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The Success and the Failure of Black Art

Rasheed Araeen

I

Many people today would like to forget what emerged *specifically* at the beginning of 1980s and what its first protagonists termed ‘Black Art’. This term may indicate a racial connection or imply the visual expressions of a race or its specific characteristics, but, as I argue here, this reading is not only simplistic but dangerously misleading. The real significance of the term lies in its specific temporality and historicity, which is often ignored even by those who write sympathetically about the work of black artists and their contribution to mainstream British culture. In fact to ignore this specificity and its social significance – which expresses not only a critical moment in the history of postwar British society but also a black experience and its articulation within the trajectory of postwar modernism – and to collapse it into whatever is produced by black artists is to undermine its historical importance.

However, the allusion to ‘race’ in this specificity indicates an experience of a particular group of people or a community, which has resulted not necessarily from its own perception of itself but the way white society defines it by invoking its difference. This difference is of course there and is part of the community’s identity, but it is not fundamental to what it aspires to in the modern world. What therefore concerns Black Art is not so much this difference as how this difference is defined and experienced in a society that has not yet fully come to terms with its colonial past and its racial violence. It seems that the intensity of this experience among some black art students was so great that they were unable to share it with their white teachers and class fellows, producing a frustration and an anger that led to a denunciation of the whole system. It was this denunciation that underlies the emergence of Black Art in the early 1980s. It should not therefore be confused with the work of every black artist before and after this emergence.

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My aim here is to first give a brief history of Black Art in Britain, describe its specific aims, objectives, and indeed its true vision, and then to see what was its achievement; and finally to ask how and why an art which began with a historically important radical position and agenda failed and collapsed into what has now become anything produced by non-white artists. Although the idea of Black Art became widespread by the mid-1980s, as part of what is now known as the Black arts movement, comprising and encapsulating visual arts, film, photography, poetry, theatre, etc, my concern here is specific to various visual art expressions of Black Art.

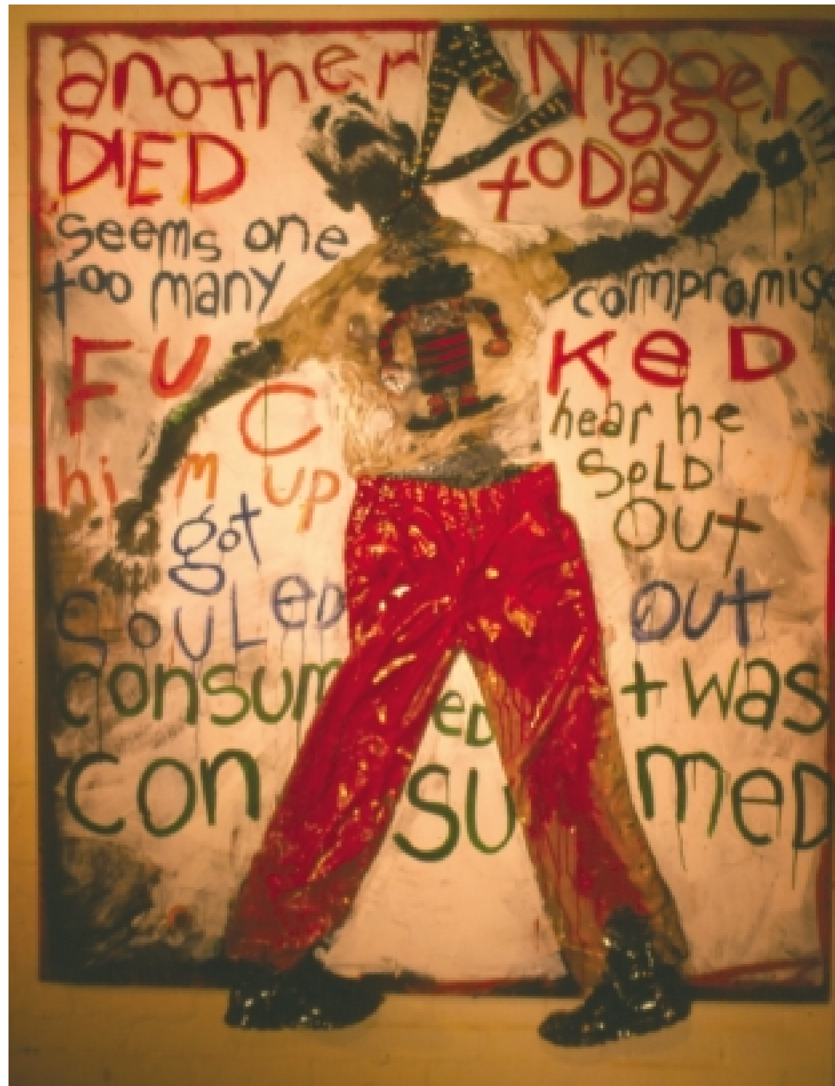
What was particularly significant about Black Art was its ability to respond critically to the social and political forces of the time, and to set up an ideological framework for a militantly radical art movement. Its aim was to confront and change the system that, though centred in the West, encapsulated and dominated the whole world. It was the time when in Britain, as well as in the US in particular, the political leadership turned to the right in order to explicitly re-establish its anti-socialist and imperialist agendas, with dire consequences for the world at large but also for the liberalism of the mainstream art world. It was in this sociopolitical milieu, when many 'avant-garde' white artists – as they were thus deprived of their historical roles as the progressive conscience of Western liberalism – began to turn to their inner selves, cynicism and language-games, that Black Art in Britain came up with 'a voice of humanity', as I wrote in 1982, 'that refuses to be brutalised and insensitised'.[1]

It all began in 1979, not long after Mrs Thatcher had come to power as a result of her racist anti-immigrant speeches, when a young black art student of Afro-Caribbean parents, who was doing his foundation course at the Lanchester Polytechnic in Coventry, altered an image of the Union Jack in such a way that it appeared to contain a Swastika. His name is of course Eddie Chambers, and what he then proceeded to do further was remarkable. Although this allusion within the Union Jack has significance he did not stop there, turning the whole thing into an art object. This would have foreclosed the possibility of a further transformation. Although this Union Jack-fascism nexus was a cliché, even at that particular moment at the end of 1970s when British society was in a grip of right-wing xenophobia, its implication pointed to a reality. It seems Chambers wanted to warn us about the danger of fascism within the growing nationalist identity of a Britain based exclusively on its indigenous white population; and what he also did was to suggest a radical process by which to deal with this danger. He in fact then proceeded to tear up the combined image of the Union Jack and a Swastika, resulting in small shreds so that the whole thing was no longer recognisable either as an image of the Union Jack or of a Swastika. Although the work does not resolve into anything definable, it does raise an important question. How do we *re*-define Britain as a multiracial society before it fragments into ethnic categories under the weight of its old order?

Soon after finishing this as his first work, comprising four panels and entitled *The Destruction of the NF* (1979), as the basis of a radical framework for his art practice, Eddie Chambers met Keith Piper in whom he found a kindred spirit. They not only became good friends but also

1. Rasheed Araeen, 'Paint it Black', *City Limits*, 45, London, Summer 1982; reprinted as 'ART FOR UHURU: some reflections on the recent emergence of black consciousness in art', in Rasheed Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*, Kala Press, London, 1984, pp 149–52.

Eddie Chambers, *Destruction of the NF*, 1979–80



Keith Piper, *Black Boys Keep Singing (Another Nigger Died Today)*, 1982

partners in or pioneers of what we today know as Black Art. This partnership was extremely important in transforming the practice of two individual artists into a considerable movement, which brought into its fold many other artists. With other artists joining them, they formed a group called 'Pan-Afrikan Connection', issued statements, and organised exhibitions and conferences.

It was in their first exhibition in London in 1982, held appropriately at the Africa Centre, where I first saw their work. The exhibition included five artists, who described themselves as the descendants 'from Africans dispersed during the Atlantic slave trade',[2] and explicitly identified themselves with the struggle of African people all over the world: 'we feel for our brothers and sisters throughout the world who are the victims of racial injustice. . . . In developing our sense of "some

2. Araeen, 'ART FOR UHURU', ibid.

bodiness", we are trying to avoid blind mimicry. We are trying to recreate and develop our humanity.'[3]

As soon as I entered the exhibition, I was overwhelmed by its visual impact. It was unique; nothing similar to what I had seen in the mainstream art world. I immediately decided to write:

> What is really significant is the presence of tremendous energy, the sense of full commitment and definite direction. . . . The work may be loud and noisy. But, then, it's partly deliberate: the attempt is to express anger and frustration. . . . The furiousness is about the world in which hypocrisy, smugness, cynicism, self-exaltation, self-righteousness, etc. have become norms.[4]

As I have pointed out above, these artists were not only involved in producing works of art and exhibiting them together but their programme and radical agenda extended to other things, such as conferences and workshops, so that the specific nature of their art practice could be discussed and debated within the larger context of the community. Soon after their exhibition at the Africa Centre, a conference was organised in Wolverhampton,[5] which attracted a large gathering of black artists from all over the country, including Frank Bowling who was himself involved in a 'black art' debate in New York ten years before. For the first time, we saw there Lubaina Himid and Sonia Boyce, who in their own way were developing a Black Art perspective. In fact, their presence in the conference was extremely important for black women to get together and discuss their own specific positions, which gave a new dimension to the movement. They all took part in a special workshop organised by Claudette Johnson, who was one of the artists in the exhibition at the Africa Centre in 1982.

My own contribution to this debate was a paper entitled 'Art & Black Consciousness',[6] by which I tried to define the notion of blackness outside and beyond what was, until then, seen to be an experience and expression of black people originating only from Africa. My point was that if we argue that 'black experience' represents an experience in relation to a white society and its racism, then this experience cannot be limited only to African or Afro-Caribbean people. Racism was a legacy not only of slavery but also of European colonialism, by which all non-white people were subjected to its violence. For the white coloniser every colonised person was 'black'. It was therefore more appropriate to use the term 'black' for people of both African and Asian origins. Although my suggestion was then received with a degree of indifference, it became clear by the end of 1980s that I was not indulging in a fantasy.[7] It then became obvious to many that it would be wrong to associate the word 'black' only with the skin-colour of people, particularly of African origin, so as to avoid an essentialist connection. The use of the word 'black' in Britain has in fact resulted from the common experience of people of both African and Asian origins, and it was and is not unusual for many Asians to call themselves 'black' even when they could pass as Europeans. However, what still baffles me today is the common use of the phrase 'black and Asians' (meaning, 'African and Asians'), not only by the white media but also by some eminent black academics – thus essentialising the 'blackness' of African people.

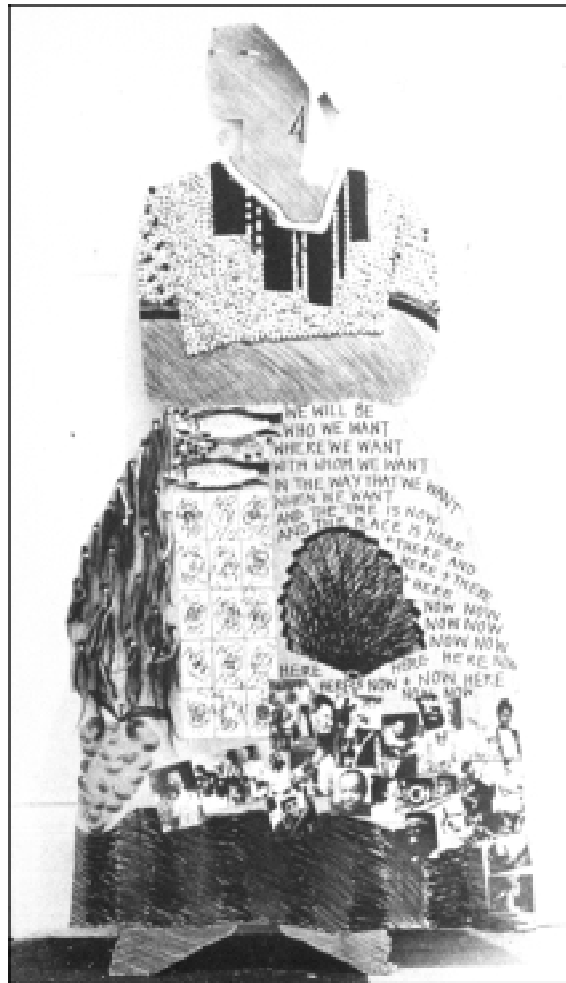
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. The First National Black Art Convention, Faculty of Art & Design, The Polytechnic (now University) of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, 1982.
6. Rasheed Araeen, 'Art & Black Consciousness', in *The Essential BLACK ART*, exhibition catalogue, Chisenhale Gallery/Black Umbrella, Kala Press, London, 1988.
7. See Rasheed Araeen and Eddie Chambers, 'Black Art: A Discussion', *Third Text*, no 5, Winter 1988–89, pp 51–77.

Sonia Boyce, *Lay Back, Keep Quite and Think of What Made Britain So Great*, pastel on paper, 1986, The Arts Council collection

Although the women artists I have so far mentioned were of African and Afro-Caribbean origins, there were also Asian women who were engaged independently in developing black feminist perspectives. It is important to mention them here not only because of the importance of their work but because they also helped define black experience beyond its essentialist association with its African roots.

In 1979, Mona Hatoum, a Palestinian, entered the Slade School of Art to do her postgraduate studies, followed one year later by Chila Kumari Burman. Both Hatoum and Burman developed their radical positions independently, without any knowledge of what Chambers and Piper were doing up in the north. Hatoum in her early work explored her position as a Palestinian woman in exile, but in her 1984 work entitled *Them and Us . . . and Other Divisions*, she clearly identified herself with the black struggle. Burman, while still in college, began to depict heroic black women in her silkscreen prints. Here is what Burman inscribes within a visual work of 1982: 'Solidarity with our Sisters in South Africa'.

It is important to highlight specifically the role of Lubaina Himid in bringing black women artists together, by organising not only their group exhibitions but also workshops and conferences in which issues relating to black women were debated (without the interference of men). I will let Lubaina Himid speak for herself, with a text inscribed within one of her visual work:



Lubaina Himid, *We Will Be*, 1983

WE WILL BE
WHO WE WANT
WHERE WE WANT
WITH WHOM WE WANT
IN THE WAY WE WANT
WHEN WE WANT
AND THE TIME IS NOW
AND THE PLACE IS HERE
+ THERE AND HERE
+ THERE + HERE
NOW NOW
NOW NOW
NOW NOW
HERE HERE HERE NOW
HERE NOW + NOW HERE
NOW NOW

Mona Hatoum, Live Work: *Variation on Discord and Division*, 14 December 1984, The Western Front, Vancouver, BC, photo Corry Wyngaarden

The group exhibition she organised at the ICA in 1985 called 'Thin Black Line' was particularly important because it brought black women artists of both African and Asian origins together. It included Chila Kumari Burman but also introduced the work of Sutapa Biswas, particularly her famous piece in which she depicts herself as the goddess Kali with a machete in one of her hands that had chopped off many white heads.

It was this militancy of the young generation of black artists, who were born and/or brought up in Britain and who had experienced racism from childhood, that produced and defined their work. This militancy was also characteristic of some black films, photography, poetry and theatre, produced during the early 1980s, which together with the visual arts formed the whole body of the Black arts movement.

Although some people believe that Black Art or a Black arts movement still exists, in my view this is no more than a fantasy. There are some individual artists who have managed to maintain their militancy but the strategy and ambitions of the later generation of black artists that emerged in the early 1990s were not only different but purposefully shunned the very idea of a critical discourse that confronted the established order. This decline in the militancy of black artists is due to a variety of complex reasons, and I shall come to this later. It is important, first, to evaluate the success and achievement of Black Art.

II

The main success of Black Art lies in its ideological commitment, in its agenda to confront, change, and humanise the prevailing (art) system so that it recognises the equality of all people. This was not confined to a verbal rhetoric to embarrass the liberalism of the system and push the careers of the artists involved in the movement, but it seemed they genuinely wanted to offer a framework to develop and produce art which was radically different from what was prevailing and was institutionally legitimised. In order to understand this radicalism, we must return to the example of Eddie Chambers's first work. The importance of this work lies not only in its ideological position against what he sees as the forces of oppression – forces which were and are not only patently against the humanity of black peoples but also an affront to humanity as a whole – but also in its search for a new radical language of art. This position was expressed not only verbally, in his frequent statements and writings, but more importantly also through the development of a language that involved a process of destruction and transformation. It was a process of making new things, a language of self-expression that went beyond what was known to be already defined by traditions, both old and modern – although the modern tradition of altering the existing or found image by tearing it or cutting it into pieces and reorganising it, or putting different or incongruent images together to make a new image, is not new. It goes back to synthetic Cubism, and was developed further during Dada. The revolutionary use of altering an image by cutting and reorganising it, particularly into a montage, was established by Heartfield in his opposition to Nazi Fascism. But Chambers's approach has been somewhat different. Unlike Heartfield's work, which by 1979 had become a reified object and a subject of coffee-table art books, Chambers's work suggests a process with a potential for further and continual transformations. Another extremely important aspect of the work is its apparent lack of racial references and the absence of the artist's own ethnic identity in it.

What thus emerges from this work is a dynamic process, based on the dialectic of change and transformation, which begins with an antithetical position but as the process continues it is synthesised both conceptually and semantically. However, it seems that the importance of this process was not grasped paradigmatically by Chambers himself, resulting in his subsequent abandonment of this mode of practice in favour of a kind of work which did not involve the destruction or deconstruction of an object of oppression and its transformation. Although this was some-

what of a regression, which involved a return to already established forms of collage, the spirit of defiance and militancy was maintained iconographically by depicting the victims of racial oppression and violence in his later work. This change from a paradigmatic critical process of transformation to an iconographic visual language thus became somewhat the hallmark of Black Art.

It is difficult to say whether the main preoccupation of Black Art with the victims of racial violence – though it was not without an irony or humour in some cases – was due to the shift in Chambers's own work or whether it was that he came under the influence of what others were doing. However, what was consistently sustained by the group together, and subsequently by the movement, was a sense of discontentment and frustration expressed through an angry opposition to the system. This was a legitimate anger of people who were subjected not only to economic exploitation but also to racial abuse. Here is Dominic Dawes, who was included in the Africa Centre exhibition:

> In your town and cities, on your subway walls, etc. and just as much in your mind, there is racial abuse: WOGS GO HOME, NF RULES, BLACK BASTARDS, PISS OFF NIGGERS, etc.[8]

Claudette Johnson, another artist from the same exhibition:

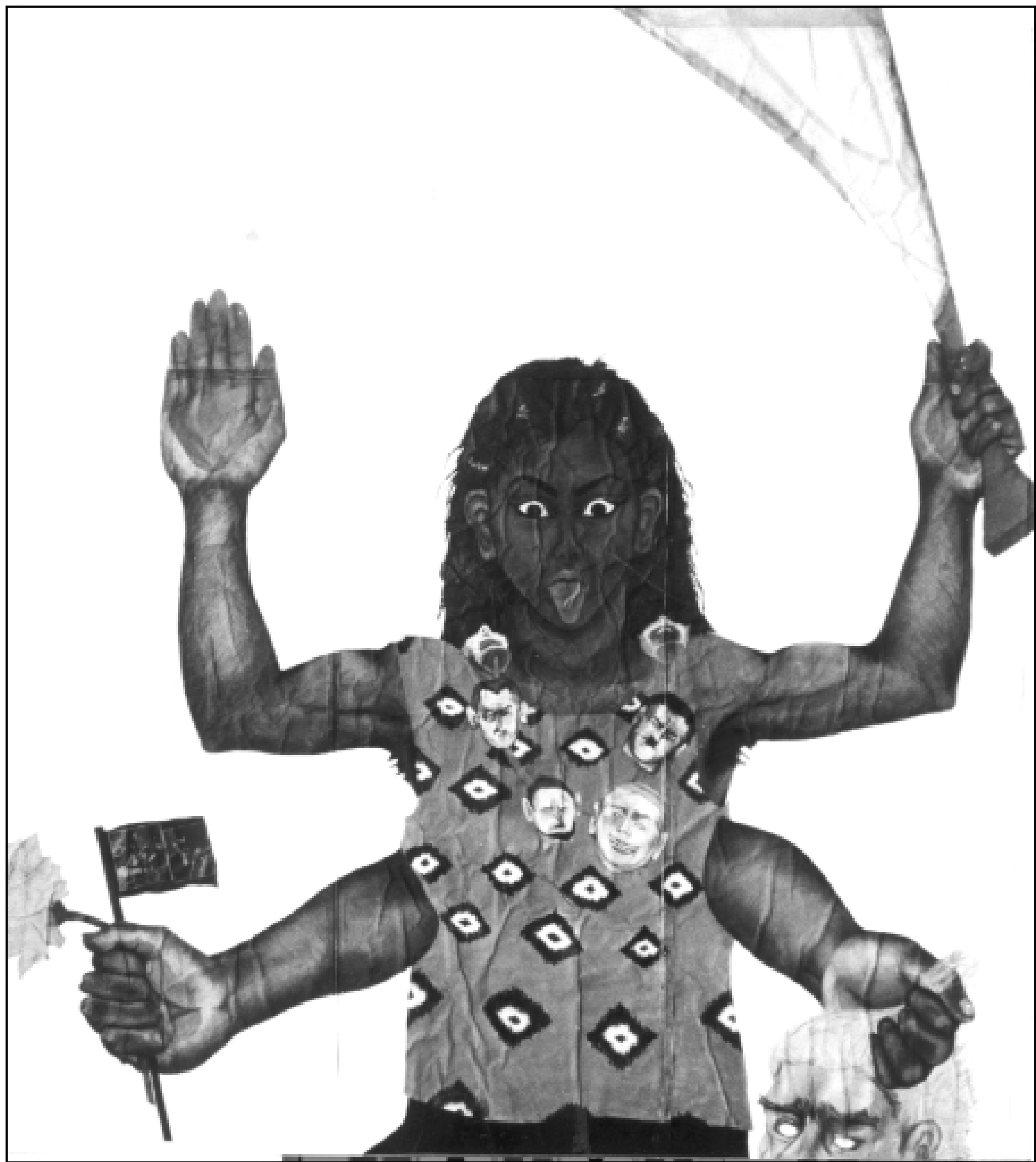
> My work is about the conflict and growth that has been the experience of the African women born and raised in the West. . . . It attempts to express the myriad aspects of oppression, racist and sexist, that have shaped us. It deals not with specific events but our responses: anger, frustration, fear and depression. . . . It charts the move towards relating to one another that we have devised for our survival. . . .[9]

What I am trying to establish here specifically is the legitimacy of the anger that gave rise to an oppositional discourse, an artistic phenomenon that has historical precedents. In fact, history is full of movements that resulted from discontentment with the established order, often with anger against the ruling classes which had produced human oppression, death, and misery. The response of the great Spanish artist Goya to the suffering caused by the Napoleonic invasion of Spain is well known. Although what he produced was not a departure from the iconographic tradition, he did push the language to a point whereby it became radically different from the one he used for other works. The rough brush strokes by which he dealt with the brutality of the war were unique within his oeuvre. Thus, by going beyond the prevailing conventions of the language, he could still make the same language express what a historical event was and the human suffering it caused. The modernity of this work in fact surpasses any other work of the time.

But what the artists faced in the early twentieth century was an entirely different challenge, because the traditional language then had reached a point of exhaustion and could not function in a significant or critical way. Particularly for Dadaists, who were disturbed and disillusioned by the inability of the bourgeois ruling class to prevent the First Great War of the century in which millions of people died, it became necessary to destroy the very language that was sanctioned and legitimised by bourgeois values.

8. Araeen, 'Art FOR UHURU', op cit.

9. Quoted in Araeen, ibid, p 150.



Sutapa Biswas, *Housewives with Steak Knives*, 1985

The postwar arrival of people from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean in Britain – and what they contributed to the country – was also a historical event. The society, which was considered to be a white society, suddenly faced a large immigrant population racially and culturally different from its indigenous people. It was a useful population –it did those jobs that

the natives either could not do or did not want to do – and was initially welcomed but only if it did not attempt to enter its social space and demand equality. To give them equality and accept those who were racially different as equal citizens, with full rights in every sphere of British social and cultural life, would have demolished the very structure that gave white people their sense of superiority and supremacy. For a society that had not yet come to terms with its colonial past, it was necessary to maintain this white privilege by maintaining the structure inherited from the empire with its legacies of racism. Although racism affected all the generations of black people in Britain, it seriously disturbed those children who were born and/or brought up here, producing in them an extreme sensitivity to what they witnessed around them. It was this sensitivity that produced a radical opposition to the system which perpetuated what was a violence against humanity; and which indeed led to the Black arts movement.

It is not unusual historically for only a few people in society to realise its oppressive nature and inhumanity. It was Goya alone in art who responded to the miseries of the Napoleonic wars; the Dadaist response to the brutality of the First Great War was also confined to a small minority of artists. Those who responded to the human predicament caused by racism also consisted of a few artists. But that does not mean that this response can be reduced only to the ethnic or racial experience of the others. What Black Art sensed and faced was not only unacceptable to human dignity, it also realised that its expression was not possible within the niceties of the aesthetic values promoted by the (white) bourgeois system. What in fact differentiated these artists from the mainstream was not the invocation or enunciation of their race or ethnicity in their work, or a desire to go back to African or Asian roots or cultures, or to reconstruct them in the light of what some black academics call diaspora experiences, but their uncompromising modernity – a modernity which was given a new role within the avant-garde. If the function of the avant-garde is to question and challenge the established order, Black Art does exactly this, not only by verbal rhetoric, which has always been part of the avant-garde, but also by a visual language which, as I pointed out in my review of 1982, 'questions the very foundation on which we normally base our critical judgement'.[10]

The importance of Black Art lies with its critical intervention within a trajectory of twentieth-century modernism, with its unique way of looking at and articulating the world, but it also redefines this tradition radically through an experience that was not only socially unique and disturbing but also historically located. The specificity of this experience cannot be separated from the universality of human experience and its history. If we dismiss and remove from history what is experienced only by a racially distinct group, then this should also apply to European people and their cultures. It should go against all logic to accept the experiences of only the white race as the expression of universal humanity.

The achievement of Black Art should therefore be seen in its attempts to intervene in and disrupt the established order of the avant-garde, based exclusively on the work of white artists and its historical genealogy, with an implication for the deconstruction and reconstruction

10. Ibid.

of its history. This may appear to be an overstatement. But if we look at the whole history of interventions in the modern mainstream by the so-called Third World, it should be clear that I am locating the Black arts movement in the larger historical context of the global cultural processes of decolonisation. In art this may not yet be significant quantitatively, but we should not forget that a single individual, Brancusi, put a marginal country like Romania on the map of art history.

What we must therefore recognise is that Black Art represents, in its temporality, the dialectic of decolonisation as part of the worldwide struggle for liberation not only of the colonised or oppressed but also of the coloniser from its Eurocentric racist assumptions and perceptions. Although black experience or consciousness gave the black community in Britain an awareness of its own position in society as a whole and its creative potential, this consciousness represents a vision of the world which is free from all forms of domination. The Black arts movement represents this consciousness, vision, and creativity.

III

It was not my intention here only to valorise Black Art beyond a critical scrutiny. In fact, it would not be enough only to look at what Black Art wanted to achieve in terms of its interventions and its vision but also what it actually and eventually achieved. Did it persistently maintain a radical position and for how long? If it failed to maintain its radical position by becoming part of what every black artist wanted to do, and eventually reached an end, what was the real cause of its demise? By looking now also at the failure of Black Art, it is not my aim to dismiss or undermine its achievement. On the contrary, it is my attempt here to salvage and reiterate its temporality and historicity. Although movements do not last long in history, it is important that the specificity of Black Art is separated from what is generally perceived as 'black art', in order that its historical achievement is maintained.

However, I ask myself: why have its protagonists allowed the radical aims and objectives of Black Art to be absorbed and undermined by everything produced under the banner of 'black art'? Why are they now silent or meekly accepting whatever is offered by the society they wanted to change? Has anything changed, besides some black artists having won the Turner Prize? Is this what Black Art wanted to achieve? If this was what the movement wanted, why was there talk about white oppression? Has this oppression ended?

The emergence of Black Art or the Black arts movement was the result of a gut feeling, of an anger produced by (white) oppression and injustice. It was a genuine feeling, which made some black art students rebel against the system and its art institutions. What Black Art did not realise was that it was up against a mighty power and its highly complex institutional system, which could not be changed by merely shouting at it and making appeals to its liberalism. It failed to understand that art is not just a form of self-expression through the production of images but a complex discourse which involves, incorporates, and is dependent on other things in order to realise its full significance. If it must enter the system in order to change it, this entry is a complex phenomenon that

requires an understanding of history and how one deals with it, and how one locates within it.

In fact, behind its radical agenda, Black Art suffered from its own lack of theoretical understanding, confusions, and contradictions, from its lack of sufficient knowledge and clear understanding of history, from its lack of intellectual maturity and the infantile egotistic self-importance of its members which prevented them from making a connection with historical precedents.

When Black Art emerged in its initial stage in the early 1980s it was ignorant of what it was against in terms of art history; it did not even know the history of black struggle in art in Britain. All it knew was that 'white art' was not good; it therefore wanted to produce 'black art'. The idea that whatever was produced by black artists for black people was 'Black art' collapsed when it faced its own contradiction. This was what Chambers, at the end of the 1980s, says:

> The struggle to build a bridge between black artists and the black community is not an exclusive struggle. It does not exist at the expense of other things. I do recognise the validity of the struggle vis-à-vis white institutions. My own approach now, which may be pragmatic, in curating exhibitions is to place Black art in white gallery spaces. There is a kind of duality to the whole situation, but unfortunately there is no correlation between the two. It may be dangerous to generalise, but the fact remains that the black community is not interested in what goes in the white galleries.[11]

Chambers does not ask why the black community is not interested in 'what goes in the white galleries'. Is it just the galleries, or art in which the black community is not interested? Did it help when Black Art was shown in the galleries run by black people themselves?

By the middle of the 1980s, there were two galleries that were funded by the Greater London Council (GLC), one for African and Afro-Caribbean artists and the other for Asians. Despite his own subsequent shift towards the acceptance of artists of both Asian and African origins as part of the Black arts movement, did Chambers question this institutionally imposed separation? Not only did he not raise any objection about this separation based on ethnic and racial grounds but he also failed to face and recognise the real aspirations and ambition of those people who were responsible for this division. In fact, most African and Asian people were not interested in questioning or confronting the system but only wanted to share its multicultural pie, whatever colour or shape it came in, and were quite happy to enter the system on the basis of ethnic and cultural differences and divisions.

IV

When the Black arts movement emerged as a whole body in the mid-1980s, and began to attract institutional attention, the institutions no longer represented a white establishment. The system had already recognised the absence of black people from its institutions and had opened its doors to them, to those who were happy to help it implement its own multicultural agenda and programme. Most of these people were

11. Rasheed Araeen and Eddie Chambers, op cit, p 53.

in fact accepted by and became part of the art establishment, not on the basis of any expertise or knowledge of the arts and the history of black contribution to the mainstream but as a result of the institutional response to their rhetoric of complaints and demands. They constantly appealed to the conscience of liberal institutions and offered their services within the prevailing system; and in most cases they used their ethnic or racial identities to enter the citadel of power and join in the celebration of its newly acquired cultural diversity.

It was therefore not the traditional power of art institutions that Black Art faced when it tried to enter institutional spaces but artistically ignorant and illiterate black functionaries. What Black Art thus encountered was not a body of institutionalised mainstream discourse that it wanted to enter and disturb, but its multicultural façade. In fact, the discourse of Black Art, with its confrontational agenda and alternative modern vision, was stopped at the threshold and its power defused by mixing it with other things of an ethnic nature. What was extraordinary was not that the radicalism and militancy of Black Art was reduced to the discourse of ethnic cultural entertainment but a lack of realisation on the part of the pioneers of the movement that Black Art was thus so easily disarmed.

Although the driving force behind all this has been the Arts Council and its perception of the creativity of black people based on their specific ethnicities, the role of the GLC in this respect has been much more important. Right from the beginning, the GLC got everything wrong as it reduced the specificity of black struggle in art to the problems of ethnic minorities and their traditional cultures, with an assumption that black people themselves would be the best to solve them. It was also assumed that since black women were the most oppressed section of the society, they should be put in a position of power. It would be totally wrong to deny the oppression of women, particularly of black women in a white patriarchal society. But an oppressed body by itself, by the mere awareness of its oppression, cannot deal with or confront what produces oppression. This awareness has a radical potential but this potential can only be realised when it is reinforced by knowledge and understanding of the specificity of the oppression. If the issue is about art, one cannot deal with its discourse merely by an anti-racist rhetoric. One needs full knowledge of the discourse, the history of its achievements, and both its inclusions and exclusions. If the dominant discourse had suppressed the achievement of artists of a minority community, one should know the nature and history of this suppression before one can deal with it. One must then produce a radical strategy or counter-discourse capable of dealing with what is not only a complex situation but is also controlled by the dominant but liberal institutions.

Imagine that an oppressed person, who is never involved in art and has no knowledge of art and its history, who cannot even differentiate one picture from another on the basis of their visual qualities let alone their historical formations and significances, is put in charge of the art section of an important institution. What could you expect from this person? This is exactly what happened at the GLC. Ignorant and intellectually deficient black men and women were appointed, merely on the basis of their belonging to ethnic minorities, to implement the GLC's

art policies and funding. The result was a disaster for the future of black artists. Millions of pounds of public money was wasted in support of populist but phoney projects and organisations, merely because they were set up and run by black people who had little or superficial interest in art.

Its most disturbing impact was on the Black arts movement. The GLC apparently supported it and provided money in some cases, but for the wrong reasons. First, it did not fully understand what constituted Black Art, except that it was something produced by every black artist. It did not understand that art was a specific discipline, with its own body of knowledge and expertise, its specific temporality and historicity, and that you could not treat the work of a committed professional artist in the same way you looked at drawings by children.

In 1985, one of the GLC's black art officers – who happened to be a woman – organised and curated what she thought would be a major statement of historical importance. Except for a few good artists, it comprised mostly the works of amateurs, beginners, dabblers, and so on, including drawings by black children. It showed no concern for the quality or significance of art as a professional or critical practice, let alone an awareness of its historical importance. The whole thing was a disgraceful display and celebration of ignorance, philistinism, and mediocrity. This shameless display of mostly awfully bad or third-rate works was held inside a specially built tent-like structure within the premises of the Royal Festival Hall.[12] The exhibition was opened by the then Mayor of Lambeth who declared the exhibition to be 'the great achievement of the black community which the system had been ignoring'. In the face of such a spectacle of cheap entertainment, put up by the system in the name of black people – which was in fact an affront to the historical achievements of black artists in Britain – the Black arts movement became helpless in its radical agenda. In fact it thus allowed itself to be manipulated by the system for its own purpose.

V

The problems the movement faced were not just ideological but were also due to a lack of both material and intellectual resources. There was no way for black art to survive except to get whatever it could from the system. Eddie Chambers, its main protagonist, abandoned making art in favour of curating exhibitions, particularly when some institutions were willing to give him a job. He knew he could not earn his living merely by making art, but curating would provide him at least something with which to survive. I have been sympathetic to his position, so long as he struggled to maintain his radicalism. But it seemed that he gave up his radical position rather too easily. His uncritical acceptance of whatever black artists did brought with it a change of view in him that was contradictory to the initial aims and objectives of Black Art. In fact, by the end of the 1980s, his views were not much different from the establishment's view, which by now began to use the term 'black art' to replace 'ethnic art', which was used before to designate whatever black artists did.[13]

12. This reminded me of an exhibition of contemporary African artists in France some years ago, for which the walls of the exhibition hall were covered with bamboo, to simulate the interior of an African hut, on which were then hung specimens of modern African art.

13. Araeen and Chambers, op cit.

The ultimate blow that Black Art received was from an unwarranted interference from the opportunism of some black cultural theorists. As I have said before, Black Art suffered from a lack of intellectual resources, by which I meant the absence of a rigorous theoretical formulation to place it within the history of the mainstream. Instead of art historians and theorists, who would have helped develop a discourse in support of Black Art as a form of the historical avant-garde, we had sociologists of postcolonial theory who suddenly entered the scene. What happened was this: as some black academics saw the multicultural gravy-train there ready to depart, they jumped on it and produced their muddle-headed theories of *cultural difference* and *ethnicities*. This was a godsend to the establishment's agenda to allocate a specific role for black artists in British society. Although the establishment had been supporting black artists (right from the beginning in the 1950s when some artists of Asian and Afro-Caribbean origin began to appear on the art scene) on the basis of their *difference*, this was done without the availability of a postcolonial theory. But now it could justify theoretically and promote only those artists who entered the scene carrying their ethnic identity cards. In fact the authenticity and legitimacy of their artworks now became entirely dependent on their showing some signs of their racial or cultural origins in Asia or Africa.

Thus the theories of ethnicity and cultural difference not only ignored and undermined the historical importance of Black Art, and led it to its eventual demise, but also produced a specific postmodernist framework for the production and legitimisation of art for artists of non-white racial groups. The tropes of irony and self-parody that we notice in the work of successful black artists in the 1990s is the product of an institutionally legitimised and predetermined framework, by which their significance is controlled and contained within the larger spectacle of multiculturalism. They may deal with the issues of 'race' but the methodology deployed in their work poses no threat to the power of Eurocentric status quo.

What Black Art faced, right from the beginning, was an insurmountable problem. Throughout history art was produced in relation to or in the service of the dominant section of society; and the society as a whole would benefit from it only when it was mediated by this section. Particularly when art in the twentieth century became critical of the established order, the recognition and legitimisation of its critical radicalism became dependent on the society's liberal art institutions. In this respect, Black Art found itself in an impossible position, not so much for its unacceptable critical stance but more for the way black people were and are positioned within British or a European society. What is extraordinary is not that Black Art could not be institutionally recognised and legitimised, but that the very presence of black artists in Britain and their work – whatever its nature – was and is seen as being outside the modernist mainstream. Even when some black artists receive institutional support that leads to their successful careers, they continue to be seen as 'foreigners' and are not allowed to enter the mainstream history of art in Britain. Given this situation, how could Black Art even survive, let alone succeed?

The demise of Black Art is not unique, although its causes may be unusual. Every radical movement in the past had a short lifespan but they survived in history as a body of ideas. The survival of Black Art as a body

of ideas representing a significant moment in history will depend on the kind of society we have in the future, whether these ideas have any use or not for future generations. Let us hope for the day when the contingent ‘Black’ of Black Art will no longer be needed and its ideas will be recognised as part of the struggle of the whole of society to become more humane and equal.

A version of this paper was delivered to a conference ‘Shades of Black: Assembling the Eighties’, organised by David A Bailey and Sonia Boyce, at Duke University, USA, 19–22 April 2001; and is included in the book of the same title to be published by Duke University Press at the end of 2004.