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**Art in Action: Learning from Sonia Boyce's *Feeling Her Way*,  
Venice 2022**

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**Art in Action: Learning from Sonia Boyce's *Feeling Her Way Venice 2022* Dr. Laura Sillars, 2023**

**Art in Action: Learning from Sonia Boyce's  
*Feeling Her Way, Venice 2022***



Sonia Boyce, artist commissioned by the British Council for the British Pavilion 2022 - Image credit - Cristiano Corte © British Council

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## Executive Summary

This research asks what we can learn from the success of Sonia Boyce at the 2022 Venice Biennale. It opens with a personal account of viewing the work. It moves on to consider the press response to Boyce's work and the strategies required by the artist to resist identity-based interpretation. Boyce's diplomatic work in handling the press reveals the structural inequities faced currently by artists operating at all levels who have a global majority background or any other identity that has been historically marginalised within Western culture. To understand the interpretative challenges faced by Boyce, it is necessary to return to the art and its histories, the 1980s and the British Black Arts Movement and the art of the following decade. The lack of attention paid to the history of the British Black Arts Movement period poses a genuine risk to any artist whose work emerged at this time, and has historically contributed to limiting artists' access to elite platforms such as the Venice Biennale. Great Britain's pavilion programme over the last thirty years and its relationship with market forces exposes critical structural issues that, for the creation of future equity, must be addressed. Finally, the role of collaboration and partnership across wider contemporary art and cultural sectors is proposed here as offering potential for progress towards more equitable creative futures.

## Thanks

The work of Professor Sonia Boyce OBE as an artist, an arts leader and a cultural activist provided the inspiration and energy for this report. The artist gains my greatest thanks. The Clore Leadership Fellowship Programme and its partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council provided the impetus and resources to support the production of this report, for which I am endlessly grateful. Hilary Carty's inspirational leadership and Jonathan Mayes's support and encouragement, Shelley Pearson's efficiency and friendliness are all appreciated. Ashleigh Barice, who worked on the transformative Black Artists & Modernism audit at MIMA, under the guidance of Prof. Boyce and Dr Anjalie Dalal-Clayton, undertook an early close reading of a draft of this report and offered thoughtful and precise feedback for which I give my sincere thanks.

Thanks goes also to Professor Simon James of Durham University and to Teesside University colleagues Professor Sarah Perks, Dr Paul Stewart, Ali Reid and Charlotte Nichol for their meticulous reviews of drafts. Andrew Kirk, the most regular reader of my work, receives warm thanks and recognition. This text incorporates learning drawn from discussions with MIMA colleagues Elinor Morgan and Helen Welford, as well as conversations with Plus Tate Directors from across the UK and Tate Directors Dr Maria Balshaw and Alex Farquharson. Thank you to Tate Liverpool Director Helen Legg and Ceri Barrow who invited a presentation at the annual Directors conference.

I would like also to thank Charlotte Burns and Julia Halperin for their reports analysing market data and its intersection with gender and race and for permission to use the charts they commissioned made by Nehema Kariuki. Miranda Stacey at the Venice Biennale team kindly shared data on the 2022 edition as well as press packs and images. Thank you, as always, to Joanna Deans for the beautiful graphic design. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my colleagues at Teesside University, from our Vice Chancellor Professor Paul Croney who offered advice on how to approach the text, to fellow colleagues in the School of Arts and Creative Industries, the Creative and Cultural Research Centre and members of the Impact Acceleration Account team who have been endlessly encouraging. Any errors, of fact or of judgement, remain entirely my own.

## Art in Action: *Feeling Her Way*

'I want you to imagine yourself as a bird'  
'I am Queen!'

Errollyn Wallen in *Feeling Her Way*, 2022

The composer Errollyn Wallen's voice gently commands a room containing musicians Jacqui Dankworth, Poppy Ajudha, Sofia Jernberg and Tanita Tikaram. She invites them to imagine themselves flying in air and, through their voices, to claim the status of Queen, to seek freedom. Guttural noise, breathless notes formed out of the intake of air, high-pitched squeaks and words broken down into repeated letters 'n, n, n, n' overlay each other. Despite the cameras that encircle them, these women seem to have no fear as they test and play with the sound waves they produce. The artist Sonia Boyce has brought these singers together to generate the core sonic and visual content of her work *Feeling Her Way* as her contribution for Britain's pavilion exhibition at the Venice Biennale. Boyce, with Wallen and the singers, has co-created an environment where experimentation becomes possible. The singers appear to feel safe. They can take risks. They riff off each other. At times their voices compete – in volume, in scale, in height. At other times they whisper tones which tend towards animal rather than human. They test the limits of their lungs, their capacity to make noise through their bodies.



Four of the six spaces of Great Britain's Venice pavilion are devoted to a filmic portrait of a single singer or a pair of singers as they improvise; the largest entrance hall gallery presents a film of a collective musical process guided by Wallen. The smallest gallery at the back, which links the two flanks of the building, displays items from Boyce's 300+ *Devotional* archive of music (CDs, records, posters, paraphernalia) by Black female singers or musicians. The golden, tessellated wallpaper seems at first to be decorative, but a second glance reveals that it is made up of collaged photographic fragments taken at the Abbey Road recording studio where the sounds that surround the viewer were captured. *Feeling Her Way*, Boyce's Venice exhibition, is a study of infrastructure – technical, material, social and physical. The photographs in the wallpaper focus on obscure equipment: the strangely gilded wheels of a trolley, the patterns of the wooden parquet floor, cables and microphone stands. Although gold is the dominating colour, the pinks, yellows and purples in the geometrical patterns are abstracted from the music studio pictures. The visual samples mirror the audio samples that can be heard in the installation – both have been collaged and remixed. Sound and image draw attention to the way media are constructed. The audience is invited to listen to recorded sounds, view the documentary film footage and, through the wallpaper, gain a snapshot of the technical environment of the original site of production. The wallpaper is hypnotic. It allows the eyes to glaze over as well as to gaze, to focus on the films of the singers. It has the effect of attuning the senses towards the sound.





Oversized golden nuggets form reflective seats. Extrusions of fool's gold (iron pyrite) encrust the walls and their reflective surfaces spin out the patterns of the wallpaper beyond itself. They augment the shimmer, glamour and sheen of the installation. In one room, a sculpted crystalline form extrudes from the ceiling. In another, CDs are held wall-mounted by sculpted fool's gold forms. In the archive room, gold and black geometrical shapes tessellate. There is a thickness to the paper, a gloss: it is reminiscent of another era. 1980s flock wallpaper meets a shimmering Shirley Bassey gown. A spray of glitter is pasted as if it is the sound emerging from the mouth of Tanita Tikaram. Fleeting sound is turned, Midas-style, into shining gold matter.



Above: Room 3 in the British Pavilion featuring performers Jacqui Dankworth and Sofia Jernberg - 2022 - Image Credit - Cristiano Corte © British Council

Left: Room 4 in the British Pavilion featuring the Devotional Collection - 2022 - Image Credit - Cristiano Corte © British Council

Boyce's 2022 Venice commission *Feeling Her Way* brought together threads that can be traced throughout the artist's oeuvre. Her work with Black female singers goes back to Liverpool in the late 1990s. Idiosyncratic wallpaper is also a repeated trope that can be traced to her earliest work. The symbolic sculptural form of fool's gold was developed in recent installations at Eastside Projects and MIMA (2020-22). Golden threads that run through Boyce's work weave through *Feeling Her Way*. As much as it announced a new beginning – new voices, characters, places and ideas – the work arrived as a powerful summation of a four-decade career.

Early works by Boyce employ pattern to dazzle the viewer, confuse visual logic and confound restrictive aesthetic systems. In *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* (1986), the depiction of wallpaper provides a radical resistance to standardised genres or the geometrical perspectival logic of foreground and background.



Inspired by Frida Kahlo's work, which Boyce experienced first-hand at the Whitechapel Art Gallery's presentation of Kahlo's inaugural European solo show, the wallpaper conjures magical realism. In *She Ain't Holding Them Up* the wallpaper peels away at the top to reveal palm trees and yellow birds, iconic visual symbols of the Caribbean. At the same time, the wallpaper mirrors the domestic world of the smart formal front room so central to the social and family life of Caribbean communities.



Art in Action: Learning from Sonia Boyce's *Feeling Her Way*, Venice 2022

*She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* - 1986 - Middlesbrough Collection, MIMA - Photographer: Jason Hynes

Laden with symbolism, narrative structure and culturally specific iconography, a work such as *She Ain't Holding Them Up* crafts an aesthetic resistance to the abstraction and conceptualism that dominated debate in the late 1980s. It questions representation in art history and connects visual tropes of domestic photography to make sense of larger, global histories. Similarly, the wallpaper in Venice filters content between the Abbey Road studios and the Venice pavilion galleries. The wallpaper is a conceptual device through which sites of production and sites of reception connect. Favoured by the Beatles, the studio Boyce inhabits has cult status. Venice is also an iconic site. The wallpaper pays attention to these hallowed spaces and invites audiences to consider them as architectural and social constructions.



In more recent projects, such as *In the Castle of My Skin* at Eastside Projects and MIMA (2020/21), crystalline sculptures covered with wallpaper from the artist's previous work combine Boyce's work with that of other artists as a political, collaborative act.



Sonia Boyce, *In the Castle of My Skin*, 25 January to 8 August 2020, Eastside Projects<sup>1</sup> – Photographer: Stuart Whipps, courtesy of Eastside Projects

In 2020, Boyce worked with Eastside Projects and MIMA to develop major new installations and an exhibition that moved between each site. Here the artist experimented with the concept of fool's gold and combined 7 of MIMA's collection works with work by 7 artists from the artists' network. Part of the structure was used as a ramp by skateboarders with whom the artist had collaborated. *In the Castle of My Skin* starts with the metaphor of skin as a covering, a surface, a barrier, a marker of identity and a connector between internal and external worlds. The title comes from George Lamming's 1954 novel.

The Castle of My Skin was reformulated for MIMA in 2021<sup>2</sup>. Sonia Boyce, *In the Castle of My Skin*, 11 June – 10 October 2021 at MIMA. Organised by MIMA with Eastside Projects, with support from Henry Moore Foundation and The Elephant Trust. Photographer: Jason Hynes

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the project see: <https://eastsideprojects.org/projects/in-the-castle-of-my-skin/>

<sup>2</sup> For the full press release see: <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/399653/sonia-boyce-in-the-castle-of-my-skin/>, accessed 31 March 2023.

The crystalline nuggets of fool's gold in *Feeling Her Way* function symbolically. The crystal is emblematic in critical feminist iconography. For Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, the crystal is put forward as a metaphor to scaffold alternative constructions of knowledge that move beyond a singular or invisible author.<sup>3</sup> Crystals allow for multiple perspectives to be expressed simultaneously. A crystal diffracts rather than reflects light. Diffraction is the science of touch and exchange. Authors, places, power, resources shape knowledge, which is always situated and located. Knowledge is filtered by people and generated in real places. The crystal is a three-dimensional structure that offers a model of thinking that is layered, interactive and grown in space and time.

Multiple perspectives and situatedness undergird *Feeling Her Way*. The making process is documented, including film footage of the artist operating in the music studio alongside the singers and the conductor. The fragments of photographic content locate the event in a specific place and indicate cultural histories and institutional power. The voices overlaying each other speak to creative co-production, interaction and communality. Boyce rejects the singular authorial perspective, and yet her convening role is acknowledged. Every element of the work is scaffolded by ethical intention.



Room 3 in the British Pavilion featuring performers Jacqui Dankworth and Sofia Jernberg – 2022 – Image Credit – Cristiano Corte © British Council

<sup>3</sup> Donna Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others' [1992], in *The Haraway Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 70; Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 189, 191. Barad references E. F. Keller and C. Grontkowski, 'The Mind's Eye', in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (eds), *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science* (London: D. Reidel, 1983), pp. 207-24.

The sonic content is encompassing and moving. *Feeling Her Way*, for me, tapped into an uncannily parallel experience. As a young teenager, along with a small group of other female singers, I was invited to participate in a recording at Abbey Road studios. For two days, in the same studio in which Boyce drew together these internationally leading figures, we anonymous youngsters trained and recorded. We ate our meals in the studio canteen. We slept in the studio flat. Singing together with the group in that hallowed environment was extraordinary. It had a profound effect. At the time I was experiencing Hitchcockian nightmares that culminated in my inability to escape or shout out. These persisted until, in the middle of the night at the Abbey Road studio flat, after an intensive day of singing, connection and hilarity with the other girls, my recurring dream was punctured by my own piercing scream. I woke everyone. Something had shifted. The night terror shattered and never returned. It is this visceral force of the voice to break mental barriers that *Feeling Her Way* embodies. The sheer joy of sounding your voice and the exuberance of stretching sonic limits in a group is not merely playful, it is furiously powerful.

Boyce asked the singers to use their voices to express freedom. In undertaking such a task they smash restrictive thought-patterns, they open new possibilities and, through their voices, they swell and expand. They create new spaces to inhabit in new ways of being. Sound encompasses a viewer in the way image cannot. At times, their improvisation exposes learned musical patterns and linguistic tropes. At others, the strange sounds they intone craft novel arrangements and configurations that evade logic or standard musical modes. The sounds interact, tessellate and vibrate. Freedom is experienced, the work suggests, through and in the body, with the voice as dynamic energy. The voice can remake and reclaim freedom.

## Artist in Action: The Burden of Representation

**The work for me is doing something. It's doing something in the world.**

Sonia Boyce to Alan Yentob in BBC's *Imagine*, 7 November 2022

**Sonia Boyce becomes first black woman to represent Britain at Venice Biennale.**

David Sanderson, *The Times*, 12 February 2020

The press is driven by news stories. The media plays a role in shaping the reception of art – and artists. From the outset, the fact that Sonia Boyce was ‘making history’ as the first Black British woman to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale dominated the headlines. Boyce, determined to release the work into the world, adopted a sophisticated suite of strategies to shift the media response. To journalist Farah Nayeri of *The New York Times* she questioned the celebration of this point:

‘To be the first suggests that there wasn’t space for anyone like me before,’ she said, adding that she hoped that her Venice victory wasn’t just ‘some kind of blip,’ and that ‘the door stays open for more to come through.’<sup>4</sup>

Representation is at the heart of occupying the Great Britain pavilion for the Venice Biennale. For any individual, representing a nation is fraught with complexity: legitimacy, patriotism, politics. Adding a ‘first-ever’ prefix to an identity exponentially increases exposure and generates ‘news’. This news can preclude journalists from creatively engaging with the work.



Artist Sonia Boyce standing in room 5 at the British Pavilion, 2022, Image Credit – Cristiano Corte © British Council

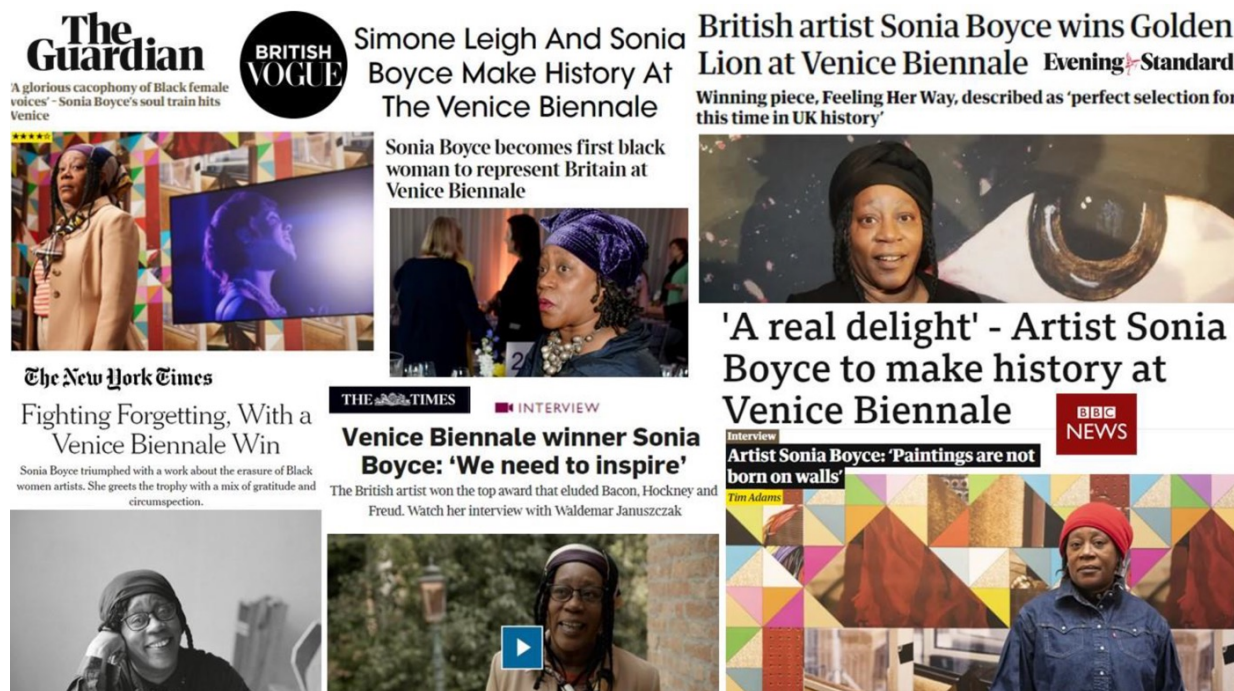
<sup>4</sup> Farah Nayeri, ‘Fighting Forgetting, With a Venice Biennale Win’, *The New York Times*, 13 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/13/arts/design/sonia-boyce-venice-biennale.html> (accessed 25 March 2023).



To gain imaginative and economic currency, artworks need to be looked at, talked about and to live in the imagination of the viewer. Artworks become exchangeable ideas and seep into shared cultural memory. They become reference points for times, places and histories. Driving analysis through the frame of the global majority status of the maker, or any another distinguishing factor such as disability, class, gender or sexuality, limits potential interpretations. In a 2005 essay 'Iconography after Identity', Kobena Mercer revisits the idea of the burden of representation.<sup>5</sup> Mercer argues, in relation to art, that if identity leads analysis it reduces vital critical engagement:

Writing about art entails a continuous reflection on the circuit and interrelationship between three very different sorts of things: artists (who tend to be human beings); art worlds (which are contingent sociological structures); and artworks (which are usually physical objects). In the discourse of so-called criticism surrounding minority formations we tend to see an over emphasis on the first and the second, which overshadows, if not completely obliterates, the third.<sup>6</sup>

Mercer's essay was included in the edited volume *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Art in 1980s Britain* (2005) for which, with co-editors David A. Bailey and Ian Baucom, Boyce was awarded the 2007 History of British Art Book Prize (USA). As a professor, Boyce has championed close, in-person readings of physical artworks as a strategy to resist a frequent deflection from the art object in favour of a focus on identity and ethnicity. This approach has been scaled through major research projects that stretch across the UK, with funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Black Artists & Modernism (BAM), based at University of the Arts London, in



Press cuttings courtesy of British Council.

<sup>5</sup> Kobena Mercer, 'Iconography after Identity', in David Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce (eds), *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Art in 1980s Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 49–58. For a discussion on the impact of this period, see Elizabeth K. Robles and Dorothy C. Price (eds), *After the Black Arts Movement: Framing the Critical Decade* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Mercer, 'Iconography after Identity', p. 53.

collaboration with Middlesex University, has supported museums and galleries to audit their collections to understand their demographic data and then, separately, to invest time to look at, reflect upon and analyse artworks.<sup>7</sup>

The BAM method includes group sessions in which readers articulate what they see: the shape of a work, colour, form, texture, scale, narrative, iconography, structure and materials. They allow themselves time to make imaginative, creative associations. They draw on their personal experiences. In an era of digital distraction, attention capture is increasingly understood. We invest time, and how we spend it shapes our imagination. It matters who interprets work, why and how. Interpretations are always subjective, and aesthetic value is neither stable nor finite. Cultural value accrues through layers of re-reading an object. Compounded neglect reduces the artistic currency of works. If the entire interpretation of an object is framed around the DNA of its maker, it sits in a collection store as a one-liner. The work fails to claim museum real estate. Some cold-stored objects are rarely, if ever, placed in the gallery spotlight.<sup>8</sup> This process of close reading does not ask if a work or object meets any universal standard; it asks for an account of the peculiar qualities of a singular object. The process honours the lived experience of the viewer as an interpreting agent. It slows things down. It opens things up. Paying close attention to art is a radical act.

### ***Feeling Her Way through the Burden of Representation***

Across the whole Venice run and through the tour, Boyce used her agency to educate the press on the distinctions between aesthetic analysis and the flaws of identity-driven responses. That *Feeling Her Way* platforms the subjectivities of people whose voices are statistically less publicly audible does not mean that the identity of the artist should provide the primary mode of analysing the work. Of course, the content of the work and the artist's lived experience are connected, but the work – its visual formation, materials, symbols, iconography, aesthetic structure and conceptual tools – has its own life. Limiting interpretation reduces the potential liveliness of the work.

For the Biennale opening period alone, the British Council recorded more than 230 journalists visiting the pavilion. The artist gave more than fifty interviews and over a hundred articles were generated by UK media outlets.<sup>9</sup> From the outset, the artist tactically avoided being drawn into becoming a broad cultural commentator on polemical issues. Key British newspapers sought to link her work to issues related to Brexit (*The Times*, 12 February 2020) and statue toppling (*The Times*, 1 May 2021).<sup>10</sup> In each instance, Boyce found a diplomatic way of steering the discussion back to her art. At points, the artist's frustration and exhaustion with the ongoing cultural diplomacy required to influence and inform the press about the politics of representation is palpable. Speaking to Alan Yentob on the BBC TV programme *Imagine*, Boyce explained that:

<sup>7</sup> Black Artists & Modernism (BAM) was a three-year research project based at University of the Arts London, in collaboration with Middlesex University, and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council between 2015 and 2018. It asked how artists of African and Asian descent in Britain feature in the story of twentieth-century art. BAM researchers address the understated connections and areas of contention between Black-British artists' practice and the work of art's relationship to modernism: [https://www.arts.ac.uk/uai-decolonising-artsinstitute/uai-related-activities/black-artists-and-modernism](https://www.arts.ac.uk/ual-decolonising-artsinstitute/uai-related-activities/black-artists-and-modernism) (accessed 29 March 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Boyce drew attention to this in 'Whoever Heard of a Black Artist? Britain's Hidden Art History', dir. Alex Harding, prod. Tayna Hudson, BBC 4, first broadcast 7 November 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Data received from the British Council in March 2023. This does not include the statistics for the tour.

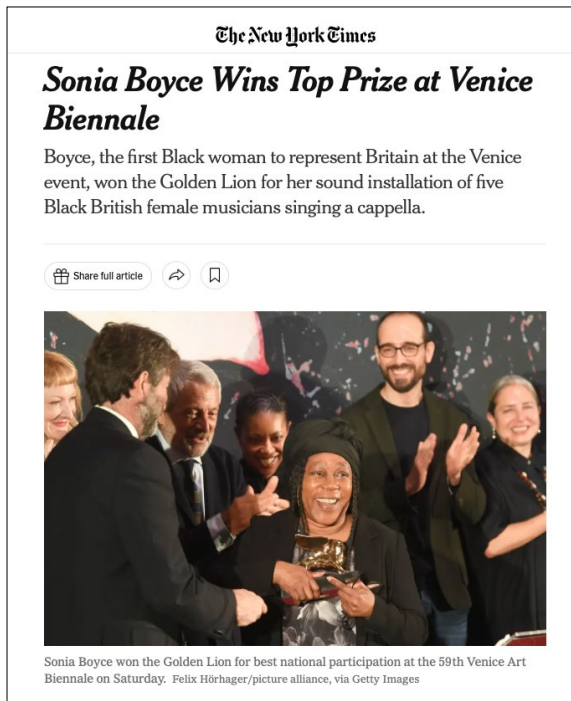
<sup>10</sup> Linked to Brexit in David Sanderson, 'Sonia Boyce Becomes First Black Woman to Represent Britain at Venice Biennale', *The Times*, 12 February 2020; and asked about statue toppling in Rachel Campbell Johnston, 'Sonia Boyce: "How do we return to history and to its ghosts?"', *The Times*, 26 June 2021.

The work for me is doing something. It's doing something in the world ... If it just constantly reverts back to my physiognomy then I get really pissed off.<sup>11</sup>

In Yentob's documentary, Boyce reflected that by focusing on her identity, critics risked diminishing the work. Followed by the camera through the wider Venice exhibition, Boyce's daughters optimistically looked to a future where identity would not be news. Writing for *The Guardian* on 30 January 2023 about Boyce's *Feeling Her Way* touring to Turner Contemporary in Margate, Claire Armistead noted that as she made her way to the interview she was 'warned' that the artist was 'tired' of being asked to reflect on her role as Britain's first Black woman to take over the Venice pavilion. Armistead reflects:

When I finally do ask her, she quotes a phrase coined by the art historian Kobena Mercer in a 1990 article titled 'Black Art and the Burden of Representation'. 'The idea that one stands there as a representative [of a minority] is something that is projected on to me, and it always has been projected on to me, and to many others who are in a similar position, whether it's a question of gender, or race or sexuality,' she says.<sup>12</sup>

Mobilising art theory bolstered Boyce's insistence that journalists look beyond the artist and to the art. As well as an artist, Boyce is a university professor by trade, and her engagement with the press can be seen as the confident rhetoric of an individual steeped in both theory and practice.



Screenshots from *The New York Times* and *The Art Newspaper*, online, both April 23, 2022

<sup>11</sup> Boyce speaking to Alan Yentob in 'Sonia Boyce: Finding Her Voice', dir. Alex Harding, prod. Tayna Hudson, *Imagine*, BBC 1, first broadcast 7 November 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Claire Armistead, 'From Venice to Margate: World Conquering Artist Sonia Boyce Brings her Supergroup to the Seaside', *The Guardian*, 30 January 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/jan/30/venice-margate-sonia-boyce-supergroup> (accessed 26 March 2023).

Winning the Golden Lion supported Boyce's goal to shift press focus from her as a cultural figure towards the work. In *The Times*, Waldemar Januszczak placed the win within art's histories and described Boyce's 'warm', 'welcoming', 'moving' work, which brought him, at points, 'to tears'.<sup>13</sup> Here 'first-ever' headlines were replaced by an art historical one: 'Venice Biennale Winner Sonia Boyce: "We need to inspire"', with a subheading: 'The British artist won top award that eluded Bacon, Hockney and Freud.' Januszczak located Boyce's success within the history of art and her artistic oeuvre, the artist's own creative production, and reflected on how her work has shifted since her early career.

As *Feeling Her Way* toured to Turner Contemporary, more nuanced responses emerged. Maya Jaggi's evocative language in the *Financial Times* brings the work to life. Here visual analysis and knowledge of Boyce's artistic trajectory converge. Biography is present but plays a minimised role. Jaggi writes:

The dramatic staging ... tessellated wallpapers using fragments of production stills, from studio mics to flower-strewn shoes ... harks back to the warmly patterned backgrounds in Boyce's early drawings, which reflected her childhood in east London and her Caribbean heritage, but grew menacing or subversive in figurative pastels such as 'Lay back, keep quiet and think of what made Britain so great' (1986), with its thorny black flowers, critically alluding to the English rose.<sup>14</sup>

Jaggi imaginatively engages with the imagery, symbolism and iconography of the work. The writer seeks aesthetic and conceptual coherence to make sense of the artist's practice. From the previous edition, the British Council saw a 52 per cent increase in videos viewed through social media and estimated a 238 million global online audience reach and a broadcast audience of over 35 million. Boyce's media tactics provide a blueprint for future PR and marketing teams to best support artists whose identity status might make them a target for identity-based interpretation.



Boyce and Claudette Johnson at *Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s–Now* at Tate Britain screenshot from BBC's *Imagine: Sonia Boyce: Finding Her Voice*, 7 Nov. 2022

<sup>13</sup> Waldemar Januszczak, 'Venice Biennale Winner Sonia Boyce: "We need to inspire"', *The Times*, 1 May 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Maya Jaggi, 'Sonia Boyce, Turner Contemporary Review – Exhilarating Improvisation Makes New Listeners of Us All', *Financial Times*, 14 February 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/e05124ba-9e26-46c6-8f29-720086d76a5c> (accessed 26 March 2023).

The most powerful media strategy was Boyce's determination to share her limelight with members of the artistic community who had supported her for decades. In Yentob's documentary and for Nayeri's *The New York Times* article, which was syndicated globally, a cast of trusted interlocutors were drawn upon as expert witnesses, aesthetic analysts, art historians and cultural theorists. Artists, curators, friends and family stepped into the bright lights, which gave new dimensions and perspectives to Boyce's work, politics and her work's impact. While Lubaina Himid, Claudette Johnson and Zineb Sedira (France's artistic choice for 2022) are well-known artist figures, their individual and collective histories have not always received the level of attention that they deserve. Similarly, in the French pavilion, Sedira included a video interview of herself and Boyce in conversation with arts leader Gilane Tawadros. Here the three women discussed their working lives, the people, institutions, places that helped them grow. Sedira, Boyce's London neighbour and friend, featured in Yentob's *Imagine* documentary. Together, Boyce and Sedira introduced a community of artists whose collective contribution to culture deserves recognition. They demonstrated the alternative methods they had engaged to support their careers and the significant networks that enabled them to progress. Moreover, through including and referencing many other artists in her interviews and media opportunities, Boyce platformed artists who could also occupy a future Venice pavilion. Moving beyond the headlines that just by being there these artists were 'making history', Sedira and Boyce used the high-visibility platform of Venice to shape future histories.

### ***Making Histories Visible***

The lack of attention paid to the art histories of the 1980s continues to impact the success of the artists who emerged from that period. In her essay 'Inside the Invisible: For/Getting Strategy', Lubaina Himid highlights the lack of history writing, documentation, archive building and solo shows and monographs on the work of Black British artists, particularly women.<sup>15</sup> The repeated circulation of incorrect information that then becomes 'fact', deficient resources for the scholarly activities needed to preserve artistic memory, and a pervading sense of uninterest underpin the collective frustration articulated throughout the *Shades of Black* conference and associated publication. The real-world implications of this sustained lack of investment can be noted in the responses to Boyce's Venice project. In *The Times*, for example, Rachel Campbell Johnston justified a 2-star rating for Boyce's Venice work, in part because so much 'time and patience' was required to 'tap into the backstory that dates to the black British cultural renaissance of the 1980s'.<sup>16</sup> Despite important moments of visibility for the British Black Arts Movement (BBAM), with leading practitioners in exhibitions, events and catalogues, a lack of fluency with these histories forms a barrier to imaginative entry at many levels.<sup>17</sup> This is exacerbated by the fact that the art histories of the BBAM cannot be slotted into the neat historical chronology of British contemporary art that has dominated the last three decades. Research into BBAM and the 1980s troubles those who seek a simple canon of contemporary British art history or a canon that is validated by market forces.

<sup>15</sup> Lubaina Himid, 'Inside the Invisible: For/Getting Strategy', in Bailey et al. (eds), *Shades of Black*, pp. 41–48.

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Campbell Johnston, 'Sonia Boyce in Venice Review – Boundary-breaking Pavilion Lacks the Wow Factor', *The Times*, 19 April 2022.

<sup>17</sup> It must be noted that much important work has been undertaken to research these histories. Good bibliographic sources can be found in Elizabeth K. Robles and Dorothy C. Price (eds), *After the Black Arts Movement: Framing the Critical Decade* (London, Bloomsbury, 2020) and Sonia Boyce, Dorothy Price (eds), *Art History: Special Issue: Rethinking British Art: Black Artists and Modernism* (Vol., 44, Issue. 3, 2021), pp.456–675.

The creative and cultural energy of the 1980s was driven by second-generation Black British people of Caribbean descent who addressed the British art scene with politically motivated vigour and new aesthetic approaches. Writing on the mass movements of people from the early twentieth century in *Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s–Now*, David A. Bailey situates the BBAM renaissance within a *longue durée* narrative.<sup>18</sup> Social movements, leading critical figures and new cultural forms that developed in early 1920s diasporic communities scaffolded the work produced in the 1980s. This globally connected community responded to political shifts and cultural content from across the world, and understanding these histories requires trans-Atlantic perspectives. BBAM altered British culture but its sources and energy were not broadly understood. Bailey writes that:

The Black Arts Movement burst onto the British art scene with breathtaking intensity in the 1980s, changing the nature and perception of British culture irreversibly, and infiltrating not just the visual arts and film, but theatre, music and literature.<sup>19</sup>

Art schools became important convening centres. Bailey notes that the Blk Art Group, Sankofa Film and Video Collective emerged through connections formed in educational contexts in locations such as London, Wolverhampton and Nottingham. Artworks made by artists in these groups often responded to acts of state violence against Black bodies. Marlene Smith's *Good Housekeeping* (1985) directly addressed the shooting of Cherry Groce, which, along with the death of Cynthia Jarrett, triggered the Handsworth uprisings that provided the content for Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986). Photographers Vanley Burke and Pogus Caesar also documented social unrest in Birmingham and the communities who were affected. BBAM artists were energetic forces in the British cultural landscape, operating with agency and influence. These artists shifted debate and informed policy.<sup>20</sup> In the catalogue for *Feeling Her Way*, Boyce recalls in interview with Courtney J. Martin that seeing Wolverhampton Art Gallery's 1981 *Black Art an' Done* exhibition was 'like a thunder bolt' that led her, as an art student, to a community that stretched across the UK.<sup>21</sup> A year later, the First National Black Art Convention organised by Pan-African Connection consolidated social connections and generated a sense of possibility.

These artists collectively articulated a new cultural energy and possibility and exhibited widely in leading public art galleries and museums across the UK.<sup>22</sup> However, although many artists continued to make work, by the early 1990s the BBAM lost momentum, in part due to press backlash. Of the same moment, Jean Fisher described the BBAM as being 'submerged' by the Young British Artists (YBAs), who erupted into the art world at the end of the 1980s.<sup>23</sup> In 'A Case of Mistaken Identity', Gilane Tawadros argued that two exhibitions exemplify the cultural pivot between the YBA

<sup>18</sup> Alex Farquharson and David A. Bailey (eds), *Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s–Now* (London: Tate, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> Here Bailey links the 1976 Race Relations Act with the first report on what was termed at the time 'Ethnic Minority Arts', written by Naseem Kahn; see Bailey, 'Caribbean Movements in Britain', in Farquharson and Bailey (eds), *Life Between Islands*, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> Emma Ridgway and Courtney J. Martin, *Sonia Boyce: Feeling Her Way* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Boyce's CV from the 1980s is indicative of the scope of the BBAM across the UK. Boyce's work was shown in important exhibitions curated by Himid, including *Five Black Women* (1983) at the Africa Centre, London, and *The Thin Black Line* (1985) at London's ICA. Although London's Black Art Gallery appears several times on Boyce's CV in the 1980s, the venues for her exhibitions tended to be publicly funded organisations spread across the UK – Battersea Arts Centre (London), Mappin (Sheffield), Bluecoat (Liverpool), Cornerhouse (Manchester) and other London venues such as the Whitechapel and the Hayward. The titles of the group exhibitions show ambition to embrace and elevate the BBAM: *Black Woman Time Now* (Battersea Arts Centre, 1983), *No More Little White Lies* (Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, 1985) and *The Essential Black Art* (Chisenhale, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Jean Fisher, 'The Other Story and the Past Imperfect', commissioned by Afterall and TrAIN, *Tate Papers*, no. 12, 2009, <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/7273> (accessed March 2023).

moment and the BBAM.<sup>24</sup> The first was the now legendary *Freeze* (1988) exhibition of sixteen students in an empty London Port Authority building organised by figures such as Damien Hirst and Angus Fairhurst. *Freeze* announced the new generation of British artists who came to be known as the YBAs and who quickly gained a market and sustained media attention. The second, in 1989, was the landmark exhibition *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, which gathered 24 artists in the Hayward Gallery on London's Southbank and was curated by Rasheed Araeen.<sup>25</sup> The bellicose press response to *The Other Story*, Tawadros argues, twisted and turned flawed notions of identity and authenticity.<sup>26</sup> In an interview with Courtney J. Martin in the *Feeling Her Way* catalogue, Boyce recalls the impact of the press response to *The Other Story* as one of cultural closure:

The force of the backlash was about trying to quell the momentum. The critical backlash was institutionally structured. The deafening criticisms of that exhibition were a real setback.<sup>27</sup>

For Fisher, the YBA moment gained traction, in part, because unlike the BBAM it appealed to a retrogressive desire to refigure Britishness according to a distinct geographical narrative. The apoliticism of much of the work made it commercial. Controversial content garnered media interest but was largely underpinned by stable universal themes. Sharks in formaldehyde solution, unmade beds, portraits of female serial killers, preserved butterflies provided the content for iconic works that dealt with death, sex, evil, beauty and decay, and seamlessly connected the content to well-defined art historical genres. Despite, at times, being overtly shocking, the work was easily legible.

Nevertheless, the YBA moment was not simply a rupture from what came before; the BBAM aesthetically and conceptually pre-figured the YBA moment. The YBA moment rejected the activism and political advocacy of the BBAM artists while it drew on the cultural credibility of the figure of the artist as agitational and confrontational. Mercer suggests that YBA, or New British Art, was a mythic formation dependent upon that old idea of rupture from the past combined with a nostalgia for lost national identity. In *Travel and See: Black Diaspora Art Practices Since the 1980s* Mercer argues that the New British Art was a synthesis of extant cultural forms that continued from the BBAM. What emerged, he reflects, 'was neither new nor British'.<sup>28</sup> In the exhibition catalogue for the 2022 Tate Britain touring exhibition *Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s–Now*, co-curator Bailey tracks the derivation of the concept of 'cool' that was central to YBA aesthetics and the 'Cool Britannia' motif developed by the New Labour government to rebrand Britain. The roots of 'cool' are found in the diasporic linguistics of the generation of Caribbean artists who arrived in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>29</sup> The appropriation of 'cool', Bailey argues, is a cultural hijack from Caribbean culture. Moreover, the concept of the young artist as an agent of change was formed within BBAM. Key BBAM exhibitions such as *Black Art an' Done: An Exhibition of Young Black Artists* (1981) and *The Pan Afrikan Connection: An Exhibition*

<sup>24</sup>Gilane Tawadros, 'A Case of Mistaken Identity', in Bailey et al. (eds), *Shades of Black*, p. 124.

<sup>25</sup>The exhibition subsequently travelled to Wolverhampton Art Gallery, Manchester Art Gallery and Cornerhouse in 1990.

<sup>26</sup>Tawadros, 'A Case of Mistaken Identity', p. 125.

<sup>27</sup>Fisher, 'The Other Story', p. 27.

<sup>28</sup>Kobena Mercer, *Travel and See: Black Diaspora Art Practices Since the 1980s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), ebook, location 3465.

<sup>29</sup>Bailey, 'Caribbean Movements', p. 31.

of *Young Black Artists* (1982) at Birmingham's Ikon Gallery and Coventry's Herbert Gallery (1983) promoted the cultural credibility of young, agitational artists. The concept of energetic young artists in Britain as an agential cultural force filtered from the BBAM through to the YBAs. As multi-media approaches, aesthetic styles, linguistic forms and concepts migrated from the BBAM into the YBA moment, political agitation diminished. It would be unfair to say that there is no political content in the work of the YBAs, there are many examples: Jenny Saville's paintings of women such as *Propped* (1992) question accepted notions of femininity, and Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) questioned the racial construction of religious piety. However, where the conceptualisation of artist as an identity in the BBAM was predicated on cultural activism, by the time 'B' stood for British rather than Black the visibility demanded by the artist was rhetorical and speculative. Irony replaced political action.

Over the last three decades art historians and artists have attempted to process the criticisms of *The Other Story*.<sup>30</sup> In 2018, with almost thirty years of hindsight, academic Lucy Steeds enacted a fictional walk-through of Araeen's exhibition in 'Retelling "The Other Story" or What Now?' for the journal *Afterall*.<sup>31</sup> Using installation shots and supported by ten years' worth of conversations with exhibiting artists, Steeds brought *The Other Story* to life in a new way. Here the writer acknowledges the weighty, politically motivated discourse that surrounded the exhibition on its launch, and places it in a footnote. Steeds then turns to archival photographs of the exhibition installation to form new insights around critical themes such as whether the project 'characterise[d] or further[ed] the project of anti-imperialism'. The writer imagines the experience of walking through each room and pays close attention to the works on display. She asks questions of form, content, style, and responds to the visual sensations that each work produces. This rhetorical form unburdens the exhibition from the history of representation and releases it from being defined by fierce intensities. This approach pays attention to the art which the media *mêlée* at the time almost entirely failed to explore. Steeds' experimental approach to reconsidering *The Other Story* is indicative of a new moment of creative possibility for the writing of histories. Steeds' writing reviews the work anew, albeit through a second-hand lens.

The much-needed survey presented in *Life Between Islands* is bursting with understudied critical figures, movements and connected production hubs such as publishers, artist groupings, music and performance venues.<sup>32</sup> In Wolverhampton, Keith Piper, Marlene Smith and Claudette Johnson, members of the original Blk Art Group, have reformed as a research team to ensure the historical legacy of the project. In 2023 Tate acquired Himid's *Making Histories Visible* archive, which provides another collective research opportunity. Urgent work is still needed to uncover and expand the histories of Black artists in Britain: living memory and archives are easily lost, restorative historical justice is required for those artists whose work has been marginalised, and a new generation of artists are entitled to draw from rich cultural histories that are woven through the last thirty years. Revised art history-making has been needed for decades, but now, more than ever, the component parts are in place

<sup>30</sup>For examples, see Andrew Graham-Dixon, 'Pride and Prejudice', *The Independent*, 5 December 1989; Brian Sewell, 'Black Pride and Prejudice', *Evening Standard*, 4 January 1990; Peter Fuller, 'Black Artists: Don't Forget Europe', *Sunday Telegraph*, 10 December 1989. Homi Bhabha and Sutapa Biswas responded to reviews in 'The Wrong Story', *The New Statesman*, 15 December 1989. Key press responses were gathered as a case study of receptions of art in Steve Edwards (ed.), *Art and its Histories: A Reader* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press in association with The Open University, 1999), pp. 263-77.

<sup>31</sup>Lucy Steeds, 'Retelling "The Other Story" – or What Now?', *Afterall: Exhibition Histories*, 30 September 2018, <https://staging.afterall.org/exhibition-histories/the-other-story/retelling-the-other-story-or-what-now> (accessed 30 June 2023).

<sup>32</sup>Bailey, 'Caribbean Movements', pp. 29-31.



to enable serious progress. Urgency increases as artists reach their last decades. Investing time and resource in the radical act of looking at artwork to expand art histories is a critical pillar for creating and then sustaining more equitable artistic futures. The Venice Biennale provides a salient case study.

### ***Brand Britain: Young British Artists and Venice***

Over the last three decades, almost 70 per cent of the 15 Venice pavilion exhibitions have included group or solo shows of artists who had YBA credentials. The artists shown were members of the original peer group at Goldsmiths, were included at *Freeze*, featured in one of collector Charles Saatchi's exhibitions of Young British Artists in the early 1990s, or were included in the larger surveys of the moment at *Brilliant!* starting at the Walker Art Center Minneapolis (1996), or London's Royal Academy exhibition *Sensation* (1997), which presented works from Saatchi's collection. From 1993, when the Independent Group member and British pop-art pioneer Richard Hamilton represented Great Britain, YBAs such as Damien Hirst, Christine Borland, Mat Collishaw and Henry Bond were presented in an influential exhibition *Aperto 93*. In the following edition, alongside works by the figurative painter Leon Kossoff, the British Council produced *General Release: Young British Artists*, which included Fiona Banner, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gary Hume among others. Since then, high-profile YBA artists have occupied the Venice pavilion with solo shows, including Rachel Whiteread (1997), Gary Hume (1999), Mark Wallinger (2001), Chris Ofili (2003), Tracey Emin (2007), Steve McQueen (2009) and Sarah Lucas (2015). Predating the YBAs, Gilbert and George, who took the pavilion in 2005, were highly influential forebears to the YBA group. Mike Nelson (2011) and Jeremy Deller (2013) are not counted here as YBAs, as they emerged later and were not included in those key YBA moments. Both artists are, however, often referred



to as post-YBAs and as inheritors of key conceptual tenets. Only in the last three editions has the field significantly opened out, with Phyllida Barlow (2017), Cathy Wilkes curated by Zoé Whitley (2019) and Boyce curated by Emma Ridgway (2022). More work is needed to understand the narrow focus of attention demonstrated by selectors for Venice, by rolling back to the late 1980s it is possible to see key gear shifts.

Anish Kapoor's 1990 Venice pavilion marked a watershed moment. In 1989, tipped to be Britain's next representative at Venice, Kapoor was rationalised in the conservative broadsheet press response to *The Other Story* as an exemplar of why the exhibition was not needed. It was reported at the time that Kapoor had rejected the invitation to contribute to *The Other Story* because of 'fears' about how the project would impact his career.<sup>33</sup> In the press, the artist was projected as a symbol of an egalitarian, post-identity British culture that enabled any artist to reach the highest artistic echelons and achieve cultural recognition. After this moment and for the next twenty-two years the Venice pavilion became an international cultural champion for British contemporary art that was almost exclusively made up of the YBA peer group. While there was diversity of gender, class, race, artistic form and practice, the selected artists were filtered through a narrow conceptual lens.

The monocultural articulation of British contemporary art that emerged through the Venice pavilion exemplifies Mercer's 'contingent sociological structures'. A network of actors facilitated the proposal of artists, the selection, funding, promotion and the validation of decisions that ultimately led to the curatorial choices for the Venice pavilion. Venice was not anomalous in the wider cultural milieu of the period – it exemplified the cultural groupthink of the era. The first artist to break through the cultural 'stranglehold' was Barlow, who took the stage at the age of 73 and, in an interview with *The Guardian*, described why she felt she had been historically overlooked:

Barlow credits her late-blooming career to a boredom with the 'young British artists' mentality. The YBA movement gripped the art world in the late 1980s and kept a stranglehold on it for more than 20 years, but it eventually wore thin, Barlow said. It has led curators recently to look to the past in search of forgotten artists – many of whom were women.<sup>34</sup>

Further research is needed to fully understand the drivers that produced the cultural conditions outlined above; for now, however, it is enough to say that, like every other museum, gallery or arts institution, the Venice pavilion is not neutral. Like all our UK institutions, it needs to invest time in considering its own histories as a means of clarifying its future intentions. In the last few editions, the Venice pavilion has shifted its approach. The curatorial process has become more open and the tight connection to the YBA community has been replaced by a more expansive artistic programme. There is more work to do, and this should focus on increasing transparency and accountability. Who selects the selectors and could an oversight and advisory board strengthen the artistic mission of the Venice pavilion? Barlow's comments suggest

<sup>33</sup>Rasheed Araeen, 'Postscript', in *The Other Story, Afro-Asian Artists in Post-war Britain* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1989), p. 105.

<sup>34</sup>Hannah Ellis-Peterson, 'Phyllida Barlow: I couldn't have coped if fame had come 20 years ago', *The Guardian*, 10 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/may/10/phyllida-barlow-couldnt-cope-fame-came-20-years-ago-venice-biennale> (accessed 30 June 2023).

that the changes she saw were not driven by a deliberately expansive vision of art and artists. The artist suggests that the selectors were simply following trends: the YBA star waned and the pavilion followed. While this may or may not be the case, if the British Council is seeking to increase equity of access to the Venice pavilion, it must clearly articulate this vision and strengthen governance to support its decision making. When considering the intersection of market forces and identity markers the need for clarity of intention and transparency of process becomes even clearer.

### ***Upstream Influences: Commercial Art Galleries and Public Platforms***

Transparency, at all levels, is important for the development of equity, and this includes financial clarity. Gareth Harris and Anny Shaw's 2015 *Art Newspaper* article 'Who's Bankrolling the Venice Biennale?' provides an attempt to understand the entangled relations between public and commercial interests in Venice. Here the pair contrasted pavilion models and explored commercial and private financial investments in the Venice Biennale. From trusts and foundations to corporations and private individuals, the motivations and returns-on-investment range from pure philanthropy (particularly where a country has no governmental art funding) to direct commercial gain. The interaction between private and public money generates questions of ethics. In the article, industry figure Andrew Renton defends the British Council, stating that it is 'pretty incorruptible' because it implements a rigorous selection process.<sup>35</sup> This does not mean, however, that commercial and private support has no conditioning role. Upstream of an artist being placed on to a long list, their reputation will have developed through a matrix of esteem indicators. It matters where they studied, where they have shown their work, with whom, how many times, as well as what prizes they have won and who has written about them. Commercial exhibitions and funded projects will be included in this list.

Harris and Shaw quote France as having a £900,000 budget broken into three lots of £300,000, with the final lot being made up of private sponsorship and charitable giving. Of the Great Britain pavilion, they quote a spokesperson who points to a £250,000 national budget being matched by dealers who pay for the production costs as well as funding the opening reception. Having commercial gallery representation appears here as a prerequisite for occupying Great Britain's Venice pavilion. Requiring an artist to have commercial representation is highly exclusionary. While it is unlikely to be an explicitly essential criterion, in the last thirty years none of the artists who have shown at Great Britain's Venice pavilion has not had commercial representation.

Boyce's early CV is peppered with exhibitions in commercial galleries such as Gimpel Fils (1984), Nicola Jacobs Gallery (1985), Basel Art Fair (with Gimpel Fils, 1987) and Angela Flowers Gallery (1988). These commercial opportunities dropped away in the 1990s and beyond, and her latter career is heavily weighted to (many leading) publicly funded institutions. While she has some commercial representation, long-term commercial support has not fuelled Boyce's career.

Lack of commercial support has wider implications. Writing in the *Gentlewoman*, Christina Ruiz reflects on the economic underpinnings of success, noting that:

<sup>35</sup>Gareth Harris and Anny Shaw, 'Who's Bankrolling the Venice Biennale?', *Art Newspaper*, 7 May 2015.

The last time Sonia Boyce was invited to make a work for the Venice Biennale, she had to take out a bank loan to finance its production. That was in 2015, when she had no commercial gallery to help cover her costs or navigate the infrastructure of the most prestigious contemporary art show in the world. Seven years on, Sonia, who turns 60 this year, is returning to the Biennale in April as the UK's official representative, the first Black female artist to be selected for the role, with an entire exhibition funded by the British government and private sponsors. This time round, she has two galleries backing her: Simon Lee in London and A Palazzo in Brescia, northern Italy.<sup>36</sup>

Commercial backers do not simply lead to potential income through art sales, they provide up-front investment in major projects such as Venice. Private investment can support an artist to turn a major opportunity into the visibility and esteem that generate economic success. Private investment also supports an artist's long-term legacy and, through managing their estate, their place in art history.

Another *Art Newspaper* article by Anny Shaw in 2019 drives home the point that gallery representation and professional success are related to gender.<sup>37</sup> Based on the work of economist Clare McAndrew, Shaw traces the decline in the commercial representation of women artists. While 10 per cent of commercial galleries have no women artists on their books, almost half (48 per cent) have 25 per cent or fewer women. The most commercially successful artists secure multiple representative galleries; some have up to ten galleries representing them. Very few women have achieved this.

Julia Halperin's 2015 research, with data analysis by Nilkanth Patel, underlines the significance of representation. Under the title 'Almost One Third of Solo Shows in US Museums go to Artists Represented by Five Galleries', Halperin argues that the most elite level of art production is heavily influenced by a small number of actors. Examining 590 solo exhibitions in leading US art galleries and museums, Halperin and Patel established that between 2007 and 2013 Gagosian Gallery, Pace, Marian Goodman Gallery, David Zwirner and Hauser and Wirth had a disproportionate influence on public institutions.<sup>38</sup> In New York's Guggenheim, the article notes, these galleries represented 90 per cent of the artists awarded solo shows in the five years analysed. This study looks explicitly at America, where there are significant differences from the UK, with increased commercial/public interactions; nevertheless, the patterns of influence do track across the Atlantic. Shared good taste and international quality provide the primary rebuttal from gallerists and curators; the data incontrovertibly exposes the reality that not having commercial support impacts career progression. Lack of commercial representation impacts the amount of PR, marketing, sales to museum collections as well as private sales that an artist makes. At a fundamental level, commercial representation drives visibility and awareness. Lack of commercial support places the artist in a precarious position in relation to a high-visibility project.

<sup>36</sup> Boyce's commercial relationship with Simon Lee Gallery ended in 2023. Cristina Ruiz, 'Sonia Boyce: The Artist Bringing Everyone to the Table', *The Gentlewoman*, 25 (spring/summer 2022), <https://thegentlewoman.co.uk/library/sonia-boyce> (accessed 26 March 2023). All spellings taken from article.

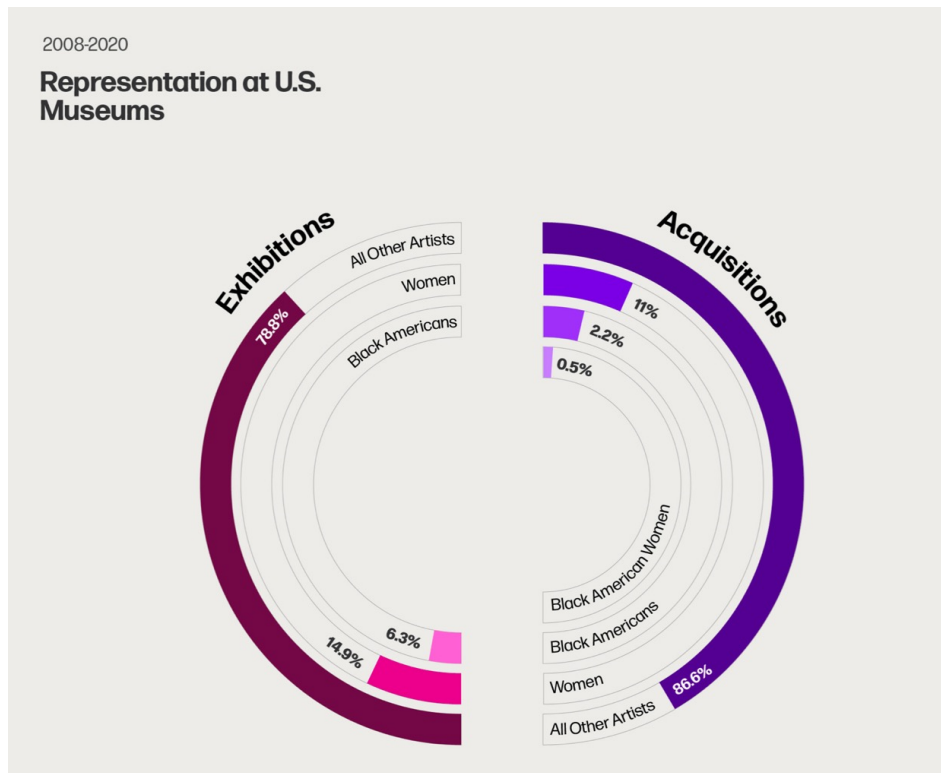
<sup>37</sup> Anny Shaw, 'Gallery Representation Dwindles for "Established" Female Artists, New Research Finds', *The Art Newspaper*, 25 January 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Julia Halperin, 'Almost One Third of Solo Shows in US Museums go to Artists Represented by Five Galleries', *The Art Newspaper*, 2 April 2015.

Representation in commercial and public institutions directly intersects with identity.<sup>39</sup> Halperin’s ongoing collaboration with Charlotte Burns on *Burns Halperin Report* which began in 2018. This report starkly shows, again with US data, the lack of representation of Black American Women within both acquisitions and exhibitions in major museums in the US.<sup>40</sup>

For some years, Boyce had commercial representation from Brescia’s experimental Apalazzo gallery, and following the announcement of her Venice achievement she gained (albeit only for a short while) representation from London’s Simon Lee gallery. Since then, it has been announced that Hauser and Wirth will represent the artist. Boyce maintained academic and other commitments while taking on the Venice project. As a seriously experienced artist, Boyce was not a high-risk selection; however, it is easy to imagine selectors being concerned for the capacity of an individual artist operating without commercial support.

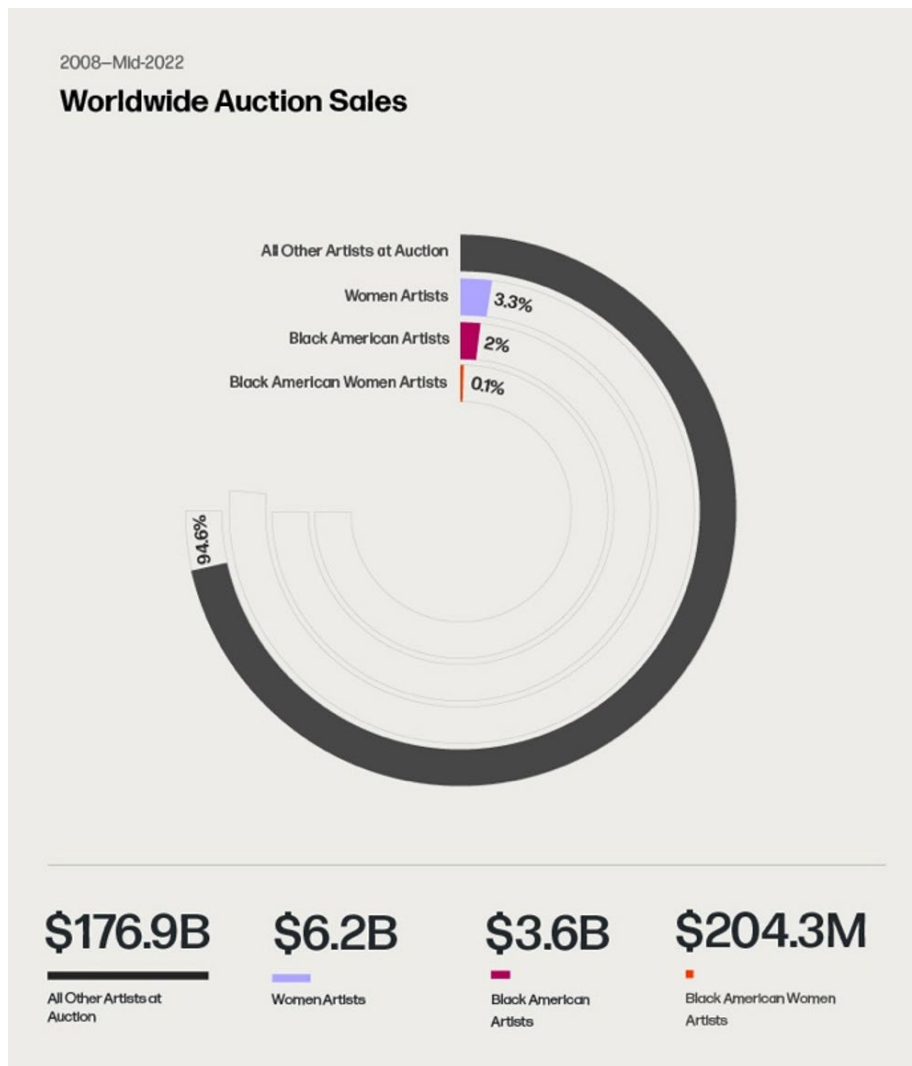
Multiple criteria shape the artistic brief, conditions of selection, preferable artist career-stage (credentials and proven track record), the selection of selectors and ultimately the stress-testing of potential decisions. These factors will include whether the artist is deemed fundable. In this way, the financial model of the pavilion project affects curatorial decision making. For such an important and gold-dust opportunity, the profile of the artist must undoubtedly be robust. This assessment, however, is highly subjective. Commercial art galleries, particularly the large, powerful ones, help develop their artists’ profiles. Renton is surely correct that the British Council would never be directly led by the influence of a commercial gallery or sponsor. However, in the subtle balance of selecting one artist over another, even to appear on the long list, reputation, which at some level includes fundability, will be a motivating factor. Commercial relations are part of this mix.



Graphics by Nehema Kariuki. Courtesy of the Burns Halperin Report 2022.

<sup>39</sup> See the headlines of the report here: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/full-data-rundown-burns-halperin-report-2227460>  
<sup>40</sup> Data visualisations by Nehema Kariuki can be found here: <https://studioburns.media/the-data-visualized/>

Commercial success is, in some parts of the artworld, considered a proxy for quality. Brian Sewell and Peter Fuller justified their vitriolic responses to *The Other Story*, in part, because they argued that the artists could not sustain a market for their work (Sewell) and relied on public funds (Fuller).<sup>41</sup> The media and the market are intimately connected. While it is not true that BBAM artists have not sought and found markets for their work, it is true that commercial success has been inhibited by the intersection of structural biases apparent within the media, funding, commercial and public institutional systems. These systems compound inequities. While Burns Halperin point to glimmers of hope, it remains clear that the market is a highly skewed and intensely retrogressive system based on a conservative and risk-averse modes of assessing future value. Their report shows that between 2008 and 2022, more than \$41.8m more money was spent on works by Picasso than by all women put together. Women’s work accounted for \$6.8bn in this period out of a market of \$187bn.<sup>42</sup> It is in this context that the report shows that while only 0.5% of US Museum acquisitions were of work by Black American Women (against a national population density of 6.6%) auction sales are even more limited at 0.1%.<sup>43</sup> Put simply, following market forces drives inequality.



Graphic by Nehema Kariuki. Courtesy of the Burns Halperin Report 2022.

<sup>41</sup> For an early discussion of responses to *The Other Story* see Edwards (ed.), *Art and Its Histories*, (1999)

<sup>42</sup> Analysis of this data by the authors can be found here: <https://studioburns.media/letter-from-the-editors/>.

<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that this data is only a sample and is geographically specific to the USA. Moreover, large museum collection acquisition data can be impacted by major bequests and auction house data includes both primary and secondary market. Nevertheless, as the art market is global, this data provides a useful indicative benchmark.

There is absolutely a place for commercial support within the Venice financial model and wider arts and culture. However, for equitable conditions to emerge, the budget of the Venice pavilion must become entirely disassociated from the identity of the artist. Only in this way will the pavilion team be able to generate new conditions to shape their selection of artists. These new conditions must include decreased dependence on market forces to fund artist projects. This will be hard to do, but it is not impossible. Great Britain's Venice pavilion can hardly be called precarious; however, its biennial fundraising mission inevitably impacts what is possible and therefore who this is possible for. The funding model inhibits risk taking and limits access. Combined with its high visibility nationally and internationally, the not-fully-funded status of the project impacts on its capacity for equity.

### *Circumventing the Market*

Achieving academic success has enabled Boyce to influence and shape art historical discourse through leading major projects that engage artists, academics, curators and museum directors and through publishing and conferences. In the 1990s she undertook residencies in prestigious Fine Art and Art History departments such as San Diego Arts Faculty, University of California; the Department of Art and Art History, Duke University, North Carolina; and the Department of Art History and Archaeology, University of Manchester. It is possible to extrapolate that as well as delivering her artistic work, the privileged insights the artist gained into the engines of art history making supported her to develop ways of harnessing art historical processes for her broader goals. This academic pathway has helped bypass the market as well as enabling the artist-as-professor to challenge and collaborate with others to shift art histories.

Ascending to the top of both the British art world and the academic hierarchy is a considerable feat. In early 2023, Boyce and Himid alone represent 5.7 per cent of the UK's Black women professors.<sup>44</sup> This contrasts with their collective status as less than 0.01 per cent of the national professoriat. Boyce, who has taught in art schools throughout her career, including at Goldsmiths as the YBAs emerged, gravitated to the highest academic rank, first as visiting professor at Wimbledon in the mid-2000s, later holding full professorships at Middlesex and University of the Arts, London. In 2020 there were so few Black female professors in British universities – 35 out of 19,285 – that a photographic portrait included them all.<sup>45</sup> As the statistics above show, not many women of colour make it to the top of either structure, let alone reach the top of both.<sup>46</sup> Not all artists could simultaneously leverage the two highly competitive systems of academia and the professional art world.<sup>47</sup> Over the decades, Himid and Boyce have achieved numerous accolades, decorations (OBEs, MBEs, a CBE for Himid) and honours (both are Royal Academicians). It is striking, however, that they have

<sup>44</sup>This data is subject to change throughout the year as new appointments are made.

<sup>45</sup>Emma Jacobs, 'Academics' Hard-won Success Comes against the Odds', *Financial Times*, 9 March 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/7e2a2976-5eef-11ea-8033-fa40a0d65a98> (accessed 25 March 2023). According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, in 2014/15 there were 25 Black female professors, and in 2021/22 this had increased to 45. Higher Education population data can be found at <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/working-in-he/characteristics> (accessed 25 March 2023).

<sup>46</sup>To support race equality, Advance HE has established the Race Equality Charter: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter>. More broadly, there is also much work to do within higher education to build greater equity.

<sup>47</sup>During the process of writing this report UKRI and AHRC published their Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategies; see <https://www.ukri.org/publications/ahrc-equality-diversity-and-inclusion-action-plan/ahrc-equality-diversity-and-inclusion-action-plan-research-and-innovation-by-everyone-for-everyone/> (accessed 30 June 2023).

had to achieve so much to occupy key platforms such as the Turner Prize (Himid) and Venice (Boyce). Few artists who have represented Great Britain at Venice have had so many laurels as Boyce. There is a risk that when considering the maintenance of future equity, Boyce, as role model artist, is indicative of too high a threshold.

Boyce and Barlow could have taken over the Venice pavilion several decades earlier. Himid was able to win the Turner Prize in 2017 only because the age limit of 50 years old was lifted the year before. The narrow focus of the artworld in the 1990s and 2000s has created a backlog of significant artists whose work demands attention. In the case of Venice, a more equitable approach would be to adapt the model to expand the opportunities available. In the early 1990s, the YBA artists benefited from being presented in the *Aperto* and *General Release* group shows at Venice, alongside more senior figures. Cross-generational exhibitions and thematic group shows alongside the Pavilion solo project would expand opportunity for participation. These expanded projects could be pitched for by institutions across the UK. This would allow emerging and mid-career artists more platforms to present their work and would acknowledge the limitations of the pavilion solo show, which can support just 15 artists in any thirty-year period.

There are glimmers of hope, but they need to be treated with care. The extraordinarily accomplished filmmaker and artist Sir John Akomfrah CBE RA has been selected for the next Venice edition. Akomfrah, whose *Handsworth Songs* (1986) won the Grierson prize for best documentary, was a leading figure in the BBAM. Akomfrah's name was put forward through a national open call to curators across the UK, a structural innovation. In her 2019 *Art Newspaper* article, Shaw cites evidence from the head of research at *ArtTactic*, Peter Gerdman, who notes that three of the top five selling artists of African descent are women: Marlene Dumas, Njideka Akunyili Crosby in first and second, with Julie Mehretu at fourth.<sup>48</sup> There are new economic opportunities. Boyce's success is leading to many further opportunities and *Life Between Islands* is touring the globe, and as it does so, will expand art historical awareness. Nevertheless, these are small gains, and much work is required to increase equitable structures and opportunities. Akomfrah is a world-renowned artist and comes with solid commercial backing. His participation does not demarcate any significant departure from the market-orientated selection criteria. The 1980s BBAM story presents a cautionary tale. Turn the pages of *Shades of Black* and re-read the shock, dismay and pain expressed in the essays. This publication documents how mood music can change. Here artists, curators and directors pieced through the fragments of hope and possibility of the 1980s and wondered at the cultural closure that followed.

During the period of writing this report, new studies on arts education have been published that identify serious concerns for access to art: *The Art in Schools Report: Foundations for the Future* commissioned by Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and A New Direction,<sup>49</sup> and the *Art Now Inquiry* commissioned by the All Party Group for Art, Craft and Design in Education. Both reports surface significant challenges to art education within formal settings. Reports have also emerged from the creative industries sector more broadly that show decline in access to the arts, with

<sup>48</sup>Shaw, 'Gallery Representation Dwindles'.

<sup>49</sup>Pauline Tambling and Sally Bacon, *The Arts in Schools: Foundations for the Future* (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2023), available at <https://www.anewdirection.org.uk/asset/7739>; for a review of key moments in arts education in the last forty years, see <https://www.anewdirection.org.uk/asset/6774/download?1680110130> (accessed 31 March 2023).



universities, schools and the professional arts sector collaborating on the *Creative Education Manifesto* and the *Save Our Subjects* campaigns.<sup>50</sup> The Durham Commission (2019) pointed to the fact that while state schools have reduced access to the arts, private schools have not.<sup>51</sup> In distinct ways each study evidences serious issues in the arts education pipeline. STEM-based priorities have sidelined creative subjects, and this affects equitable access to creative careers. Boyce's early school career evidenced strong support in primary and secondary school settings (trips to galleries and extra-curricular support). Despite the work of art galleries and museums, over the next two decades equity of access to the arts overall is likely to decrease as young people from diverse backgrounds have less access to art in school. In relation to these pipeline issues, institutions will need to increase their willingness to take artistic risks, and as we have seen, there are economic barriers to risk taking.

This report is entitled *Art in Action* to place the focus of our collective work onto the art that we will leave behind as a resource for future generations. Art does something in the world. It creates change through living in our collective imaginations. Art allows us to think differently, see from another's perspective and reach unexpected conclusions in our own lives and work. Without sustained structural interventions there is no real systemic change. Without the development of new business models, partnerships and new value sets, the commercial market will continue to decide who is worthy of investment and whose art will stay in circulation. Without addressing issues in the arts education pipeline, gains that have been made could evaporate for future generations and young people will not become artists. Without the ongoing production of new, rich, written and curated art histories, our collective imaginations will not expand and the media will not fill this void. What provides most hope, however, is that these barriers to achieving more equitable conditions are becoming better understood. Extraordinarily successful moments such as Boyce's Venice triumph can provide a platform from which to leap forward if we pay attention to why it has taken so long for this moment to happen, if we consider what else needs to change and if we put this mission at the heart of our own work as artists, curators, producers, educationalists, directors, patrons, funders and board members.

<sup>50</sup>The government's *Creative Industries Sector Vision* can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/creative-industries-sector-vision/creative-industries-sector-vision-a-joint-plan-to-drive-growth-build-talent-and-develop-skills> (accessed 30 June 2023). This was a multi-agency project that brought together formal education networks and the professional arts and creative sectors and can be found at <https://www.unialliance.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ArtsEssential-Manifesto-03.pdf>; see also <https://www.saveoursubjects.org>

<sup>51</sup>The Durham Commission 2019 can be accessed at [https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Durham\\_Commission\\_on\\_Creativity\\_04112019\\_0.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Durham_Commission_on_Creativity_04112019_0.pdf) (accessed 30 June 2023).

## Taking Action: Seven Recommendations for Change

To improve equity of access into the arts as a professional field and to increase the visibility of Black artists, collaboration needs to drive meaningful change. We need:

- New relationships between the professional arts sector and higher education to build equity.
- New approaches to funding projects such as the Venice Biennale with an artistic support fund to enable the participation of artists who do not have commercial representation.
- A new national digital resource that centres equity at its heart and addresses lack of cultural access.
- A national programme that celebrates the broad contribution made by Black artists to the UK cultural field.

To achieve equitable change, agencies should take the following actions:

### 1. Collaborations between the British Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Arts Council England (ACE)

Working together with the AHRC and ACE, the British Council could transform the Venice opportunity from a starry PR event into a strategic driver of transformative change and enable greater creative risk taking. AHRC and ACE should work together with the British Council to underpin the Venice Biennale as a project that delivers across all their strategic agendas: research, engagement and national participation in international culture. This would support ACE's *Let's Create* as well as the AHRC's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Plan.

For each Venice Biennale, AHRC and ACE should work with the British Council to deploy a four-year Research Fellowship funding package, available to both the selected artist and curator. This length would allow for an exhibition tour/legacy programme, evaluation and reflective analysis and the publication of findings. It mirrors the two-year period of the Biennale process, allowing a support network to emerge between years. The artistic and curatorial fellowships would be supported by a host higher education institution which would bid to become a Biennale curator/artist and to supply a host academic supported through the AHRC/ACE programme.

AHRC involvement would unlock the Venice Biennale for the UK research community in a fundamentally new way. ACE's investment would underpin the British Council's capacity to build greater equality, diversity and inclusion into the pavilion project and would support a national tour of the UK upon return. This partnership would give confidence to an academic publishing house to commit to a long-term series of publications of the quality of the 2022 Yale catalogue.

## 2. Private Philanthropists and Corporate Partners

Private philanthropy has an important place within the British Council pavilion project. It must be encouraged but not depended upon. Private philanthropists and corporate partners should continue to be encouraged to invest in the Venice Biennale programme. Their investment raises the visibility of the programme and supports artists who do not have commercial backers. If core delivery was less dependent upon private philanthropy, this resource could be channelled into a longer-term programme that would better support equality, inclusivity and diversity. A Venice endowment fund could support artists to contribute who do not have a commercial backer. Widening access programmes such as the Venice student fellowship programme, supporting emerging artists to attend the event and network, and future fundraising activities will build resilience and relevance.

## 3. Artists, Commercial Galleries and Artist Estates

Significant financial value is created through participation in the Venice Biennale. Commercial galleries, artist estates and artists who have benefited from the Venice Biennale should donate a work to support the creation of a Venice Biennale artistic endowment fund. This could support future artists engage with the Venice opportunity who do not have commercial representation.

## 4. The BBC, ACE, AHRC and DCMS to collaborate with the wider arts sector to create an Online Art School

Boyce benefited from childhood access to the arts and encouragement at school to move on to further and advanced study. In 2023 the cross-agency campaigns *Creative Education Manifesto* and *Save our Subjects* pointed to the dramatic decrease in students studying creative subjects, with students taking GCSEs in arts subjects declining by 40 per cent since 2010. To address the inequality of access to the arts, the Durham Commission (2019) and the recent *The Arts in Schools: Foundations for the Future* (2023) call for the creation of high-quality online resources developed in partnership with the professional arts sector. A digital resource does not fix but directly addresses issues of equality and diversity in the current creative talent pipeline.

This report calls for strategic investment in digital arts resources accessible nationally and internationally. I propose the creation of an Online Art School developed through a multi-agency approach, with resources to support children, families and schools as well as students and adults. The establishment of an Online Art School builds on what we have learned through the pandemic. The resource connects arts education work with collections research and national curriculum key stages. There have been numerous successful

experiments, in particular addressing mental health issues. This project could draw in small-scale professional arts companies as well as national galleries and museums funded by DCMS and ACE NPOs. It should be supported to generate new digital resources for children and teachers through a partnership between ACE, DCMS, AHRC and the BBC.

AHRC's 'Towards a National Collection' (TANC) programme provides one starting point for this programme, as does 'The Space', the digital arts and audiences platform established in 2013. The National Saturday Club also provides an exemplary approach to building opportunities for young people nationally. The BBC produces high-quality children's media. Individual arts organisations provide excellent resources. No current resource, however, fully meets the creative arts content needs of children, families and schools.

This gap represents a huge opportunity. There are many stakeholders and agencies that could support this work, such as the National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD), Engage and Local Education Partnerships, as well as the government's Department for Education. There are also many digital development companies that would be well placed to support such an initiative (Adobe, Apple, Microsoft). Art and Design Schools across the UK are well placed to contribute content.

The Online Art School will create and curate diverse, digital art resources for use in classrooms and in children's homes. Digital does not replace physical access but it contributes to levelling the playing field.

## **5. Charitable Trusts: Jerwood, Art Fund, Paul Hamlyn, Esmée Fairbairn, Henry Moore and Clore Duffield Foundation**

Arts charities have influence and convening power, and supply cultural leadership to the wider arts sector. Charitable trusts should use their proximity, leadership and authority to shift the Venice Biennale into a sustainably resourced programme. For each edition, a vast amount of energy is invested in securing investment that is based upon the artist as an individual practitioner and their specific idea. While accountability and policy alignment will be required, mid- to long-term charitable investment will reduce the precarity of the project, which directly impacts upon the artist. Upstream this process affects which artists are selected.

Charitable trusts should work with the British Council to make a mid- to long-term commitment to invest in a Venice Biennale artistic support fund. Through doing this, they will be in a strong position to set criteria for robust selection processes and ongoing commitments to accessibility. Further, they should influence the generation of more equitable pipelines and support structures through the interventions noted above.

## 6. British Council

The British Council has now instituted a selection process for the curator of the Venice Biennale pavilion as well as for the artist. To achieve the goals listed above and sustain longer-term investment from funders, the British Council will need to develop more transparency and accountability around the Venice pavilion programme through an oversight or advisory board. There may also be operational requirements to manage a set of longer-term relationships with artists, curators and stakeholders rather than employing a one-off event-based approach. Success would see a mixed balance of artists presented at Venice who would exemplify the extraordinary artistic contribution of the United Kingdom, one that is not all filtered through the commercial lens.

## 7. Tate and Plus Tate

Tate's recent acquisition of the *Making Histories Visible* archive creates a unique opportunity for the creation of a national creative programme that seeks to celebrate and platform the many decades of work made by Black British artists who have not had the profile that their contribution deserves. As part of this research process, I presented work-in-progress to the Plus Tate Directors forum and there was support and enthusiasm for the idea of a national project based around *Making Histories Visible* ... so let's now make it happen.

