INTRODUCTION

Bringing together collectives of visual artists, videographers and photographers, ‘Black Arts’ developed in Britain in the 1980s. Most of these collectives were created just after the First National Black Art Convention (1982), a major gathering that brought together ‘Black’ visual artists, but during which no common aesthetic was adopted. Therefore, ‘Black’ does not designate an ethnicity or colour, but a political place of enunciation that is common to migrants or British people who immigrated. In other words, British Black Art entails individuals who are defined by a common political space that is linked to the movements of British decolonisation in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. Some like Eddie Chambers became avant-garde artists through the practice of collage, others like Sonia Boyce were inspired by Mexican Surrealism and took interest in figuration, and in particular in the history of the representation of women, whilst still others engaged in a discussion on the history of forms in relation to famous paintings, as was the case for Lubaina Himid. Video and cinema collectives sought to renew the expressionist aesthetic with an innovative mix of documents, archives and fiction (the Black Audio Film Collective), whilst photographers took interest in Gay and

Fig 1 Claudette Johnson, I came to dance, 1982. 
Drawing, pastel on paper 91,45 x 121, 92 cm
Lesbian politics and how it is represented (Rotimi-Fani Kayode and Sunil Gupta). There were numerous shows, but artists were generally given a rude welcome, especially in 1989 just after the Hayward Gallery’s The Other Story exhibition, which was organised by Rasheed Araeen, an artist and the editor of the art journal Third Text. These artists were labelled the ‘Angry Young Black’ in reference to the realist writers of the 1950s, ‘the angry young men’,4 who had been criticised for engaging more in social satire than in a formal approach to literature.

The 1950s and 1960s had seen the emergence of modern abstract ‘cosmopolitan’ painters such as Frank Bowling and Aubrey Williams, then kinetic artists like Li Yuan Chia, and the visual artist and performer David Medalla, who were part of artistic internationalism. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, art moved in different directions. On the one hand, due to the sudden institutional marginalisation of these internationalist artists, who as a result left for the United States; and on the other, due to the birth of British Black Art—a movement bringing together different collectives and individuals. This movement was empowered by artists who were caught up in a crisis of cultural identity and the rise of racism, and whose practices made use of the tools of Western art, but were opposed to the British aesthetics dominated in particular by the conceptual ‘Art and Language’ approach (and Victor Burgin’s work).

The conditions in which the artwork of British Black art emerged are linked to a social and political history, and in particular the uprisings in Handsworth, Brixton and Toxteth in the early 1980s, in a context marked by Thatcher’s anti-immigration politics. However, these productions must be read and analysed not as prime examples 1 John Osborne’s play Look Back in Anger, which played at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956, caused an uproar in the press, which was interested in the realism characterising the narrative of the hero Jimmy Porter, who was from the working class. The following year, John Braine published Room at the Top, in which the hero Joe Lampton tries to rise up into the middle-class society of Bradford. In 1959, Allan Sillitoe conjured up images of rural, working class England in Saturday Night and Sunday Morning.

of the conditions of production or of those who represent this history of the communities that emerged after the British decolonisation, as has often been the case, but above all as singular visual and formal propositions, which have participated in and catalysed art history itself.

Long excluded from art history by the mechanisms that construct art history in general and British art history in particular, the artists associated with British Black Art have gained a certain amount of institutional visibility since the early 2000s. The first major academic event that contributed to this visibility was the publication in 2005 of the work Shades of Black: Assembling Black Art in 1980s Britain,5 which included essays, a portfolio, and the proceedings of a symposium organised by David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce at Duke University in 2001. This work analyses the pluralistic positions within this artistic movement. It indicates the urgent need to engage in a critical analysis of these works of art, and to move beyond, on the one hand, the sociological analysis of the conditions in which the movement emerged; and on the other, the efforts in terms of documentation and archiving undertaken since the end of the 1980s by those involved in this movement. The Blk Art Group exhibition at the Graves Gallery in Sheffield (2011-2012), and three projects at Tate Britain: The Thin Black Line(s) exhibition at the Tate Britain, organised by Lubaina Himid and Paul Goodwin in 2012, the collective Migrations exhibition, and the rehang of the permanent collections in 2012 directed by Penelope Curtis, rehabilitated and highlighted the key works created by this movement, from a historical point of view, but not from the perspective of the critical issues raised by these works. Likewise, the recent books Black Artists in British Art and Things Done Change, by Chambers, who founded the Blk Art Group and is a curator and professor of African Diaspora art history at the University of Texas, provide very precise documentation on the...
history of practices, as well as an analysis of institutional mechanisms. His different works strive to reconstruct a historical narrative, collect archives, describe events, and show the groups and collectives that have contributed to this heterogeneous movement. Yet they make no mention of the critical potential of the works within the history of Western art.

The reasons behind the marginalisation of the British Black Art movement are largely based on the racism inherent in cultural institutions as Rasheed Araeen, Chambers, and Richard Hylton have argued since the 1980s. Leon Wainwright has also highlighted the way in which questions on the ‘canons of art’ have had little effect on the re-writing of the history of Caribbean and postcolonial art in the UK. In addition to highlighting the need to reread the artistic canons, my book also shows that the artistic choices made in certain works by British Black artists, and what they say about art history and the history of ideas have also led to their marginalisation.

My book is an analysis of the critical underpinnings of some works that have become emblematic of British Black Art, and especially the ways in which they act within Western art history. In a period of art that is supposedly anti-theoretical, provocative and highly mediatised, and represented by the likes of Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and other Young British Artists supported by the gallery owner Jay Joplin and the advertising executive Charles Saatchi, Black British artists, who are rarely represented by commercial galleries, sometimes collected by institutions (the Arts Council), and whose work is often wrongly labelled too categorically (and on the basis of identity-related criteria) as ‘ethnic art,’ propose a veritable critique of the history of Western art.

Many authors—often from the field of sociology that was derived from cultural studies—have contributed to defining the positions of the artists in the British Black Art movement (Stuart Hall, Hazel Carby, Paul Gilroy, Kobena Mercer). Other people involved in the arts, including artists, critics and curators have conducted research on the artistic choices made in the works (Araeen, Jean Ficher, Gilane Tawadros, and Boyce). Among these writers, Gilane Tawadros wrote a fundamental article on the unique position of artists such as Boyce, Himid and Sutapa Biswas, who have a special point of view for observing art history in the postmodern period. My own work opens up new pathways for interpreting these works, based on a historical reassessment of the critical discussions that focus on emblematic works of British Black Art to reflect upon their contributions and their inscription within the narratives on art in the context of an art history that is being rewritten, in which the criteria for assessing the works and the methodological tools of art history have been redefined, particularly since 1989. It is organised in four chapters, each of which analyses the relationships between artistic productions and critical theories or art theory, informed principally by the close relations to Black British feminism and new art history, as

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methodology combining Marxist and Foucaultian heritage. In my book, I systematically examine the relationships between the artistic tools specifically used in the artistic productions and how they belong to a place that is gendered, racial, and sexual and inscribed within a social class, combining the formalist heritage of poststructuralism with intersectionality. This methodology enables me to move beyond a sociological reading of artists by engaging in an analysis of artistic forms, while taking account of the historicity of the socially situated construction of academic knowledge and artistic propositions.

My own study makes use of this methodology developing four ways of reading specific works of British art: 1) A study of the British Black Art project in structural and political terms; 2) How the choice of and interplay between the various media used by British Black artists makes sense in terms of art history; 3) The links between the materiality of artistic productions in relation to ‘internationalism’, through the representation of the ‘black artist’ subject; 4) An analysis of cultural history taking as its point of departure the racialised and gendered New Left proposed by Stuart Hall and its effects within several art scenes. Each of the chapters and the different readings proposed combine an analysis of the materiality of artworks and an intersectional approach. The readings I propose aim to shed light on the critical content in these works of art—and their position within art history (and within this history, the political sense of the term ‘Black’)—within the European art world after the end of its grand narratives.


