Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain

by Eddie Chambers

New York: Rodopi, 2012. 299 pp., 22 color photographs, bibliography, index. $98.00 cloth.

reviewed by Olubukola A. Gbadegesin

In the years after World War II, waves of immigrants from all over the British Empire flooded into the United Kingdom in response to labor shortages during a massive national rebuilding campaign. Even before this mass incursion, the country had an incredibly fraught relationship with immigrants of non-European persuasion, which was exacerbated further as evident in the staggering increase in racial violence against Afro-Asian populations over the subsequent decades. The government enacted a series of legislations that significantly steered the influx of specific immigrant groups (read: Afro-Asian) into the country by the mid-1970s. However, the issue of racial inequality and prejudice in the increasing multiracial, multiethnic country was only minimally addressed. These lop-sided policies continued well into the Thatcher era and persist in more nuanced forms even today. In Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists, Eddie Chambers traces the legacies of this troubled history as it relates to the work, receptions, and critiques of black artists in the UK from the 1980s into the present.

In a chronological narrative, Chambers begins by considering the activists, discourses, and large-scale exhibitions that defined the 1980s as a period of black artistic production and promise in UK, though he clarifies earlier that his primary concern is England. He focuses on the dialogues sparked by two large group exhibitions—“Into the Open: New Paintings Prints and Sculptures by Contemporary Black Artists” (1984) and “From Two Worlds” (1986)—which, as Chambers argues, ostensibly granted greater visibility to black artists, while simultaneously limiting them to racially themed survey shows. Things Done Change criticizes the politics of a gallery system that, by turns, ignored, ghettoized, and selectively embraced black artists, while restricting their access to mainstream exhibition spaces. The text further argues that the “institutional embrace” and liberal state sponsorship of young black artists in the last two decades have been largely motivated by crass political expediencies and the racial ambivalences that typify these artists’ practices. In fact, Chambers argues that “celebrity artists” like Chris Ofili, Yinka Shonibare, and Steve McQueen were largely distinguished by and rewarded for the lack of sociopolitical (particularly racial) interventions in their work. The text closes with an ominous prediction that the current cohort of young black British artists may soon be overtaken by successors who may regard them just as dismissively as they had regarded their own predecessors. Things Done Change is in direct dialogue with Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain (2005), a volume edited by David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, and Sonia Boyce that emerged out of a conference by the same name. Chambers is also in conversation with authors like Gen Doy (Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Post-Modernity, 2000), Rasheed Araeen (The Third Text Reader, 2002), Kobena Mercer (Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies, 1994), and Kwesi Owusu (Struggle for Black Arts in Britain: What Can We Consider Better than Freedom, 1986, and Black British Culture & Society, 1999), who are all concerned with the myriad challenges of black cultural production in the UK. The text is situated in the “wider recent history of visual arts activity in the UK” (p. xxix) and examines shifting practices and receptions of black artists in the decades since 1980, paying particular attention to the political inflected nuances of these interactions. Things Done Change revisits the curatorial practices, art criticisms, and legacies at work in shows like “Into the Open” and “From Two Worlds” as well as “Double Vision: An Exhibition of Contemporary Afro-Caribbean Art” (1986), “The Thin Black Line” (1986), and “The Essential Black Art” (1988). For its source material, the text relies on the immediacy of catalogue materials, exhibition proposals, newsprint, and other popular media—where many of the prevailing professional and lay impressions about contemporary artistic production are formulated and circulated—to corroborate his claims regarding the racial prejudices that circumscribed the practices of black artists. The text frequently executes close critiques of the practices and (apolitical) positions of specific artists who represent the particular period or phenomena under consideration.

Things Done Change protests that the 1980s have been overly canonized as the pinnacle of black artistic production in England; however, the text frequently and admiringly refers to this period as one of more substantive and critical artistic production than its successors. In fact, the entire text is inflected with impassioned tones that often drift into the realm of advocacy, lending the text an engaging but noticeably subjective voice. In truth, Chambers’ assessments are often reasoned enough without the “between the lines” readings that he often uses to shed light on the intentions behind various statements. In his analysis of this period, Chambers does make a key point that space like the Black-Art Gallery emerged out of necessity, providing some exposure to black artists in absence of any major institutional interest in their work. And when institutional interest was finally shown, it was channeled through large group shows that followed a “separatist” model, which sought out artists based on their racial identity rather than an analytic and unbiased investigation of their work. Moreover, these large group shows did not result in programmatic shifts in gallery/museums schedules nor did they reflect a more substantively integrative change in policy within these institutions. To this point, Chambers suggests that the seemingly meteoric success of young black artists is less attributable to institutional receptivity of their talents and more to pragmatic calculations by powerful interests, like the Tate Modern, the New Labor Party, etc. With this and other provocative claims, the text directly identifies the racialized fractures within mainstream contemporary art networks in the UK.

While the text is accessible and refreshingly clear, its arguments are often redundant. Perhaps this repetition is due to the uneven use of footnotes. For example, a somewhat unsatisfying aside explaining the title of the text was slipped into an early footnote, while tan-
gential remarks that would be better served as footnotes find their way into the main text. Significant editing lapses are distracting but admittedly, not enough to derail the otherwise coherent and impassioned argument. Even with its limitations, *Things Done Change* is an important work that lends a unique methodology and well-deserved analysis to a rarely examined trajectory of the recent black artistic practices in England.

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**book review**

*Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life* edited by Okwui Enwezor and Rory Bester

New York: Prestel, 2013. 543 pp.; 100 color, 500 b/w photographs. $75.00 cloth

reviewed by Paul Von Blum

Some images in the history of documentary photography transcend their times, becoming universal symbols that simultaneously encourage viewer empathy and political resistance. Dorothea Lange’s haunting *Migrant Mother*, Robert Capa’s stark Loyalist soldier at the moment of death in the Spanish Civil War, and Nick Ut’s shocking nine-year-old Vietnamese girl running naked after being napalm-burned are among many in this category. Likewise, the long struggle against apartheid in South Africa from 1948 to 1994 generated some equally compelling photographs that have become iconic masterpieces in the history of the genre. Among hundreds of others, Jurgen Schadeberg’s portrait of a smiling Nelson Mandela at his treason trial in 1958, Peter Magubane’s chilling image of caskets following the Sharpville massacre in 1960, and Sam Ndzima’s horrifying picture of the murdered 12-year-old Hector Peterson during the Soweto rebellion on June 16, 1976, are classic works of modern photographic art.

Mandela’s death on December 5, 2013, and the extensive grief of the world’s leaders and millions of ordinary persons of all races again brought South Africa into international consciousness. The appearance of this monumental history of photography documenting the rise and fall of apartheid comes at a propitious time and makes a stellar contribution to contemporary history and art history alike. Coeditors Enwezor and Bester have compiled an astonishing array of photographs and essays that document the turbulent, violent, but ultimately inspiring transformation of South Africa from an outlaw racist nation to a multiracial democracy following the end of apartheid and the election of Nelson Mandela as the first black president in 1994.

The chief feature of this large volume is its magnificent collection of photographs spanning the apartheid and post-apartheid years. The book is one of the most stunning collections of South African photography ever assembled. It includes images from some of the most accomplished and renowned figures in South African photographic history. These are photographers whose combination of personal courage in the face of brutal governmental repression and persecution and extraordinary technical skills have elevated them to the front rank of world contemporary photographic artistry. Many of them took serious risks in getting their shots, and some suffered imprisonment and exile, making their achievements all the more remarkable. Among others, the book includes numerous works of Peter Magubane, Jurgen Schadeberg, David Goldblatt, Bob Gosani, Sam Ndzima, Alf Kumalo, Eli Weinberg, Ernest Cole, and many others.

The volume is organized both chronologically and thematically, making it especially useful for readers seeking to learn about recent South African history or to augment their knowledge with vivid and dramatic visual imagery. Some of the most dramatic works record the grotesque repression of the apartheid era. Cole’s classic images of the daily humiliations of life for the African majority, required under the brutal apartheid laws, are especially noteworthy. So too are David Goldblatt’s acclaimed photographs of exhausted black workers commuting long distances to work for paltry wages under degrading conditions. These efforts complement Magubane’s, Ndzima’s, Weinberg’s and several others’ photographs of the merciless brutality of the white racist police and military.

*Rise and Fall of Apartheid* also deals extensively with the long and heroic resistance struggle, from the Defiance Campaign from 1948 to 1959 to the Soweto rebellion of 1976—the spark that signified the beginning of the end of apartheid even while Nelson Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island. There are also many other notable photographs of rebellion by blacks, Indians, and white supporters, including the women of the Black Sash and university students throughout the country. Fearless photographers covered these courageous events and disseminated their works to domestic and international audiences. Photographs of the historic Treason Trial and the Freedom Charter have likewise made powerful contributions to twentieth century documentary photography. Above all, these collective images reveal how militant protest grew over the decades, ultimately becoming a force that demanded the sympathetic attention and action of the international community.

Some of the most engaging works in this book reflect the extraordinary dignity and vibrancy of black life in South Africa under appalling conditions. Among the most powerful examples are from *Drum Magazine*, the chief journalistic outlet for African photographers during the 1950s. *Drum* employed some of the major black photographers, like Magubane, Gosani, and Kumalo, and sympathetic white artists, like Schadeberg and others. *Drum* expressed the cultural renaissance of black South Africans of the time, especially the musical and dance expressions of the black majority. *Drum* also produced trenchant investigative reporting accompanied by strong documentary photography. One of its classic images was Bob Gosani’s 1957 portrait of Nelson Mandela sparring with star boxer Jerry Moloi, an image widely disseminated during the celebrations in the immediate aftermath of Mandela’s death.

Several other themes in this book offer readers an intriguing opportunity to learn more fully about the disconcerting realities of life under apartheid. One especially insidious way the regime attempted to legitimize apartheid was the early 1960s creation of the “Bantu Stands,” ostensibly independent homelands that actually deprived black South Africans of their citizenship. The white government established Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Ciskei, and Venda as “independent” nations. No nation except the South