

from storytelling to anecdotal comments, including factual descriptions of every procedure the doula performs, such as how to empty remaining body fluids and wash a dead body with soap suds. Rico's gestures and movements punctuate the boldness of the script and its macabre humour. There is no sentimentalism here in her delivery; the work foregrounds the intensity and tenacity of the performer while demystifying the fear of touching and caring for a dead body, but it sometimes leaves little room for the viewer to imagine a more meditative and gentle approach to afterlife care.

*One Big Bag* is the second instalment of a three-part work which began in 2019 with the performance *Help the Dead*. The project is informed by several years of research on death doulas and the establishment of the rights and practices of queer death along the west coast of the US. Drawing from the impact of the AIDS crisis and the establishment of black funeral homes in the US during the civil rights movement, the work is a profound reflection on the vital role of common care infrastructure. For members of LGBTQ+ communities, the death event is when the rights over their bodies can be undermined and repeatedly threatened by heteronormativity. 'Often with these big life events,' Hughes comments, 'norms are re-centred and the biological family becomes relevant again - unless you've done the paperwork.' Taking death into your own hands, choosing your own doula, imagining your own creative and sustainable funeral: such actions produce a serious political act of self-determination as well as a sharp critique of the death industry. Why spend \$0,000 on a funeral when a body can be transported and buried in a cardboard box, be dressed in a mushroom biodegradable burial suit and loved ones can be gathered to remember a life lived under a favourite tree?

*One Big Bag* is a poignant work that reminds us of the urgency of rethinking the politics of mourning, and the material and financial ecologies of death care. This seems even more crucial in our time of mass death from war and the continuing pandemic, when, for safety reasons, the primacy of nuclear families was reinforced to the exclusion of other queer and non-normative relations, and in-person funerals were restricted or banned. To help a person have a good death is an act of love, yet to make sure that the life and the body is honoured, and their chosen family recognised, should be a human right: 'Open your heart and do the work so that your life can end with the same spirit that it was lived.'

**Lucia Farnati** is a curator and independent researcher, and co-author of *The Force of Listening*, 2017.



Helen Cammock, 'behind the eye is the promise of rain', installation view

## Helen Cammock: behind the eye is the promise of rain

Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover  
26 February to 22 May

Helen Cammock's art has something for everybody: the personal touch of the memoirist, the analysis of the critic, the tragic storytelling of the historian of oppression and persecution, the poet's sensitivity to the texture of language, even some brightly coloured abstraction to butter up the transitions with added optical punch. Most of these multiple registers adopt the vehicle of her voice, which interweaves through her installations with the synchronous echo of various soundtracks. The association of range with ambition, and of both with the immersiveness of the presentation – in the populist sense beloved of art institutions these days – may explain the contradiction at the heart of her work: that a sanitised accessibility should be the defining formal and sensory impression left by art which takes as its primary theme the murky, recalcitrant subject of racial injustice.

On a plywood platform, crossing the Kestner's main gallery, Cammock – part-gospel singer, part-charismatic preacher, part-cultural studies lecturer – wandered back and forth on the opening evening, alternately reading and singing from a script, which collaged high-frown quotes (Walter Benjamin, Franz Fanon and her own writing) with sung extracts from American black spirituals and Caribbean folk songs. Although the platform dominated the main gallery, its role was limited to providing a walkway for a ten-minute performance – which would take place twice – and a base for panels, raised off its edge, on which Cammock's posters were displayed. With poetic phrases arranged across blocks of solid colour in a post-Mallarméan scatter of neat sans-serif, the posters draw on both the formalist monochrome tradition and the free-form stanza structures of concrete poetry, without engaging with either beyond a level of design or rhetoric. Similarly, two wall-hanging fabric works were too passively artisanal to warrant the allusion

to the urgency of protest banners, which their form courts. These elements combined into a decor as free of sharp edges as any library foyer exhibit. In the neighbouring gallery, there was even the obligatory information station: a table strewn with relevant literature – James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Stuart Hall – along with a pair of Cammock catalogues and a recent edition of *Prizes* in which she features. This managed to seem both presumptuous and reductive.

If the three films were cast as substance to justify the blandness of the exhibition's staging, they were equally cloying in their well-meaning ineffectuality. *They Call It Idlewild*, 2020 – an indictment of the hypocrisy of a white leisure class, which exploits black workers while perpetuating a myth of the lazy black man – has Cammock philosophising around quotes from James Joyce, Jonathan Crowe and Confucius (Reviews *AM436*). For all their multivalency and virtuosic shifts of tone and form, her stream-of-consciousness monologues remain stuck in a personal animus, which fails to be sublimated into the coherence of historical/political critique, and so defaults to the softer art of the postcolonial: suburban gardens, wind-pulsed trees, blurred fields through rain-spattered cast-iron windows. This anyone imagery, shot during a residency at Wysing Arts Centre in Cambridge, forms a decorative foil for the meanderings of a script peppered with truisms ('randomness is like idleness'), which cultivate a veneer of profundity, but turn out to be either meaningless or platitudinous when you think about them. There is a characteristic change of gear as intellectual speculation retreats into either anecdote or free association, in the process renouncing any claim to cogency. 'We live in this haze of appropriation', Cammock intones in *There's a Hole in the Sky Part II – Listening to James Baldwin*, 2016, but the haze is in her language, in which quotes from Baldwin are decontextualised windows of clarity.

*Changring Room*, 2014 – a meditation on some ceramic sculptures of wild animals made by Cammock's father, a schoolteacher and amateur artist – is the best of the films because it is the most personal, limiting itself to the lens of her experience. Why do some artworks receive a museum's reverence while others are dismissed as sentimental junk? The exhibition's single striking conjunction is the framing of these ceramics – a few of which are physically present as well as filmed – as works of 'outsider art' by implication of the generic forms of 21st-century contemporary installation surrounding them. It is as if Cammock's conventions had conspired against her. She aims to evoke the pathos of her father's fate as an artist *manqué*, but her work patronises him in the guise of offering his work the institutional attention which eluded him in his lifetime. The crux of the film is her repetition of the 'n'-word as a slur that others have applied to others, but which, through her repeated intonation of it, has been internalised, so she is afraid that she will end up applying it to herself: 'I say, nigger, that's what they call you, that's what they call me, have called me.' Sharply observed vignettes, invoking her father's experience as a black immigrant in 1970s Britain, expose by contrast the airiness of the poetic and theoretical language in which they are couched: 'I remember shopkeepers would avoid putting change in your hand.'

In a talk at the Courtauld a year ago, Cammock spoke of her interest in what she called 'the audible fingerprint', which she defined as how the perception of a statement is determined by who is saying it. She

took this as confirmation of the 'relationality' of writing, presumably in the sense that what is written, unlike what is spoken, is interchangeable in context, and so essentially independent of writer or reader. But her art's 'audible fingerprint' seems more aligned to speech's direct trace of a particular speaker, even to the old modernist concept of the artist's 'voice' as a trace of subjectivity, despite her desire to dress the concept in 'relational' garb. Her voice, as it appears in her art, acts as an emollient, domesticating her references. As she has said, 'Everything [I] make is obliquely [my] story'. The problem is that the obliqueness is taken as synonymous with the art, whereas the best of this exhibition is the complexity which arises from the framing of George Cammock's naive but specific ceramics and drawings, particularly in conjunction with those moments when Cammock briefly casts aside her pretence to 'relationality' and responds directly, in plain language, to her feelings about her father, his art and what they mean to her.

**Mark Prince** is an artist and critic based in Berlin.

## Anne-Marie Creamer: Dear Friend, I Can No Longer Hear Your Voice

Sir John Soane's Museum, London, 9 March to 5 June

Anne-Marie Creamer uses photogrammetry and CGI animation to reconstruct not just the bedchamber but also the presence of Sir John Soane's wife Eliza, who died, tragically, at an early age in 1815. Sited at the Sir John Soane's Museum, the ten-minute film, *Dear Friend, I Can No Longer Hear Your Voice*, combines sight and sound with voice and song to create a powerful testimony to love and loss.

Most of the house is exactly as Soane left it when he died: after preserving Eliza's bedchamber for 19 years, he eventually turned it into a room for his architectural models. In the press release, Creamer thus describes her project as 'an act of archaeology and revelation.' Using Soane's architectural drawings as its basis, the film guides the viewer around the reconstructed space. It focuses on the bed where Eliza died as well as the everyday items that she left behind – a pair of gloves, a book, a clock – and the room looks as though she still inhabits it. The film has a painterly quality, with warm soft colour and sunlight streaming in through large windows. Eliza's presence is suggested through shadows that are there and not quite there, making her absence that much more apparent.



Anne-Marie Creamer, *Dear Friend, I Can No Longer Hear Your Voice*, 2022, video

JANE AND LOUISE WILSON: *The Toxic Camera*  
29 APRIL – 5 JUNE 2022

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The accompanying soundtrack, by composer Verity Standen with lyrics by Creamer, begins with the words of the film's title, a poignant address from Soane to his wife. They are taken from a longer passage in *Covino, ou l'Italie*, a novel by Madame de Staël, first published in 1807, in which a young man addresses a portrait of his dead father. It reads in full: 'Dear Friend, I can no longer hear your voice, but tell me by your mute gaze, still so powerful to my soul, tell me what I must do to give you in heaven some satisfaction.' Soane had this inscription written on the Soane family tomb and added to a portrait drawing of Eliza that hangs in the house.

Although the soundtrack draws on Soane's diary as well as letters by his male friends, it is sung by a chorus of female voices, from which Eliza's is notably absent. Soane could no longer hear her voice and neither can we. Diary entries mark the days leading up to her sudden death before his friends 'do nothing but talk of his loss.' His world turned upside down and the voices sing of the 'awful silence.' The harmonious vocals abruptly take on a high degree of dissonance with harsh jarring sounds, felt viscerally by the viewer, to explore Soane's grief.

Absence permeates a number of Creamer's previous projects, too, including *Treatment for Six Characters: An Unrealised Film* by Lutzji Prandelio, 2015, filmed in the playwright's former home, and *The Life and Times of the Oldest Man in Soane of Fioriano*, 2013-15, an entirely fictitious character whose life is constructed through interviews. Each of these works asks: what is the relationship between the material forms that a person leaves behind and the immaterial stories that our memories weave around them? Piecing together fragments of narratives and evidence, Creamer highlights the voids that remain between them and the absence of the main character.

Following Langlands & Bell (2020-21) and Pablo Bronstein (2021-22), this is the third exhibition at the Sir John Soane's Museum by a contemporary artist, while a further series involves architects and designers. The Soane's Museum is not alone in exploring this contemporary curatorial practice: London's Freud Museum led the way, and now a wide range of former domestic spaces are commissioning artists to produce new works, from Van Gogh House London to Blenheim Palace and the Palace of Versailles.

Although described as an 'immersive' film, 'site-responsive' seems a more apt term for a work which is designed not just to be sited in a specific place but which exists in response to it. The Soane Museum is particularly striking for its abundant collections; crammed full of sculptures, architectural fragments and other antiquities as well as drawings, paintings and an Ancient Egyptian sarcophagus, it is a space of impressive material objects mainly from the classical past. Seen within the Museum, *Dear Friend, I Can No Longer Hear Your Voice* invites the viewer to reconsider the surrounding rooms and to reflect on themes of mourning and remembrance that resonate throughout and beyond its walls.

**Deborah Schultz** is senior lecturer in art history and visual culture at Regent's University London.

## Books

### The Soul of a Nation Reader: Writings by and about Black American Artists, 1960-1980

This reader is the latest spin-off in the long life of the much-lauded exhibition 'Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power', curated by Mark Godfrey and Zoë Whitley. Edited by Godfrey and Allie Biswas, *The Soul of a Nation Reader: Writings by and about Black American Artists 1960-1980* joins a growing field of scholarship concerned with re-evaluating specific moments in the US when social and civil unrest, compounded by racial inequality, coincided with multifarious artistic practices including those produced and framed by the Black Arts Movement. Recent books include Susan E Cahán's *Mourning Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* and Darby English's *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*, both from 2016; *The Wall of Respect: Public Art and Black Liberation in 1960s Chicago*, the 2017 publication edited by Abdul Kalimat, Romi Crawford and Rebecca Zorach; and Zorach's own 2019 title, *Art for People's Sake: Artists and Community in Black Chicago, 1965-1975*. Although concerned with discourses emerging from this era, Godfrey asserts that the reader also seeks to 'counter' particular omissions in American art history: 'There are many anthologies of key texts by artists and critics associated with Minimalism and Conceptual art', the curator states, before lamenting that there are no equivalent anthologies about 'Black artists of the period.' To remedy the situation, this publication presents some 200 texts written by over 50 different contributors from both notable and, perhaps, less familiar names, including Marion Perkins, Raymond Saunders, Emory Douglas, Dore Ashton and Lawrence Alloway. Although primarily centred on New York, this is a veritable treasure trove of material, garnered from art journals, some long-defunct, self-published pamphlets, exhibition catalogues, exhibition statements and newspaper articles, as well as transcripts from interviews and public round table discussions.

While debate, argument and critical accreditation are invariably centred on black artists and their work in a racially divided society, a burning but largely unanswered question is where do white artists, the minimalists and conceptualists, figure? Yet Godfrey's 'guiding principle' for selecting material is very broad. It includes 'the role and predicament of Black artists, or of Black women artists specifically; the possibility or impossibility of a Black aesthetic in general and in specific media; the status of abstraction in Black art; what kind of institutions should house her work of Black artists'. Notable inclusions from outside the visual arts offer a broader context and recognition of the interplay between how black writers and the Black Arts Movement, primarily a literary movement, supported, influenced and riled black visual artists in equal measure. This material includes Ishmael Reed's 'The Black Artist: Calling a Spade a Spade', 1967, Amiri Baraka's 'The Black Aesthetic', published in *The Negro Digest* in 1969, and Toni Morrison's foreword for the first edition of the important but short-lived *Black Panther*, *Annual* in 1967.

The texts are more or less evenly spread across the first 15 years covered by the anthology. However, 1969, 1970 and 1971 contain a quarter of the anthology's

selection, 14, 18 and 21 texts respectively, reflecting an intense period of debate and publishing. Included among these documents is a transcript of 'The Black Artist in America: A Symposium' which involved senior and emergent practitioners such as Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff and Sam Gilliam. For Godfrey, Jacob Lawrence and Tom Lloyd's exchanges here exemplified a bygone age of 'polemical, sometimes outright aggressive tone of debate between Black artists'. Conversely, Guyanese-born British painter Frank Bowling's trilogy of essays from 1969, 'Discussion on Black Art', originally published in *Arts Magazine*, and his 1971 text 'It's Not Enough to Say "Black is Beautiful"', according to Godfrey, 'shunned' the likes of Benny Andrews and Dana Chandler, deeming them 'mere message makers', unlike Melvin Edwards, Al Loving and William Sauter Williams, who were 'disrupting and transforming current artistic conventions'. Importantly, Andrews, an influential painter and founding member of the Black Emancipation Cultural Coalition (BEOC), formed in 1968 to 'confront racism in the arts sector', and artist and visionary publisher Samella Lewis, founding editor of *Black Art Journal: An International Quarterly* in 1976 (which in 1984 would become *International Review of African American Art*), rightly punctuate the anthology.

Despite its abundant themes and range of styles, this reader is, surprisingly, arranged chronologically, rather than thematically. On occasion this works well, for example in exchanges between Hilton Kramer and Benny Andrews in the *New York Times* in 1970, centred on the politics of the exhibition 'Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston'. Both Godfrey's lengthy introductory overview and Biswas's short paragraphs about individual texts and their authors are indispensable in offering some historical perspective. In general, however, the chronology appears the least compelling way to arrange material, particularly as the years 1974 to 1984 are each represented by only one or two entries, signalling a gradual decline in what Godfrey terms 'collective statements and polemical disagreements'. Although the volume of material disputes, there are still important texts about the formative careers of the likes of David Hammons, Senga Nengudi and Dawoud Bey. 'Perspectives/Commentaries on Afrocoiba' from 1979 by Larry Neal, another influential figure in the Black Arts Movement, demonstrates the enduring synergies between visual art and literature. Yet a thematic ordering, or grouping of similar kinds of texts, such as AD Coleman's belated but important appreciation 'Roy DeCarava: Thru Black Eyes' in 1970 and Linda Goode Bryant and Marcy S Phillips 1978 essay 'Contextures', written to accompany a series of exhibitions organised under the umbrella title *Afro-American Artists in the Abstract Continuum of America Art: 1945-1977*, may have made for a more instructive and user-friendly anthology.

Towards the end of his introduction, Godfrey opportunistically reflects on the greater status and recognition now conferred on some African-American artists since 'Soul of a Nation' was shown at Tate Modern in 2017. The exhibition's three-year tour across the US certainly coincided with several notable exhibitions, including Mark Bradford's and Martin Puryear's retrospectives at the US pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 2017 and 2019. Consequently, however, Godfrey fails to acknowledge that none of the African-American artists in 'Soul of a Nation' had previously exhibited at Tate, including Faith Ringgold who, we are told, 'by the early 1970s ... had established herself

in international circles'. Ringgold's first solo exhibition in Europe took place at Weiss Berlin in 2018, followed by another at the Serpentine Gallery in 2019. Tethering the anthology to the progenitor exhibition raises the spectre of selective amnesia; for example, Tate's penchant for importing white-only American-artist exhibitions during the 1950s and 1960s, including 'The Art of the Real: USA 1948-1969' in 1969, are more than historical footnotes, precisely because they coincide with the years covered by this anthology. Such institutional antics remain absent from the 'Soul of a Nation' franchise. While it is right to bemoan today's conservatism in the art world, specifically the 'general politeness that pervades discourse between artists', Godfrey remains mute about the self-serving agendas of curators and institutions that serve-up racially bifurcated and partial accounts of American art history as genuine acts of altruism.

*The Soul of a Nation Reader: Writings by and about Black American Artists 1960-1980*, eds Mark Godfrey and Allie Biswas, Gregory R Miller & Co, 2021, 628pp, 35 col., £24.95, 978 1 941366 32 5.

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## Look Again

### Travis Alabanza: Gender Afua Hirsch: Empire Nathalie Olah: Class Bernadine Evaristo: Feminism

Look again. What, at the border-defining mural, *The Expedition in Pursuit of Rare Meats*, by Rex Whistler depicting an imagined hunting scene and the 'unsequoically ... offensive' depiction of a black child being kidnapped and enslaved that has been in mainstream press for nearly two years? No, not that. Not while the Tate ethics committee considers which artist will be commissioned to create a work to sit alongside it (Artnotes AM464). Anyway, the restaurant is closed until all this happens, no doubt causing a major financial loss through unsold lunches, so you cannot look at that particular chapter of Tate's story at the moment. Look again. What, at the make-up of donors, patrons, board and Tate Foundation honorary members who may or may not have nefarious links with Russian leaders? No, not that either. Anyway, Tate isn't immune to the knotty systems of repressed, artwashed and obfuscated leaderships that have, historically, been shown to power national cultural institutions.

'Look Again' is the title of Tate's latest collection of pocket-sized books that reapproach the national collection of British art, reassessing how institutional structures shape systems of knowledge. This is what we should apparently be looking at, again: the Tate collection, but through different eyes. These first four titles guide us on a tour of cultural and socio-political terrains, each written by a leading voice in their field: Nathalie Olah on class, Afua Hirsch on empire, Travis Alabanza on gender and Booker Prize-winning Bernadine Evaristo on feminism. Eight other titles are scheduled, but this opening line-up looks for four huge topics that are on the forefront of an