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## **Collage and Recollection in the 1970s and 1980s: Three Black British Artists**

'Yet history can only ever be re-read and re-articulated from within the terms and assumptions of our own time. Retelling involves reconstruction... It is also the case that by naming a period, a decade, we fetishise it and give it an imaginary unity. History does not march in such tidy formations... While it is useful to think in terms of decades, it is vital to bear in mind the longer continuities and to map the links between different dimensions of struggles.'

-David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall, 1992

There is a clear direction in art writing and curating at present to redress the conflation of art and identity when presenting and remembering the histories of Caribbean, African and Asian diaspora artists in Britain. Recent notable publications (Orlando, 2016; Mercer, 2016; Wainwright, 2017; Bernier, 2019) have advocated for and worked from various positions rooted in image and object-based assessment to access what art historian Heinrich Wölfflin has called the 'dialogues between picture and picture' (Wölfflin 230). This momentum is especially palpable in the production of artist monographs covering the work of Frank Bowling (2011, 2016), Rasheed Araeen (2018) and Lubaina Himid (2019); the research-based activities and outputs arising from the AHRC funded Black Artists & Modernisms research project (2015-8), whose mantra of 'attend to the work' defined their engagement with artworks within national and regional public collections; and the scholarship of scholars including Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Lucy Steeds on exhibition cultures during and after the 1980s.<sup>i</sup> Such activities have been further enriched by exhibitions exploring the place of black artists within wider narratives of British art, including Himid's Turner-Prize winning trio held in 2017; the series organised under the title *The Place is Here* (2016-7); Manchester Art Gallery's *Speech Acts: Reflection-Imagination-Repetition* (2018-9); and major career retrospectives for Sonia Boyce (2018), Araeen (2018) and Bowling (2019).<sup>ii</sup>

It is vital here to note that much of the activity arising from this turn to the object is in no small part built upon the adjacent activities of artist- animateurs who have maintained their creative practices sometimes alongside curatorial, archival and educational interests, further establishing how works of art are embedded in a wider cultural politics such as discourses of identity and its

bearing on aesthetics.<sup>iii</sup> Thus, such artists have exhibited artworks and undertaken research around them, as a way of constructing intellectual frameworks for looking at, writing about and thinking through culture.<sup>iv</sup>

This practice has historical roots in the 1980s. Examining the narrative of 'black art' provided a strand of enquiry for Piper and Smith's exhibition *The Image Employed: The Use of Narrative in Black Art*, staged at Cornerhouse, Manchester in 1987. Taking up the dual role of artist and curator, in her 'Introduction' to the catalogue Smith frames the project as an

attempt to move towards the formulation of a language with which to examine Black art practice by responding to the work of a number of Black artists; It is in recognition of the functions that criticism(s) sensitive to our practice can fulfill that this attempt is made. (Smith, np)

She calls for sensitive and responsive critical languages that function across and around the aesthetic, political and epistemological dimensions of art practice. These languages must be unfixed, unsettled and as ever-evolving as the ongoing creative projects that they seek to address.

Building on these foundations, here I contend that an object-led approach to artworks produces important supplementary understandings to those developed within other theoretical frameworks, not least those of sociology and cultural theory, which have hitherto dominated evaluations of the creative practice of black artists in Britain. Moreover, by looking at and responding to artworks we can uncover a complex history of art; one that plays across and between the spaces of texts and contexts, aesthetics and politics of art and which complicates the 'imaginary unity', to quote Bailey and Hall once again, of historical remembrance. The aesthetic manoeuvres entailed in works of visual collage and montage and the processes of collecting and archiving that are central to their processes, lend themselves particularly well as evidence. By looking to the collage as a spatial and temporal engagement that begins with collecting, saving and processing found material, we are able to see better the complex plurality of relationships and convergences within artistic practices, and how they emerge from the plural positions of the artist-animateur.

Such an approach to understanding collage is relatively new. Only within the second half of the twentieth century did scholarship around the early *papiers collés* of Pablo Picasso (typically mythologized as father of this medium) come to properly examine any a connection between the artist's collage and the political uses of visual imagery or techniques such as typography. .<sup>v</sup> Whilst a concern with Picasso's politics had remained nascent for decades in scholarship on him, the opposite has been true of the collage and montage practices of black artists in the 1970s and 1980s.. As one reviewer in *The Guardian* noted, regarding the *Black Art An' Done*, the 1981 exhibition organized by a coalition of emerging black British artists (soon to call themselves the BLK Art Group), 'their art is really just a collection of some political posters [...]'.<sup>vi</sup> Tied irrevocably to the racial tensions that shook British political and social life in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the meaning and value of their strategies of collage and montage have been largely over-determined, confined to the description of being a political intervention. Notably, for art historian Kobena Mercer, a shift towards a 'cut-and-mix aesthetic', that he observes in art of the 1970s and 1980s, breaches or 'perforates' the boundaries of such 'sharply drawn frontiers' between the 'message' of an image and artist's concern with form (Mercer, *Perforations* np). He looks to works such as **Keith Piper's 'The Black Assassin Saints' (1982)(Fig.1)**, for evidence of more porous divisions, ones that confound a binary of art and politics, such as in artworks that speak at once to the anti-racist and socialist politics of the New Left as well as return to expressive modes championed by the otherwise conservative return to painting during that decade.

### **Rasheed Araeen: 'For Oluwale' (1971-3/5) to 'For Oluwle II' (1988)**

That the supposed frontier between art and politics wears particularly thin in modes of address rooted in collecting and collage is evident in early works by a now much-celebrated artist-animateur Rasheed Araeen. His **'For Oluwale' (1971-3/5)(Fig. 2)** interrogates the boundaries and interplay interstices between aesthetics and politics. The work is frequently pinpointed at the decisive shift in Araeen's oeuvre between minimalist and kinetic sculptural works, which he developed in Pakistan until moving to London via Paris in 1964, and the political conceptualism that emerged alongside his other critical and

curatorial work. Looking to the processes of collecting and collage at play we can illuminate some of the ways in which he constructs a history of art embedded with continuities and dimensions of struggle across time and place. Araeen first encountered the details of the life and death of David Oluwale, a British Nigerian who fell victim to a sustained campaign of police violence that led to his death in 1969. His story resurfaced in 1971 with a manslaughter trial of the officers involved. Reading coverage of the trial, Araeen was moved to make a work dedicated to him. Although he began to collect and store the printed material that would form the basis for 'For Oluwale', it would remain unused for several years before preparations for the exhibition *Artists from Five Continents* (1973) at London's Swiss Cottage Library. Here Araeen produced a panel of hardboard, upon which he mounted a display of text organized into three registers. The top two were made up of photocopies of an article that a handwritten note indicates is from *The Guardian*. While laid out like a conventional news article, with a small off-centre picture of Oluwale, in fact this is effectively a small-scale collage. To produce the square-ish form of the text, Araeen cut-up and rearranged the image and text of the original article, extracting both the by-line and the title, and then produced photocopies of his re-workings on a machine at the Library. The bottom register of material was the same text hand-typed for readability by Araeen, who was concerned that the print in the re-worked article was unclear.<sup>vii</sup> Without the photograph and any of the textual structure of newsprint, here Oluwale's story takes on a personal dimension and Araeen's manual engagement with the printed material is brought to the surface.

On the second week of the exhibition, the artist returned to reconfigure and add material, initiating a collage process that lasted over the four weeks of the exhibition. Retaining the newsprint collage, he introduced pages from the latest edition of *Freedom News*, detailing ongoing issues of police brutality. A short-lived publication by the British Black Panthers, *Freedom News* arose from a growing post-war black Press that included major titles like *Race Today* and numerous pamphlets and newsletters.<sup>viii</sup> By 1973, as a member of the Panthers, Araeen participated in the production and dissemination of *Freedom News* and other publications, allowing him to collect material for use in his art practice. The headlines blare 'POLICE RIOT IN BROCKWELL PARK', 'POLICE TERROR MUST

STOP', above images of black men in handcuffs or showing injuries sustained at the hands of the British State. Interspersed with printed images of black fists in salute, the conventions of the broadsheets give way to the aesthetic of the small-scale print tradition of the radical Left; calls for action in the present drawn into conversation with the tragic outcome of action-not-taken years before. To this continuity of struggle across time, as the panel changed over the following weeks, Oluwale's story was replaced by other found material such as leaflets and photocopied news-articles protesting anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles.

In the third week (Fig. 3) the panels began to address the contemporary visit of Portugal's Prime Minister Marcelo Caetano to London. Culminating in celebrations of the sexcentenary of the Anglo-Portuguese alliance, the visit was marked by public protests for which there were notices in the form of leaflets. Produced by the End the Alliance Campaign they decried the ongoing Wars of Liberation in Portugal's then-colonial states in the 1960s and 1970s. Like *The Guardian* article that Araeen preserved for several years before creating 'For Oluwale', it is notable that the 'End the Alliance' leaflets here reappear in the slightly later, 'No Politics, Please'(1974)(Fig.4). In this work, the leaflets create a rectangular field on a red-painted board, overlaid by a poster. Collected in the previous year, the poster advertises the British Museum's *600 Years of Anglo-Portuguese Alliance* which was exhibited contemporaneously with the Swiss Cottage show. Unlike the carefully placed elements of 'For Oluwale', the poster has sections torn from it, underscoring the physicality of Araeen's intervention and recalling the palimpsest textures of household refuse littering the streets; summoning leaflets and posters haphazardly layered on top of each other, becoming sun-bleached and torn over time. Here, however, Araeen's layers speak to each other across time and space. Although the title of the exhibition is legible, the only other semi-complete section of the poster is an illumination from a late-fifteenth-century edition of the *Anciennes et nouvelles chronique d'Angleterre* manuscript depicting the royal marriage that secured England's relationship with Portugal.<sup>ix</sup> At the centre of the poster these torn sections reveal a black and white photocopy of a found image. While difficult to distinguish immediately, given both the print quality of the reproduction and the areas of green poster that partially and irregularly cover the surface, it clearly depicts the

mutilation of dead black bodies by Portuguese soldiers. The bodies of soldiers and victims, clergy and aristocracy drift in and out of focus. Histories are entangled as the then and now come to bear on the here and there. With the linked circuits of colonial and neo-colonial power and the industry of culture laid bare, the futility implied in the title is clear.

In the final week of the display, the *End the Alliance* material was supplemented by further pages of that week's *Freedom News*. Among these was coverage of resistance to racist immigration policies which made use of a well-known photograph from the marches against the 1962 Immigration Bill, another layer of meaning to the historical continuities mapped by Araeen. We find the artist's hand at work with a handwritten text appended to an article which encourages viewers to 'Organise to fight for a decent home!'. Other material includes photocopies of articles from the *Free Palestine* newspaper accompanied by a hand-typed passage calling attention to the flow of arms from the UK to Israel. Again, Araeen plays in the interstices of time and place and here and there; the institutional spaces and voices of art galleries, museums and broadsheet newspapers and the political and material spaces of activism that his work sought to occupy. For subsequent exhibitions beginning with *Works 1965-1975* (1975) he re-activated the 1973 material by re-creating each of the panels and displaying them side-by-side. The movement through time from week to week was translated into a movement across space; Araeen's physical intervention in the work memorialised in the static work. The activities that were once contemporaneous to the work's exhibition, documenting the dynamic social and political world happening outside of the Library in the summer of 1973, now fixed as a material history of the recent past and the artist's relationship to it.

Crucially, however, for Araeen this fixity is disrupted continuously by the implications of time and space within hegemonies of art and knowledge. Echoing Bailey and Hall's statement around the re-construction of histories, he asserts that 'ideas as knowledge...can always be salvaged from history, given a new context and made to move forward within the dynamic of new time and space. (Araeen, *Ecoaesthetics* 682). Nearly twenty years after Araeen began to collect

material around the death of Oluwale, he salvaged the events of 1969, 1971 and 1973 in 'For Oluwale II' (1988)(Fig. 5). Each of the original four panels have been photographed and the colour and texture of the collages flattened into the gray-scale of reproduction. The original re-constructions of the *The Guardian* article are rendered more blurry through being copied and re-copied; details are lost in re-construction. However, with the addition of two new panels, Araeen brings others to the surface. The first new panel is a hand-typed text introducing the story of Oluwale and outlining the technical and critical processes behind the 1973 work. An emphasis on the importance of infiltrating the gallery space, as a location for 'bourgeois aesthetic assumptions', with 'actual reality' comes to life in the second new addition, another enlarged text –an anonymous letter of complaint sent to the Visual Arts Director of the Swiss Cottage Library in response to the 1973 exhibition (Fig. 6). 'Hampstead Resident' implies that the painting intended for exhibition has been displaced by 'a copy of a newspaper called the *Freedom News Special*', condemning the publication as 'hate propaganda' and appealing to the Library to remove 'this offensive publication as quickly as possible'. It is notable that the writer fails to register the work as an artwork at all but rather as a bare display of political text. The 1973 panels boldly made space for social and political realities within an art-space, using the language of modernist formalism to address the material realities of colonial and neo-colonial subjects. Yet, in 1988, Araeen would come to reckon with the forces of hegemonic resistance that guard the frontiers of aesthetics and politics. Reasserting the status of his work as a critical political artwork via one new panel, he marked out the difficulties of doing so in the other. The salvaged 1973 works are re-constructed here to foreground Araeen's ongoing concerns around the place of black artists in a British art world that is unable and unwilling to recognize the historical significance of their practice.

### **Eddie Chambers: Destruction to 'Civilisation' (1988).**

For writer and critic Jean Fisher it is this difficult dynamic, and more precisely the relationship between black artists and modernist art histories, that underpins Eddie Chambers's 'Destruction of the National Front' (1979-80)(Fig.

7), another collage work and one that has become emblematic of the 'critical decade' of the 1980s (Fisher, 2009). Produced while Chambers was a foundation year student at Coventry Lanchester Polytechnic it was included in the BLK Art Group's series of exhibitions entitled *The Pan-Afrikan Connection: An Exhibition of Work by Young Black Artists* (1982-83). Like the 1975 iteration of 'For Oluwale', Chambers's 'Destruction --' is made up of four collage works that play across and between time and space. The artist's experience of mechanical distance from visual representation that comes with assembling a collage, counter to the expressivity more frequently accredited to painting and the distinctive aesthetic peculiar to activist print media all feed this concern. A series of British flags painted in the shape of a swastika is mounted on dark card and shown progressively torn apart. In contrast to 'For Oluwale', with its careful handling of print media, this ripping and tearing, like that in 'No Politics, Please', is more physical. It begins slowly, with a single tear to the corner of the second flag, gaining momentum and urgency. The third flag is torn into large and even pieces, while in the fourth they are much smaller and disorderly. Crucially, rather than representing material collected over a period of time, the artist has focused attention on material of his own creation.

Whilst a rich body of ongoing scholarship continues to engage the modernist implications of Chambers's work, not least its relationship to the histories of collage and painting, it is equally important to note its connection to the print media that is central to Araeen's collage practice.<sup>x</sup> As noted by Lucy Steeds, the source material for the Union Jack-cum-Swastika was a poster published by the Anti-Nazi League which shouted from the headline: 'THE NATIONAL FRONT IS A NAZI FRONT!' (Steeds np).<sup>xi</sup> Designed by David King, whose work with the ANL is best known for its constructivist aesthetic, the poster and others like it were printed in response to the proliferation of stickers, posters, leaflets and graffiti advertising the slogans of the then-ascendant far Right and deeply racist National Front. This widespread feature of the cityscape is highlighted by early BLK Art Group artist Dominic Dawes who noted the extent and impact of racist sloganeering in a statement for the group's 1982 exhibition at the Africa Centre:

In your towns and cities, on your subway walls etc., and just as much in your minds this is racial abuse: WOGS GO HOME, N.F. RULES, BLACK BASTARDS, PISS OFF NIGGERS etc. But you made us the so-called 'bastards'? (Dawes np)

Produced in runs numbering high into the tens of thousands and posted across the nation's cities in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the ANL posters were hung above and alongside the racial abuse described by Dawes; a continuous visual reproduction of the tensions that fuelled, and were fuelled by, the 1977 Battle of Lewisham and the uprisings in London, Bristol, Birmingham and other major British cities in the early 1980s. Although collected by Chambers in 1978, like Araeen's printed source material, it remained in the artist's possession for a time before entering his practice.<sup>xii</sup>

Much of the ANL imagery from this period made an explicit link between the activities and ideology of the NF and Nazism, often by layering text and historical photographs of historical episodes of violence. In his poster, however, together with the juxtaposition of a street march of the Birmingham branch of the NF with the visage of Adolf Hitler, King also associated the Union flag with the swastika, by placing them alongside each other in a banner carried by the group. Whilst for Sophie Orlando, Chambers's sharp focus on this combination of imagery can be considered not only politically and within the context of American post-war art (55), it is worth remarking how the work is in dialogue with another of Araeen's early collage works, **'Civilisation' (1974) (Fig. 8)**. Like 'No Politics, Please' the textures of 'Civilisation' recall the visual landscape of the city -- the layers of fliers, stickers and posters that shape Chambers's collage. Rather than tendering a link between narrow forms of Britishness and fascism, however, Araeen draws attention to the implicit ties between the neo-colonial politics of Right-wing nationalism and the production of hierarchical master narratives of art and culture (Boyce, 132). A hand-drawn Union flag is layered under a poster for Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation: A Personal View*, a landmark television series first aired in 1969, and some found images including a photograph of Winston Churchill, pro-Palestinian activism and the ongoing conflict in Vietnam. The

connections and linkages make visible Araeen's emphatic assertion in his seminal critical work 'Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto', that:

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF EUROPEAN CIVILISATION AS THE  
MAINSTREAM IS ONE OF THE MOST CATASTROPHIC DEVELOPMENTS  
THAT HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN HUMAN HISTORY, DESTROYING OR  
SUPPRESSING OTHER CULTURES AND CIVILISATIONS. (76)

Like Chambers's art in this respect, Araeen's bears out an expressive field in which the themes of construction and destruction are graphically explored: the Union flags are both produced by the artists' hands and the assembled material is ripped and torn. The historical and geographical range of their attention is considerable, ranging from the colonial era to the nationalist mythologies that condensed around the Second World War, into the cultural and political climate of the 1970s. Each artwork reveals the visual and ideological artifices of art and politics.

The hegemonies of culture come under further critical attack in Chambers's 'Black Civilisation' (1988) (Fig. 9) in which he explores 'civilisation' outside of the frame of a Eurocentric concept rooted in colonialist cultural hierarchies. The work is comprised of postcards from the British Museum featuring objects from Africa held in the collection. Postcards depicting the Benin bronzes and the painted sarcophagi of ancient Egypt are lined up in rows behind plates of glass secured by metal fixings. Between the rows are painted the words: 'He's one of the first black men. Who bring black civilization, UNIVERSALLY..'

This was created for Chambers' Africa Centre exhibition (*Marcus Garvey: The Blackest Star*, 1987), one of several shows held that year to commemorate the centenary of Garvey's birth. Looming large within Chambers's creative and critical practice -- as evidenced in comparable works such as the portrait poster by Chambers, 'Marcus Garvey' (1987) -- is the artist's sense that, Garveyism 'knows no frontiers, and, in a way, spans centuries and not just decades... [It] can be summarized as being everything that is, and everything that has ever been within Black politics, Black culture and the Black community'<sup>xiii</sup> (Chambers np). Shifting between various frameworks of 'blackness' -- from the Third Worldism of Araeen's practice towards Garvey's approach to Pan-Africanism -- we see once

more the practices of collecting and collage being forms of public address that bind together aesthetics and politics.

Whereas the other works I have examined are rooted in the collection and display of printed ephemera of daily life – the newspapers, posters and leaflets that come to line recycling bins and peel off of subway walls – here we find Chambers using postcards, thereby unpacking their significance for the history of colonialism – the postcard as ‘fertilizer of the colonial vision.’ (Alloula 4) . Lined up tidily, the rich visual production of ‘black civilisation(s)’, indicates the British Museum’s continuing role within colonialism, as it commodifies cultural differences with the assistance of visual means such as the postcard. These postcards were collected amid a proliferation of exhibitions of African plastic arts across the 1980s that Chambers would write critically about (1989): ‘two-a-penny’ images that offered little which is new or unknown and have helped to circulate stereotypes of African art as ‘primitive’ or ‘tribal’ by ignoring modern and contemporary life and art from across the continent. When mounted on hardboard and accompanied by the words of reggae musician Burning Spear, who Chambers credited as one of only a few faithful interpreters of Garvey’s message, the postcards take on new meanings (see also: Chambers *Artist’s Statement* np). They bring together the intellectual and aesthetic creativity of Africa and its diasporas to create a visual genealogy of ‘civilisation’, drawn from Garvey’s Pan-Africanism.

### **Marlene Smith: ‘Art History’**

Postcards play a further and fascinating role in **‘Art History’ (1987)(Fig.10)**, made by another member of the BLK Art Group, Marlene Smith. Like Chambers and Araeen, Smith is an artist-animateur, describing herself as an ‘artist who curates’.<sup>xiv</sup> ‘Art History’ comprises a column of four postcard-sized images (two of which are actual postcards) displayed alongside a vase holding a a colourful bunch of artificial flowers. The images depict, from top to bottom, the American sculptor Edmonia Lewis, a painted self-portrait by Simone Alexander, a photographic portrait of the potter Magdalene Odundo taken by Ingrid Pollard, and another photo-portrait by Brenda Agard. On each postcard Smith has

recorded in pencil the names of these artists. The viewer is given Lewis's name, the years of her birth and death and the fact that she was a sculptor. For the other three images, the artist is listed alongside the title or subject of the work and its date. Thus the basic details of an 'official' history are put into place. With this necessary gesture, Smith's contemporaries – young black British woman artists – are inserted within a narrative of black woman creativity that transgresses the hierarchies of 'fine art', foregrounding photography and assemblage of ready-made materials, as well as textiles, with a vase made of white crochet, stiffened in sugar-water. The meaning of the work, like those of Araeen and Chambers, springs from the act of making,

Indeed, looking more closely at the set of postcards in 'Art History' -- Alexander's self-portrait and Agard's photographic portrait – allows us to consider how Smith, like Araeen and Chambers, has raised questions about texts and their contexts, as well as hierarchies and canons of culture maintained through the process of collecting. The postcard featuring Alexander's work was produced to promote an exhibition of the artist's work at The Black-Art Gallery London. Developed by Shakka Dedi and Eve-I Kadeena for OBAALA, the group that took over its running and operation, the Gallery first opened in 1983.<sup>xv</sup> Created to respond to the scarcity of space and exhibition opportunities for black artists, particularly in parts of the city nearby (much less within) majority black communities, under Dedi's directorship the Gallery stuck closely to similar Garveyist notions of community and formations of blackness that underpinned Chambers's early practice. The postcard that Smith displayed in her 'Art History' was one of those that were typically made for each new exhibition at the Gallery.<sup>xvi</sup> As Chambers notes, although frequently modest in scope such visual material alongside small runs of catalogues, posters and press releases would circulate outside the walls of the Gallery in order to provide an important means of drawing attention to black artists. They have remained an invaluable form of documentation from this period, material that 'did much to cement the notion that Black artists were, or could be, practitioners of note, merit and credibility' (Chambers 2014, 115).

This circulation of material echoes Walter Benjamin's assertion that reproduction of artworks allows the 'original to meet the beholder halfway' and facilitate personalised and localised encounters. Both 'Art History' and 'Black Civilisation' hail such a beholder in the gallery and museum space as well as the canons of art history. Crucially, both works are the basis for a look at the role of the local and the personal within institutional histories of art. For example, the place of 'Art History' is complicated by Smith's own history with The Black-Art Gallery,<sup>xvii</sup> as well as what is extant in archives and bibliographies of the history of the Gallery. By the mid-1990s, as Chambers notes, 'when the gallery closed, its entire contents – archive material included was simply junked or got rid of' (Chambers, 2014). Any comprehensive and official collection of visual material – postcards, posters, catalogues – together with other forms of documentation were, over the course of a moving-out period, lost to researchers.<sup>xviii</sup> However, due to the wide circulation of printed ephemera, of course, much of the archive remains – fractured but not entirely forgotten – in various forms, placing a greater emphasis on works such as Smith's 'Art History' to index what is lost. .

Fragments of this history of art can also be found woven into the personal collections of material held by other artists, material that was exchanged through the informal networks and support system of the black arts milieu of the 1980s. Such a convergence of institutional and personal histories, materialized through visual ephemera, is also pertinent to the second postcard in the 'Art History' assemblage, the portrait of an unknown subject by photographer, poet and playwright Brenda Agard (presented here at the bottom of the column). Entitled, 'Portrait of our Time', the work was taken up by another poet and artist, Maud Sulter within her project of the same name and also to publicise the 1986 exhibition *Testimony: Three Black Women Photographers* (Camerawork, London). Importantly, Smith came to the postcard privately when it was sent to her by Sulter. On the reverse, not made visible in the 'Art History' work, is written correspondence.<sup>xix</sup> The 'official' narrative of Smith's art history -- the image and the name and date of Agard's work – here exists simultaneously with an institutional history of the reproduced image, as well as Smith's private relationship with Sulter as both a friend and a fellow artist.<sup>xx</sup>

Like Araeen and Chambers, Smith calls upon elements of mass-produced print culture to map the longer continuities between artistic and political concerns across space and time. Through the collection and re-presentation of postcards and images she opens up a field of enquiry across the spheres of the personal, aesthetic, institutional, geographical and political. For some critics, this arises at least in part from a sense of lack – a lack of recorded history, of institutional access and a lack of connectedness to developments within ‘mainstream’ contemporary art – that forced artists of the 1970s and 1980s to operate continuously in the space between art and politics. However, much like the mythology that Picasso’s collage was somehow apolitical, there is an illusory aspect to the perspective that black British artists have been absent – even if artworld institutions failed to create meaningful spaces and narratives for them. Indeed, as outlined at the beginning of this essay, the importance of artist-animators across and after the ‘critical decade’ highlights the pressing need for artists to have created their own artworlds by taking on the role of critic, activist, curator, art historian and archivist. Through an object-led engagement with the complexities offered by forms of address that explicitly link the artist, artwork and print culture through processes of collecting, we find embedded a history of art which originates at the confluence of generative presences: from the presence of a rich, fluid and ever-present visual language of print culture (whose absence in the present day can be largely explained by the digital turn) to the ongoing presence of trans-historical and trans-national creative and intellectual histories. Not least is the presence of formal and informal networks of friendship and support. It is from this position, rather than one of deficit and void-filling, that Araeen, Chambers and Smith have made art that pushes against the easy binaries and tidy formations of historical remembrance.

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<sup>i</sup> See: Dalal-Clayton, Anjalie. 'Challenging Narratives? The Framing of Black Artists in Afro Modern'. Conference paper delivered at *Now and then...Here and There....*, Tate Britain, 7 October 2017; Steeds, 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> Whilst the term black or Black remains heavily contested, here I use it in the lowercase to refer to Afro-Asian artists practising in Britain during the 1970s

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and 1980s, reflecting blackness as an identifier of cultural politics rather than epidermal difference.

<sup>iii</sup> Here I borrow the term 'artist-animateur' from Kobena Mercer's 'Perforations,' keynote lecture delivered at *Reframing the Moment: Legacies of the 1982 BLK Art Group Conference*, University of Wolverhampton, October 27, 2012. See also: Deborah Cherry. 'The Urgency of the Now'. *The Place is Here: The Work of Black Artists in 1980s Britain*. Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum and Sternberg Press, 2019. 33-42.

<sup>iv</sup> Among these are: the African and Asian Visual Arts Archive, founded in Bristol in 1989 by Chambers; the BLK Art Group Research Project (2011-2012) led by artists Claudette Johnson, Keith Piper and Marlene Smith; the Making Histories Visible archive (2005-present) led by Lubaina Himid at the University of Central Lancashire; and collections of writing -- Araeen and Chambers; Araeen, 1984; Chambers, 1999. A small selection of Himid's critical interventions can be found in exhibitions and catalogue texts for: *Thin Black Line: An Exhibition at the ICA*. Hebden Bridge: Urban Fox Press 1985; *Thin Black Line(s)*. London: Making Histories Visible Project, Centre for Contemporary Art, 2011.

<sup>v</sup> See Leighton, 1985, for example, which takes up a line of inquiry from Robert Rosenblum's 1965 presentation at an annual meeting of the College Art Association of America. Leighton highlights how the artist collected and assembled specific newsprint texts, creating not only to passages of colour and texture but also concrete political meanings.

<sup>vi</sup> McManus, Irene. 'Black Art An' Done'. *The Guardian*. June 1981. A clipping of the article can be found in the *Blk Art Group Scrapbook 1979-84*, digitised by Keith Piper, Marlene Smith and Claudette Johnson for the BLK Art Group Research Project: [www.blkartgroup.info](http://www.blkartgroup.info).

<sup>vii</sup> Araeen, Rasheed. Email to the author. 11 March. 2019.

<sup>viii</sup> For more see: Benjamin, Ionie. *The Black Press in Britain*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 1995.

<sup>ix</sup> The manuscript is held by the British Library and has been digitised. It can be found online at:

[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Royal\\_MS\\_14\\_E\\_IV](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Royal_MS_14_E_IV)

<sup>x</sup> See: Orlando 2016 in which the author considers Chambers's work alongside American developments in 'combine painting' and Neo-Dada. Also see Sonia Boyce's contribution to Aikens and Robles 2019 in which she considers the work within the context of a DIY aesthetic defined by Punk and links to twentieth century avant-gardism.

<sup>xi</sup> The work can be accessed online at :

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1260477/the-national-front-is-a-poster-king-david/>

<sup>xii</sup> Chambers confirmed his ownership of this poster in an email to the author. 25 April. 2019.

<sup>xiii</sup> The work can be accessed online at:

<sup>xiv</sup> For more on the work see: Bernier 2019; Price, Dorothy. 'Editorial'. *Art History* 41 1 (2018): 8-10; and Robles, Elizabeth. 'Reframing Art History' (Aikens and Robles, 2019, 91-98).

<sup>xv</sup> Organisation for Black Arts Advancement and Leisure/Learning Activities.

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<sup>xvi</sup> Some further examples of these promotional postcards are reproduced in the archival section of Aitkens and Robles, 2019.

<sup>xvii</sup> Closely associated with the gallery, where she worked for a time alongside Dedi, Smith took on the role of Director in 1990.

<sup>xviii</sup> See also the holdings of the library of the Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva, London) and Chambers's open-access archive, [www.diaspora-artists.net](http://www.diaspora-artists.net).

<sup>xix</sup> Elsewhere in my discussion around this work, I have previously identified this postcard as being from the Black-Art Gallery. This was incorrect and I hereby apologise and confirm its correct attribution.

<sup>xx</sup> This information is drawn from a series of conversations between Smith and the author during and after a visit to *The Place is Here* at Nottingham Contemporary in early 2017 and through summer 2018.