

Nottingham  
Contemporary

# The Place Is Here

The 1980s – A group exhibition  
of works and archives by more  
than 30 artists

4 February – 30 April 2017





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The starting-point for this exhibition is a pivotal decade for British culture and politics: the 1980s. Spanning painting, sculpture, photography, film and archives, The Place Is Here brings together a wide range of works by more than 30 artists and collectives. The questions they ask – about identity, representation and what culture is for – remain vital today.

In 1982, a group of artists and thinkers met in Wolverhampton at the the First National Black Art Convention, to discuss the “form, future and function of Black Art”. Two years later, the second “working convention” took place here in Nottingham. What constitutes “black art”, or the “Black Arts Movement” was, and continues to be, heavily contested.

This exhibition traces some of the urgent conversations that were taking place between black artists, writers and thinkers during the 80s. Against a backdrop of civil unrest and divisive national politics, they were exploring their relationship to Britain’s colonial past as well as to art history. Many artists were looking to the Civil Rights movement in America, Black feminism, Pan-Africanism, the struggle over apartheid, and the emergent fields of postcolonial and cultural studies.

The Place Is Here does not present a chronological survey. Instead, it is conceived as a kind of montage. For many of these artists, montage allowed for identities, histories and narratives to be dismantled and reconfigured according to new terms. The exhibition assembles different positions, voices and media to present a shifting portrait of a decade while refusing to pin it down. The presentation is structured around four overlapping groupings, each of which is titled after a work on display: Signs of Empire; We Will Be; The People’s Account; and Convenience Not Love.

#### Artists include:

John Akomfrah, Rasheed Araeen, Martina Attille, David A. Bailey, Sutapa Biswas, Zarina Bhimji, Black Audio Film Collective, Sonia Boyce, Vanley Burke, Chila Kumari Burman, Ceddo Film and Video Workshop, Eddie Chambers, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Joy Gregory, Sunil Gupta, Mona Hatoum, Lubaina Himid, Gavin Jantjes, Claudette Johnson, Isaac Julien, Dave Lewis, Mowbray Odonkor, Pratibha Parmar, Maybelle Peters, Keith Piper, Ingrid Pollard, Donald Rodney, Veronica Ryan, Marlene Smith, Maud Sulter.

#### Archives:

Blk Art Group Research Project; African-Caribbean, Asian & African Art in Britain Archive (Chelsea College of Arts Library, University of the Arts); The June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive (including films by Imruh Bakari, Ceddo, Amani Naphtali and Maybelle Peters); Making Histories Visible Archive (Centre of Contemporary Art at the University of Central Lancashire); The Stuart Hall Library, Iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts), London.

The Place Is Here is curated by Nick Aikens and Sam Thorne, with Nicola Guy. The exhibition is an expanded version of a presentation Aikens curated at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, in 2016, titled Thinking Back: A Montage of Black Art in Britain. Archival displays are curated in collaboration with Vanley Burke, June Givanni, Lubaina Himid, Claudette Johnson, Keith Piper, and Marlene Smith.

*The Curators would like to thank Vanley Burke, Deborah Cherry, Charles Esche, Annie Fletcher, June Givanni, Paul Goodwin, Claudette Johnson, Lubaina Himid, Amna Malik, Keith Piper, Marlene Smith and Grant Watson, as well as all the artists and lenders.*

#### Selected Quotes

*“It is the main function of the British Art Establishment, particularly its official bodies, to support, encourage and thus promote the art activity of its people. The question now is who does it actually consider its people. The answer to this of course would be the British people. But this does not of course answer everything, because the crucial part of the whole question is: what are the various components that make up British society?”*

Rasheed Araeen, ‘Notes Towards a Black Manifesto’ (1977)

*“The group believes that Black Art – which is what they call their art – must respond to the realities of the local, national and international Black communities. It must focus its attention on the elements which characterise [...] the existence of Black people. In doing so, they believe that Black Art can make a vital contribution to a unifying Black culture which, in turn, develops the political thinking of Black people.”*

Press release for the exhibition ‘Black Art An’ Done’, Wolverhampton Art Gallery (1981)

*“Our methods vary individually from satire to storytelling, from timely vengeance to careful analysis, from calls to arms to the smashing of stereotypes. We are claiming what is ours and making ourselves visible [...] We are here to stay.”*

Lubaina Himid, exhibition foreword for ‘The Thin Black Line’, ICA, London (1985)

*“I would say much of the work is different because we are presented with the problems of forging, or one could say, synthesising the varying elements of identity – not only in terms of artistic language but also because we have to address ourselves to a historical context within a politicised community.”*

Sonia Boyce, interview with John Roberts, Third Text, issue 1 (1987)

*“The term ‘black’ is used ‘as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain’, which ‘came to provide the category of a new politics of resistance, among groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions, and ethnic identities.’ It refers to a kind of ‘cultural politics designed to challenge, resist, and, where possible, transform the dominant regimes of representation.”*

Stuart Hall, ‘New Ethnicities’ (1988)

*“The recurrence of collage, montage and bricolage as organizing aesthetic principles in black visual arts in Britain can be seen to involve similar formal and aesthetic strategies of hybridity that critically appropriate and rearticulate given signifying material in producing new representational strategies.”*

Kobena Mercer, Welcome to the Jungle (1994)

*“The violent rupture enacted by certain works of British Black Art is above all linked to their harsh criticism of the models proposed by art schools in the 1970s–1980s and by extension the canons of art history they support.”*

Sophie Orlando, British Black Art (2016)

*“The 1980s [...] remain for us a difficult decade. They seem to be presented as the source of a fully formed and uncontested narrative package [...] Much less common is a presentation of the 1980s as a historical space that has yet to be fully narrativised and appraised by drawing on the multiple remembrances of those who were there and lived the decade. Particularly disturbing for me is the easy and profoundly unreflective use of two grand narrative terms: black art and the Black Arts Movement.”*

Keith Piper, from Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain (2005)

*“Being written out of history can happen to you. There is no safety in collusion with those who want to suppress our art and suppress our voices. They will turn their weapons on you and who will be there to help you if your contemporaries no longer exist?”*

Maud Sulter, in Feminist Art News (1988)

*“Once we have recognised that there are many forms of black representation – all of which have their weaknesses, ideological limits and strengths – then we can also recognise that there can’t be any one right moment, genre or discourse.”*

Stuart Hall and David A. Bailey, from Ten:8 magazine (1992)

*“The work of contemporary black artists will be seen to be derived from a ‘double consciousness’ which not only affirms the interdependency of the histories of black peoples and Western civilization, but also questions the precepts of Western historiography, that is the ordering of history in terms of the privileged concepts of tradition, evolution, sources, and origin.”*

Gilane Tawadros, ‘Beyond the Boundary: The Work of Three Black Women Artists in Britain’ (1996)

*“The word ‘radical’ carries with it connotations of rootedness [...] which have once again become highly significant for British political culture. ‘Race’ must be retained as an analytic category not because it corresponds to any biological or epistemological absolutes, but because it refers investigation to the power that collective identities acquire by means of their roots in tradition. These identities in the forms of white racism and black resistance, are the most volatile political forces in Britain today.”*

Paul Gilroy, There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack (1987)