

**TRANSFORMATION AND DEFIANCE IN THE ART
ESTABLISHMENT: MAPPING THE EXHIBITIONS OF
THE BLK ART GROUP (1981-1983)**

by

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research is to examine the activist role of the BLK Art Group and argue that it fought against racial alienation in the Western art establishment by using exhibitions *Black Art an'done* at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 1981 and *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, which travelled through Britain from 1982-1983, as platforms to radiate their political positions throughout Britain. Using these two exhibitions as case studies, the thesis examines theories including spatial transformations from the geographical to the abstract; strategies of dissent against institutions beginning with the art school followed by the art museum; and the public reception of these activities leading to the creation of subsidiary publics. The exhibitions have been investigated in secondary literature, but have not formed the centre of detailed analyses. Therefore the thesis relies heavily on documentary material from exhibition archives. The thesis presents a detailed account of early 1980s black visual culture through exhibitions rather than individual art works due to the BLK Art Group's activist political aims. The thesis has reconsidered the trajectory of contemporary exhibition and visual culture and placed the Group at a fundamental axis of politically driven artistic practice in 1980s Britain.

For
Barbara and Kent Abraham

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INTRODUCTION

A founding member of the BLK Art Group, Eddie Chambers states: ‘I remember in late 1979 early 1980 standing on the steps of Wolverhampton Art Gallery [...] just offered an exhibition, we joked about pioneering a new form of art. Excited, happy, confident, we called it ‘Blackism.’’¹ The compelling motivation of my research is grounded in the significance of this statement, that the BLK Art Group believed to be developing and advancing a new ‘ism’. Art historical research is eminently important to document and discuss the Group’s momentous desire to found a new formal movement, therein differencing the canon of contemporary visual culture. The very instance that the Group felt to be driving a new ‘ism’ indicates not only the institutional problematic of equal representation of art created by black artists, but also the need for a new artistic movement due to the lack of an existing arena for the Group’s artistic practice. I will argue that those artists who participated in this initial exhibition, which would eventually be called *Black art an’Done*, changed not only British visual culture by announcing a new visual arts agenda informed by a critique of the racial parochialism of the British art world,² but also its reception by instigating intense debates about the meaning and definition of ‘black art’ which followed over subsequent decades.³

¹ Gilane Tawadros and Victoria Clarke (eds), ‘Black Art Now’, *Annotations 5: Run Through the Jungle: Selected Writings by Eddie Chamber*, London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1999, 59

² David Chandler (ed.), *Relocating the Remains: Keith Piper*, London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1997, 18

³ *Ibid.*, 21

Scope

The BLK Art Group emerged from the West Midlands when they publicly entered the art establishment with the exhibition, *Black art an'Done*, at the Wolverhampton Gallery in 1981 followed by the self proclaimed 'First National Black Art Convention' held at Wolverhampton Polytechnic in 1982, and worked as a collective until 1984. The Group was initially founded by artists Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, both graduates from Lanchester Polytechnic in Coventry, and Donald Rodney, while a Fine Art student at Trent Polytechnic, later followed by Claudette Johnson and Marlene Smith, all Birmingham based artists. However, the Group had a frequently evolving cache of definitive members including Ian Palmer, Dominic Dawes, Wenda Leslie and Lubaina Himid.

The thesis will reconstruct the art histories of the 1980s in Great Britain; mapping the work of the artist collective BLK Art Group that has been previously occupied a blind spot of art historical recognition. I will argue that despite the relevance of containing some of the most prolific black artists and producers active in Britain today as its members, particularly Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper, the BLK Art Group is explored nowhere in detail. My original contribution to late twentieth-century British art history is to present a detailed argument of the activist role of the BLK Art Group through their use of exhibition making as a tool to enter and therein critique art institutions. As argued by the editors of *Making Connections* in 2002, these stories need to be redeemed, remembered, and celebrated,⁴ so that never again

⁴ Ian Grosvenor, Rita McLean, and Sian Roberts (eds), *Making Connections: Birmingham Black International History*, Birmingham: Black Pasts, Birmingham Futures Group, 2002, 30

will a single story be told as though it is the only one,⁵ through recognition of alternate voices in the study of art history enabling a pluralistic, heterogeneous, and comprehensive understanding of twentieth-century visual culture.

It needs to be emphasised that the BLK Art Group was a principally black art initiative in Britain that also felt responsible for addressing the alienation of African-Caribbean, Asian, and Indian people in the contemporary art establishment. The artists of the Group fulfilled several roles: they understood themselves as cultural theorists, sociologists, anthropologists, curators, critics, art historians, academics, and amateurs.⁶ The understanding of the artists' multiple responsibilities is vital to the acknowledgement of the function of the collective as a major disseminating body of political black visual culture. The theory and practice demonstrated by the BLK Art Group through its various roles listed above were a core component in gaining visibility for black artists and their integration into recognised contemporary arts practice. All of the artists, with the exception of Donald Rodney who passed away in 1998, are still engaged and a driving force in the discussion of black art and culture through visual arts teaching in universities, curatorial work and writing, and have continued to publish, produce and exhibit extensively, particularly evident in the case of Eddie Chambers who is the lead researcher in a recently AHRC-funded archival project.⁷ This thesis will fill the void in art historical literature by exploring the

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19 from, John Berger, G. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972

⁶ Kobena Mercer, 'Iconography after Identity', David Bailey, Ian Baucom, Sonia Boyce, (eds), *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 50. Oxford English Dictionary: 'A person who is the driving force for or presiding influence over a cultural or other activity (esp. in the performing arts); a coordinator, a promoter.'

⁷ Anonymous, *Arts and Humanities Research Council, Case Study: Diaspora Artists*, <<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundedResearch/CaseStudies/Pages/DiasporaArt.aspx>>, accessed January 2010

expansive work of the artists, documenting their mission thirty years after the initial meeting on the steps of the Wolverhampton Art Gallery as an important moment in British visual culture.

Literature Review

The artists of BLK Art Group are noted in writing regarding black art and cultural studies of the late twentieth century, yet rather than focusing on discussing their participation to the artist collective during the period of the Group's practice between 1981-1984, particular emphasis is placed on the political and theoretical motivations of the artists predominantly in the work that was created after the Group had dissipated. Not only is the very existence of the BLK Art Group rarely mentioned in art historical and cultural studies texts, but also, if mentioned, it is often described as a rather minor or post-art school project, and is mentioned alongside other artist collectives of the period, including Sankofa, Black Audio Film Collective, the Asian collective Retake, HAVAC (Hounslow Asian Visual Artists Collective), and Ceddo, yet seemingly reduced to an abbreviation in a list.⁸ There is a significant lack of analysis of specific art works produced by the BLK Art Group, a considerable deficit particularly within art historical literature. Since this neglect may well lie in the lack of a comprehensive archive due to the pioneering state of the Group's activities as young, black, politically radical artists in the early 1980s, many of the galleries

⁸ Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschlüter (eds), *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Publishing: Liverpool, 2010, 193

involved in their exhibitions have not kept files, thus large amounts of the material are maintained by the artists in self initiated archival projects.⁹

There are several pre-eminently significant cultural theorists that have written extensively on the area of black British culture prior, during and after the period in which the BLK Art Group was active including Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Kobena Mercer, Gilane Tawadros, Kwesi Owusu, Leon Wainwright, Maud Sulter, Amelia Jones, Bell Hooks and Hazel Carby all of whose writing has influenced my approach to the thesis which can be broadly subsumed as postcolonial. There is a vast dissimilarity in the overall amount of published material on black culture in the UK as in the United States where there is rather an abundance of scholarship in comparison. The tremendous amount of material on twentieth-century African American culture indeed provided an unquestionable influence on the artists of the BLK Art Group,¹⁰ beginning most significantly with the Harlem Renaissance otherwise called the New Negro Movement of visual art, poetry, music and drama that began in the 1920s and 1930s in New York, the African American Civil Rights Movement which additionally gave impetus to the Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movement in New York during the 1950s and 1960s. Within the UK there are specific disciplines that have received considerable scholarship, these fields include

⁹ Archives including: Diaspora Artists, African-Caribbean, Asian and African Art in Britain Archive and African and Asian Visual Artists Archive

¹⁰ Eddie Chambers, *The Emergence and Development of Black Visual Arts Activity in England Between 1981 and 1986: Press and Public Responses. The Emergence and Development of Black Visual Arts Activity in England Between 1981 and 1986: Press and Public Responses.* inIVA archive, Goldsmiths College, University of London, London, January 1998, 351

black theology,¹¹ black literature,¹² and black music,¹³ yet black art is still rather insufficiently researched.

This review of pertinent literature in relation to twentieth-century black British art will focus on four sources of writing that offer the most critical arguments about the artists and their work in the Group. Rasheed Araeen provides the starting point by which to begin the literature review, contextualising the conceptual positions of the period in which the BLK Art Group emerged, and indicating the cultural and political ideologies that might have influenced the Group particularly in the writing published in the late 1970s and early 1980s. From the first-person viewpoint as a member of the BLK Art Group, the significant writing of Eddie Chambers is a central focus of the literature review. His literary contributions of political philosophies have been articulated in exhibition catalogues and publications, including essays published in journals such as *Third Text* and arts magazines like *Art Monthly*, as well as his remarkably insightful doctoral thesis, submitted in 1998 to Goldsmiths College, University of London. Additionally, the documentation of the conference ‘Assembling the Eighties: A Trans-Atlantic Dialogue on Afro-Asian Arts in Post-War Britain’, hosted by Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina in 2001, includes the collected papers presented at the conference from artists, curators and critics on the topic of black visual culture in the contemporary period, which will inform a review of eminent arguments on the period of 1980s in Britain. Finally, art

¹¹ See journals including: *Black Theology: An International Journal*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, bi-annual publication. *Black Theology in Britain: a journal of contextual praxis*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, bi-annual publication

¹² Prabhu S. Gupta, *Black British literature: An Annotated Bibliography*, Sydney, Oxford: Dangaroo Press, 1986.

¹³ Paul Oliver (ed.), *Black Music in Britain: Essays on the Afro-Asian Contribution to Popular Music*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990

historian Gen Doy provides a recent analysis on black British artists titled *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity*. Published in 2000, the book explores the visual culture, theory, and politics of black artists in Britain in the twentieth century from an art historical perspective by focusing arguments around black artists and their visual work. The literature review will follow a chronological discourse, commencing with influential precursory writing, then moving towards Eddie Chambers as an artist and theorist who wrote during the period and afterwards, followed by a retrospective analysis that reflects critically on the period in which the BLK Art Group existed.

The earliest major contemporaneous texts on black British visual arts practice that reflects a direct influence towards the work of the BLK Art Group is the writing of Rasheed Araeen. Within the collection of Araeen's writing titled *Making Myself Visible* published in 1984, several important issues regarding identity, exclusion, and a call for a unified opposition against the Eurocentric art establishment are brought into focus and centrally inform the review of Araeen's literature. In papers, personal letters, a black art manifesto, and correspondences from galleries and art councils, the texts provide a prime position to think about the political environment in which the BLK Art Group developed. The influence of Araeen's ideas relating to where black artists fit into the art establishment seem to be the most prolific and influential to the BLK Art Group. Araeen states in 1979: 'The internationalism of Modern Art is false and phoney, since it offers no place for the participation of non-European people in its development and evolution [...]. It is therefore imperative for me to challenge this context and search for a different direction, in order to formulate and develop a critical discourse [...]. My own work is an attempt towards the realisation of this

specific goal.¹⁴ I will argue within the thesis that these powerful beliefs were adopted by the BLK Art Group and that this ideology perhaps fuelled the Group's dedication towards critiquing, challenging and differencing the British art establishment.

Araeen's most forceful writing and perhaps most directly influential to the BLK Art Group is the essay 'Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto' published in *Black Phoenix* in 1978. Alluding to the conspicuous presence of racism in the housing sector, Araeen states: 'A DOOR WHICH IS SHUT IN OUR FACE BY THE WHITE LANDLADY IS ALSO THE DOOR WHICH OPENS TO THE ART ESTABLISHMENT.'¹⁵ To overcome this rejection from the art establishment based on ethnicity and racial difference, Araeen promoted a change of power in the art world, one that was collectively unified in opposition to Western domination and rejected the mainstream.¹⁶ However, in order to reject the mainstream and practice in separation of the art establishment, a new movement that encouraged alternate exhibition opportunities, theoretical debate, and visual communication was called for. Araeen clarifies: 'The third world artist is not seeking a position in Western art but his rightful place in the contemporary world which is being denied to him.'¹⁷ This statement is important because it indicates Araeen's the desire to fit into the canons of Western art history by proposing the creation of a new international canon, one

¹⁴ Rasheed Araeen, statement originally published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Contact: From Contemplation to Agitation*, June-August 1980, Krakow, Poland, Rasheed Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*. London: Kala Press, 1984, 5

¹⁵ Rasheed Araeen, 'Introduction', *Making Myself Visible*, London: Kala Press, 1984, 13 (Capitals cited after the original)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Rasheed Araeen, 'Preliminary notes for a BLACK MANIFESTO, Western Art v. Third World', *Making Myself Visible*, London: Kala Press, 1984, 83

that does not abide by the rules of the European art establishment. Araeen professes that there, 'MUST EMERGE AN INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT WHICH IS DIFFERENT FROM AND IN OPPOSITION TO WESTERN ART.'¹⁸ A search for alternate methods and forms for this new art movement is therefore also essential, as the work does not use the rules and traditions of European art histories of painting and sculpture, hence Araeen's switch from traditional methods of visual production from painted abstractions to performances and photo-based new media. I will argue that this manifesto was embodied and realised by the BLK Art Group, as a reflection of shared political ideologies with Araeen.

A protagonist and organising member of the BLK Art Group, Eddie Chambers, is placed at the centre of the literature review as he represents the concurrent player and retrospective reporter of the period. Chambers has written substantially on black British contemporary visual culture as an academic art historian holding a PhD in the History of Art, cultural theorist, and artist. Commencing with a description of the extent to which Chambers has strengthened the discourse of black visual culture, I will move into a more general account of Chambers' attitudes towards the art establishment and issues relating to black art in particular, followed by a focus of writing involving the BLK Art Group and its exhibitions.

Chambers has made several contributions to the access and study of black British art, including the establishment of the 'African and Asian Visual Artists' Archive' in 1989, a black artists' research and reference facility that he coordinated until 1992,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 94 (Capitals cited after the original)

now situated at the University of East London, School of Art and Visual Theory, as well as a recent AHRC-funded archival online project, 'Diaspora-Artists.net'.

Chambers and his activity in the BLK Art Group is therefore not only the focus of my research, but his archives form an important source for my research. These archives will provide imperative primary sources, including drafts, articles, catalogues, correspondences, and sketchbooks that were maintained by Chambers. Research into Chambers' archival material presents an opportunity to re-evaluate British art history and the integral role of diasporic art cultures, which has eminent ramifications to how British artistic heritages are viewed today.¹⁹

Apart from the archival material, Chambers published essays and reviews for several art journals providing a rich source for studying the BLK Art Group. The collection of his papers published as *Run Through the Jungle* in February 1999,²⁰ includes articles from the 1980s and 1990s addressing imperative issues in his visual, curatorial, and scholarly work and are divided into thematic chapters: institutional and curatorial practice, black art, and black politics. This collection of writing highlights Chambers' opinions circling the challenge and lack of representation of black people from the mainstream art establishment and within the history of art. Chambers states: 'But white people are not the only ones that can curate exhibitions, organise talks or type letters, any more than Black people aren't the only ones who can make frothy cappuccinos or cut sandwiches. But if we accept this, how can we then account for the continued conspicuous exclusion/absence of Black people from

¹⁹ Anonymous, *Arts and Humanities Research Council, Case Study: Diaspora Artists*, <<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundedResearch/CaseStudies/Pages/DiasporaArt.aspx>>, accessed January 2010

²⁰ Eddie Chambers, 'Eddie Chambers Biography', *Eddie Chambers*, <<http://www.eddiechambers.com/#>> accessed January 2010

jobs in the visual arts.’²¹ The proclamation that black artists were rejected from participating in the art institution reflects Chambers’ and the wider BLK Art Group’s belief that the art world hierarchy based on race and gender should be challenged and opposed. Chambers consequently asserts that there is a definite unfairness in the gallery sector: ‘All sorts of people like art, all sorts of people make art. And all sorts of people want to be involved in the process by which art interfaces with the public. When will galleries realise this, accept this and above all, do something about it?’²² This exclusivity from the art establishment is a ramification of the exclusion of black people from the canons of Western art history as equals rather than embodiments of the history of colonialism that heighten constructions of the ‘other’. This cyclic trajectory of exclusion from one element of the art establishment to another, are inherently linked; there needs to be a break within this system. I will argue that the BLK Art Group provided this most important puncture in the establishment by looking at the Group’s specific expressions of activist actions in visual art through exhibitions.

Eddie Chambers’ most substantial recent writing would be his doctoral thesis in History of Art awarded by the Goldsmiths College, University of London, in 1998 for his research on ‘Black Visual Arts Activity in England Between 1981 and 1986: Press and Public Responses’. Chambers’ states:

The aim of this research is to examine the emergence and the development of visual arts practice amongst the ‘second generation’ of Black people in England [...]. The research pays particular attention to

²¹ Eddie Chambers, ‘Whitewash’, Tawadros, Gilane and Victoria Clarke (eds), *Annotations 5: Run Through the Jungle: Selected Writings by Eddie Chambers*, London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1999, 13 (Capitals cited after the original)

²² *Ibid.*, 15

the role played by the press and media in shaping the curatorial agendas of art galleries within England, in relation to Black artists, during the period of the study - that is, 1981 to 1986, the years identified within the research as marking the collective eclipse of this new generation of Black artists in England.²³

Chambers' thesis is imperative to this research as it documents a first-person account as an active artist of the period, and subsequent reporter and critic of the activities of black British art of 1980s. His research offers an indication of the varying opinions under which the BLK Art Group was practising, but does not describe in any detail the work of the Group, excluding also substantial visual analysis of art works. A very valuable account of the environment surrounding exhibitions in the early 1980s is presented in chapter four titled, 'The First Exhibitions, the Earliest Responses', as they were predominately organised or included work by the BLK Art Group; which forms the central focus in my research. Since archival material from this period is sparse, this written account from Chambers himself provides a basis for my research of exhibition responses from 1981 to 1983 of the BLK Art Group. According to Chambers' thesis, *Black Art an'done* in 1981 was 'identified as the first exhibition to signal the decisive emergence of a new generation of Black artists and marked the beginning of a decade of visibility and activity for Black Artists in Britain.'²⁴ However, despite this significant comment that the exhibition altered the course of contemporaneous visual culture in Britain, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis of this exhibition, which in fact enhances the reasoning by which further research of the exhibition, as the vehicle that drove the collective's mandate forward, is so crucial.

²³ Chambers, *Black Visual Arts Activity in England*, 5 (Capitals cited after the original)

²⁴ Chambers, *Black Visual Arts Activity in England*, 105 (Capitals cited after the original)

Documentation of the conference ‘Assembling the Eighties: A Trans-Atlantic Dialogue on Afro-Asian Arts in Post-War Britain’ in 2001 provides a retrospective discussion about contemporary black visual culture since the BLK Art Group. The conference brought together Stuart Hall, Rasheed Araeen, Kobena Mercer, Leon Wainwright, as well as members of the BLK Art Group and its contemporaries including Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers, Sonia Boyce, Lubaina Himid, and Supta Biswas. The conference papers, which were subsequently collected and published in 2005, in a text titled *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, discuss the work of black artists in Britain in the 1980s in relation to the socio-political environment of Britain at the time. The texts focus on the 1980s in Britain as a significant moment in the History of Art, worthy of detailed articulation as evidenced through the international symposium and publication. The major discourse of the period, and of the papers presented, circle the notion and definition of a black aesthetic, also questioned by Stuart Hall at the conference: ‘Black because the artist is black? Or because they are about a black experience? Or because they deploy a black visual language? And if so, of what does this black aesthetic consist?’²⁵ Through a visual and exhibition based analysis of the work created by the BLK Art Group I intend to offer responses to these still enduring concerns specifically involving the ways in which race and identity were articulated through the exhibitions as the hub of the artists’ practice.

²⁵ David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce, ‘Shades of Black: Assembling the 1980s’, David Bailey, Ian Baucom, Sonia Boyce (eds), *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, xvii (Capitals cited after the original)

The BLK Art Group and its significant projects are mentioned and alluded to throughout the papers included in this publication. Araeen discusses the early work of Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper as pioneering the black arts movement in the UK, he states: ‘This partnership was extremely important in transforming the work of two individual practitioners into an artists movement [...] they issued joint statements and organised exhibitions and conferences.’²⁶ Of course the partnership that Araeen is not stating, but loosely describing, was the collective activity of the BLK Art Group. Araeen continues to describe his experience with this work, as ‘overwhelmed by its visual impact.’²⁷ The BLK Art Group’s progressive work ‘disrupted the established order of the avant-garde based on white genealogy, and offered a reconstruction of the history of modern art.’²⁸ Such inspired discussion of the work of the BLK Art Group and its achievements promotes the impetus towards research into the practice of the Group from its earliest manifestations to its last, so that to properly document the achievements of these artists.

The most recent art historical book in the field of black British art is Gen Doy’s *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity* published in 2000. Doy addresses the more overriding issues concerning black art, suggesting methodological frameworks one might use to approach black British visual culture. Doy states that the postcolonial themes of hybridity, fluidity, ambiguity, and in-betweenness are perhaps

²⁶ Rasheed Araeen, ‘The Success and the Failure of the Black Arts Movement’, David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, Sonia Boyce (eds), *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 22

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Araeen, *Shades of Black*, 28

more clearly articulated in visual culture than in written form.²⁹ Presenting black visual culture as a discourse of hybridity in ethnicity and identities,³⁰ Doy substantiates the judgment that these central themes of postcolonialism are thoroughly embedded in black visual art practice, demonstrating this through theoretical discussions and analyses of visual imagery. Outlining key texts, theorists, accomplishments, and limitations of black visual culture, Doy presents a substantial ground by which to situate black British art within and also outside of cultural frameworks, specifically modernity and postmodernity.

Being undoubtedly such a seminal contribution to the topic, it may come as a surprise that there is no detailed mention of the BLK Art Group in Doy's book. Perhaps this is because the book tends to focus on relationships between specific works of art and thematic issues in black art including fetishism and objectification of black bodies, rather than focusing on institutional and exhibition issues. Doy does, however, discuss members of the BLK Art Group including Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, and Eddie Chambers, and evaluates the work of Piper as 'one of Britain's leading younger artists, and a pioneer of the contemporary Black art movement.'³¹ Quite importantly Doy presents analyses of the work of these artists as well as presents reasoning of the artist's media choices. Chambers and Araeen have agreed that artists who continue to make work in the traditional form of painting and sculpture may be seen as not only old-fashioned, but conforming to the traditions of the Western art establishment. As I have previously noted, that by integrating new media, these artists

²⁹ Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers & Co. Ltd., 2000, 234

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 242

³¹ *Ibid.*, 82 (Capitals cited after the original)

can be seen as more progressive, rejecting the preconceived format of visual production. However, as I will later demonstrate, this position of aligning media to the rejection of Western art history is problematic.

Doy frequently makes reference to Araeen's *The Other Story*, and its significance to black visual culture. She states: 'One of the important things accomplished by *The Other Story* was that it made clear that for many years, black artists have made significant, though often unacknowledged, contributions to modernist art.'³²

However, I will argue that this acknowledgement of black art happened earlier in smaller scale exhibitions, albeit without the same amount of publicity as the Hayward Gallery exhibition. Certainly, black artists have been ignored in the histories of art, and when the end of modernism approached, it was welcomed as a liberating and empowering move forward.³³ Referring to a major problem for black artists, Doy states:

Modernism can be seen as a white creation, utilising black culture for its own ends, but never fully acknowledging black, Asian, or Oceanic cultures on their own terms. Should black painters attempt to avoid modernist painting and turn to figurative representation of black experiences, engage critically with modernism, or paint modernist paintings on the existing terms of modernist art?³⁴

This statement reflects Araeen's and the BLK Art Group's work as visual artists, through media decisions and issues regarding the identity of the black artist. This straddles the problematic dichotomy between the artist who also happens to be

³² *Ibid.*, 24

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 39

black,³⁵ and the black artist that accepts and represents a fundamentally black identity, an issue that Chambers emphatically describes in his writing. However, this dichotomy is quite contentious since there has yet to be a thoroughly described definition of black art and its limitations. The argument revolves around the division which at one end upholds the notion that black art must be political by taking account of being black, in opposition to the idea that the producer is secondary therein disregarding who is speaking, an inherently Barthesian and Foucauldian authorial argument. This hugely important argument will be further examined particularly in the arena of the BLK Art Group's exhibitions as they aimed to represent publics and advocated a public voice by maintaining authorial power.

The issue of authorship remains centrally important, since these artists were making work based on the black experience and about black culture, the voice of the author is prominent. Doy infers: 'the consideration of authorial statements is necessary and useful. I feel this is a particularly important point with respect to black artists who have been silenced and marginalised in the past.'³⁶ Arising from the alienation of their cultural voices, I will argue that these black artists rejected silencing by advocating an arena by which to difference visual and exhibition cultures in Britain. Consequently, Doy argues against the death of the author, which is also in line with fact that the BLK Art Group felt they needed to assert themselves as Master Narrators of their own stories. Doy concludes: 'If we do not listen to the voices of the creators of black culture, attempting to understand why and how they represent certain things,

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 45
³⁶ *Ibid.*, 48

then we also play a part in suppressing active subjects from history and culture.’³⁷ I will examine in later chapters if and how the Group’s approach to authorship and representation perhaps presents a collapse of the dichotomy of the individual and the collective, as seemingly holding equal importance during the years of the Group’s prominence. The Group was a collective that bound together the philosophical and artistic concerns of its members speaking collectively through exhibitions, yet whether each member remained an individual in the process still requires some investigation. Theorising the collective voice of the BLK Art Group, will lead to comprehending the problematisation of the Group’s collective identity and authorship, issues that perhaps led to the dissipation of the collective in 1984.

Methodologies

The BLK Art Group inherently profess a central argument of postcolonialism, which is to reject the Eurocentric views of history that marginalise colonised countries and peoples as the ‘other’.³⁸ The Eurocentric domination of the art establishment is enabled by the attitude of the West towards other non-Western cultures as inadequate in the intellectual pursuits of visual creation; this is inextricably linked with the history of colonialism and Primitivism.³⁹ According to Stuart Hall, postcolonialism presents a decentred rewriting of earlier, nation-centred imperial grand narratives.⁴⁰ The BLK Art Group does not necessarily embody a re-writing of the narrative of the history of art in the twentieth century, because this would mean a conformation to the

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 205 (Capitals cited after the original)

³⁹ Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*, 11

⁴⁰ Stuart Hall, ‘When Was ‘The Post-Colonial’? Thinking At The Limit’, Iain Chambers, Lidia Curti (eds), *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies. Divided Horizons*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, 247 (Capitals cited after the original)

traditions in which the history of art is articulated. Rather, the BLK Art Group presents a new course of visual culture, one that is not concerned with re-writing an already flawed narrative, but one that supersedes it and perhaps runs concurrently to it. The thesis will pursue the idea that the members of the BLK attempt to eradicate the white mask, revealing their black skin through exhibition based strategies and subject matters embedded throughout their visual and textual work.⁴¹ It needs to be emphasised that the significance of this revealing of black skin is for the artists a symbol of a rejection of modernism and the West's monopoly of the art establishment and its institutions. However, the very fact that the Group implemented Western traditions of exhibition, public display, and the instigation of a new 'ism', which is a momentous emblem of modernism, indicates how problematic it is to get rid of the 'white mask.'

The specific methodologies that are used as theoretical frameworks within each chapter include cultural theory and philosophy. These approaches include the articulation of space driven by Henri Lefevbre's contributions to thinking about how spaces are produced, as well as theories of institutional critique as articulated in the 1970s, that question how the art establishment, the canon and the art institution can be challenged using subversive methods of language and exhibition strategies. The writing of Jürgen Habermas on the public sphere will frame the postulation about the Group's goals as a means to connect to, affect, represent and inspire others. This idea will be posed in opposition to a theorisation of counter-publics, that in the creation and development of another public, one that is opposed or runs alongside central or

⁴¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, London: Pluto Press, 1986

majority publics, a counter-public is born. These methods were selected to substantiate the central arguments of each of the chapters, which include strategies of critique and opposition, physical and conceptually produced spaces and the central goal of reaching and influencing viewing publics. Using these methods as frameworks in which to situate and theorise the Group's work allows for a discussion that is perhaps more experimental and original rather than focusing solely on the racial difference in a postcolonial argument. The exhibition will be treated as a means of transforming and defying the art establishment, an act which inherently was driven and fuelled by a decision to reject a subordinate position, by presenting art work in cultural institutions as political statements.

The overriding approach of research and framing of the thesis is a focus on the exhibition practice of the BLK Art Group, where the display and programming of the exhibition provides the domain in which their work was disseminated and brought into public and institutional awareness. Therefore less attention is given to the exhibited works as such. To approach the work of the BLK Art Group through the praxis of exhibition creation and analysis is a rather unconventional method, where just as postcolonial writing and theory have informed the ways in which the questions that transpose the thesis have been articulated, exhibition based theory including the ritual, communicative performances, and canon creation are equally relevant theories in which to situate and approach the Group's work from an art historical perspective of display. By using the exhibitions as the nuclei of analysis, I am developing an art historical method that is currently advancing in contemporary academic research. The publication *Exhibition Histories* published by Afterall Books that launched in October 2010, explores in detail various exhibitions since 1950 that have shaped the

progression of the history of art. It is a unique publication as it promotes research that is shaped by exhibitions by providing attention to the ways in which art works were brought to public attention through the exhibition. Using the exhibition as the object of examination also allows for a slightly peripheral and perhaps more critical look at the Group's activities, where not only is their production of visual art analysed and contextualised but so is their writing in exhibition literature, language used in texts and work titles, exhibition programming, reception of publics and interaction with institutions, all taken into consideration in order to propose a more full account of their activities as true political performances in an exhibition format.

It is important to note at this point that throughout the thesis I will use the correct sentence case for the word black, that is spelling it with a lower case b. Throughout Eddie Chambers' writing for instance, the word black and the title black art are often capitalised, which is seemingly in order to politicise and mark it with equivalent importance to a nationality like British or as an artistic movement, like for instance the YBA (Young British Artists) label. Gen Doy has described in detail reasons for not capitalising black. Doy sites a passage written by Gilane Tawadros, the director of inIVA (Institute of International Visual Art), from the exhibition catalogue to *Mirage*, that 'the general editorial position has been to use the term 'black' (with a lower case b) as referring to peoples of African, Asian, South East Asian, Latino (Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban) or Native American descent.'⁴² Doy expands upon this statement by describing that black with an 'upper case B has tended to be used to refer to Black as a proudly chosen identity, history and culture associated with

⁴² Doy. *Black Visual Culture*, 9

African roots, distinguishing the term from a simple adjective ‘black’ describing colour.’⁴³ Throughout the thesis I too will follow the editorial decision to use black with a lower case b, for reasons that since the artists and cultural theorists that will be examined do not each align themselves with the same political attitude in terms of defining black art. The thesis will follow in Doy’s decision to capitalise black if describing the Black Art Movement for instance, but when describing the work of black artists, the word will remain in proper sentence case. Additionally, in the MA dissertation by Richard Halstead called ‘The Other Story and Institutional Visibility of Black Arts in Britain from 1980-1990’ he describes that ‘I have attempted to distance myself from both the patronising phrase ethnic arts and the use of capital letters (Black Art) suggesting that by its very nature such production has radical political ends.’⁴⁴ Although the thesis will be highly substantiated by artist’s texts as well as postcolonial theory, which at times also includes texts that capitalise the word, I will avoid the language syntax that is often used in these texts, but rather articulate these ideas in correct English sentence case in order to represent a non-aligned position.

Structure

The central argument that runs through the entire thesis questions how the curation and organisation of exhibitions can serve as a social gesture and as a platform on which to expand the Group’s political ideas about inequalities based on race in Britain as well as in the history of art and the canons that mitigate its boundaries. I

⁴³ *Ibid.* (Capitals cited after the original)

⁴⁴ Richard Halstead, *The Other Story and Institutional Visibility of Black Arts in Britain from 1980-1990*, inIVA archive, Institution unknown, London, 1990 (Capitals cited after the original)

argue that the BLK Art Group's work was innovative in that it wasn't innovative in medium, but rather it was pioneering in how the Group used conventional gallery spaces and curatorial strategies to challenge and unearth the lack of inclusion of black artists in the art establishment, an act that has not been exercised previously in the UK. That while their work heavily consisted of drawing and painting in the early 1980s, using traditional media was completely untraditional since by using relatively safe media their work would be more accepted into central institutions and given more of an opportunity to be subversive in their subject matters in visual and textual narratives. The thesis will be formed and approached by examining how the Group's visual art, written texts, exhibition programming, curation, and display strategies culminate in the exhibition and how the exhibition performed as the vehicle and body of their practice. The thesis will unpack questions regarding how the Group treated the exhibition format as a tool that slyly concealed the artist's underlying intentions about changing the state of racial indifference to the work of black artists in the art world.

Since the exhibitions form the subject of analysis where the works meet the institutions and the publics, the area of examination in each of the subsequent chapters will focus on the exhibition where theories of space, strategies implemented in the space, as well as publics and the formation of counter-publics will be articulated. In this way, a selected number of art works will be examined in a visual analysis, but images of works that were included in these early exhibitions were not kept on file in the gallery's archives, nor are very many of them described in any detail in secondary sources. Additionally, as described in the methodological introduction above, the decision to focus the analysis on the exhibition rather than

predominately historical or visual based convergence, offers a unique opportunity to bridge thinking about exhibition histories as a distinctive area of art historical inquiry. The history of exhibitions is one that lacks in comprehensive analysis; which is particularly true in the case of the BLK Art Group. With this direction of methodology and structure of analysis I hope to advance art historical examination in the area of exhibition theory as a critically significant meeting point of artistic production, curatorial articulation, textual analysis in exhibition literature and interpretive texts as well as the public reception of these activities.

The thesis will commence by looking at how exhibitions can function as political performances by positioning the Group's exhibitions as transformations of space. The chapter will outline and discuss the critical functions of the exhibition in terms of the power the exhibition has as breaking open the otherwise seemingly sealed doors of the art establishment while also entering the art canon and art history. With this in mind I will question how museums can be approached as canon creators and how exhibitions can function as canon challengers. With these questions I will utilise two of the Group's exhibitions *Black Art An' Done* and *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* as case studies in which to argue that the artists of the BLK Art Group transformed the spaces they exhibited within using strategies to critique the art establishment and its institutions. However, *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* will form main subject of the analysis in the thesis due to the amount of literature, archival material, and secondary sources on the exhibition and the featured art works. This chapter will continue into a discussion of the art school as a first encounter with the art establishment where very early on, the fundamental practices of the art world were introduced to the artists. The rejection of the ideologies presented to the artists in the art school represents the first

moment of disassembling what Stuart Hall called the ivory tower of art education. The chapter will move into an analysis of the problematic of the artist's relationship to the art establishment and where they are located in terms of inside, outside, or on the margin of its borders. The ways in which the artists rejected, questioned or critiqued the art institutions will be examined by thinking about strategies that the Group used as a means of critique including subversive language as a direct tool in which to oppose racism and very clearly state their political positions. Language is an important element of the Group's strategy of subversion; this includes the titling of the collective, the exhibitions, as well as text in the visual work and writing.

The following chapter will focus on how the BLK Art Group transformed the spaces that they exhibited within. This articulation of space will be split between physical and abstract spaces in order to open up a discussion of the philosophical rendering of space and its ability to rearrange physical limitations. This discussion will begin with the widest possible analysis of physical space that of the geographical, it will then follow into a more narrowing discussion of institutional spaces, gallery spaces, and exhibition spaces. Throughout the discussion of these various spaces, issues including the utilisation of geographical spaces as a strategy to connect to the widest possible desired publics will be posed and defended. The choice of specific institutional spaces will form a large component of the theorisation in this chapter where reasons for which the Group showed their work in regional galleries rather than alternative exhibition venues will be examined. This discussion will be followed by questioning that if the exhibition is interpreted as a medium in which to present artistic and political ideas, the elements of how publics understand the space is fundamental. Using archival material, the space of the exhibitions themselves will be analysed

including the placement of work on the walls and any interjections in the spaces by others. The chapter will close with a discussion of immaterial spaces, predominately looking at how the archive as an object challenges the limitations of geography, or physical space, and exists as remnants of these past events while simultaneously collapsing the two forms into a space that is also mnemonic, historical and virtual. In challenging the restrictions of temporality, it is important to explore how the archive can behave as an additional realm of existence that combines the physical with the conceptual.

Chapter three explores an overarching goal of the Group that is embedded in all the mission statements in the exhibition literature, which is to inspire an emerging creative black public. As this is a centrally motivating intention of the Group's activities it is important to understand how the Group sought to achieve this goal, if it was realised, and to what extent this was successful. These questions will be considered through articulating how the Group's work was brought into the public sphere by looking at how the work was made public, what allowed it to be pushed into the public and consequently how this action created an alternate public by citing individuals who viewed the exhibition and were consequently shaped and influenced by it. The chapter will outline the strategies that were taken to achieve a creation of a public by utilising popular methods of communication in the exhibition *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* that includes informing publics through exhibition programming in film, dance and verbal communication. The chapter will close by presenting a theory that by aiming to create alternate publics that are divergent from the dominant public, the Group in turn created publics, which I define as counter-publics.

Finally, the concluding chapter will commence by attending to the loose ends that were left unfinished or remaining problematic in the thesis. This examination will be followed by presenting an examination of the current discourse of political art in exhibitions. The importance of looking at contemporary political art in comparison to the BLK Art Group's political work will highlight the potential ramifications that the Group had on subsequent exhibitions and artist collectives. Since the BLK Art Group was seen as radically political and highly shocking to publics of the West Midlands, it is useful to compare their work to that of contemporary artists whose practice is seemingly equally shocking to determine what constitutes a political artistic practice. This will follow by turning to a self-reflexive approach to the research by offering further avenues of investigation and propositions of framing research by other methods, which in turn could produce dissimilar outcomes and arguments for subsequent papers on the articulation of the work of the BLK Art Group. The chapter will close by situating the Group's influence on black British visual culture and examine to what extent the artists were successful in reaching their collective goals.

CHAPTER ONE

DEFIANCE BY DIFFERENCING

‘Who speaks to and for whom and under what conditions as well as where and when the particular utterance occurs are significant questions that can be asked of any communications performance.’⁴⁵ This quotation, applied to exhibitions by Bruce Ferguson, highlights the relevance of understanding exhibitions as dialogues. If exhibitions are approached as communicative performances, as a staging of discourse in which ideas are projected through visual and textual work, it could expand the limits of how we might understand exhibitions and their capabilities as social and political platforms. Taking this assumption on board, this chapter addresses a fundamental question of who is speaking for whom, in what ways and with which words as it will indicate how the BLK Art Group was able to communicate their political stances on the state of exclusion in the art establishment. As I stated in the introduction chapter, the gallery or museum institution is a central element in the web of interlocking institutions that encompass the art establishment as a whole. Thus I propose that we imagine the exhibitions as attempts to shift the art establishment in geographical terms, originating from regional and predominately Midlands-based locations and consequently creating reverberations across Britain.

Exhibitions can be viewed as functioning like a fundamental didactic tool, one that adopts the role as mediator and enables an interface between the artist and the public where this staging of discourse may be made apparent and projected to its audiences.

⁴⁵ Bruce Ferguson, ‘Exhibition Rhetorics: Material speech and utter sense’, *Thinking about Exhibitions*, New York: Routledge, 1996, 183

The BLK Art Group proposed a critical engagement with museums and galleries through strategies that critiqued the art establishment for the racism and exclusion that dominated its histories. Through exhibitions, the Group aimed to subvert institutional infrastructures, by exhibiting themselves.⁴⁶ To describe that the artists had exhibited themselves as a collective representative of a black artistic public, defines the action of entering the art institution as both a black subject and object, in a space that had never displayed work of such direct and racially political subject matter. The work was shaped with autobiographical references and citations of current social activity in Britain including incidents of race riots and murders born of racism, referencing the time of contemporary situations in the country by pointing directly at the inequalities, prejudices and discrimination that had been so emphatically experienced throughout Britain. The exhibitions of the BLK Art Group functioned as the medium by which the artist's political ideas were presented and deliberated, and therefore served as a forum on which to object to the isolation and erasure where certain stories, like these, were written out of art historical accounts.

The exhibitions examined in the following will explore the most significant exhibitions of the BLK Art Group: *Black Art an' Done* in 1981, followed by *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* that travelled in Britain during 1982 and 1983. These exhibitions have not found much recognition in art historical literature so far. Eddie Chambers PhD thesis outlines the exhibitions of the Group, particularly in chapter four titled 'The First Exhibitions, the Earliest Responses' where the *Black Art an' Done* and *The*

⁴⁶ Clémentine Deliss, 'Returning the Curve: africa95, Tenq, and "Seven Stories"', *African Arts*, Vol. 29, No. 3, Special Issue: africa95, 1996, Los Angeles: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center, 36-47

Pan-Afrikan Connection are described. Chambers outlines background descriptions of the exhibitions, including the impetus of their development and the controversial issues and differences regarding press responses from black and white critics. Chambers describes the public responses as outlined in the cultural magazines *Frontline*, the *Jamaican Weekly Gleaner*, *Time Out* and *City Limits*, but does not seem to use *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition archive from the Herbert Museum and Art Gallery or the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* that covered the press responses from the exhibition, as resources. In *Black Visual Culture*, Doy does not focus on the exhibition culture of black art, with the exception of *The Other Story*, but rather places an analysis of art works within postcolonial methodologies at the centre of the argument. This chapter will therefore contribute to the abovementioned art historical literature by arguing that the artists of the BLK Art Group intentionally transformed the art establishment by disturbing or reorganising established modes of exhibition based experience,⁴⁷ using strategies that both subtly and abruptly manipulated and diverted the power and order of knowledge,⁴⁸ in the art institutions.

Prior to analysing the particulars of the exhibitions in order to indicate how exhibitions function as communicative tools, it is important to theoretically contextualise the role and abilities that exhibitions can exercise. This will be formed by first examining the Group's relationship to the art education system as the first encounter with the art establishment, followed by concentrating on the critical functions and narratives of the Group's exhibitions in general, the role of the canon in

⁴⁷ Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010, 290

⁴⁸ Marion Endt, 'Beyond institutional critique: Mark Dion's surrealist wunderkammer', *Museum and Society*, March 2007, 12

adopting institutional histories of the exhibitions and will conclude by investigating the language and political discourse that was implemented throughout the Group's exhibitionary practice. The following chapter will examine in detail how the specific exhibitions were used as vehicles for transforming the art institutions by showing black art in spaces that had not shown this work previously, thereby producing and making space for themselves in a literal way in the galleries and in a metaphorical one in the canon.

1.1 Pedagogy and Art School Curricula: Disassembling the ivory tower of art education

The BLK Art Group's aims of stimulating wider public debate and gaining greater visibility for marginalised artists had indeed arisen from an initial critique of the failure of the art school system to embrace a curricular pluralism which recognised that Britishness was not a homogeneous cultural identity.⁴⁹ Rasheed Araeen reinforces the notion that the art school is a significant player within the art establishment; he notes that the:

Knowledge passed on to students is knowledge received by the art establishment, generated by recognition and signification of art activity, and since this recognition has not been given to black artists, even when some of them have been on the forefront of new developments in contemporary visual arts, they have remained, along with their contributions INVISIBLE.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Kobena Mercer, 'Witness at the Crossroads: An Artist's Journey in the Post-Colonial Space', David Chandler, (ed.), *Relocating the Remains: Keith Piper*, London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1997, 22

⁵⁰ Rasheed Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*, London: Kala Press, 1984, 146 (Capitals cited after the original)

Chambers proclaims: 'Being students, much of the focus of our agitation was the art school, which involved attempts to challenge the dominant art school ideology.'⁵¹

The Group faced the challenge of exclusion in the art school as their first art institutional encounter; therefore it is logical that their first act of differencing was through an action of critique that was centrally aimed towards the art education system.⁵²

In 1987, Keith Piper and Donald Rodney issued a statement called 'Piper & Rodney On Theory'. Its opening paragraph reads:

In Britains [sic] art schools, where the mythology of individual self-expression is held at a premium, collaborative activity is discouraged. Apart from throwing a spanner into bureaucratic machinery geared to assess the virtuoso, collaborative activities begin to counter many of the negative effects of an individualism which leaves the art student isolated and vulnerable. Supporting collaborative activity has therefore never been in the interest of the art school hierarchy [...]⁵³

The act of creating an artist collective can be understood as rejecting what Chambers and Piper cite as individual practice that was held at a premium. The very act of collaborative action is inherent to the Group's political prerogatives of binding together to represent an artistic black public, but it also presents a rejection of the position of the heralded individual artist in the art school and consequently in the art establishment.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 60

⁵² Mercer, *Relocating the Remains*, 23

⁵³ Eddie Chambers, 'Keith Piper, Donald Rodney and the Artists' Response to the Archive', *Axis: Online Resource for Contemporary Art*, <<http://www.axisweb.org/dlFULL.aspx?ESSAYID=27>>, accessed May 2011

It is important to contextualise and situate the workings of the BLK Art Group in relation to what was happening elsewhere in terms of rebelling against the art school, to outline the positions of rebellion towards the art education system that were exercised in Britain for reasons other than race. Antagonism, protest and subversion were practiced as constant acts of defiance in the art school, not just in terms of racial rebellion but also including, for example, the student revolts at Hornsey College of Art in London in 1968 in the form of the six-week protest, and the rise of punk culture and its influence on the visual art. Collaborative practices between the student and the teacher were experienced particularly at Goldsmiths where many of the work and exhibitions of the YBA artists were highly influenced and mentored by lecturers including Michael Craig-Martin and Jon Thompson, which thereby dissolved the conventional hierarchical roles of the teacher and student. Just as Carol Duncan describes museums as sites of ritual and citizenship, it is evident that the art school may also be used as a site of ritual and consequently rebellion.⁵⁴

This first territory of the art establishment that the artists faced was fraught with exclusion and played a major part in compelling the artists to question boundaries of acceptance, realising early on that the work they were interested in making was not what the art school encouraged. Piper describes that:

The black art student cannot afford the luxury of complacency as enjoyed by many of his white counterparts. These people, finding little worth responding to in their decadent lives of leisure and pleasure, seek out even more obscure playthings amongst the self indulgent vogues of ‘art for art’s sake’. The black art student, by his very blackness, finds himself

⁵⁴ Adrian Rifkin, ‘Protest in Art School: Rituals of Power and Rebellion since the Sixties’, panel discussion at the Serpentine Gallery and Southbank Centre’s Hayward Gallery 9 June, 2010, [http://thehayward.southbankcentre.co.uk/2010/06/09/deschooling-society-podcasts---episode-6---protest-in-art-school-rituals-of-power-and-rebellion-since-the-sixties'/>](http://thehayward.southbankcentre.co.uk/2010/06/09/deschooling-society-podcasts---episode-6---protest-in-art-school-rituals-of-power-and-rebellion-since-the-sixties/), accessed May 2011

drawn towards the epicentre of social tension. He is forced to respond to the urgency of the hour. The aspirations of the British Black are ripe, and our time is 'NOW' [...] Let us strive by any means to raise the revolutionary consciousness of each other as to the form and functioning of the social, political and economic barriers which this man has placed all around us, and within our very minds.'⁵⁵

This early divide between what was expected in the art school and what the artists produced was an early indication of their deeply contentious relationship with the art establishment. As indicated in their subject matters, the exhibition of this work and the distribution of writing about black art, the artists clearly did not obey what the art school professed. Instead, the artists continued to develop the work that was reprimanded, work that rejected art for art's sake, but rather poignantly signified socially significant situations in Britain, including imagery of mutilated black bodies hung by nooses, as will be later examined in the proceeding chapters.

Kobena Mercer writes that Chambers 'saw the need to present a radical black alternative to the self-indulgent and apolitical brand of creativity being encouraged within art schools and to this end prepared plans for a group show in 1980,'⁵⁶ this exhibition, *Black Art an'Done* opened at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 1981. By staging exhibitions in the public sphere that were beyond the art school itself, the Group created a direct fusion between black politics and visual practice.⁵⁷ The art school's disapproval of the artist's work reinforces the notion of the establishment's maintenance of boundaries concerning those included and those excluded from the institutions of art.

⁵⁵ *Black Art an'Done: An Exhibition of Work by Young Black Artists*, exhibition pamphlet, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 9-27 June, 1981, 3 (Capitals cited after the original)

⁵⁶ Mercer, *Relocating the Remains*, 23

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Further, and to offer a contradiction to this argument, Araeen describes, '[...] meeting an old friend at the ICA. He advises me to be careful. "If you want to be a successful artist, stop criticising the establishment. Try to make friends in the art world. This is a very sophisticated society, and you must develop sophisticated responses to it. You can't bite the hand that feeds you, particularly when the hand is white and the mouth is black. Don't open your mouth too much."'”⁵⁸ The BLK Art Group evidently disagreed with the above statement made by an acquaintance of Araeen. It is in fact the sheer determination to push against this idea of opposition to the art establishment's prejudices that the Group's work is so significant, so much so that the exhibition *Black Art an'Done* was 'identified as the first exhibition to signal the decisive emergence of a new generation of Black artists and marked the beginning of a decade of visibility and activity for Black Artists in Britain.'⁵⁹ Significantly, it was one of their teachers from Lanchester Polytechnic in Coventry named Eric Pemberton who mentored the students and pushed for *Black Art an'Done* to be included at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery. In the end, it was this influential teacher, employed by the school that distanced and alienated the artists, who helped enable the artists to have a voice. Moreover, the artists indeed dared to tread into the contemporary art world with their own perceptions, alternatives, and challenges,⁶⁰ and consequently aimed to escape the constraints of the art education system and did so by entering the next element of the art establishment: the art institutions of display and exhibition.

⁵⁸ Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*, 155

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 105 (Capitals cited after the original)

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 104

1.2 Critical functions of the exhibition: museums as canon creators, exhibitions as canon challengers

According to Ferguson, who is cited in the opening sentence of this chapter, an exhibition has the ability to form a communicative device, a means by which ideas in the visual work expand and transform in a physical space. Just as painting, performance, installation and sculpture are considered artistic media, I propose that an exhibition can also be regarded as a medium consisting of visual work which is placed and contextualised in an atmosphere where it engages with the gallery, the geographical location of the museum, and the viewer. The exhibition is a staging of ideas where an exchange occurs between the artist and the viewer as an indirect line of discussion infiltrated through the art works on display in the gallery. The notion that the exhibition is a staging of ideas inherently implies that it signifies the role of a mediator to which the work becomes public. This is imperative in understanding the importance of the exhibition as a crucial platform on which to present and articulate political ideas based on race.

The idea of the exhibition as an intermediary in the discourse between artist and viewer is enhanced since *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition was staged for several weeks and travelled around the UK from Bristol to Birmingham, London, Nottingham and Coventry,⁶¹ consequently enabling this discussion to continue not only at different places, as discussed in detail in the next chapter, but also over an extended period of time. Duration of exhibitions is significant in relation to expanding notions of the exhibition as the staging of discourse, as it allows and

⁶¹ For details of exhibition venues, see Appendix Two

promotes a continual dialogue. Chambers states that ‘acknowledgement of and reference to, Black politics grows out of a sense of duty and commitment to the Black community,’⁶² therefore thinking about duration is also important in terms of the enduring impression that the Group wanted to present to the black community through an insistence on making and leaving tracks in the art establishment. It is therefore crucial to note that the exhibition primarily played the role of a forum in which the Group presented and discussed their political ideas, but perhaps more importantly, it was the stage that allowed them to make their ideas public, lasting, and acknowledged by the art establishment.

The BLK Art Group used exhibitions as a way to achieve acknowledgement and power in the art world. The power that the Group desired was to be able to speak to and for the black British community from inside the art establishment to simultaneously indicate that there still remains institutional racism within it. The artists used the exhibition as a platform to stage this discourse, as perhaps a channel of speech or an essay in which these political ideas regarding race and equality could be presented and deliberated upon. If we accept that the exhibition presents a staging of discourse, we can unfurl this idea by describing that a dramatisation also occurs in the art gallery. Jürgen Habermas notes that public discourses must identify and dramatise the subject of discussion,⁶³ stating that they can be metaphorically described as performances and presentations that invoke not only fora but also stages and arenas, demanding that public discourses be both attention catching and

⁶² Gilane Tawadros and Victoria Clarke (eds), *Annotations 5: Run Through the Jungle: Selected Writings by Eddie Chambers*, London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1999, 37 (Capitals cited after the original)

⁶³ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998, 359

innovative as well as convincing and justifiable.⁶⁴ The following will outline the theoretical contextualisation of cultures of display as having the ability to challenge the art establishment, its canons and histories and I will prove that the exhibitions functioned as a mode of dialogue utilising the characteristics of performing a discourse that Habermas outlines above.

The BLK Art Group practice falls within the initial movements of drawing attention to black people and their creative outputs in Britain. The Birmingham based artist Vanley Burke predated the BLK Art Group, and widely exhibited his work in Britain during the early 1980s. The exhibition titled *Handsworth from the Inside 1979-1983* was displayed at Grove Lane Junior School in 1979, and was also later exhibited at various national venues including the Commonwealth Institute, London in 1983 and the Ikon Gallery in 1983.⁶⁵ The difference between Burke's and the BLK Art Group's work is its subject matter that emphasises political change by presenting imagery of murder and hate crimes against black people which will feature in a visual analysis later in the thesis. The Group was the first in England to show such highly critical and poignantly political work responding to the racial inadequacies in the art establishment.

International movements including the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s or the Black Arts Movement or Black Power Movement in the 1960s both in New York, created

⁶⁴ Jessica J. Kulynych, 'Performing Politics: Foucault, Habermas, and Postmodern Participation', *Polity*, Vol. 30, No. 2, Palgrave Macmillan Journals, 1997, 14

⁶⁵ Connecting Histories, *MS 2192 Vanley Burke Archive, 1970-2005*, [http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/Downloads%20\(pdf%20etc\)/Vanley%20section%20A%20&%20B.pdf](http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/Downloads%20(pdf%20etc)/Vanley%20section%20A%20&%20B.pdf), accessed May 2011

vast ramifications in not only the art establishment but in American society at large by providing fora in which to listen to the voices that were otherwise ignored. The BLK Art Group took momentous inspiration from these movements, so much so that Eddie Chambers notes: ‘we had settled on The BLK Art Group as a name for our collective. This directly copied Black Power activists like LeRoi Jones who had taken to writing “Black” as BLK, in part, to infuse the word with a new, defiant resonance that set it apart from and above what Jones saw as its debased, oppressive and depoliticised usage.’⁶⁶ I will return to this idea of using language as a strategy of critique and outline a more comprehensive examination of the titling of the Group, however, what is important to draw attention to at the moment is the inspiration from these American movements, so much so that the title of the collective was directly influenced by the writing of African-American writer and activist Amiri Baraka, born Everett LeRoi Jones. In Chambers’ PhD thesis he cites Larry Neal, an activist in the Black Power Movement in America, in an essay called ‘Black Art and Black Liberation’ Neal states:

We bear witness to a profound change in the way we now see ourselves and the world. And this has been an ongoing change. A steady, certain march toward a collective sense of who we are, and what we must now be about to liberate ourselves. Liberation is impossible if we fail to see ourselves in more positive terms. For without a change of vision, we are slaves to the oppressor’s ideas and values - ideas and values that finally attack the very core of our existence. Therefore, we must see the world in terms of our own realities.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ LeRoi Jones, ‘The Need for a Cultural Base to Civilrites and BPower Mooments’, *The Black Power Revolt; A Collection of Essays*, Boston: Porter Sargent, 1968, 119 [sic]

⁶⁷ Larry Neal, ‘The Black Arts Movement’, *A Turbulent Voyage: Readings in African American Studies*, 3rd Ed, Floyd W. Hayes (ed.), publisher location Unknown: Publisher unknown, 1970, 30-53

Taking inspiration from promotion of self-liberation mentioned above, to strive for a collective empowerment, in addition to the Group's stated insistence that the work intended to inspire the black youth to 'develop their creative genius'⁶⁸ it is clear that the Group was conscious of directing a shift within the art establishment through the use of exhibitions to change the vision and limitations of how visual art is experienced in Britain. Through the self-organisation of exhibitions, the artists rejected what they considered to be the mould and the model of 'Western' art and its associated art history.⁶⁹ This action was embodied in the exhibitions that pervaded the Midlands, as each one enabled a further step towards altering the art establishment according to who is included and which voices are presented.

1.3 Bordering the Canon: Challenging it or falling in?

Canonical critique is a critical questioning of what the art establishment deems admissible. The Group aimed to expand 'the' canon, as it lacked certain representations of black art, which according to Chambers, is art that specifically addresses the black experience and current political conditions.⁷⁰ A canon *per se* includes what has been accepted into the art establishment, the work that has been collected by museums; it is taught at universities as belonging to the history of art, and it is the subject of literary and critical discussion in mainstream art journals and magazines. According to Griselda Pollock, canons are set by institutions, publishing houses and university curricula and 'we know these canons through what gets hung in

⁶⁸ *Black Art an'Done: An Exhibition of Work by Young Black Artists*, exhibition pamphlet, 1

⁶⁹ Eddie Chambers, *The Emergence and Development of Black Visual Arts Activity in England Between 1981 and 1986: Press and Public Responses. The Emergence and Development of Black Visual Arts Activity in England Between 1981 and 1986: Press and Public Responses*. inIVA archive, Goldsmiths College, University of London, London, January 1998, 110

⁷⁰ Tawadros and Clarke (eds), *Run Through the Jungle*, 30

galleries, played in concerts, published and taught as literature or art history in universities and schools, gets put on the curriculum as the standard and necessary topics for study at all levels in the educating, acculturating, assimilating process.⁷¹ There is a strategy of the canon's maintenance that is upheld by art institutions through which some artists are enabled to speak and are empowered and others are silenced and marginalised.⁷² According to Pollock, the canon can be perceived as a filter in which artists are selected and thus gain access to the museum, gallery and histories of art.

Much of the work of museums has been consumed by the canon yet simultaneously contributes to the establishment of a canon. Museums are a central signifying system that has been used to construct dominant canons;⁷³ therefore just as museums are canon creators, exhibitions can be perceived and utilised as canon challengers. The following will explore the function of the BLK Art Group's art exhibitions in terms of the canon of exhibitions and the implications of using exhibition-making as an empirical tool to realise political aims. The sub-chapter will begin by looking at how the Group's exhibitions revised the canon by editing what was granted admission to it, followed by how the function of the exhibitions was aligned with the practices of institutional critique and the ambivalence of operating on the border of the canon while also critiquing its system.

⁷¹ Griselda Pollock, 'About Canons and Culture Wars', *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Writing of Arts Histories (Re Visions: Critical Studies in the History & Theory of Art)*, London: Routledge, 1999, 4

⁷² Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, London: Routledge, 2000, 21

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 140

It should not be underestimated how fundamental it was that the Group entered art institutions and mobilised politically saturated subjects of the condition of the black experience in Britain into Midlands based art galleries during the 1980s, rather than rejected them completely. Rasheed Araeen asks:

Why then have black artists been ignored, so much so that they have been excluded from all levels of the British art world; from art shows, art discussions, art history, art education ... etc? The reason for this could only be that it has not been in the interest of the art world, to come to terms with what could offer a challenge to its values, attitudes and prejudices. As a result, black artists have remained invisible or the marginals of this society.⁷⁴

By entering the gallery and prying open the doors of the canon of contemporary British art, the BLK Art Group rejected the exclusion from art shows, art discussions, art history, and art education and refused to remain on the margins. This refusal of subordination was accomplished by exhibiting their work in the museums that have previously rejected those who challenge those values. The way in which history is narrated is then closely tied in with relations of power that shape, select, and edit our information, in this way, 'White Knowledge'⁷⁵ has tended to silence and exclude the histories of black people. Certainly, the art establishment controls what is included and excluded within its domain, where this boundary is managed by institutions that uphold and abide by these dominantly Western, male and parochially fuelled guidelines.

⁷⁴ Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*, 105

⁷⁵ Les Back and Anoop Nayak, *Invisible Europeans? Black People in the 'New' Europe*, Birmingham: All Faiths for One Race, 1993, 137

In the essay 'Exhibitions and Interpretation' Eileen Hooper-Greenhill describes revising the canon as a means of making visible what was 'formerly subsumed and rendered invisible within large Western-derived universal narratives, and reterritorialisation entails the projection and exploration of new territories formerly left off the cultural map.'⁷⁶ In criticising and editing the boundaries of the art canon, the BLK Art Group initiated a revisionist approach towards the history of art by expanding what was considered worthy of inclusion in galleries. It is quite appropriate to term this endeavour as Hooper-Greenhill has describes it, a reterritorialisation, as the Group's amendment of the boundaries of institutional territories where black artists could exhibit art work was altered by the Group. The notion of a reterritorialisation is explicitly linked not only to physically entering the art institutions and maintaining that their racially political work is more important than what Piper describes as 'self-indulgent art for art's sake,' but it is also linked to a reterritorialisation of the canons of art in the late twentieth century.

Kobena Mercer describes that 'what is important to acknowledge here are, first, the unique achievements of the BLK Art Group in displacing the formation of British modernisms as components of a national culture, and second, Piper's distinct foreground role in enacting this ruptural rewriting of modernism's core questions about the articulation of art and politics from the standpoint of cultural *difference*.'⁷⁷ This idea can be expanded to also include a reterritorialisation through exhibition, comprising all aspects of the art institutions including the art school, gallery and museum, to also include a revision of late twentieth-century art, critiques of its

⁷⁶ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, 140

⁷⁷ Mercer, *Relocating the Remains*, 21 (Italics cited after the original)

canons and a reformation of the art establishment at large. Araeen premeditated this in his 'Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto' from 1978 describing the rejection of Western domination that the Group later facilitated through their work, professing that 'the choice for us is clear. Either we accept our marginalised separate categories or reject them.'⁷⁸ This statement is highly contentious and runs a litigious line throughout the entire thesis, that is to question whether the artists are to work in the establishment and attempt to change it from within its gates, work alongside the canon's border where the institutions are somewhat utilised yet continually criticised from within, or to reject the entire Western art world altogether and exist within canons and institutions specific to the needs of the artists, including exhibiting work in strictly black art spaces and publishing texts in black cultural journals. Therefore the very act of practising within the art establishment indicated that the Group perhaps saw the canon as a malleable entity.

In this line of argumentation it is important to cite a contemporaneous artist and cultural theorist Raimi Gbadamosi. He describes that:

Being unwilling to accept that there is a universal manner to contemplate art, leads to a rejection of the canon and, with it, its attendant privileges. Any attempt at establishing a new critical system conducive to the exploration of new art forms and practices will be undermined by the fact that it ultimately needs to seek acceptance and validation from the very infrastructure it has rejected.'⁷⁹

To advance this argument, Allan Kaprow's essay 'The Education of the Un-Artist' examines the strategies of artists who seek to liberate themselves from the

⁷⁸ Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*, 14

⁷⁹ Raimi Gbadamosi, 'Am I black enough?', *Third Text*, 12: 44, 1998, 69

institutionalised world. These are artists or un-artists, who some or all of the time ‘operate outside the pale of the art establishment,’⁸⁰ however, they always report their activities to the art establishment, which duly records them in its art pages, in this they are as dependent on the established art context as were the Dadaists, who never left it in the first place.⁸¹ This takes the argument to a point of which is highly contestable. Indeed, the Group challenged the canon, and seemingly agreed with Araeen’s perspective that the pre-existing canon exemplifies Western domination and needs to be rejected. However, it seems that by entering mainstream art institutions including the Wolverhampton Art Gallery and the Herbert Art Gallery, they intended to enter and transform the canon and ultimately the art establishment, yet the strategies they used to point out institutional and regional racism in Britain using their visual work suggests a more complicated approach. The Group seemed to desire a place within the art establishment, yet simultaneously remained adamant about not conforming to the work that was championed by it. Most importantly, the artists rejected the historically bound and outdated canon and attempted to alter its future discourse. This is evidenced in the fact that the BLK Art Group started by exhibiting their work in traditional or regional gallery spaces like the Wolverhampton Art Gallery or the Herbert Museum and Art Gallery, which are located at the margins, rather than firmly established institutions such as the Tate or even the City Art Gallery in Birmingham, due to the increased possibility of attaining a spot in the exhibition program.

⁸⁰ Allan Kaprow and Jeff Kelley, *Essays On the Blurring of Art and Life*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003, 98

⁸¹ Carol Duncan, *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in the Critical History of Art (Cambridge Studies in New Art History and Criticism)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 220

Seemingly in opposition to the above argument of not confirming to the practices and subject matters that dominated the histories of Western art, is Eddie Chambers' *Destruction of the National Front* from 1980, where the artist tore a print of the Union Jack into pieces and reassembled it in the medium of collage in the shape of a swastika⁸² [Fig. 1]. This work indicates the artist's operation within the border of the canon due to the work's medium of paper collage and its subject matter of the British flag and the swastika. Firstly, there is a heavily instated iconography of flags in twentieth-century art history as a signifier that has been repeatedly used as a means to subvert or challenge its signification as a symbol of nationhood and nationality. Art works that employ the use of the flag for similarly grounded politically driven critiques to the BLK Art Group include for example Rasheed Araeen's *Green Painting* which according to Gen Doy perhaps connotes the Pakistani flag,⁸³ Jasper Johns' series of flags of America, David Hammons' work, *African American Flag*, as well as contemporary political work including Thomas Hirschhorn's installation at the Power Plant Art Gallery in Toronto titled *Das Auge*. Secondly, the collage medium of the work is an engrained and thoroughly practised medium inside the canon and thus pushes the Group's ambivalent position even further towards operating well inside of the art establishment. The argument culminates with the problematic of a multiple act of critiquing history, whilst simultaneously seeking a place within it.⁸⁴ The artists sought to make work that critiqued the art establishment

⁸² Zoe Ingalls, 'Art of the Disenfranchised: The British Black Arts Movement', *Duke Magazine*, Volume 92, No.2, March-April 2006, <http://www.dukemagazine.duke.edu/dukemag/issues/030406/disenfranchised1.html>, accessed May 2011

⁸³ Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers & Co. Ltd., 2000, 45

⁸⁴ Chambers, *Axis: Online Resource for Contemporary Art*, <http://www.axisweb.org/dlFULL.aspx?ESSAYID=27>, accessed May 2011

and the art that permeated its histories, while simultaneously demanding a place for themselves.

1.4 Resuscitating Institutional Critique

The arguments of the chapter thus far have focused on defining and outlining functions of the exhibition, significance of school curricula and defining the role of canons. I have suggested throughout the chapter that the artists were very clear on challenging the art establishment and its institutions through specific strategies of critique, including the implementation of the flag as a major signifier. As Foucault describes:

Critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices we accept rest [...]. Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believes, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such.⁸⁵

This idea is reminiscent of theories of institutional critique, where part of its project was to dismantle elitism, classism and racism.⁸⁶ On the subject of institutional critique, Fraser Ward describes that ‘the narrative of the development of institutional critique must be situated within a broader account of the public sphere. One effect of this is to suggest that institutional critique has been prematurely buried.’⁸⁷ The Group’s exhibitions may be theorised within frameworks of reworked variations of

⁸⁵ Lawrence Kritzman (ed.), *Michel Foucault, Politics, Philosophy and Culture-Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, New York: Routledge, 1988, 154

⁸⁶ Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Silvia Kolbowski, Miwon Kwon, Benjamin Buchloh, ‘The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial’, *October*, Vol. 66, Autumn, 1993, 14

⁸⁷ Frazer Ward, ‘The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity’, *October*, Vol. 73, Summer, 1995, 80

institutional critique. Thinking about how the exhibitions served as a tool to communicate and advocate political ideas is indeed a variation of institutional critique, perhaps a re-emergence, a means of critically challenging the museum context that the Group acted within.⁸⁸ I am suggesting that theories attributed to institutional critique be unearthed here and applied to the Group's exhibitions in order to conceptualise how the artists challenged the institutions and simultaneously also the canons and the history of art.

The visual and textual work of the BLK Art Group, motivated by inequalities and exclusions based on race, is closely aligned with the practice of Fred Wilson and Renée Green, perhaps more so than the work of Andrea Fraser, Marcel Broodthaers, Robert Smithson for instance. According to Mark Dion, institutional critique is differentiated between two strands:

As I see it, artists doing institutional critiques of museums tend to fall into two different camps. There are those who see the museum as an irredeemable reservoir of class ideology – the very notion of the museum is corrupt to them. Then there are those who are critical of the museum not because they want to blow it up but because they want to make it a more interesting and effective cultural institution.⁸⁹

It is clear that, according to Dion's definition, the Group fulfilled both factions that he describes above. The artists did perceive the museum and gallery as wrought with institutional racism, yet simultaneously by exhibiting and working within the institution they therefore also seemingly believed that this could be changed. It is

⁸⁸ Julie Ault, 'Three snapshots from the eighties: on group Material', Paul O'Neill (ed.), *Curating Subjects*, Amsterdam: Edna van Duyn, 2007, 32

⁸⁹ Lisa Graziose Corrin, 'Miwon Kwon in Conversation with Mark Dion', *Mark Dion*, London: Phaidon, 1997, 16

evident that the Group wanted to ‘blow up’ the exclusion and prejudice that dominated the Western art establishment yet did not want to obliterate the establishment but make it more inclusive to the minorities that have been previously excluded. Words like inspire, develop and encourage,⁹⁰ are embedded throughout their exhibition literature, thus we can acknowledge that the Group’s intention was to make the art establishment, in Dion’s words, ‘a more interesting and effective cultural institution through the exhibition.’⁹¹

Furthermore, Donald Rodney states in his artist statement to the exhibition *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*: ‘What is shown on these hallowed art walls cannot change the world. Even so don’t rest at ease in your bed tonight for this is only the foundation stone for tomorrow’s new “Black dream”.’⁹² This articulation indicates ambivalence between inclusiveness of blackness and a tendency towards separateness, through statements and exhibition practices that excluded white artists from the Group’s entire praxis. With this quotation it is clear that Rodney acknowledges that the work cannot change the world, but that it is a small step towards one that is more inclusive. However, despite this statement, the Group was adamant about creating a movement that set into motion the development of a black British art movement. The first paragraph to the introductory chapter to the thesis opens with the statement that the artists wished to create a movement titled Blackism, an indication that the Group felt they could change the canon by developing a new black art aesthetic and style. Despite Rodney’s statement above, I would argue that the artists did in fact seem to

⁹⁰ *The Pan-Afrikan Connection: an exhibition of work by young black artists*, exhibition pamphlet, Herbert Art Gallery, 20 February – 20 March, 1983, 1

⁹¹ Corrin, *Mark Dion*, 16

⁹² *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, exhibition pamphlet, 4 (Capitals cited after the original)

believe the work could change ideas about black art and its position in the art establishment. It could be proposed or assumed that in saying: ‘what is shown on these hallowed art walls cannot change the world’ was meant to describe that the Group’s work could not change the state of racism in the world at large, but rather their work could change the course of contemporary artistic production.

Michel de Certeau’s 1974 study *L’Invention du quotidien*⁹³ examines tactics by which individuals might be able to outwit institutional power structures imposed upon them in everyday life, which proves a useful tool for analysing the relationship between artists and institutions. Significant to this argument, de Certeau argues that the ‘Indians remained other within the system which they assimilated and which assimilated them externally’⁹⁴ and that ‘they diverted it without leaving it.’⁹⁵ Applied to the artist and the institution of the museum, this means that the artist uses both an insider and outsider perspective, simultaneously ‘remaining other’ from within the institution. This challenging position is reinstated by Marion Endt describing Mark Dion that, ‘instead of employing strategies of oppositionality [...] which no longer have effective currency [...] became absorbed into the very system they sought to critique the artist brings the museum’s own history and ancestry back into play in order to reconfigure its present situation.’⁹⁶ This is precisely one of the strategies the Group orientated in their exhibitions: by showing work that presented the black body as a subject of prejudice and racism it inherently points out that the reason there is such shock that reverberated through the communities where the work was displayed,

⁹³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Endt, *Museum and Society*, 12

an intense topic of discussion in the following chapters, was precisely because nothing of this manner had been shown there previously, which consequently poses the question of for what reason this was the case.

1.5 Subversive Language as Political Performance

According to political scientist Jessica Kulynych, the performative protestor does not argue against the institutions it opposes, but rather mocks it utilising puns, jokes and caricatures to expose and reveal the existence of subjection where we had not previously seen it.⁹⁷ Thus, the performative resistance of the Group did not explicitly detail the institutional racism in the museum and gallery, but by exhibiting their politically didactic work it illustrated the fact that that this was the first highly critical black exhibition to be shown in the mainstream regional galleries in the Midlands. This sub-chapter will outline the Group's usage of language as a political tool. This explanation about the Group's name would otherwise be located at the beginning of the thesis, however it is placed in this order because of the chronological development where background theorisations regarding the collective's mandate and exhibition practice is required in order to situate the usage of language as a tool to aid in the realisation of these aforementioned practices.

The following statement made by Donald Rodney in his artist statement for the exhibition *The Image Employed: The use of narrative in Black Art*, at Cornerhouse

⁹⁷ Kulynych, 'Performing Politics: Foucault, Habermas, and Postmodern Participation', *Polity*, 334

Art Gallery in 1987, introduces the importance of written and visual strategy in the work of the BLK Art Group:

The role of my art is to inform, educate, stimulate and agitate. It is my wish to use accessibility as a weapon of political liberation and subversion through seduction. I use the written word and visual metaphor as my political tools. I have no other. The viewer, the reader, the innocent bystander, is coerced (gently or bluntly, depending on the subject matter) to take an active part in decoding and reading the visual and written language.⁹⁸

In order to fully comprehend the strategies the Group employed to critique the institution, it is necessary to carry out an analysis of their choice of language in writing and texts, as its role was fundamental in the process of opposition and differencing. The strategies of critique encompassed all outputs of the Group's communication devices including visual, exhibitionary and language based methods. Looking at how the Group used language as a principal tool to subvert and critique the Western domination of the art establishment is central to the Group's practice. This is evident in the extensive artist statements that describe political opinion rather than act as a descriptive tool to accompany the art work, this includes the texts in their exhibition catalogues and writing that is embedded in several of the paintings and photo-based visual works.

The power of language was theorised by Barthes wherein he distinguishes between two types of language in his essays 'The War of Languages' and 'The Division of Languages' published in the book titled, *Rustle of Language*. In these essays Barthes

⁹⁸ Keith Piper and Marlene Smith, *The Image Employed: the use of narrative in Black art*, exhibition catalogue, Cornerhouse, Manchester, 1987

distinguishes between two forms of discourse ‘encratic’ and ‘acratic’. He describes that:

Languages which are articulated, which develop, and which are marked in the light (or the shadow) of Power, of its many state, institutional, ideological machineries; I shall call these *encratic* languages or discourses. And facing them, there are languages which are elaborated, which feel their war, and which are themselves outside of Power and/or against Power; I shall call these *acratic* languages or discourses.⁹⁹

With this distinction in mind it seems that the Group’s use of language, as a political tool towards the dissemination of power while also being outside or against power, indicates that according to Barthes’ theory the language can be placed in alignment with both encratic and acratic language. The Group’s discourse is aligned with language that acts as a tool to subvert and assert power, by entering the institutions while also subverting them. This approach to the artists’ language de-stabilises this dichotomy of language as a political tool in order to defy the hegemony of power in the art establishment.

The original title of the BLK Art Group, which was the Pan-Afrikan Connection until 1984,¹⁰⁰ is marked with significance in that the word Africa is spelled with a ‘k’ rather than its usual spelling with a ‘c’. It is not uncommon to see Africa spelled this way, however this alteration can be interpreted as a strategy on behalf of the Group to repudiate all references to Western domination. Pan-African theorist, Dr. Kwame

⁹⁹ Roland Barthes, ‘The War of Languages’, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989 (Italics and capitals cited after the original)

¹⁰⁰ Tate Britain, ‘Donald Rodney Display: Timeline’, <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/rodney/timeline.htm>, accessed April 2011

Nantambu describes that according to the Afrikan-American poet and writer Haki Madhubuti, there are several reasons to spell Afrika with a 'k', including:

Most vernacular or traditional languages on the Continent spell Afrika with a K, K is germane to Afrika. Europeans particularly the Portuguese and British, polluted Afrikan languages by substituting 'C' whenever they saw 'K', we are not certain of the origin of the name Afrika, but we are sure the name spelled with 'C' came into use when Afrikans were dispersed over the world. There the 'K' symbolises our coming back together again.¹⁰¹

Not only was the collective titled The Pan-Afrikan Connection but also were the touring exhibitions that travelled throughout Britain in 1982 and 1983, also titled *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*. Indeed, the utilisation of the letter 'k' rather than 'c' signifies a refusal to adopt European titling, signifying the rejection of colonial possession and subservience and, in accordance to the above statement, it also corroborates the Group's fundamental argument to attempt to 'unify all peoples of African descent in a common struggle against colonialism and racism.'¹⁰² In the introduction to *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition pamphlet it describes that: 'the phrase 'Pan Afrikan Connection' was carefully chosen. It means [...] in developing the sense of 'somebodyness' we are trying to avoid blind mimicry. We are trying to recreate and develop our humanity.'¹⁰³ Chambers describes that it 'is these artists who are making, through their work, a collective, aggressive challenge to cultural domination.'¹⁰⁴ The rejection of the Western spelling of the word Africa to Afrika signifies this challenge to cultural domination. It is a small yet incredibly poignant change to the word and highly indicative of the sly strategy through which

¹⁰¹ Kwame Nantambu, 'Why Spell Afrika with a K?', *Trinicenter.com*, 17 February, 2002, <<http://www.trinicenter.com/kwame/2002/Feb/172002.htm>>, accessed April 2010

¹⁰² BLK Art Group scrapbook, *Keith Piper: Relocating the Remains*, 23

¹⁰³ *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, exhibition pamphlet, 1

¹⁰⁴ Chambers, 'Beyond Ethnic Arts', *Annotations*, 65

every element of their work, down to the spelling of its exhibition and collective title was controlled and claimed by the artists.

The following and enduring title of the artist collective, BLK Art Group, was inspired by the writings of Everett LeRoi Jones, to paraphrase from earlier in the chapter, as an attempt to reclaim the word with activist significance that rejected the oppressive usage of Western domination. This restructuring of the word 'black' in the title of the collective is a frankly powerful gesture. According to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) the phonetic pronunciation of BLK is blæk, blāk or bl-uk. By removing the letter a, it does not alter the phonetic sound of the word, yet it alters how the word is perceived, it is therefore a new word which possesses the same sound as the original with the same base meaning of the word black. I uphold that this alternation of the word was perhaps a strategy designed to avoid or bypass what the public previously perceived of as black art, as a lower art opposed to the fine or high arts and to indicate a new direction in black visual culture that was initiated by the Group. This tactic was also taken by the Group's contemporaneous photographic collective D-Max in which the artists avoided the use of the word black in their group name, but rather chose the apolitical and unrestricting name 'D-Max' which is technical term for photo density.¹⁰⁵

There seems to be two distinct motivations driving the avoidance of the word black.

To follow from the above discussion of the historical, colonial and oppressive significance of the word Africa that was replaced with Afrika, the first motivation of

¹⁰⁵ Tawadros and Clarke, *Annotations 5*, 37

the spelling alteration appears to be driven by an attempt to separate their work from preconceived ideas of black art, to perhaps rephrase what constitutes black art in the late twentieth century. Piper describes:

When I think back and recall the 80s. The term black art was deeply contentious. Right at the start, it's interesting that in terms of the BLK Art Group, when we were speaking about a convention, a conference to discuss this, we very specifically didn't want to use the term black art [...] it had already been so steeped in this idea that it was linked to skin colour, and not anything that was internal to the work. In the flyers we try and introduce BLK as black art [...]. A youthful suggestion [...] to do with what the artists were attempting to do within the work.¹⁰⁶

This notion of overcoming and reorganising previous conceptions about what defines black art as an artistic movement or style also encompasses a rejection of the preconceived subservience of black art within the Western art establishment. Sonia Boyce describes: 'What seemed to be one of the key rallying calls was an anti-modernism, an anti-art for arts sake. The practice was not only engaged with modernism as a counter-culture to modernism, but a politics that internationally envisaged force.'¹⁰⁷ This statement corroborates the argument of reasons for which the word 'black' was altered because it allows an even farther retracted position from the art establishment. To transform a word that was used as a signifier and tool of racial alienation enables a repossession or reterritorialisation of the word and its historical implications.

¹⁰⁶ Keith Piper, 'Briggs, Bryan in Interview with Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce on Exhibition Case Study: Black Skin/Blue Coat, The Bluecoat, Liverpool, 4 April-4 May 1985', 'Global Exhibitions: Contemporary Art and the Africa Diaspora, *Afro Modern Symposium*', Tate Liverpool 19 February 2010, unpublished digital recording, 30 minutes, private archive of Julia Abraham, Birmingham 2010

¹⁰⁷ Sonia Boyce, 'Briggs, Bryan in Interview with Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce on Exhibition Case Study: Black Skin/Blue Coat, The Bluecoat, Liverpool, 4 April-4 May 1985', *Afro Modern Symposium*

This idea may also be expanded to include the reasoning for the exhibition title, *Black Art an'Done*. According to Chambers the title signifies:

[...] a popular Jamaican expression of the time. As with many other Jamaican expressions and phrases, 'an done' did not translate neatly into what might be termed 'standard' English. However, the term approximately translated to 'that's that' or ' [...] let that be the end of it [...]', 'and leave it at that'. To those with African Caribbean backgrounds who could understand the exhibition title, it read something like 'this is Black Art, and there's nothing more to say about it.'¹⁰⁸

This description of the title verifies that what the artists were trying to achieve in their exhibition was to show a definitive presentation of what black art was at that moment as divergent from the mainstream. It also signifies the influence of an international unity of African descendants in their usage of a Caribbean phrase and it can be read as a reaching out to include black people from these disparate places, not just black British artists but a truly Pan-African motion of unity. However, the title can additionally be interpreted according to the aforementioned proposal of reversing or transforming what was preconceived as black art into a new aesthetic, by suggesting that the exhibition perhaps embodies a breaking down or taking apart of black art, where its previous definition and perception is literally undone. The idea of reorganising the word 'black' declares the arrival of a new direction for black art in Britain. Chambers corroborates this notion of a new emergence in the art establishment of black artists, he describes that the 'exhibitions that were originated and organised by the then "younger" generation of Black British artists themselves [...] marked the historical point at which the new Black artist emerged. I would suggest that the first such exhibition was *Black Art an'Done*.'¹⁰⁹ The exhibition signified an unravelling of previous considerations of what defined black art, verified

¹⁰⁸ Chambers, *Black Visual Arts Activity in England*, 105 (Capitals cited after the original)

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 59 (Capitals cited after the original)

by Chambers' statement that a new black artist has emerged,¹¹⁰ marked by the exhibition *Black Art an'Done*.

The second motivation that can be identified as an evasion of the word black illustrates the union between different black publics, mainly of African or Caribbean descent. Keith Piper during the conference 'Global Exhibitions: Contemporary Art and the Africa Diaspora, Afro Modern Symposium' at Tate Liverpool in 2010, described that the use of the term black 'was a very fierce counterargument, OBALLA, that opened Black Art Gallery, saw black as very specifically African descent [...] in terms of this discussion of issues of African artists [...] I think it's interesting we didn't think about it at the time: the BLK Art group as Caribbean descent.'¹¹¹ I would argue that the artists did rather indirectly or abstractly think about this, by changing the title of the collective from the Pan-Afrikan Connection to the title BLK Art Group and removing the 'a' in the word black. It is an indication that the Group conceivably intended to demonstrate a unity of all people of African and Caribbean descent; the 'a' removes this counter-argument and does not specify the original locality of the artist as either African or Caribbean, but rather signifies both or either. This surely is a strategy to include and direct their work to as many black publics as possible.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Piper, *Afro Modern Symposium*

The writing in *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* pamphlet is forceful and polemic, describing three reasons as to the phrase and title of the exhibition *Pan Afrikan Connection* :

1. There have been right dispersions of Africans at various times in history. These artists are descended from Africans dispersed during the Atlantic Slave Trade (1500-1833).
2. We feel for our brothers and sisters throughout the world who are the victims of racial injustices. 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' M.L. King 1929-1968.
3. In developing our sense of 'somebodiness', we are trying to avoid blind mimicry. We are trying to recreate and develop our humanity.¹¹²

The three statements are indicative of a connection of all black people, a calling together to develop a union and connection in order to claim a rightful place in the art establishment. Additionally, Keith Piper's artist statement in the *Black Art an'Done* pamphlet protests: 'Let us bend our art into an ensign around which to rally the people. Let it raise our consciousness and stimulate debate as to how most effectively we can conduct our struggle, inspire organised self-defence, expose and oppose our enemies and seize justice.'¹¹³ This is highly reminiscent of polemical writing, speaking collectively using a plural pronoun to describe a rallying call to oppose enemies of the Western art establishment. This very loaded artist statement does not describe artwork but rather, as I have previously described, it explains Piper's political position and incentives for making art that addresses these concerns. As evidenced in the example of Piper's text in the exhibition pamphlet, the Group's exhibition literature very rarely describes the art work but rather pays close attention to the political rallying, which situates the texts closer to polemics rather than the explanatory descriptions of the visual work that are conventionally found in

¹¹² *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, exhibition pamphlet, 1

¹¹³ *Black Art an'Done*, exhibition catalogue, 8

exhibition literature. It would seem that every output was strategically conceptualised and placed accordingly to demonstrate a thorough communicative performance directed to alter the state of contemporary British art.

1.6 Conclusions

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of the chapter concerning the central prerogative of the BLK Art Group's exhibitions, it would seem that the exhibition model was used as perhaps a means to disseminate ideas of activist nature, as a vehicle for the Group's message of the rejection of prejudice in the art world. It is conclusive to say that the aim of the exhibitions was to epitomise the manifest goal to present work that remained aggressively relevant to the needs of primarily the black community,¹¹⁴ which of course are not clear or homogenous, but represented the needs of the Group and those that also felt oppressed by the art establishment. Although it is imperative that the work not be reduced exclusively to political activism but that the BLK Art Group engaged strategies that critiqued the racial inequality of the art establishment through visual and textual work that doubly performed on the platform of exhibition. This chapter has examined how the BLK Art Group projected political protestation in the art establishment, through the use of exhibitions as the chief apparatus for their objections to it, while also contributing to the opening up of gallery spaces to those who had previously been excluded. The following chapters will examine how the Group used the physical and conceptually produced spaces of exhibitions to consequently connect to publics, by offering a

¹¹⁴ Chandler (ed.), *Relocating the Remains*, 21

ground that enabled the artists to develop critical curatorial strategies to ensure that art galleries across Britain were obliged to take notice and account of black artists.

CHAPTER TWO

THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF SPACES AND PLACES THROUGH EXHIBITIONS

In questioning ‘How do we enable people to transform space? Can we actually do so?’¹¹⁵ this chapter will argue that the BLK Art Group transformed spaces and in doing so created space for themselves very literally in the gallery but also in the art establishment as a whole. In the 2007 special edition of *Art History* titled *Location*, Deborah Cherry and Fintan Cullen describe that space or location ‘hovers between the generic and the specific, it entangles particular sites and larger spaces, the imaginary and the actual, the virtual, the material, memory and history.’¹¹⁶ This interpretation of the meaning of location offers a starting point in which to begin thinking about the implications of space, however, it is not specific enough to the chapter’s central impetus, that is to approach the spaces the BLK Art Group produced and intervened with from the widest physical approach to space to the most minute and immaterial. This chapter explores ways in which the BLK Art Group utilised exhibitions as a vehicle for political action and as an examination of social situations. This exploration will examine how the Group approached exhibition culture as a political stage that manipulated and transformed the spaces that they exhibited within.

This chapter will expand upon the discussion of exhibitions that were discussed more generally in chapter one and will look at exhibitions in terms of the implications that location, space and place have on the art works. The discussion will follow a

¹¹⁵ Tim Unwin, ‘A Waste of Space? Towards a Critique of the Social Production of Space’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2000, 24

¹¹⁶ Deborah Cherry and Fintan Cullen, *Location*, London: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 1

framework that will proceed from a macro to a microanalysis of space, commencing with an examination of the geographical place of the exhibitions, followed by looking at how specific gallery spaces were transformed by strategic exhibition methods, then finally moving into an examination of the archive and written texts as imaginary or conceptually produced spaces. The exploration of the geographical places in Britain where the BLK Art Group exhibited will offer a means in which to hypothesise reasons why specific exhibition venues were chosen, and the influence these geographical locations have on the reception of the exhibitions. The platform of exhibitions that carried the visual work, the exhibition literature and the archive that collapses history and memory in a total abstract space will provide the three cornerstones on which to ground the implications of space and its transformative potential in exhibition culture.

Throughout this chapter I will use the term space, as it refers to the physical, conceptual and abstract. Place can be defined as rooted specifically in the physical whereas space connotes a more abstract concept. Arguably space can be considered as empty until we name it, and once meaning is ascribed to it, it is at this point when space becomes place,¹¹⁷ meaning a specific location. However, it is this intersection of space and place, where location and site are bound with meaning that will be used as the basis for understanding physical space in this chapter. Thinking about space not only as the literal embodiment of location but also as a theoretical approach to include external elements like the artist's writing significantly builds upon widening the potential of space and its utilisation as an approach to exhibition culture.

¹¹⁷ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A short introduction*, Blackwell Publishing: Victoria, 2005, 11

Theorisations of space are heavily explored within cultural theory and philosophy, particularly in France and more recently in the United States. Writing on the articulation of space has been driven by Henri Lefebvre's contributions to thinking about how spaces are produced, Gaston Bachelard's attention to philosophical spaces and their relation to the 'poetic imagination,'¹¹⁸ Michel Foucault's examination of the utopian and heterotopian spaces which we inhabit, Michael de Certeau's focus on the spatial practice of everyday life, and last but not least, by Soja's proclamation of the spatial turn. However, this chapter is primarily influenced by the spatial theory of Henri Lefebvre as formulated in *The Production of Space*, as it will fuel the development of this argument by providing a framework within which to approach the Group's use and manipulation of space. If one imagines an upright triangle with the bottom two corners signifying social and physical space and the top corner as mental space, a product and result of the marriage of the social and physical, it becomes clear that the grounding foundation of space is created through concrete elements like geography as the physical and the publics who enter and interpret the space as the social, two inherent and implicating factors in the conceptual production of space. This chapter will focus on the development of physical and conceptual spaces that will stimulate the discussion of the social, the subject of the following chapter.

Approaching the understanding of space to include not only that of geography and gallery venue, but also space created by work that transcends visual materiality,

¹¹⁸ Etienne Gilson, 'Introduction', August 1963 in Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1958

forms the basis of what I call conceptual space. What is particularly pertinent to this notion of space created by work that transcends visual materiality, is the idea of a shared notion of space as conceptually widened through publications and new media, a space created outside of galleries, which in turn implicated physical spaces by contributing to the ways in which the spaces were consequently transformed. Bhabha describes that space includes ‘interstitial spaces, beyonds and between,’¹¹⁹ conceptually comprehended as a ‘Third Space’¹²⁰ a space that emerges from two already existing spaces that come together. This idea can be derived from the reading of Derrida who has opened up notions of the ‘entre’ the ‘between,’¹²¹ an idea that by making space we establish space. However, the notion of a third or an in-between space can also be interpreted as a dislocation of the original space, adjusting the space out of its prefixed joint. This moving the space out of its joint may not be visible, yet it is present, nonetheless, as the Group conceptually established new spaces and fundamentally made space for themselves in the gallery.

In thinking about space it is important to note Foucault’s contributions to the articulation of space. Foucault’s text ‘Des Espaces Autres’ describes different spaces, fundamentally focusing on utopian and heterotopian spaces. Foucault acknowledges and cites the split between physical space and what he calls fantastical space that is ethereal and transparent.¹²² The limitations of Foucault’s spatial theory are that almost the entire emphasis is on the space in which we live, rather than, as Lefebvre

¹¹⁹ Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Silvia Kolbowski, Miwon Kwon, Benjamin Buchloh, ‘The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial’, *October*, Vol. 66, Autumn, 1993, p 3-27

¹²⁰ Homi Bhabha, ‘The Commitment to Theory’, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (eds), London: Routledge, 1995, 209

¹²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, London: Continuum, 1981, 222

¹²² Michel Foucault, ‘Dits et écrits 1984’, *Des espaces autres* (conférence au Cercle d’études architecturales, 14 mars 1967), in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, n°5, Octobre 1984, pp. 46-49

has noted, on the, ‘gap between the theoretical (epistemological) realm and the practical one, between mental and social, between the space of the philosophers and the space of people who deal with real things.’¹²³ Indeed we are confronted with an indefinite multitude of spaces, and, as Lefebvre explains, each space piled upon or contained within geographical, sociological, political and literary spaces;¹²⁴ yet in placing the BLK Art Group’s work in a framework of space that encompasses physical and mental realities, it offers an opportunity to examine not only how their work created and transformed real spaces, like the gallery sites, but also how their work manipulated spaces and did so through conceptual processes of intervention.

2.1 Strong West Midlands Connections: Engaging geographical spaces as methods of strategy

Canadian curator and art historian Charlotte Townsend-Gault notes that there is no such thing as neutral space.¹²⁵ Every space comes with explicit and implicit signs that direct how the space be interpreted and read. Certainly the geographical location of where artwork is displayed offers considerable importance to the reception, experience, and possible preconceptions to the work. For example, an object by an unknown artist displayed in a small regional gallery will present a different signifier than if that object is displayed in a national museum located in a capital city. One might suppose that the unknown artist was perhaps filling a programming gap at the regional gallery, yet perhaps the display of an unknown artist at a national gallery

¹²³ Henri Lefebvre, ‘Plan of Present Work’, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991, 4

¹²⁴ Lefebvre, ‘Plan of Present Work’, *The Production of Space*, 8

¹²⁵ Charlotte Townsend-Gault, ‘Rebecca Belmore And James Luna On Location At Venice The Allegorical Indian Redux’, *Location*, London: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 180

would bestow esteem and intrigue on the artist. This understanding confirms the notion that geographical location of exhibition display is crucial. The location of an exhibition, or in this instance geographical place, has the ability to transform or control the significance of space and influence its uses and users.¹²⁶ Therefore, this sub-chapter will examine for what reasons the BLK Art Group was decisive in its choice of location of the galleries in which they exhibited and suggest that the artists intentionally chose spaces as an element of strategy, a way to use the gallery system as a means to widely disseminate their political ideologies with a specific mindfulness to the region's racial populations and intended audiences.

The earliest exhibition of the BLK Art Group was *Black Art an'Done: An exhibition of work by young black artists* held at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery in in 1981.¹²⁷

The geographical location seems to have been an obvious choice; Eddie Chambers describes the artists' connection to Wolverhampton as all having 'strong West Midlands connections, all of them had grown up in Wolverhampton, with the exception of Keith Piper who had grown up in nearby Birmingham.'¹²⁸ Although Birmingham proudly claims the title of England's Second City,¹²⁹ this close comparison as the top two largest cities is not aligned with the visual and exhibition culture that is produced there. The lack of creative spaces in the West Midlands may well be down to the development of industrialisation and the motor industry in the

¹²⁶ Deborah Cherry, 'Statues in the Square', *Location*, London: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 140

¹²⁷ List of artists located in Appendix B

¹²⁸ Eddie Chambers, *The Emergence and Development of Black Visual Arts Activity in England Between 1981 and 1986: Press and Public Responses. The Emergence and Development of Black Visual Arts Activity in England Between 1981 and 1986: Press and Public Responses*, inIVA archive, Goldsmiths College, University of London, London, January 1998, 105

¹²⁹ F.W. Bradnock (ed.), *The City of Birmingham Information department by the Direction of the General Purposes Committee, The City of Birmingham, Official Handbook*, Birmingham: The Birmingham Printers Ltd., 1947, 13

preceding decades. The city was hit by heavy unemployment and thousands of local people lost their jobs.¹³⁰ There was, however, the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, founded in 1965, which formed a successful epicentre for contemporary art.¹³¹ Speaking of the 1960s, David Prentice, a contemporary of the Ikon Gallery's founder Angus Skene, describes that it was 'very difficult to describe really how deprived Birmingham was in those days. It was a glum little city [...] there was a bloody-minded "Brummie-ness" [...] which was lovely but it wouldn't go away.'¹³² To extrapolate from this statement it seems that without the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham's involvement in artistic contemporary creation might have starved. The artistic desolation of the West Midlands is additionally corroborated by Keith Piper as he describes that there was a 'sense of aesthetic bleakness derived from growing up in the West Midlands during the industrial recession of the late seventies and early eighties, which was able to match well a fashionably anti-crafts values, anti-bourgeoisie art establishment posture.'¹³³ However, despite the Group's political decision to exhibit in the Midlands, as it contained the highest population of black publics, the number of exhibition venues in the Midlands was miniscule. The sheer amount of spaces to show work in London in comparison to Birmingham in itself is reason to question why the BLK Art Group chose to exhibit in the creatively desolate space of the Midlands.

¹³⁰ Malcom Dick, *Birmingham: a history of the city and its people*, Birmingham: Birmingham Library Services, 2005, 42

¹³¹ Rose Jennings 'Birmingham on the cutting-edge: A groundbreaking gallery deserves this long-overdue retrospective', *The Observer*, Sunday 29 August 2004, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2004/aug/29/art1>>, accessed April 2010

¹³² Rachel Campbell-Johnston, 'Lip service paid to a Sixties icon: The 40th-Anniversary show at Birmingham's Ikon Gallery is thick on Sixties nostalgia, but well worth celebrating', *The Times*, August 25, 2004, <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/article473796.ece>, accessed April 2010

¹³³ Chambers, *Black Visual Arts Activity in England*, 106

We may hypothesise about the reasons behind exhibiting work in the Midlands: the artists were born, educated, and based in these regions, the chances of securing exhibition space in Midlands galleries as a marginal space might have been more promising outside of the epicentre of London, arguably because in London the competition was much higher and thus much harder to succeed in a capital which draws in such a large number of artists. The Group did exhibit in London, including the *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* at The Africa Centre in 1982, yet the concentration of the exhibitions was in the West Midlands. The topic of racial populations and publics will be closely examined in close detail in the following chapter, however, on the subject of geographical locations it is important to point out that the Group abstained from exhibiting work in the North of England, since perhaps the Midlands had a larger and more concentrated population of black people with far scarcer black populations in the North. According to The Runnymede Trust and The Radical Statistics Race Group's 1980 publication, *Britain's Black Population*, the black population is numerically larger in some areas of the country than others; for example, there are many black people who reside in Bradford but few in Barnsley, and due to the heavy immigration after World War Two of African and Caribbean people to the UK, the highly populated areas where black people live is a consequence of where immigrants settled in the 1950s and 1960s; their choice of place in turn, was related to the demand for labour, such as in the metal manufacturing industries in the West Midlands.¹³⁴ It seems that most significantly, the Group wanted to influence and inspire the widest population of black people and

¹³⁴ The Runnymede Trust and The Radical Statistics Race Group, *Britain's Black Population*, London: Heineman Educational Books Limited, 1980, 8

since the Midlands has had a very high concentration of the black British population; the location of exhibiting around the Midlands makes calculated sense.

The following statement from the introduction to the pamphlet accompanying the first exhibition of the BLK Art Group, *Black Art an'Done* offers further insight as to the decision to exhibit work in the Midlands:

This exhibition of visual work by five young black artists is the first of its kind to be mounted in Wolverhampton. It is a stride along the road to 'somebodyness' for the black community. These artists have all struggled to succeed in an adverse situation. We hope that they will 'Keep on Keepin' on'. We hope that the exhibition will inspire other black youngsters to develop their creative genius.¹³⁵

Indeed, *Black Art an'Done* was the first exhibition held at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery to prominently feature a group of young, radical and shockingly political artists, and this is so fundamentally important because it was the first time that such radically political black artists were given a voice in this area, thereby marking this event as paramount in the history of the West Midlands in the 1980s. Black British art had been exhibited in the West Midlands prior to BLK Art Group including, as I have previously mentioned, Vanley Burke in exhibitions in Birmingham including *Handsworth from the Inside* at the Ikon Gallery in 1983 and Anwar Shemza, an Indian born artist who had exhibitions at the Gulbenkian Museum of Oriental Art and Archaeology in Durham in 1963, the Teeside Art Gallery in 1973, as well as exhibited work in the Hayward Gallery's exhibition *The Other Story*. However, the Group's work involved political subject matters that were far more politically critical than Burke's documentary style photography of black publics, or Shemza's abstract

¹³⁵ *Black Art an'Done*, exhibition pamphlet, 1

prints and paintings. The *Black Art an'Done* exhibition demonstrated an acceptance from the art gallery which is not only a severely important first welcoming into the art establishment for such racially based political art by black artists, but as the pamphlet states, 'it is a stride along the road to 'somebodyness,'¹³⁶ a recognition, inclusion and acknowledgement of the Group's work to be considered relevant and important. The final sentence in the above statement from the exhibition pamphlet demonstrates the pedagogical aim of the exhibition: it should instil hope and encourage creativity of other young black people, a creativity that should be recognised. It also underpins the fundamental reason for why the Group chose to exhibit in the Midlands, due to its high percentage of black publics.

Chambers repeatedly discussed the obligations of the black artist's responsibilities to the community to educate and inform the viewer, where 'Black artists should be missionaries who are dedicated to helping Black people move from a negative state of existence to a positive state of survival. Our art must embrace all dimensions of blackness.'¹³⁷ This statement again suggests the pedagogical function and dedication to affecting publics. Sonia Boyce, a subsequent affiliate of the Group, corroborates this notion describing that 'in 1981 I saw Chambers and Pipers' work at Wolverhampton. Theirs was the first contemporary black art I had seen.'¹³⁸ The following year at the BLK Art Group's 'The First National Black Art Convention' in Wolverhampton, Boyce met the Group; this demonstrates the impact of the exhibition and convention space providing grounds for networking, places where they could

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Eddie Chambers, *Black Art: Plotting the Course*, exhibition pamphlet, Oldham Art Gallery, Wolverhampton Gallery, Bluecoat Gallery, 1989, 15 (Capitals cited after the original)

¹³⁸ David Chandler (ed.), *Relocating the Remains: Keith Piper*, London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1997, 36

meet other black artists and perhaps, as the pamphlet states, ‘inspire other black youngsters’ to push through the rejection based on race, and promote the development of art and creativity as a positive outlet of energy instead of the conventionally negative association of young black people with crime. Comradeship and collaboration was instilled very early with the commitment to working as an artist collective, exhibiting and working together to create a forefront of revolution in the art world, demonstrated by the very idea of forming a collective body. This discussion of inclusion of black artists will resurface in chapter three regarding publics, however, it is important to note that the geographical location of *Black Art an’Done* in Wolverhampton, a city with no previous politically critical black art exhibitions, worked to open up the Midlands as a vanguard space for the inclusion and advancement of black artists that was pushed forward by the BLK Art Group.

The exhibitions to follow *Black Art an’Done* embody the most substantial work of the Group during a period of most intense collectivity, between 1982 and 1983. The exhibition was titled *The Pan Afrikan Connection: an exhibition of work by young black artists*, travelling to several venues across the country: Bristol, Birmingham, Coventry, London and Nottingham,¹³⁹ the probable reasoning for the choice of geographical spaces was previously examined in this chapter. One of the main aims of the Group was to expand awareness about the work of young black artists in Britain; Chambers describes that ‘Our position was that as Black artists we were under obligation to make work which unreservedly aligned itself with the struggle of

¹³⁹ Gallery venues listed in Appendix Three

black people.¹⁴⁰ The desire to reach a wide network of black people and communicate the struggle of overcoming hardships based on race in the work of the BLK Art Group was a central concern, thus the significance of the travelling exhibition is momentous in that it achieved an expanded awareness geographically throughout England. This web of exhibitions undoubtedly reached a wider audience than the first exhibition and influenced individuals who had not seen black art previously. The wide network of exhibitions that spread around the country throughout the Midlands and London heightens this idea of reaching and making contact with a broad diversity of people. The idea of recreating the exhibition several times across the country is a clever model to achieve the goals of the Group: that in repeatedly showing the work in multiple geographical spaces there is a naturally increased quantity of publics that will view and possibly be affected and influenced by the work.

2.2 Borrowing Institutional Spaces

It is important to highlight that the significance of these exhibitions in the Midlands, by students and recent students,¹⁴¹ none of whom was older than twenty, is doubled when considering that publicly funded and commercial art galleries typically excluded the work of Afro-Caribbean and Asian artists altogether from their exhibition programmes, and if their work was included it was generally marginalised

¹⁴⁰ Gilane Tawadros and Victoria Clarke (eds), *Annotations 5: Run Through the Jungle: Selected Writings by Eddie Chambers*, London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1999, 57 (Capitals cited after the original)

¹⁴¹ Chandler (ed.), *Relocating the Remains*, 22

by presenting it in eroticised or primitivised terms.¹⁴² The esteemed inclusion in spaces that was achieved by the Group indeed propelled them into what followed over the next three years in the collective, which was a rapid dissemination of black art through the exhibition *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*. Chambers states that 'Black artists were not fortunate enough to be offered space at these venues and had little or no chance of securing exhibitions elsewhere. They had to do with the ghettoisation of their work, that is being able to exhibit only in community centres, youth clubs, libraries, and so on.'¹⁴³ However, this was not the case for the BLK Art Group; they exhibited at very impressive venues across the UK during the early 1980s, including the Ikon Gallery, Wolverhampton Art Gallery and Herbert Art Gallery.

In the 'Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto' Rasheed Araeen writes: 'but if this is to serve the true interests of all peoples rather than become another instrument of selfish Western interests, it must be based on a clear rejection of Western art history as THE mainstream.'¹⁴⁴ Araeen expressed the emphasis of working outside of the parameters of the mainstream art establishment, however, this argument did not apply to the Group's choice of spaces in which they exhibited. What is debatable is the reason why the Group did not participate in the exhibition of their work in 'other' spaces such as buses, subways and billboards. It is necessary to note alternate exhibition venues since other radically political artist collectives such as the Guerrilla Girls who were practicing within the similar period of the early 1980s in New York,

¹⁴² Heather Maitland (ed.), *Achieving Diversity*, 10, www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/.../navdiffpt2_phpJGPnwp.doc, 20 July 2010, accessed April 2011

¹⁴³ Tawadros and Clarke (eds), *Annotations* 5, 70

¹⁴⁴ Rasheed Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*, London: Kala Press, 1984 (Capitals cited after the original)

were using alternate spaces like billboards and the sides of buses that travelled through the city.¹⁴⁵ This kind of exhibition escapes the restraints of the gallery and museum in favour of a mobile, highly accessible and visible form of exhibition, one that might seem to be in line with the BLK Art Group's political prerogatives. In the previous chapter I discussed issues of opposition with the art institution, specifically addressing issues regarding the Group's institutional and canonical criticism, however, in relation to physical space, it is important to build upon this previous examination of institutional subversion and note that these artists were not disseminating political ideas through guerrilla tactics using the exhibition space of buses for instance, but were approaching the art establishment very professionally. This decision is quite compelling as one might assume that by reading their political polemics a kind of alternative exhibition practice and means of rebellious artistic dissemination would be logical, however, the Group communicated these radical ideas without using radical spaces, they received the attention they desired in a very proficient and calculated way using universities, regional galleries and museum spaces.

In his essay 'The Gallery as a Gesture' Brian O'Doherty describes that the general term 'space' replaced the word gallery in contemporary art display and was used precisely because it avoided the connotations of an institutional or commercial environment, where an hierarchical, formal arrangement might determine audience behaviours in pre-set ways.¹⁴⁶ Examining the implications of gallery spaces in their

¹⁴⁵ Guerrilla Girls, 'How Women Get Maximum Exposure In Art Museums', <<http://www.guerrillagirls.com/posters/getnaked.shtml>>, accessed June 2011

¹⁴⁶ Brian O'Doherty 'The Gallery as a Gesture', Reesa Greenberg *Thinking About Exhibitions*, New York: Routledge, 1996, 396

geographical location, as well as type of venue, whether commercial, regional, artist-run, or alternative exhibition site, will expand the notion that gallery spaces can be converted by the work that is shown within them. This conversion of space perhaps occurs by the merits of the work itself, intentionally manipulated by the artists through carefully challenging methods of display or by external interjections or influences that fundamentally alter the exhibition. I will examine how the Group transformed already existing gallery spaces that it occupied in order to conceptually create new spaces, ones that had not previously been occupied by young black artists.

The artists did not attempt to occupy or create new spaces for exhibiting art works, as the Ikon gallery did during its early years by setting up booths in shopping centres or as the artists associated with Brit Art who converted factory spaces into exhibition venues in the 1980s.¹⁴⁷ The Group consciously wanted to show black art in spaces that had not shown this work previously, therefore this can be read conceptually as producing and making space for themselves in the galleries and in the canon rather than creating completely new spaces or exhibiting in spaces that were intended specifically for black artists. The significance of this motion is imperative as it indicates the desire to open up a space, an interstitial space, and step into the art establishment, rather than reject it completely. Working inside the art establishment would certainly be perceived as a divergent action to the Group's contemporary Rasheed Araeen, who, as I have previously discussed, rejected the Western art establishment, which would inherently include traditional exhibition spaces.

However, Araeen's objection to the art establishment as outlined in the 'Preliminary

¹⁴⁷ Antonia Grousdanidou, *Internationalism and locality: The Ikon Gallery and its exhibitions*, MPhil thesis, University of Birmingham, 2010

Notes for a Black Manifesto' seems to have ceased by the late 1980s as evidenced in the exhibition *The Other Story* held at the Hayward Art Gallery in 1989. His rebellious and acute writing that rejected Western art institutions was concentrated in the late 1970s and early to mid 1980s, simultaneous to the time of the BLK Art Group's existence. The BLK Art Group utilised the pre-formed art establishment by using its institutions as arenas to gain professional acknowledgement for their work and through their intervention transformed it into a new space that implicitly challenged and excavated its embedded prejudices.

The history of the Wolverhampton Art Gallery's collection is relevant to describe at this stage of the argument concerning institutional spaces. The gallery's holdings include a collection of Northern Irish art works. This collection is indicative of a 'reassessment and evaluation of the effects of the conflict, this is a move that encourages reflection also about the process of representation [...] and the roles that notions of the visual have played in determining our knowledge of the course of events.'¹⁴⁸ Subsequently in 1993 the Contemporary Art Society Collection Scheme in Wolverhampton reviewed the collection of contemporary work, and it was decided that social and political themes were to be developed in the collection.¹⁴⁹ It could be hypothesised that this interest in collecting work with political subject matters and contested social themes, which was realised ten years after *Black Art an'Done* exhibition in 1982, could have perhaps been somewhat influenced by the Group's exhibition at Wolverhampton. In the early 1990s the Gallery had acquired a work by

¹⁴⁸ Fiona Barber, 'Envisioning Conflict: Art and Politics in Northern Ireland', Kate Pryor (ed.), *Northern Ireland Collection Catalogue*, Wolverhampton Art Gallery & Museums, 2007, 33

¹⁴⁹ Brenden Flynn, 'Origins of the Collection', Kate Pryor (ed.), *Northern Ireland Collection Catalogue*, 9

Gavin Jantes from his *Korabra* series on the theme of African diaspora. It is possible then that the importance of the BLK Art Group's exhibition at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery was not only significant in that it was the first highly political black art exhibition by young black artists at the gallery as well as in the region, but also in that it seems to have had an influence on the direction of the Wolverhampton Art Gallery's acquisition of a collection that 'reflects aspects of the social and political landscape of modern Britain.'¹⁵⁰

2.3 Reading Exhibition Space: Interjections and transformations of *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*

To build upon the initial discussion of geographical and institutional space I will now turn to an analysis of the exhibition space in the gallery as the arena for the Group's radical demonstrations of political visual doctrines. In order to read how the gallery spaces that the BLK Art Group exhibited within were transformed into new spaces, Lefebvre argues that a space can be decoded or read, and that this space implies a process of signification.¹⁵¹ Focusing on *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition at the Herbert Art Gallery in 1983, this sub-chapter will describe how elements of the exhibition were paramount in displacing and transforming the gallery experience. Eddie Chambers later writes in the exhibition catalogue to the 1989 exhibition *Black Art Plotting the Course*: 'The group's first exhibition at Wolverhampton Gallery in 1981, with the help of Wolverhampton School teacher Eric Pemberton, we developed what we considered to be a progressive, somewhat revolutionary context for our art,

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9

¹⁵¹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 17

as well as attempting to embrace Black politics within our work.’¹⁵² I would like to pursue the idea that the exhibition signified the physical embodiment of the Group’s ideas and that the revolutionary context that Chambers refers to above is the exhibition itself, a body around which the political ideologies are contextualised by visual art and written work in the accompanying exhibition literature.

Carol Duncan’s writing in *Civilising Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* offers a useful framework in which to theorise how the BLK Art Group’s exhibitions altered the spaces they exhibited within and how these changes perhaps transformed the conventions of the gallery. The ritual of the museum, according to Duncan, consists of immersion into a site of cultural activity.¹⁵³ This description of the gallery imbues the idea that the exhibition space is a distinct space with a particular expectancy; it is a liminal space that exists slightly outside of reality and when it is disrupted by unexpected changes, the ritual is broken. As discussed in *Civilising Rituals*, the term liminality was developed by British cultural anthropologist, Victor Turner, and applied to the attention we bring to art museums, these cultural situations, Turner argued, ‘could open a space in which individuals can step back from the practical concerns and social relations of everyday life and look at themselves and their world, or at some aspect of it, with different thoughts and feelings.’¹⁵⁴ What is important here is the understanding that the gallery does in fact provide a special space that is inscribed by ritual where the contemplation of objects assumes central importance. Once this liminal space has been manipulated and the ritual is altered, one’s

¹⁵² Eddie Chambers, *Black Art: Plotting the Course*, exhibition catalogue, Oldham Art Gallery, Wolverhampton Gallery, Bluecoat Gallery, 1989, 21 (Capitals cited after the original)

¹⁵³ Carol Duncan, *Civilising Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, London: Routledge, 1995, 11

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

experience within the space perhaps changes to uncertainty and curiosity. To substantiate how the BLK Art Group transformed gallery spaces I will outline how signifiers in the gallery have the ability to provide clues as to how to read the space that the works assume.

Altering the ritual of the museum as an exhibitionary methodology is not a new strategy; this means of challenging or subverting the exhibition is thoroughly embedded within the history of exhibition culture. This is evident throughout the twentieth century in all major art movements. In Britain, exhibition as shock tactics are conventionally associated with the YBAs beginning in the late 1980s with work that was directly intended to shock, including for instance the exhibition *Freeze*. This exhibition in particular is aligned with the BLK Art Group's exhibitions in that it was organised by Damien Hirst while he was still a student at Goldsmiths College in London in 1988, and featured a collective body of artists working under a group title. The comparisons between the groups might end there yet despite this history of intentional shock in exhibitions, the BLK Art Group used shocking narratives of race and prejudice in their work, employing subject matters that were unprecedented in the Midlands. As I have described, physical spaces have the power to define experience and alter the viewer's reception in that space. Signs communicate how to experience spaces; these signs can take the form of direct textual signs like didactic panels or indirectly as the location and order of art works within the gallery space thereby determining the course of viewing.

The public received the exhibition very abrasively; it was interpreted as offensive, racist, and inflammatory.¹⁵⁵ By the wishes of the Councillors of Coventry the result of this uproar of negative reception, which is outlined in articles in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, was to place a physical paper sign at the entrance of the gallery to warn visitors of the exhibition's 'offensive' material. Found within the Herbert Art Gallery archive of *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition is a document with two drafts of the sign to be included in the exhibition, written by the Senior Keeper of Visual Arts, Patrick Day, who according to the files seemed to be the central point of contact between the Group and the Herbert Art Gallery. The first draft of the sign reads: 'This exhibition of young black artists contains images and language that some people might find offensive. It is an adult exhibition. Children under the age of 16 should be accompanied by an adult' and the second draft: 'Some of the images and the language in this exhibition might shock. It is an adult exhibition and children under the age of 16 should be accompanied by an adult.'¹⁵⁶ It is not clear what the wording of the final sign was, nevertheless, this physical sign that was installed at the entrance of the gallery door is blatantly preconditioning the viewer prior to entering the gallery, consequently influencing how the viewer encounters the works by altering the experience of the exhibition tremendously.

The sign was not part of the exhibition, in that neither the artists nor the Herbert Art Gallery devised it. It therefore cannot be critiqued as an intentional strategy used to provoke a very literal and bluntly positioned change of ritual in the gallery, yet the

¹⁵⁵ Unknown Author, 'Row over art show prompts adult ruling', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, Herbert History Archive, 22 February, 1983

¹⁵⁶ *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition archive, Herbert Museum and Art Gallery, Coventry, England, accessed April 8, 2010

sign indeed very clearly alters the gallery space by restricting who can and cannot see the exhibition, and explicitly alienates and demarcates the exhibition from the rest of the museum. The sign was forced into the gallery on recommendation from the city of Coventry, and is highly indicative of the possible racism and prejudice that the Group directly pointed and brought attention to in their work. Picking up from the argument of the Group's exhibition strategies from chapter two, this sign could be interpreted as working with what the BLK Art Group had intended for their work to communicate by underlining issues of racism in Britain, as a tool that highlights the inherent racism and censorship against black artists. This can be read as an unintentional interjection which further enabled the Group's criticism of the art institution, even though the presence of the sign was not intended by the artists, it explicitly contributes to the underlying thesis of their work: the rejection, transformation and subversion of the discrimination and alienation of black artists.

To build upon and contextualise the reading of the exhibition space in *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* it is relevant to mention the exhibition *The Thin Black Line* from 1985 as an exhibition that was also unintentionally transformed by the spatial framework of the gallery, which in turn contributed to the thesis of the exhibition. Lubaina Himid curated the exhibition *The Thin Black Line* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, and despite the fact that it was not a BLK Art Group exhibition, it included Marlene Smith who was a previous member of the Group as well as Himid and Sonia Boyce who were contemporaries and worked with artists of the Group. The exhibition was mounted in the corridor and stairwell in the ICA, literally standing between two galleries rather than displayed inside of a gallery. Chambers describes that the exhibition was '[...] marginalised in the most obvious of ways, hung as it is

along a pokey, cramped, altogether unsuitable corridor and stairway.’¹⁵⁷ Chambers develops this point further in a subsequent essay:

The thinking here must have been along the lines of ‘Why exhibit one Black artist, or why give them the whole gallery space, if you can do a job-lot and get away with exhibiting eleven of them – all in the same space, and all at the same time?’ [...]. The corridor space [...] was cramped, dull, pokey, and altogether unsuitable. To this can be added the final insult – in the adjoining gallery (a well-lit, spacious area) was an exhibition by one solitary white artist, whose work could very reasonably be described as crap.¹⁵⁸

The way in which the work was mounted in the gallery implicitly revealed the basis of inequality and lack of equal exhibition space within at the ICA by the very instance of the work’s installation in the corridor. In the exhibition catalogue, Himid states: ‘It is clear there is reluctance to place our work on the map of credibility. The gate-keepers still see us as risk at worst and exotic at best [...]. We need room to expand our ideas [...]. We demand exhibitions that contextualise our ideas.’¹⁵⁹ These artists need room to expand their ideas, literally in a gallery at the ICA, and perhaps more importantly, a space to develop their artistic practices in the art establishment at large. Despite the fact that the institution decided on the location for the exhibition, it can nevertheless be interpreted as pointing out the prejudices of the museum as an aid to further illustrate the marginalisation of black women artists.

In the year 1980, five years prior the *Thin Black Line*, the ICA hosted three high profile feminist art exhibitions: *Issue: social strategies by women artists*, *About Time*

¹⁵⁷ Eddie Chambers, ‘The Marginalisation of Black Art’, *The Race Today Review*, 1986.

¹⁵⁸ Eddie Chambers, *Annotations 5*, 17 and 18 (Capitals cited after the original)

¹⁵⁹ Lubaina Himid, ‘Afterward,’ *The Thin Black Line*, exhibition catalogue, Institute of Contemporary Art, 1985

– *Video, Performance and Installation by 21 Women Artists and Women's Images of Men*. It is therefore quite curious that the *Thin Black Line* was shunned to the corridor space of the gallery since the ICA seemed to welcome three feminist exhibitions during the early 1980s. In particular the exhibition *About Time – Video, Performance and Installation by 21 Women Artists* seems to be similar in curatorial context and content to the *Thin Black Line*, as both exhibitions proclaim and insist that the acknowledgment of woman artists is overdue in large exhibition institutions like the ICA. The catalogue describes that ‘the exhibition marked a turning point as a major gallery show of women's time-based art, an area which had previously provided women artists with a means to "question and bypass the gallery system which had for so long been stacked against them"¹⁶⁰.¹⁶¹ However, the difference between the two exhibitions is precisely race: *About Time* consisted of white woman artists including Catherine Elwes, Tina Keane, Roberta Graham, Marceline Mori, Susan Hiller, Rose Garrard, Alex Meigh and Jane Rigby, whereas the *Thin Black Line* consisted of all black British women artists. In this way, the ICA was almost critiquing itself on behalf of the artists, pointing out its own inequality through the signification of the hallway display.

An additional indication of prejudice lies in the installation of the *Thin Black Line*, where the work very literally was not hung inside of the gallery where artwork is traditionally displayed. This installation decision subsequently disrupts what Carol Duncan calls the ritual of the museum, by indicating the exhibition is not equal to the

¹⁶⁰ Lynn Mac Ritchie, *About Time: Video, Performance and Installation by 21 Women Artists*, exhibition catalogue, London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1980

¹⁶¹ Tom Roberts, *About Time: Video, Performance And Installation By Women Artists*, ICA London and Arnolfini, Bristol' November 1980, *Lux Online: History*, <http://www.luxonline.org.uk/history/1980-1989/about_time.html>, accessed May 2011.

work in the adjacent galleries. The museum has the power to control how the work is perceived within its walls, therefore to restrict the exhibition to the seclusion of the corridor can be interpreted as a proclamation that the work is not of a high enough standard to be included in the official gallery space. This action of keeping the exhibit in the hallway maintains the notion that Western art is dominant, and art created by black women artists is inferior, thus preserving the hierarchy of what is acceptable and what is not. A final observation rests on the title of the exhibition as it suggests that the work was only marginally permitted in the gallery, not fully accepted into it, yet simultaneously not entirely excluded either. The exhibitions *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* and *Thin Black Line* were each shaped by interruptions from the institutions that critically altered the exhibition, which in turn heightens the thesis of the exhibitions to point out and reject institutional racism and exclusion. By entering the Herbert Art Gallery and the ICA the exhibitions presented an attempt at equal representation as black artists. Through the lack of importance that was attributed to the exhibitions, demonstrated by the interjection of the sign and the location of the art works, the exhibition explicitly demonstrates the prejudice towards black artists.

2.4 The Altered Experience of the Exhibition: Image, Text and Analysis

An additional ramification of the expressed distaste of the exhibition was the ordering of the works in the exhibition. The work that caused repeated bashing in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* was Keith Piper's painting titled *Reactionary Suicide: Black Boys Keep Singing or Another Nigger Died Today* of 1982 (Fig. 2). As previously noted in chapter one, a central stratagem of the BLK Art Group's work and exhibition culture was shock. The visual work was frankly confrontational and depicted words and

images drawn from the social upheaval and distress of racial discrimination. The work exposed and addressed overt racism as it occurred on the streets and in the media, often by re-telling historical and current events from points of view that were unacknowledged by the mainstream,¹⁶² from the perspective of the victims of these racial hate crimes.

Text is highly prominent in this work, the background is inscribed with text that reads: ‘another nigger died today seems one too many compromise fucked him up hear he sold out got souled out consumed + was consumed.’¹⁶³ Clearly influenced by the Notting Hill riots of 1958, Brixton riots of 1981, Enoch Powell’s 1968 ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, as well as visits of Martin Luther King and Malcom X, the work is described by Stuart Hall as infiltrated with ‘rage and anger at the speed and depth of this racialising process “at home” explode across and literally scar the surfaces of work like Keith Pipers’ *Reactionary Suicide: Black Boys Keep Singing or Another Nigger Died Today*, 1982.’¹⁶⁴ To speak of anger as scaring the surface of the painting is such a physically emotive yet precise description of this painting. The forceful brush handling of the canvas outlined in red with washes of black and white paint in the background, with the addition of text that is deliberate yet seemingly quickly inscribed as the paint is allowed to drip below, culminates to signify an uneasiness, an energy embedded in the background that visually reads, in addition to the textual reading, of infuriation. The foreground consists of a black man, arms outstretched in

¹⁶² Maitland, *Achieving Diversity*, www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/.../navdiffpt2_phpJGPnwp.doc. 20 July 2010, accessed April 2011

¹⁶³ Text from painting *Keep Singing (Another Nigger Died Today)*, from 1982, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 182 x 121 centimetres

¹⁶⁴ Stuart Hall, ‘Assembling the 1908s: The Deluge – and After’, *Shades of Black*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 9

an almost crucifixion state, with the head drawn backwards and wide gaping mouth screaming in agony. The man's necktie is held upwards, which indicates that he has been hung where the necktie signifies a noose, corroborated by the legs and feet that are left dangling and inwardly pointed. The sheer suffering that is embedded in this work by the visual subject is enhanced by the text thereby adding an additional layer of meaning. The fury embedded in this painting very directly alters the ritual of the museum, depicting the reality of racism with a terrifying image of discrimination blatantly positioned in the Herbert Art Gallery: a place that has never before seen work created by critical and politically aware black artists.

The *Coventry Evening Telegraph* newspaper describes the wish to take down Piper's *Reactionary Suicide: Black Boys Keep Singing or Another Nigger Died Today* but that the artists 'will pull out of the show if the picture is removed'¹⁶⁵ and that they 'threatened to cancel if the painting was withdrawn.'¹⁶⁶ The compromise was that the work be relocated to the far wall of the gallery, away from the entrance to avoid immediate sight of the work from the doorway. Yet, is this work in fact as offensive as the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* leads the reader to believe? True, the painting contains a representation of a man seemingly hanging from his necktie as a noose, but this is not explicit. It certainly contains swearing and alludes to hanging, but it is devoid of violent weapons, battle, gore, or overt and clear murderous acts. In fact, this work is far less offensive than some work done in the previous decade in some conceptually grounded and performance based practices, including for example,

¹⁶⁵ Author Unknown, 'Art Show Heading for Clash', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, February 19, 1983, Herbert History Archive

¹⁶⁶ Author Unknown, 'Row over art show prompts adult ruling', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, Herbert History Archive, February 22 1983

American artist Chris Burden in his work *Trans-fixed*, from 1974, in which he was nailed to an automobile thereby crucifying his own body. Is Burden's performance not more directly startling, brutal and perhaps offensive than Piper's? The difference is race. This image pushes the disturbing realities of racism in the viewer's face and demonstrates the brutal inhumanity of hate based on race. It ultimately points a finger at the viewer and implicates the one viewing the work, turning the act of entering the luminous world of the museum into an uncomfortable and socially critical experience.

Similarly, Darby English has commented on Glen Ligon's text-based paintings describing that in 'reading these words, one finds oneself the unwitting agent of an extreme impropriety, as one is conscripted into the promulgation of a stereotype [...] it forcefully engages a racial stereotype.'¹⁶⁷ By placing these hateful words into the mind of the reader of this work it conjures the image of racial discrimination, stereotyping, but also sympathy, turning text to thing,¹⁶⁸ consequently affecting the viewer, presenting a more powerful and direct reading in addition to the purely visual. English describes that these visual and textual paintings 'evoke a gamut of specific, wholly imagined bodily schemas – the stereotyped “niggers” [...] mordant black spectacle.'¹⁶⁹ It is a condition of reading that we permit the work to enter us and particularly when text is married to horrific images of pain the reader can be emotionally affected and implicated in this process.¹⁷⁰ Lefebvre substantiates this idea stating, 'human beings [...] *have* a space and that they *are* in this space [...] they

¹⁶⁷ Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010, 249

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 241

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 250

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 241

do not merely enjoy a vision, a contemplation, a spectacle – for they act and situate themselves in space as active participants.’¹⁷¹ In reading the work the viewer is therefore actively consuming it; the text and the image of the artwork, thus it is reliant on the viewer as the partner in activating the spectacle. The space that is created between the viewer and the artwork is abstract, existing inside the physical space of the gallery. Furthermore, adjoining text within the pictorial plane of the painting deepens the comprehension of the work: the text assumes two functions as a signifier within the space: it carries content as a visual image yet also a communicative tool through its textual reading.

These impositions on the gallery space are highly indicative of the power these changes in space have in defining the ‘relative standing of individuals within that community.’¹⁷² Carol Duncan claims that by controlling the spaces in which cultural artefacts are displayed, the museum also controls the ‘representation of a community and its highest values and truths.’¹⁷³ The insertion of the warning sign demonstrates the control of the public who see the exhibition and maintains the racial difference in the gallery by stating that the exhibition and its contents are abrasive and separate from the work by white artists in the rest of the gallery. These signifiers denote the division between what is considered acceptable fine art in the museum by white artists, and the politically poignant work by the black artists, as indicated in its censorship. The interjections uphold racial alienation and even build upon it by explicitly stating that the exhibition is so offensive that only adults may view it,

¹⁷¹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 294 (Italics cited after the original)

¹⁷² Duncan, *Civilising Rituals*, 8

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

preconditioning it as an almost pornographic exhibition, one that should be concealed behind closed doors.

It is necessary to point out that the production of space in this exhibition by both the BLK Art Group and select publics of Coventry, was produced not only through a dialogue of racism and demonstration of power to control what is displayed in the museum, but also a performance of prejudice. Racial difference was inscribed and embedded in the gallery space with the abovementioned signifiers that were brought on by some of the uncompromising white middle class of Coventry, which will be expanded upon in chapter three regarding publics, thereby corroborating the discrimination and refusal to accept non-white artists within the institution. The space was ultimately transformed not only by the artist's work in the exhibition, but transformed by the interpolation from individuals of Coventry, even before publics were able to view the exhibition. The very fact of the uproar against the exhibition as presenting 'offensive' subject matter illustrates the success and achievement of the transformation of the space.

2.5 The Collapse of Physical and Immaterial Spaces

The space that is created between a viewer or reader and an artwork, is a conceptual arena. This space need not be limited to physical, geographical and gallery spaces but also includes and intersects with, what Lefebvre calls, mental, or perhaps a more useful term, conceptual or immaterial spaces, that were produced and occupied by the BLK Art Group. Moving now towards an exploration of the abstract spaces the BLK

Art Group created through the artist's texts and archives, it is important to note that according to the lines of thought offered by epistemology, describing the status of space as a 'mental thing' or 'mental place'¹⁷⁴ or a space of ideas, it offers a way to begin to think about space as Henri Lefebvre described, as a product of something that is produced materially while at the same time 'operates as a theoretical concept and practical reality in indissoluble conjunction.'¹⁷⁵ This argument will be informed by the abstract spaces that the artists produced through numerous textual publications in exhibition literature and the storage of this material in an archive.

The Group's reliance on writing is fundamental in contributing to the idea of the production of conceptual spaces. The writing in the exhibition pamphlets and catalogues are small polemics embodying each artist's stance on the issues of racism through critical writing that critiqued cultural prejudices in Britain. The introduction in the *Black Art an'Done* exhibition pamphlet written by Eddie Chambers states:

Because of the fact that we, the 3.7% of the British population, have been and are being oppressed as a race and exploited as the working class: now more than ever before, the Black artist has a growing obligation to acknowledge (in and through his or her work) the fundamental elements that characterise our existence as Black British. The work of the Black artist should be seen as having specific positive functions: a tool to assist us in our struggle for liberation, both at home and abroad, as opposed to simply reflecting the moral bankruptcy of modern times. Black art should indicate and/or document change. It should seek to effect such change by aiming to help create an alternative set of values necessary to better living. Otherwise it fails to be legitimate art. Generally speaking "*Black Art an'Done*" aims at raising the level of self-awareness and motivation amongst ourselves.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 3

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 66

¹⁷⁶ Eddie Chambers, *Black Art an'Done*, exhibition pamphlet, Institute of International Visual Arts archive, 2 (Capitals cited after the original)

This tone of writing is similar to a manifesto, a political polemic that outlines the motives of the artists of the Group, including what needs to be included in the work to be considered fitting into their definition of black art and what does not. For the purposes of examining conceptual space, it is important to emphasise that the writing continually uses the pronoun ‘us’ and ‘we’ insinuating that the collectiveness is not only of the Group, but also the black publics to which the work refers and is directed. The space that is created in using a plural and common pronoun assumes a collective reading of the text, thus the conceptual space is expanded, beyond the exhibition space, towards the creation of an abstract space.

The Group’s driving goal, interpreted from their artist statements, seemed to be the vast dissemination and communication of their political arguments towards inclusion in the art establishment. As visual artists, exhibitions are often the communicative medium of choice, however, exhibitions are inherently a hugely time consuming endeavour where only one, or at most a small amount, of exhibitions can occur at a time. In order to avoid this constraint, the Group additionally utilised text and writing as a forum, as these media can be published and easily made multiple without requiring physical space. Gaston Bachelard eloquently describes the reading of space, he says, ‘I stated that to say one ‘reads’ a house or a room, makes sense. We might also say that writers let us read their treasure-boxes [...]. If we “read” a Rilke box, we shall see how inevitably a secret thought encounters time.’¹⁷⁷ Thinking about how text can operate in this manner invariably turns the writing, which inherently is a completely abstract composition of letters, into a space, a box full of abstract ideas.

¹⁷⁷ Gaston Bachelard, ‘Drawers, Chests and Wardrobes’, *The Poetics of Space*, Massachusetts, Beacon Press: 1969, 83

The writing of Eddie Chambers in particular, continues to be polemic and forceful in attitude and style throughout the 1980s to the present. The introduction chapter contains several statements from Chambers' writing that have been widely published to indicate the forceful and political vigour that permeates his work.

It was suggested earlier that the travelling exhibition, *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, demonstrates a web of expansion and distribution of the Group's ideas, however, the writing by the artists of the Group builds upon a comprehensive expansion of conceptual space, one that is not restricted by geography. This idea may be imagined as a conceptually produced blanket of the BLK Art Group's work extending across England. Lefebvre describes that 'the "moment" thus conceived of has its memory and specific time. Repetition is an important aspect of this "temporality,"'¹⁷⁸ which is important when thinking about exhibitions where impermanence is inherent in the practice. Lefebvre continues, 'the re-presentation of a form, rediscovered and reinvented on each occasion, exceeds previous conceptions of repetition. And furthermore, it includes them; because it also involves the return and reintegration at a high level – individual and social – of elements of the past and the surpassed.'¹⁷⁹ Not only does the travelling exhibition *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* embody the re-presentation and rediscovery of the exhibition content that is reinvented each time with the implications of the change of geography and its viewers, but also the artist's writings, in pamphlets and catalogues, as artist statements and essays, fulfil what Lefebvre describes as a repetition and re-presentation of their ideas. Significantly

¹⁷⁸ Henri Lefebvre, 'The Inventory', *La Somme et le Reste*, Paris: Meridiens, Klincksieck, 1989, reprinted in Stuart Elden, Elizabeth Lebas, and Eleonore Kofman (eds), *Henri Lefebvre: Key Writings*, New York: Continuum, 2003, 174

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

however, the writing is not reliant on physical space as the exhibition is, the repeatability of textual media is immaterial and can be innumerably re-presented.

This idea of repetition and re-presentation may be expanded to also include a re-emersion that is felt when viewing an archive. It is so significant to discuss the archive because it overthrows the limitations of geography, in other words, of physical space, and exists almost abstractly as remnants of these past events while also collapsing the two forms into a space that is mnemonic, historical or virtual. In challenging the restrictions of temporality, the archive can present an opportunity to analyse a physical and conceptual space that behaves as an additional element to the exhibitions and writing. The introduction chapter describes Eddie Chambers' dedication to collecting and maintaining an archive, physically and virtually as an online database called 'Diaspora-Artists.net'. I argue that the archive may also be considered a space where visual and textual work is kept as if in a private collection or personal exhibition, that is located, like an exhibition, in a physical space, yet escapes the restraints of temporality. Chambers' archive indeed presents the qualities of an exhibition, a vast and comprehensive exhibition chronicling the work of black artists in the 1980s leading into the 1990s, which is saturated with the achievements in visual and written work by the Group.

To approach the archive as a discourse of historical events and statements, it must be understood that the archive maintains a system of governance where there is a regulation of the documented historical events. According to Foucault the archive assumes an archaeological function: '[Archaeology] is nothing more than a re-

writing: that is in the preserved form of exteriority, a regulated transformation of what has already been written. It is not a return to the innermost secret of the origin, it is the systematic description of a discourse object.’¹⁸⁰ Thus the archive is a document that recounts the initial experience; a uniquely created space that hints at the initial remembered event. Moreover Foucault describes:

The archive is not that which, despite its immediate escape, safeguards the event of the statement, and preserves, for future memories its status as an escapee [...]. It is obvious that the archive of a society, a culture, or a civilisation cannot be described exhaustively [...]¹⁸¹

The archive assumes a space of its own; literally and physically it is a space that echoes the actual events that it depicts, but this space is shaped by the archive’s creator. It obviously cannot represent an exhaustive account of historical events, but what is included is chosen which therein substantiates a narrative: a separate space to that of the events it depicts. Foucault describes the archive as a system of formation and transformation, which describes a continually changing archaeology of material culture. The archive is fundamental to this discussion of the implications of space since it presents a folding of physical and abstract space, where the contents refer to physical space, but one that can only be imagined; one that is now only a mental space.

2.6 Conclusions

The BLK Art Group penetrated macro spaces in Britain and promoted a collective power that permitted the conceptual transformation of physical spaces. The Group

¹⁸⁰ Michael Foucault, ‘The Historical A Priori and the Archive’, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1989, 140

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 145 and 146

brought together artists who were relatively isolated and unsupported, enabling them to exchange ideas and develop their thinking about their art,¹⁸² and consequently assume and convert artistic spaces to project and demonstrate their political work. In thinking about space from the widest perspective of geographical location to the smallest concept of a written text or archive, it is implicit that in order for a space to become significant as a forum it must be inhabited, created, and challenged by individuals. Ultimately, it seems that physical space has no reality without the energy that is deployed within it by individuals.¹⁸³ The argument that would proceed this statement would contend that spaces would have no existence at all if humans did not create and experience them. Lefebvre defines space in a highly appropriate, yet perhaps tautological and obvious statement: '(social) space is a (social) product.'¹⁸⁴ In order to compound this argument about the vast importance that the BLK Art Group imposed onto the art establishment, it is fundamental to open up an analysis of the notion of publics that operated within these spaces. Lefebvre argued that subjects, or perhaps, publics are produced in and through space, therefore the following chapter builds upon the arguments on spaces by discussing how publics produce, are affected by, and affect the spaces that were created and transformed by the BLK Art Group.

¹⁸² Maitland, *Achieving Diversity*,
<www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/.../navdiffpt2_phpJGPnwp.doc>, 20 July 2010, accessed April 2011

¹⁸³ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 26

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 26

CHAPTER THREE

THE PRODUCTION OF PUBLICS

It has been reiterated throughout the thesis that the fundamental motivation behind the formation of the BLK Art Group was to make public the artists' beliefs regarding issues of racism in the art establishment. The exhibitions provided a means to present a public face of the Group that addressed and embodied the idea that black art should be about and created for black publics. This insistence began in the initial moments on the steps of the Wolverhampton Art Gallery when Chambers and Piper declared 'Blackism' as a contemporary artistic movement that developed throughout their exhibitions and in the related exhibition writing that signified a strong reliance and dependence towards black publics. By looking at how the artists made their work public, and in turn, how the work created publics, I will demonstrate that in the spaces that were produced by the Group it was the act of making their work public and therefore moving towards the production of publics that were of chief importance. Thus, participation in the mainstream art establishment by exhibiting in regional art galleries substantiates the performative concept of participation as resistance and explodes the distinction between public and private and between the political and the apolitical.¹⁸⁵

The etymology of the word public is important to define, as it will be used in two contexts throughout the chapter. 'Pub' – comes from 'public house', which originally

¹⁸⁵ Jessica J. Kulynych, 'Performing Politics: Foucault, Habermas, and Postmodern Participation', *Polity*, Vol. 30, No. 2, Palgrave Macmillan Journals, 1997

meant ‘any building open to the public,’¹⁸⁶ meaning to make something known to a community. However, public can also mean a group of people, or the creation of a group of people, it defines the political ideal of open, inclusive, and effective deliberation about matters of common and critical concern.¹⁸⁷ Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere as including guaranteed access to all citizens,¹⁸⁸ a sphere where the public organises itself as the bearer of public opinion,¹⁸⁹ where individuals gather to participate in open discussions. He describes, ‘we call events and occasions “public” when they are open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs [...] when we speak of public places.’¹⁹⁰ This chapter will outline the progression of the BLK Art Group into the public sphere by looking at how the work was made public, what means allowed for this and consequently how this action functioned to create alternate publics.

Habermasian theories of the public sphere will offer a rich framework in which to hypothesise about reasons as to how the Group’s work reached its intended audiences and to what extent the Group succeeded in creating publics. The importance of the exhibition as the centrally significant tool of dissemination of the Group’s political ideas is due to the fact that curation and exhibition organisation act as performative and communicative social gestures and mark a display of knowledge, power, and spectatorship, and perhaps more importantly, it also marks the production of a

¹⁸⁶ Online Etymology Dictionary, < <http://www.etymonline.com/>>, accessed July 2011

¹⁸⁷ Mary P. Ryan, ‘Gender and Public Access: Women’s Politics in Nineteenth-Century America’, Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993, 260

¹⁸⁸ Jürgen Habermas, ‘The Public Sphere’, *New German Critique*, volume 3, Duke University Press, 1974, 49

¹⁸⁹ Geoff Eley, ‘Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures’, Craig Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993, 290

¹⁹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991

public.¹⁹¹ This chapter will challenge theories of the public as a sphere in which inclusivity of all people is adhered to, and it will present an argument that points to the exhibition as the mode of address that consequently contributed to the creation of an alternate public.¹⁹² The chapter will proceed by outlining the potential problematic of representing a public, followed by examining what strategies were taken to achieve this by utilising popular methods of programming and communication demonstrated in the exhibition *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*. The chapter will close by presenting a theory that examines the consequence of the Group's actions in the creation of alternate publics that is divergent from the dominant public. The chapter aims to identify the means of making work public and in turn producing a public body in which to realise the central goals of the Group.

3.1 Making Work Public: The communicative act of showing and sharing ideas publicly

As I have mentioned above and throughout the thesis, the work was made public for very specific reasons: to inspire black people to develop creative talents and respond to the black communities, as a means to perhaps unify black culture, challenge the conceptions of a black visual aesthetic and move away from alienation in the art world. Habermas describes that publicity is aimed at strengthening the prestige of one's own position through public discussions of organisations.¹⁹³ We therefore might align this notion of publicity to the presentation of the exhibitions mounted by the Group, as a means to make their work public through the display of their work in public art institutions. This sub-chapter pursues the argument that the exhibitions

¹⁹¹ Simon Sheikh, 'Constitutive Effects: The techniques of the curator', Paul O'Neill (ed.), *Curating Subjects*, Amsterdam: Edna van Duyn, 2007, 175

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 180

¹⁹³ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 200

therefore not only functioned as a forum to publicise their political ideas but that the medium of exhibition as the tool of communication was the grand means of making their work public to inspire the black community. By organising and exhibiting work in public galleries the artists fully operated and asserted control in public spaces, therein emerging from a semi-private state of existence as artists in the protected environment of the art school where they exhibited work in classes and to other students, and on to a public state of exhibition in established galleries. The exhibitions themselves signify an otherwise ignored black public entering the public sphere, evidenced by exhibiting in metropolitan galleries and inhabiting the public spheres of predominately West Midlands' gallery spaces.

It is imperative that artists exhibit and show their work to the public, in order to make their work known and get acknowledgement from others, however, there is a distinction between the creative process of making work and the communicative act of showing it publicly. This is to say, that there is a commonality in artistic practice that follows the notion that making work is primary and the exhibition of the work is secondary, a somewhat requisite or a resultant and perhaps inferior element in the artistic process. I uphold that the BLK Art Group's artistic practice regarded the mobilisation of their work into institutions through the exhibitions as equal to the production of their work, and as I have previously argued, by adopting the notion of the exhibition itself as an equal artistic medium.

As quoted in the introduction chapter, Chambers states and restates a heavy reliance on making the Group's work public. In discussing the unfairness in the gallery sector,

Chambers proclaims that ‘all sorts of people want to be involved in the process by which art interfaces with the public.’¹⁹⁴ This constant focus on interacting with the public is unwavering throughout Chambers’ writing, he describes, ‘I think black artists cannot afford to forget our communities, we cant forget these realities.’¹⁹⁵ This statement underscores the thesis throughout his entire textual and visual practice that the work is intended for the public since ‘acknowledgement of and reference to Black politics grows out of a sense of duty and commitment to the Black community.’¹⁹⁶ In the exhibition pamphlet to *Black Art: Plotting the Course*,¹⁹⁷ Chambers states in reference to the press release for *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition at the Africa Centre in London:

They are concerned with the propagation of [...] Black art within the wider sphere of Black culture. The Group believes that Black art [...] must respond to the realities of the local, national, and international Black communities. It must focus on the elements that characterise [...] the existence of Black people. In so doing, 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.¹⁹⁸

The central reasons for making the work public evidently comes from a rooted belief that by showing black art in galleries it will inspire other black artists to produce art works and consequently alter the course of contemporary artistic practices to include artists despite their race.

3.2 Representation of Publics

¹⁹⁴ Tawadros and Clarke (eds), *Annotations 5*, 15

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37 (Capitals cited after the original)

¹⁹⁷ Eddie Chambers curated *Black Art: Plotting the Course* at Oldham Gallery in 1988

¹⁹⁸ Press Release for *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, held at the Africa Centre, 4 May – 5 June, 1982 (Capitals cited after the original.)

There is much contestation regarding the issue of representation, as I will shortly outline, however, it is necessary to discuss the Group's approach to representation and its relationship to publics since the aim of a collective was to create their work 'for Black people, and about Black people.'¹⁹⁹ Due to the lack of representation of black artists, the Group took self-representation into their own hands. The Group's exhibitions were unlike traditional artist exhibitions where the curation, programming, installation and catalogue are conventionally left to the curator or gallery staff, since the artists organised and coordinated each of these aspects of the exhibition themselves. This indicates that the artists aimed to assert a firm control over the exhibition, yet this was not always the case, as identified in chapter two with the interjection of the Councillors of Coventry in *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*. Nevertheless, the exhibitions were not conceived under the direction of an external curator, where a curatorial thesis is developed and framed around visual art works. Rather, according to Chambers, what sets the Group's exhibitions apart as a distinct grouping is that they were artist-led, as opposed to gallery-led.²⁰⁰ The main assertion that this sub-chapter upholds is that the Group seemed to perceive the exhibition as primary or equivalent to the visual art work itself and that this was accomplished through the Group-led curation, programming of the exhibitions and texts that mobilised the communication of their motivating ideas of creating art for black publics.

¹⁹⁹ Tawadros and Clarke (eds), *Annotations 5*, 65 (Capitals cited after the original)

²⁰⁰ Eddie Chambers, *The Emergence and Development of Black Visual Arts Activity in England Between 1981 and 1986: Press and Public Responses. The Emergence and Development of Black Visual Arts Activity in England Between 1981 and 1986: Press and Public Responses*, inIVA archive, Goldsmiths College, University of London, London, January 1998, 60

This problematic of representation is relative when artists are ‘positioned on the margins of the institutional spaces of cultural production, they are burdened with the impossible task of speaking as “representatives” in that they are widely expected to “speak for” the marginalised communities from which they come.’²⁰¹ Paul Gilroy agrees that ‘the idea that artists are representative, public figures has become an extra burden for them to carry. Its weight can be felt in the tension between the two quite different senses of a word which refers not just to depiction but to the idea of delegation or substitution.’²⁰² The Group’s work not only spoke for and about the black community, with stated desires to inspire other ‘black youngsters,’²⁰³ but it also represented or intended to represent black publics of Britain and their combined struggles and prejudices. On one hand this idea is in line with the Eurocentric notion described by Marx that, ‘they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented’²⁰⁴ yet on the other hand, when there is an under-representation of a public an example needs to be made in order to promote and radiate change. Further, in the catalogue to the *Thin Black Line*, Lubaina Himid sites that her work ‘seeks to contribute to the building of a material culture that might have been denied [...] my audience is the people in the work.’²⁰⁵ Himid’s description of building a black culture for a black public, also embodies the significance of the Group’s practice as producing awareness about black publics while also aiming to inspire and therefore also create publics.

²⁰¹ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge, 1994, 235

²⁰² Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the politics of Black cultures*, London: Serpent’s Tail, 1989, 34

²⁰³ *Black Art An’Done* exhibition pamphlet from exhibition archive held at the Herbert Museum and Art Gallery

²⁰⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1978, xiii

²⁰⁵ Lubaina Himid, *The Thin Black Line*, exhibition catalogue, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1985

In chapter two, I referred to Chambers' comment about the role of black artists:

'Black artists should be missionaries who are dedicated to helping black people move from a negative state of existence to a positive state of survival. Our art must embrace all dimensions of blackness.'²⁰⁶ Although he describes that the work is to define all dimensions of black publics, surely this is not possible. Gen Doy corroborates this notion, describing that 'it is quite true, that there never was a single black culture.'²⁰⁷ Of course, there can never be, as Paul Gilroy has also written an 'absolute essence of blackness,'²⁰⁸ and it does not seem as though Chambers and the Group were attaining to this essentialist perspective where all the black people of Britain fit within one public solely because of their skin colour. This is evident in Chambers' writing in the exhibition catalogue to *Black Art: Plotting the Course* from 1989, where he states, 'Many black artists thought they could make it by being as non-black as possible. They are not black artists.'²⁰⁹ Furthermore, there are artists who Chambers describes as 'Black artists wanting to be white [...]. One of the most promising young Negro poets said to me once "I want to be a poet - not a negro poet" meaning, I want to write like a white poet meaning subconsciously, I want to be a white poet, meaning I would like to be white.'²¹⁰ This statement is certainly indicative of the multiplicity of black publics, and is corroborated by Fanon in that 'Negro experience is not a whole, for there is not merely *one* Negro, there are *Negroes*.'²¹¹ However, Fanon states: 'The

²⁰⁶ Chambers, *Black Art: Plotting the Course*, 15

²⁰⁷ Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers & Co. Ltd., 2000, 242

²⁰⁸ Paul Gilroy, 'On the Beach: David A. Bailey', *Small Acts: Thoughts on the politics of Black cultures*, London: Serpent's Tail, 1989, 148

²⁰⁹ Chambers, *Black Art: Plotting the Course*, 12

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ Fanz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove Publishing, 2008, 132 (Italics cited after the original)

black is a black man [...] for there are two camps: the white and the black.’²¹² This would seem that although there are multiple black publics that present varying degrees of bearing the mask, according to Fanon they are all still black. Indeed this distinction between black publics is directly in line with the Fanonian theory that certain black publics bear a white mask and is also directly symptomatic of the Group’s proclamation for the end of recognising the black-self as white psychologically.²¹³ The other side of this argument is to question whether or not it is the responsibility of the black artist to make work that is for black publics. Doy substantiates this idea by stating that ‘it seems unfair to burden black artists as a group with expectations and conditions which are not demanded of white artists.’²¹⁴ These arguments indicate the multiplicity of black publics and place a problematic on the responsibilities, if any, that black artists have towards embodying a representative stance for black publics. It would therefore seem that the publics that were represented by the Group were in fact quite narrow in that they excluded not only white publics, but also black publics that perhaps did not always address ‘black issues.’²¹⁵

Derived from the above argument, it can thus be deduced that the artists were distinctly aware of the plurality of approaches to race, despite skin colour denoting one specific experience, and aimed to repudiate the stance of the black artist conforming to white artistic practices. Contrastingly, artist Isaac Julien has said, ‘I don’t see myself as being representative of any community. I see myself as a cultural

²¹² *Ibid.*, 8

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ Doy, *Black Visual Culture*, 9

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

activist who tries to make interventions into cultural space and those interventions may draw on very personal experience.²¹⁶ Julien's position is distinct and different in relation to the Group and is indicative of a new generation where he situates himself as an individual artist in society; an artist born from the fight of the BLK Art Group. Dissimilarly from Julien's individual practice, the Group wanted to draw particular attention to the politics of black culture, which is inherently closer to political activism through the exhibition of themselves as a united black public comprised of and speaking to several black publics.

The plurality of the Group is evident in the individual members' work where each artist created work independently from the others as opposed to a process of collaboration. Yet, since they formed a group, the individuality does not seem to have been in the foreground but rather they represented a collective embodiment of activism. Due to the quantity of writing by Chambers, the correspondences between him and the institutions on behalf of the Group, as well as his introductory remarks in each of the exhibition pamphlets, it gives the impression that he was the central representative of the Group. The number of art works exhibited by each member of the Group in both *Black Art an'Done* and *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* may also indicate the weight that that member maintained in the Group. This speculation does not suggest a completely balanced equation, where the higher number of art works exhibited equals the power of the artist in the collective, however, it would seem that those who controlled the publicity of the Group also exhibited or produced a higher quantity of art work. According to the archival material, for the exhibition *Black Art*

²¹⁶ Isaac Julien, 'In Two Worlds: An Interview with Isaac Julien', *Sight and Sound* 7, July 1999, 33

an'Done Eddie Chambers exhibited twenty-nine works; Keith Piper exhibited twenty-four; Andrew Hazel exhibited six; Ian Palmer exhibited four; and Dominic Dawes exhibited four.²¹⁷ In the *Pan-Afrikan Connection* Eddie Chambers exhibited sixteen works; Keith Piper exhibited eleven; Claudette Johnson exhibited ten; Donald Rodney exhibited eight; Wenda Leslie exhibited five; and Marlene Smith exhibited four.²¹⁸ Since the highest number of art works exhibited in both exhibitions falls on Chambers closely followed by Piper, it would therefore seem that they drove the impetus for the Group's existence. This conclusion is corroborated by the very occurrence of their initial conversation on the steps of Wolverhampton Art Gallery about the development of Blackism. However, despite the amount of work shown, the plurality of the Group's approach lies in the collective political undercurrent that drove the artists to exhibit and work together as a collective, as a move to make the art establishment recognise the work of politically active black artists.

The core of the Group seemingly consisted of Chambers, Piper and Rodney. This indicates that there does not seem to be a plural or wholly collective approach to the Group's artistic practice but rather is indicative of a singular message and representation. In the end this approach evidently did not prove successful with the dissipation of the Group in 1984 when the artists developed more explicitly individual approaches to their practices. The work of the artists after the Group's existence continued but in disparate ways. Chambers went on to predominately curate exhibitions and produce critical writing about black and diasporic artists, completed a PhD in the History of Art, and joined the University of Texas at Austin as an

²¹⁷ Consult Appendix Two for details of exhibition and titles of art works

²¹⁸ Consult Appendix Three for details of exhibition and titles of art works

Assistant Professor in 2010. Keith Piper went on to produce a vast amount of art works throughout the 1980s to the present date using increasingly expanding mixed media and technological based installations and in 2006 he took up a Readership in Fine Art and Digital Media at the University of Middlesex where he is currently based. Marlene Smith is Director of The Public in West Bromwich and the current professional activities of Claudette Johnson, Andrew Hazel, Ian Palmer, Dominic Dawes, Wenda Leslie, Janet Vernon are not clear. Donald Rodney, who passed away in 1998, is cited in an interview stating that the Group ‘self-destructed.’²¹⁹ Perhaps a conclusion that could be drawn from this statement is that the Group no longer felt that they would benefit by working under a collective identity. It would seem, according to the subsequent career directions of each of the artists, that Piper and Rodney were the ones to continue to create visual art works and Chambers continued to write and curate exhibitions; incidentally the three artists who exhibited the most work and controlled the publicity of the Group. This indicates that the impetus of the Group seemed to be located in the desire to perpetrate political ideologies and change the state of the art establishment, by using art works and their exhibition as tools to accomplish this goal.

3.3 Making a Popular Black Culture: Events accompanying the exhibitions

In the pamphlet produced for *Black Art: Plotting the Course*, an exhibition curated by Chambers at The Black Art Gallery in London in 1988, it contains statements

²¹⁹ Donald G. Rodney, ‘Interview between Ruth Kelly and Donald Rodney, at Donald’s house, London 11/03/94’, conducted as part of a research degree ‘The BLK Art Group in historical context’, Open University, <<http://www.iniva.org/autoicon/DR/interv2.htm>>, accessed August 2011

articulated by the OBAALA (Organisation of Black Arts Advancement and Learning Activities) committee, including a statement regarding how to make the work accessible in order to reach the intended public, stating: ‘It is essential that Black artists aim to make their art “popular” – that is an expression that the wide community can recognise and understand.’²²⁰ This opinion may be interpreted in a variety of ways. The term popular could describe an activity or art work regarded with approval, be well known, visible and accessible, it can also be interpreted art historically as within a hierarchical system of classifying art, including the outdated notion of low and fine art for instance. Within the framework of thinking about publics, I will interpret this statement through the former definition of the term popular as easily recognisable and understandable since it is clear that the work should be accessible so that the most extensive and diverse public bodies will be interested. Given that public reception is vital according to both the BLK Art Group and OBAALA, the work should ‘play a very important role in community education and positive development’²²¹ thus it would need to be direct while retaining critical political messages in order for it to affect the public and mobilise the changes of opinions regarding inclusivity that the Group was communicating. This sub-chapter will demonstrate how the events planned in association to the exhibition *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* at the Herbert Art Gallery were created according to this definition of popularity in order to increase and expand the range of black publics that viewed the exhibition.

²²⁰ Chambers, *Black Art: Plotting the Course*, 23 (Capitals cited after the original)

²²¹ *Ibid.*

Public programming is a conventional outlet that is intended to contextualise the exhibition and is often in the form of lectures, artist or curator talks, film screenings or workshops. Audience development is a desirable consequential result of public programming, and it is defined by an enrichment of the experience of the visitor by helping them learn more and deepen their enjoyment of what the institution has to offer, which combines the aims of curator, educator and marketer.²²² The aim of exhibition programming, where subsidiary events are planned in succession to the exhibition as such, is intended to inject the institutional experience with enhanced meaning and engage visitors through multiple experiences to consequently enhance access. There has been a growth of scholarship towards examining the position of the audience and programmed events at the museum. In Graham Black's text *The Engaging Museum: Developing museums for visitor involvement*, Black cites Richard Sandell, the Director of the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, where he describes that the museum can:

Contribute towards social inclusion at an individual level by engagement that promotes positive outcomes such as enhanced self-esteem and creativity. At the community level the museum can act as a catalyst for social regeneration, empowering communities to increase their self-determination and develop the confidence and skills to take greater control over their lives and the development of the neighbourhoods in which they live. Museums, through the representation of inclusive communities within collections and displays, have the potential to promote tolerance, intercommunity respect and to challenge stereotypes.²²³

These various levels of inclusion that Sandell outlines are possible when museum programming is developed alongside exhibitions in order to contextualise and

²²² Anderson Hans Christian, *Museums Journal*, 2005 in Christian Waltl, 'Museums for Visitors: Audience development - A crucial role for successful museum management strategies', Intercom 2006 conference paper. <<http://www.intercom.museum/documents/1-4Waltl.pdf>> accessed August 2011

²²³ Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing museums for visitor involvement*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2005, 50

provide a fuller framework in which publics from different backgrounds and interests can find a programme to engage with. This concept of eliminating barriers between communities and museums is important in relation to the BLK Art Group and their exhibition mandate of promoting inclusively in the art establishment with the support of the public programming employed in the institutions.

The exhibition *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* was accompanied by extensive programming of events. These events include the screening of four films: *Black Britannica*, *It Ain't Half Racist*, *Steel 'n' Skin*, and *Dread Beat an' Blood*. In the exhibition archive at the Herbert Art Gallery in a letter written by Eddie Chambers to Patrick Day, Senior Keeper of Visual Arts, it contains the reasons for choosing the films that were presented. Chambers describes that the films:

Highlight and focus on, the political elements of the work to be exhibited in Coventry. These are not 'ethnic' or 'cultural' films, strictly speaking, as are the films you mentioned. Black art, as produced by our group, seeks to escape over limiting and imposing categories as 'ethnic'. Like the film-makers responsible for the films circled, our art is produced because of, and not despite, the political climate.²²⁴

The films were complimentary to the exhibition, meeting the function of outreach programming in order to engage and extend the thesis of the exhibition and the works within it. These films, as Chambers describes above, were particularly chosen to additionally define and offer supplementary material to enhance the work in the gallery, in order to reach the widest possible public and communicate the most accurate message using all possible outlets of dissemination.

²²⁴ Letter written from Eddie Chambers to Patrick Day, January 13, 1983, archive of the *Pan-Afrikan Connection* at the Herbert Art Gallery, Coventry (Capitals cited after the original)

Additional programming included a symposium between Lubaina Himid and Donald Rodney, that provided an ‘opportunity to discuss the exhibition and debate the issues.’²²⁵ No further information is included in the archive concerning this particular event, yet one might assume that this environment of debate and dialogue demonstrates the artists’ willingness to engage in discussions directly with the black publics that they were centrally directing their work to, as well as those who might contest and perhaps disagree with the work. To introduce a symposium type environment through open discussion signifies a welcome atmosphere in which to address the work on display and the themes that were woven throughout the art works regarding black history, black culture, black politics, and black people.²²⁶ The symposium is perhaps the most openly accessible route in which to communicate the above themes through a direct conversation with the public. The act of public discussion invites inclusivity to publics to communicate positions whether positive or negative, and further publicise the concepts of the work shown visually through conversation; perhaps the most direct way to make ideas public and simultaneously create an informed public.

Supplementary events that would certainly coincide with the intention to maintain popularity amongst publics included a dance and drumming workshop, which according to a letter found in *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition archive, directed to the Chairman and members of the Leisure Services Committee, was

²²⁵ *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition poster, archive of the Pan-Afrikan Connection at the Herbert Art Gallery, Coventry

²²⁶ Chambers, *Black Art: Plotting the Course*, 23

‘popular and quite inoffensive,’²²⁷ as well as a tie and dye workshop that was ‘also popular.’²²⁸ This programme of events was certainly intended to provide a widespread means of communication to engage with the widest possible audience to include those who were interested in visual art and who regularly attended galleries but also those who were interested in learning about the content of the workshops who might not have seen the exhibition otherwise, opening the gallery to include events to attract those not only interested in the visual.

As described above, this is common in contemporary exhibitions, with education and public programming departments dedicated to widening audiences in the gallery and museum to encourage a more inclusive viewing public, however, during the early 1980s it was slightly more uncommon to see exhibitions with such a diverse programme to accompany the exhibition, particularly in regional galleries with smaller budgets and staff teams. The exhibition functions as an outlet of public communication at all levels of community interest as it allows for direct engagement and interface with various publics through visual work as well as supplementary artist talks and symposia in addition to informal or community based workshops. This approach to exhibition culture therefore indicates a dedication to social education. Since the artists were critically unhappy with their education in the art school they chose to approach the public programming events in their exhibitions as instruments to provide the education that they once perhaps desired, in order to consequently

²²⁷ Letter to the Chairman and members of the Leisure Services Committee, written by W. Davies, Director of Leisure Services, archive of the Pan-Afrikan Connection at the Herbert Art Gallery, Coventry

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

produce politically aware black publics and provide an education experience that was denied to them.

3.4 Identifying Contesting and Accepting Publics through Exhibition Responses

In a letter cited above it describes that the workshops were considered inoffensive.²²⁹

This statement was necessary because of the unusual (compared with the other exhibitions) reaction from the Councillors and some members of the public of Coventry over the exhibition the *Pan-Afrikan Connection* at the Herbert Art Gallery, as described in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*.²³⁰ I will utilise the newspaper articles as frameworks to suggest how the artists, by creating such heavily political work, pointed out and made visible a particular public in Coventry that was uncomfortable with the display of racially political work. To supplement Chambers' text on the responses of the BLK Art Group exhibitions, the following paragraphs will annotate the newspaper articles of the *Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition in Coventry as an indication of the public reception and response generated as a result of the exhibition.

This particular exhibition received fierce press in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* detailing the reception of the exhibition from the perspectives of Coventry Councillors, local teachers, students, and Eddie Chambers. Analysing the public's reception to this exhibition provides an indication as to how the some of these publics

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ In the *Pan-Afrikan Connection* archive at the Herbert Art Gallery are letters pertaining to the articles published in this newspaper, however these articles were not included in any of the exhibition files, located in the Coventry History Centre Coventry Heritage and Arts Trust, at the Herbert Art Gallery are the articles that describe the public's reaction to the exhibition

of Coventry reacted to the display of the Group's work. Eddie Chambers' PhD thesis outlines in precise detail the press responses to the exhibitions throughout the 1980s; however, he does not investigate the articles in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* newspaper in response to *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition. Rather, Chambers examines other sources of response to the exhibitions, concentrating his criticism on the contradictory responses by 'Black and white reviewers with reference to material from newspapers and magazines.'²³¹ Furthermore, in an article titled, "'Some head will roll'" in art row, published in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* on Tuesday February 22, 1983, it describes that, 'Councillors are furious that they were not told about it being mounted at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum [...] "Somebody's head is going to have to roll for this," said Tory leisure spokesman Councillor Helen Cooper.'²³² And in another article called 'Row over art show prompts adult ruling' it expresses that, 'The controversy surrounding the modern art show began when gallery attendants complained that some of the pictures, including one of the Queen, were racist and inflammatory.' This statement indicated the problematic of pinpointing a specific public who reacted negatively towards the exhibition.

On February 19, 1983, the day of *The Pan-Afrikan Connection's* private view held the day before the exhibition was set to open to the public, an article was published in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*. The article, which is written anonymously, titled 'Art Show Heading for Clash' is headed with the line: 'An exhibition at a Coventry gallery could be cancelled because of a row over an "offensive" painting'²³³ the work

²³¹ Chambers, *Black Visual Arts Activity in England*, 105 (Capitals cited after the original)

²³² David Shukman, "'Some head will roll", *Coventry Evening Telegraph* Saturday February 22, 1983

²³³ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, Saturday February 19, 1983

that is described yet not titled, but corroborated by personal correspondence with Keith Piper, was *Reactionary Suicide: Black Boys Keep Singing or Another Nigger Died Today* (Fig.2). The intention of the work in the exhibition was to demonstrate protest and propagate political opinion about the black experience directed to promote change and unify a black culture. The work was indeed political, as evidenced in chapter two in its visual analysis, yet it is not overtly offensive, it is not what writer and activist of the Black Arts Movement in America, Larry Neal describes as ‘art that screams and masturbates before white audiences.’²³⁴ As previously discussed, the argument of these articles express distaste directed towards the BLK Art Group and their work describing it as ‘offensive’ ‘inflammatory’ and ‘racist’.²³⁵ However, it is important to note that these articles demonstrate the beliefs of some of the publics of Coventry and are highly emblematic of their intolerance as expressed in the newspapers.

A positive reaction was cited in the newspaper as well, this is evidenced in an article written about the opinion of Father Cyril Barratt, lecturer in the philosophy of art at Warwick University and art critic. He is quoted stating that the works are: ‘Extremely lively, aggressive, but definitely not offensive [...]. It’s a bit of an indictment against Coventry that this has happened.’²³⁶ Indeed this is indicative and a reflection of the feelings of a public of Coventry, and I have previously alluded to the idea that these articles very literally demonstrated a seemingly particularly racist public of Coventry.

²³⁴ Larry Neal, ‘Larry Neal Speaks on the Black Arts as Folk-Based & Directed at Black People’, taken from a taped interview 12 March 1974 at Yale University published by *Chicken Bones: A journal for literary and artistic African-American themes*, 1985,

<http://www.nathanielturner.com/larrynealspeaks.htm>, accessed July 2010

²³⁵ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, Saturday 19 February, 1983

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

A letter from the exhibition file at the Herbert Art Gallery, directed to Mr. John, with no additional contact information or institutional connection, and no marked author, describes: 'This exhibition was initially much maligned in the Coventry Press and as you know better than by some members of the Leisure Services Committee. This tells me that racialism exists in Coventry just below the surface.'²³⁷ These articles may be interpreted as documentation and proof of the public disapproval of black art that the Group was directly speaking about in their work.

An indication of the racial population of Coventry provides substantiation for the seemingly underlying racism that was illustrated against *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*. According to the racial composition of Coventry in 1991 published in the *National Ethnic Minority Data Archive Information Paper*, nearly one eighth of the population was from a racial minority group; 88.2% of the population of Coventry was white, and 11.8% consisted of Black Caribbean or African descent.²³⁸ In 2005 the population composition of black British citizens of British cities included over 1 million in Birmingham at 7.8%, over 400,000 in Bristol at 4.0%, over 300,000 in Coventry at 7.8% and Wolverhampton at 6.7%.²³⁹ It is important to note that during the 1980s the classification of 'black' meant all of those who were not white, including those of Asian and Iranian descent. This slightly higher population of black British citizens in Coventry than Wolverhampton for example could have produced a higher amount of racist opinion which would therefore create a cold front of

²³⁷ Anonymous letter written to Mr. John, from the archive of the *Pan-Afrikan Connection*, Herbert Art Gallery

²³⁸ David Owen, 'The Ethnic Composition of Coventry in 1991', *National Ethnic Minority Data Archive Information Paper*, Centre in Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick, Coventry, August 1995, <<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/~errac/coventry.pdf>>, accessed August 2011

²³⁹ Unknown author, Office for National Statistics, <<http://www.ons.gov.uk/about/index.html>>, accessed August 2011

acceptance of the BLK Art Group's work from some of the white publics of Coventry. In fact, within the published discrimination towards the artist's work, described in the press articles, lies the proof that equal inclusivity of artistic representation in public galleries was not welcomed and definitely not practiced. The articles corroborated the exclusivity in the art establishment that the Group aimed to disrupt with their exhibitions, and contributed to the exhibition's thesis of pointing out discrimination and working towards its obliteration.

Throughout the thesis I have noted the Group's insistence of aiming to reach, inspire and educate young black people that racism in the art establishment should be collectively overruled and rejected. The Group was successful in doing this through the exhibitions by attracting large numbers of black people some of them artists, some art students, some future art students. Chambers describes in the catalogue to *Black Art Plotting the Course* that 'Jas. Singh Purewal, who saw *The Pan-African Connection* exhibition in Coventry in 1983 [...]. Two years later entered the Fine Art Course at Leeds Polytechnic and his work produced during his time at the college and included in this exhibition, bears witness to the BLK Art Group influence.²⁴⁰ Influence was precisely one of the central goals to the Group, and this statement, although coming from Chambers and not Jas. Singh Purewal, not only fulfils the Group's goal to educate and inspire, but it proves the successful creation of a public. Additionally, at the 2010 conference for the exhibition *Afro Modern* at the Tate Liverpool, during the case study for the exhibition *Black Skin/Bluecoat*,²⁴¹ where

²⁴⁰ Chambers, *Black Art: Plotting the Course*, 22

²⁴¹ *Black Skin/Bluecoat* was held at the Bluecoat Art Gallery in Liverpool from 4 April to 4 May in 1985

Bryan Biggs, director of the Bluecoat, Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce discussed the exhibition; a woman in the audience presented a comment, she said:

I grew up looking for myself in art galleries [...] looking for my reflection of myself [...] I thought you were so radical as a group of artists and I thought you were dead mature [...] you were younger than me [...] and you gave to me as an emerging artist an image of myself that stayed with me all my life. As important as this exhibition is here, it gives us a contemporary image of ourselves [...] the collection of you that have stayed in the visual arts have kept that image of me and us to the forefront, and really I am so grateful for that because it is an inspiration and it enables me to find myself in these buildings, that historically we have built [...] and I think it is just an important thing that everybody needs to find themselves in galleries and I think without those visual images we would still be lost.²⁴²

The statements above corroborate the argument that the Group succeeded in influencing the black community, and it is with this influence that publics were formed and political participation was enacted, not only through the visual and exhibition practices but also through the medium of talk.²⁴³ Publics necessitate participation of the individuals within them in order to be constituted as a public, hence the importance that the Group attributed to inspiring other black youths through as many communicative methods as possible. It is this acknowledgement that the BLK Art Group paid to black artists and black publics, including ones interested in visual art and those interested in film, lectures, or workshops for instance, that allowed for the birth of informed black publics in the Midlands during a time when they were severely underrepresented.

²⁴² Bryan Biggs, 'Interview with Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce on Exhibition Case Study: Black Skin/Blue Coat, The Bluecoat, Liverpool, 4 April-4 May 1985', *Global Exhibitions: Contemporary Art and the Africa Diaspora*, Afro Modern Symposium, Tate Liverpool 19 February 2010, unpublished digital recording, 30 minutes, private archive of Julia Abraham, Birmingham 2010

²⁴³ Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, No. 25/26, Duke University Press, 1990, 56-80

3.5 Birthing New Publics: The BLK Art Group's counter-public

The new publics that were formed by the Group may be perceived of as antagonistic to the protagonist dominant publics. Perhaps it is suitable to think about the protagonist publics, including the ones that were offended by the Group and professed to relocate the 'offensive' painting, as being aligned with the mainstream art establishment that the artists were seeking to reject. The publics that the BLK Art Group consisted of and represented did not try to peacefully co-exist alongside with the dominant public as a subordinate group; but rather existed in direct contrast and often, in direct confrontation to it.²⁴⁴ Several publics concurrently exist including nationalist publics, popular publics and women's publics to name a short few, thus according to Habermas there were always competing publics.²⁴⁵ The Group embodied a micro-public, that was also representative of several black publics, and organised itself around issues that opposed what the dominant publics upheld. I argue that it is beneficial to think about the Group and the publics they created as counter-publics, groups that oppose and challenge the dominant public.

In the book *Counter-publics and the State* the counter-public is defined as 'a collectivised opposition [...] when we refer to a counter-public our usual assumption is that we are speaking about a body that is somehow distinct from, outside or opposed to the public. A counter-public *is not* the public.'²⁴⁶ What the counter-public highlights is the heterogeneity of public thought containing opposing beliefs and

²⁴⁴ Chambers, *Black Art: Plotting the Course*, 18

²⁴⁵ Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,' 61

²⁴⁶ Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, *Counterpublics and the State*, Albany: University of New York Press, 2001, 65 (Italics cited after the original)

practices to the dominant public. Nancy Fraser pursues this idea with the notion that parallels the counter-public to the subaltern public, one that appears outside while also beneath the dominant public.²⁴⁷ Fraser describes a United States feminist subaltern counter-public with its journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centres, academic programs, conferences, festivals, and local meeting places, and as a result of the formation of this public the disadvantage of women is reduced in official, or dominant, public spheres.²⁴⁸ It is important to note that these groups, according to Fraser, invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs, through agitation activities that challenge the dominant public.²⁴⁹ The BLK Art Group may be placed in alignment with the subaltern and American feminist publics that Fraser discusses, which also generated agitational activities in their language, texts, visual work, and exhibition.²⁵⁰

The BLK Art Group created an alternate public to which they could enter into a discourse with other interested individuals, thereby entering a performative concept of participation by finding a voice outside of mainstream deliberation,²⁵¹ albeit at times still facing censorship from the dominant publics that ruled the institutions they worked within. Despite this, it is still impossible to claim that a public or counter-public would in fact be completely inclusive. An inherent problem of publics and counter-publics is the issue of repeated exclusion. It is necessary to point out a central

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 62

²⁴⁸ Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', 67

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 123

²⁵⁰ Details of these actions will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter to contextualise notions of institutional critique through shock tactics and strategies to challenge the dominant public

²⁵¹ Asen and Brouwer, *Counterpublics and the State*, 62

criticism of the counter-public fuelled by the BLK Art Group in the fact that it seemed to abide by a severe exclusionary rule. As was discussed previously on the topic of representation, this exclusion was against people who were not black, excluding as well black people who did not address the black experience, those who perhaps wore a white mask. This is not to negatively criticise the Group's creation of a politically aware counter-public since their motives were to specifically address the black community and advance discourse around the black experience, one that rejected and was rejected by dominant publics, yet this inherent quality of exclusion in the creation and practice of publics is problematic. The BLK Art Group's public emerged with the intention of expanding the space around which black artists were included in the art establishment, however it would seem that despite these anti-egalitarian intentions, the counter-public demonstrated their own mode of exclusion and marginalisation.²⁵² I propose that the world that was imagined by the Group's exhibitions was one that no longer contained exclusivity, in that their counter-publics were exclusionary until the dominant public practiced inclusivity, and therefore render their counter-public unnecessary.

3.6 Conclusions

The Group required the participation of individuals to inform and consequently create publics or counter-publics as a result of making their work public. Participation in a public is reliant on a public sphere, an arena in which to create and promote a public. Habermas describes the public sphere as a 'linguistically constituted public space [...] a network for communicating information and points of view which are [...]

²⁵² Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', 67

filtered and synthesised in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions.²⁵³ This brings the argument back to thinking about spaces, and how places, spaces and publics correspond and rely upon one another to challenge positions and promote changes in the art establishment. Publics are located and become informed in the intersection of physical and conceptual spaces where critical activist positions are made public. Recalling the argument of abstract space and how the BLK Art Group propagated this space through their writing for instance; the public spheres need not be defined by a physical presence but rather by a communication structure.²⁵⁴ According to Habermas, ‘the more they detach themselves from the public's physical presence and extend to the virtual presence of scattered readers, listeners, or viewers linked by public media, the clearer becomes the abstraction that enters when the spatial structure of simple interactions is expanded into a public sphere.’²⁵⁵ Therefore, the quintessential constitution of participation in a space that the public requires can also be approached by thinking about abstract participation, that is, participation that is not reliant on geographical location. Habermas describes, ‘every encounter [...] reciprocally attributing communicative freedom to each other, unfolds in a linguistically constituted public space.’²⁵⁶ In order for a public to be created and maintained it must be acknowledged and supported through exhibitions and writing, for example, in order to bind it together. It is only through this reciprocal relationship, of what Habermas calls performance, that publics can continue to exist. Thus, participation in the public sphere, which was directed by the Group’s visual work and exhibitions, promoted

²⁵³ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998, 360

²⁵⁴ Kulynych, ‘Performing Politics: Foucault, Habermas, and Postmodern Participation,’ *Polity*, 9

²⁵⁵ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 361

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

inclusively in the art establishment and consequently acted to support under-represented publics to have a space in the institutions of art.

CONCLUSION

The thesis has examined how the artists of the BLK Art Group presented their political positions about racial inequalities in the art establishment through exhibitions, as the arena and forum in which to transform institutional spaces, communicate directly to publics and to create new publics. Keith Piper notes that ‘together we attempted to formulate a working dialogue on Black art, exhibiting the work of young politically aware Black artists in a wide range of venues under the title of *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*.’²⁵⁷ This goal of formulating a working dialogue as an interaction between relational partners underscores and emphasises the mandate of the Group’s work: to open up the acceptability towards all artists to participate in the art establishment. The thesis has argued that the exhibitions achieved this goal; it brought publics together in spaces and places where this discourse could occur and conversations could be based upon the subjects presented in the art works and in the accompanying texts. This concluding chapter will summarise and tie up loose ends of one of the most significant positions of the thesis, that is to define where the BLK Art Group is located in relation to the art establishment, whether the artists are metaphorically located within or outside of its borders. The conclusion will continue by looking to other activist artist collectives that engage with politics in their visual work and exhibitions, followed by thinking about how the Group used institutions to its advantage in order to point out underlying racism, it will then continue into a discussion of other possibilities of research and methodologies on the topic of the

²⁵⁷ Keith Piper, ‘Artist Statement’, *Into the Open*, exhibition catalogue, Mappin Art Gallery Sheffield, 1984 (Capitals cited after the original)

BLK Art Group, and close by situating the influence of the Group preceding its expiration as a collective.

Attending to a Remaining Problematic

A point of contestation that is woven throughout the thesis is locating specifically where the Group stands in relation to the art establishment. To reiterate the proposed positions: do they reject it completely, do they work within it, yet reject it secretly or subversively, or do they directly work within it and follow its systems and frameworks? The thesis has attended to this question in the preceding chapters, however it is valuable to summarise this position to conclude the thesis, while looking back to all arguments that come before, as they are fundamental to the comprehension of how the Group's work functioned in location to the art establishment.

The artists of the BLK Art Group seemingly remained critical of the art establishment while existing within its institutions. They exhibited their work in rather conventional ways in the traditional media of painting, print making, and drawing, in addition to installing their work in the gallery in a standard museum practice, with an exhibition program that contextualised the art works and their subject matters. It would seem that despite writing about fighting against Western domination that controlled the art establishment the artists did everything they could to practise in the most seemingly standard way within it, however, as it has been demonstrated throughout the thesis,

this was done by employing tactics and strategies that subtly challenged the institutions they worked within.

Painting was a repeatedly practiced medium that the Group employed in their work. The period of the 1980s was a fundamental moment in the art history of painting in the Western art establishment. In Neo-Expressionism, painting reacted against conceptualism and minimalism. This movement occurred in the United States, Germany, France and the UK as demonstrated in the work of British artists Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Christopher Le Brun and Paula Rego. The recurrence of painting was particularly demonstrated in the exhibition *A New Spirit in Painting* at the Royal Academy in London in 1981, and often cited as the most visible display of changes that brought an end to the dominance of abstract painting and sculpture and the reintroduction of content, narrative and expression.²⁵⁸ The Group's work fits within this refocusing on content and narrative in painting, which was previously ignored and phased out in the preceding decades. The Group's heavily content laden, figurative, and narrative based work came at a time when this depiction of subject matters was most welcomed in painting and perhaps aided the artists in acquiring a spot in institutional exhibition programming.

It is fair to conclude that even though the artists wanted to change the state of the art establishment, they did not want to alienate themselves from it, but rather seemingly understood that there was no other arena in which to exist in order to make these

²⁵⁸ Sandy Nairne, 'Black Arts in the Maelstrom', *Oxford Journals*, <<http://hwj.oxfordjournals.org/content/61/1/25.full>>, accessed July 2011

changes. Therefore, this action can be interpreted as perhaps more political than at first realised: the Group's rejection of the art establishment's exclusion was demonstrated in its willingness to participate in the establishment. Balancing this fine line of producing politically radical work, without being wholly extreme or fundamentally confrontational, in order to enter the institutions and consequently produce changes is precisely the achievement of the Group's exhibition-based practice.

Activism and Politics in Visual Art Practices in the 1980s

The BLK Art Group's work was revolutionary in its dedication to making the art world recognise the work of black British artists. As I have noted in the previous chapters, work of this kind was done in other parts of the world, predominately in New York City, where movements like the Black Arts Movement within the Black Power Movement in the 1960s worked to influence all aspects of the creative arts to inspire black people to demand inclusion. The BLK Art Group's work was the first of this kind to be developed and realised in the UK, thus marking their contributions as revolutionary to the development of opening up artistic practice for people of all races to be more inclusive and positive.

During the 1980s a New York-based artist collective titled Group Material,²⁵⁹ focused itself on social awareness particularly regarding Latin American right-wing

²⁵⁹ Artist members include: Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Mundy McLaughlin, and Tim Rollins

militarism, education, and AIDS.²⁶⁰ This collective worked in a similar methodology to the BLK Art Group, in that they also treated exhibition making as a medium on which to develop their approach to visual arts practices that were geared towards propagating social change. In a description of the practice of Group Material, they state:

Our exhibitions and projects are intended to be forums in which multiple points of view are represented in a variety of styles and methods. We believe, as the feminist writer Bell Hooks has said, "We must focus on a policy of inclusion so as not to mirror oppressive structures." As a result, each exhibition is a veritable model of democracy [...] we encourage greater audience participation through interpretation.²⁶¹

This focus on the exhibition and its public reception runs parallel to the BLK Art Group, where Group Material worked to transform the notion of exhibition curator into a verb by treating the installation of art for public viewing and reception as an artistic medium itself.²⁶² The linkage between these two collective groups lies predominantly in the idea that exhibitions can function as a dedication to social communication and political change, a place where political ideas and positions take precedence and retain the goal of the artistic production.

In a contemporary review in *Artforum*, Scottish artist and writer Thomas Lawson wrote that for Group Material 'the idea behind each show is considered more

²⁶⁰ D. Georges, 'Group Material: The Activation Of Presentation Space', *In The Flow: Alternate Authoring Strategies*, 1996, <<http://www.franklinfurnace.org/research/projects/flow/gpmat/gpmattf.html>>, accessed July 2011

²⁶¹ Artist Statement, *Group Material from Democracy: A Project by Group Material*, Dia Art Foundation, New York, 1990, 2

²⁶² Georges, *In The Flow*, <<http://www.franklinfurnace.org/research/projects/flow/gpmat/gpmattf.html>>, accessed July 2011

important that any of the pieces in it.²⁶³ This posture could perhaps also be argued for the BLK Art Group, that in considering the strategies that the Group employed through their thoughtful programming it would seem that the exhibition, as the very act of mobilising their work into the institution, was itself the political proclamation and consolidation of their thesis. This of course is not to say that their respected art works lacked in artistic merit or development of concept, but rather the work had to fulfil the purpose of addressing their stance on the state of racial difference in the UK and in the Western art establishment, in a way that was not overly confrontational in order not to dissuade the institutions from taking on their exhibition proposal, but just enough so that the work would subtly confront these issues. Similarly to Group Material, I would argue that the BLK Art Group's political engagement and motivation presented in the exhibitions was perhaps the most important and fundamental aspect of the Group's work. The art works, texts and extensive programming culminated in the exhibition as the praxis and the motor of progression that the Group fuelled.

The artistic activity that occurred in the 1980s in Canada, United States, and the UK for instance, indicates a collective disdain towards the then current state of art works that were deemed acceptable and worth exhibiting. Social activism during the 1980s, which included topics like the AIDS pandemic, the state of racial, gender and sexual orientated alienation, were subjects that were felt to be hugely relevant to deliberate upon and critically examine through visual arts practices. Within the UK, similar collective activity of coordinating and organising exhibitions by artists rather than

²⁶³ Jonathan Griffin, 'Arroz Con Mango (What A Mess)' Mousse - Archive - Issue #23 - Group Material, Milano, Italy, <<http://www.moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=537>>, accessed July 2011

institutionalised curators includes the initial years of the YBA. The BLK Art Group presents a substantially influential position as one of the first collectives geared towards entering the art establishment in regional institutions with race based politically grounded art works and belief systems that pushed hard for change and inclusion.

As previously noted, the Group created work that balanced the line of firstly seeming acceptable towards the art institutions yet was simultaneously critical of them. One could imagine how these subjects could be presented in such a way as to completely ratify and mark a substantial controversy, which for example was explored in chapter two in a comparison to Chris Burden's *Trans-Fixed*. The artists could have included a performance that physically and literally re-enacted the injustices towards black British people in the gallery, yet the artists chose to render images in painting, printmaking and photography. Although when one looks at this work almost thirty years later, it does not seem so radical. If the artists did enact a performance, like for instance Araeen's work *Paki Bastard: Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person* (Fig. 5) shown at the Artists for Democracy Gallery in London in 1977 and subsequently at the Whitechapel Gallery and Sussex University in 1978, where he referred to the insult 'Paki Bastard' and the violent assaults that have been experienced at the hands of the police and white gangs,²⁶⁴ the reception would likely have been substantially more obtrusive. This performance is shocking in terms of its direct relation to the viewer, which is indeed much more extreme and bluntly positioned to be radically political than the work of the BLK Art Group. Araeen's performance in comparison

²⁶⁴ John A. Walker, 'Chapter 8: 1977', *Left Shift: Radical art in 1970s Britain*, New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2002, 196

to Keith Piper's *Reactionary Suicide: Black Boys Keep Singing or Another Nigger Died Today* (Fig. 2) is important to describe since these works are particularly similar in subject matter. Both works contain an outstretched male figure against a white background superimposed with text that describes an act of human injustice based on race. Araeen's work is far more radically severe than the Group's, which simply could come down to the intensity that this strand of performance that is aligned with autobiographical performance and body art from the 1970s, has over painting as a conventionally less radical and affecting medium. The fact that the Group used paint and print media corroborates the idea that the artists were presenting their work in a way to challenge art institutions without completely alienating themselves from them.

Thoughts on Political Art: A Parasite in a Host Institution

The thesis has suggested that the Group's work infiltrated the art institutions in ways that subtly stirred and opened up the canons of acceptability in artistic and exhibition practices. In a recent publication titled *Byproduct: On the excess of embedded art practices* published by YYZ Books in Toronto Canada, it questions contemporary political art that works in institutionalised systems, including essays which articulate the notion of the art work, artist, or collective as infiltrating an institution where it can be likened to a parasite feeding off of a host. It was suggested that while the Group's work consisted of traditional media in the early 1980s, it could be interpreted as a strategy that in the use of relatively safe or conventional media, their work would be more accepted into central institutions and given more of an opportunity to be subversive in their subject matters and visual and textual narratives. The work had to enter into the art institutions in the first place in order to exercise their mandate of

inspiring and reaching other black publics, so if the work was extremely radical in content or media, it would likely not have been able to achieve this goal.

A recent example of this subversive behaviour that can be placed in alignment with this argument of the Group's work is the Canadian performance artist Camille Turner in her work as *Miss. Canadiana*. Turner, who is a black Canadian artist, enacts the part of a beauty queen on an international *Red White and Beautiful Tour*, which began in 2002 and is ongoing (Fig. 5). Dressed in a tiara, sash and gown, Turner inserts herself into public spaces and records the public responses in a series of live, site-specific performances in which she uses her body as a site of social investigation.²⁶⁵ The work challenges the idea of the Canadian identity by dressing in a way that leads the viewer to believe Turner is a pageant delegate representing Canada. Turner subtly enters often unannounced and at times uninvited to events and festivals and unassumingly acts the part of *Miss. Canadiana*. The work presents a non-confrontational way of confronting difference,²⁶⁶ embedding her political performances into Canadian institutions. The inclusion of Turner's work in relation to the BLK Art Group contributes to an overriding line of reasoning that runs through this thesis, that the Group used strategies to covertly pose racially based identity questions and therein overturned exclusionary positions of black artists in British art institutions. Turner, like the BLK Art Group, uses the institutions in a way that subversively challenges them in their unawareness to the fact that they are hosting

²⁶⁵ Camille Turner, 'Miss Canadiana', <<http://www.year01.com/camille/misscanadiana.html>>, accessed June 2011

²⁶⁶ Marisa Jahn (ed.), *Byproduct: On the Excess of Embedded Art Practices*, Toronto: YYZ Books, 2010, 13

such politically motivated work within its system.²⁶⁷ However, this idea of the invasion of the artist is more equated to the case of Turner's work than the Group's, where as she performs her work unannounced, the Group's exhibitions were planned in detail with the institutions they worked with. This methodology that the Group seemed to implement can be placed in alignment with the theory of a Trojan horse strategy,²⁶⁸ where the art project is discussed and offered, but the real work, the focus of opening up spaces in British art institutions for black artists, happens without an explicit announcement.

Furthermore, a particularly complimentary point of discussion on the relationship of political art when in contact and relation to institutions is the notion of the parasite. French philosopher and author Michael Serres describes that the parasite is an exciter, it enters a body and infests it, its power is measured by its capability to adapt itself to hosts, it transforms a system and irritates it, it is a troublemaker, but how can the state of things transform themselves otherwise?²⁶⁹ The Group's exhibitions fulfilled each of the positions that Serres describes here, yet the revolutionary aspect is the idea that they adapted themselves to the host in order to penetrate it, in order to activate a change in the system. The Group infiltrated the institutions and transformed them almost secretly from within its walls where the galleries were used as hosts for the undisclosed project. The Group discussed and presented the exhibition to the institutions, where the core of the work was the very fact that they entered the galleries, were given the space to direct discussion with the publics of the Midlands,

²⁶⁷ *Byproduct*, 14

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 14

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 19

and consequently change the course of acceptability of black British artists. The exhibition itself is a Trojan horse, where the true heart of the art work is in the signification of the exhibition, a critically articulated means of utilising the exhibition as a mask for political forum.

Additional Avenues of Research and Alternative Methodologies

The thesis has provided an account of the exhibition culture of the BLK Art Group through rather unconventional methodological approaches that examined the ways in which the exhibitions defied and transformed the art establishment. This approach of course has its limitations, where for instance the art works themselves were not placed at the forefront of the research and articulation of the Group's practice. It is productive to propose aspects of further research towards the articulation and documentation of the activities of the BLK Art Group to outline areas of under-researched topics in the hopes of closing the gaps in late twentieth-century visual culture. Research into the BLK Art Group's later work is an area that requires substantiation, this includes the years beginning from 1984, the date of the Group's termination, by examining the specific reasons why the decision to dissipate the collective came to fruition, as well as the bodies of artistic, curatorial and written work the artists pursued in the late 1980s and 1990s leading to the present date. An additional avenue of articulation includes research into the women of the Group. Unfortunately, there is a lack of material in archives or secondary resources that cover this topic; however, the female BLK Art Group artists Claudette Johnson and Marlene Smith, as well as the earlier women artists including Janet Vernon and Wenda Leslie are still alive, thus an oral historic account would be a plausible

resource in which more detailed information can be attained. Additionally, the provenance and acquisition history of BLK Art Group art works in regional and national collections, in Britain and abroad, would provide an indication as to the institutional reception of the work. This analysis would potentially indicate the art establishment's turn to acceptance of the Group's work specifically, but also more broadly, work of politically driven black artists.

A collection of oral histories taken from each of the members of the Group would allow for a fuller understanding of the Group's work that is not found elsewhere in archives or in secondary writing. In addition to an oral historic approach, particular methodological approaches that would be particularly useful in framing this research include feminism and Marxism. A specifically black feminist approach, as its triple hinged position of exclusion has been thoroughly documented in the work of Bell Hooks and Hazel Carby, could substantiate theories about black women artists and their position in the Group and in art institutions. A Marxist approach would provide a valuable framework by which to propose questions about the production of the Group's work from the view point of the art market, as well as the potential implications of including otherwise excluded work as tokenistic on behalf of the institutions as a gesture towards the increase of capital and funding due to an exhibition program that includes cultural or racial minority artists. Additional methodological frameworks that would be equally beneficial and contributory to future research include an Althusserian focused Marxist approach to describe the state apparatuses that the Group worked within and also rejected, as well as a McLuhanian analysis on the media and outlets that the Group utilised in order to radiate their political messages. The implementation of these methodologies would

provide several perspectives and approaches, which would deepen the knowledge of not only the Group's work as a collective as well as each of the individual artists' work within and following the livelihood of the Group, but also in terms of international artistic practice and politically driven art and exhibition practices in the 1980s and after.

The BLK Art Group's Influence

To conclude the thesis it is vital to assess the influence of the Group and their exhibitions on black visual culture in Britain to situate their work within subsequent art historical practices. It is admissible to state that once the Group entered art institutions and exhibited their work in several institutions in the UK, which worked to open up spaces in which black British artists could exhibit and connect with publics to influence and inspire creativity amongst them, the Group's goal was achieved and their practice came to an end. The Group's work was successful in promoting changes in the art establishment primarily since their work continues to resurface. This includes the very occurrence of the conference and exhibition *Assembling the Eighties: A Trans-Atlantic Dialogue on Afro-Asian Arts in Post-War Britain*, in 2001 at Duke University, that was subsequently made into a publication titled *Shades of Black*, as well as the exhibition *Afro-Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic* at the Tate Liverpool in 2009, and the most recent and fundamental instance of the Group's re-emergence in the 2011 exhibition *The BLK Art Group* at the Sheffield Museum's Graves Gallery, where rarely seen BLK Art Group art works in the museum's collection are displayed. Additionally, the Group's work undoubtedly directly impacted on the development and launch of inIVA in 1994

which was built on the intention to address an imbalance in the representation of culturally diverse artists, curators and writers,²⁷⁰ through the development of an exhibition space, the promotion of education and research through a comprehensive website and the Stuart Hall library and archive. As well as through publishing several texts, monographs, and catalogues to influence forthcoming generations of black artists by providing substantial resources to assist their creative or academic development.

The Group's work also directly impacted the success of black British Turner prizewinning artists Chris Ofili in 1998 and Steve McQueen in 1999, albeit by presenting work that imbues alternate undertones from that of the BLK Art Group, what Doy describes as work that is 'playful, sacrilegious and flirtatious rather than politically serious or confrontational,'²⁷¹ like the work of the Group. Yet, without the initial mobilisation of political activism that the Group projected, this level of inclusivity would likely not have been possible in subsequent years. These instances signify the remaining relevance of situating the Group's work within the history of contemporary British visual culture and the importance of contextualising their work and that of their contemporaries in forthcoming art historical texts and exhibitions that look back to these early accomplishments while also looking forward to artists who continue to push against boundaries in the Western art establishment.

²⁷⁰ inIVA, 'History', <http://www.iniva.org/about_us/about_iniva/who_we_are>, accessed August 2011

²⁷¹ Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers & Co. Ltd., 2000, 242

APPENDIX ONE

CHRONOLOGY OF BLK ART GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- June 1981 *Black Art an'Done*, Wolverhampton Art Gallery,
Wolverhampton
- October 28, 1981 *The First National Black Convention, Open Exhibition of
Black Art*, The Gallery, Faculty of Art and Design, The
Polytechnic, Wolverhampton
- June 1982 *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, The Africa Centre, London.
Touring to the following institutions:
- July 1982 *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, The Ikon Gallery, Birmingham
- November 1982 *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, 38 King Street Gallery, Bristol
- January 1983 *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, The Midland Group, Nottingham
- February 1983 *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, The Midland Arts Centre,
Birmingham
- June 1993 *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, The Africa Centre, London
- March 1983 *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, The Herbert Art Gallery,
Coventry
- 1984 *An Exhibition of Radical Black Art, The BLK Art Group*,
Battersea Arts Centre, London. Touring to the following
institution:

An Exhibition of Radical Black Art, The BLK Art Group,
Winterbourne House, University of Birmingham, Birmingham

APPENDIX TWO

BLACK ART AN'DONE: AN EXHIBITION OF WORK BY YOUNG BLACK ARTISTS

Source of Material: Documentary exhibition information found in the exhibition archive held at the Institute of International Visual Art (inIVA).

Exhibition Title: *Black Art an'Done: An exhibition of work by young Black artists*

Location: Wolverhampton Art Gallery, Wolverhampton, West Midlands

Date: 9-27, June 1981

Printed Material: 6-page pamphlet

Artists in Exhibition: Eddie Chambers, Dominic Dawes, Andres Hazel, Ian Palmer and Keith Piper

Titles of Art Works in Exhibition:²⁷²

Andrew Hazel

1. *1967*²⁷³
2. *1968*
3. *1969*
4. *1970*
5. *We hold these truths*
6. *Brixton, 1981*

Ian Palmer

7. *Keita*
8. *One*
9. *Gift*
10. *Stevie After Oxtoby*

²⁷² The thesis does not provide detailed information about the provenience of the art works due to a deficiency of visual or textual documentation of the works as determined in archival material and secondary literature

²⁷³ Spelling and punctuation of all titles cited after the original

Keith Piper

11. *Go West Young Man*
12. *Uhuru – I*
13. *Question*
14. *A Little Bit of Africa*
15. *400 Years*
16. *The Death of a Stereotype*
17. *Confrontation*
18. *A Monument to our Shattered Dreams*
19. *King*
20. *The Rise of a Cultural Storm Trooper*
21. *Target Piece*
22. *Two*
- 23A. *Hero*
- 23B. *Martyr*
24. *African*
25. *South Africa*
26. *Queen*
27. *Warriors*
28. *Prince*
- 29A. *Gunship 1 (F111A)*
- 29B. *Gunship 2 (Kunst und Politik)*
30. *Untitled*
31. *Ali: The Final Round*
32. *Uhuru – 2*

Dominic Dawes

35. *Time Will Tell*²⁷⁴

37. *War*

38. *Inna Ingran*

39. *Untitled*

Eddie Chambers

40. *Only Muscle and Blood*

41. *We're Gonna Lay Down the Law*

42. *Marley – 1*

43. *Marley – 2*

44. *Marley – The Blackwarrior*

45. *The Struggle Continues*

46. *How Long Has This Been Going On*

47. *Who Nuh Black*

48. *America 1*

49. *America – 2*

50. *Che*

51. *Pan Afrikanism and Socialism*

52. *And Black British*

53. *U.S.S.R. (Marxism)?*

54. *Africa*

55. *Anarchy*

56. *Mugabe – 1*

57. *Mugabe – 2*

58A. *Brixton, April 1981 – 1*

58B. *Brixton, April 1981 – 2*

59. *Behold.....*

60. *God Save The Queen*

²⁷⁴ Numbering skips from 32 – 35 in original archival document and from 35-37

61. *Immigration*
62. *On The Wall*
63. *Its The Only Way To Be*
64. *The I Threes*
65. *War At Its Whitest*
66. *Untitled Sculpture*
67. *Untitled Sculpture*

APPENDIX THREE

THE PAN-AFRIKAN CONNECTION: AN EXHIBITION OF WORK BY YOUNG BLACK ARTISTS

Source of Material: Documentary exhibition information found in the exhibition archive at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Jordan Well, Coventry. The following information is from the *Pan-Afrikan Connection* archive including exhibition pamphlet, miscellaneous letters and documents.

Exhibition Title: *The Pan-Afrikan Connection: An exhibition of work by young black artists*

Printed Material: 8-page pamphlet

Artists in Exhibition: Eddie Chambers, Claudette Johnson, Wenda Leslie, Keith Piper, Donald Rodney and Janet Vernon

Locations and Dates of Touring Exhibitions: Consult Appendix One for exhibition details.

Titles of Art Works in Exhibition:²⁷⁵

Claudette Johnson

1. *Nude figure arms overhead, feminist ear-ring*²⁷⁶
2. *2 figures – one is red, one is green*
3. *Standing? figure in black, hands behind head*
4. *Cubist nude in red yellow green and black*
5. *Seated figure in black, dark red and white background*
6. *Nude lying down against green background*
7. *'eh – eh burana' blue figure*
8. *Alabaster head*
9. *Old woman, black ink*
10. *Wooden relief*

²⁷⁵ The thesis does not provide detailed information about the provenience of the art works due to the high impact and mandate of politically driven activism that was chiefly displayed in the exhibitions in addition to the deficiency of visual or textual documentation of the works as determined in archival material and secondary literature

²⁷⁶ Spelling and punctuation of all titles cited after the original

Wenda Leslie

11. *Work illustrated on poster*
12. *Black and blue torso*
13. *Crouching figure pale*
14. *Crouching figure medium*
15. *Crouching figure dark*

Keith Piper

16. *Wedding 'he looked ... to sporty!'*
17. *England Expects*
18. *As arm in arm they enter the gallery*
19. *Go West Young Man*
20. *Who set the weak against the weak*
21. *The birthday party*
22. *The first black assassin saint*
23. *They are dirty*
24. *Another nigger died today*
25. *Pair – Always just the body*
26. *The ancestral seat*

Donald Rodney

27. *Desert Box – 'its now just a waste land!'*
28. *Sadly the Redskin has his reservations*
29. *Another one bites the dust*
30. *A Brave loses courage*
31. *100% cotton*
32. *Red clothes and hanging figure*
33. *The only good injun...*
34. *To have and have not*

Janet Vernon²⁷⁷

Eddie Chambers

35. *Who's been telling you lies then?*
36. *Does the difference matter (police photo)*
37. *Set of 4 'aint gonna sit on my arse and wonder'*
38. *Fair – 'go for it'*
39. *Our eyes are put out (box)*
40. *Hand and light (box)*
41. *Set of 5 – Ayatollah with barbed wire and handprint*
42. *Hammer, a tool for beating metal, sickle ...*
43. *Set of 3 – 'Rise ye mighty people!'*
44. *Watching the cricketers – Europeans only*
45. *Worth a small sacrifice*
46. *Set of 3 – Bewilderment for America*
47. *Pair – American flags*
48. *I was taught to believe my only ability was swinging*
49. *Jamaica's greatest National Hero*
50. *Dr. Martin Luther King*

Marlene Smith²⁷⁸

51. *Pity my simple city*
52. *And all things nice*
53. *4 heads, one screaming*

²⁷⁷ Janet Vernon's name was mentioned in the exhibition archive and pamphlet but without explicit titles of work

²⁷⁸ Marlene Smith is not included as a participating artist as noted in the exhibition pamphlet. This list of works was found in a letter that outlines all art works in the exhibition from the archive at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum. It would seem that she was intended to be included in the exhibition and for a reason was not included, or alternatively, the exhibition pamphlet is incorrect and mistakenly excludes her name and list of works

54. *Profile caricature*

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Eddie Chambers, *Destruction of the National Front*, 1980, collage, four panels, each 35 x 20 cm. Image reproduced in David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, Sonia Boyce, (eds), *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. Accessed May 2011.
2. Keith Piper, *Reactionary Suicide: Black Boys Keep Singing or Another Nigger Died Today*, 1982, Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 182 x 121 centimetres. Image reproduced in Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschlüter (eds). *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic*, exhibition catalogue. Tate Publishing: Liverpool, 2010.
3. Rasheed Araeen, *Paki Bastard: Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person*, 31, July, 1977, live event with slides and sound, performance documentation. Artists for Democracy, London. Photo courtesy of Rasheed Araeen. Image reproduced in John Albert Walker, *Left shift: radical art in 1970s Britain*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2002. Accessed June 2011.
4. Camille Turner, *Red White and Beautiful Tour: Miss Canadiana*, September 2008, performance documentation. Image reproduced in Camille Turner's website for *Miss Canadiana*. <http://www.misscanadiana.ca/teatime.html> accessed July, 2011.

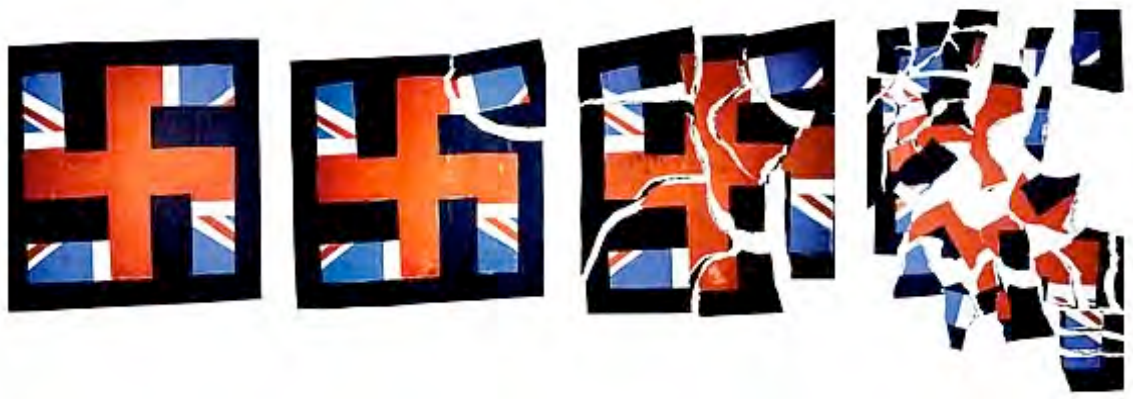


Fig. 1

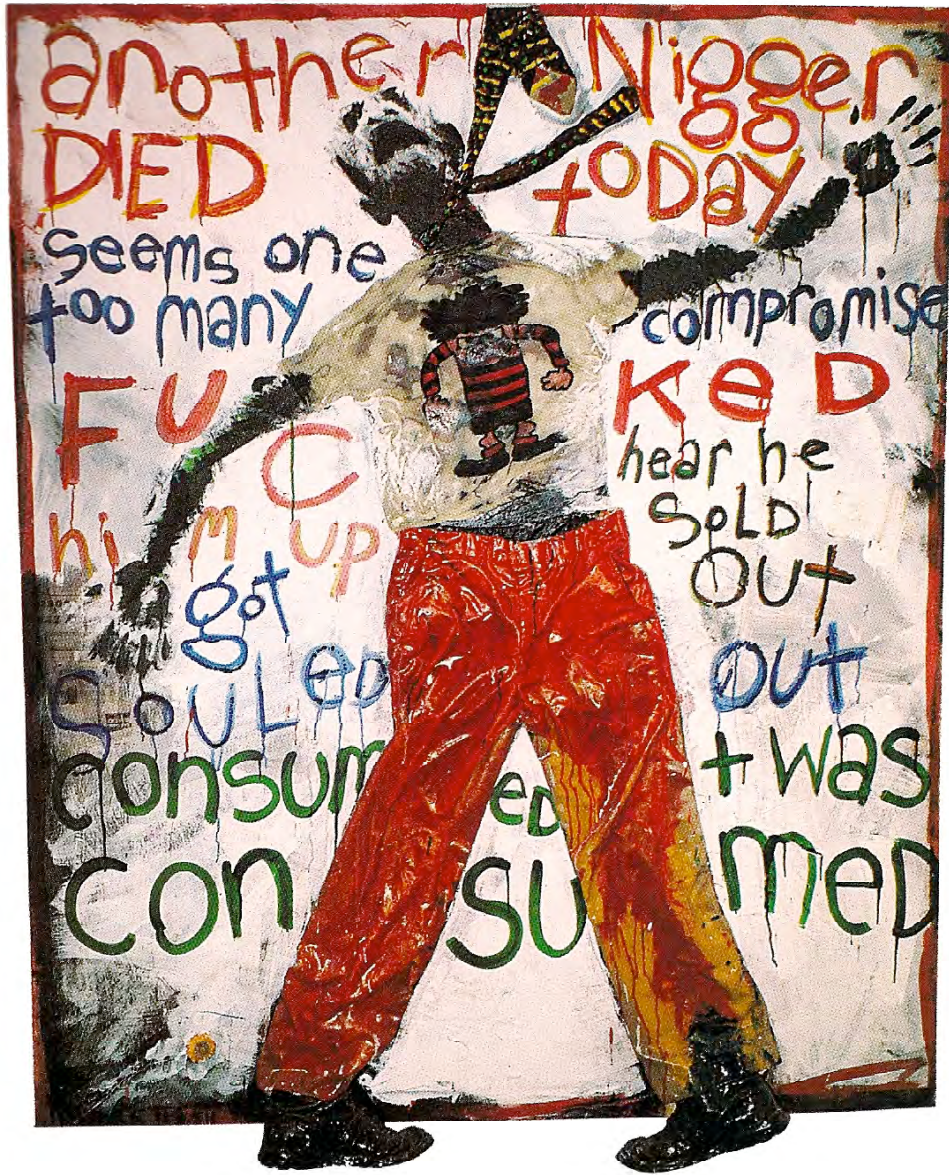


Fig. 2

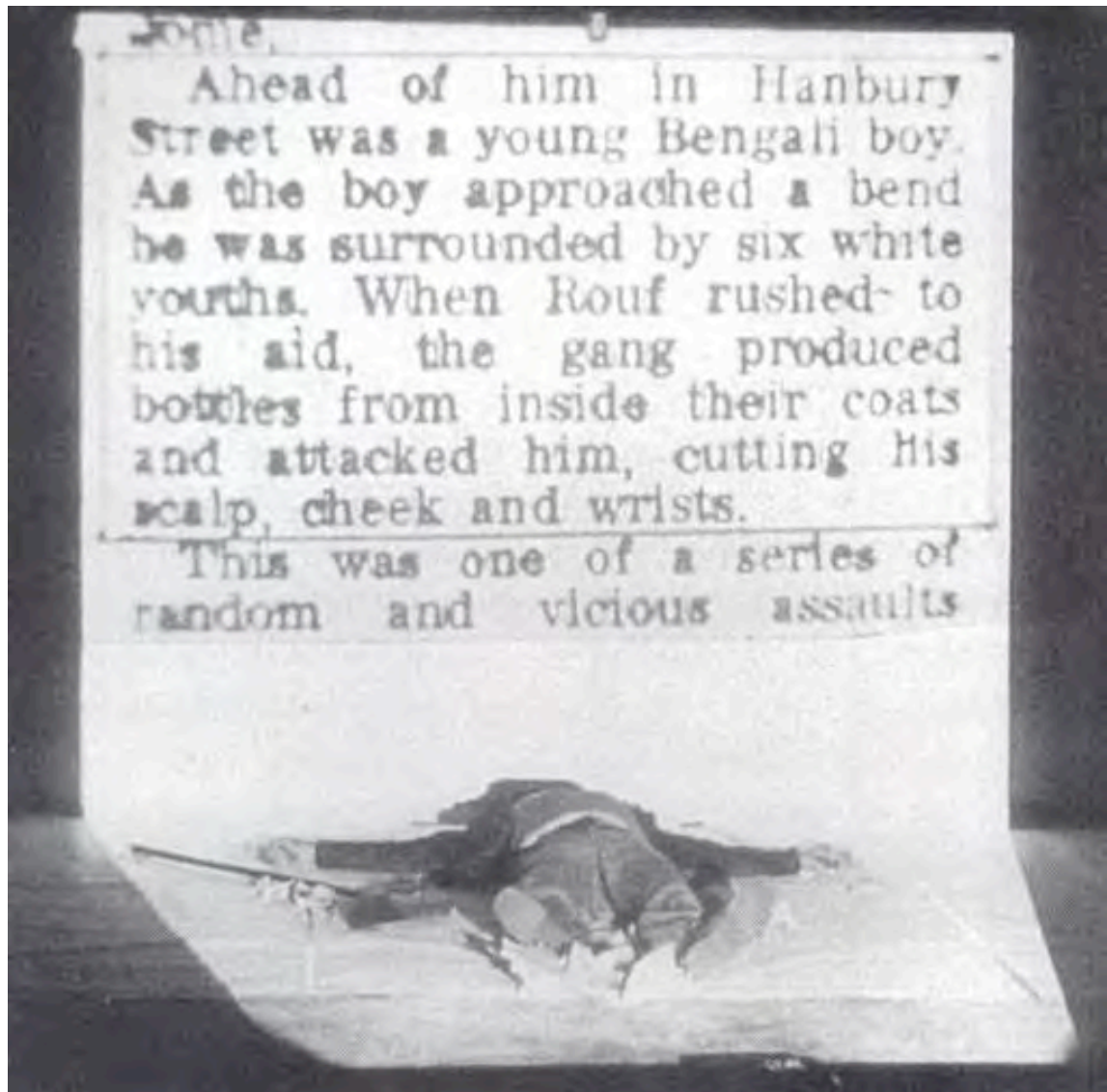


Fig. 3



Fig. 4