**Stuart Hall**

# Assembling the 1980s: The Deluge—and After

This paper tries to frame a provisional answer to the question How might we begin to "assemble" the 1980s as an object of critical knowledge? It does not aspire to a definitive interpretation of the period. Other contributors address this question with far greater authority. Not being a practicing artist, art critic, historian, or curator, mine is a strictly amateur view. What I try to do, instead, is to "map" the black arts in Britain in the 1980s as part of a wider cultural/political moment, tracking some of the impulses that went into its making and suggesting some interconnections between them. I "assemble" these elements, not as a unity, but in all their contradictory dispersion. In adopting this genealogical approach, the artwork itself appears, not in its fullness as an aesthetic object, but as a constitutive element in the fabric of the wider world of ideas, movements, and events, while at the same time offering us a privileged vantage point on that world.

In *Different: Contemporary Photographers and Black Identity*, Mark Sealy and I make the argument that contemporary black photography continues, in many ways, to operate on a problematic first defined by the practitioners who emerged in the 1980s.[1] We may

think of this as the first, genuinely "postcolonial" moment in black artistic practice. It witnessed an explosion of creative work by artists from places historically marginalized from the centers of power and authority. It opened up certain possibilities in art practice and defined an "economy" of themes and images with which contemporary practitioners are still reckoning. Though not a unified, coherent, or organized phenomenon, this "movement" (if something so loose can be called such) must be tracked, not only in the visual arts, film, and photography, but across music, literature, and the performing arts, popular culture and fashion. Broadly speaking, it is driven by the struggles of peoples, marginalized in relation to the world system, to resist exclusion, reverse the historical gaze, come into visibility, and open up a "third space" (between the weight of an unreconstructed tradition and the impetus of a mindless modernism) in cultural representation. It therefore belongs to that uneven, contradictory, and bitterly contested transformation of cultural life now in progress across the globe, which attempts to de-center Western models and open a broader, more transcultural and "translative" perspective on cultural practice and production. It challenges the institutional spaces, established circuits, and validated canons of critical achievement of the metropolitan mainstream.

This "movement" has global significance. It refuses to be constrained by national boundaries, emphasizing instead a lateral, diasporic, transnational perspective. The project persists, despite being confronted on all sides by deepening inequalities of power and material resources and marked by a persistent racism. Unable as yet to stem frontally the tide of Western-driven, neoliberal globalization and its cultural agendas, this is globalization's Other, transnational face—its subversive reverse side. As we argued, "Refusing, simultaneously, either to disappear into the global bazaar of the international art market or to be holed up forever in some 'local' ethnic ghetto, this movement is 'located' in, without being rendered motionless by, places of origin, skin colour, so-called racial group, ethnic tradition or national belongingness and is part of a new, emergent kind of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism.'"[2]

The 1980s, then, saw the onset of a "deluge" of creative activity. However, the "Shades of Black" conference also constituted the 1980s as a puzzle, an enigma. In the history of the postwar black visual arts in Britain, the 1980s remain a vigorously contested space. This may be because they have become an object of desire, weighed down by



the projection of powerful but unrequited psychic and political investments. Thus, some see the 1980s as the moment when the dream that artists from the former colonial empires could enter the mainstream of modern art and claim their rightful place there was abandoned. Some see the 1980s as the moment when art as an essential weapon in the armory of antiracist politics surfaced—and was derailed. Some see the decade as the moment when the arts were harnessed to the expression of excluded cultural, national, ethnic, and racial identities—and became mired in the multicultural trap of "cultural difference." Some see the 1980s as the moment when what was progressive in modernism was subverted by the vagaries of postmodernism and betrayed by cultural theory's so-called collusive relationship with global capitalism. The protagonists of these various positions are unlikely to agree—or even to agree to differ! Indeed, the old antagonisms are still pursued, sometimes with a venomous intensity. We are still in the post-1980s, living its turbulent afterlife, with all the heated controversy of an unsettled history in which everything is still urgently at stake.

We need to bear in mind the transatlantic nature of the dialogue that "Shades of Black" initiated. Here, comparisons are useful, but closeness can also be a source of misunderstanding. The Black Arts Movement in the United States, which emerged during the post–civil rights period, was enormously influential for black British artists like Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper and the formation of the Pan-Afrikan Connection in 1982. However, the term "black" in the British context (and, incidentally, in this essay) always also references migrants from the Asian subcontinent as well as the African diaspora, a fact that makes the politics of antiracism significantly different on the two sides of the Atlantic. There are deeper historical differences. For African Americans, the key factor has always been slavery, whose consequences continue to shape daily domestic American life. In the Caribbean case, in the 1950s and 1960s, the central issue seemed to be, not slavery per se, but colonialism. Certainly, the postwar generation of Caribbean and Asian artists who migrated to Britain were primarily motivated by anticolonialism and the struggle for national independence. Further, because Britain—unlike the United States—managed slavery and colonization at a safe distance, the migrations of the 1950s were the first time a black working population in any significant numbers had come to live, work, and settle in the white domestic space. These and other facts should make us wary of easy U.S./U.K. comparisons. The powerful impact of black American

popular culture on black British culture in the 1990s and after has tended to obscure these historical distinctions.

I attempt to treat the 1980s as a conjuncture, as Gramsci understood it: a fusion of contradictory forces that nevertheless cohere enough to constitute a definite configuration.[3] Althusser called it "a condensation of dissimilar currents," the "ruptural fusion of an accumulation of contradictions."[4] The forces operative in a conjuncture have no single origin, time scale, or determination. Like a symptom, conjunctures are always *overdetermined*. They have different time scales—"How long," Gramsci asked, "is a crisis?"—and are defined by their articulation, not their chronology. Decades seem a convenient way of getting a handle on conjunctures but can be misleading because they tend to fetishize them, condensing them into easily assimilable blocks of time, giving them a sequential form and an imaginary unity they never possessed. Much the same can be true of "generations," which, as David Scott argues, should be defined, not by simple chronology but by the fact that their members frame the same sorts of questions and try to work through them within the same epistemological, political, or aesthetic horizon, or as he calls it, "problem-space."[5] For example, did the highly politicized artwork of the late 1970s and early 1980s and the more figural and neoconceptual work of the late 1980s and 1990s belong to the same problematic because they were produced by the same generation? Did both belong to the same conjuncture? Perhaps, indeed, the differences between them constitute something more like a profound rupture. If so, we need to know why this break occurs within what on the surface appears to be the same conjuncture.

My argument is indeed that the problematic that frames this work did fracture decisively *in* the 1980s, leading to a profound "conjunctural shift." Framing the discussion as "the 1980s" may therefore serve to conceal how deep and extensive these seismic shifts turned out to be. I therefore tend to see the decade as a period of breaks, as well as of continuities, setting in play a number of impulses whose directions do not necessarily, in the end, add up. Instead, I try to map them as a series of overlapping, interlocking, but noncorresponding histories, and the shifts and fissures they opened up.

Bearing in mind the caveats above, we can still usefully divide the British postwar black art scene into two distinct waves. The first generation were born as colonial subjects in their countries of origin before World War II and, with one or two exceptions, came to Britain as practicing artists, with a body of work already behind them. They



arrived on the crest of the wave of postwar decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s. Between 1949 and 1966, Francis Newton Souza, Frank Bowling, Aubrey Williams, Donald Locke, Ahmed Parvez, Anwar Shemza, Avinash Chandra, David Medalla, Balraj Khanna, Iqbal Geoffrey, Uzo Egonu, Saleem Arif, Ivan Peries, Li Yuan-chia, and Rasheed Araeen, among others, arrived in Britain. Incidentally, the only member of that generation who was a contributor to this symposium was Rasheed Araeen—painter, sculptor, curator, editor of *Third Text*—the last of that group to arrive and manifestly a transitional figure who spans both generations. The leading figures of the second wave, who surfaced in the late 1970s and early 1980s—including Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, Lubaina Himid, Sonia Boyce, Claudette Johnson, Mona Hatoum, Maud Sulter, Donald Rodney, Gavin Jantjes, as well as many later contributors—were all born in the 1950s or 1960s and did not exhibit work until two decades later.

One immediate contrast is between the attitudes to modernism of these two waves. Broadly speaking, the artists of the first wave came to London in a spirit not altogether different from that in which early European modernists went to Paris: to fulfill their artistic ambitions and to participate in what they saw as the heady atmosphere of artistic innovation in the most advanced center of art at that time. The visual artists were not alone in this. In the 1950s and 1960s, London was a mecca for a whole generation of Caribbean writers, intellectuals, and artists who felt at that moment that they had to migrate to fulfill their artistic ambitions. The West Indian novel—of Sam Selvon, George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, Wilson Harris—was in many ways the product of this migratory movement.

They came, of course, to claim their place as artists in a movement from which, as colonials, they had been marginalized but to which in every other sense they felt they naturally belonged and that, in a way, belonged to them. The promise of decolonization liberated them from any lingering sense of inferiority. Their aim was to engage the art world as equals on its own terrain. In that sense, they shared much with, and were clearly part of, the rising optimism of the Windrush generation of Caribbean migrants, who came in the 1950s and 1960s to make a better life for themselves and their families, and whose jaunty self-confidence is so palpable in the images of their arrival published in the press and magazines at the time. They came because of the colonial connection, however deep their anticolonialism; because it was to many "the mother country," as

well as the "mother" of all their troubles. They came to see for themselves, to look it in the eye—and to conquer.

The distinctiveness of this world and its anticolonial mentality may be difficult for younger contemporaries to imagine or inhabit. It may also be difficult now to understand the degree to which modern art was seen by these artists as an international creed, fully consistent with anticolonialism and its profound resistance to the imposition on colonial peoples of false European values. Contemporary art was regarded as essential to a modern consciousness. These artists shared with other colonial intellectuals of their generation an aspiration to destroy the feudal structures of the traditional world they inhabited as well as the foreign institutions associated with colonialism. But their dream was not to restore the ancient past so much as to issue in a new era of progress, change, modernity, and freedom. Critical of the mindless imitation of Western artistic models, they nevertheless saw, as Rasheed Araeen has argued, an engagement with "modern art" as "the only way to deal with the aspirations of our time."[6] They regarded the artistic vocation as a universal calling capable of transcending narrow cultural or historical conditions. They claimed art in the name of "humanity" in general.

Many were already familiar with developments in contemporary Western art and already practicing what they saw as "modern art." Some, no doubt, as Araeen remarked in his *Black Manifesto*, accepted "the 'supremacy' of Western developments in the contemporary field by following whatever styles [were] developed or produced in the major art centres of the West."[7] But others, certainly, in the spirit of those indigenous "modernisms" that had taken authentic root in the "periphery," subscribed to the views of Herbert Read, one of British modernism's leading apostles, who saw modern art as the attempt "to create forms more appropriate to the sense and sensibility of a new age."[8] These artists were, in that sense, "moderns" in spirit, if not specifically "modernists." They had internalized the spirit of restless innovation, the impulse to "make it new," which defined the modern attitude. Frank Bowling, who left London for the United States in 1966 and who has had an unswerving loyalty to abstraction throughout his career, said, "I believe the Black soul, if there can be such a thing, belongs in Modernism."[9]

Rasheed Araeen put it clearly in *The Black Manifesto*, albeit with perhaps a stronger "third world" emphasis than many of the first generation would have adopted. He argued that some



> Third World artists have taken an entirely different direction, by accepting the challenge of this modern age. While conscious of their own indigenous cultural backgrounds (which they sometimes reflect in their work), they recognize the technological nature of various developments in the West. They consider it their legitimate right to make use of *contemporary* knowledge in their work . . . just as Western artists were able to benefit, and are still benefitting from their knowledge of Afro/Asian traditions. . . . What is singular about these artists is that they are innovators. Thus they contribute to contemporary developments in their own right, by their own original ideas, concepts and synthesis/antithesis; and more importantly they offer a challenge to Western domination by defying the hegemony of art styles perpetrated and promoted internationally by the *transatlantic* gallery circuit of the Western world.[10]

There are many parallels with this complex attitude to "the idea of the modern." The Harlem Renaissance aspired to combine the formal mastery of European modernism with what Houston Baker calls "the deformation of mastery" through which the black vernacular could be expressed.[11] There is that vibrant, heady, syncretic, urban culture that surfaced in the 1950s in the mixed areas in some South African cities, providing the matrix out of which the antiapartheid struggle emerged, including that astonishing company of black journalists and photographers grouped around the magazine *Drum*: Peter Magubane, Bob Gosani, Alf Kumalo, and others.[12] More personally, I remember the young black intellectuals I knew in Kingston, Jamaica, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, dreaming of freedom to the subtle, haunting, but forbiddingly complex and uncompromisingly "modern" tonalities of Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. The attitude today—that modernism somehow belonged intrinsically and exclusively to the West, was in effect part of a wider conspiracy to entangle artists in the Western "grand narrative," and that salvation lay in the return to neglected indigenous cultural traditions—is quite alien to this perspective.

This is a question not just of different attitudes but of a different structure of consciousness, different conjunctures. The loss of confidence in the first approach was the cumulative result of a devastating critique which has proved historically decisive. Its complex history would have to include, inter alia, the critique of cultural imperialism developed by the intellectuals and leaders of the anticolonial and national liberation movements, the growing awareness of "the dark side" of the Enlightenment and the ways its universalistic promise has been particularistically appropriated by the West, the

searching exposures of Eurocentrism and Orientalism, and the critique of modernism's celebration of "primitivism" which simultaneously opened Western art to non-Western knowledge and appropriated the latter as an exoticized, subordinate support.

The difference in attitude between the generations, then, registers on the one hand as a profound epistemological shift from what we might call the anticolonial to the postcolonial, and on the other as a transformation in what Raymond Williams called "the structure of feeling."[13] This shift was inevitably reflected in the work of artistic production. The outlook of the first generation (like that of the Western political left of the time) was cosmopolitan and universalist. Think of the range, in content and style, of Aubrey Williams's work (plate 1), combining as it does the Mayan-inspired figures and natural forms of his Guyanese and Latin American "continental" work, the swirling modernist abstraction of his "cosmologies," and his struggle to find a visual correlative to the symphonies of the Russian composer Shostakovich. That of the second generation tended to be more relativist and particularistic. One way of posing the question about the 1980s, then, is How, when, and why did this shift from universalism to relativism come about? This involves our thinking through the connections and transitions between a series of overlapping histories, all of which come together around the shifting genealogies and topographies of race.

Of special relevance was the actual experience of the first wave, which turned out to be a patchy and dispiriting affair. Many participated alongside British artists in the movements of the period, exhibiting and attracting favorable critical attention. They were perceived for a time as central to the British avant-garde, operating at what Guy Brett calls the heady interface between artistic innovation and transnationalism. But many had a difficult time, found the doors of recognition barred, and became progressively disenchanted. Some experienced isolation and lived in virtual self-imposed exile. At one point, Ahmed Parvez tore up his canvases and in 1967 left England for good. Anwar Shemza experienced a kind of artistic trauma at ignorant and patronizing attitudes to non-European art and totally changed artistic direction. Many followed the shifting index of significance in the international art world and emigrated to the United States. Even the best found their work increasingly sidelined, their place in modern British art progressively written out of the story (hence the title of Rasheed Araeen's epic The Other Story exhibition). Araeen himself remarked:



> In the early Seventies, after I had been in Britain for almost ten years, I went through a personal crisis losing all hopes of becoming a successful artist. What really bothered me was not that I had not yet become a successful artist but the institutional indifference towards a work that was central to the development of modernist sculpture in the mid-60s. I could not rationalise this indifference, particularly when my understanding of the art institution was that of an enlightened institution keen to recognise and celebrate any historically important work—as it was doing in other cases. My first response to this crisis was to abandon making art for a while in favour of political activity, with a hope that it would help me understand this institutional anomaly.[14]

Hostile accounts of this shift attribute it to the movement from the anticolonial/antiracist political critique of the 1960s and 1970s and its replacement by the cultural politics of the postcolonial 1980s and after—a shift for which so-called cultural theory is held largely responsible. This is, to put it mildly, a simplification. What it ignores or ruthlessly foreshortens is the fact that, in this period, the whole fulcrum of the political world as we knew it shifted fundamentally. To speak metaphorically, between the work of Souza or Williams and that of Eddie Chambers or Keith Piper falls the shadow. We can mark the transition by way of a series of iconic critical events: the Notting Hill race riots of 1958; the Smethwick election of 1964; the visits of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X; the formation of the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination in 1965; the immigration acts restricting entry, with their second-class citizens and "partial" categories; the appearance of Stokely Carmichael at the "Dialectics of Liberation" conference; the sound of Bob Marley and the sight of locksmen on the streets of Handsworth; the new "sport" of Paki bashing; Enoch Powell's 1968 "rivers of blood" speech. Rage and anger at the speed and depth of this racializing process "at home" explode across and literally scar the surfaces of work like Gavin Jantjes's *Freedom Hunters* (1977), Eddie Chambers's *Destruction of the National Front* (1980) and *I Was Taught to Believe* (1984), and Keith Piper's *Reactionary Suicide: Black Boys Keep Singing* or *Another Nigger Died Today* (1982; plate 2).

By the mid-1970s, race and racism had finally "come home." There was a fully formed, popular black consciousness, a full-blown, indigenous antiracist British politics and a

powerful grassroots mobilization against racism and racialized disadvantage, as well as a growth in visibility of racist grassroots organizations and police harassment using the "sus" laws in the streets.[15] The "subjects" of this antiracist politics were identified by the single, collective signifier *black*—a generic term, a composite political identity, which deliberately eschewed any distinctions between Afro-Caribbeans, Asians, and Africans. When, in his *Black Manifesto*, Rasheed Araeen speaks in the name of a black "we," he means, as he says, people of the third world, from "Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean." But, he adds, "we *must* also include in it all those non-European peoples (whom we shall collectively call 'blacks' or 'black people') who now live in various Western countries and find themselves in a similar predicament to that of the actual Third World."[16] This was actually part of the work of constructing a new collective black subject, though this identitarian language was not available or in use at the time.

The implications of all this for cultural production and for the Black Arts Movement in the 1980s is beautifully captured in the struggle to connect, as well as the failures of connection between, two different generationally inflected conceptions of "a black arts movement" in two significant texts, loci classici for the British debate, which help us to ground the transition I am attempting to document. The first is the lecture by Aubrey Williams on "A Black Aesthetic" given at a "Race Today" seminar in 1987, followed by discussion. This document is interesting for at least three reasons. First, here is a distinguished member of the first wave addressing a problem in terms defined by the second. Second, it reveals Williams's (and, I think, his generation's) complex *ambivalences* toward the question of "a black aesthetic." On the one hand, he affirms, "My work is dominated by my black roots. And I don't have to express that verbally."[17] But he enjoins his audience to move away from the mere surface of the issue and "turn a little bit more inside and really face what we have inside." It is not clear exactly what he means by this, but it is not hard to see that the idea of art harnessed to a militant, public, black politics is not endorsed by Williams, either in content or tone. Third, there is the gap of incomprehension between him and his younger black audience. The latter are not at all happy when he answers a question about "roots" by quoting the example of pre-Columbian influences in his Olmec-Mayan work. And when challenged directly about a new black British creative period, his response is: "I see it, but it's very squeaky."

Even more revealing is the Rasheed Araeen/Eddie Chambers exchange in *Third Text*.



"I would define Black art," Chambers told Araeen, "as art produced by black people largely and specially for black audiences, and which, in terms of its content, addresses black experience."[18] As he put it in 1986, "It is black artists alone who determine the form, functioning and future of black art";[19] his artist's statement to the Black Art An' Done exhibition at Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 1981 describes it as "a tool to assist us in our struggle for liberation, both at home and abroad."

One problem with this formulation concerns the question of "separatism": black art defined by black artists for black audiences about black experience. How, Araeen asks, does this relate to the Asian experience? Chambers acknowledges that his perspective has shifted since the early 1980s and that he has had to "take on board other people's realities . . . working with all artists of both Asian and Afro-Caribbean origin." But elsewhere he returns to "the cultural specificity of . . . contemporary [black] experiences." Araeen expresses fears about "being separated from the main body of this society." Shouldn't black art address the whole society and fight to enter the mainstream?

Then there is the issue of essentialism. Does the category "black art" include whatever a black artist produces, or is there something historically or aesthetically specific about it? Are paintings like Shanti Thomas's *The Roti Maker* (1985) and Errol Lloyd's *The Domino Players* (1986–88) black because the artists are black? Or because they are about a black experience? Or because they deploy a black aesthetic language? And, if so, of what does this black aesthetic consist? Eddie Chambers says it involves the visual arts using easily recognizably black languages and forms, as music does with jazz, reggae, and calypso. Araeen emphasizes the syncretic roots of jazz and the specificity of the black American experience from which historically it emerged.

Two visions or pathways for the black arts seem to be in contention here. They are not diametrically opposed. Both are informed by a political critique; both want an art practice that is engaged with these larger political questions. But they register deep differences of experience and political perspective, which plays through into the aesthetics. Araeen's perspective remains embedded in a radical third worldist position, by which the black experience is itself framed. Chambers's perspective is more rooted directly in the experience of being black and its practices derive from the cultures of the black world.

From my point of view, understanding the 1980s involves explaining how *both* these

perspectives differ from what we have been calling the anticolonial consciousness of the immediate postwar artists; how these two variants of a more politicized perspective on the black arts come to be on offer at the end of the 1970s; and why, in the event, the work that follows later in the 1980s, while maintaining significant continuities with both positions (Keith Piper is a good example here), charts, on the whole, a third, distinctive and different path.

The new experience of racialized exclusion bore directly on the second generation born and schooled in Britain. Those separated by migration from their original homes but profoundly alienated by racism from any sense of belonging to, or recognition by, British society were haunted by questions of identity and belonging: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where do we belong? Questions of identity were particularly pertinent for postcolonials whose connections with their precolonial and ancestral cultures had been brutally interrupted by transportation, slavery, and colonization. West Indians were said to have a special problem with identity because of this fractured history.[20]

The question of identity, which surfaces in the work of black artists in the 1980s, far from being some apolitical subjective indulgence, related to what we would now call "the production of a new, black subject." Rediscovering a language within which these fractured linkages could be understood and redeemed was essential to that "decolonization of the mind" for which writers like Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral had called, without which political independence would be an empty shell. Distinctive to the postcolonial moment, then, were issues of culture and identity—affirming an alternative to the degraded experience of colonization—and these gradually took their place not as secondary to but as *constitutive* of the politics of antiracism and social justice. Identity acquired a political meaning. Political struggle acquired a cultural dimension. This generated a new racial consciousness, which reshaped the critical debates, the political activism, the arguments—and inevitably the artistic work and cultural production—of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Here, we need to slot a set of histories into place. The identity question was overdetermined from at least three different directions. First, there was the way this question surfaced among second-generation blacks in Britain, where it tended to be answered, in the 1970s, in terms of a symbolic restoration of the African connection, for so long submerged and disavowed in the Caribbean itself. This is better described as the rediscovery of an African identity *through* its diasporic translation and dissemination. This is that Africa that is "alive and well in the diaspora," as much a "country of the mind," "an imagined community," as a real, historical space: a sign of blackness, which connects with Africa through its New World displacements. This Africa began to be spoken at this time by young black British people primarily through the languages of Rastafarianism, resistance, and the symbolism of dreadlocks, which provided that symbolic identity they could not find elsewhere. Its iconography was evident everywhere in the black culture of the period—in the visual arts, perhaps, most splendidly, as celebrated in the photography of Vanley Burke, Horace Ové, and Armet Francis, and given erotic value in the images of Rotimi Fani-Kayode (plate 3) and Robert Taylor. They testify to the way a new Pan-African diasporic imaginary surfaced at the center of the black community, redeeming through image and sound the breaches and terrors of a broken history.

This is the performative identity we find in the rhythms of Bob Marley and "roots" reggae: a syncretic, contemporary music masquerading as a traditional music of memory, transmitting ancient pulses by the most modern of technologies, and speaking as much of Kingston and London as of Nigeria or Angola. This whole formation that made black, hitherto a negative and degraded object, into a positive point of identification was grounded in the double and triple inscriptions of a richly metaphorical syntax. It condensed into one narrative or visual trope the dissimilar currents of the search for identity; the displacements of migration; the loss of Africa; the terrors of the Middle Passage; the trauma of enslavement and indenture; the suffering still in place, despite independence, in Kingston's Trench Town; *and* the new kinds of suffering that had emerged in the "Babylons" of Handsworth, Brixton, Bradford, Toxteth, and Moss Side.

Second, there was the impact of the civil rights struggle, especially the path the movement took from the integrated "black-and-white-unite-and-fight" civil rights desegregation struggles of the mid-1960s to the Black Power, Black Consciousness, "black is beautiful" phase, with its much greater emphasis on race as a positive identity category and its separatist, cultural, nationalist, Afrocentric, and essentialist emphases. This, too, was a seismic shift. It was from this that Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, and others picked up the idea of a black arts movement grounded in an Afrocentered black identity and a black aesthetic. Exhibitions like Black Art An' Done (Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 1981) and Five Black Women (Africa Centre Gallery, London, 1983), organized by Sonia Boyce,

Lubaina Himid, Claudette Johnson, Houria Niati, and Veronica Ryan, translated these vibrations to the British scene, opening the floodgates to the deluge of independent shows and exhibitions that staked out the terrain of the autonomous Black Arts Movement of the 1980s.

The third set of histories has to do with the sea change that transformed the political field in the 1970s. This, too, is an extremely complex story, whose detail cannot be encompassed here. However, it is important to register it at this point, if only to dispel the illusion that the history of black politics can somehow be written and understood exclusively from within its own parameters and frame of reference. Here, we must include such general factors as the changing composition of social class in the postindustrial economies of advanced societies; the collapse of class as the single, master category of political change, into which all other contradictions (of race, gender, etc.) could be condensed; and the greater awareness of the specificity and "relative autonomy" of social divisions like race as a cross-cutting dimension in social conflict. With the rise of the so-called single-issue social movements, each with its own relative autonomy and "subject" defined in terms of the authenticity of those in whose name political demands were being made, we can trace the fragmentation of the political field, the complexity of building political alliances and new conceptions of the political subject. There was a loss of confidence in "objective" class interests to determine fully political involvement and a greater attention to "subjective" factors. Overarching all this was the "crisis" of Marxism (especially its economistic variants during the 1970s) as the general theoretical horizon within which all serious political struggles (including antiracism) had to be organized, and the lack of any alternative comprehensive framework of analysis or action.

Thatcherism and free market neoliberalism were the forces that successfully hegemonized this crisis in the postwar settlement. This historic watershed in world history not only reshaped in its wake the New Right and New Labour but redrew the whole political landscape. The destruction of the social fabric, the assault on the welfare state and punishment of the poor and disadvantaged at home, globalization, and the deregulated market economy abroad together unbent the springs of social and political action, including antiracist politics. The racial upheavals of 1980–81 and 1985, though undoubtedly a response to the brutal impact of these developments on black and Asian communities,



were in fact the last of their kind for fifteen years, until the racially motivated riots in northern industrial towns in 2001. Of course, racism and racial violence—casual, deliberate, and institutional—did not abate. But nor were black and Asian populations immune from either the effects of the privatization of "the public good" or the seductions of the enterprise culture.

The new political conjuncture affected black politics very directly. But it also had a much broader impact on the thematic concerns of the Black Arts Movement. For example, the rise of gender and sexual politics, loosened from the iron grip of economic determinism by the same process that made race more visible and autonomous, was just as decisive for black consciousness. Gender and feminist politics and the sexual liberation movements were the revolution within the revolution—movements that exposed the structures of oppression and exclusion and the habits of "secondariness" *within* the ranks of the oppressed, exposing the unconscious practices of "male mastery," which passed unremarked in the daily and sexual life of the subordinate, while never entirely supplanting the struggles against other forms of oppression. This introduced a necessary complexity into the political field: the complexity of a double inscription, because black women had to negotiate solidarity with their sisters (or gay people with their partners) against the heterosexual norm prevailing within their own side, while simultaneously finding ways of affirming solidarity in the common struggle against racial oppression and economic exploitation. And men had to bring to consciousness the unconscious habits and expectations of their privileged position within a wider subordination. The same problem emerged in the post–civil rights struggle in the United States, and African American women have written with great depth of feeling about the issue. This struggle on two fronts introduced the radical principle of *difference* into a political field hitherto constructed primarily in terms of a unifying, undifferentiated solidarity.

It is difficult to underestimate the rupture that flowed from all this. For example, a whole continent of themes, issues, figures, and experiences, hitherto excluded from the political field proper because they were considered too personal, too emotional, too subjective, or too domestic, was opened up to the visual gaze in the work of the 1980s women artists. Until then, the black family album had remained, so to speak, a firmly closed book. It is not an exaggeration to say that, without this conjuncture of feminism and black politics, the outstanding work of the period by Sonia Boyce,

Claudette Holmes, Lubaina Himid (plate 4), Maud Sulter, Mona Hatoum, Sutapa Biswas (plate 5), and others would simply never have appeared. The fact that black women artists were often organizing and exhibiting separately from men, the tensions that were obvious at the time between them, the powerful eruption of this unfinished question in an unexpected reprise at the time of The Other Story, and its continuing presence as an underground rumble in the debates around the "Shades of Black" conference are enough to suggest that its reverberations remain resonant.

There were also significant theoretical issues at stake. Here we must map into place the theoretical deluge that swept, in a series of waves, across the 1970s and 1980s and that is often too polemically and simplistically corralled into the convenient term of abuse: cultural theory. In fact, the issues include often different, and mutually contesting, developments: new theories of language and discourse; the post-Bakhtinian attention to the way that the polysemic nature of language and the "slippage of the signifier" had sparked struggles over meaning, constituting the cultural field as a key site of political struggle; the growing importance of psychoanalytic and other theories of subjectivity, bringing into the visual field the inner landscapes of the racialized experience; feminist theorizations of gender, sexuality, and desire and their articulations with racial and other kinds of difference; and the rise of postcolonial theorizing and the philosophy of the Other. In this space of renewed theoretical debate—registering a fateful (some would argue, fatal) historic, epistemological half-turn—there emerged what have come to be called the "posts": poststructuralism, post-Marxism, postfeminism, the postcolonial. The prefix signaled not the passing of time but the waning of old paradigms: passage without supersession, dialogic movement without dialectical sublation, the condition of the postmodern as a state of permanent transition.[21]

The details of these debates matter less than their cumulative consequences for the politics of representation and their impact on the artistic practices of the 1980s. Broadly speaking, the main effect was to undermine confidence in the ability of aesthetic languages to represent sociopolitical reality in a direct or literal way. Realism and naturalism in the visual arts and the documentary mode in photography were radically undermined in terms of their direct capacity to capture the political realities of racialized exclusion, exploitation, or otherness. These were not simple facts, whose complexity of meaning and experience were manifest immediately on the surface of things, or accessible—without mediation—to the naked eye. This is why the strategy of simply replacing negative racial imagery with "positive images" was quickly abandoned. In fact, the stereotypes and tropes of racism could not be subverted or overturned by a strong dose of unmasking reality—in part because it is not possible to live outside representation. A damaging system of representation can only be dismantled, not by a sudden dose of "the real," but by another, alternative system of representation, whose form better approximates the complexity of the real relations it seeks to explore and contest.

These developments radically problematized the question of race itself and what Fanon identified as "the fact of blackness." Race offered too simple and banal a surface to this analysis. Like gender, it was a difference whose complexity did not immediately reveal itself to the naked eye. The racial gaze was itself a constructed one. Was black identity, then, to be defined historically or biologically? The historical product of living in a racialized world, or a genetic inheritance? If blackness was transmitted biologically, how did the antiracist case differ from the racist one, apart from the question of how positively or negatively this racial inheritance was evaluated? Did race transcend time and place? Such issues connected directly with the shift in practice in the 1980s from the binary of pure abstraction or pure documentary realism to the more mixed or hybrid mode of the constructed image and the return to the figural. These questions about the distinction between an essentialist and a historical definition of race and the foregrounding of the racial signifier underpinned the growing preoccupation, in the work of black artists and photographers in the 1980s, with representations of the black body, with putting the abjected black body "in the field of vision." The body became a space or horizon on or within which to explore the complexities of the black subject, the inner landscapes of black subjectivity, and the intersecting planes of difference around which its social space is constructed. With this questioning of the black body, we come face to face with what elsewhere I called "the end of the essential black subject," triggering that kaleidoscopic proliferation of meanings around blackness and the hidden connections between the racialized, the gendered, and the sexualized body—a site of convergence that for so long had been the privileged operational zone of racist discourse.[22]

The issues posed here are complex and profound and, in my view, remain unresolved. They have to do with how to think, in a nonreductive way, about the relationship between the work and the world, form and content, signifier and signified. They ask the question

of whether identity has a full positivity of its own, self-present to itself, or whether it can only be thought through its "lack," its *différance* (neither its absolute difference nor its pure sameness) from all the other terms with which it is articulated. And what are the political and aesthetic and cultural implications of the answers we give to that question?

Subsequently, these questions have been represented as falsely and illegitimately forced on artistic practices by so-called cultural theory, with the implication that it was part of some deliberate conspiracy to deflect the Black Arts Movement from its true objective. It would be hard to deny the heady theoretical climate that prevailed in the 1970s and 1980s, as one French theorist after another took his or her place on the rapidly rotating conceptual stage. However, I hope I have said enough to show that, in my view, it was the different currents of ideas and events flowing into the 1980s, the seismic movements of the time, the profound political and other shifts they registered, in whose aftermath we continue to live, that were transmuted into the problematic of the work. With artists such as Sonia Boyce, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Sutapa Biswas, Joy Gregory, Sunil Gupta, Roshini Kempadoo, Ingrid Pollard, Dave Lewis, Ajamu, Zarina Bhimji, Mitra Tabrizian, and Chila Kumari Burman, these issues were not so much blindly repeated as "worked on," using the image as a kind of "problem-space" for conducting an investigation. These real political, economic, and cultural shifts are, in my view, what really defined what we might think of as the agendas of artistic practice in the 1980s. To represent them as the result of intellectual bad faith or artistic naïveté, or to suggest that black art practice could or should somehow have ignored them, is to trivialize history, because it requires us to simplify the connections between politics and cultural production. It misses the significance of conjunctural change and encourages us to indulge in a form of idealism, in a strategy that is ultimately unlocated in the materiality of historical circumstances. Such an approach to the question of "assembling the 1980s" no doubt feeds the spirit of sectarian animosity that too often animates critical discourse but falls woefully short on analytic or explanatory power.

Despite the sophistication of our scholarly and critical apparatus in art criticism, history, and theory, we are still not that far advanced in finding ways of thinking about the relationship between the work and the world. We either make the connection too brutal and abrupt, destroying that necessary displacement in which *the work* of mak-



ing art takes place. Or we protect the work from what Edward Said calls its necessary "worldliness," projecting it into either a pure political space where conviction—political will—is all, or into an inviolate aesthetic space, where only critics, curators, dealers, and connoisseurs are permitted to play. The problem is rather like that of thinking the relationship between the dream and its materials in waking life. We know there *is* a connection there. But we also know that the two continents cannot be lined up and their correspondences read off directly against one another. Between the work and the world, as between the psychic and the social, the bar of the historical unconscious has fallen. The effect of the unseen "work" that takes place out of consciousness in relationship to deep currents of change whose long-term effects on what can be produced are, literally, tidal, is thereafter always a delicate matter of *re-presentation* and *translation*, with all the lapses, elisions, incompleteness of meaning, and incommensurability of political goals that these terms imply. What Freud called "the dream-work"—in his lexicon, the tropes of displacement, substitution, and condensation—is what enables the materials of the one to be reworked or translated into the forms of the other, and is what enables the latter to "say more" or "go beyond" the willed consciousness of the individual artist. For those who work in the displaced zone of the cultural, the world has somehow to become a text, an image, before it can be "read."

I have tried to present some of the tumultuous currents flowing into the 1980s. But what happened to them—in terms of the work—as they fed into the visual imaginary? We certainly cannot say that the work *resolved* them. They are as yet unresolved in any final sense, which is why the period is so contentious, and why we keep returning to it. We know that, somewhere during the 1980s, the world—*our* world—changed dramatically and decisively. How, remains to be specified, in all the rich conjunctural detail we can assemble. The very intensity of the deluge produced an extraordinary creativity from the most marginal spaces. What it did not produce was *answers*. Instead, the work itself became a kind of "problem-space," in which, literally, our "troubles" were given form.

## Notes

1. Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy, *Different: Contemporary Photographers and Black Identity* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001).
2. Ibid., 34.
3. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).
4. Louis Althusser, "Contradiction and Over-determination," in *For Marx* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1969), 99.
5. David Scott, "Conscripts of Political Modernity: C. L. R. James, Toussaint Louverture and the Making of the Caribbean." Unpublished paper.
6. Rasheed Araeen, *The Other Story*, exhibition catalogue (London: Hayward Gallery, 1989), 60.
7. Rasheed Araeen, "The Black Manifesto," reprinted in *Making Myself Visible* (London: Kala Press, 1984), 1.
8. Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964), 11, quoted in Araeen, *The Other Story*, 16.
9. Frank Bowling, "Frank Bowling and Bill Thompson: A Conversation between Two Painters," *Art International* (December 1976).
10. Araeen, "The Black Manifesto," 10.
11. Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 56.
12. Hall and Sealy, *Different.*
13. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1961), chap. 2.
14. Rasheed Araeen, "Re-thinking History and Some Other Things," *Third Text*, no. 54 (spring 2001): 95.
15. The "sus" laws were laws of suspicion that permitted the police to arrest individuals not only for crimes that had been committed but for crimes the police believed a "suspect" was about to commit. They further permitted the police to designate entire areas as "criminal" and so to arrest anyone in those spaces.
16. Araeen, "The Black Manifesto," 1.
17. The unpublished transcript is held in the Aavaa archives, University of East London, Docklands Campus, London.
18. Rasheed Araeen and Eddie Chambers, "Black Art: A Discussion," *Third Text*, no. 5 (winter 1988): 52.
19. Eddie Chambers, "The Marginalisation of Black Art," *The Race Today Review 1986* (1986): 33.
20. On a personal note, it was to explore this issue that, in 1956, I turned from my doctoral research on a literary topic to pursue the question, raised in the anthropological debates of the time, about Africa survivals and syncretism in the New World, a deviation that led me into cultural studies and the much abused "cultural theory."
21. See Stuart Hall, "When Was the Post-Colonial?" in Lidia Curti and Iain Chambers, eds., *The Post-Colonial Question* (London: Routledge, 1996).
22. Hall and Sealy, *Different*, 101–103.



**Rasheed Araeen**

## The Success and the Failure of the Black Arts Movement

In this essay, my aim is first to give a brief history of the Black Arts Movement in Britain in the 1980s, describe its aims and objectives—and indeed its true vision—and then to assess its success. Finally, I would like to ask how and why a movement, which began with a historically important radical position and agenda, failed and collapsed into what has now become "anything produced by nonwhite artists." Although this movement had become widespread by the mid-1980s—comprising and encapsulating visual art, film, photography, poetry, theater, and more—my concern here is specific to the various forms of visual art.

What is particularly significant about what was described by its first practitioners in the early 1980s as "black art" was its ability to respond critically to the social and political forces of the time and to set an ideological framework for a militantly radical arts movement. Its aim was to confront and change the system that, though centered in the West, encapsulated and dominated the whole world. In Britain, and in the United States in particular, it was a time when the political leadership turned to the right, explicitly to reestablish and reinforce its antisocialist and imperialist agendas, with dire