Art History at the Barricades

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When, in January 2018, the artist Sonia Boyce was invited to run one of Manchester City Art Gallery’s ‘Museums at Night’ events in advance of a major retrospective of her work opening there a few months later, she spent the previous months in conversation with curators and local audiences about the role of museums as institutions, and the dynamics of cultural power. On the night of her take-over, and in discussions with the group and the curator of collections, it was agreed to remove John William Waterhouse’s 1896 painting *Hylas and the Nymphs* from a room in the gallery entitled ‘In Pursuit of Beauty’, and to replace it with a note explaining that a temporary gap had been left ‘to prompt conversations about how we display and interpret artworks in Manchester’s public collection’ (*plate 1*). During the evening, Boyce invited members of the public to stick post-it notes on the wall with their responses (*plate 2*). The event was designed to raise questions about how the museum had constructed an idea of beauty predicated on paintings of largely passive, or predatory, in the case of the Nymphs, naked female bodies. The entire event was recorded, edited and incorporated into a multi-channel film entitled *Six Acts*, which was subsequently included in the retrospective of Boyce’s work that
opened at the gallery a few months later and which is now part of the permanent collection in Manchester.

Other scenes in the work included artist Lasana Shabazz enacting a complex, multilayered, drag performance. Wearing a voluminous, floor-length, white dress, they literally act out both the acronym ‘drag’ (‘dressed resembling a girl’) and the associated idea that the word traditionally refers to anything attached to a moving body that restricts its progress, such as the weight of a skirt dragging along the floor.¹ The long, stuttering title of this piece, *Lasana Shabazz as...Ira Aldridge as...God save the Queen Abolitionist version as...Whiteface Minstrel as...Football Hooligan*, likewise foregrounds its performative layering. James Northcote’s 1826 portrait of Ira Aldridge as *Othello, the Moor of Venice (plate 3)* from the museum’s permanent collection is the inspiration for Shabazz’s *dramatis persona* as he wanders through the gallery. Chicago-born Aldridge (1807-1867) was the first black actor to be cast regularly in Shakespearean male lead roles on the nineteenth-century stage, and he would ‘white up’ to play various characters including Macbeth, Shylock and King Lear. In Boyce’s film we witness Shabazz in turn ‘whiting up’ and singing the 1843 abolitionist version of the patriotic American song *My Country, 'Tis of Thee* to the tune of the British national anthem.² Shabazz also appears to become increasingly drunk, aggressively discarding multiple cans of lager, before the
performance ends with his slurred rendition of the racist minstrelsy song *Camptown Races* of 1850 (one familiar to many as the basis for the 1966 British football chant ‘two World Wars and one World Cup’). The richness of the associative layers of this site-specific performance are manifold, but it is the queering of the art gallery, of categories of race, gender and sexuality, and of British nationalism (Shakespeare, the monarchy, football), that make this intervention especially powerful. The four remaining ‘acts’ were also filmed on the night for inclusion in the final work. Given the lack of interaction with, yet proximity of the art gallery to, Manchester’s self-styled ‘Gay Village’, Boyce invited regular Canal Street performers, contemporary drag collective The Family Gorgeous (Anna Phylactic, Cheddar Gorgeous, Liquorice Black, and Venus Vienna), to respond to a single artwork of their choice hanging in the same gallery as *Hylas and the Nymphs*. Works that they selected included *Eve Tempted* (1877) by John Spencer Stanhope, *Syrinx* (1892) by Arthur Hacker, and *Sappho* (1877) by Charles-August Mengin. Yet of all the richly-crafted moments in *Six Acts*, it was with the temporary removal of Waterhouse’s *Hylas and the Nymphs*, one scene within the series designed as a provocation for conversation, where the ferocity of the backlash was unprecedented.

De-contextualized from its role as part of a new artwork, accusations of censorship caused a Twitter storm, and a number
of indignant fans of Waterhouse’s work directed a torrent of abuse at the museum, its curators, and at Boyce herself. The action lit the blue touch paper, and news of the event went almost immediately viral, coming as it did in the wake of the #MeToo movement, almost daily revelations of predatory sexual behaviour by powerful men in the cultural sector, and debates around museums, censorship and decolonization. As Gilane Tawadros, a trustee of the Stuart Hall Foundation, commented at the time:

Such complaints willfully obscure the role that art institutions play in shaping our cultural identities through exhibitions and displays. [...] At a time when Britain is painfully reconfiguring its identity in relation to Europe and the rest of the world, and campaigns such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo are exposing once again the fault lines of racism and sexism, we need cultural institutions to be self-reflexive, and critical about the mirrors they hold up.³

For Boyce, in a re-iteration of a long-term strategy that she deploys in her art in different forms, the act was designed to raise questions about the role that institutions play in shaping cultural identities through exhibitions, displays and architectural spaces. As both Tawadros and Boyce have asked a number of
times: ‘who chooses which narratives are important and
determines what is, or is not, a legitimate part of the national
cultural story?’

The questions that Boyce raises in *Six Acts* are more
pertinent than ever, particularly at the time of writing, only a
few months before Britain and Northern Ireland are scheduled to
formally exit from the European Union. Whilst the United
Kingdom is wresting control of its borders from Europe, it is
also politically legitimizing nationalism, xenophobia and
concomitant racism. Indeed, in a very local incident on the
doorstep of my own university campus recently, pan-European
far-right anti-immigration youth movement ‘Generation
Identity’ made their presence felt for the first time, part of a
worrying rise of racially-motivated incidents on university
campuses across the nation. The waters of a fountain outside
the Music Department were dyed in a virulent red with the
words #RIVERSOFBLOOD emblazoned on a makeshift placard
in front. The sign referred to the highly inflammatory speech
made in 1968 by the conservative MP for Wolverhampton,
Enoch Powell, who protested on racist grounds against the
arrival of immigrants from both the former Empire and
Commonwealth countries to the United Kingdom. The
significance of interventions by contemporary artists like Boyce,
working in tandem with curators and art historians, to probe the
visual rhetoric of nationalist cultural politics across time and
space, is, and has always been, vital to a healthy democracy.

Through her work as a Black British artist within a predominantly white academic system, she continues to question the boundaries of who or what constitutes British art - and indeed Britishness - in a complex address to history, aesthetics, desire and subjectivity.  

The idea of an identifiable school of British art was, of course, predicated on nineteenth-century taxonomies of national identity that enabled dealers and collectors worldwide to separate ‘the best from the rest’ – the Italians from the Dutch, the French from the Netherlandish, and so on. But also, crucially, it enabled the political distinction of being British from being, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s terms, subaltern, peripheral, without voice and therefore without power. By the late 1940s, definitions of Britishness, shored up during the ‘us’ and ‘them’ years of the Second World War, were fundamentally challenged by the arrival of the so-called ‘Windrush generation’. Britain’s leading role in the dissolution of its own jingoism, however, was yet to be understood or even acknowledged for at least the next four decades, and, like any psychic repression, makes a regular return. In Brexit Britain it is currently at its height with the government’s scandalous record on immigration rights marching hand in hand with the worrying rise of right-wing nationalisms across Europe and America. The emergence of the ‘Black Arts Movement’ in 1980s Britain was prompted by
the first generation of artists like Boyce, born to black and Asian parents who settled here in the 1950s and ’60s. They are a group whom Stuart Hall has referred to as being ‘profoundly alienated from recognition or acceptance by British society at large’, split between two or more cultures, and ‘haunted by questions of identity and belonging’.10 Yet the recent revival of interest in them through multiple exhibitions has finally begun to shift the critical paradigm in which their work is being discussed. No longer confined to the straight jacket of identity politics, the contribution of Britain’s diaspora artists to an expanded field of what constitutes British art in an era of post-colonialism, trans-nationalism, and globalization, is finally being reassessed.11

Yet should this editorial simply read like a celebration of the cultural richness of a small corner of the contemporary British art scene against the daily infractions of xenophobic nationalism, it is, I think, worth further contextualization. One year ago, my inaugural editorial called for the discipline to ‘do so much more to embrace its increasingly diverse constituency of potential readers and contributors’.12 Lubaina Himid had just won the Turner Prize, the first woman of colour to do so in its over-thirty-year history, and Reni Eddo-Lodge was touring the country in the run-up to the publication of the paperback version of her groundbreaking book, Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race, first published in June 2017. In the same year Tate Modern presented the magisterial exhibition
Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power, whilst 2018 saw the first major retrospective of the work of Adrian Piper, A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965-2016, at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Against the backdrop of these long over-due celebrations of black women’s creativity, protests against what have been regarded as the appropriation and/or marketization of ‘black pain’ by artists such as Dana Schutz in the USA in 2017, and Luke Willis Thompson in the UK (a 2018 Turner Prize nominee) continue to polarize opinion. Aruna D’Souza’s 2018 publication, Whitewalling: Art, Race and Protest in 3 Acts, is one art historian’s attempt to reflect on the Dana Schutz controversy within a longer view of histories of art, race and power in America as viewed through the lens of an additional two historical case studies. D’Souza’s book is also one amongst a swathe of new publications that are rapidly addressing the dearth of scholarship by taking issues of critical race as their central concern, and that begin the long journey ahead to consider seriously the overdue imperatives to decolonize our curricula. In October 2018, the Royal Historical Society published its damning report, ‘Race, Ethnicity and Equality in UK History’, in which, amidst myriad extremely useful practical recommendations, was a call for journal editors to: ‘proactively encourage submissions from BME authors’; ‘make sure that you have a diverse board’; and ‘diversify your content’. These are all concerns central to Art History under
my editorship, and the coming few years will see a raft of
initiatives designed to put them into action.

In 2019 we mark the centenary of the founding of the
Weimar Republic (and its premier art institution, the Bauhaus)
with a special issue dedicated to the subject of ‘Weimar’s
‘Others’’. The issue interrogates how a focus on the art-
historical margins, on ‘Weimar’s ‘Others’’, might either change
our thinking about what Weimar Germany was, or perhaps
confirm the dominant narratives of decadent excess, moral
decay and imminent political danger that mark the period in
most extant accounts. It asks who or what constitutes ‘others’?
And the special issue’s introduction takes seriously the
implications of several decades worth of scholarship on Black
Germany to ask how art historians might begin to use the
methodological tools developed by scholars such as Sara
Lennox, Tina Campt, and others, to rethink Weimar and its
artists ‘otherwise’. Further issues of the journal in the year
ahead also see a range of art-historical scholarship at its best,
from articles on Mimbres painted bowls and fifteenth-century
altarpieces, to sixteenth-century gambling games and
contemporary film. The material turn in art history is evident in
essays on aluminium, photography, montage, print, woven
writing, painting and other media, all brilliantly researched,
written and argued interventions into the field.
In this issue of *Art History*, then, in addition to the span of scholarly articles on a wide range of topics, we also present the first in a new development within the journal’s reviews section that focuses on art-historical scholarship published from outside the Anglophone context. Riffing on the late Linda Nochlin’s celebrated essay, Brazilian art historian Rafael Cardoso asks us to consider ‘Why Have There Been No Great Portuguese-Language Art Historians?’ By highlighting ‘the monolingualism of the global’, and the ‘hegemony of English’ in his extended review essay, Cardoso perceptively teases out the problems inherent in trying to separate out art-historical writing by large and diverse linguistic communities such as those fluent in the Portuguese language. The commissioning of Cardoso’s review is just one example of some of the perceptual shifts and interventions that the editorial team of *Art History* are making in order to flag up the roles and responsibilities that the journal has in developing a diverse readership for the future, to take seriously the academy’s responsibility to decolonize its curricula, and to open up its spaces to more ethnically diverse participation. Developing strategies for nurturing mutually meaningful relationships with scholars based in the Global South through writing workshops and active mentoring is another route. And whilst the journal continues to welcome the broad church of art-historical enquiry in its general issues such as this one, the next few years under my editorship will also see
some specific interventions in the reviews section and the special issue programme in particular, which will be designed to offer examples of the very best new scholarship in an expanded field of decolonial art history. Buckle up.

Notes

1 International performance artist Lasana Shabazz elects to go by the pronouns they/them so the editorial is written to reflect that choice. The editor is grateful to Sonia Boyce, Celia Turley, Sam Bibby and Manchester Art Gallery for their support in the accuracy of the information about Six Acts provided.

2 The song My Country, 'Tis of Thee was written by Samuel Francis Smith and performed to the melody of the British national anthem on 4 July 1831 at an Independence Day celebration in Boston. In 1832 it was performed under the title America. In 1843, abolitionist verses to the same song were written by A. G. Duncan. Duncan’s lyrics critiqued the patriotism of the original by pointing out the hypocrisy of its rhetoric of America as the land of liberty when it was still a ‘stronghold of slavery’. See Ace Collings, Songs Sung, Red, White and Blue: The Stories behind America’s Best-Loved Patriotic Songs, New York, 2003.

3 Gilane Tawadros, ‘Removing nymphs from a gallery is provocative – but does not merit contempt’, The Guardian, 2 February 2018 [https://tinyurl.com/y9czo6yh].

4 Tawadros, ‘Removing nymphs from a gallery is provocative’.

5 Eleanor Busby, ‘Racist incidents at UK universities have risen by more than 60 per cent in two years, figures show’, The Independent, 11 June 2018 [https://tinyurl.com/y88arxlh].

6 Emma Grimshaw, ‘Demo planned after far-right group dye Bristol fountain red’, Bristol Post, 26 November 2018 [https://tinyurl.com/yau6286t].
Boyce’s recent film for BBC Four, ‘Whoever Heard of a Black Artist: Britain’s Hidden Art History’, is an example of the wider research context for her own practice as an artist. Aired on 30 July 2018, it was a culmination of the three-year Arts and Humanities Research Council funded research project, *Black Artists and Modernism* (www.blackartistsmodernism.co.uk). See: https://tinyurl.com/yb39t5gz; and https://tinyurl.com/y75em5x6. It is of course not only visual artists who are at the vanguard of speaking out for democratic human rights through their art, but also writers and musicians such as Afua Hirsch, Nikesh Shukla and Akala, all of whom have also published trenchant critiques of race and class in contemporary Britain. See: Afua Hirsch, *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging*, London, 2018; Nikesh Shukla, *The Good Immigrant*, London, 2016; and Akala, *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire*, London, 2018.

For a recent set of interesting discussion papers on the concept of ‘British art’, see Richard Johns, ‘There’s No Such Thing as British Art’, *British Art Studies*, 1, Autumn 2015 [https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-01/conversation].


Recent exhibitions of work by many of the artists discussed in Hall’s essay include: *No Colour Bar: Black British Art in Action, 1960-1990* (Guildhall Art Gallery, London, 2015/2016); *The Place is Here* (Nottingham Contemporary, 2017); Lubaina Himid’s *Navigation Charts* (Spike Island, Bristol, 2017) and *Invisible Strategies* (Modern Art Oxford, 2017); Chila Burman: *Beyond Pop* (Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 2017); Keith Piper: *Unearthing the Banker’s Bones* (New Art Exchange, Nottingham, 2017); David A. Bailey’s brilliantly-curated *Diaspora Pavilion: Venice to*
Wolverhampton (Venice Biennale, 2017/Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 2018); Boyce’s 2018 retrospective at Manchester Art Gallery; Rasheed Araeen’s 2018 retrospective at the Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, and then at the Baltic, Gateshead; as well as Hamad Nassar’s Speech Acts, currently on show at Manchester Art Gallery until April 2019; Zarina Bhimji: Lead White on display at Tate Britain until June 2019; and forthcoming exhibitions on the work of long-neglected artists like Veronica Ryan at Spike Island in 2020.


13 In March 2017, white artist Dana Schutz elected to exhibit her painting Open Casket at the Whitney Biennial. The painting was based on graphic photographs depicting the violence enacted on the murdered body of fourteen-year-old school boy Emmett Till, who was lynched and then drowned in Mississippi in 1955, having been falsely accused of flirting with a white female shopkeeper. Yet Schutz chose to abstract the photograph in a seemingly formalist exercise in the application of paint. Protests against Schutz, the painting and the Whitney quickly gained momentum and fierce debates about art, race, privilege and protest emerged. In particular, see Hrag Vartanian, ‘The Violence of the 2017 Whitney Biennial’, Hyperallergic, 20 March 2017; Coco Fusco, ‘Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz’s Image of Emmett Till’, Hyperallergic, 27 March 2017; and Aruna D’Souza, ‘Who Speaks Freely?: Art, Race and Protest’, The Paris Review, 22 May 2018. The Whitney debacle had come just a few months after artist Kelley Walker exhibited deeply offensive images of police brutality against Civil Rights protesters and smeared them with white and dark chocolate, and ‘whited out’ images of black women by smearing them with toothpaste, at an exhibition in Missouri. See Brian Boucher, ‘Artist’s Depiction of Police Brutality Sparks Boycott at St Louis Museum’, Artnet News, 23 September 2016. And more recently, in September 2018, a group of artists known as BBZ London staged a protest at Tate Britain against the nomination for the Turner Prize of Luke Willis Thompson’s 2017 autoportrait, a silent film
installation that depicts Diamond Reynolds, who broadcast on Facebook Live the fatal shooting by police of her partner Philando Castile in front of their four-year-old daughter, during a routine traffic stop. The BBZ artists’ collective wore t-shirts with the words ‘Black Pain is not for Profit’, echoing the work of Parker Bright who protested against Dana Schutz’s Open Casket, first in a direct action in front of the painting, and then by painting a portrait of himself, Confronting My Own Possible Death (2018), in the gallery standing in front of Schutz’s painting and wearing a t-shirt with the words ‘Black Death Spectacle’ emblazoned across it.

