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Shades of Black: Assembling the 1980s

In his concluding comments to “The Living Archive” conference, sponsored by the London-based African and Asian Visual Artists’ Archive (Aavaa) and held at the Tate Gallery in March 1997, Stuart Hall issued a challenge to his audience. Responding to Rasheed Araeen’s discussion of the importance of producing a history (or histories) of the contemporary black arts scene in Britain and the danger, in generating such histories, of “ghettoizing” a diverse body of artistic works in a “minority enclave,” Hall stated: “I have to say that I think it’s time that those issues were more directly and extensively faced and probed. I think that there’s been a kind of slackness around notions of cultural diversity and ethnic arts, et cetera. We’ve been through a very intense period of reflection around that, and we’re now in a period when a variety of different formulations stand in place of really serious and rigorous thinking and I hope therefore that today’s debate, which opened up some of those positions, can really be followed through on some subsequent occasions.”¹

This book, and the set of transatlantic conversations and conferences that preceded it, represents one response to that challenge.

Beginnings, however, as Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and numerous other critics have reminded us, are notoriously unstable things. And so perhaps another point of departure was a heated conversation that took place in the fall of 1997 between Ian Baucom, Sutapa Biswas, Sonia Boyce, and Keith Piper several days before the opening of *The Unmapped Body: 3 Black British Artists*, cocurated by Baucom at the Yale University Art Gallery. “What do you think of doing a book about the black British art movement of the 1980s?” Baucom asked, setting off a contentious discussion. Was there a movement as such? How might a volume on its history enable *and* limit the study and critical reception of individual artists and individual works? What, after all, did it mean for the Yale show to group Biswas, Boyce, and Piper together as “3 Black British Artists”? The conversation produced no definitive answers, but it did generate one shared conviction: if you raised the question, you would be sure to start a debate about whether that “movement” existed and what it might have consisted of. Baucom later repeated the question to Boyce, citing the importance of *Ten.8* magazine’s final issue, *The Critical Decade: Black British Photography in the 1980s*, as the impetus for developing a discussion on the period. The decision to proceed by organizing a set of conferences, one at Aavaa and another at Duke University, brought the project into conversation with an ongoing debate on transnationalism.

During the 1980s a number of non-UK cultural critics were instrumental in ensuring that black British cultural theory was read, and the work of black British artists and filmmakers made visible, in a series of international spaces, particularly in the United States. During the same decade there were also several institutional projects that focused on the problem of a transnational dialogue on contemporary black British art. This was very different from the reception that black British cultural practice was receiving in Britain by the end of the 1980s. These projects were, however, almost exclusively American-led, particularly in the areas of photography (US/UK Exchange and SF Camerawork), independent film (*Young, British & Black*), and survey visual art exhibitions (Disputed Identities).² By the late 1980s and early 1990s, in response to this arrangement of institutional power, a number of projects began trying to redefine the transnational boundaries of the dialogue, with organizations like Panchayat organizing black British exhibitors at the Havana Biennale in Cuba and the presentation by Autograph (the Association of Black Photographers) of black British photography at the Arles photography festival in

France. The conferences and this book have sought to participate in this reorganization of transatlantic power dynamics.

Organizing the follow-up conference at Duke in the spring of 2001 was, in the event, a fortuitous experience, and not only because of Duke's long-standing history of dialogue with black British cultural practice under the initiative of Jane Gaines in the Film Department and Richard Powell in the Department of Art and Art History. The lineup for the conference, hosted by the newly opened John Hope Franklin Center for Interdisciplinary and International Studies, included scholars, artists, and curators from the United Kingdom and the United States and fit perfectly the Center's dedication to cross-disciplinary collaborative exploration. It was a unique opportunity to bring together the generation that participated in the 1980s Black Arts Movement, to incorporate the new debates that emerged in the 1990s, and to engage the voices and opinions of a broad range of U.S.-based artists and scholars. The keynote speech delivered by Stuart Hall was followed by the opening of an exhibition produced for the conference, *Objects in Time*. The exhibition included a commissioned artist film, *Chanting Heads*; a chronological account of Afro-Asian art activity in Britain from 1935 to 2000 titled *Timeline*; a Stuart Hall/Autograph collaborative film, *The Appropriated Frame*; and a show reel of films produced during the 1980s and 1990s about the Black Arts Movement and individual makers entitled *The Moving Cube*. The conferees also visited and incorporated in their conversations the student-curated exhibition of contemporary Asian art *Made in Asia?* that had been coordinated by Stan Abe.³ The conference itself was organized to cover four main interdependent areas: aesthetic and artistic practice since the 1980s, curatorial debates during and since the 1980s, influential cultural criticism and art historical debates, and the influence of government policy on the arts and their dissemination.

Behind all these arrangements, however, were those initial questions: What is, or was, this "Black Arts Movement" in Britain? And why the 1980s? What was it about this moment and this convergence of artistic and political allegiances that paved the way for a generation of "raised in Britain" practitioners and analysts to meet and to name a black British art movement?

The title of both the conference and this book provides a preliminary set of answers, though perhaps only if appended with a question mark. For as much as the aim of this project has been to produce a series of accounts of this "critical decade" (as David A.

Bailey and the other editors of *Ten.8*'s final issue have named it), it continues to ask whether it is in fact possible to speak of a semicoherent arts movement organized under the signs of “blackness” and “black Britishness.” It asks what it means for these terms to name the historical and conceptual site where a variegated array of artistic practices intersect. It asks what is gained, and lost, by gathering and organizing both practices and a history of practices in this way, and whether history is well served by such an impulse to collect and identify. The project thus implicitly constitutes an inquiry into the nature not only of a movement but of movements, particularly those sorts of “Renaissance movements” (the Harlem Renaissance in the United States, the Celtic Revival in Ireland, the Sophiatown generation in South Africa, to name but a few) that have proven so central to the artistic, cultural, and political history of the twentieth century.

This endeavor proceeds from the conviction that such movements are made, not found, that they are shaped and patterned, that they are historically produced and historically productive, that movements, identities, identifications, and histories are concrete, if highly negotiable, assemblages. Like an archive, however, assemblages of this sort exist not merely to catalogue or contain the past but, as Jacques Derrida has recently reminded us, as openings to the future.⁴ For they exist not only as repositories to be guarded but as something to be disassembled, reassembled, and disassembled once more—at once shifting landmarks relating to what has been and intimations of what is to come. To “assemble the black British 1980s” is thus in a very real sense to produce an array of contemporary histories in which both past and future are made present.

This work thus implies an investigation of what might be called the “liveliness” of history by examining the temporal coordinates of knowledges, concepts, institutions, and practices. To speak of a movement is also to speak of several interlocking moments: that of the movement itself, the moments from which it emerged, and the moment from which it becomes possible to look back in retrospect and forward in anticipation. Hence the title “*Shades of Black*” is chosen in part because, for many of the artists concerned, artistic practice has frequently been a sort of anamnestic labor. It is perhaps a conjuring art, an invoking and materializing of histories, subjects, and images that have been repeatedly unnamed, repressed, or assigned only a flickering, spectral visibility. “There are no stories in the riots,” the narrator of John Akomfrah’s film *Handsworth Songs* (1986) indicates, “only the ghosts of other, earlier stories.” That title is also chosen

because to look back at the Black Arts Movement is to revisit something that has a sort of “untimely,” troubling, ghostly relation to the present, occasioning much debate for artists, curators, and art historians unsure as to whether this particular disappearing/reappearing shade of “black” or “black British” art should be recalled or dispelled. It is to that uncertainty, to that ambivalence about what to do with the specter of black art haunting contemporary art history and art practice, that this book seeks to respond. As the obvious pun on “shades” indicates, it further seeks both to retain a primary focus on the visual and to insist that any apparent absolute has a multitude of incarnations. Any one history encompasses a multitude of stories, and a history of a black British arts scene cannot be monochromatic; black is not black but all the shades of black.

This, obviously enough, constitutes an invitation to enormous labor, yet the outcome cannot be, in any sense, encyclopedic. Nor should it be. For it has been a central notion of this project that to attempt a definitive or exhaustive history is to work counter to the spirit of the artistic enterprises that the project seeks to engage. If those enterprises share anything in common, then, somewhat paradoxically, it is a suspicion of fixed definitions, absolute histories, encyclopedic knowledges. The difference around which a British Black Arts Movement might be organized, as Hall argued at the “Living Archive” conference, is not the difference of a preexisting essence but of a differentiated set of “routes by which practicing comes to modernity.” By attending to such a concept of difference, we have hoped to produce not a synthetic history of the black arts scene in Britain, but a collection of histories, a corporate and polyvocal genealogy, a lively and living archive of the present’s ability to assemble both its pasts and its futures.

The book is organized in four parts. The first section collects thirteen texts developed from talks delivered at the Duke conference. The second consists of Jean Fisher’s “Dialogues.” Drawing on the video documentation and transcripts of the conference, Fisher was invited to give shape to and elaborate on the lively exchanges that unfolded over the four days for this publication. What emerges is a thorough and engaging sense of the complex debates. The third section comprises a revised text and image edition of the *Timeline* shown in the Objects in Time exhibition. And the fourth is recommended reading on postwar black arts in Britain. The text throughout is illustrated with individual works that the many contributors to this volume have identified as crucial to their unique trajectories through the archives of this moment. The volume as a whole is a record of

those routes they have traced, an editorial curation, of sorts, of conversations, texts, and images that shade this “critical decade.”

A few more words of explanation are due, on not only the matter of black British art but, also, the question of the 1980s, the moment we have chosen to posit as critical. Why select a frame that implies the priority of retrospection as much as it assumes the coherence of an (in many ways) artificial periodization? By way of an answer, some preliminary overview of the contributors’ own responses to such questions might prove valuable. In his essay “Assembling the 1980s: The Deluge—and After,” Stuart Hall traces some of the key positions, circumstances, and shifts that took place not simply in the 1980s but over a forty-year period, asking whether it is possible to assemble a definitive interpretation of the 1980s without taking into account earlier decades, international events, and social movements. Paying particular attention to the 1950s and 1960s, he argues that events that took place in these periods had an important effect on the 1980s and 1990s, while also underscoring a crucial difference in attitude between the two consecutive postwar generations. Indeed, he suggests that what made the 1980s unique was its convergence of two generations of black artists, together with their contrasting relationship to modernism, and the opposing anticolonial and postcolonial politics they articulated.

Two discourses on black art ground his argument: Aubrey Williams’s “A Black Aesthetic,” a discussion with an audience of black artists organized by the Race Today collective in London in the mid-1980s, and Rasheed Araeen and Eddie Chambers’s exchange in *Third Text* no. 5, “Black Art: A Discussion.” “Two visions or pathways for the black arts seem to be in contention here,” Hall suggests. “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 [of the two generations].” Artists of the first generation, such as Williams, who migrated to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, were, he goes on to suggest, fully engaged with modernist ideas and the “international style.” They came to London, Hall notes, “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.” Artists of the subsequent raised-in-Britain

generation, such as Chambers, however, did not invest in modernist internationalism. Instead, Hall indicates, they rebelliously embraced an ethnocentric aesthetic as a challenge to the endgame of late modernism and as a way of raising critical questions about identity and representation within the framework of an emergent postcolonial critique of history. For these artists, Hall argues, the problems of modernism had been displaced by the problematics of identity, but, in the process of sowing the seeds for a self-consciously “Black” Arts Movement, Chambers and his contemporaries left a crucial series of questions unanswered (or, perhaps, unanswerable). Hall inquires: “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?”

For Rasheed Araeen—an artist, founding editor of *Third Text*, curator of the first survey exhibition of black art at a “major” British Gallery (*The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, Hayward Gallery, 1989), and Chambers’s interlocutor in the *Third Text* conversation—the answers to such questions are necessarily indexed to the practice of a radical politics and the refashioning of the official institutions and knowledges of the art world as much as they are bound to representational grammars of identity and race. The purpose of his essay “The Success and the Failure of the Black Arts Movement” is, in fact, to chart what he sees as the rise and fall of the radicalism of the movement. The historical overview he presents signals 1979 as a key moment, one that oversaw not only the birth of Thatcherism as a political force, but the parallel emergence of artists like Mona Hatoum and Eddie Chambers, who began their public careers by asserting a critical challenge to the Eurocentrism of British art schools. Araeen supplements this investigation of arts school interventionism, discussions of founding black arts exhibitions (the Pan-Afrikan Connection at the Africa Centre, London, and the Thin Black Line at the ICA, London), and the vocal emergence, in the early 1980s, of black women artists with an analysis of one of Chambers’s early works, *The Destruction of the National Front*. Araeen suggests that this piece fused together the modernist tropes of collage and cubism with a new radical language, and so helped to define the movement Chambers and his contemporaries were helping to establish. “[The] change from a paradigmatic critical process to the formation of an iconographic visual language,” evident in all these developments and visually signaled in Chambers’s work, Araeen argues, “became somewhat the hallmark of the Black Arts Movement.” In Araeen’s view, however, the

early promise of this moment was not kept. He sees a subsequent falling off, indeed a “failure,” that he attributes to the lack of an ongoing will to intervene politically within the art establishment. To his mind, artists became too happy to take their share of the “multicultural pie” offered by public funding bodies and organizations like the Greater London Council and the Arts Council. He also suggests that the celebration of ethnocentrism, what he identifies as the “unwarranted interference from some black academics and cultural theorists,” and the rising tide of global capital in the art market led to the decline of the radical position that the Black Arts Movement had staked out for itself in the early 1980s. As a result, he suggests, the work of black artists has remained marginal to art historical discourse.

Keith Piper’s “Wait, Did I Miss Something? Some Personal Musings on the 1980s and Beyond” is less pessimistic but equally cautionary, particularly regarding the retrospective impulse that risks recollecting a moment like the 1980s as something other than it was. He argues that the 1980s continues to be a “misread, misaligned, and misinterpreted decade” dominated by discussions on the use of public money, political correctness, and the frustratingly unresolved terms “black art” and “Black Arts Movement.” Despite these cautions, Piper does, however, offer his own provisional route through the decade. He notes the significance of the inaugural National Black Art Convention, which was held at Wolverhampton Polytechnic in 1982, as the first visible sign of an emerging Black Arts Movement. The convention sought to explore different uses of the term “black art,” to make visible the existence of contemporary black artists, to engage questions of gender (artists such as Claudette Johnson, Piper recalls, were crucial in this regard), and to discuss the formation of organizations like the Black-Art Gallery in London and the support of public funding bodies like West Midlands Arts, which could ensure that the black art agenda was firmly acknowledged by the art establishment. At the beginning of the 1980s, he reminds us, the visibility of black artists’ work in galleries was virtually unheard of, and greater access to mainstream art venues became a central rallying call for collective action.

By the late 1980s, however, with Thatcherite policies firmly entrenched in Britain, public and independent art venues sympathetic to the concerns of black art faced a withering backlash. The broader closing down of liberal left institutions, Piper observes, led a large number of black artists to “hang up their brushes.” In the 1990s, things

shifted once again. The decade saw the Turner Prize conferred on black artists such as Steve McQueen, Chris Ofili, and Anish Kapoor, but Piper asks whether these success stories have fulfilled or merely displaced the agenda raised by the 1982 convention. His answer is a fairly unambiguous, if not nostalgic, no. He sees the 1990s as dominated not by radical politics but by the influence of commercial galleries, a televisual culture that has fashioned a media-friendly presentation of art, and the rise of the yba (young British artist) generation. The difference between the decades, at least in perception, is thus, for him, quite great. As he puts it: “Art in the 1980s has come to be mythologized as drenched and constrained by imposed notions of what came to be termed ‘political correctness,’ while the irreverent yba . . . could be celebrated as part of an unfettered, postpolitical *Loaded* generation.” In the changed political climate that sprang up in the 1990s, devoid of the political urgency that inspired the work of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Piper therefore wonders whether we have lost the ability to imagine viable alternatives to the stranglehold that the global commercial art world has on the production, packaging, and dissemination of contemporary artistic practice.

Lubaina Himid’s “Inside the Invisible: For/Getting Strategy” is equally filled with discomforting questions. It is in fact a compendium of such queries. Originally presented as an interactive performance in which conferees were asked to open and read a numbered statement placed in an envelope on their chairs, to which Himid then responded, that performance piece is here reproduced in essay form as a catalogue of incisive and thought-provoking questions about what Himid also sees as the failures of the Black Arts Movement of the 1980s. The inadequacies of strategic action and thought, an overreliance on public funding institutions, the self-imposed marginalization of black artists from the mainstream, the sparsity of writing about women’s work: all these and other issues engage her attention. She is, in particular, highly critical of the ease with which gender discrimination continues to marginalize and erase the contributions made by black women, especially in light of the fact that, throughout the 1980s, there were intense and ongoing collaborations among black women artists who were responsible not only for making work but for numerous coorganized exhibitions and independently produced publications. Collaboration, she notes, was key to what happened in that earlier moment. She wonders how that activist collaborative energy might be reharnessed under present conditions.

Like Himid, who further argues that critical theory and art history have served black British artists poorly (she berates theorists' and critics' failure to support artists by not writing enough about their work), Kobena Mercer also finds the art criticism on and of the period inadequate. Taking as his cue Jean Fisher's "plea to attend to the work before us," he argues that despite a recent "normalization" of diversity and difference within what Sarat Maharaj calls the "multicultural managerialism" of the art world, a crucial art historical amnesia remains prominent. Amnesia here signifies not an absolute loss of memory but a matter (in the case of black British art) of forgetting the artistic object itself in favor of discussions that emphasize the ethnicity of the artist, the general problematics of race, and the relationship of practitioners to the art establishment. The result of this, he argues, inevitably deflects attention from the artwork and its relationship to the broader story of twentieth-century art and the histories of diaspora that, in their turn, are among that story's crucial, if unacknowledged, frames. Within the general contours of this argument, Mercer does go on to praise what he sees as some of the exceptional works of historiography that "redress and amend previous omissions in the common understanding of the modern art narrative." The research that has taken place among African American academics in particular (most notably, Richard Powell's *Black Art and Culture in the Twentieth Century* and Sharon Patton's *African-American Art*), together with the comprehensive chronologies in the exhibition catalogues of *The Blues Aesthetic*, *The Other Story*, and *Transforming the Crown*, all provide, he suggests, a model for the investigations that are now necessary. The concluding remarks of his essay "Iconography after Identity" summarize his concerns and his reformulation of Fisher's plea: "[We must] begin to let go of the way in which the reading of the aesthetic autonomy of the diaspora art object has been continuously overdetermined by a discourse about identity and institutions whose time is now at an ending."

The cluster of essays that follow—Susan Pui San Lok's "A to Y (Entries for an Inventionry of Dented 'I's)," Zineb Sedira and Jawad Al-Nawab's "On Becoming an Artist: Algerian, African, Arab, Muslim, French, and Black British? A Dialogue of Visibility," and Yong Soon Min and Allan deSouza's "CoRespondents"—raise another, if related, set of questions, questions whose frame is not so much temporal as spatial. "I want to take a spatial turn," Yong Soon Min indicates at the beginning of her collaborative piece on the labor of collaboration. "Artworks can be thought to have addresses . . . they can be

located . . . they come from someone, who comes from *somewhere*.” That “someone” and that “somewhere”—as each of these three contributions stress—are, however, not so easy to locate as they might at first seem, and are certainly not innocently or effortlessly situated within the ethnogeographic place marker “black British.” For even if “blackness” in Britain means something rather different from what it means in the United States—specifying primarily, particularly during the 1980s, an act of social and political identification, an alliance politics around common experiences of disenfranchisement—by affiliating differences it also threatens to elide them, or hierarchize them, or overdetermine them.

“Y(B)B(AA)C(YRWBW/M)A?” susan pui san lok slyly inquires, wittily demanding why one might want to be a yba in the manner of Damien Hirst and Co. Also implicit in the question is why the 1990s explosion of the fragile 1980s consensus on blackness seems to have made available to her the option to become a Young (Black) British (Anglo-Asian) Chinese (Yellow Red White and Blue Wo/Man) Artist? Zineb Sedira and Jawad Al-Nawab’s question is similar: “Algerian, African, Arab, Muslim, French, *and* Black British?” How did a 1980s politics of “black” solidarity situate within itself this seeming excess of ethnic, national, and cultural identifications? For all these contributors the question of “black British” art becomes a complex problem of elaborating and complicating filiations and affiliations, structures of collectivity, and habits of collaboration. This applies both within Britain and the many diasporic communities it houses, and abroad, in France, Algeria, China, Korea, and the United States (to name but a few of the “addresses” to which their works respond). Indeed, if the meaning and coherence of “black” emerges from the 1980s as something less certain, less identifiable, and more global than it might at first glance seem, so too does “British” and the range of locations in which “Britishness” is itself under constant reconstruction.

The United States is certainly one of those locations, hosting a number of the more recent survey exhibitions and explorations of black British art (the Duke conference included). But it is also one of the places in which artists continue to refashion figures of blackness and concepts of Britishness, frequently in collaborative ventures such as those described by Yong Soon Min and Allan deSouza, and those that Dawoud Bey chronicles in his “Collaborative Projects: Toward a More Inclusive Practice,” and in the exhibitions Judith Wilson examines in her essay “Triangular Trades: Late Twentieth-Century ‘Black’

Art and Transatlantic Cultural Commerce.” To exhibit, as Wilson indicates, is not only to show but to continue to make or remake what is shown, to acknowledge that artworks exist in a triangular circuit of production, distribution, and consumption. When the work that navigates the triangular routes of the art world is itself work that is engaged not just with blackness but with the black Atlantic and its triangles of history, identity, and commerce, then the art historian, Wilson argues, must be particularly attentive to the “transatlantic circulation and exchange of information and ideas . . . [that has] inspired exciting new [black] visual practices and critical discourses on both sides of the Atlantic.” In such exchanges, and in the exhibitions and shows that frequently allow such exchanges to take place, work does not merely travel from one side of the Atlantic to the other but recodes the Atlantic as an ongoing space of black cultural fashioning and refashioning.

Like Wilson, Dawoud Bey, a U.S.-based photographer, has a long history of working on cooperative transatlantic projects; his street photography work on black urban communities in the United States, to cite a single example, was first exhibited in London at Camerawork’s 1989 US/UK Photography Exchange exhibition. As he suggests, the collaborative postwar production of polysemous, circum-Atlantic codes of blackness (in which the black British arts scene has played such a crucial part) entails more than the cooperation of individual artists or groups of artists. It also demands a delicate mix of working with and contesting the authority of those arts institutions (particularly museums) whose business is to display and so also to mystify and to fix “culture.”

The type of art-making projects Bey has undertaken with American teenagers within the white walls of the museum are one way to demystify the ever more global codes of ethnicity and race that (as Wilson also suggests) museums habitually police. A rigorous attention to the money flows of late capitalism, Stan Abe suggests, is another. Reframing the sorts of problems raised by Susan Pui San Lok in a global context, Abe suggests that questions of Asianness and Chineseness in the contemporary art world not only complicate the contours of blackness, but reflect a kind of multinational investment strategy in the commodity of multiculturalism. Race, nation, and ethnicity, he implies, are not the only codes subtending the post-1980s emergence of Asia in global grammars of multicultural, minority, or black art—so too is capital. Just as capital flows, particularly as it follows the movements of a cosmopolitan Asian elite, so too does the institutional

art world's desire and ability to capture and commodify the radical political energies that phenomena like the Black British Arts Movement helped to put into global circulation.

Gallery, museum, and multinational capitals not only follow the arts. As Naseem Khan indicates in her essay "Choices for Black Arts in Britain over Thirty Years," sometimes the money has to come first, particularly when that money comes in the form of governmental funding for the arts. But how to fund black art? Or, as Gilane Tawadros asks in the volume's final essay, "A Case of Mistaken Identity," how to curate what has been funded and created? For Khan—an ex-senior policy advisor to the Arts Council of England and the chief researcher of the 1976 report *The Arts Britain Ignores*, the first major study of "what were then called 'ethnic minority community arts'"—any answer to such questions is double-edged. To fund "ethnic" or "black" arts or "cultural diversity" is to address the social and political realities of a long, long history of disenfranchisement and misrecognition, but it is also, potentially, to "ghettoize . . . [to] stereotype . . . [to] categorize people in ways they reject." To refuse to fund art on such principles, to recognize "the inadequacy of ethnic categorization," may be to free artists "from systems that take as their starting and end point the race of the person involved," but it is also to leave the fundamental inequities of the system in place. The 1980s—a moment, she suggests, in which the born-in-Britain generation of artists turned from a practice based on cultural preservation (of the elsewheres of their immigrant parents) to one predicated on the desire to challenge prevailing forms of discrimination—forced policymakers to follow such paradoxes through to all their points of self-contradiction. The matter, she indicates, may not have been resolved in the 1980s, but its urgency could certainly no longer be escaped.

As Tawadros argues, however, even when such questions are seriously handled, policymakers and government funding can do only so much. Taking as her point of departure two "infamous" late-1980s shows, Damien Hirst's *Freeze* (in the London Docklands) and Araeen's *The Other Story*, Tawadros asks why the careers of the *Freeze* artists were so rapidly launched into lucrative international orbit while the artists represented in *The Other Story* have frequently continued to travel beneath the gallery world's radar screen. The "Cool Britannia" ideology and arts policy of the early years of the Blair government certainly had something to do with the more readily fashionable and marketable art of Hirst and his fellow ybas. However, it is the broader, global postnationalization of culture

characteristic of our hypercapitalized turn-of-the-millennium moment, she argues, that has had an even more determinative impact on the world's art markets and its curatorial practices. If hypercapitalism breeds postnationalism, then it also generates what Tawadros identifies as a new type of internationalism in the arts evidenced, in part, by the explosion of international exhibitions (the Istanbul Biennale, the Havana Biennale, the Cairo Biennale, etc.) challenging the hegemony of the Venice Biennale as the major international event of the art world calendar. As director of the Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), Tawadros might be expected to laud this development. And she does see signs of positive change in this new internationalist moment. First, it has given organizations such as inIVA the paradoxical freedom to return to and query the now denaturalized category of nationhood; to curate black British art now, she implies, is not so much to investigate "blackness" as to probe the internationalism of "Britishness." Second, it allows curators greater opportunity to interrogate the city (rather than the nation) and the urban articulation of global forms of cosmopolitanism. But the internationalization of the visual arts in general, and of black art in particular, is, she further suggests, a mixed blessing, for it comes in two forms: an external or long-distance internationalism and an internal or diasporic internationalism. External internationalism—the inaugural exhibition *Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis* (2001) of the Tate Modern in London supplies her chief example—seems predicated on the conviction that difference is elsewhere, in Lagos, Rio, and Bombay in the case of the Tate Modern show. An internal or diasporic internationalism, on the other hand, locates difference here, wherever here may be, but particularly in the metropolitan centers of the "first world," in the diasporic reconstitution of London and Paris as much as in Havana or Rio. It is, her essay implies, by highlighting the constitutive *internality* of difference that phenomena such as the Black British Arts Movement continue to play such a vital role, refashioning and reproducing our conceptions of the global and the international just as much as it has helped to reconfigure understandings of the nation and of race.

The title of Tawadros's essay, "A Case of Mistaken Identity," refers to that curatorial error (or willed blindness) that mistakes alterity at a distance as the only authentic form of difference, "relegating the cultural articulations of diaspora in the metropolis as secondary, inauthentic." But the phrase, turned into a question, could also serve as a cautionary interrogation of the project of this book. The Black Arts Movement in

Britain—a case of mistaken identity? Perhaps yes, if to take the incredible variety of work gathered under the sign of such a movement is to neglect the artistic qualities of the work itself and treat it as only so much sociological evidence. Yes again, if it is to ghettoize, stereotype, or categorize the artists who produced that work in ways they would reject. And yes, yet again, if it is to confer a nostalgic coherence and authenticity on a moment that is inevitably more various, less unitary, and less easily contained than a lazy historiographic thought would like to admit. But also, no. Taking such a movement *as a whole* invariably risks a set of critical mistakes, but to refuse the risk of mistake—to surrender history purely to the skepticism of the nominalist impulse—is to ignore the extraordinary history of collective, collaborative thought and work to which the following pages testify. And it is also to abandon the very possibility of any politics but the politics of solipsism. To “take” a Black British Arts Movement as something worth knowing, to “take” the moment of the 1980s as in many ways “critical,” may be to risk any number of mistakes, but mistakes themselves are often our best chance for a better, more informed, less uniform “take” on history. To venture a take, to make a mistake, to take back or retake what has been (mis)taken—surely this is one of the collective impulses behind so much of the work considered here. The invitation of this volume (to its readers as to its contributors), like the invitation from Stuart Hall to which it in part responds, is to take that impulse on.

Notes

1. Stuart Hall, keynote address, “The Living Archive” conference, Tate Gallery, London, 1997; transcript held at Aavaa.
2. UK/US Photography Exchange, curated by Kellie Jones, Jamaica Arts Center, New York, 1989, and Camerawork, London, 1989. Artists: Dawoud Bey, Charles Biasiny-Rivera, Mikki Ferrill/Ingrid Pollard, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, and Maxine Walker. Coco Fusco, *Young, British and Black: A Monograph on the Work of Sankofa Film/Video Collective and Black Audio Film Collective* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls and the Contemporary Art Center, 1988). Disputed Identities: US/UK, curated by Rupert Jenkins and Chris Johnson, SF Camerawork, San Francisco, 1990. Artists: David A. Bailey, Sutapa Biswas, Lyle Ashton Harris, Roshini Kempadoo, James Luna, Yong Soon Min, Ingrid Pollard, Vincent Stokes, Diane Tani, and Carrie Mae Weems.
3. *Made in Asia?*, curated by Randi Reiner and Phil Tinari, Duke University Museum of Art, Durham, N.C., 2001.
4. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).