my actual title was 'Curator of Cross-Cultural Programmes'. So it was the programme that was cross-cultural, not the curator. I think that linguistic thing is indicative of the fact that...you know, people have said to me, 'Why are *you* the Cross-Cultural Curator? Why isn't everyone doing it?', and I would agree with them. I would say, 'I don't call myself the 'Cross-Cultural Curator'. I'm no more cross-cultural than anyone else! I don't have an insight, because I am black in 'cross-cultures' than anyone else'.

ADC: What does 'cross-cultural' even mean?

PG: Exactly. I think the term itself was deliberate. They could have called it the 'Diversity Curator' or 'Multiculturalism Curator'. I think they chose 'Cross-Cultural' to take it out of that 'diversity' discourse. There's a whole genealogy to the term 'Cross-Cultural', which I did some research on. It has quite a progressive usage, particularly in the way that Caribbean theorists have used it, such as Wilson Harris, which refers to the ways in

which cultures intersect and how they are critically redefining human communities. The cross-cultural space par-excellence is the Caribbean. Because of slavery and migration, you have a culture that is completely hybrid. It's completely creolised in many ways. In a way, that is where a lot of cross-cultural thinking comes from. In the context of this particular position at Tate, it was understandably, but mistakenly, seen as being about trying to broaden Tate's diversity remit. That's what I inherited but that's not how I interpreted it.

There were three important things about that role, in my opinion. I've written this down. The first was that the role sought to broaden Tate's intellectual remit through public programming to address issues of globalisation, cultural difference, migration, postcolonialism and transnational perspectives. This was stated in my contract. And I did a number of events from programming conferences, such as *Global Modernities* as part of the Tate Triennial to doing panel discussions around *Migrations*. The second thing, and this was something that I pushed for, was to foster internal dialogue at Tate around critical issues of cultural difference. So, I set up the Tate Think staff seminars. Mike Phillips, who was in the role before me, had done these seminars but he brought in a lot of external speakers, He brought in a lot of black and Asian speakers, i.e. his friends, into the gallery, bought them breakfast and talked about 'diversity'. I didn't see the point in that. Why do that at Tate when you can do that anywhere? How is that going to change Tate? So, I deliberately didn't do that. I think some people were pissed off because they expected me to invite them into Tate. But no, I wanted to talk to the curators. So, I set up a programme of seminars where I invited everyone [internal to Tate], from the Chief Curator through to visitor services people. Did you come?

ADC: Yes, I came to one.

PG: Eventually, and this is what happens, that programme was appropriated by the research department. It then became a curatorial seminar programme, which I was invited to be a part of. The original issues that it was supposed to deal with around globalisation and cultural difference was changed, to deal with curatorial practice, and then it was only learning and exhibition curators who ended up as part of that group. So, one legacy of my programme was that it led to this particular group. It helped to start some sort of discussion. The third area that my role focussed on was to contribute to and challenge debates on 'cultural diversity' and multiculturalism and its relation to art practice. So, I staged a number of events with Third Text. We looked critically at what 'cultural diversity' means in terms of art practice, we did a conference called 'What is British Art', we did a seminar with the Arts Council and Third Text around the relevance of 'cultural diversity' to art, and I did a series of events called Conversation Pieces where I invited artists to come to Tate to talk about their work and practice in relation to key work in the Tate collection. The fourth area, which I inherited, was around audience development and engagement, which I suppose all learning programmes were seen as contributing to. So, obviously, a number of my events appealed to a broader audience, not just the Ofili Late at Tate, I did another one on Polish art and the Romanian Cultural Centre and we had a lot of audiences from that community coming in. The fifth area was exhibitions and displays, and that was a break through because I think I was one of the first learning curators to be involved in that process. So those were the areas that I think the cross-cultural programme contributed to.

Question 8:

In your experience, how do you feel the approaches of large, publicly funded art galleries and museums have developed since the 1980s, in regard to the exhibiting and art historical positioning of black British artists? How have debates on the 'in/visibility' of black British artists developed since the 1980s? (01:14:50 minutes into recording)

PG: One of the paradoxes of the current situation is that although there are a number of exhibitions featuring black artists now, black artists are pretty invisible compared to the 1980s. In the 1980s there was a huge amount of visibility of black artists because of the actions of artists such as Lubaina Himid, Sonia Boyce and BLK Art Group, which made them visible. They organised exhibitions for themselves and then public galleries responded to that, particularly regional galleries. As Mike Tooby pointed out [at the BLK Art Group symposium in Sheffield, 22/02/2012], the national galleries were not as prominent in that effort. But regional galleries, such as Rochdale Art Gallery, Birmingham, Manchester, were really important in making black artists visible. However, my critique is that the curatorial framing of these works at the time has contributed to their invisibility now. What has happened today is that a number of black artists are hypervisible. These are the ones who have achieved high commercial success; Chris Ofili, Yinka Shonibare, Steve McQueen and possibly Huw Locke. These big superstar artists are hypervisible, but you can name them all on one hand. They are perfectly integrated into the museum system and they have escaped the limiting label of 'the black artist'. For example, the Chris Ofili show wasn't seen as a 'diversity' show, or a black art show. It was seen as a show of one of the most important contemporary artists. It was quite an accolade for him because mid-career retrospectives at Tate are rarely given to living artists. The last person to have that was Peter Doig, and in my opinion there is a connection there [Ofili and Doig studied together at Chelsea Art School and have remained friends, and also now both live in Trinidad]. I think Chris Ofili's show made sense because he is a really popular artist and his work speaks to a broad range of people. The fact that he focuses his work on the black image and the black image in popular culture is incidental, in some respects. Ofili is not part of the 'diversity' movement. So, I think a number of black artists have come into hypervisibility, but below that radar...Can you think of many artists that have...There's Anthea Hamilton, whose work is not overtly black and she had a show at Tate as part of Art Now, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye now has a solo show at Chisenhale and she is on the cover of the latest Frieze Magazine as well. So there are one or two who are getting there. But in terms of black artists qua 'black artists', they are pretty invisible, apart from in these historic shows [*Migrations*, *Afro Modern*, *Thin Black Lines*, *The BLK Art Group*]. And in terms of a younger generation of black artists I think we have moved back to a position of invisibility. Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe they will just emerge as contemporary artists. Maybe it is a good thing that they are not highlighted as black artists.

ADC: Yes, that's something that came up in my interviews with the artists in Sonia Boyce's Action show. The older two of the four, Grace Ndiritu and Robin Deacon, were aware that it was possible they were being pigeon holed from time to time but they frankly didn't care. They just wanted their work to be seen, and were to happy to be pigeon holed in a number of different ways if that meant their work would be shown. The younger two, Junior Boakye-Yiadom and Beverley Bennett, didn't even seem to be aware that being pigeon-holed as a black artist was a possibility. They were excited and hopeful about their careers, having both only just finished art school. So, I think that that combination of attitudes reflects the direction that the next generation of black artists are headed in.

PG: One of the indexes to see whether young black artists are invisible or are being incorporated simply as artists is to look at group shows. So, for example, if we look at The British Art Show 7 [2010-2011], there wasn't one black British artist in that show, and that was a show of contemporary British art. There were a couple of Asian artists, one of whom was Haroon Mirza. But there were certainly no artists of African descent in that show and there were very few artists of Asian descent in that show. If you take that as an indication of an opportunity to reflect the diversity of practices in Britain now and there were no black artists in that show...Ok maybe there wasn't anyone good enough or maybe the curators doing the research didn't know any...so again we're coming back to the same issues that we've had in the past. So, this is where the 'cultural diversity' issue doesn't really go away. We could be tempted to say 'we're all post-black now, we've got over it, we don't need 'cultural diversity' any more, we want these artists to be known as just artists', and then they are invisibilised. And then in response to that, some artists may start thinking that they need to make ore 'black' work in order to get into a Black History Month show just to get noticed. This is where, I feel, the responsibility now falls on curators in these institutions and curatorial perspectives around dealing with black artists. This is where a lot of the debate needs to focus on. For example, the curators of The British Art Show – I'm not saying they should apply 'diversity' criteria to make sure they include the token Asian or black artist, but they do need to widen the parameters of their research. There are many black and Asian artists who are doing really interesting, cutting-edge work, some of which is related to race and some of which isn't, but which is not being included in these shows. I would hope that by the time the next one comes around in five years, that question will arise. From my perspective, the struggle continues. My own particular practice as a curator is not focussed on 'diversity' or on black art, as you know. What I try to do is to keep my parameters open and to include the broadest possible range of practices as I can. For example, I am working on a public art project on a mountain in Switzerland. It has nothing to do with race. The curatorial premise is based on John Berger's book, Ways of Seeing. Yes, I have included some artists who are black, but that's just part of my own interest. We need to get to a position where all curators have that interest. Where we no longer have curators saying 'I don't know any black artists'. We need to move beyond that. I feel that curators who have been trained in more progressive disciplines that deal with postcolonialism and other critical perspectives are more likely to have a broader palette from which to draw. That might be one answer. That's why I am now about to start some research at the Royal College of Art curating course, looking at some of these issues and the history of curatorial practices in Britain, but focussing on issues of postcolonialism, transnationalism and race.

Appendix 8.13

Interview with Peter Gorschlüter

7 Mat 2010 at Tate Liverpool, Albert Dock, Liverpool Waterfront, Liverpool L3 4BB

Question 1:

How did the idea for the exhibition come about and when? (00:00:47 minutes into recording)

PG: Tanya Barson had the initial idea and she developed the idea before I joined Tate Liverpool in 2008 so at that point there was already a broad outline of the concept of the show so Tanya must have started with it in 2006/2007. When I joined TL I saw this concept and thought that it was really intriguing and by that time Tanya had already moved to Tate Modern (she was previously the curator at Tate Liverpool) and she had developed the concept during her time at Tate Liverpool. Although she had moved on we decided to go ahead to realise it and develop it into a proper exhibition and this decision was made in early 2008. It took about 2 years to refine the concept and research works related to the ideas. It's very much inspired by this book by Paul Gilroy and this has been widely acknowledge as a really important book in cultural studies and the interesting this is that the notion of the Black Atlantic and the African Diaspora has had a huge impact on modernity and this book has only really been looked at in terms of a few writers, music and a few intellectuals but less in regards to the visual arts. And it's obvious that there have been so many connections between the cultures and continents around the Atlantic that Tanya thought it would be really interesting to explore this idea in relation to the visual arts. The exhibition then from the outset wanted to take Gilroy's book as a starting point but not trying to illustrate the book. I think that that would not have been possible anyway because there are definitions in there that don't really need to be illustrated in terms of chapters and so on. So it was really more the broad notion of the Black Atlantic as a starting point and a few maybe streams of ideas that arise out of it, like double consciousness and so on and places them in the context of the visual arts. So that's really how the show came about, sort of Tanya's ideas that we felt it's kind of tied to an alternative perspective on the history of modern art and modernism as such.

Question 2:

Why do you think the concept for the exhibition was developed at this time, in 2006 or so, and not earlier given that Gilroy's book has been around for over fifteen years? (00:04:19 minutes into recording)

PG: Good point. It's really a question for Tanya to answer in a way, I can only add to this that there's definitely something about recent years the increased interest, and willingness, and openness to look at not only contemporary art but also at artist history in a more global and international way and explore some of strands that have been neglected or kind of overseen before and its partly a younger generation aspect. I think when Gilroy's book was published both Tanya and myself were still at school. I don't know why other curators haven't picked it up. The other thing is that the book covers quite a huge area intellectually but also geographically, and some of these sorts of areas like Africa or the Caribbean or south America have only been explored in more depth in recent years in terms of kind of artistic practice and so on, and I think that we are now in an interesting moment where all these different areas of research are starting to look at how they relate to each other and to look at this connectivity and probably that process has taken a while and we are now probably at a moment where more and more these kinds of connections are being made and mainly through the internationalisation and

globalisation of contemporary art and the art market as well. In way this show if you look at it, it very much tries to explore this history of modernism and modernity from a very contemporary perspective so even though the journey the visitors take from the early twentieth century to the present, I think the curatorial concept is actually the other way around. I think our inspiration came from more contemporary artists and how they are kind of grounded in these hybrid cultures and in-between cultures. Artists like Chris Ofili, his family are from Nigeria, he is a black British artist, but he is living in Trinidad. He almost spans three continents, in one person, one identity. So it's quite interesting to see, that almost starts to become common practice but where are the predecessors?

Question 3:

What do you think the relationship is between Tate's vision for 2015 and Tate's priorities to 2012 and the *Afro Modern* exhibition? (00:08:56 minutes into recording)

PG: Well you look at the paper you could say *Afro Modern* ticks a lot of these boxes but we must be careful. This exhibition wasn't developed to tick the boxes, but I think this has increased awareness of openness and inclusiveness and internationalism that this exhibition kind of delivers in a way so it fits very nicely with Tate vision and Tate's efforts to develop and present and collect a broader range of art works and to kind of acknowledge a more complex history of modernism than the western European or north American one that for has for a long time has been the major focus, not only for Tate but also every museum in the western world. So, I think a lot of the research that has been done will definitely contribute to how Tate develops its acquisitions and own vision. So I can't really say which one was first, they were parallel processes and of course if an organisation starts to put these priorities they affect you thinking or encourage program curators to think along these lines, so it's a dialogue.

Question 4:

What kind of narratives do you think are in the exhibition aside from the obvious ones in the way the exhibition is laid out? What were the major narratives that you and Tanya wanted to tell with this exhibition or wanted to reframe. (00:11:13 minutes into recording)

PG: The exhibition covers 100 years if not more if you include the idea that the artists relate to ideas that developed way before the 20th century. It covers a lot of geographic territory; it covers a lot of ideas from identity, to body politics to modernism. I think the way that we wanted to introduce a broad picture or the whole story, but still we wanted to make it specific. So we decided to do this by selecting artists and works that have literally done this transatlantic journey, so either artists who have travelled physically from one place to another or studied or spent a lot of time in Europe like Tarsila do Amaral or Wilfredo Lam, then returned to their home countries, and bringing this new expertise, knowledge, artistic, language and combining them with their surroundings and culture and roots. So I think every single artists or work in this exhibition does have this reference to journeys and travelling and making transatlantic connections, and I'm not quite sure if the visitors really got this when walking through the exhibition, and obviously we tried to explain it in captions and also by juxtaposing certain works and bringing them together in certain rooms and I think that was a really important idea about showing the connectivity and the network.

Question 5:

If you didn't think the visitors necessarily grasped that, what do you think they did take away from the exhibition? (00: 14:09 minutes into recording)

PG: I think that for a lot of visitors many of the artists that we showed were unknown. I think we were introducing them to artists but also to artistic practices and works they have never seen before and encouraging them to relate those works that were not familiar to them to works that are very familiar to them like a Picasso and so on and some of the more known African-American artists like David Hammons and black British artists like Keith Piper and Isaac Julien. I think we were encouraging them to make these connections and rather than seeing them as isolated, seeing them as part of a process and the development of this century. I think this came through; most people got this but probably didn't always get the detailed reason why certain artists were there and if you don't read all the captions or you're not familiar with the artists anyway you might not know that the artist travelled and spent some time in this place or that place. And I think that that's ok. In the preparation of the exhibition there were some concerns that this would be an overtly intellectual exhibition that you could only understand fully by reading Gilroy's book, but I think from the outset we were very convinced that this exhibition would also work on a very direct visual and even emotional level and a lot of it I think did I only really got aware of it when I saw the works in the space that almost all of the works in the exhibition deals with, in one way or another, the body, and I can't think of an exhibition in that past that was so much about figuration and used the body to speak about identity, culture, hybridity and so on. I think even if people who don't necessarily have a broad knowledge or deep knowledge of art or art history, one thing they can easily familiarise with is representations of the body and there is something very immediate about that in the sense that we all have a body, and we immediately have some kind of relationship if we see a representation of the body, I think that makes this exhibition quite accessible to a broad audience.

Question 6:

What kind of concepts or ideological frameworks do you think have been employed in the exhibition?

(00:18:10 minutes into recording)

PG: I think the exhibition has 7 rooms, but if you look at it from a distance it's probably divided into two parts, which are the first part of the twentieth century and the second part of the twentieth century. In the first part we were kind of able to follow it in a kind of chronological overview, or journey and trajectory, and maybe because we have a bigger distance to it and because the art world wasn't necessarily so broad and complex at that time, as it probably is now and it was easier to speak about movements and certain groups of artists having a certain dialogue and a developing a certain artistic practice. SO I think that it was still possible to focus on these developments, possible to show these kinds of groups in the first part of the exhibition. But then when it comes to after the 1960s it becomes a very focussed period of time where issues about identity and race and black power and so on arise and issues of society and integration and exclusion. Bu then after the 60s it's really difficult. You can't really continue to structure it in decades or into....In way we kind of left the chronology there and said 'ok from the 1970s or 80s onwards', we made a decision to structure the exhibition more thematically, rather than chronologically. So the last 3 sections of the exhibition are all about concepts or ideas rather than time or history. The first one is about history but in a more generic way about reconstructing the middle passage and artists related their

work to the past, or history or imagined history, and then in 'Exhibiting Bodies' it was about body politics and representations of the body and views of the body and the last section is about a very contemporary angle and how artists nowadays relate to all of what we have seen in the exhibition in the previous 6 sections.

Question 7:

How do the books and the merchandise for the exhibition get chosen and by whom? (00: 21:55 minutes into recording)

PG: I think the *Afro Modern* model is more low key because the shop runs the same offer as it always does and then they stock books that relate to the concept of the exhibition or to artists that are in the exhibition. What usually happens is that the shop manager approaches the curator and asks if there are any books or related literature that we should stop in the shop and that you think will be interesting to buy or to have available there. So this happened. We were expecting a more academic audience so the show said they would focus more on books and literature rather than merchandise. Has there been any merchandise?

ADC: No, but one thing I noticed was that there are lots of monographs and introductory texts like books on African-American art and so on. But one thing I noticed and I found it kind of funny, I think it was the Ofili catalogue for the show at Tate Britain next to a book called 'How to talk to your children about world art'. I was interested in that juxtaposition and the kind of small scale framing of ideas with those books next to each other. I mean do we think of Chris Ofili as a 'world artist', whatever 'world art' means? I was also interested in the title of that book, 'How to talk to you children about world art' as if you need to talk to them about it in a different way from whatever non 'world art' may be.

PG: It's like 'How to talk to your children about the Holocaust'.

ADC: Well exactly. I mean these things just get put next to each other when you're busy and you're just trying to stock your shelves, so I'm not reading too much into it, but I was interested in the kinds of messages that are given in the exhibition but also the other kinds of messages that come out of the partnerships this show has had with other shows around Liverpool and also the small scale messages that come from a visitor going to look at the books afterwards, and maybe never having heard of Chris Ofili before (although I would find that unusual) and to see his catalogue placed next to a book on 'world art'. It's also especially interesting, that concept of 'world art' when the premise of the *Afro Modern* exhibition is to not think about 'world art' and 'European art' but really to expand our ideas much more. I was just interested in whether you and Tanya had had a lot of input into that.

PG: Well not so much. With Picasso, opening in two weeks time, Tate enterprises actually produces merchandise and that becomes part of the visitor experience and also the commercial set out and budget model for such exhibitions. But I can't think of what enterprises should have done. I'm quite glad that they didn't engage in producing any merchandise because what could it be? And it's obviously a risk or danger that you'd get it terribly wrong, like the title of that book. I mean what could you offer? Little boats to be built or whatever?

Question 8:

Why did you choose to have a section based around the idea of 'Post-Black'? (00:26:55 minutes into recording)

PG: In the first title of this section post black was only one part of the subtitle so we didn't necessarily decide from the outset is that this section should be about post black art. What we wanted is to have was a contemporary section, to get as close as we can to today's artistic practice and to see how artists are reflecting on ideas that have been introduced by other artists before, partly by artists that are on view in the other sections. This was probably the source of inspiration for the whole exhibition. Today's artistic practice of black British artists, African-American artists, Caribbean artists, are very much aware of the issues of hybridisation and diversification and what the history of the African Diaspora and so on in their work and they look at it from the present and that was the whole inspiration for the show. And then it was labelled in the end 'From post modern to post black' for different reasons, one of them being, the first title included that it included appropriation, humour and other strategies and it was just too long as a section title – too many layers in there, and we were asked to simplify it to work more as a headline than an explanation of the complexity of artistic strategies today. So maybe it became too reduced in a way, a lot of people were not familiar with the current debates and thought we were introducing the term post black, which obviously we were not, it was introduced by Glenn Ligon and Thelma Golden. So that was part of the criticism. How could curators dare to think of artists being post-racial, but actually we didn't imply this, we were just interested to show that this is a current issue.

ADC: It's interesting that people had that perception as it's clearly stated in the wall panel who up with the idea and what it's about.

PG: I think maybe as it always is with terms that are very provocative, and post black is provocative title, I think Thelma and Glen it was partly humorous, partly provocative, and partly a real concern they put into this terms and they put it out there in the world for debate. And that's what we also wanted to achieve. And I think this section is very successful. In the press and when I talk to people it was the only section that people really questioned. But that's exactly what we wanted. We wanted to have the last section as open as possible, as open to debate, as contemporary as possible. To say 'Ok, that's where we are now. These are the ideas that are flurrying around. We don't have enough distance to this yet to say what it is, what will survive, it's not yet defined'. The title could have had a question mark at the end. I mean it implies a question mark but we didn't put it there physically. But, curatorially, there was a question mark.

Question 9:

The section identifies a number of strategies that the artists use, sampling, appropriation, recycling and so on. And it suggests that these techniques are characteristic of post black artists. Would you agree with that? (00: 31:45 minutes into recording)

PG: I don't think it's necessarily specific to black artists in that sense, but they are strategies that are deployed by black artists to deal with the past and elements of the past and reception and history. I think other artists do this as well, but in the context of the exhibition it was intriguing and striking that if you look at contemporary black artists that see their work in a history, they quite often use these strategies but that doesn't mean that only black artists would use them. We have to be careful how to phrase that.

ADC: One of the things that I noticed in the catalogue essay between Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon, who coined that term, 'Post-Black', is that Thelma actually argues that the term post-black simply refers to artists who are concerned with either a different set of issues from the previous generation or who chose to approach those sets of issues in a different way from the previous generation. She said the term isn't really about the actual practices of the artists. So bearing that in mind, I was wondering why practices were the emphasis of that section of the exhibition. I say that because looking at the individual captions against each work in that section, that's really what comes through in the explanations about the works, the techniques that each artist uses.

PG: Yes, good point. I think it focuses so much on techniques because what a lot of the artists in that section have in common is that they try to overcome content by addressing it. It's quite interesting to see these different strategies of trying to overcome history, content, identification with a certain set of issues, racial and cultural discourses and so on. So it's not a lack of content.

ADC: So are you saying it's more of a focus on technique and strategies to try and deal with content in a different way?

PG: Content is quoted in a lot of these works and juxtaposed or brought into new relationships and that creates something new. But the techniques are a fundamental part of the art work or the practice of the artists probably more than it was previously, when artists were addressing it with their body or representations of the body, and so on. And now they are addressing it by strategies of remixing and sampling and humour.

ADC: Well, there's no reason why the exhibition had to adhere to Golden and Ligon's definition.

Question 10:

The artists shown are described as a new generation and are distinguished as different to the previous generation as we have just discussed. I was looking at the ages of the artists shown in that section, which range, at the time of the exhibition, from 30 to 67. This suggests to me that they are chosen from at least 2 generations. What do you think about that? (00:36:53 minutes into recording)

PG: Definitely yes. There are artists like David Hammons making an appearance in there and you could argue that he is not in a young regeneration. He has been around for 40 or 50 years. But I think he has been so hugely influential for a lot of young artists and he continues to be almost a godfather of a lot of, not only African-American artists but black artists. So he almost has to be there because a lot of artists relate to that in contemporary practice. And then there are some artists in there who are around the age 40-50 generation, and we didn't necessarily want to say that today's practice is only about young artists practicing. Artists of an older generation can be as important and as contemporary as the younger artists. So it wasn't really a concern when selecting the artists.

Question 11:

Of the 10 artists shown in that section, 6 of them are from the US and only 1 is British. That's not a criticism just an observation. With that in mind, to what extent the idea of 'Post-black' is applicable to the British context? (00:38:50 minutes into recording)

PG: That's a huge question.

ADC: I know. I was wondering if you had had more space or if the exhibition had solely been on that subject, are there other black-British artists that you'd have liked to have included as part of that discussion?

PG: Well I'm sure we would have. In a lot of the reviews there are criticisms of who was missing, like Yinka Shonibare and so on. I mean everyone knows about at least five African or African-American or black British artists who were overlooked. One thing is that this exhibition tries not to be a survey of black artists. That's really important for an understanding of the exhibition. We wanted to steer away from that. There have been other exhibitions that have tried to do this like Africa Remix, in terms of contemporary African art. That wasn't our interest. We were interested in introducing narratives and showing connectivity between the different cultures and countries around the Atlantic and to show how they relate. I think that's really important. These contexts are often seen separately, if you look at African-American artists there, and black-British artists here and exhibitions about Latin American art, and African art and so on. There are not many exhibitions that have tried to bring all these things together and show how they have related and continue to relate.

ADC: In terms of the new ideas that have developed in recent year, 'Post-Black' is one of the main ones that I'm interested in, but I don't know yet how much that relates to the British context, which is my focus.

PG: I'm not sure. We never had the discussion about how, or if this is a term that relate more to African-American artists. I mean it comes from an African-American context; it was coined there, and seems to be more grounded in African-American art, than in other cultures.

ADC: Perhaps the ideas apply in the British context? I was interested in comparing Chris Ofili with artists in the other rooms like Sonia Boyce and Keith Piper, and thinking about how it was so much about ideas for them, and I'm not saying that ideas are not important for Chris Ofili, but technique is perhaps is perhaps even more important for him than perhaps it was for some of those earlier black British artists.

PG: I agree. The other thing is that I'm not sure if you could apply the idea of 'post-black' to a Latin American context or a Caribbean context. I feel that the way black cultures are grounded in their cultures... in a way they are much more advanced. It's like this is a discussion they don't need to have in the Caribbean or Latin American context. The way that the society has evolved in not so much about separation but about hybridisation and about bringing all these contexts together. Whereas the American history is much more about exclusion and separation, and only slowly has developed into a more globalised and diverse society, and where this is accepted and not even questioned anymore. So I think that's why the idea of post-black relates so much to African-America and also probably black-British. There's something about it. There probably wasn't as much of a history of exclusion, but I need to be careful. I didn't grow up here so I'm not

an expert about black British history. I think that society has always been a bit more multicultural here, in a way. So it's probably a different kind of ground to be looked at.

Question 12:

To what do you understand black artists to be referring when they discuss their visibility in the mainstream? (00: 46:13 minutes into recording)

PG: Addressing this visibility was crucial to black British artists in the 1980s like Sonia Boyce and Keith Piper and Black Audio Film Collective and so on. Well you would need to tell me. I'm not sure if this is still very much a concern for practicing black British artists at the moment.

Question 13:

Do you think discussions about the visibility of black British artists have the same sense of urgency or importance that they perhaps did 10 or 20 years ago? (00: 47:25 minutes into recording)

PG: I think, I hope aspects of racial or cultural roots or determination become less important to be addressed in terms of art and as the society develops into a more open society. England is so much more advanced in terms of diversity than any other European country at least. Definitely more the Germany or Italy – the two countries I'm coming from. For me living here is fine, although I'm white European so I don't suffer from exclusions that other people from other cultural backgrounds do. But I think while the society is developing in a much more open way this will affect artistic practice in way that some of these issues will not be as important as they were 20 or 30 years ago. It was much more to broaden understanding and also develop relationships or acceptance of other cultures and now I think Britain is more and more international anyway and diverse so this will be reflected at some point in the art, not in terms of art addressing this issues, but it becoming totally normal that we show artists from all kinds of backgrounds next to each other and make other connections between them other than cultural. That's something we are developing towards.

Question 14:

What new ideas in the ongoing debate about black artists' visibility are you are aware of and what do you think of them? (00: 50:35 minutes into recording)

ADC: You can skip that one if you're not sure.

PG: I'll probably have to, as I'm not sure.

Question 15:

How do you think now ideas or development in the debate about visibility relates to developments in cultural policy and understandings of contemporary British art? (00: 51:16 minutes into recording)

PG: I think the understanding is much more advanced or progressive that what is reflected in Tate's collection. WE are taking care of a collection that has grown over more than 100 years and a lot of this growing of the collection has been very Western European and very British art focused. I think now our understanding is that we have to have a much more international view of it, and certain artists, movements and connections, relationships have been completely overlooked in the past. There is an awareness is already there but we are only at the beginning of starting to reflect this new thinking in

regards to things that have grown over a long period of time. Until the Tate collection is really diverse – it'll take another few decades because the relationships of the percentages of the works that are white British and Western European are so high that the balance will take a long time. I think the intellectual debates and artistic practice and partly the contemporary curatorial practice is more advanced than our collection. In terms of visibility it will take some time before this becomes a natural part of our archive and made visible like this. AT the moment we can only make it visible with exhibitions like *Afro Modern* and temporary exhibitions and debates and conferences – by things that can be turned around quickly. Even if you look at books and art history and the revision of art history it can take a long time. It's still very much, if you speak about black culture you have to speak about ethnography more or less now and if you speak about art you speak about white western art. There is a lot to be written about and shown and developed to make it really visible. On a positive side it seems to me in Britain, at least at Tate, they have an understanding and awareness of this and actions have been taken to make sure these will be shown.

Appendix 8.14

Interview with Lubaina Himid

17 January 2012 at the Bluecoat, School Lane, Liverpool, Merseyside L1 3BX

Continuation of discussion which had started before recording began, in which ADC was explaining to LH what her research questions were. (00:00:19 minutes into recording)

ADC: Do you want to start with...if you had a thought going on from what I was just saying? Please go for it.

LH: No, I don't think I did really have a thought. I think that trying to work out what the approach coming out of young black artists is to that history, is something that we have been trying to work out since that history. So that is a bit of a challenge, because I think it's quite an individual thing, and I have a sneaking suspicion that it was ever thus. So, strangely, I don't think there's all that much difference from how black artists who were coming out of art school thirty years ago thought and how they think today. Because, if you go into the art school, they are already thinking along certain lines. The art school, obviously, is not a neutral place. It teaches a particular way of being, more than it teaches you how to mix blue and yellow to make green. It's teaching you how to be an artist, whatever an artist is. So, any artists coming out of the art school are going to be thinking in a particular way.

ADC: And what do you think that is?

LH: I think it's very much based around the market or it's based around the history – the public collections. Or, increasingly, I think there are some art schools that are training artists to be generally creative, because they don't wish to teach them to be individual practitioners. But, generally, speaking, the mark of success in an art school setting, is to succeed commercially as an individual practitioner. I don't see why black artists coming out of the art school are thinking any differently than any other artist.

ADC: Yes, that's definitely my experience from having interviewed the four young artists who were involved in Action [exhibition curated by Sonia Boyce which took place at The Bluecoat in 2010]. I asked them if they had worries about access to 'visibility' or if they felt that there was anything that stood in their way. And they, particularly the younger ones, said that they felt, you know, 'I'm just starting out, I've got no idea, but maybe in ten years' time I'll feel differently. But, right now, I'm just feeling optimistic and excited about my career'. The older ones felt like, 'I don't care how people position me and I'm happy to play different roles, as long as I get my work shown'. Would you say that was your attitude when you were finishing art school?

LH: I would say that my attitude was slightly different. Not special, but different, because I trained as a theatre designer. So, I am in an art school setting, absolutely, but I am on a course that is about *teams* of people, about *groups* of people; so, groups of actors, groups of makers of props, if you like – if you want to use old fashioned terms, and groups of people making scenery. We're talking around texts, and we're designers, not fine artists, following texts or music, ballet music, opera, theatre. The whole ethos of that art school was...well, it was a pretty grand and elite sort of place at Wimbledon Art School, but nonetheless, there was an ethos of...if you were in the second year of that art school, you were part of the work team of the third year. It wasn't about the individual. It was about the team. Yes, it was about who was designing the set for this

play or ballet or whatever, but it was totally understood that you couldn't do it alone. It wasn't about doing things alone. It was about being able to communicate with a team of people, and getting your ideas, gradually, to develop in collaboration with directors, with performers, and with a space. So it's a completely different way of dealing with creativity, and dealing with the art school. It still wasn't a fun place to be, it was still hell. But I was being trained in a different way. So by the time I came out of...we're talking...leaving the BA course in 1976. The air was *thick* with politics; the politics of IRA bombings in London, with all that 1970s shift towards Thatcherism and the like, the three-day week. It sounds like a kind of war zone now. One of the funniest things...the people I went to Wimbledon with, we all used to take, because we didn't care, we used to take sugar in our tea. There was a sugar shortage, and there was a guy who used to dip toffees in his teas, and that's how he dealt with it. It was mad. But if you talk about it, it sounds like World War Two. So, it was thick with the politics of the everyday. You were confronted with the political situation of there being shortages of things, three-day weeks and power cuts, in the everyday. So it made you a political animal. And if you weren't...it was an extremely a-political course at Wimbledon, but if you understand how much further you can get in a group than you can get individually, how much more interesting...I mean it was challenging, because if you want to get your ideas across it is challenging, but it is more interesting to work collaboratively, as a team, then you come out of that art school, truly damaged...you do come out damaged in some way, but with a different sort of training. So I was different, in that way.

ADC: How would you compare that to some of the artists you exhibited alongside in *The Thin Black Line* or *5 Black Women Now*?

LH: I think that, say, Veronica Ryan, well you would have to speak to Veronica Ryan, but if you read Veronica Ryan's texts in the original *Thin Black Line* catalogue and any other texts from shows that she had from around that time, she was trained as a fine artist and she thinks in that way – as an individual artist who is mapping out a career that she would parallel with some of the great British sculptors. You know, that's the language she uses, those are the institutions that she veers towards and that's the canon that she belongs to. It's completely different. I think Sonia [Boyce] is the same, really. She very much had a clear idea of herself as an individual, in those days. I think her work has developed in all sorts of different ways since then. But she was very clearly telling the story of her life. They were particularly personal investigations and snapshots of her every day. And that's what made them so incredibly desirable. Nobody had seen the story of black people's every day, except other black people. I don't think that was a strategy, that was just what she did. She told the story of her life. And that's completely different. I had come out of art school thinking, 'What team can I belong to? How can I find a place where I can work with other people and be part of this?'. That's when I began to get seriously politicised because I couldn't find anywhere to belong to. I realised that I hadn't been very strategic about belonging, about signing up to a team or a club or a theatre or a designer, and be a part of their team, before I left. You can put that down to, somewhere, a desire...I mean, I've always been an incredibly political person, going on marches, or making quite political work before I went to art school. But I'm not entirely sure that if I hadn't managed to belong and integrate I might well have gone with it. But that not being able to either form a team or form a design studio or be part of any of the great houses – the Opera House, the Royal Shakespeare Company, or any of those – I started to see how one could do it in fringe theatre, which I worked in a bit before...But in order to make any money I had to spend a bit of time, as theatre people do, doing other things than theatre things, waitressing...ordinary jobs, and trying

to put my creativity into that, by designing restaurant interiors and so on. So I kind of came at it from a different direction. My desire to organise and think of myself as part of something comes from an earlier political drive that I had as a teenager. I couldn't find any way to translate it into theatre. I could see how it could be done theoretically, but I couldn't make it happen. So, I was much more able to make it happen as a ...I didn't call myself a 'curator' then, and I don't think I even would now...but as an organiser of exhibitions, or a facilitator or a selector of other people's art, and as an encourager of other people's creativity.

Question 1:

Could you tell me how the Thin Black Lines display at Tate Britain came about? How did the idea for re-staging that show come about? Who approached who and why? (00:12:25 minutes into recording)

LH: It is complicated. The 'why' is less complicated, strangely, than the 'how' because...we need to go back to *Afro Modern* at Tate Liverpool. Here we are, in 2010 [referring to the time when the exhibition *Afro Modern* was on at Tate Liverpool and also to the years leading up to the exhibition when it was in development] and in the 2000s and there is a hint of yet another blockbuster show. Now, Eddie Chambers, and all sorts of others, have railed against the idea of a blockbuster show for decades. We know what happens. Many, many artists, they put, perhaps, three or four pieces of work on the wall, audiences are asked to walk many miles, making links and connections, reading, doubling back, revisiting. That's the good experience of a blockbuster show. The bad experience is that a big institution puts on an enormous show like that and they feel, for the next decade, that they've done their bit. We thought we had had that argument, that discussion. So there's that. Then there is the fact that some people, myself included, who are not included in this show, which to some degree, didn't quite make sense to me. I couldn't understand what is the premise of this show if these are the artists that you're dealing with. But because it was an enormous blockbuster show, I was only momentarily deeply annoyed. I thought, 'well, it doesn't make any difference anyway. I look a bit of a fool in this region not being in this show'. It makes you look like an idiot because everybody assumes you must be in it... '*Afro Modern* – Lubaina must have been in that. That makes sense'. So there was a little conflict about that, with myself.

I made a show, which I was making anyway, or which I had negotiated, anyway, across a few sites of National Museums Liverpool; Lady Levers, the Maritime Museum and Sudley House, and then over on the Wirral, the Williamson. And then the idea was to put it into some shops and cafes. So it was in the art shop in Jackson's in Slater Street and also in the Women's college at Blackburne House. So I made this show that splayed across several sites – *Jelly Mould Pavillions* – and the point was that you would go from site to site, and understand the city and black people's roles in the building of the wealth of that city, while going to these massively beautiful museums, and finding, tucked in as installations, these settings or these fake architectural exhibitions. I was making that anyway, and I think it was absolutely due to end on the day that *Afro Modern* began. So that, coincidentally, I have to say, was in my agenda. That was what I was focussing on, which is why the *Afro Modern* thing didn't eat away at my soul as I know it did for some other artists. So, I was very much involved with Liverpool, with the curators in Liverpool, with the museums in Liverpool, and with the city itself – I was doing slavery walks, all kinds of websites and negotiating with the newspaper, around this show.

I go to the *Afro Modern* dinner, because I had been on the board at Tate Liverpool and I work with the collection and blah blah blah, and I am sometimes invited to these kinds of receptions. I would go to an opening but I don't always go to the reception. I don't really like them very much. There's a kind of false sense of elitism and I find them quite difficult. At this age I'm not really a dinner party creature. Anyway, I go to this dinner and the people at the reception for *Afro Modern* and the people that were quite near me at the dinner, assume I must be in the show. They say, 'What was your work in the show?', and I say 'I'm not actually in the show. But because a lot of the people that are in the show, I have shown with, or I have given them a small opportunity early in their career, I kind of feel I'm in the show just through things I have done and conversations I've had, but I'm not actually in it'. So I'm sitting next to a guy and I don't know who this guy is. He asks me about my work and what I do, then he realises who I am and I realise who he is and he is Paul Goodwin, who was one of the associate curators on the show. Now, because I'm now fifty-seven – I'm not twenty-five – I don't say, 'What the hell have you made a show like this for?'. I say what I actually believe, which is 'I can see why you wouldn't put the work of Lubaina Himid in this show because it would interrupt the narrative of the show'. Even if you look at that show, as you obviously did, many times, it was of a certain colour. There was even a colour palette to that show. There was a lot of brown, a lot of black, a lot of white, a lot of tan, a lot of grey. But if you put in a Lubaina Himid painting, just as a visible object in that, it holds up the narrative and it messes up the flow. You have a set of rooms like that and something would stop. Plus there's the fact that a lot of my work has a redemptive quality about it. There is a kind of hope. I refuse the negative, if you like. I have to find a resolution to the challenge of invisibility or mass murder or whatever it is. And that doesn't fit in with the narrative.

ADC: There were no works that addressed that as an issue.

LH: Well, as your analysis was much more intense than mine, I'm glad we agree. So, curatorially, there was no place for Lubaina Himid. As soon as I saw that show, I absolutely understood it. If I was curating it I wouldn't have put it in either because it would have mucked up the story that was being told.

So actually, we had a really useful and interesting conversation about the invisibility of black women artists, whether I was interested in doing any work around that. Frankly, at that dinner table, I wasn't very interested, because I knew that revisiting that time would mean revisiting all kinds of personal things as well as political things, that I wasn't entirely sure I could manage to do. So we're talking about April 2010. But I had already been writing about that time, to some degree because I needed to get it straight in my head, I was finding that people were interested in transnational curating, and I was finding myself in meetings unable to remember who said what to whom. And I began to write these things down.

And so he asked me whether I was interested in revisiting this time. I said, 'No, frankly, I'm not really that interested. I'm certainly not interested in curating shows. But I am interested in having discussions, panel discussions, seeing whether my story matches with anybody else's story. He was education curator at the time at Tate Britain, and he said 'Maybe we could do some public discussions and private seminars at Tate'. I said, 'Yeah, I would be quite interested in that'. We parted on that vague note. But it was very much like, you go out to lunch with some guy and he says 'I'll see you next week' and you think 'I don't give a shit', you know...it was pleasant but you know, I always read

those things in The Guardian about blind dates. It was about a second. It was interesting, but I didn't think anything would come of it.

But then, he seemed to have gone away and put forward the idea of what black women artists were doing in the 1980s to the programme coordinators or whatever they're called at Tate Britain. Before I knew it, so we're talking April 2010, we had much conversation all the way through 2010, and by the end of 2010, we were talking about the possibility of displaying archive material in a bigger show about the 80s that might happen in 2012. So I thought that was ok, as I have a lot of archive material and I was quite interested in that. So I talked to my team at UCLAN [University of Central Lancashire], and we were thinking, 'Ok, if we were to divide this into what women were doing in the 80s, how much stuff do we actually have?'. So, we thought that that was maybe what the contribution would be. But sometime in the winter of 2010/2011, suddenly there's a decision that it's going to be a show about...a display – it was always called a display which is quite particular – a display about black women artists in the 1980s and would I co-curate it with Paul [Goodwin]. Penelope Curtis [Director of Tate Britain] writes me an email and says she would really would really appreciate it if I would work on this project with Paul.

ADC: Would they have gone on to do it anyway, if you had said no?

LH: I think they might have, but I think what would have happened, because that's what it proved, is that it would have been difficult. They would have had to come back to me because I think what became apparent was that, in some senses, I kind of held some keys to how it could be done. Not the *only* way it could be done, but if you were going to do it – well I *would* say that, and the wisdom of that is something we can discuss – but there is only one way to do it. For me, if we were going to do it, I had to feel at the end of it that I had carved a permanent place for black women artists at the heart of British art. That was the only point in then doing it; to show that we were making work (not enough), to show that we made work then but are not making work now (not enough), to show that we were making work then and have been making work continuously, and that the work was then quite excellent and is still making differences was the point. So, I think we would have gone on the make a 1980s research-based display. But it was only ever going to be in one gallery. Of course, there was a danger, if you were going to spread it to 'the 1980s black artists', you've got a mess on your hands. You can't make a show in one room, because what you realise is that it has to be a blockbuster show then. If you are going to call it that, then it's massive. Displays can only usually be work that is in the Tate collection. But then, if you look at what is in the Tate collection by black women artists from the 1980s, there isn't very much. So, then we've got another problem on our hands, having narrowed it down, then what are we to do? So I said we had to borrow work to make it work. We had to borrow work from other collections, because what I was trying to show was that this work was worth collecting. Tate didn't collect it, but it was worth collecting, and for reasonable amounts of money, more or less at the time. Penelope Curtis, at Tate, was willing to go along with that, even though, to some degree, it exposed huge shortcomings in Tate's collection. But I think, to be frank, that that show developed as it developed because that's a problem that's useful for her to deal with.

ADC: In what way do you think it is useful?

LH: I think she can question what is in the collection, what should have been, what the role of Tate is in collecting emerging work, rather than a knee-jerk reaction. She can maybe now – I don't know for certain – but maybe she can have much broader discussions about collecting than she could have had if she hadn't been encouraging and questioning. But you would have to speak to her about that. But that's what it seemed to me. To not only not mind that the work didn't come from her collection...to some degree...in conversation, she has said that Tate had somewhat missed a trick – but she could say that because it was thirty years ago and it wasn't her responsibility – but I think that she thought that that opened up interesting debates. She's very much a champion of Veronica Ryan. She very much likes that work and I think she saw that as another opportunity to show Veronica's work and to bring that back into our debate and conversation. So, it had all kinds of different uses for Tate Britain. I thought that it could have some uses for the women who were selected for it. I don't know if that answers the question, but it [the display] came about in a messy sort of way. I suspect that many shows probably do.

Question 2:

At the time Paul [Goodwin] was in the Public Programme team at Tate Britain as the Cross-Cultural Curator. That post hadn't existed for very long, but before Paul was in it, Mike Phillips was in that role. What do you think the significance is of Paul being in that role when he met you at that dinner? If it hadn't been him that had met you, and it had been a different curator, Tanya Barson for example, do you think the discussion about Thin Black Lines being shown at Tate could have happened? (00: 29:55 minutes into recording)

LH: No. I don't think so. I think he was trying to redress a balance. I think he had understood that there was a discussion that was missing. Because I wasn't making a claim at all, that black women artists led that movement in the 80s. We didn't. But we were at the heart of many of the different sorts of groups, as ever; women are very often at the heart of political groups, political activity, but they don't often lead from the front. But you often cannot tell the story of a group without telling the story of the women. I also think that women in groups, whether they are artistic groups or political groups, or political artistic groups, tend not to stick with the group. They tend to have conversations with other groups and don't think of themselves as, you know, 'The Labour Party'...they think of themselves as other things as well...lawyers or doctors or mothers or whatever. So, I think women tend to group in different ways. So, I'm not sure that a conversation with any other kind of curator could have had that sort of rambling set of hunches or feelings or vague remembrances. If I had had that kind of discussion with any other kind of curator, even though they might well have been freelance curators or whatever...I think...it's difficult. You can be *in* the Tate but not *of* the Tate. I think there were things that we wanted to say to the institution itself as well as to the world outside, and I think if you were working with certain curators, maybe those who have been there fifteen or twenty years, there's also a difficulty that they have saying things about the Tate – about its role and about the way it could do more or should do more. There's a difficulty there. But because Penelope Curtis wanted me to work – for free, I have to say – as a freelance curator, she was obviously up for the critique. She understood that I understood about the art, probably more than I understand about the politics. So the bottom line is that I will always want to make a beautiful experience, if I can, because that's where I think political arguments are won, in the art gallery. If you can create an experience in which audiences feel differently, once they've gone out to how they felt when they went in. And they don't, sometimes. Of course, sometimes audiences don't know why they feel differently, because they're not reading the context, they're just

experiencing the rooms. But I think there are ways you can do that. And I think she [Curtis] knew that I would do that.

ADC: So you didn't get paid?

LH: No. But I do get paid by the university. But it is an important issue. Not so much is it an important issue that Tate would want me to do something but not pay me. That's not the problem. But the problem is, perhaps, that you can then only have Lubaina Himid to do it, because only Lubaina Himid could afford to do it – because I have a professorship in the north of England. It's a particularly difficult situation. There's a mirroring of those early shows, where I could facilitate, curate and select those shows because of where I was living and who I was living with. I could do it for no money because no one was asking me for any money to live on. You know, having to pay the rent, and if you don't pay the rent you get thrown out. It was a casual way of being in those days. So, again, only I could have put on those shows because I could do it for no money. And that tips the balance of the politics, again. Although it's not something I beat myself up about, it is important, because it means that if you choose somebody to make shows who is not going to be demanding a living wage for doing it, then they've got a particular attitude on life, they come from a particular direction. It makes a difference.

ADC: I was also thinking about the importance of Paul Goodwin's role at Tate, which I suspect has probably changed now.

LH: Yes, they've sort of abandoned that role altogether. There isn't such a thing as a cross-cultural curator any more.

ADC: I've always felt that it's very problematic to have a separate role that deals with the sorts of issues that he ended up dealing with, and that the kind of work he did wasn't spread out among the work of the 'normal' curators. But, having said that, most of the work that he has done without him and without that role. And now what happens? I have very mixed feeling about it. So, I was wondering what you feel about it?

LH: I definitely think that is the danger. He works in a freelance capacity now. He's been curating *Migrations* which opens at the end of January [2012 at Tate Britain]. But yes, I think there has been a terrific shift at Tate in education which was, to some degree, which was disguised, as these things often are, by cuts in funding. But what cuts in funding allow you to do is just your politics. It's that simple. You see it everywhere and I think that's what happened to them. They needed less staff in that department so they shift the emphasis away from one thing to another. I think he is valued and I think his contribution was valued, but I am not sure whether Tate as a whole...the best thing, possibly, to have would have been a cross-cultural curatorial team. Then they would have had some clout, across Tate. But asking one man to have that influence across that enormous set of institutions ... because although they are one Tate, they are run differently. I think it's a pity that he isn't in that role now.

Question 3:

So thinking again about the nuts and bolts of that display...you sort of hinted at it at the Otherwise Engaged Symposium, what sort of difficulties and obstacles did you encounter in getting that display together, especially in terms of how Tate runs itself?

(00: 40:10 minutes into recording)

LH: I suppose the difficulties were not organisational or bureaucratic. I am particularly allergic to bureaucracy. But, that was not an issue. I suppose the obstacles, and the mistake is, from my point of view, looking back, is that it [the display] benefits from being under the wing of the British collection. So, as you walk through the galleries, it seems part of Tate. It belongs. That's a great advantage for me, because if it seems to belong, that is, to some degree, a lot of what I have been trying to achieve. On the other hand, that total integration of works that are borrowed from other collections mean that the difficulty and the challenge of trying to make sure that after the black diaspora has a place, if it wants it, at the heart of British art, makes that look easy, makes it look not like a challenge at all. So, to some degree, while looking at it as a room, it also vanished. Trying to keep that display visible over these seven months has been a challenge. Lots of the messages I was getting from Paul, rather than from the central set of people, was that they were not prepared to fund a catalogue or a leaflet; it was a display. So we couldn't do that. You don't have an opening, because it's a display. Marketing were very cautious about pushing it when it opened, from their point of view, not curatorial, that much of the work was borrowed. They didn't want a debate about that in the press.

ADC: Even though Penelope Curtis didn't mind?

LH: Yes. That's the case of huge institutions, if you go onto any museum, publicity and marketing are running one kind of organisation, curatorial are running another kind of organisation, buildings and estates are running another organisation. So it doesn't cohere in quite the way you hope it would. So it [the display] was in danger of becoming invisible. Now, I think what's happened, is that because of the networks; the networks that I have, that Paul has, that the artists have, and because it is in London – the heart of art school land, academia and all the rest of it, it isn't, in fact, invisible academically. But in terms of press, absolutely. My university, the University of Central Lancashire, were well up for providing funds for a catalogue. But of course, it's a whole other project, so it was never going to be able to come out in time for the opening, but there's a legacy there.

So I guess the obstacles or the difficulties were having made something, and having gone through the tedium – there were only fourteen pieces of work on the wall and maybe forty items of archive material in two cases – the bureaucracy for that is very particular, and the rules for that are very particular. But, on the other hand, the team that put it together, in the week that we put it together, there were never less than fifteen people in the room making sure it was hung beautifully, labelled beautifully. I mean the texts, you can put any old text on the wall, as you absolutely would know. So, I wrote a lot of texts, but there is a particular way of working at Tate Britain, where they really don't go for more than two hundred word introductory texts and one hundred word texts for the artists. So, that was very challenging, because you could have written five or six thousand words in each of those cases. I found that challenging; how to tell a story without telling the story, and letting the work tell the story was a real challenge. Of course, I believe in the work, but there is something about words that do provide the background. This is why I made that map. What I was trying to say was that much of that black/Asian art experience happened because of the funding that was available and because it was happening in theatre, in publishing, in the art schools to some extent – people were able to go back to art school to do the odd lecture here and there. So the women in that room were connected; all these different sort of creative bodies. I

attempted to tell that story in a map because I couldn't tell it in text. I found that a challenge and an obstacle.

Question 4:

What do you think the reason was for it being a display and not an exhibition? Was it because of needing to borrow works? (00:47:18 minutes into recording)

LH: Yes. Well, it is on for seven months, and that's probably as long as any hang. I think exhibitions take a lot more money and are saying something else, aren't they? If Tate have got an exhibition on then it's inviting a dialogue between, perhaps, the owners of those paintings or sculptures or whatever they are, who might be artists or who might be great collectors, or who might be other museums. Exhibitions are about showing off lovely things, but they are also about conversations between owners.

ADC: And they are also about making money.

LH: I think that would have been the ultimate challenge. It would have made it very difficult to make it into something you had to pay to get into. If it was something you had to pay to get into, I would have had a real difficulty with that. That just about goes against every principle that I have. I think those chance encounters are often what completely shifts people's thinking. And you haven't much of a hope of a chance encounter if you have to cough up £8.00.

I think there are all sorts of reasons [why it was a display and not an exhibition], but, if I thought that display would never lead to anything else I wouldn't have done it. But I do believe that it can and will lead to more acquisition of work. At least four of those artists of the seven were not in the collection at all – that's Ingrid Pollard, Maud Sulter, Sutapa Biswas and Claudette Johnson. I put those people's work in because I want Tate to consider acquiring that work. I think it's absolutely essential. They might not be able to do it by the end of the run, but I definitely hope they will be able to do it by the middle of the decade.

ADC: What leads you to believe that Tate will?

LH: Because I think I have had influence on them buying work before. If you go back to 2005, I made a piece of research called 'Open Sesame' which directly addressed work by people of the black diaspora in their collection; what was in there and what wasn't in there. And then you look again at a piece of work we did in 2007, huge shifts happened. I think without acknowledging it, up front, there are people in that institution listening, and making, clumsy though they may be sometimes, attempts to redress a balance. I suppose the simple answer is, I've done it before and I'll do it again. I think it's possible.

Question 5:

Having now finished putting that display together, what conclusions have you drawn from that experience? What new insights, if any, have you gained from having worked on that project? (00:51:23 minutes into recording)

LH: I suppose I've understood that it's strangely easier to deal with the biggest and most grand national collection than it is to deal with the large, metropolitan galleries and museum services. They're not so frightened. They're a bit frightened about what their audiences and governors will say. But they are not as afraid as cities in Britain. So, it's

useful thing to know; that actually they are massive but they are up for a certain amount of challenge. But there is nothing more spectacular than knowing that a million people have gone through that gallery. Even if lots of them weren't taking any notice of it, even if it was half a million who actually noticed what was on the wall, and a quarter of a million took any notice, it's still just incredible. So, it's worth everything to do that.

What other insights? Strangely, I've understood that there are a whole band of American curators who are much more interested in what we did, what we tried to do and what we failed to do, and also what we're still trying to do, than many British curators, academics and gallery staff, because they came to that show. Having engaged them with that work, and for much of the time, they were saying, 'It's great to see this work in the real. I've only ever seen one of these pieces, or seen them in reproduction'. So the insight was that I realised that the impact we made, all of us, was greater than you would ever imagine, wandering around Britain. Not necessarily the same artists, I have to say, but people like Isaac Julien are massive in The States. And to some degree, I think he would agree that it came out of those movements. So I think those reverberations are much more internationally felt than I had understood. I don't think we are as invisible internationally, as we are, say, in the city of Liverpool.

ADC: Why do you think that is?

LH: I think it's a British way of doing things, which works to some degree. Without using some sort of ridiculous cliché, it's a gentle, polite, slightly secretive repression that happens. There's very little emphasis on money and on the market, even though it obviously functions in a very important way. If you are to discuss what's important, the public gallery is still considered an important place. So, the commercial or private collector doesn't have as much visible influence here. I think in Britain, one knows one's place, and you keep to your place. You're not going to get killed if you don't, but you kind of get ignored if you don't behave. If you don't behave, if you rebel, there's a kind of blanking that goes on – politically or creatively. But if you do behave, you're a piece on the chessboard, and you go at the pace that things are allowed to go at. This 80s revival [exemplified by exhibitions/displays such as Thin Black Lines, the BLK Art Group and Brixton Calling] is the pace at which it's supposed to go.

ADC: Could you expand on that?

LH: I suppose the thirty-five year olds are looking back at what was happening when they were being born. I think that's the pace at which curatorial patterns go.

Question 6:

Do you think that that's the only reason why these shows are happening now? Because, I remember you briefly mentioning at your talk in Leeds [at the Otherwise Engaged Symposium] about the importance of looking back at that period now. Could you go through that point again? What do you think the significance is of these shows happening now? (00:57:33minutes into recording)

LH: Not that we're that old, and I think that I'm older than most of these artists like Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce [whose work is revisited in the above mentioned displays and exhibitions], I'm about seven or eight years older than them, but I think there's that. I think unless some of that story is captured now, from fifty year olds and fifty-five year olds, the drive and the energy to do it would be lost, in fifteen years' time. The very

people who do have the drive and the energy to look back at those shows are in the middle of their careers and need to make a career for themselves. Academics, or whatever, need to find a way of making themselves visible. So there are histories that are neglected or forgotten or mis-told. I think you have to have a lot of energy to do it, and a lot of time and a lot of brain cells still intact. So you've got to be somewhere between the age of thirty and forty-five to be able to do it. So, I think in all sorts of ways, the time is right. My range of cultural expertise is not as great as it should be. But if I knew about car design or bicycle design, or if I knew about architecture to a great degree, I'd probably find in all sorts of circles that period [the early 1980s] is being looked at, certainly politically, because there seem to have been shifts and changes, lurches to the right, lurches to the left, uprisings and so on.

ADC: I was wondering if that is a factor. People seem to be comparing the present moment with the early 1980s, politically. I was wondering if it is something to do with a mourning for a lack of politics in art, or if it's something to do with...after the YBAs and artists becoming much more individualistic in their approaches, and now we're seeing a much more collaborative approach to art making beginning to surface again. So, I was wondering if that is part of the reason for looking back at that period now...for inspiration or...

LH: Yes, I don't know. I don't know that it is. I think you'd have to be cleverer than me to know that that was the reason. I can only say from my personal point of view. I thought that if I don't write this down now I am never going to remember what the hell went on, frankly, because I have other agendas and I have hundreds of other people to deal with now. So that's why I wanted to write that stuff down. And Maud Sulter died, meanwhile, and Donald Rodney, and they were significant. They were quite particularly brilliant, and had a way of telling a story about their work that is different to how I would tell it or how Sonia [Boyce] might tell it. And I think there are artists like Claudette Johnson or Ingrid Pollard who have a very special and particular story to tell and don't always make the opportunity for themselves, or aren't given the opportunity to tell it. So that was important to me. If I don't say...really look at Claudette Johnson, who's going to say it? If I don't say Ingrid Pollard is making particularly insightful, yet quite consistent comment on our environment, then who's going to say it? That's not to say that these women were invisible, but their contribution is quite significant. So, that's a personal thing, and I know why I did it. But, except for the reasons of fashion and age and of that's what I think people do – look back at a time that is of their time but in which they were not active. So it seems like history to them, it seems lost, it seems vanished, it seems buried.

The YBAs are a funny anomaly really. I think they were absolutely aware of what we had been doing; they were in those shows or they were at those shows of ours. But their tutors had a much greater understanding of the market, and understood that that was obviously a way to make money, but also to make a point about artists having careers. It was a way of keeping the art school going. Many people mention that they didn't go to art school because they didn't want to, or their parents didn't want them to, or told them they were too clever to do it, or that they would never make any money. So, the YBAs did art schools a favour, because young people could point to them and say, 'Actually, you can make money, you can have a career, you can have a reputation'. So, to some degree, I think the YBAs were an art school construct, to make sure that the art school continued to be relevant, because they were being swallowed up in larger universities and institutions.

Question 7:

How do you think debates around the issue of black artists' visibility have developed since the 1980s? What is your perception of that issue, now? (01:05:08 minutes into recording)

LH: Without trying to shirk the question, it is quite difficult to analyse a visibility or invisibility, when you're in it. But if you think about Yinka Shonibare, Steve McQueen and Chris Ofili, black artists have probably never been more visible, from the 1980s to now. They have kept that person at the front of everybody's thinking for quite a long time. They have all done it in a way that is about as political as the British art establishment is ever going to allow. But they're still a lot more political than, say, Gary Hume. So, to some degree, the old guard of Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers and Donald Rodney – you can make an absolute analogy between those three and Ofili, Shonibare and McQueen. Those three are beget of those three. There couldn't have been Ofili, Shonibare and McQueen without those three. They wouldn't have existed. So, to some degree, I think they kept the idea of black art alive, even if it wasn't our idea of black art. They kept it visible, even if it wasn't our idea of visible. They made a lot of us invisible with their visibility. But if you look at any art movement, that's going to be the case. But that's sort of the point. You have to trash people before you can make a space. I'd rather they didn't. I'd rather they hadn't. But I'm not surprised. As I said, I've seen generations and generations of art students doing that.

But I would perceive that there wasn't an invisibility, because I could always make that connection between what they were doing and where they came from. But in terms of how that initial, very vociferous and very particular set of people – the BLK Art Group – made us all visible, it couldn't last, could it? It couldn't sustain a visibility over all that time because it wasn't connected enough to money or influential enough in the big institutions.

Obviously, visibility, and I do talk about it a lot, is that it is ironic that the most visible artists in a room of artists, the black artists are the most visible because they're black and the rest of the room is usually not. But black artists are the most invisible in terms of the histories and the art market. But it's not a surprise and if you compare it to the rest of Europe, what we have managed to achieve here is phenomenal. But again, I think it's that British sort of way; allowing a certain amount of things to happen and keeping it at a particular level. It's not a country of extremes, whatever anyone might say, compared to France or Germany. The French or the Germans would be in complete denial of a black art movement, of the existence of black artists except as exotic being in a small, commercial gallery way. They don't see them as international players, I don't think.

It's how you define invisibility, where you come at it from, what the advantages are. Then there are the whole difficulties that artists have; the desire to be individually important, and yet, a kind of inability to be particularly articulate, verbally or academically, to contextualise that. The artist is always relying on a whole set of other people to make that happen. Artists themselves are not particularly good at making themselves visible. It's less of a team thing. You can't easily work in the way that musicians work – in a band or in an orchestra, you're part of all sorts of communal and group activities – so it's always going to be a bit of a challenge for artists to main a visibility, unless they have commercial support or state support. I would say that those three - Ofili, Shonibare and McQueen – absolutely understood that. They found themselves, more or less, a very nice mixture of state and commercial support. They

were taught very well, they understood it and they took advantage of it. I wouldn't want to use the word 'grateful', but it is hard work to sustain careers that they have. They do have to still make the work. They still have to go through the enormous amount of public attack that Chris Ofili went through, or ridicule that Yinka Shonibare often goes through, to keep going. So while they may be able to ask for in the hundreds of thousands for their work, they have to work for it. They were prepared to go out on a limb, they were prepared to be controlled and guided by dealers and public curators to do it. I think they are very much puppets, really. But to some degree, it's helpful. They didn't disappear.

So, I think that invisibility is relative, it's questionable, it's arguable. Black women were never at the forefront of things; they were at the centre – at the heart of things. I think Sonia Boyce goes out on a limb, is not afraid to be experimental, works well with institutions, works well with say, The Bluecoat, or Tate. Women's lives are like that. You can't put as much time and energy as a man can into that career. But I think Sonia Boyce probably comes nearest, at keeping herself visible and therefore keeping the rest of us visible, consistently, from 1983 to 2013.

Question 8:

What are your feelings about The Bluecoat's relationship to the issue of black artists having or not having visibility in publicly funded or mainstream galleries? What has your experience been, either through your involvement or through your observations? (01:15:09 minutes into recording)

LH: Well, it's a difficult relationship, certainly. I think one of the reasons is because it's in Liverpool. I think it's a difficult place; a difficult city that had a superficially open attitude but, in fact, is quite divided and quite a challenging place for a black person to be. I think all the institutions in Liverpool reflect that because they have to be aware of that. The interesting thing about The Bluecoat is that it has consistently seemed open to the idea of black artists. The history is long and the association has been quite strategic. But, I think, in terms of advancing particular careers, or opening up really interesting debates within the city, I don't think they've managed to do. But it's an art centre. It's not parliament. It doesn't make laws. It can only do what the people working here can do. There have been different relationships with all artists in Liverpool since the beginning of The Bluecoat as an arts centre. It was the centre of art before Tate came along. The Walker was there, but it [The Bluecoat] was the centre of energetic, emerging contemporary practice. To that degree, it was incredibly useful. It was always there to attempt to have those debates.

My relationship to it is a bit dodgy. I've never really been able to form a useful relationship with The Bluecoat. But it's probably a question of taste, as much as anything. I think the kind of work I make will not go down the route that perhaps it needs to in relation to The Bluecoat. The work I make is very much about a... some of the time it's quite funny, it asks you to engage with it and then do something about it, it gives you space to find a way forward. So I would say it's probably a bit positive and a bit funny for The Bluecoat. I've never been able to strike up, even though I have known the curators – the different ones over the years – quite well, I've never been able to strike up an exhibiting relationship with The Bluecoat.

ADC: Would you want one?

- LH: Yes. Absolutely. If I could do it, I would. If they would offer me, I would do it, because I think it's such an interesting city. The *Jelly Mould Pavilions* piece that I made was about trying to get the people of Liverpool to engage with the city and the treasures of the city. We were trying to make those analogies between the things that were hidden and the things that were obvious. I would make something quite different at The Bluecoat, but it would probably reflect on the things that I always have. But if you were to lay The Bluecoat next to other institutions – the Cornerhouse or the Serpentine, any other sort of comparable institutions – it has done an incredible job.
- ADC: I did some research based on the information given in the 'Timelines' chapter of *Shades of Black* [Duke University Press/INIVA, 2005]. I was trying to find out who was exhibited the most, which regions were the most active in terms of showing the work of black artists...
- LH: If you were going to compare The Bluecoat to the Ikon in Birmingham, I still think...
- ADC: The problem with my figures is that they are only based on the information provided in *Shades of Black* [2005], and I'm not sure just how comprehensive that was, but the most exhibited black artists between 1976 and 1999...it was fifty-fifty between men and women, and I'm pretty sure that that's down to the exhibitions you had organised, anyway Keith Piper was the most exhibited during that period, followed by Sonia Boyce, and then followed by you. The most exhibited artists between 1980 and 1989, you were at the top.
- LH: That is extraordinary!
- ADC: The most exhibited black artists between 1990 and 1999...Chila Burman is at the top of that list, but you don't feature on the list.
- LH: Isn't that funny? Yes, because I had left London and had started to teach up at the University. So that makes sense.
- ADC: Yes. And then in terms of the most active galleries between 1976 and 1999, at the top is obviously the Black Art Gallery, followed by Brixton Art Gallery, and 198 Gallery, and then Ikon.
- LH: Oh, ok.
- ADC: And then The Bluecoat comes in a little bit further down the list but still in the top few, and then Camerawork, and then Rochdale Art Gallery.
- LH: Because I was there and Maud Sulter was there, and Jill Morgan, who ran the place, was there [at Rochdale]. She was incredibly involved.
- ADC: Yes. Between 1980 and 1989, those same galleries feature in the top few active galleries in terms of showing the work of black artists, but the ones at the very top are all in London. Only Sheffield Art Gallery features amongst those at the very top. Between 1990 and 1999, 198 Gallery was the most active gallery.
- LH: You know, I had no perception that the Ikon was up there along with The Bluecoat.

- ADC: No, it's not the first gallery you might think of when thinking about those significant black art shows of the 1980s.
- LH: No.
- ADC: In terms of regional activity, and excluding London which was obviously the busiest region, the West Midlands was the most active, followed by the North West.
- LH: That's interesting.
- ADC: I'm not sure how I will use this information, but it's there.
- LH: Yes. Well, I think The Bluecoat has done its bit by picking up the threads of things. But if we count visibility, going back to a previous question, in terms of monographs, television programmes, presence in connections, being at the forefront of the debate about art, then that's another thing. That's what real visibility is. If you're ever going to pursue this idea of visibility, I think you have to pursue the money spent on PR. I think, somehow, somebody has to find out what Tracey Emin spends on PR. What does David Hockney spend on PR? What proportion of their income is spent on PR? I think there are simple sums that are done. There are PR rules that you have to be talked about, say, once every fifteen days to keep your name in the...and it doesn't matter how. Ed Milliband being talked about as an idiot is better than not being talked about at all for fifteen days. To think about visibility and significance in terms of politics, rather than commerce, is maybe a mistake. If Ikon have shown more black artists than The Bluecoat, it will be because Birmingham City Council totted up their numbers, and proportionally speaking, decided to put more money into that gallery, for those particular shows. The amount of black shows that are on are absolutely usually matched to where they could get the funding from. If there was no funding, no separate applicable for funding, there would be no shows. So, if you were going to say that the Ikon did better than The Bluecoat, if the Ikon could apply what one would cheaply call 'black money', but The Bluecoat couldn't, then The Bluecoat would win. That's something to think about. I don't know how you find out how the average but very visible artist in Britain keeps themselves in the public eye. But, I think you ring up a PR company and say, 'How much would you charge to publicise what I do for you?', and have a whole conversation about ...you know, if you wanted to be in the paper every week or local TV, how much would they charge? Then you add a few noughts and then you've got it. I don't think it's a criminal thing to do, I don't think it's a wrong thing to do. I think it's a fact. When you see Tracey Emin on the front page of the Guardian with the Queen opening the Turner Contemporary gallery in Margate, there's a PR company that managed that.
- ADC: I haven't spent a lot of time thinking about that, but it could be pretty major.
- LH: It could be – to visibility. I don't think you would have to go on the most enormous tangent. You probably know people in bands. You could get them to ring up a PR company and ask what it would cost. Ringing up as an academic, they would think it was a bit weird. But a band, or a clothing company or something like that.
- ADC: I'll let you know if I do!
- LH: It might help. How much are big galleries and institutions' marketing budgets? It all goes towards it...keeping visible.

ADC: Yes. I think The Bluecoat suffer from an invisibility themselves because of that issue.

Appendix 8.15

Interview with Grace Ndiritu

3 May 2011 at her studio (Flat 30 Crownstone Court, Crownstone Road, London, SW2 1LS)

Question 1:

Perhaps you could start by telling me how you first got involved in the *Action* exhibition and how you were approached. (00:00:23 minutes into recording)

GN: Ok. How I got involved was Sara [Sara-Jayne Parsons] – she emailed me, and just told me the brief of the exhibition. That was it, basically. And then we spoke on the phone and she explained more. And then eventually, Sonia and Bryan came round for a studio visit. I showed them the Alaska piece. And I told them about the new piece that I wanted to make – *A Week in the News* [this became *A Week In The News: 7 Places We Think We Know, 7 News Stories We Think We Understand*, 2010 and was displayed in the Bluecoat Hub during the *Action* exhibition]. That was it basically. I didn't see Sonia until the opening. But I went up to Liverpool before Christmas [2009] for the day and I met up with Bryan [Biggs] and Sara again and I showed them the piece I was working on - *A Week in the News* – that became the commission. We also looked at the technical stuff to do with the installation. What made me do this exhibition was it was an opportunity for me to showcase this *Journeys North* [*Journeys North: Pole to Pole*, 2009] and that it would be installed professionally and properly, and they did such a good job with the installation. The pictures I got of it, I'm still really proud of it and I still get really good feedback. So, that's how I got into the show.

It wasn't really contextualised within, what you've written as a 'black survey show' [referring to ADC's email and list of interview questions]. That's not what I felt about it. Initially, obviously because Sonia [Boyce] is so located in that history of black art, I did think to myself, 'Do I want to do this show?'. Because I've really avoided being in those types of shows within Britain. I feel that the culture here and the history here hasn't been that sympathetic or it hasn't been supported enough, in the right way. Whereas, I've done a lot of interesting shows in America. I've shown at the Studio Museum, I was in *Flow* [an exhibition at the Studio Museum, Harlem, New York in 2008, which was a survey of new work by twenty emerging artists who were either born in Africa or born to African parents, and live and work in Africa, Europe or North America]. You know that show they do every five years? So I was in that one. I did a show at the Met which was about essential art of African textiles [*The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design Without End*, an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2008-2009], and a parallel show at Gray Art Gallery [*Poetics of the Cloth African Textiles/Recent Art* at Gray Gallery, New York in 2008] and recently I did a show called *Pattern ID* in Akron [Akron Art Museum, Ohio, in 2011] and in Kansas [Kemper Museum, Kansas, in 2011]. That's also about textiles but it also has a lot of interesting artists like Kehinde Wiley and Nick Cave from that Afro-American culture, you could say. But they're all...the thing in America they're all seen as...they might start off in the Studio Museum but in the end, a lot of them are seen as legitimate artists, on the same level as their white counterparts. Whereas here, it doesn't feel like that here.

It feels like...when I first moved here, I have a weird history. I'm from Birmingham, but I studied in Winchester, I was studying textiles, and then I went to De Ateliers in Amsterdam for two years. So there, my idea of a career in art was quite European. Seeing shows in Germany and Holland, and doing them and all my teachers being a very international crowd. I had amazing teachers like Marlene Dumas and Ceal Floyer and Stan Douglas and Steve McQueen. So that level of teachers just opened my eyes up and

I thought 'Wow! You can do anything as an artist! It's not limited'. So that's how I've always thought of being as an artist. Then I moved back to England. It did help me that I started my showing career in Europe and not England, because it looked good on my CV as a young artist having done that, whereas everyone else had gone to London and Goldsmiths and stayed. I had a wider experience. So that helped. Then I moved to Delfina. I was there for the UK residency. So I got a free studio for two years. It was an interesting time, because the artists in the building – we had Glenn Brown, Michael Raedekker, Mark Titchner – we had a varied level of artist. It was nice for me. It made me learn a lot about how the art world works, realistically. De Atelier was quite a utopia – we had a free studio, a free house, free everything, support. So then going to Delfina and seeing how the art world works in terms of selling art, it made me really realise. That's when I could see that you could get trapped, pigeon-holed as a black artist, and never be seen as equal to my counterparts. So I always avoided that within the British landscape, because I knew that all the boys like Mark or Toby Ziegler, they were allowed to do whatever shows they wanted. I thought, 'Well, why can't I?'. So when interesting things came up in America I thought 'OK, why not?'. Obviously my family is from Africa and I've been going there since I was a kid and also for my own research. So I've started to try and show in Africa every year now. I've shown in Dakar, Lagos, Addis Ababa, and I'm hoping this year in Bamako. So, it's very important to me. But it's not limiting. Africa is a global phenomenon! It can't be contained.

I've always felt that what I didn't like about Britain is because it's an island it's so provincial. Even if you're not black, it's provincial. When I was in Holland they would call us 'Island Monkeys', because we just stay on this island and are very inward looking. You can see it because it has taken so long for contemporary African art to be shown here. Maybe in the last year there has started to be more of a little surge. But that was what was so fascinating during that time of *Afro Modern* and the Chris Ofili retrospective and the Bluecoat show. Finally there was some discussion. After that I met and had some interesting discussions with curators from the Tate about why that scene is not here. You can see it in America, Paris, even Berlin, but you can't see it over here. So that's my wider context. But obviously I just want to be seen as a regular artist. I wouldn't want to be just seen as a female artist, even though some of my work could be seen as feminist. It's limiting.

Question 2:

Going back to the Bluecoat show, you mentioned how you felt about exhibiting in that exhibition, but had you heard of the Bluecoat before? (00:08:40 minutes into recording)

GN: I had kind of heard of them because of the Liverpool Biennial and they have a good reputation and a long history. But I didn't know their history to do with them working with black or ethnic minority groups. So until the installation and Sonia had that cabinet with all those leaflets and flyers for the last twenty years. It was fascinating to see that. I didn't know that that had gone on. And to learn that Sonia had shown there before and this was an anniversary show. I thought it was really interesting that's she decided, instead of having a big solo show she shared the show and gave the spotlight to younger artists. I thought that was really nice and also an interesting way of doing things. I didn't know the other artists in the show, apart from Robin [Deacon], who I had met, but I didn't really know him. I didn't know the younger artists and I didn't know their work.

Question 3:

How did you feel about being in an exhibition that was curated by Sonia? (00:10:02 minutes into recording)

GN: What do you mean? Do you mean her as an artist?

ADC:

[REDACTED]

GN:

[REDACTED]

Question 4:

Did you feel there was a connection between your work the other three artists in the show? (00:11:15minutes into recording)

GN: No. Not really. The media was very different. Robin had film, but his was more of a documentary whereas mine was an installation with sound. It was very different. The drawing...No I didn't really feel there was a tie. Maybe, I suppose, there was a thread of performativity in all the work. But none of the work was particularly to do with race or culture. Maybe Junior's [Appau Boakye-Yiadom] piece with the melon. That was the only thing. Because it wasn't obvious. If it wasn't for Sonia's name on the show, if it had somebody else's name, you wouldn't think it had anything to do with race.

ADC: Definitely. According to the text panels it was the performative nature of all of your practices that was the thread that held the show together. I was wondering whether you felt that there was that link between your works.

GN: I can see it, but I couldn't say that I really felt it. Maybe I can't be objective. Sometimes when you're in a show you can't really see the bigger picture. It's hard to say.

Question 5:

What did you feel the rationale for the show was? (00:13:05 minutes into recording)

GN: I thought it was to give Sonia this platform for her new work and to have this anniversary idea, but to have a twist on it. So instead of having a normal retrospective or survey...The thing about Post-Black is that it's an American phenomenon. I didn't understand how it fit into British history. We don't have that history. We don't have a Thelma Golden here. We don't have a Studio Museum. INIVA and the Studio Museum are very different; they have different levels, different platforms, different histories and a different amount of influence. So that didn't really make sense to me, to call it that. Whereas the link from our show to *Afro Modern* made more sense to me. I thought it was really good that our show was on at the same time. It made that *Black Atlantic* triangle have another dimension, because here was a group of even younger artists making work that maybe linked to that work that was in the Tate [Liverpool]. I thought that was important, actually, that the shows coincided.

ADC: The final room of *Afro Modern* was supposed to bring forward the idea of Post-Black. It had Kara Walker in it, Chris Ofili, Ellen Gallagher I think, and all of them were well-established. I thought that in the end, *Action* was in dialogue with that room.

GN: Exactly. We were the next stage. Definitely. But they were all American artists, apart from Chris Ofili. They were mostly American artists. That's the difference. I suppose if we had had an American artist in our show it would have balanced things out. But, yes, I felt that we were the 'dot dot dot' of the show [of *Afro Modern*].

Question 6:

Apart from the question of it being a black survey show, did you have any concerns or reservations about being involved in *Action*? (00:15:55 minutes into recording)

ADC: I know there were a few artists who had declined to take part in the show, precisely because they didn't want to be associated with the idea of Post-Black or be in a show of only black artists.

GN: [REDACTED]

ADC: [REDACTED]

GN: I think she must have been surprised that I said yes. I think I have a reputation to say no because I have always said no to everything [every show in Britain that could be seen as a 'black show']. But my intuition told me, even before I knew this *Afro Modern* show was going to happen, that it was the right thing to do. And it *was*, because of the talk I did at Tate Britain with Paul Goodwin who was also doing talks for *Afro Modern*. So it made sense. I am a person that follows their intuition. [REDACTED] My intuition is very powerful and that's what told me to do the show. Maybe if these other things hadn't been in the air and I hadn't subconsciously picked up on the links then I wouldn't have done it. I'd be interested to know whether Sonia was surprised that I agreed to do it.

ADC: How did Sonia know about you? Had she seen you work before?

GN: I think me and Sonia met in 2004 when I moved to London. I think I met her through Manick Govinda at Artsadmin. No. Adelaide Bannerman curated a talk with Adrian Piper when I first moved here and I happened to be on the panel for that talk and showed some of my work. I think Sonia was there. I think that's how I met her. But I feel like I've always known Sonia even though I don't see her very often. She's always been around. I saw a show of hers at the Agency Gallery. I can't remember when that was. So I've seen bits of her stuff. And she teaches at Wimbledon and I went there to see another artist's work. I went to the opening and I'm sure I saw her there. So we've always known each other's work. And obviously, Sonia's in the history, with Eddie Chambers and all that gang – that 80s gang. When you think, 'Oh I need to learn something', they're the names that come up, aren't they?

Question 7:

If someone were to say that *Action* was a black survey show, what would your response be? (00:19:30 minutes into recording)

- GN: No. I don't think you could say four artists can be a black survey show, first of all. If you added us to the *Afro Modern* show then it would be a black survey show because it would go over time longer. Even in the last room [of *Afro Modern*], those are old pieces, pieces that we have seen in magazines a lot. [REDACTED] In that sense *that* [*Afro Modern*] is more of a black survey show. I think it's quite a dangerous thing to say anyway, isn't it? I'm doing a survey at the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art, London] of my films in June [2011]. So it's comprehensive but it doesn't show all the films I have ever made. It would be impossible and I'm only one person. So trying to say that about four artists, or ten artists or twenty artists... you would need the whole of Tate Modern! [REDACTED]
- ADC: If I were to say it was a black survey show, I wouldn't be using the term to suggest that the show surveyed *all* art by black artists. I think the term has been used to describe shows of only black artists, who are brought together for an exhibition not because they all happen to use the same medium or address similar issues in the content or whatever, but only because they all happen to be black.
- GN: I'm not sure I agree with that. Normally, don't survey shows have highlights in them? With our show it was the first time for most of us that we were showing those works. It's not like there was anything classic in the show. That's why I think *Afro Modern* was more of a black survey show because there were specific highlights that you would think 'I'm going to see that show because of this'. Our show was new work. There was no history. It's like *Africa Remix* [2005]. Survey shows seem to me to always be more comprehensive and have highlights. Whereas our show...did someone actually say it was a black survey show?
- ADC: No. But it was a question for Bryan and Sara. They took it into consideration that some people might think that.
- GN: I don't think anyone said that about our show.
- ADC: No. But, interestingly, even though the fact that all four of you were black wasn't mentioned in the press release and text panels, many of the press reviews noted that you were all black artists.
- GN: Maybe because Sonia's black? But then her work was about white pensioners! Maybe they googled us or maybe because of the link with *Afro Modern*?
- ADC: Yeah you could have figured it out, but how many people writing the exhibition listings in newspapers would do more than just lift sentences out of press releases? There weren't many actual reviews. Anyway, I haven't heard anyone say that it was a black survey show, but in my conversations with Bryan and Sara, they said that it had definitely been a concern for them. They wondered whether they would be accused of showing these artists just because they happened to be black.
- GN: OK, I can see what you mean.
- ADC: But it was when they teased out of Sonia what it was that she liked about the artists she had selected that it was the performative nature of all of your practices that she liked.

- GN: So they asked Sonia to curate the show as well as her own solo exhibition?
- ADC: Spike Island asked the Bluecoat to host *Like Love 1* because it was a touring show, and the Bluecoat agreed and asked Sonia to do *Like love 2* with them, and realised that they would still need to fill up the rest of the gallery space. So they offered her the chance to do a mini-retrospective of her own work, or to do a group show with Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers and Tam Joseph like she had done twenty-five years ago, or she could curate a show. And so she chose that.
- GN: So are you going to ask Sonia about how she pulled together that list of artists?
- ADC: Well I'll ask her why some of the artists that they had approached declined to take part in the show. Bryan and Sara suggested that some artists didn't want to be part of a show of only black artists because they didn't want to be pigeon-holed.
- GN: That makes sense. That's natural that they were worried about that, like I was when I moved to London. But do you think that because Sonia is so located in the history of starting that movement, that maybe they don't want to be connected to that movement?
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Question 8:

To what extent do you think *Action* was in dialogue with the final room of *Afro Modern*, the one which introduced the idea of there being Post-Black artists? (00:29:05 minutes into recording)

- GN: It only fits when it's connected to the American context. If it was just our show [*Action*] on its own it wouldn't make any sense [to describe the *Action* artists as being Post-Black].
- ADC: How does it make sense with that American link?
- GN: Because it has a longer history. It's more established. We know why that word came around. When Obama was being elected it was called 'Post Black Politics'. But *we're* not living in a Post-Black country, are we? We can't even get multiculturalism right! We're in a regressive society. I think Post-Black is way too far ahead.
- ADC: So you don't think that it could apply in the British context?
- GN: No way! How could it apply? You wouldn't say that in France would you? When you can't even wear a headscarf! Europe is going backwards, not forwards.
- ADC: Could you tell me what you understand by the term Post-Black?
- GN: Only from what Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon have said and how they used to have these conversations in the 90s. He is worth having a talk to. He has a big show on at the Whitney [Whitney Museum of American Art, New York]. It's a retrospective going back to the time when he and Thelma started working together. So it would be good for you to see that show. The Post-Black guy is being legitimised through having this Whitney solo show. Whereas here, I can't imagine that ever happening...in this context. Chris Ofili is the first one. I don't know. It's very complicated.

Question 9:

Do you ever worry about being labelled in a particular way or about being pigeon-holed? (00:32:00 minutes into recording)

GN: Yeah of course. But I worry less now because I think I have proven myself. I think my work has stood the time and a lot of different types of people like it, have seen it, written about it, have bought it. It's not just black people. I've done enough non-black shows to prove...whatever. But when I was at Delfina, yeah of course. Because I could see that the guys, the white men, they could do whatever they wanted. And I wanted to do whatever I wanted. I was lucky because places like the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham gave me a show, and then I showed with them in Venice for the Biennale [2005]. They just liked the work. There was no conversation about race. But it's complicated because obviously I am black. So you have to figure out how you're going to negotiate it. Some artists totally deny their blackness. They go out of their way to never do a black show. Like Steve McQueen. He's purposefully avoided all that for many years, even though people always pull him back in, to write about it. But he would never have anything to do with Post-Black. Whereas, for me, because I have done a lot of travelling, I want to be a part of the contemporary African art scene. It makes sense. It feels right. Whereas, the black British scene...it doesn't feel right to me. But to somebody else it might feel right and the Africa thing might seem weird. And most white artists just want to show in New York and Berlin! They don't really think about being big in India. Maybe they would about China, but it would just be an add-on. But it wouldn't be a part of their identity or process. Whereas Africa is actually a part of my normal everyday living. So it makes sense. I think you have to negotiate what you feel comfortable with. But some people have tried to pigeon-hole me as a feminist artist or as a political artist.

ADC: How have you felt about that?

GN: I didn't used to like the feminist thing. But now as I get older I quite like it. It's quite funny. I can see why now, more clearly. You get affected more by sexism as you get older, as a woman. You see the inequalities more. But in the end you just want to make good work. I just want to have some effect...that touches people and something that is meaningful within the history of art. Because I have done a lot of performance work I get a lot of performancy-type shows, shows about performance on film. But I've also been in shows to do with fashion. My work can be read in that way. And textiles. So there are many different categories, I'm lucky, that my work can fit into. And now, recently, more environmental stuff, because I do a lot of work about that sort of thing. So I am lucky that my work can be read in many ways. But if you only made a certain type of work you would be more limited. But then you can only make what you make.

Appendix 8.16

Interview with Judith Nesbitt

26 May 2010 at Tate Britain, Millbank, London SW1P 4RG

Question 1:

Why did Tate decide to organise this exhibition and why now? (00:00:48 minutes into recording)

JN: Well, Chris Ofili established his practice in the course of the 90s, made his reputation here in London and since then has really expanded his audience. So there has been a very steady development. 'Steady' sounds very unexciting and it's anything but unexciting. It's an extraordinary career and his work is represented in the collection by two works from the 90s, but also 'The Upper Room' acquisition which was shown here at Tate Britain in 2005. All that meant that there was a body of work by an artist whose reputation was well established, which seemed to us ready for a reassessment not least because in the last five years he has been much less present, having moved to Trinidad from London. In that time his work has developed in a very interesting way. So we thought it was an interesting moment to gather together his work from the early mid 90s right through to the present day and to see what the stories are that are emerging within that one career. But a shorter answer is that there hasn't been a survey show since 1998. In fact there has only been one survey show and that was organised by Southampton City Art Gallery, it came up to The Serpentine and then to Manchester. That was in 1998, the year that he was then nominated for the Turner Prize. So it seems like a long time ago, and much has changed in the world and much has changed in his work in that time. So it felt like there was a job to be done. You can always argue that there is a job to be done – looking more closely at an artist's practice. But we have to also think, is there a sizeable audience for this, and certainly it seemed to us that there was enough curiosity about what Chris Ofili has been doing, about the ways in which his work has developed since he was most recently visible at the Venice Biennale in 2002. So here we are in 2010. He is a prominent, significant artist who's established a reputation not only here in Britain, but internationally. So it seemed he was a good subject for a survey show. It's one in series of mid-career surveys that we've done here at Tate Britain, beginning with Tacita Dean in 2000 and Wolfgang Tillmans in 2003 and we did a three-hander in *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* - Angus Fairhurst, Sarah Lucas and Damien Hirst, and then Peter Doig in 2008. So within our programme there is a series of mid-career surveys. Artists don't think in these categories, 'Mid-Career' and 'Senior Retrospective'. But it's shorthand for thinking about how we structure our programme. So we thought the work was interesting, there was a story to tell and there was an audience to come to see it.

Question 2:

Through the exhibition the captions didn't contain any interpretive text. Would you agree with that and if so was that a particular strategy? (00:05:04 minutes into recording)

JN: What do you mean by interpretive?

ADC: I felt that the information in the accompanying leaflet was ore about how he had come to use his materials and where the inspiration for content had come from. So it explained background information but compared to other exhibitions I didn't, I felt that you were trying to let the works speak for themselves more.

JN: The short answer is that we didn't put words on wall because Chris didn't want words on the wall. So we were respecting the artist's wishes absolutely in that sense. And he

did absolutely want the paintings to be ... for the visitor to encounter the paintings in a very direct, unmediated way. He would accept that there is a whole lot of discussion and factual information that, at another level, sits beside the work. But he wanted, and we were very happy to support that desire, that people should have to deal with the paintings as material things and that a textual commentary wouldn't play a part in the visitor's experience of the exhibition itself. But, yes, of course the leaflet is there if people want to consult it. In that format you have to be very brief. So between the learning and curatorial departments we agreed which little snippets of information seemed most helpful and relevant. We wanted to bring a range of different voices and approaches to even that short amount commentary.

ADC: I felt that if there was any interpretation in the leaflets it was coming from direct quotes from Chris Ofili. I was interested in whether that was a particular strategy you wanted to use?

JN: We take responsibility for the editorial decisions about what material we put in that leaflet. He saw it and signed it off but it was our work. So I don't know that I would say there was an overt strategy to prioritise one kind of information over another. What we were seeking to do was, yes, include the artist's own voice in that little anthology but also other kinds of responses. But the other piece of interpretation that we put in place was the film interview and we felt that that was a really important opportunity for visitors to get sense of who the artist is and where the artist is now. I don't mean just geographically, although that of course plays an important part in the recent work, but to get a sense of an attitude of an artist's making of work. Chris Ofili has been much reported and commented upon and there is so much material there in press cuttings going right back to the early/mid 90s and, in a way when you come to present a survey show, you don't want to start with that or prioritise that. I think you want to allow artist's practice to come to the fore and for that to be quite importantly shaped by the artist's current practice. I think we succeeded in doing that, in giving a sense of Chris Ofili as a 41 year old artist who is on the move and for whom painting is a live exploration and adventure. In a way you look at what comes before through the lens of where the artist is now. I think it would have been wrong, curatorially, to over historicise the work. I think it's for others to make those analyses. But in presenting the work, we wanted the artist in the present moment to be very much to the fore. I think the film helped to do that. I think the new work, that final room, the blue room, the two penultimate rooms...I mean about a third of the show was new work. That's important when it comes to presenting an artist who is only 41.

Question 3:

Did Chris see the film and was he part of the signing off process? (00: 11:26 minutes into recording)

JN: Yes. He had editorial involvement, absolutely. Like many artists he was probably reluctant to commit to doing that in the first instance but was very supportive of the intention to offer a broader context for understanding his work and he gave a lot of time to the making of the film and was involved in the shaping of it. But he was very pleased indeed with the approach of the filmmaker. He absolutely had an opportunity to see and comment on it. It was a conversation, but a very productive and happy piece of work.

Question 4:

Were there any particular narratives or frameworks that you wanted to put forward when you were curating the exhibition? (00:12:53 minutes into recording)

JN: I think that's what I've been talking about really. It's about being able to prioritise the artist's current practice and almost to work backwards from that. I mean, we didn't in the end. We did think about whether we should actually start the show with the new work, but I think it would have been too wilful and insistent to do that. And actually I like the journey that unfolds through the course of the exhibition. I think one of things came through to me in making the show with Chris and then the experience of being in the show was how he has so successfully and deliberately created space for himself to work in. This is an artist who has literally moved studios quite a lot. That's a physical manifestation of someone, I think, who is extremely thoughtful about how he's working, the contexts he's working in or being positioned within, and more than that, a desire to maintain a real mobility and a freedom of movement. So that means, for example, you see how at a certain stage he breaks out of the way of working using the layering and the resin and the glitter and the dung balls and the map pins, and collage and all of that. He deliberately wiped it clean almost literally. He spent a year where he didn't make any paintings at all, after Venice, only working on paper, not producing paintings on canvas. So this is an artist who is conscious of having the freedom of manoeuvre, the freedom to move forward in his practice and I think that comes through very strongly in the show.

Question 5:

What's the significance of having the show at Tate Britain as opposed to Tate Modern? (00:15:12 minutes into recording)

JN: Tate Britain was set up in 2000 to show a wide framework on art in Britain – the sixteenth century to the present day. So, major monographic shows of British artists are presented here at Tate Britain. That's the short answer.

Question 6:

What do you think it is about Chris Ofili's work that has brought him perhaps more success and fame than other black British artists of his generation? Is there something different about his practice or the way he has chosen to engage with the art world which enabled him to have access to and representation from the mainstream? Or would you disagree with that notion? (00:15:59 minutes into recording)

JN: I think that's very complicated and loaded. It's like he's taken a special pill or something. I don't think that suddenly he is more visible. What he was resisting was being absorbed into any one of a number of stereotypical boxes that people might have wanted to put him in. And he was doing that with very deliberately, overtly pillaring... parodying those kinds of projections of black masculinity, sexuality. He said, at the time, that he did not want to be a representative of any moment or cause. And specifically about the work of artists of the 80s, and what had gone before him, there's a lovely quote that he didn't 'want to be part of a PC project'. He said if you were part of a PC project you would have to be right all the time and he didn't want to be right all the time. He wanted the freedom to be wrong or off message or just simply an individual. He was very clear about just simply forging his own language and setting the terms for his own work and clear, as well, that other people would make of that what they would. They'll put him in whatever context they want to. Success and fame? Any artist wants their work to be

seen and Chris is no exception. He was putting out a calling card from quite early on. He was wanting to be seen and noticed. He was doing it through his work. I don't think it would be fruitful to start looking at how he was operating in the art world. I just think he was very smart but instinctive.

ADC: I was wondering if there is something that he has done right that others have got wrong, in the way that he has allowed his practice and his career to develop?

JN: It's not a formula. The last thing he would want would be to create a winning formula, except to be himself. He has always said, 'that's what I want to be, and that also means being contradictory, and maybe disappointing people, or alienating people'. He's had the self-confidence and the determination simply to be himself as an artist.

Question 7:

How do you think Chris Ofili has been positioned or understood in the context of contemporary British art history or in understandings of British art history? (00:21:00 minutes into recording)

JN: One of the contexts in which he was positioned in was YBA because he showed in 'Brilliant' in 1995 at The Walker Art Centre and then of course in 'Sensation'. He was positioned as one of a generation of artists who emerged in the 90s even though he didn't go to Goldsmiths and he wasn't hanging out with the core group YBA artists. He kept his own space, I don't know that consciously he kept distance but he wasn't in that crowd necessarily. His friends were his Chelsea contemporaries. So that was one frame that has been put on his work that seems less than true really. He was part of that moment and Saatchi's collecting of him gave him visibility and prominence incredibly. So when the whole 'Sensation' controversy blew up in Brooklyn in 99. But I think then there was another history which is the artists who have represented Britain at the Venice Biennale or the artists who've been nominated and won the Turner Prize. So there are these various lines that you can draw. I think it's too soon to say how we understand his contribution to British art history. He's only forty-one. But already there are so many interesting narrative threads that run through his work. It's interesting; his move away from London. I think that's significant. It's personal of course; it's what's good for him. Trinidad is a good place for him to be, to work. But how that story might look in forty years' time will be even more interesting. It's a kind of reverse movement because there are narratives of artists who are coming from the Caribbean to art schools in London and developing their work here or in Paris or New York. I'm talking about the 50s and 60s. So I think there is another dynamic of artists going out from Britain, working internationally, many of them in a very mobile way and Chris has made a real decision to settle in another part of the world where he is not visible and not prominent. That's what he wanted and that's what has allowed his work to develop as it has through the course of this decade. I think it is too soon to say how that story is going to fill out.

Question 8:

Ofili was positioned as being part of a new Post-Black generation of artists in the *Afro Modern* exhibition at Tate Liverpool. What do you think about the idea of 'post-black' and do you see Ofili as being a part of it? (00:26:00 minutes into recording)

JN: Well, if I was to say yes it would undermine a whole lot of what Chris is doing in his work, which is what I've been talking about. About creating a freedom to be an individual rather than a badge wearing member of any club. As it happens I think that

Chris' relationship with Thelma Golden is extremely strong and there is no doubt that there is a strong correspondence and a continual dialogue there. But I don't think it's for me to say 'Snap, yes, Post-Black; Chris Ofili – perfect match'. It would seem glib, to me, to do that. Is he engaged in those dialogues? Certainly. I have no doubt that he is interested in that set of conversations. But I don't know, and you would have to ask him, whether Post-Black is something that he would be happy to have on his passport, as it were.

Appendix 8.17

Interview with Sara-Jayne Parsons

14 April 2011 at the Bluecoat, School Lane, Liverpool, Merseyside L1 3BX

Question 1:

Could you tell me how you first got to know about the Liverpool and the Black Atlantic programme and how the Bluecoat came to be involved? Was the collaboration with Sonia Boyce something that came first? (00:00:38 minutes into recording)

SJP: If memory serves me correct – and I can go back and check dates of emails and things – but I think Marie-Anne [McQuay] from Spike Island had approached us with the project that Sonia was doing there and wondered if it would be possible that we could collaborate in terms of being a tour venue for that show. At the time I didn't know anything about Tate's [Liverpool] programme – *The Black Atlantic* – I didn't know anything about that, but was just really excited that there was an opportunity to work with Sonia. Personally, when I had been living and working in the United States, I had really wanted to do some work with Sonia there. I had known her work when I was in this country [the UK] and had kind of followed her through the 90s and was really trying to find a way to work with her at some point. Just, you know, she was on my short-list of people I'd love to work with. So when this opportunity came up I just thought it was too good to pass. I also knew from the short time I had been at the Bluecoat and from chatting with Bryan [Biggs], that Sonia had a connection to the Bluecoat. - that she had shown here at an early and pretty critical point in her career and within a very particular context, of what it was like to be a black artist in the 80s in the UK. And I just thought it was a timely moment to engage with an artist like that, not only because of the project she was doing in Bristol, and obviously I thought that was completely relevant, but particularly to bring her back to the Bluecoat. And then it was some weeks...I don't know if it was months, but I think it was fairly short, I don't think it was more than six months, but it was a fairly short time after, that I had heard from Marie-Anne, that then we heard from Tate – that they were wanting to develop a programme around their exhibition [*Afro Modern*]. So, it just seemed to make sense, but at the time I wasn't sure what the real connection was, other than, quite crudely, that Sonia was a black artist. So we knew that her work was going to be included in that show. But at that point I didn't have an idea or think of it as a strategy about what our show could do. Because at the time we were just thinking that our show would take the show from Bristol. But then as we learnt more about that show we realised that it would be quite small in terms of the gallery space that it needed and so we had these other spaces available. And so we sort of went from there. But at that time, then, I knew that Tate had this programme in development. So it sort of snow-balled and came from that, but it started with that initial contact from Marie-Anne and then got more complicated as it went along.

Question 2:

In that collaboration between Sonia and the Bluecoat, how did the ideas for both the *Like Love Part Two* and *Action* exhibitions develop? (00:03:52 minutes into the recording)

SJP: Well, very much like Spike Island, because we don't have a collection, and because we commission new works, and at that point we were realising that we had about two thirds of the gallery space we needed to fill with something else. So we thought, 'What would those possibilities be?'. And one was to do what we do, which is commission. So the idea then was to approach Sonia to see if she would do a commission, but akin to

what she had done in Bristol, if she would do the same kind of work here. And with our participation department there was a strong feeling that there was a good match between what she had done in Bristol and the possibilities of what she could do here. So we approached her with that idea. But the idea of *Action* came later because, Bryan and I, if I remember correctly, we started doing a bit of research. We thought through the idea of Sonia coming back to the Bluecoat twenty-five years after she had been here, and thinking, 'What would it be to work with artists now, who are in the position that she was in then? Who are the young black artists and what is the context for how they make their work and how different is it to where Sonia was at that time?'. And we both started doing a little bit of research and we realised that there certainly wasn't a lot going on in the north-west in terms of young black artists. We knew very few. For some of them, the work probably wasn't quite ready, wasn't maybe at the standard, or the kind of finished work that we would exhibit. So we just started having conversations with Sonia and it occurred to us that actually she's incredibly well-placed, not only because of who she is, and the circles that she moves in quite naturally and as part of her own daily practice, but also because she is a teacher. She's really involved in the development and nurturing of younger artists. So we thought that was something that...well I've taught before, but not at the moment, so I thought that was something that Sonia could bring to the idea of what we were exploring; the then and now. So that kind of came a bit later. So we went back to Sonia and said 'Would you like to curate the other spaces?'. So, for me and Bryan it was a really interesting process of exploring avenues along the way and feeling like, 'Well, that doesn't really fit', or 'That doesn't really feel right or doesn't feel genuine', maybe? And that was the idea. I didn't want to feel like, particularly with *Action*, that we were just doing a show that was black artists. It had to be relevant. I felt like Bryan and I – there was so much that we still needed to do and it was increasingly clear that there was only a short period of time to do that. So we had to rely on Sonia's expertise, and certainly, her connections. What she did then was come forward with suggestions of artists and we looked at them together. And then from there we decided on a short-list of artists that we wanted to approach, and find out more about their work, and find out if they would be interested in showing with us. But also to be really clear about the platform with which the exhibition was about [sic]. Because by now, the *Black Atlantic* programme was also developing. So we had several things going on and we realised that she was an artist, then and now, in the show, and she was also the curator. But also we were asking her to do something very particular. We were asking her to select work by young black artists, which is quite a problematic thing to do, in a way. And it would certainly have been even more problematic if Bryan and I had done it. But I think as we found out, in the process of looking at the artists that Sonia had suggested, approaching them and talking to them, some of the artists did absolutely not want to be involved. They very politely said they didn't want to be involved, but they didn't want to be pigeon-holed as a black artist. They felt the way that our project was developing and also alongside Tate's project, that they wanted to step away from that. They didn't necessarily want to be included under that umbrella. We absolutely understood that, and certainly respected that. But it was a learning curve along the way and for Sonia also. So that was the interesting thing. We were having the luxury of learning from the inside and learning from Sonia too.

ADC: She hasn't curated many, or any shows before has she?

SJP: I think it was probably quite difficult, in terms of the logistics and in terms of the space. We knew, once we had selected the spaces where her work was going to go, the Bristol work and the new Liverpool commission, we realised that we had the possibility of the

large gallery space and the small black box space, so there was about two thirds. So it was at that point when we were talking about the artists that she had suggested, that then Bryan and I were the ones who were really looking at the space and thinking about the logistics about how we show that work, how we present that work and how each artist got a significant amount of space. But we also wanted to make sure that they stood on their own, stood within their own space. So it was a group show of four artists, but at the same time we wanted them to be individual presentations. Because we thought it was a significant selection from Sonia. So, for our marketing team, it was probably quite a nightmare to say, 'We're kind of doing three shows in one, the Bristol show, our show with Sonia and *Action*'. I think in some ways, and maybe the actual results of how you encountered the shows and the spaces and the presentations – that might have been confusing for the audience. But in a way, it was confusing territory, it sort of overlaps. The idea of Sonia engaging with younger artists and we had asked her to do this, but in the back of her mind we had asked her to think about 'Can you remember back to when you were in that position, and when you first had your show at the Bluecoat?'. So we asked her quite specific things and curators don't get asked to do things in quite that way and it was quite personal. We were quite challenging. We asked her to think about the Bluecoat, about Liverpool, about her connection as a young artist. We didn't just say 'Give us a show!'. We gave her some questions along the way.

ADC: How do you think her response to those questions came through in the exhibition? For example, the context of Liverpool or her experience of having exhibited twenty-five years before?

SJP: I think she looks for excellence in everything, so that's a great yardstick by any means. She's not easily fobbed off with faddish, fashionable things that young artists might do or might perpetuate because they think they think it's going to get them to a particular place, or the next step in their career or a gallery or whatever. I think she is very real in what she does. I think she understood that our audience in Liverpool is quite interested in humour, so there was work that was quite humorous and quite funny. Robin Deacon and Junior [Appau Boakye-Yiadom], I think in their work there were elements that were quite humour that appeal to a Liverpool audience. I think she also realised that it's quite a political city, and then maybe from her platform as a young artist within a political context in the 80s. So somebody like Grace Ndiritu almost fits that bill. But then Sonia is a consummate... she is an artist, she is a maker, she is interested in all the beauty and aesthetics of materials, so then I think I can see where Beverley's [Bennett] work comes in. But then there are other things that Bryan and I thought about. He described Sonia when she arrived for her show here in the 80s, I think she arrived the day before, and apparently her work was just rolled up and stuck in a backpack. And she just walked in through the door and said 'I'm here. What do I need to do with it?'. Bryan said that image of Sonia never left him. For me, watching Sonia's selection of artists come into the spaces, and meeting people like Beverley in particular, and Junior, there was that wonderful moment when I saw them light up and engage with the space and get nervous on two levels, that they were having a show at the Bluecoat, which was a big deal to them, but also they had been selected by Sonia. So we put them under quite a bit of pressure and it did remind me of Bryan's story. It was funny, because with some of the artists we did have to talk about how you present your work. Beverley's drawings, for instance. We had to have a conversation about how those were going to be hung so they would be safe. Just so they wouldn't be damaged by our inquisitive audience coming up to grab them and have a look at them. Or Junior, leaving us a piece that was on a low platform with what looked like oil and having him understand that we have

lots of little audience members that might like to crawl all over it. So Sonia gave a challenge to the artists but they all took it in their stride. And I saw that parallel. I don't think she consciously threw that challenge to them, but the whole time I was reminded about Bryan's comment and I was wondering how the *Action* artists felt, some were more experienced in terms of exhibiting than others, but how they stepped into the Bluecoat. Some of them fit the bill of Sonia's original arrival.

Question 3:

What did you hope to achieve through staging the two exhibitions? (00:15:56 minutes into the recording)

SJP: I think it was an exploration of Sonia, as an artist, as a teacher and as a curator. For me, she became the central thing. So we did have the work from Bristol but she also had a very particular engagement here in Liverpool with the Blue Room. I think one of the main things I wanted was for people to understand that. That somebody like Sonia...there's an amazing generosity of spirit about what she does and who she is. And without creating a show that's an homage or a biography or a retrospective or something like that, it was a different way of letting people in. We wanted to show brand new work, we wanted to show fresh work. We also wanted to perhaps investigate some of those questions through different generations. So Bryan knew the context of Sonia's work from the 80s but he wondered what it is like for young black artists now. So we wanted to navigate that somehow, in a way that made sense to the Bluecoat. And that comes back to Sonia and Sonia's relationship to the Bluecoat and having shown here. I don't know that that necessarily came through. I think maybe our audience would have had to pay very particular attention. But for me she was at the centre of everything that we did. And I was glad because I thought it was as it should be.

Question 4:

How do you feel the two exhibitions were contextualised by the Liverpool and the Black Atlantic programme and by *Afro Modern* in particular? (00:18:26 minutes into the recording)

SJP: I ended up feeling that our show was even fresher because that was quite a traditional survey show. Maybe that's just from my own research. I found works there and artists represented in that show that I would expect. So it wasn't that new to me. But I'm sure for a more general audience it was, incredibly so. But I remember, after I had seen the Tate show a couple of times, after the second time I was walking away thinking, 'OK, that was good but I'd like to know what's happening now'. And I felt that the work of some of our artists could have been in that...I felt that there was a very strong connection between then and now. I thought it was a great counterbalance to what we were doing and I thought it contextualised their work quite well. The fact that Sonia had a piece in the show and many of her contemporaries from the 80s and, in particular, her first connections to the Bluecoat from that time period were also in the show. But I would have liked to have seen more younger artists in that show. So I felt that what we were contributing to the overall programme in the city was then really valuable. Once you joined it up...the Aubrey Williams show over at NML [National Museums Liverpool – Walker Art Gallery], it became really rich. You could get your history lesson, almost. But then you could engage with something brand new or you could engage with a much deeper understanding of one artist. So I thought it worked really well, in that sense, in a visual context. In terms of the programming, I'm not sure how well that knitted together. For me, the difficulty with the whole programme was trying to understand who our audience was beyond just a general audience. I was trying to work with black

and ethnic minorities within the city and further a field and I don't know that we really attracted those audiences. I would have liked to figure out a way to do that in a more meaningful way. But maybe that's not appropriate. I would just assume that people would want to come and see the shows, but maybe that's not the case.

ADC: I thought that both *Action* and Like Love two were in dialogue with room 7 in *Afro Modern* which was the Post-Black room. That room was trying to introduce the idea of Post-Black artists. Peter Gorschülder [co-curator of *Afro Modern*] said that they weren't trying to define what Post-Black means but instead put a question mark there and say 'This is an idea that is being debated now and these are some artists you might want to think about when thinking about the idea of a Post-Black artist. But as you said, the artists they showed in that room are well-established. But that's Tate's remit. They're not going to show emerging artists. But that is the Bluecoat's remit. So I thought it was a response. There was a connection there by saying 'Actually, *this* is 'Post Black''.

SJP: And that's interesting. Just the use of that term, it was something that we engaged in but it didn't stand at the forefront as a pennant or a banner.

ADC: The idea was there but you didn't actually use the word which I thought was clever.

SJP: For me it came from not wanting to categorise things and to be sensitive to that. The funny thing is, when I was working and living in the United States, and when I was first introduced to Thelma Golden's work and the idea of 'Post Black', I was working with many black artists at the time. And I thought, 'This is great. Somebody is actually talking about what this is'. It was really embraced, in quite a positive way. So when I came to this country and we started this project, and we started talking about the term 'Post Black', I started picking up on a much less positive response to the term, from people that I was talking to. Whether it was artists, in our looking for artists for *Action*, who I talked to and who didn't want to be involved. Some of their concerns were about being labelled 'Post Black', and what that meant. It made me really uneasy. I thought, 'I've had this experience where I thought it was ok to talk about this, but I'm actually finding that it's very contentious in this country'. And so I pulled back from it and had to sit and listen and observe. I had a great conversation with Hew Locke. It was one of those off the cuff chats, we ran into each other at Frieze Art Fair or somewhere, and I asked him if I could give him a call just to talk through this idea of 'Post Black', and I described to him what I've just described to you. He just laughed and said 'In America they have a totally different idea about what this is. Here it's much more something that you have to get your teeth into, in terms of the potential to be controversial'. So, that was very helpful for me because I had started to back away from it, and actually, I realised that I needed to step forward. But at the same time we [the Bluecoat] had been careful about how we were going to position ourselves. I hadn't thought about the fact that the term doesn't show up in any of our materials. But it is certainly all over our notes and our research. It wasn't a conscious decision to block it out in the end. It just almost didn't need saying.

ADC: The idea of Post-Black was alluded to in the press release and some of the text panels, without actually using the term, which is perhaps the essence of Post-Black anyway.

SJP: If you think about it, what was the remit that we gave Sonia for *Action*? 'Select some young black artists. But we can't say we've selected them because they're young black artists'. So it was a weird, paradoxical thing we were asking her to do. But I think it got to the heart of that conversation around Post-Black and we kind of found ourselves in it

and realised, 'We're actually really engaging with this, in a very thoughtful and honest way'. It was a difficult thing to get our head around. But we also wanted to be sensitive and not alienate people.

Question 5:

The introductory text panel, press release and the archive display box in the foyer contextualised the two exhibitions against the Black Skin/Bluecoat exhibition of 1985. Why did you chose to do this and why was it important to do it? (00:27:19 minutes into recording)

SJP: The Bluecoat has a reputation for working with artists right before they appear on the radar. But it's not just about the artists and their work, it's also about ideas and bigger cultural connections. There's also the Bluecoat's reputation for programming music, live music and now literature and spoken word. So it's not always about the visual. It becomes about ideas. It's also the desire to work hard to make this a place for everyone. And that was what Sonia remembered about the Bluecoat. That it was sometimes risk-taking, back in the 80s and beyond. It sometimes took risks and showed work that nobody else was showing. It would sometimes give artists a foot up the ladder. From my perspective...I came to the Bluecoat in 2006. I've learned about the history of the Bluecoat through researching the archives and predominantly, from talking to Bryan. But it's still really important to me...the simple premise of you don't know where you're going and how you're going to get there until you know where you've come from. I think you should always embrace the past, for all its faults as well as celebrations, but have a knowledge and understanding of that before you can make clear sense of where you need to go. I tend to do that with most exhibitions here; think about 'What have we done here before? How can we do it differently? How can we engage with the same audience but give them something fresh, something that they haven't seen before?'. I think Liverpool is a very particular place, and is quite a nostalgic city. If you do anything in terms of reading about the history of Liverpool, it's a taxi driver that can probably tell you more than the library can! I think people really enjoy those opportunities for a look back. It was good that we could show the breadth of programming that the Bluecoat had had and to contextualise where Sonia, in the 80s, fit within that, specific to the Bluecoat. But also when we had the Bluecoat set within a national or international framework, in terms of being a contemporary arts venue, not just visual arts, but all arts. That's an important part of the legacy of what happens here. It also opens the door to all different kinds of audiences that's really key.

Question 6:

What do you think the public response was? (00:31:05 minutes into recording)

SJP: I think they were mystified! I think it's very funny, just anecdotally, I think that some of the work by the *Action* artists was really mystifying to some of our audience. Junior's work; people thought it was funny and liked it but didn't quite get it. I don't know if that's about an audience not engaging with conceptual art in the same way. One of the interesting things for me was the response to Sonia's work with the Blue Room. I did several tours with all different kinds of people from retired people who come on a Saturday afternoon to groups of fine art students and students from other disciplines. There was a really mixed *reAction* to the work with the Blue Room. On the one hand, there were people who were saying 'Isn't the artist just exploiting people with learning difficulties, by putting them in front of a camera or by asking them to talk about very personal things?'. Even though I described how the process worked with Sonia and the Blue Room over a long period of time, some people couldn't get their heads around

what we tried to do, in terms of working with the Blue Room. The argument of the other side was 'This is great! Give us more! We want to see artists engaging with ideas and people that they might normally not'. They were very proud that it was a major international artist who took the time to develop a relationship with people from our community and then made of body of work about it which was really poignant. That surprised me that there was a bit of a split about that. I think in terms of the installation of that work; it was a great film but I wish we had shown it slightly differently. I wish we had put it in a slightly darker space. We did use a daylight projector but this was all according to what Sonia wanted it to do. She wanted people to see it from outside on the street and she wanted it to be accessible. But I almost wish we had made it more precious because I think that the story that comes out of it is so meaningful. I worry that we didn't make it as precious as we could have. But then, that's not the kind of thing that Sonia does. We did an artist talk in the rear gallery space. We were all sitting there talking about art, and at some point some teenage kids ran by and banged on the window and told us to fuck off or something. And Sonia just cracked up laughing and I was horrified. I thought 'Oh god, we're doing this public event'. But Sonia said 'Well, look, we're sitting in a gold fish bowl!'. So it's that down to earth sense in which Sonia makes work, how she presents it and how she allows people into it. It's really refreshing to work with an artist like that, but I did want to make it a bit more precious.

ADC: It's an interesting space at the back there. Because it's open and looks right onto the street it feels like a community space, especially if you don't know what lies behind it.

SJP: If you don't know anything about the Bluecoat, that functions as a shop window. Whatever happens in that space becomes an indicator or an index...

ADC: It takes away from the high art vibe from the room, which I'm not saying is a good or a bad thing. But sometimes perhaps people might take the work less seriously in that space as a result.

SJP: It's something that I've become more aware of with each show that we've done, and now we've become quite strategic about what goes into that space. For our next exhibition there's going to be some quite shocking material that will be in there, on view. But also we are going to make a window vinyl which will be quite shocking. I'm not going to tell you; you'll have to come and see it! We think it's shocking, but you know what, in this city, it might not be! There's a show we're doing there in the summer, which will be quite funny, around the women of country music. So big Dolly Parton wigs and mad things like that. We tend to think of that room as a place where we put things of spectacle. Not always in a bid to shock people, certainly, but just to get attention. So they say 'Oh what is that and how do I get in there?'. So that room is a very particular space and I often feel sorry for the artists that we put in that room because we do ask quite a lot of them and a lot of the work. Sonia's work, in that space, is some of the quietest work that we've had. Yet I would find people standing at the window looking through to watch the video and trying to figure out what was going on.

Question 7:

How do you feel questions and issues of difference were addressed by both the exhibitions? (00:37:29 minutes into the recording)

SJP: Obviously, with the Blue Room part of the exhibition, there was an idea of difference around disability and learning difficulties. But I think in terms of what people got from

the interviews was a concern of universal things; of love, of loss, of care, of memory. So that helped you see beyond colour or disability, but in a quite a subtle way. That's actually a really tough question.

ADC: Well perhaps you've answered it through the other questions.

SJP: The Blue Room project [Like Love, part two] was probably the most transparent in terms of the discussion of difference, and then followed by the work at the Meriton school [Like Love, part one]. But *Action*, because we had those conversations around 'Post Black', we almost didn't respond to difference at all. That was diffused, in a way. I'll have to think about it a bit more.

ADC: Well, there's a couple of things I'd like to pick up on. In these exhibition case studies, I'm carefully analysing the text panels and looking out for any underlying messages that emerge, that are perhaps not intentionally expressed. Or ideas that are not addressed in the display but come through in the texts or vice versa. So I was interested in the phrase 'Universal themes of love and care' and the meaning of the word *universal* there, and also in the text panels it said that the Blue Room participants discussed 'their own ideas of love and care', and I was interested in *their own* compared to who else's ideas as it's not made clear. Is it compared to universal ideas? If so how might their ideas about love and care be different to so-called universal ideas about love and care?

SJP: Oh yeah. You've hit on something very important. This is maybe speaking beyond the Blue Room, but for people like our typical Blue Room member, or perhaps adults with learning difficulties who are not part of the Blue Room, I think they're used to having carers, or parents or siblings speak for them. And something the Blue Room is about is allowing the individual to develop their own voice, and to do that, often times, through a connection to art, and through a connection to making. Having experiences where they can meet artists one-to-one and ask questions and not having to go through a set of filters, whether they are social or personal or whatever. So there's a degree of access that those individuals have. They feel very strongly...I'd describe the Blue Room as our biggest critics when they go into the galleries. They have developed their own very strong thoughts about art and art making, from their experiences. I think with Sonia's project with them, she showed how, oftentimes, adults with learning difficulties or anyone who is disabled are not accepted in the same way. They might not be perceived as having the same concerns or worries and obviously having very different concerns. But when it comes to universal things, so not mobility, but the idea of love or care; what does that mean? How is that individualised experience different or the same? Those are open-ended questions and I thought that's what Sonia's piece did really well. It tried to tackle that but it didn't purport to conclude. It just presented individuals from the group.

ADC: So questions were raised, but in a subtle way.

SJP: Yeah. But if you wanted to, you could take away mobility, or disability, and insert the words race, or gender.

ADC: For me, that's how issues of difference were addressed. And certain terms that were inserted into the texts that were perhaps...I don't know how much meaning was ascribed to those terms when you were writing the texts...

SJP: We were quite careful with it but something we tend to do a lot here with our exhibitions is they are often left quite open-ended. So I often think we're presenting a set of ideas or images or works or people but we're not actually saying 'This is how it is'. I feel like, why would you want to see an exhibition like that? So, I think that's something we were probably aware of. We didn't want to say 'This is how it is'. We didn't want to say 'This is Post-Black', because we're not entirely sure that it was. We also want to be inclusive and to make things accessible. We wanted to leave things open. Not in a sort of wishy-washy, we couldn't be arsed tying it all together way. But more in a respectful approach, I would suggest, that opens the door and leaves the door open for inclusive participation in what we were trying to do.

Question 8:

To what extent would you describe Action as a black survey show and to what extent was that a concern? (00:44:54 minutes into the recording)

SJP: I wouldn't. Only in the context of its response to *Afro Modern*. You could easily have not paid any attention to any of the interpretation panels. You could have just walked in, looked at the work, and maybe thought that was work by young artists. And you would have no knowledge of their background, their race or anything. I think that came through really strongly. In the end, that was kind of the point.

ADC: For me, that's one of the ways that *Afro Modern* contextualised *Action*. If *Afro Modern* hadn't been there, the question of whether or not *Action* was a black survey show might not have been raised.

SJP: Yes. I think the timing and how things knitted together across the city...if you were paying attention, and you went to the three venues; the Tate, the Walker and the Bluecoat, and you looked at them as a critical mass of an engagement with the *Black Atlantic*, then it would start to make sense, in terms of a chronology, in terms of a development of themes or ideas. In an optimistic way, in a healthy and rigorous way, they all worked together, played off each other and challenged each other. So, if you were paying attention and you took all of that in, it was a meaty event.

ADC: Interestingly, across all of the partner venues, including FACT and the Slavery Museum, there are some contrasting messages coming through. Some are very celebratory, and there was a Darcus Howe talk which I think was probably not.

SJP: It would be interesting to find out, if you took these parameters; *Afro Modern*, a show like we did with Sonia and the *Action* artists, Aubrey Williams and a couple of the other events, ISM [International Slavery Museum], the film at FACT, if you took that and deposited it in London, what would that have said and what would that have done? Or if you took it to Newcastle or Glasgow or Cardiff? There's a regionalism that I'm interested in, in terms of how that programme sits within a regional remit as well. If the shows had all been in London, people would just be [shrugs shoulders nonchalantly].

ADC: I think you might have got two extremes if it had been in London. Well, I don't think Tate Modern would have hosted *Afro Modern*.

SJP: That's an interesting question.

- ADC: Well I asked Tanya Barson and Peter Gorshluter about that. Peter said that because Tanya had developed the idea for the show whilst she had been based at Tate Liverpool it had always been the plan that it would take place at Tate Liverpool. Tanya said the same, that she felt a sense of loyalty or responsibility towards Tate Liverpool, to keep the show there in spite of her having subsequently taken up a post at Tate Modern. Although she did say that Tate Modern were interested in the show.
- SJP: Well if I was in her position...I mean what would you chose to do if you were an ambitious curator? But then hats off to Tanya for being loyal.
- ADC: Yes, though I'm not sure that Tate Modern would have been willing to host the show even if they had a space for it in their exhibition programme.
- SJP: Well, I think it had a very particular resonance here. A lot of younger artists came in to look at the *Action* show. For them it was a measure, to consider where they are against their London colleagues. That's important. It was also important for those young artists [the *Action* artists] to step into Liverpool. A couple of them, I think Beverley and Junior, have been back and shown here since in different venues. They've maintained connections to the city.
- ADC: I was wondering if the artists in *Action* would have had an opportunity to show in a venue of this size and reputation in London?
- SJP: No. Which is exactly how Sonia felt in the 80s. For some artists you've got to get out of London. It's like you do it backwards. While all our artists here, it's like a brain drain south. It's trying to bring them back, in a way.
- ADC: All the *Action* artists live in London, don't they? But they all had to come here to get that kind of visibility?
- SJP: Robin and Grace probably had a certain amount of visibility. They've been part of national and international projects. So in that group of four, there are two who are already well on their way, on that trajectory. But then you've got two who are so...well Beverley, when we first started talking to her she was just graduating. It was an amazing moment.

Appendix 8.18

Notes from telephone interview with Nicholas Serota
27 May 2010

The following questions were provided before the telephone conversation:

There has been a long-running debate regarding black artists' visibility in, and representation from, mainstream art institutions in Britain. This issue is still being discussed, as demonstrated by the debate at Tate Britain regarding Yinka Shonibare's commission for the Fourth Plinth at Trafalgar Square on Tuesday 25th May 2010.

How do you think Chris Ofili's practice and career relates to these discussions?

Do you think discussions about the visibility of black artists has the sense of importance or urgency it did ten or twenty years ago?

Response from Nicholas Serota:

Chris Ofili is very conscious of his origins and connections to Nigeria. It has been evident in his work and he has been conscious of the need to adopt a language in his work that reflects this, such as references to songs in the titles of his works ('No Woman, No Cry', 1998, references the song by Bob Marley), and the relationship remains important to him.

The Chris Ofili retrospective at Tate Britain in spring 2010 was not programmed simply because he is a black artist or because of concerns regarding the visibility of black artists at Tate. However, Tate was conscious that showing him would act as a role model for young artists.

More black and Asian artists are being exhibited than before, and there have been fewer discussions in recent years regarding such artists' absences. Institutions have become more conscious of these issues and more committed to the needs and interests of their audiences and communities. However, commentators such as Rasheed Araeen are right in believing that much more work needs to be done.