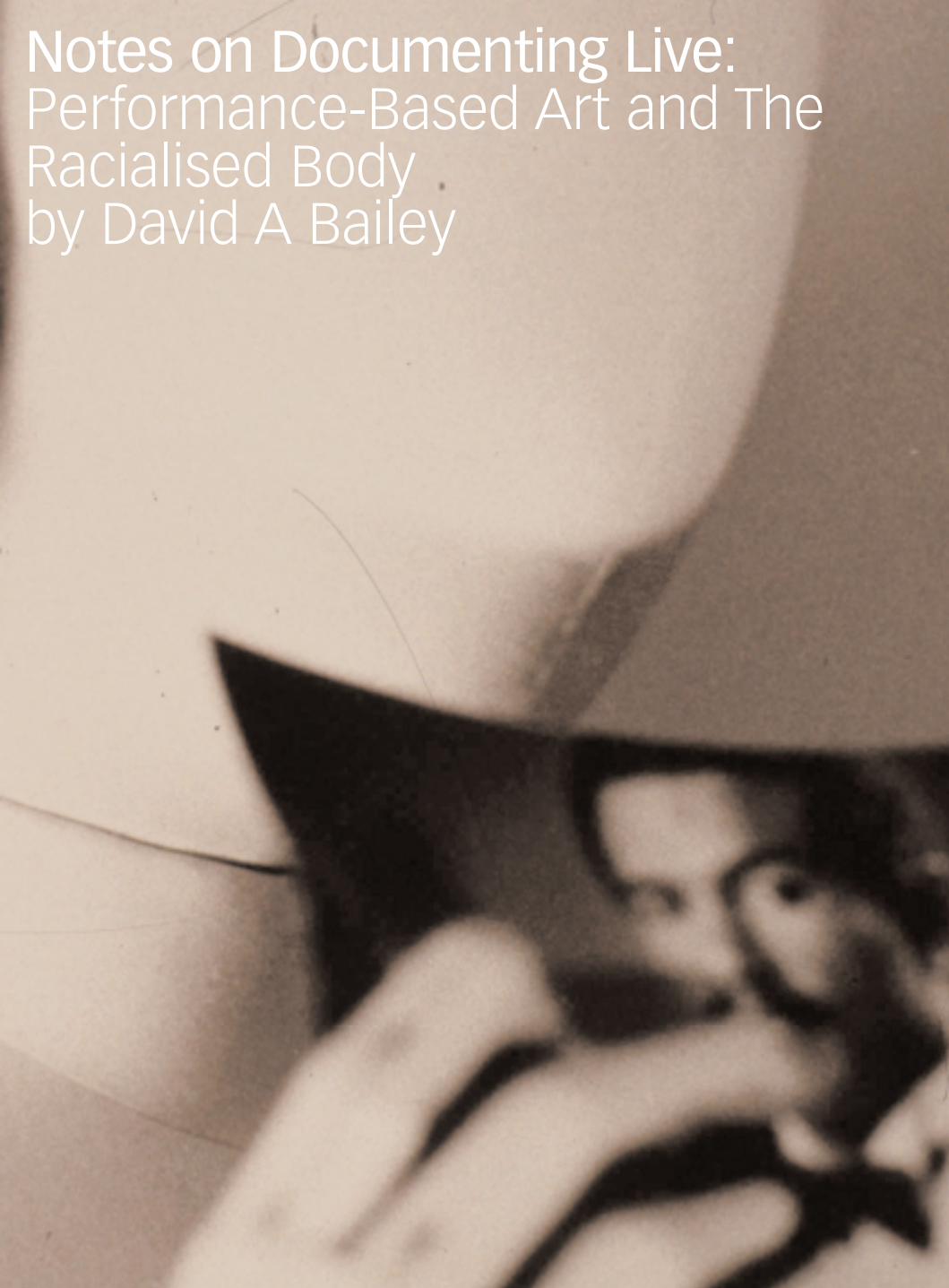


Notes on Documenting Live:
Performance-Based Art and The
Racialised Body
by David A Bailey



Introduction

Documenting Live is a unique publication and dvd resource reflecting the work of key UK based artists working in the 1990s and 2000s, and placing Live Art practices that are informed by questions of cultural identity within critical and historical frameworks.

Documenting Live has been developed by the Live Art Development Agency, curator David A Bailey and Project Director Rajni Shah in response to the challenges of documenting Live Art, and particularly the influential work of artists from culturally diverse backgrounds in the UK. It builds on a 2002 collaboration between the Live Art Development Agency, African & Asian Visual Artists Archive (Aavaa) and motiroti – a cdrom interpretation of motiroti's celebrated participatory performance *Wigs of Wonderment*.

Recognised as a practice that operates within, in between, across, and at the edges of visual art, theatre, dance, poetry, digital media and the moving image, Live Art is often an interdisciplinary, itinerant and ephemeral area of contemporary arts practice. Inevitably there are many challenges in the documentation, archiving and contextualisation of such work, and these challenges can lead to the exclusion of significant artists and approaches from wider cultural discourses and art histories. This is particularly the case for artists concerned with questions of identity, difference and the complexities of 'cultural diversity', whose experiences and practices are often sidelined within UK's cultural histories.

Documenting Live sets out to address these challenges through the creation of an archival and critical document that maps a history; marks a territory; and looks to the future. It has been developed as a resource for artists, scholars, students, curators, historians, policy makers, and anyone interested in the cultural landscape of the UK.

Thirteen artists from across several generations and diverse areas of practice were invited to collaborate on this mapping project through the creation of biographical postcards and video commentaries, the selection of illustrative documentation of their work, and participation in round table discussions prompted by David A Bailey's essay *Documenting Live: Performance-Based Art And The Racialised Body*.

In their illuminating and provocative contributions the participating artists reflect on the people, movements and ideas of the '20th century moment' that have influenced, and continue to influence, their own performative practices; consider the formal, conceptual and cultural issues informing their work in the 21st century; and offer invaluable insights into the different histories and experiences of black artists in the UK, and the evolving and shifting nature of Live Art itself.

Documenting Live contains David A Bailey's mapping essay *Performance-Based Art And The Racialised Body*; a series of artists' postcards; and a dvd featuring the artists' commentaries, excerpts from key works, and documentation of the round table discussions.

Documenting Live has been commissioned and published by the Live Art Development Agency in 2008 as part of *Restock, Rethink, Reflect*, a programme of initiatives for artists exploring and questioning notions of cultural identity.

Lois Keidan and Daniel Brine
Live Art Development Agency, Spring 2008

Notes on Documenting Live: Performance-Based Art and The Racialised Body

These notes are specifically written to accompany the unique dvd that brings together for the first time roundtable interviews with three generations of artists from the diaspora who have worked within the genre of performance based Live Art in Britain.

In the past I have written about the transformations in black British art over the last 40 years. However, this overview had a tendency to neglect the relationship and distinctiveness that performance and Live Art have played in this period. One also has to understand that in the context of the visual arts, which already suffers from under-documentation, in the case of the performance and Live Art this is even worse when we come to consider cultural diversity, which makes it very difficult for scholars, curators and artists to get a sense of a history and continuity of practice. In these notes I will want to review this period in the light of this. Of course this will not be a complete survey nor an encyclopaedic view, but the beginnings of a map of this period. These notes have been informed by three areas in my life: my work as Co-Director of the African & Asian Visual Arts Archive (Aavaa), my work as a curator, and with discussions with artists who have worked in this genre from the 1960s to the present day. To examine this period we need to look at significant developments in the following areas: institutional developments and changes; differences and convergences which led to substantial paradigmatic shifts in artistic practices; independent organisations; globalisation and internationalism; the role of the curator; social and political events.

There needs to be much more research and critical writing on black artists and black cultural practice in Britain. Although some work has been done about black artists from the post-war period, much more archaeological work is required on the pre-1945 era. The point here is that one should not isolate the practices between the 1970s and 1990s without looking at this earlier period.

In the 1950s and 1960s, England was the place where artists came together from the newly formed "Commonwealth". One crucial gathering was the formation of the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) in London in 1966 – an important moment that influenced events in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Formed by Kamau (Edward) Brathwaite, John La Rose and Andrew Salkey. Like the Harlem Renaissance that emerged in New York during the 1920s and 1930s, CAM was a diverse collection of writers, critics and artists who were interested in developing a modern Caribbean aesthetic - an aesthetic that explored colonial histories as well as defining a newly formed black British identity. It seems to me that during this period the question and practice of performance and the formation of a Live Art practice had its seeds in this movement and in this period of the CAM era. It was in this moment where visual arts were in dialogue with performance poets and at the same time in dialogue with performance spectacularists. This is the period where poets from the Caribbean were beginning to find a new voice and a new signature in Britain through the use of language and dialect where the phrase patois and

creolisation came into being in newly formed West Indian centres in London such as the Keskidee Centre in London. In this context we need to re-examine the documentary film work of the Trinidadian artist Horace Ove whose films such as 'Baldwin's Nigger' captures the dialogue between James Baldwin and the Caribbean community in London, as well as other films such as 'Pressure', which documents the West London black community.

The 1970s was also a rapidly changing period for African and Asian artists in Britain, who were making important contributions to global art movements like modernism whilst at the same time beginning to demonstrate a move towards a Live Art practice. In this context we need to look at the performative works by artist such as Rasheed Aareen and David Medalla. David Medalla formed the Artists Liberation Front and Artists For Democracy in London with an international membership that included Rasheed Aareen who performed 'Paki Bastard' (1977), one of the first critiques into the positive/negative imagery debate. Later in this decade, Aareen launched the art magazine Black Phoenix with an article entitled 'Black Manifesto'. The point here is that like the artists group CAM here was a body of artists who were not only bringing their relationships to other global artists through their work but also introducing these artist for the first time to a British audience. This is certainly the case of David Medalla whose practice related to several different international artists such as Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica which he introduced the British

artworld. The events of the 1970s led to the first major report on black arts in Britain or what was then termed, Ethnic Minority Arts. With institutional support from the Community Relations Committee (CRC), the highly influential 'The Arts Britain Ignores' by Naseem Khan was published. This initiative marked the beginning of support for black art from organisations like the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Gulbenkian Foundation. The report recommends the funding and profiling of arts from a range of culturally diverse groups in Britain and enables the setting up of the Minority Arts Advisory Service in London, with regional bodies in the West Midlands, Manchester, Cardiff and CHROMA based in Nottingham. In this moment we can see the development of an artistic social policy and, parallel to this, a formation of an aesthetic practice. Also we can see the development of a definition of performance grounded within theatre in this moment which locates performance based Live Art as marginal.

We cannot look at black art practice in the 1970s without see the bigger global picture and in this sense America and Africa become an important component. In the USA the black arts movement were forging alliances with the civil rights movement in an era where performance, the black body and language were fused together and contested in the churches, in the formation of choreographed marches, and in intimate halls and interior spaces where a narrative was being developed to mark the intervention of a new black American subject. This is clearly evident in work by artists such as

Adrian Piper and David Hammons. In Africa places like Ethiopia were being seen as the new mecca for the Rastafarian movement, whereas places like Nigeria were where the now legendary 'Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture' (Festac) was based. It was here where I argue that the first black diaspora biennale emerged bringing together visual artists with performers from around the world. It is here where we need to discuss the politics of canonisation within a form of afro-essentialism with the danger of re-writing art practice with a heavy-handed Afro-centric viewpoint. So for instance in this global context one might also consider groups like Fluxus and artists like Yoko Ono and Stanley Brouwn in Holland. In Britain there were also those that challenged the modernist paradigm with activities that took art out of the pristine "white cube" gallery space to alternative spaces and on to the streets with happenings, activism and conceptual art. The Drum Arts Centre was an alternative space, established to promote the art of black people in Britain, and in London carnival begins to form a new sub genre in the form of the sound system with the rise of dub in the formation of dub performance poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson.

The 1980s becomes a period of diverse activity from a new generation of artists, writers and critics. Civil disruptions across the country go hand in hand with the Thatcherite era, which in turn, has its influence on artistic production and policy. There is mass movement within the arena of black curatorial practice, independent

publishing, forums, mainstream exhibitions, collaborative ventures, and organisational developments. One of the most influential bodies in the 1980s was the Greater London Council, and between 1982 -1986, through funding, institutional support, and changes in legislation, artists, writers, critics, and community groups were brought together to advise and shape local government initiatives, thus transforming the cultural landscape. For the arts some of the key events included the Ethnic Arts Conference in 1982, which established the Ethnic Arts Subcommittee, as well as the Anti-Racism Year Programme; the Black Visual Arts Forum; 'Black Artists-White Institutions' Conference, The Black Experience Programme. By 1986, the Arts Council had begun to adopt some of the initiatives developed by the GLC with a special remit to develop an international black arts centre at the Roundhouse in London. For the first time in Britain there was a real and passionate push to develop policies that addressed the black subject within visual arts, film, writing and performance. It is in this context where we see the beginnings of a policy led discussion on the question of performance which leads to the formation of research and funding in the 1990s that opens up the question of inter-disciplinary practice and the exploration of performance and its relationship to the lens.

In the 'Black Experiences' issue of Ten.8, Stuart Hall made the point that in the 1980s we were entering "the Age of Innocence", which ensured that black subjectivities were visible and positioned at the centre of artistic discourses. If the 1970s was about a politicisation and

mobilisation around blackness, then the 1980s was a period when the use of the term Black was at the forefront of exhibitions, events and publications. Then there were publications such as *Making Myself Visible* (Rasheed Aareen); conferences such as 'Black Artists –White Institutions'; artist led groups such as The Blk Art Group. All gave the impression that the narrative theme and mode of address was one of confrontation and opposition. However, Hall concludes that within this moment of visibility and positioning there also was an "opening up" to the question of the complexity and heterogeneity of the black experience, an opening up that requires a critical framework that does not take for granted that it is all good.

This idea of a radical critical framework took place within the multitude of voices and differing styles of writing around black art in Britain: from the art historical to questions of psychoanalysis centering/de-centering the subject; to the "other" and colonial discourses on the body. This was clearly the case in writings by Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Pratibha Parmar, Homi Bhabha, Kobena Mercer, Eddie Chambers, Lubiana Himid, Rasheed Aareen, Sarat Maharaj, Gilane Tawadros and Guy Brett. In the writings of people such as Guy Brett there is the exploration of visual art practice and performance. In addition to this there are other writers, artists and publishers who are also trying to critically bring together in a publishing arena the question of visual art practice and performance such as Kwesi Owusu's 'The Struggle For Black Arts In Britain', 'Storms of The Heart: An Anthology of

Black Arts & Culture' (1988), FAN (1988) by Sulter and Himid. This was also the period where independent journals and publications were established that were unique in bringing together interdisciplinary genres such as Artrage, Blackboard, Making Myself Visible (1984), Third Text (1987), BA.ZAAR (South Asian Arts Forum) (1987), Black Arts In London, Race Today Review, Urban Fox Press (Passion 1989) and Mukti. There were mainstream institutional interventions by organisations that published material which explored black art practices such as CRE The Art of Ethnic Minorities (1985). The point here is that in the 1980s it becomes clear that there are policy initiatives, funding initiatives, the emergence of a critical and artistic groundswell that is focused around questions of the black body and autobiography which become a 1980s intertextual debate amongst a range of artists from different generations leading to one-off debates, publications, exhibitions and the formation of groups. It is in this context that we see a distinctive narrative emerging which leads to the formation of radical experimental theatre groups such as Double Edge, the re-imagining of choreography and dance by Greta Mendez, the performance poetry of SuAndi, the televisual subversion of the black and white ministerial genre with Lenny Henry and the distinctive music performative success of Soul To Soul who reach number one in Britain and the USA. In this context we also see elements of performance and adornment in the work of visual artists such as Keith Piper, Ingrid Pollard, Sokari Douglas Camp and Rotimi Fani Kayode. By the 1990s this emerges into a distinctive Live Art practice.

In the 1990s we begin to experience for the first time en masse artists who are exploring performative live visual time based projects whether it is in a gallery installation, in a studio theatre, or in the public realm – a unique body of work which is deeply rich in film culture, performance, theory and the history of visual arts that makes direct relationship to the modern conditions that pre-occupy the arenas of race, sexuality, memory, history, fantasy and desire in our daily lives. This is the period where we see the Arts Council producing reports into the question of cultural diversity and Live Art practices, this is the period where we see new funding streams such as New Collaborations geared towards supporting interdisciplinary practices. This is the period of the launch of publishing and exhibition franchises to Sunil Gupta (OVA), Rasheed Aareen (Kala Press) and Eddie Chambers, and of new organisations such as inIVA whose output throughout this period is multifaceted: instigating and collaborating with a range of critics, curators, artists, art historians, galleries, museums and arts organisations on exhibition and publishing projects. This is also the period when performance, film and visual art practices begin to merge with artists such as Isaac Julien and Steve McQueen, and when Live Art came into its own through the approaches of artists such as Susan Lewis, Ronald Fraser Munro, and motiroti and through the curatorial work of Catherine Ugwu and Lois Keidan at the Institute of Contemporary Arts who went on to establish the Live Art Development Agency in 1999.

Now that we are in the 21st century people tend to be obsessive with the form of practice and its relationship to new technologies rather than the object itself and its complex historical relations. This is clearly the case with Live Art where for the first time in Britain one can locate three generations of practice with artists who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s with artists from the 1980s and 1990s and artists from the 21st century. The question now is how do we (as curators, critics, policy makers, thinkers and artists) link the past with the present and the present with the past. The point is that in the 1950s in Britain there was no archival policy put in place which has meant that most of the work and practices I have discussed which dates back to the 1960s has been lost or destroyed. There are only fragments left in the form of photographs, reviews, diaries. By the 1990s this archival work improved but what now remains are vast gaps from the last half of the 20th century to now in 21st century where in Britain it is very difficult to try and navigate a historical presence of race within the performance art based genre. The next question is how do we remedy this scenario. Do we re-create some of the land making performances of the past? And document them? And if so, how do we interpret them? This was the question I was faced when working on this project and the only answer I could come to was to provide a forum where a small group of artists from the period of 1960 to the present day could discuss these issues in two roundtable discussions which were filmed alongside face to camera statements about their practice. It was out of this moment where three remarkable things occurred – the first being a discussion about the

work and the work in the context of the body and history. For artists who made work in the 60s, 70s and 80s there was a greater importance to the body not just for visibility but also for historical marking in the sense that here were a group of artists who were making and creating history through these performative moments. The second was the importance of personal biographies as statements of intent which were an important development for artists of the 1990s and 21st century. It was here where the question of influences was important. The third and most important was the need to keep these discussions living through continued meetings which the artists have organised themselves what I would call keeping the archive of performance based art alive.

David A Bailey
Spring 2008

Documenting Live

Curator

David A Bailey

Project Director

Rajni Shah

Commissioned
and published by
the Live Art
Development
Agency

Contributing Artists

Barby Asante,
Malika Booker,
Sonia Boyce,
Ansuman Biswas,
George Chakravarthi,
Robin Deacon,
Yara El-Sherbini,
Harminder Singh Judge,
Keith Khan,
David Medalla,
Harold Offeh,
Emma Wolukau-
Wanambwa,
Ali Zaidi

Design

pkmb,
dvd produced
and edited by
Liza Cazzato-Vieyra
of artdocs

ISBN

978-0-9546040-5-9

www.thisisLiveArt.co.uk

Live Art
Development
Agency



