

WE WILL BE

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[Images: Lubaina Himid, 1985, We Will Be. Newsprint, marker pen, paper, drawing pins, watercolour, crayon, pencil, yarn, foil and playing cards on plywood. Walker Art Gallery Collection]

We want we want we want –
E ver desiring, so they say, ever lacking, so they say

Whose desire, whose lack?
I turn on my heel, pivoting words and works, observing heads turned, toes tipped
Lean in to read, to see, to hear – hear, hear – here, here
Lean out to speak, speak back, and to

Before me, a hem of newsprint dulled, iconic heads on a riotous skirt
Eyes aslant, arms crossed, back straight – pins glinting – feathers fan, a fan, and a panoply of
NO, NO, NO

Who will we be – what are our possible, future, insistent, selves?
Her sisters and mothers and daughters are
Ours too, and yours, and his, and theirs, and yet

We are not merely ‘we’ but
Ever more than, never same

We may stand, and sit, and speak, and march
And chant, and sing, and yet
Never are We merely One, never presume Us and
Them

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[Images: Mona Hatoum, 1988, Measures of Distance. Colour video with sound, 15 mins 35 secs]

Word and image span distance immeasurable, meshing bodies both present and absent, scripts
screening desires
Hovering and fading, with tenderness, longing, and laughter
English tones echo Arabic, mother/daughter tongues in cheek (his jealousy in check)

Rupturing rules with sisterly intimacy, remembered in
Empty houses, mourning war

Where are our loved ones?
Everywhere scattered

Words held behind lines, memories reaching to breach lives lost, losses lived
An afternoon recalled: anatomy of maternal love
Nap interrupted, he nags against 'nonsense', disturbed by their sensual wakefulness
Trespass denied... Four years, then twenty... Trespassers will be

"We felt happy and secure and it was paradise compared to where we are now"
In Beirut, in London – still on the move – still, on the move
The place is here, and already elsewhere
Here, and always, at least, also there, and there, and there

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[Images: Joy Gregory, 1989-1990, Autoportraits. Giclee prints on cotton rag paper, 17.8 x 12.7cm]

Who we are flies out of the window; we edge, hedge our bets, in and out of frame
How we see calls for patience, endurance – as clear whites and matt blacks outline and eclipse
Out of darkness, with lightness – elusive profiles in multiple

Weak solution and waiting, to un-fog the image
Engender a presence, enable a vision

Worn backwards, a jacket, or a dress unzipped? A collarless, sleeveless 'T' is an 'I'...
Angular earrings, squares circled and looped – one ear, and the other
Nape of neck, spine semi-exposed, hair scraped and twisted tight,
a hint of skin, and shoulder
Turned away, turned to listen, tilted down and up – a jawline, defiant, attentive

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*[Images: Zarina Bhimji, 1987, She Loved to Breathe – Pure Silence. Plexiglas, latex gloves, spices.
Victoria and Albert Museum collection]*

In limbo, translucent fragments line up, suspended: some jewellery, a bird, an embroidered shoe,
a pair of latex gloves, discoloured by time
No spaces between Perspex and photographs and muslin and text –
a span of moments and places compressed – heaps of spice beneath

To and through, move along these gestures encased, enfolded, entwined, intimate and invasive –
small deaths and violent acts dismissed (under bureaucratic cover)

Her precious metals, her mettle precious, adorned and assaulted

Embellished yet unembellished truths, hints at violations, at Home and Abroad

We reserve the right (unreservedly, contentiously) to welcome or refuse to be spokespeople,
specimens, special cases (no need to applaud, tolerate, placate or contain us)

Allied, unaligned, atypical, predictable, exemplary and ordinary, average and extraordinary –
You?

We will keep working but we will not do your work for you

Even though we may be sick and tired...

When i-i-i or 'we' pivot this place, this one-time 'margin' now momentary 'centre'

A constellation of voices speak out, talk back and to – centrifugal forces

Naysaying, gainsaying – NO NO NO – witness to the unsayable and not yet said –

Take strength

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[Images: Marlene Smith (1987) Art History. Mixed media, 85 x 76 x 45cm]

White weave becomes a crochet sleeve for a vase and bouquet, an array of hot peach petals and
leafy shards

Hand-made and home-made, a DIY altar to sisters and foremothers – their histories, our histories,
art's histories too

Endeavour to remember, loop the dead into the living, to remember

New lineages, genealogies and old un-forgettings, with fake flora and fauna

Women and artists, looking out, looking out for, and holding each other up

Edmonia Lewis, Simone Alexander, Magdalene Odundo and Brenda Agard –

some names for the many sculptors, painters, potters, photographers, yet unnamed

Women and artists, watching over, and watching each other work

Archiving one another, remaking / unmaking boundaries

Now and then: she leaves America for Europe; she paints herself flushed violet, bruise-blue;

she captures her hands shaping clay; she photographs an artist for another –

each on the other's shoulders, a make-shift maternal

Totemic, polemic – a portrait of our times, for our times

Artificial flowers, all and none

New rooms next to hers, in the room next to mine, filling with shades of black

Domestic goddesses, stirring and agitating

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[Images: Sonia Boyce, 1987, From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born 'Native' Considers her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and her Roots in Reconstruction. Black & white photographs on paper, photocopies on paper, acrylic paint, ballpoint pen, crayon and felt-tip pen. Tate Collection]

Tarzan the White Man fades into a pink and white cloud – painted out, protesting
Hollywood's backward and lazy fantasies – childlike 'natives' (less-than-human),
despoiling childhood dreams
English-born and English-borne, this 'native' keeps cool, as neo/imperial emotions run high

Twelve faces pull faces, parody the parodies
Iconographies come undone and filmic frames drop, uncut and re-cut, she
Mimicks the caricatures, multiplies
Expressions, all gestures untrue – a composite composure deposing the King
I -I-I-I-I-I, I-I-I-I-I-I – a comic adventurous photo-booth cry
Selves squint and faint, stare wide and wider, in faux conscious / unconscious states

Nonsense gives way to a decolonial dance
Otherworldly gazes break the pop cultural trance
Words fail – no more

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[Images: Maud Sulter (1985) Nightmare; In the Ever Presence of the Enemy; and As a Black Woman, from the series, Poetry in Motion. Collages on paper, approx. 50cm x 40cm. Birmingham Museums Collection]

As an artist, I am also – and never – no longer – and more than – a young-black-british-anglo-
asian-chinese-yellow-red-white-and-blue-woman. And you?
Newspapers tell of stowaway survivors and policemen jailed for attacks – singed fragments spill
onto a photographed stately home – the wealthy protected, remote
Divisions (perceived, constructed, imposed), igniting fires

The Ever Present Enemy fuels phallocratic fears
Heads of state wielding paranoic powers, fanning flames
Ever provoking, stoking – named and nameless threats loom large over Liberty

"Promising Writer Dies... a shy, beautiful and considerate girl";
"Pakistani woman... plead[s] guilty to murdering her husband"
Lines, tears and cuts place youthful beauty over racialised mariticide –
who are we encouraged to mourn?

A woman killed, a woman kills; a blackwoman killed, a blackwoman kills
Chasing freedoms, bearing children
Exit and enter under attack, enter and exit fighting back

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*[Images: Ingrid Pollard, 1987, Pastoral Interlude. Hand tinted silver prints.
Victoria and Albert Museum collection]*

It is as if the forests and lakes and all of landscaped Nature belongs to a clean, clear and bright
natural Whiteness; it is as if unnatural Blackness should be confined to the besieged and
dirty city. For Britain still bleaches the
Sweat and the blood of the enslaved and working peoples, who made this nation 'GREAT'

Hordes teem in privileged and poor imaginations
Ease is a luxury, unease the more common feeling
Romantic idylls of country and city, impossible ideals of whiteness (and blackness), polarities of
power, buildings burning – sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers, daughters, sons –
England – OPEN YOUR EYES

References

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Ingrid Pollard, 1987, Pastoral Interlude. Hand tinted silver prints. Victoria and Albert Museum collection

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