



Stuart Hall and Black British Art

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Introduction: A Sidelined Area of Hall's Work

The following article deals with a somewhat neglected aspect of Stuart Hall's manifold activities and its relevance for his theoretical work: his interest in and commitment to the promotion of black British art.

To start with, a brief definition seems helpful as, in the course of time, the term 'black' has been charged with various meanings. Once used in a disparaging racist sense from the colonialists' position, it was later adopted by black people with self-confidence, first in an essentialist sense, later in more differentiating ways. It was Stuart Hall who highlighted the importance of cultural differences between the various groups living in diasporic conditions in Britain, most famously in his seminal article "New Ethnicities" of 1989. Yet when he wrote or spoke about 'black art' or 'black artists', he used the term black in the same "broad and inclusive way" as the politically active artists in the 1970s and 1980s had done, referring "to *all* those communities, of whatever ethnic or 'racial' origin, who were regarded as 'other' – *different* – and thus racially excluded" (Hall, 2001a: 35). The following study is based on this definition.

In the later part of his life Stuart Hall became institutionally involved in black art, dedicating much of his time to this engagement: for 15 years he held the chairs of the boards of both Iniva (Institute of International Visual Art) and Autograph ABP (a non-profit making arts agency promoting photographers from ethnic minorities), two leading institutions focusing on 'black art' in the defined sense, i.e. art from many corners of the world. Based in London, they run a library, publish books and pamphlets, organise exhibitions, talks and conferences. Both organisations started as small private initiatives in cramped rented rooms, working on various cultural and educational sites, galleries, schools and universities, but also in alternative spaces like the streets or nightclubs. But since 2007 they had been residing in a remarkable building by black British star architect David Adjaye (whose National Museum of African American History and Culture was opened in Washington in 2016 to great acclaim) in Rivington Place, Hoxton, East London, and the library was named in honour of their chair of so

many years: the Stuart Hall Library. Sadly, Iniva had to leave the building in September 2018 (see p. 76).



Stuart Hall in the Stuart Hall Library (2012)

Courtesy Iniva 2018

That Hall loved to spend much time at Rivington Place led to some misunderstanding. Sociologist Laurie Taylor, who visited Hall for an interview in 2007, confessed later he had heard rumours that Hall “now devoted such time to his blessed visual arts center” because of political disillusionment: “It’s a sort of alibi” (Taylor 2007: no page). Gilane Tawadros, for the first ten years director of Iniva and as such permanently in close contact with Hall, protested vehemently:

Some may view Hall’s engagement with contemporary visual art as his hobby – the equivalent of intellectual gardening, after decades of hard graft at the coalface of sociology departments, Marxist debates and cultural studies conferences – I want to argue that some of his most significant work and cutting-edge ideas have been honed on the factory floor of contemporary visual art practice. (Tawadros 2008: 65)

Hall himself said in a conversation with Les Back in 2009: “I was going to say my move to the visual arts is very late in life, but it’s not true. I’ve always been interested in the image, particularly in photography, always been interested in painting but didn’t know very much about it. And then I got involved with Iniva and Autograph as the chairs of the two boards” (Back 2009: 660). What fascinated Hall about artworks, according to Tawadros, was that he saw them as “a space of possibility – a space of critique, of poetry, of reflection, of debate” (Tawadros 2008:67). Concerning his knowledge of art, Hall was always modest. When writing about it, he used to start with apologetic reservations, but then followed these with a self-confident statement of his own specific perspective, i.e. that of a cultural theorist, as the following remark in an article of 2005 may show: “Not being a practising 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” (Hall 2005: 1; see also Back 2009: 661). As I am going to illustrate, Hall’s engagement with the visual arts was anything but a hobby or of secondary interest. For in the course of time he came to see the arts not only as a more



or less peripheral 'part' of a wider political/cultural moment, but as a central and even defining space for the construction of cultural identity.

Early Days: The Beginnings of Hall's Interest in Cultural Productions

Stuart Hall's interest in art in the widest sense, popular as well as high, began early in life. Though he later studied English literature – “My undergraduate training is in literature. I never had a training in anything else to be absolutely honest”, he confided in Les Back (2009: 665) – earlier attractions were music and the cinema. While still at school in Jamaica, Hall discovered Jazz, listening as well as playing the piano, which – apart from being a source of enjoyment – apparently soon became an important inspiration in his personal search for identity. Many years later, in retrospect, he told Sue Lawley in an interview for the Desert Island Discs programme of BBC Radio 4 how he and his brother listened to all kinds of music, but, he continued: “The first musical sound that I felt really belonged to me was the sound of modern jazz. It opened up a new world. I knew that it was a world from the margins. It opened up the possibility of really experiencing modern life to the full, and it formed in me the aspiration to go and get it, wherever it was” (Hall qtd. in Lawley 2014: no page). Miles Davis' music touched him particularly deeply:

I suppose when I was 19 or 20, I would say Miles Davis put his finger on my soul. The various moods of Miles Davis have matched the evolution of my own feelings. They continue to be a regret for the loss of a life that I might have lived but didn't live. I could have gone back, I could have been a Caribbean person. I'm not that anymore. I can't ever be English in the full sense, though I know and understand the British like the back of my hand. The uncertainty, the restlessness and some of the nostalgia for what cannot be is in the sound of Miles Davis's trumpet. (Ibid.)

Film was the other form of art that attracted Hall strongly and from an early age on, and he became a passionate cinema goer: “I'd always gone to the movies as a child; I saw every 40s melodrama, every Bogart and Bette Davis”, he told cultural journalist Maya Jaggi (2000). Both interests lasted all his life. Later in Britain, from the early 1950s on, Hall got interested in the new cultural phenomena: the growing popularity of TV, new wave films, rock music and especially the emergence of youth cultures. It seems logical that the first academic position he obtained in 1961 was as a lecturer for film and mass media studies at Chelsea College. At the same time he did some work for the Education Department of the British Film Institute, where he met and became friends with educationalist Paddy Whannel, together with whom he published his first book, *The Popular Arts* (1964).



Written before Hall's discovery of the French theorists and Gramsci, it had a practical and refreshingly optimistic aim: to change the attitude of teachers who, in the Leavis and T.S. Eliot tradition, feared a general cultural and moral decline as a consequence of the mass media's influence on the young. Instead the authors demanded: "the school must embrace the study of their [the mass media's] organisation, content and impact" (Hall and Whannel 1964:21). The bulk of this "*how to do* book", as Hall later called it in an interview with Sue Lawley (Lawley 2014), consists of a great number of practical suggestions for teaching specimens of the 'popular arts': films, thrillers, romances, TV programmes, music and dance forms. Though Hall had already dealt with the problem of racism in some articles, in *The Popular Arts* he did not give special attention to examples of black British art or culture. The same still holds true for his next book publication, the anthology *Resistance through Rituals* (1976), edited together with Tony Jefferson. In this study of youth sub-cultures in postwar Britain, class is much more the issue than the precarious situation and/or creativity of black youth, with the exception of an article by Dick Hebdige on Rastafarians (Hebdige 1976).

The Attraction of Black Film

Stuart Hall's engagement with black visual artists began in the late 1980s. In a long interview with Maya Jaggi in 2009,¹ he named two reasons, both rooted in earlier phases of his work, why he got interested in diasporic art at that particular time (Jaggi 2009). The basic condition was his firm belief in one of the fundamental discoveries of Cultural Studies, namely that culture is of equal importance in shaping society as politics and the economy, which classical Marxism had prioritised. Secondly, he confessed that after a time of intense occupation with cultural theories, he had felt that the 'theoretical turn' had come to its productive end, that ever new theories would not lead to new insights and that he rather wanted to continue to think about the concrete world, using theories merely as his tools. The visual arts, for which, he claimed, he had always had an interest, appeared as a fascinating field of cultural practice, in which similar questions were addressed as in cultural theory.

One might add that the late 1980s were also a very special moment in the history of black art, likely to rouse Hall's attention. The question of identity formation in diasporic conditions, such a central issue in Hall's own thinking, was also a topic of prime importance in the work of a new, young, British-born generation. Racial tension had intensified, especially after Margaret Thatcher's ascent to power in 1979. In the then acute economic crisis the social situation of large parts of the black community, who,

¹ The interview is available on CD: *Personally Speaking: A Long Conversation with Stuart Hall*. Interviewer Maya Jaggi, directed by Mike Dibb. A Dibb Directions Production. Distributed by Media Education Foundation, 60 Masonic Street, Northampton MA 01060. info@mediaed.org/www.mediaed.org.



already for a long time, had been suffering from high unemployment or low-paid jobs, poor housing and racial hostility, deteriorated unbearably until the pressure finally triggered the “riots” of 1981 in various big cities, especially London, Birmingham, Leeds and Toxteth near Liverpool. Yet continuing racism and exclusion also led to the politicisation of parts of the black community. Political groups were founded, like the Black Power movement after the American model, and young writers and artists also expressed their protest. Visual artists, needing public spaces to present their work, felt seriously impeded: though many of them were highly talented, they found themselves ignored by the public art institutions and limited to small shows in community centres and other marginal spaces. Some reacted by organising themselves in groups curating their own exhibitions.

For filmmakers co-operation was even more important, as their art by definition relies on teamwork and demands considerable financial investment. Some enterprising young black film-makers, all politically highly conscious, among them Isaac Julien, John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Martina Attile and Maureen Blackwood, joined in so-called workshops, the most productive becoming Sankofa Film and Video Collective, The Black Audio Film Collective, as well as Ceddo Film & Video Workshop. They were lucky in so far as in 1981, encouraged by the Ethnic Arts Committee of the Labour-dominated Greater London Council (GLC), representatives of various cultural and political organisations – including the BFI, The Regional Arts Association, and the Association of Cinematographic, TV and Allied Technicians, all worried about the growing racial tensions – had signed the so-called Workshop Declaration, which was an agreement to subsidise non-commercial black film-making to create more opportunities to express black perspectives. A year later Channel 4 was founded with a remit to promote multicultural representations and in fact began to offer screening time plus other forms of support.²

Stuart Hall’s involvement with black art began with film, which is not surprising considering his early passion for the medium: “film is for me in some ways the visual medium that I most respond to, directly respond to and emotionally respond to”, he told Les Back (Back 2009: 661). Additionally, he had already become familiar with the media world, as he had quite often spoken on radio and TV since the 1960s. In 1979 and 1980, he had helped in producing two anti-racist educational programmes: *It Ain’t Half Racist, Mum* for the BBC, together with the Campaign Against Racism in the Media, and *The Whites of Their Eyes* for the educational department of Thames TV. Now, suddenly, there was the chance to engage with artists producing counter-cultural films, developing their own aesthetic. Hall, who had acted as an advisor to the Ethnic Arts Committee of the GLC, was invited by Sankofa to join its Council of Management and help formulate their

² For more information on the workshop films and filmmakers, see von Rosenberg 2007.

policy. Soon he became also actively involved in their filmmaking. This engagement proved to be more than a one-way route: though beginning as an advisor, Hall for his part learnt from the young practitioners, who substantially influenced his theoretical work. Isaac Julien, who was to become one of the most famous experimental black filmmakers, was probably the first to involve him. He remembers: “Well, I first met Stuart out at clubs in London. It was only later that I realised: ‘Oh that was Stuart Hall!’ I think our first formal meeting was when [we] invited him to Sankofa when we were developing our film *Passion of Remembrance*” (Julien and Nash 2001: 476- 477).

In this film from 1986, the realistic portrayal of a young black woman’s personal life is intersected with documentary footage presenting important moments of black British history and symbolic scenes in which gender roles are discussed. Julien remembers how especially Hall’s account of the black British Power movement – together with ideas by African American feminists like June Jordan, C.L.R James and the *Race Today* collective – were incorporated in a scene shot in a barren desert, in which a black woman activist critiques the phallocentrism of the black British power movement (ibid. 477).



Still from *Passion of Remembrance*, film by Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien (1986)

© Isaac Julien 2018

Having thus become more aware of the importance of gender alongside race for identity construction, through Julien’s next film, *Looking for Langston* (1989), for which Hall spoke the voice-over, Hall became intimately acquainted with the problematics of black homosexuality. In a memorial speech after Hall’s death Julien remembers: “Our discussions of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography greatly affected the way I visualised black male bodies in my 1989 film *Looking for Langston*. Wanting to acknowledge his impact on my thinking, I asked Stuart to narrate some of the film” (Julien 2015: 9). He also remembers how he was fascinated by Hall’s voice: “As I am sure many would agree,

there was a unique quality to his speaking voice that was wonderfully compelling and impassioned” (ibid.). With elegant, skillfully stylised black-and-white images of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, black creativity, and homosexual love the film pays homage to the American poet Langston Hughes, a famous figure of black American cultural history. Eddie Chambers, one of the most prominent militant artists in the 1980s,³ sees *Looking for Langston* (1989) “as a key episode in Hall’s new orientation to the visual arts” (e-mail 24 Jan. 2016).

Hall’s cooperation with Julien went on for many years, Hall sometimes speaking the voice-over, sometimes appearing as an interviewee. Thus in the production of *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* (1995) he played a vital role. Julien remembers: “Stuart’s contribution, in the form of a long and fluid interview, formed the critical backbone of the project and the perfect foil to reflections from friends and colleagues such as Françoise Vergès and Homi K. Bhabha” (Julien 2015: 9). In the short *The Attendant* from 1993, a rare exception in Julien’s work as it treats black homosexuality with a pinch of irony, Stuart Hall even appears as a character, though very briefly. He visits the gallery of Wilberforce House in Hull as an art lover and intellectual, while the title figure, an old black man, ironically works as a guard, i.e. in a servant position, in the house of the great abolitionist Saint. The appearance of a young blonde visitor throws the old man into homo-erotic daydreams, which are paralleled by an elaborate tableau of a homosexual orgy staged behind a blue cloth, hiding the huge 19th-century painting *Slaves on the West Coast of Africa* by François-Auguste Biard. Thus, tongue in cheek, Julien and Hall, in the marked contrast between the poor attendant and Hall as the established gentleman, elegantly added the category of class to the axes of gender and sexual orientation crossing the axis of race.



Isaac Julien, *Encoding/Decoding in Blue (In Memoriam Stuart Hall)* (2014)

Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London. © Isaac Julien

³ Eddie Chambers later concentrated on curating and became a prolific and committed writer on black art, always remaining faithful to his critical political perspective. He presently holds the position of a Professor of Art History at the University of Austin/Texas.



Hall also acted as an advisor to other important workshop productions, including Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986), now considered a classic. This documentary about the so-called Handsworth riots of 1985, which were caused by the black population's frustration with their continuing deprivation, especially the high rate of unemployment among the young, was an attempt to show an alternative perspective to that of the authorities and the media, which almost unanimously condemned the "riots" as sheer vandalism caused by a lust for looting. Directed by John Akomfrah and, like *Passion of Remembrance* (1986), a sophisticated collage of documentary material and symbolic scenes, the film was a typical example of the workshops' ambition to leave behind simple realism, which had been the style preferred in critical black British film from early shorts in the 1960s to the feature films of the 1970s, notably Horace Ové's *Pressure* (1975) and Menelik Shabazz' *Burning an Illusion* (1981). Akomfrah constructed his counter-message by collaging recent film shots and interviews with bits from newsreels, including Mrs Thatcher's famous warning that the country might be 'swamped' by foreign cultures, with symbolic scenes, historical photographs and archival footage documenting black British history from the arrival of the Windrush to scenes of peaceful black integration.

The Impact of Hall's Engagement with Black Film on his Theoretical Work

Hall's co-operation with the film teams impacted his theoretical work in important ways. First of all, it obviously undermined the remnants of prejudice he had once held against so-called 'high culture' because of its European provenance. In an article of 1981, "The Whites of Their Eyes", Hall had expressly ridiculed the trust in experimental forms as a useful tool in the fight against deep-rooted ideologies: "The history of cultures is littered with non-revolutionary 'avant-gardes' [...] So, 'breaking and interrupting' the forms is no guarantee, in itself, that the dominant ideology cannot continue to be reproduced" (Hall 1981: 50). And in "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" (1992), in which Hall celebrated the popular forms of black culture as perfect modes of expressing cultural identity – particularly black music, a talent for style in clothing and hairdos, ways of moving the body in dance and walking⁴ – he still saw as desirable "the displacement of European models of high culture, of Europe as the universal subject of culture" (Hall 2001b: 465). Now, through his co-operation with the workshop filmmakers, however, Hall had learnt that the breaking up of traditional forms might indeed be better suited to reflect a complex reality and enlighten recipients than the traditional realist form: the mixing and contrasting of documentary footage from past and present

⁴ In an article "Frontlines and Backyards: The Terms of Change" (1997), Hall speaks of black young people's "stylisticisation of their bodies" as a "remarkable feature which has made them the dominant defining force in street-oriented British youth-culture." (Hall 2000b: 128)



with well-chosen symbolic scenes could illustrate in a highly conspicuous way that “the black subject and black experience are not stabilized by Nature [...] [but] are constructed historically, culturally, politically” (Hall 1996a: 168). The films’ resistance to commercial exploitation seemed an extra advantage. John Akomfrah’s *Handsworth Songs* gave Hall the opportunity to comment publicly on the virtues of the experimental style in response to a review by Salman Rushdie in *The Guardian*. Rushdie had criticised the film sharply for using “the dead language of race-industry professionals” rather than letting the people from Handsworth tell their own stories (1992: 116). Only three days later, also in *The Guardian*, Hall praised the film for its “signs of innovation”, essential for a new politics of representation. Rejecting Rushdie’s criticism as arrogant, he maintained that in fact the film had tried out a new language, to “get away from the tired style of the riot-documentary”. He specially praised the re-working of the archival footage and the highly original sound track, which both helped “to tell the black experience as an *English* experience.” (Hall 2000a: 264).

An even more important effect of Hall’s intellectual exchange with the filmmakers was a fundamental change in his ideas about cultural identity, namely the realisation that it was necessary to “re-theorise the concept of ‘difference’” (Hall 1996a: 169). As already hinted at, it was in the first place through films like *Passion of Remembrance*, *Looking for Langston* and *The Attendant* that Hall discovered that ‘blackness’ is not a homogenous experience determining identity, but that ‘other axes of difference’ are constantly crossing the axis of race. In “New Ethnicities” (1989), in which he famously declared ‘the end of the essential black subject’, Hall himself pointed to this source of his inspiration:

The end of the essential black subject also entails a recognition that the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions and are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender, and ethnicity. [...] To me, films like *Territories*, *Passion of Remembrance*, *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, for example, make it perfectly clear that this shift has been engaged and that the question of the black subject cannot be represented without reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. (Hall 1996a: 166-167)

Never dogmatic, Hall was however most impressed not by one of the highly serious workshop productions, but Hanif Kureishi’s and Stephen Frears’ humorous feature film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985): “*My Beautiful Laundrette* is one of the most riveting and important films produced by a black writer in recent years and precisely for the reason that made it so controversial: its refusal to represent the black experience in Britain as monolithic, self-contained, sexually stabilized, and always ‘right-on’” (Hall 1996a: 171).

The third important insight Hall gained through his occupation with black British as well as new Caribbean and African film was the realisation that “identity [...] is always



constituted within, not outside representation.” (Hall 1996b: 210) Thus he wrote in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”: “Cinema [is] not a second order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which we speak” (Hall 1990: 236-237). This was an exciting discovery: reversing traditional assumptions about visual images and identity, and more generally about the relation of experience and representation, prime importance for identity construction was ascribed to artistic productions. Two years later, in his article on black popular culture, Hall generalised: “we tend to privilege experience itself, as if black life is lived experience outside representation. [...] Instead, it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are. There is no escape from the politics of representation” (Hall 2001b: 473).

Photography

Though film fascinated Hall first and most intensely, his interest in visual representations had also turned to photography at least since the 1970s, when, for instance, he wrote a long essay on “The Social Eye of Picture Post” (Hall 1972). His interest included both documentary and artistic photography. Documentary pictures posed the same question films raised about the relation between image and the reality it seems to reflect: do the images show ‘how it really was’? Hall identified photographs as a further type of representation, in which meaning is constructed and may affect the viewers’ positioning themselves as subjects. Rejecting the “theory of mimetic representation”, traditionally applied to photography (Hall 1993: 13) and traced back by Hall to the influence of classical 19th-century realism (Hall 1992a: 18), he argued that photographs do not mirror what exists and do not tell “how it really was” (ibid.), but *produce meaning* by, for instance, the framing, the composition and tonal contrasts (Hall 1993: 14). Furthermore, he realised, this meaning is not fixed, but changes with the position of the viewer.

In an enlightening essay, “Reconstruction Work”, Hall examined early documentary images of the immigrant generation taken by (white) photographers from press agencies or high street shops. Hall describes how the pictures’ meanings have changed over time because “what ‘signifies’ is not the photographic text in isolation, but the text caught in the chain of significations which overprint it, its inscription into the currency of other discourses, its intertextuality” (1992b: 110). Thus the pictures of “boat-loads of West Indians [arriving] at the Customs” (ibid.), taken by press photographers, the people smiling and dressed up in their best outfit, can be and have been read in different ways according to the viewer’s position: the ‘innocence’ Hall, in a process of transcoding, discovers in the newcomers’ half-anxious, half-optimistic expressions and poses, was

often decoded as backwardness. Even worse, the images, accompanied by tendentious texts, were used to construct the growth of the black population as a ‘problem’: “Thirty Thousand Colour Problems” ran the title of a piece with many illustrations in an issue of the *Picture Post* of 1956 (ibid.).

On the other side there was the work of black photographers who – drawing on their own experience – documented black British life in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, balancing the often negative representations in the press with positive images of black life. Hall honoured the work of two leading black photographers with long introductions, one to the exhibition catalogue for a retrospective of Vanley Burke’s work in 1993, the other to a book of photographs by Denis Morris, *Growing Up Black* (in the 70s), in 2012.⁵ Burke is famous for his peaceful images of black life in Handsworth and impressive portraits of individual citizens, while Morris made his name as ‘the music photographer’, with photos of Bob Marley, the Sex Pistols and other rock groups appearing on record covers and in the press. This side of his work did not interest Hall so much, but the late publication of pictures which Morris, from the age of eleven, had taken in Hackney in the 1960s and 1970s fascinated him. They show playing children, home life and street scenes, dances, weddings and political demonstrations in lively snapshots. In his introductory essay Hall places detailed interpretations of single images, deconstructing “the chain of significations which overprint” (1992b: 110) them, in an analysis of black ‘colony’ life, which combines historical knowledge with his personal memories of that time. Thus two still images of a little boy on a tricycle, one showing him paddling away, “the eyes fastened, unswervingly, on the objective ahead”, the other catching his triumphant grin after his safe arrival, seem to him to symbolise the hopeful “forward thrust” of the immigrant generation (Hall 2012: 5).

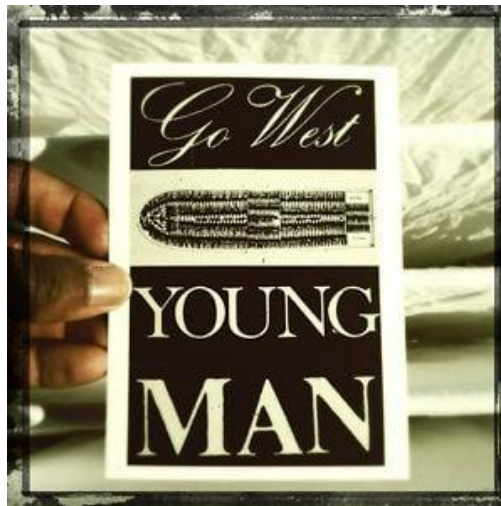


Dennis Morris, *Riding into the World* (1976)

© Dennis Morris 2018

⁵ The images are now in the Hackney Museum. The catalogue is on sale at Autograph. For more detailed information about Denis Morris’ unusual career, see von Rosenberg 2013.

Most intriguing to Hall, however, seemed the work of artists who, from the 1970s on and intensely in the 1980s, used photography in highly creative and individual ways to explore questions of identity, not in an essentialist sense, but as an ever fluid, situational result of various determinants crossing each other. As mentioned earlier, in the 1980s several young black artists organised themselves in groups with a political remit. Hall got personally involved with a group of very young black artists who stood out as particularly militant: the Blk Group (first called Pan-African Connection), founded in 1982 by four conceptual artists in the Midlands, Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, and Marlene Smith, all fresh from art schools and equally versed as the filmmakers in modern theories, postcolonial, psychoanalytical, feminist, poststructuralist. Inspired by the Black Art Movement in the USA, they expressed their anger about racial discrimination and general inequality with striking works, paintings, photo-text-montages, collages, sculptures or installations, drawing on modernist and Dada techniques.



Keith Piper, *Go West Young Man* (1987)

Courtesy Keith Piper 2018

Their initial slogan, “Black art by black people for black people”, was later dropped in the interest of a wider appeal. Soon quite a large number of other young artists associated themselves with the group. Some of them also acted as curators, especially Eddie Chambers, Lubaina Himid⁶ and Sonia Boyce, who staged some important exhibitions of black artists, first in small galleries and specialised spaces such as the Commonwealth Art Gallery (*Caribbean Artists in England* 1971) and the Africa Centre Gallery (*5 Black Women* 1983), but eventually winning over big public arts institutions to provide space for shows such as *The Thin Black Line* at the ICA in 1985 and *The Other*

⁶ Himid was honoured for her work as an artist with the Turner Prize 2017.



Story at the Hayward Gallery in 1989.⁷ Stuart Hall befriended several of these artists and often contributed to publications by or about them in catalogues and books. Sonia Boyce, now a professor at UAL, in a recent e-mail described the nature of Hall's relationship with artists: "Yes, Stuart was a friend, as well as a huge contributor to a variety of discussions (public and private) [...] Stuart was very generous with artists and thinkers, who would go to see him. I think he found a way to incorporate those exchanges into his own writings. So, I don't think it was simply one-directional." (Boyce 2016: n.pag.).

Boyce was among quite a large number of artists who were particularly concerned with identity construction, many of them women and gay artists. All of them experimented with auto-portraits for their explorations and most of them – with the exception of Boyce, who in the 80s preferred painting – used photography as their favourite medium.⁸ To give just one example: Joy Gregory's *Autoportraits* (1990), a series of close-ups in unusual perspectives and a strikingly hard contrast of black and white, tell, in the manner of a mini-cartoon, the story of her search for the self as a young black woman. The first two images seem to denote a state of confusion, four others focus on those parts of her face which are often discriminately called racial markers, her full lips, big eyes and curly hair, while two in the bottom row show her full face, but peeping from a corner (of society?) at the viewer with a shy look, suggesting questions such as: is this me? And: where do you place me?

Autograph's first gallery exhibition in June 1991 was entitled *Autoportraits*, and Hall contributed an article, "Black Narcissus", to the catalogue in which he defended "the extensive use now being made of self-images by contemporary black photographers". (1991: 2) They, he argued, do not signify "a narcissistic retreat to the safe zone of an already constituted 'self'" but present a "strategy [...] of putting the self-image, as it were, for the first time, 'in the frame', on the line, up for grabs. This is a significant move in the politics and strategies of black representation" (1991: 2). In a later interview with Maya Jaggi, Hall summed up his mutually fruitful relationship with these artists in more casual words: "In the 80s black artists became preoccupied with identity, self-portraits, putting their own body in the frame. I was writing about identity and they were practising it [...] It made me more alert to the way artistic work is an exploratory space in which ideas work themselves out" (Jaggi 2009).⁹

⁷ Keen and Ward offer a comprehensive list of all exhibitions which includes black artists from 1971 to 1996. Eddie Chambers' two book publications (2012, 2014) describe the most important shows in detail and place them in the context of cultural politics.

⁸ Other prominent artists of this generation, like Keith Piper, Donald Rodney and Eddie Chambers, favoured more directly political topics, such as allusions to the history of slavery and its legacy, as well as contemporary racism and exclusion politics.

⁹ More works by young black artists coming to the fore in the 1980s and early 1990s will be discussed below.



Joy Gregory, *Autoportraits* (1990)

Courtesy Joy Gregory 2018

Chair of Iniva and Autograph

The ‘visual turn’ in Stuart Hall’s thinking called his attention to the general importance of the visual in culture, to the semiotics of the image, the act of looking, the position of viewer and viewed, to which he dedicated two of his most widely-used publications for the Open University, the anthology on *Representation* (1997) and the text reader *Visual Culture* (1999). And it led to his practical involvement in the British art scene when, after his retirement from the Open University, he accepted the chairs of Iniva and Autograph. His most valuable contribution to both institutions was certainly his intellectual input and emotional support for individuals – John Akomfrah called him “mentor-in-chief” to the young artists represented there (Adams 2013) – but he was also engaged in practical tasks such as negotiating with the ACE and other public and private institutions. In an interview he spoke with pride of his successful fundraising (“Lottery money, European money, local community money, Barclay money”) for the new building in Rivington Place, which he hoped would become an urgently needed place for constructive dialogues between ethnic and religious groups, preventing them from drifting into “tribal enclaves” (Adams 2007: no page). The development of both institutions was, however, uneven. While Autograph has flourished and recently received a considerable increase of its annual grant from the ACE for the period 2015 to 2016 to the level of £ 700.000, Iniva got into difficult waters. After Gilane Tawadros, the highly competent first director from 1994 to 2005, left, Iniva’s public success declined and with it eventually ACE’s financial support: the ACE seriously slashed its grant twice, in 2012 by 43.3 % and again in 2015 by 62.3 %. It even advised Iniva to leave the new building and return to its former status as an itinerant agency (Quaintance 2014). As possible reasons



critics mention a series of unfortunate appointments including a sequence of disappointing directors, mistakes in management and an exhibition policy which – in hopeless competition with the big public galleries – focused on internationally successful artists rather than promoting local talent (see Araeen 2006: 151-152; Chambers 2015; Quaintance 2014). Whether Hall was in a position to have prevented any of this is a question of speculation. Though Iniva, since 2015, has seemed to be on a route of recovery under a new competent director, Melanie Keen, the latest news is that Iniva leaves Rivington Place in September 2018 (personal correspondence with Catherine Hall, August 2018).

Hall's Publications on Black British Art

Apart from a number of contributions to exhibition catalogues for single or group shows,¹⁰ Hall co-edited two volumes dealing with trends in black art and wrote a number of longer texts on the topic. In the following, I will briefly introduce these frequently overlooked writings.

The first publication was the 1992 spring issue of *Ten.8*, an art magazine specialising in black British art during the 1970s and 1980s. The issue, focusing on photography and edited by Hall and photographer and curator David A. Bailey, contained two contributions by Hall (alongside articles by Kobena Mercer, Eddie Chambers, Paul Gilroy and many others). While Hall's article "Reconstruction Work" deals with documentary photography of the 1950s, as described above, "A Vertigo of Displacement: Shifts within Black Documentary Practices" contextualises the shift to staged photography dominating the 1980s. Hall reveals the influence of theoretical developments on this change: Cultural Studies contributed the mistrust in realism, while Post-Structuralism deconstructed the concept of the fixed self, laying the foundation for the discovery of plural identities and "the kaleidoscopic conditions of blackness" (Hall 1992a: 20). The article closes with a re-evaluation of the relationship between Mapplethorpe's photographs of black male bodies and the work of Rotimi Fani-Kayodé, descendant of Yoruba chiefs and priests. While from an essentialist black position Mapplethorpe's images had been condemned as simply fetishist, critics in the 1980s also saw that he had contested the dominant view of black masculinity, giving expression to desire, a feature of his work that profoundly influenced Fani-Kayodé who, however, added an element absent in Mapplethorpe's work: allusions to African rituals and traditions.

¹⁰ See "The Black Narcissus" for *Auto-Portraits*, 1991; "Vanley Burke and the 'Desire for Blackness'", 1993; "Speak Easy: Black in the 70s", 2012; "Preface" to Donald Rodney's *Doublethink*, 2003; "Introduction" to Paul Gilroy's *Black Britain*, 2007.



Rotimi Fani-Kayodé, *Sonponnoi* (1987)
Courtesy Autograph ABP

About ten years later Hall wrote his next important essay on black art: a one hundred pages long introduction to the volume *Different: Contemporary Photographers and Black Identity* (2001), co-edited with Mark Sealy, director of Autograph then and now. The book contains a large number of photographic artworks by African American, Black and Asian British, Afro-Vietnamese, Aboriginal and “other diaspora artists” from the 1980s, which are again appreciated as belonging to a particularly creative phase for artists “culturally and geographically marginalized from the centers of power and authority” (Hall and Sealy, cover). After some general historical remarks, Hall interprets a number of selected works, which all – with very few exceptions – represent the move away from documentary realism and are constructed images, “deliberately composed or staged” (Hall 2001a: 35), thus proving the loss of trust in the possibility to directly reflect a complex reality. The images, all dealing with the construction of black identity in different grades of questioning and subversion, are grouped around themes like the nude male body, female representations of the black face, the play with signifiers of racial difference, scenes of domestic as well as of street life. A female artist whose work obviously appealed specially to Hall is Indian-born Chila Kumari Burman, whose collages are the last in the book, representing the climax of the display, so to speak. Images like *28 Positions in 34 Years*, showing a multitude of self-portraits in different attires and make-ups, seem like an illustration of his theory of identity. Hall comments: “Her work questions the capacity of any one image to reveal the one, true, essential ‘image of self’ and, instead, diasporically explores her dual cultural identity” (ibid. 103).



Chila Kumari Burman, *28 Positions in 34 Years* (1992)

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Stuart Hall's next long text on black art again focuses on the 1980s: "Assembling the 1980s: The Deluge and After", included in the anthology *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, edited by David A. Bailey and others (2005). As the article reads like a preparation for his most profound piece on the black arts, the article "Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three 'Moments' in Post-war History" (2006), it makes sense to treat them together. Hall undertakes to "map the black arts in Britain as part of a wider cultural/political moment" (Hall 2005: 1). In other words, he traces the political and cultural conditions for changes in the motivation, topics and artistic techniques of different generations since 1945. His division of the artists into three generations is handy enough to be adopted by art history, for instance by Eddie Chambers,¹¹ though the division line between the second and third generation is not as clear-cut as Hall suggests. The first, Hall argues, born in the 1920s and 30s in the different corners of the Commonwealth, came to Britain in the 1940s and 1950s. Among them were outstanding artists working in the modernist vein, like the Jamaican sculptor Ronald Moody and the painters Aubrey Williams and Frank Bowling, both from Guyana and both abstract artists. One work by Bowling may illustrate the trend. Bowling, who came to England in 1950, has over the years achieved a world-wide reputation, based mainly on his often huge abstract expressionist oil paintings, in which the luminous bright colours, often applied in many layers, blend into one another and which trigger all kinds of associations in the viewers. A work that has recently aroused new attention as part of an encompassing exhibition entitled *Mappa Mundi* in the Haus der Kunst in Munich, curated by Okwui Enwezor, are the so-called *Landscape Paintings* created between 1967 and 1971. One of these is *Polish Rebecca* (1971) showing Africa as the green centre of the

¹¹ Chambers comments at length on the change of style and political commitment of the three generations in both his books *Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain* (2012) and *Black Artists in British Art: A History since the 1950s* (2014). From his own more radical cultural-political stance, he criticises the internationally successful members of the third generation sharply.

world in a whirl of colours, in which other parts, like Australia on the left, have moved to the margins.

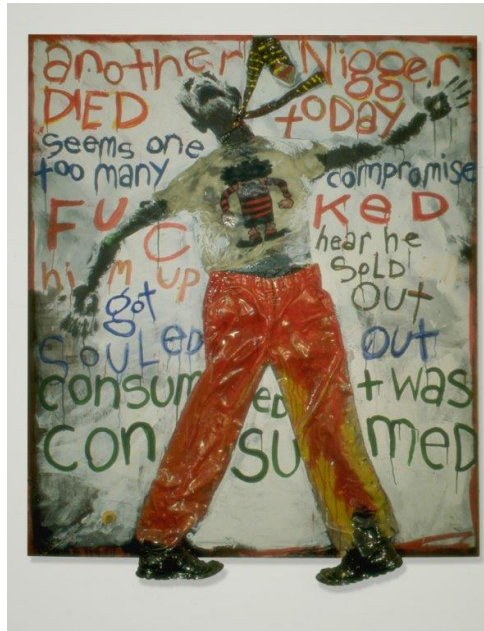


Frank Bowling, *Polish Rebecca* (1971)

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Despite their anti-colonialist political stance, the black British artists of the first generation considered themselves part of the universalist, global movement of modernism and expected to be welcomed in the European art scene. For a time they were indeed “central to the avant-garde of the day” (Hall 2006: 16), but soon many found “the doors barred”, so that some gave up painting while others emigrated, for instance Frank Bowling to the US, where he still has a studio in New York beside one in London.

The second generation, born in Britain in the 50s and 60s and appearing on the art scene in the 1980s, as the result of the political conjuncture between the 60s and 80s sketched above, produced a completely different type of art: angry, polemical, remembering past injustices and fighting present-day discrimination, as well as concerned with constructing a black and British identity. Typical examples are Keith Piper’s *Keep Singing (Another Nigger Died Today)* (1982) and Sutapa Biswas’s *Housewives with Steak Knives* (1985). Piper was born on Malta of African-Caribbean descent. The message of this shocking work, an appeal to end all violence against blacks, is easy to understand (and Piper intended it to be so), as the cruel lynching staged against a wall covered in racist graffiti refers to well-known racist acts in the past and in the present.



Keith Piper, *Keep Singing (Another Nigger Died Today)* (1982)

Courtesy Keith Piper 2018



Sutapa Biswas, *Housewives with Steak Knives* (1985)

© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2018

The work by Indian-born Sutapa Biswas, by contrast, needs some extra information to fully reveal its angry feminist message and dark humour. Biswas attacks male suppression by employing ancient mythology: the figure refers to Kali, ambiguous Indian goddess of the forces of creation and learning, but also of destruction. Some of Kali's traditional attributes lend themselves perfectly to a black feminist re-working: her blackness, representing the fusion of all colours, her defiantly stuck-out tongue, her

garland (traditionally of letters) and her four arms performing contradictory gestures. In Biswas's version one arm is swinging a knife, one is clutching a man's severed scalp, one is making a gesture of peace, while the fourth is holding a flag with a copy of *Judith and Holofernes* (1620) by female Renaissance artist Artemisia Gentileschi, telling the story of a woman's revenge. The letters of the garland are replaced by cut-off heads of white male miscreants who better beware of the furious black housewife.

Piper and Biswas were of the generation Hall personally got to know and befriended. The third generation, coming to the fore in the 1990s, is treated by Hall with disappointing brevity: "I cannot here discuss it at length" (2006: 22). Perhaps time was short (the article was based on a lecture), but maybe these artists, working in a more inclusive political climate in Britain and under the influence of a growing internationalisation of the art scene, appealed less to Stuart Hall, as they were less focused on black British issues, but often targeted new, global topics and often treated them in an ironical, playful way. In the words of Jagdish Patel, they were a generation "whose ideas were not dominated by radical politics, but by a global network of galleries, curators and television" (2014: no page.). Their art was and is, however, not a-political. While many of Steve McQueen's films, such as the short *Western Deep* (2002) about work in South African gold mines, and the film *Hunger* (2008), dealing with a famous hunger strike by IRA prisoners, are still critical in the direct way of the 80s, other works are often political in a new, indirect, often carnivalesque way, as many works by Chris Ofili, Yinka Shonibare, and Hew Locke, the most successful black artists of their generation, prove. One example must suffice here.



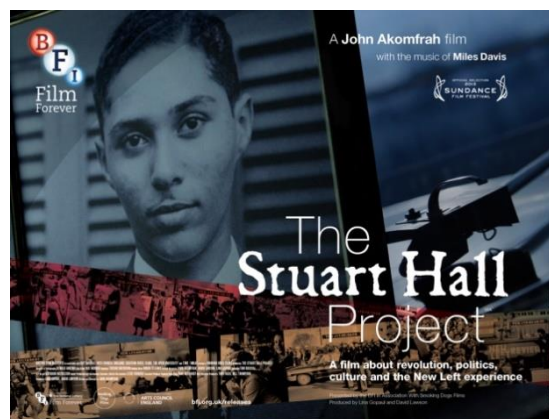
Yinka Shonibare, *Boy on Globe* (2011)

© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2018

Yinka Shonibare, who is famous for his headless figures, signifying brainless colonialism, who are dressed in “Dutch wax” (printed cotton produced in Europe and worn by African women) as a signifier of the complex relationship between the colonisers and the colonised, has created many pleasing, amusing, but still critical installations representing scenes from colonial history or denouncing ongoing western arrogance and unscrupulousness. In *Boy on Globe 4* (2011), for instance, the frolicking headless (i.e. mindless) boy, already stumbling on a scorched earth, impressively symbolises the dangers of the climate change for a careless mankind.

The Perfect End to a Long Collaboration: *The Stuart Hall Project*

The final products – and the climax – of the mutual inspiration and co-operation between Hall and the black artists turned out to be two works by John Akomfrah, which were presented to the public not very long before Hall's death in 2014. In 2012 Akomfrah staged a three-screen installation, *An Unfinished Conversation*, in the Tate Modern (later also shown at the Liverpool Biennale of that year), in which he traced Hall's memories of his life according to Hall's conviction that “identities are formed at the unstable point where personal lives meet the narrative of history. Identity is an ever-unfinished conversation” (qtd. in Adams 2013). Akomfrah's technique to visualise this insight was again that of the bricolage, juxtaposing images from the various stages of Hall's life with archival material illustrating the historical conditions, i.e. scenes from Jamaican and British life between the 1940s and 1990s, as well as some world-historical events. The 98-minute film *The Stuart Hall Project*, twice as long as *An Unfinished Conversation*, came out in 2013.



***The Stuart Hall Project*, film by John Akomfrah (2013)**

It is a longer variation on the same theme, taking more leisure over scenes from Hall's personal life and career, but also lingering more on views of Jamaica and London from the various periods and including more glimpses of contemporary wars and freedom struggles (Korea, Vietnam, Egypt, Chile, Cuba, Iran, Berlin, South Africa etc.). Both works



were composed in close co-operation with Hall himself, who provided not only many personal photographs and film bits, but also all the documentary footage, much of it BBC material, from his personal archive. As the video installation is no longer on show and only fragments available on YouTube, the following remarks focus on the film.¹²

The film follows a rough chronology and is divided into chapters denoting periods in Hall's life, beginning with "Colonialism to Postcolonialism", moving on to "Freedom Road", "The Spectre of Difference", "The Coming of Cultural Studies", "Minimal Cultural Selves" and so on until the final chapter, "The Neoliberal Problem Space". Hall appears frequently as a public speaker, in university, left-wing clubs, but most often on Radio and TV, yet though we do hear the famous voice that had fascinated Isaac Julien so much, the soundtrack is dominated by music, mostly jazz, and predominantly by pieces of Miles Davis, Hall's declared musical soulmate, which, by virtue of their changing character, were used as "a kind of marker of time" (Akomfrah 2013: 9). Mark Fisher observed: "Miles' music provides a parallel narrative – a different, yet intersecting route through the same historical period that the film tracks." (Fisher 2013: 3) The dominance of the music, however, wraps the whole film in a dreamy, nostalgic atmosphere – intensified by recurring images of beautiful land- and seascapes, with whirling flocks of birds, flowers and opulent vegetation, both in England and Jamaica – that threatens to soften the shock the images of poverty and racism, police brutality and war destruction cause which were such strong incentives to Hall's work. Nevertheless, the film is a touching memorial to Stuart Hall, who came as a young black scholarship student from Jamaica and became "one of Britain's most influential intellectuals" (pre-title sequence of *The Stuart Hall Project*). As such, the film also transports an optimistic message concerning the growing liberality of British society. Now, after Brexit and resurfacing xenophobia – remember Hall's theory that "what signifies is not the photographic text in isolation, but the text caught in the chain of significations which overprint it" (Hall 1992b: 110) – the film may demand a different reading: it may appear as a regretful memorial to the times when – despite the beginning of neo-liberalism and outbreaks of social conflicts – there seemed to be more hope that Britain – and the world for that matter – might slowly develop into an open, peaceful, multicultural society, in which everybody has a chance according to his/her talents and determination, not his/her skin colour or place of birth.

¹² Some viewers of the installation have written down their impressions, e.g. Mark Fisher in the BFI booklet for the film (1), Mark Hudson in the *Telegraph* of 15 Oct. 2012, Parminder Viron in a blog.



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