

# Third Havana Biennial 1989

A conversation between Shaheen Merali,  
Jasmine Chohan and Pitika Ntuli

2 September 2021



Shaheen In the British context, the term 'political Black' began circulating in the late 1970s and early 1980s, becoming central in the period known as the 'critical decade'.<sup>1</sup> When I use the term political Black art or Black art in this conversation, it differs from the current use of the term, which refers solely to artists of African descent. Black art by the mid-1980s mirrored globalisation as a movement in which artists of African and Asian descent in Britain created work which recontextualised places, peoples, histories and philosophies through the lens of the global majority.<sup>2</sup> Political Black art brought into the public sphere epistemic diversity, embodied knowledge, artists' experiences in British society, and critical perspectives on British and international history. While the legacy of this movement remains an enduring force, its impact on art historical discourses and artistic and curatorial practice remains under-studied.<sup>3</sup>

In this conversation with Dr Jasmine Chohan and artist Pitika Ntuli, I draw on my experience as an artist-curator who cofounded Panchayat Arts Resource in London in 1988.<sup>4</sup> Panchayat was a fifteen-year engagement that involved collecting, cataloguing and implementing an artistic and curatorial hub. We produced exhibitions, publications, workshops, conferences and research. Collectively, as artists and educators working across public, commercial and educational sectors, we engaged local, regional, as well as international communities. In the first working year of Panchayat, 1988–9, I negotiated for and curated the participation of five political Black artists from England for the Third Havana Biennial.<sup>5</sup> In May 1989, I participated in the Feria Internacional de Artesania in Havana. I met the founder and artistic director of the Havana Biennial, Lillian Llanes, and curators Nelson Herrera Ysla and Gerardo Mosquera at the Centro de Arte Contemporaneo Wifredo Lam. I learned that more than five curators had criss-crossed the Global South (including Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia) to bring a truly transnational artistic imagination to the Third Havana Biennial. I agreed to organise an informal group of Black and Asian artists living and working in London for the Biennial. Our presence at the Biennial was an opportune moment to understand our own anti-imperialism, positionality, alterity and difference.

Our conversation today will be moderated by Jasmine Chohan. Jasmine is an associate lecturer and a final year PhD student at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. She studied Cuban art at the San Alejandro School of Fine Arts in Havana and later completed a course in art history at the University of Havana in 2015. She worked in Cuba as an artistic producer for the Twelfth Havana Biennial [in 2015]. Jasmine is currently researching the history of the British diaspora artists, collaborating with groups including the 1989 Collective, Open Child Archive and The Brilliant Club's Scholars Programme to ensure dissemination of this pertinent history to the next generation. Welcome, Jasmine.

Jasmine My research and PhD focuses on the Havana Biennial and tracks the progress of the biennial from its inception in 1984 to the modern day. The most recent edition was in 2019. It is scheduled to take place again

at the end of this year (2021), but things are still up in the air. The Havana Biennial was the first time that so many countries from the Global South were coming together in one exhibition, in one spot, where they were allowed to show their artistic heritage as well as their contemporary states. In the traditional 'centre', Third World art, as it was termed back then, was shown as primitive. Any version of contemporality was tied directly to a Western aesthetic. This framed modernism as Western and any time an alternative context was suggested, it was rejected. The third edition took place in 1989. This was the year when the Tiananmen Square Massacre took place [in Beijing], the year that communist governments were falling across Eastern Europe and the internet was created. The biennial took place just nine days before the fall of the Berlin Wall, even though it was supposed to take place a year earlier. There were new political groupings and global economies. A growing collective consciousness was emerging.

Shaheen and I worked together while organising a conference at the Courtauld Institute as the 1989 Collective. We found that events that occurred thirty years ago seemed to be reoccurring today. It seemed that those histories, those exhibitions, those performances or meeting points were pertinent to our understanding of the world culturally. This history had been tucked under the carpet far too long. Until the second or third year of my PhD I had no idea about the diasporic art history that existed in this country. It was only through meeting Shaheen that this door opened for me. It was sad that it took so long for that to happen. The conference was our first attempt to try and rectify that and make sure that these histories were becoming part of a dominant discourse. We looked at the Havana Biennial and then *The Other Story* at the Hayward Gallery and *In Visible Colours: An International Women of Colour and Third World Women Film/Video Festival and Symposium* that took place in Vancouver [both in 1989]. We managed to invite Gerardo Mosquera, one of the founders of the Havana Biennial, to the conference and tie in his talk about the experiences of artists who participated in the event, as well as Keith Piper who participated in the biennial alongside Shaheen and Pitika Ntuli. It is the threads of that discussion that we are picking up on again today. We are looking at how the Third World was represented back then, how the Global South is being represented now, how those connections have developed, and why this biennial remains so important to the development of a discussion about art history across the Global South.

Shaheen      Absolutely. It is important to talk together and consider this as an event that shifted art history.

Jasmine      The Third Havana Biennial was divided into four nuclei. The event was conceptualised as a constellation as opposed to a solar system that revolved around one central exhibit. The Castillo de La Real Fuerza was one of the central places where exhibits took place. Two of the most important exhibits shown were by José Bedia and one was by Sebastião

Salgado. Bedia's work treads the fine line between traditional and contemporary. His aesthetic is not only rooted in Cuban or Latin American folkloric styles, but also tries to include elements of Western African and more widely Global South imagery (fig.1). The exhibition examined his experiences during the war in Angola, where he was conscripted to fight for freedom and independence. There was a definite melancholy around his work, stemming from his experience of being forced to go to war. Bedia managed to use his art to communicate with children in Angola. He designed toys for them. These toys were the relics of the Cuban presence in Angola that he wanted to leave behind. His exhibition referenced African visual language and aesthetics, which he reinterpreted to frame his personal experiences and roots. Sebastião Salgado, the Brazilian photographer, originally a trained economist, displayed a set of works of images from the Global South (fig.2). Focusing on worker communities and on poorer social classes, his work captured the fact that even though his narrative was vast and the countries he depicted so different, familiar experiences appeared again and again. The same symbols re-emerged consistently. This work presented a crossover at an event like a biennial where you come across artists you never would have otherwise come across.

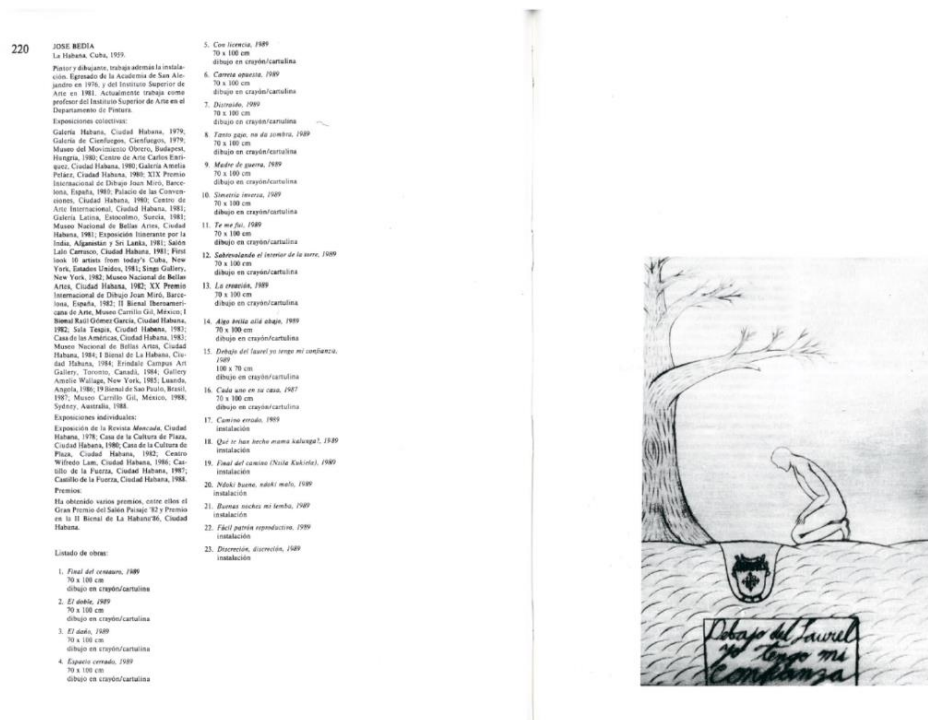


Fig.1  
Two pages from the catalogue *Tercera Bienal de la Habana '89*, dedicated to artist José Bedia, listing group exhibitions, individual exhibitions and artworks, alongside a reproduction of his work *Debajo del laurel yo tengo mi confianza* 1989  
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08159940  
© José Bedia  
© Centro Wifredo Lam

## SEBASTIAN SALGADO

Sebastião Salgado  
Ameiros, M.G., Brasil, 1984.

De 1964 hasta 1967 estudia Ciencia Económica en Brasil. Master de Economía en Sao Paulo y en Viena en 1968. Después trabaja el doctorado en la Universidad de París. Poco después se va a Europa. Su fotografía deviene un gesto de interés personal y por consecuencia su actividad principal. De 1971 a 1973 trabaja en Londres en la Organización Internacional del Café. Sus viajes en África le dan la oportunidad de realizar pequeños reportajes fotográficos. En un momento que se dedica al estudio de un formato y a la técnica fotográfica. En 1973 realiza de manera independiente un reportaje sobre la sequía en el Sahel y diversos trabajos en Francia, especialmente sobre los trabajadores inmigrantes. En 1974 trabaja en la Agencia Syra, realiza reportajes en Portugal, Angola y Mozambique. De 1975 a 1979 trabaja para la Agencia Gamma reportajes humanitarios en Portugal, Kenia, Angola, Mozambique, Rodesia, África del Sur, Marruecos, Siria, Mauritania, Islandia del Sur, y del Norte, Tailandia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Perú, Egipto, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay. Comienza en 1979 trabajo de carácter social en Portugal, Cuba, Guyana Francesa, Brasil, Irak, Bolivia, Etiopía, Camerún, Tailandia.

Exposiciones individuales:

L'Alfama des vieilles (Lisboa), París, Ginebra, Londres, Liverpool, Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Madras, 1977; Le 4<sup>e</sup> 100<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la coexistence, 1978; Condition de los trabajadores inmigrantes en Europa, 1979; Vietnam, 1984; Sahel, Famine en Afrique, 1986; Autres amériques, 1995; Gales, Hambourg et Frankfurt, RFA, 1987; Retrospectiva, Fomento Nacional de Cuba, La Habana, Cuba; Avance América et Sahel, L'Arteme en Afrique, Galerie National d'Art, Palais de la Joconde, Shanghai, 1985.

Premios:

Prix des livres de foto para Avance América, 1984; World Press Illustration, por la serie Etiopía, 1985.



Fig.2

Two pages from the catalogue *Tercera Bienal de la Habana '89*, dedicated to artist Sebastião Salgado featuring reproductions of two of his photographs taken between 1973 and 1989 [titles unknown]

Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08159940

© Sebastião Salgado

© Centro Wifredo Lam

Shaheen

Both these artists conveyed a very strong sense of immediacy – the body is central to their work. Around 1989, the art world was engaged in a large amount of abstraction, where there was a removal of information about the immediate environment, especially the body. In Salgado's work, there was an exploration of extreme forms of alienation through labour, but at the same time there was an incremental reflection and empathy. Is that something that drew you to these artists?

Jasmine

I identified with the artists on so many levels. That Salgado's background was not initially in photography, but in the study of economy – this kind of global underlying primary economy, or even a black market/parallel economy, that in Cuba or in India is so visible, but here in England, disappears. As children of colonialism, or as British Asians, this is something we have to reconcile with and reconnect to on so many levels throughout our lives, and to negotiate. That is one of the reasons I was so attracted to Cuba fundamentally. That is also why the Havana Biennial spoke to me intimately, as it was a discussion between two worlds – it was ongoing and has never really found the point of reconciliation.

Shaheen

There was a sense of it being beyond the commercial or transactional.

Jasmine

Fundamentally, the Havana Biennial was one of the first attempts at a 'Third World biennial', there were not many that came before it. Over time

that has definitely changed. The biennial is susceptible to its context. It was one of the first and the freshest from 1984 to 1991, and afterwards with the biennial boom it became a victim of its own framework. The commercialisation that was absent back then was felt very acutely in the more recent editions. A lot of galleries lobby the Havana Biennial to display their artists. It is becoming less about a communal initiative, camaraderie and internationalism. This image (fig.3) lists seventy-one countries that exhibited, but actually there were seventy-five. It shows the breadth of the project they were undertaking and the vastness of it, but also how utopian, how idealistic it was and how brilliantly it was done.

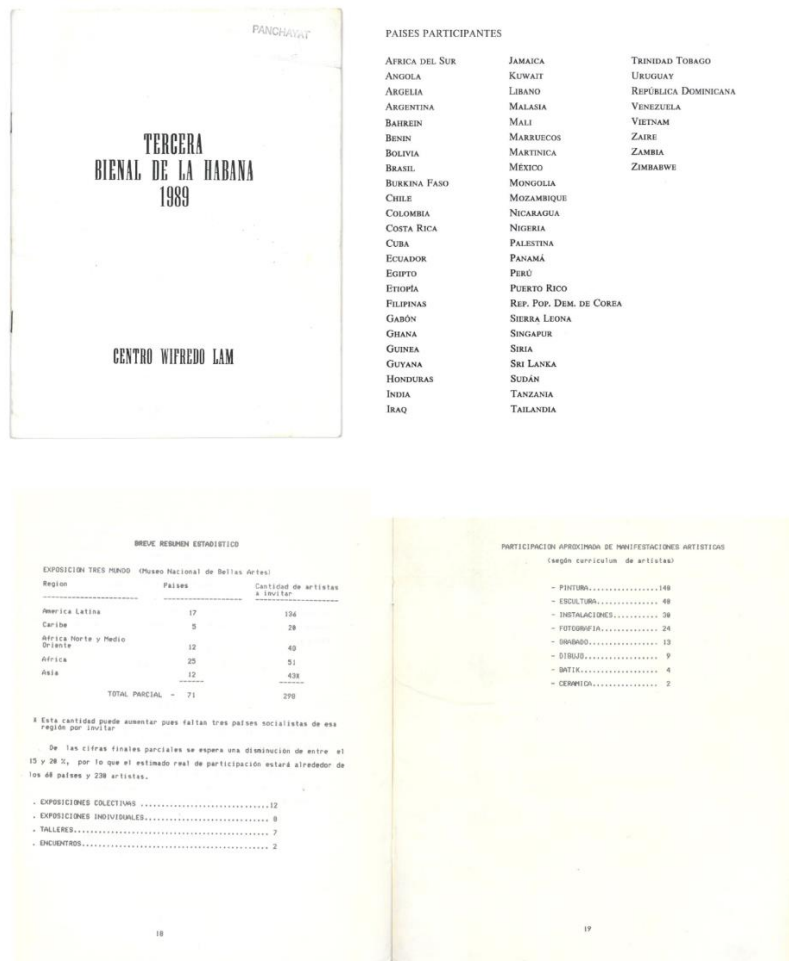


Fig.3  
Cover and selected pages from a report on the Third Havana Biennial, listing participating countries, published by the Centro Wifredo Lam  
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08159951  
© Centro Wifredo Lam

Shaheen

We were also missing in the catalogue, the participation by the five politically Black artists from Britain is not listed. We came to it really late, only six months prior to the opening. How much do you think these countries performed in an axis of protest while participating in this biennial?

Jasmine The biennial in its inception was linked to the non-aligned movement as well as Fidel Castro's incentives to thrust Cuba to the forefront of the Third World and onwards towards aiding its leadership. First and foremost, the biennial was a model of soft power. Curators including Gerardo Mosquera will argue that they were left to their own devices and they were free of political pressures for the first few editions, but you cannot escape the fact that the original purpose of the biennial was to exhibit non-aligned unity. Cuba was already having problems with the Soviet Union and Castro was friends with President Tito, President Nasser and Prime Minister Nehru, who helped form the non-aligned movement. So, for the countries represented in the biennial, there was most certainly a sense that participation itself was on some level an act of protest. This is also the reason some countries including China were not present, because at that point China and Cuba's versions of communism did not really align.

Shaheen In the list from the publication, the media used by the artists are highlighted – at the top, of course, are paintings, and towards the bottom you have batik and various other crafts or mediums. So, this idea of tradition and modernity was not expressed completely through the mediums artists used, but rather through the context, I presume.

Jasmine Well there was also the issue of transporting works. Paintings are far easier to transport than larger or more innovative formats. I think that it was again the biennial being susceptible to its context fundamentally, travel was not as widely accessible, and transport was more difficult. I think that could have been one of the main reasons why painting was the most widely used. I think, possibly, it was more down to the logistical issues than anything else.

I would now like to introduce our third speaker, Pitika Ntuli. Pitika was born in 1940 in Springs, South Africa and grew up in Witbank in Mpumalanga. While a teacher, artist and a critical thinker, he was living under the threat of apartheid in the 1960s and 1970s which forced him into exile to Swaziland where he was arrested and made a political prisoner until 1978, when international pressure forced his release to the UK. Thus, he embarked on a prodigious career in exile, completing a Masters of Fine Art in 1985 at the Pratt Institute in New York and an MBA at Brunel University London. He has lectured at various international and South African universities, including Central Saint Martin's College of Art, Middlesex University and Wits University. He is primarily a sculptor; his structures are created in any physical medium he can find – metal, wood, stone and bone – and can range from small to monumental works in granite that weigh in excess of nineteen tonnes. He has held numerous exhibitions, participated in a myriad of group exhibitions, and was awarded the Global Fine Art Awards people's choice 'You-2' in 2021. His contribution to the development of arts and culture in South Africa has been immense. He was awarded the Arts and Culture Trust Lifetime Achievement Award in 2013 and the city of Johannesburg named him a

living legend in 2012. On the back of that wonderful biography, I would like to welcome Pitika to the discussion.

Shaheen Welcome Pitika!

Pitika Thank you very much.

I arrived in the UK straight from a maximum security prison in Swaziland. I was forced to make sculpture out of the soap they gave me, out of the bread or toilet paper that I compressed to make chess pieces in order to keep my mind going. You were not allowed any running water. You were completely on your own. That is why when I arrived in Britain, poor as a cathedral mouse, I had to find the cheapest material I could use, which was a breeze block. I come from a Christian family where they say, 'A stone that is rejected by the builder becomes a cornerstone'. I wanted the breeze block to become the cornerstone of my creativity and my struggle in exile in order to capture what was happening in my country. During that time, I came into contact with many organisations and people. That is how I met Shaheen Merali, Panchayat, and so many others from diverse backgrounds coming together with their thinking, their cultures. We enriched each other. It is through Panchayat that I ended up lecturing at Camberwell School of Art on cultural representation. I built upon this work when I lectured at Middlesex University. The course was so successful that students agitated for a postgraduate course called 'Imaging the Other'.

I believe if you are an exile, you carry a double consciousness – a memory of who you are, what you want to be, and what you remain. You have to adjust your thinking, your feelings, your ideas, emotions, philosophies and spirits towards where you are. That is why in Britain, we decided to take over places such as the Third World Centre, the Africa Centre or the Commonwealth Institute, where we would put up our own exhibitions. We brought together creative persons from South America, El Salvador, Chile, Pakistan, gathering artists, dancers, poets and musicians, to get a sense of the multiplicity of interconnected ideas. One art form influencing another, a conversation of creativities taking place at a particular time.

These are some of the images that I had from the Third Havana Biennial (fig.4). I studied Fine Arts at the Pratt Institute, but at Brunel University I studied industrial sociology and comparative industrial relations. I was working as a trade unionist, that is why you see there a beaten-up copper plate, it is an example of miners working. In the bottom slide, one sees a woman with hair that flows like a river, that speaks to the power of women and the issues of feminism. These pieces we felt should be shared with the Cuban audiences.





Fig.4  
Details of *Untitled* 1988, by Pitika Ntuli, published in the brochure for  
the exhibition *At the Nerve End of Our Dream*, Greenwich Citizens  
Gallery, London, 1990  
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133768  
© Pitika Ntuli

I was also involved with the Africa Centre, London and organisations including African Dawn. We held workshops including music workshops, painting, sculpture – bringing everything under one roof. Finally, we convinced a local pub to let us do our poetry. They gave us a room upstairs. That room ended up being converted into what is called Apples and Snakes (in the London borough of Camden).<sup>6</sup> Apples and Snakes brought a range of activities together. The series of four poems in the accompanying image were a statement (fig.5). I was so worried about my country, South Africa. That is why I became a sculptor because it is so easy to censor words. They censored my words and they chucked me out of college, then I felt that I should move over into sculpture and hide my meanings in them. You cannot ever underestimate my country – they jail you for what they think you think.

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● LEMN SISSAY – fine young performance poet  
● AARON WILLIAMSON – 'unnerving' performance poet  
M.C. FERENC AZSMANN

**FRIDAY 11th OCTOBER**  
HANGING'S TOO GOOD FOR 'EM – celtic/country twist featuring – JULIE MCNAMARA  
● JACKIE KAY – fav. Black-Scottish poet – tonight launching her 1st full collection – 'The Adoption Papers'  
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NCHAYAT (5) INDEX ON CENSORSHIP # 16  
South Africa

**Pitika Ntuli**  
**Four poems**

*'You scrape the bottom of your soul, trying to find answers, and that keeps you occupied. Then you sit down and look at a brick and in your mind you scribble carve that brick. At the same time you write poems in your head, poems you can't admit to paper... These are the words of Pitika Ntuli, South African sculptor and poet, who left his native country in 1963 and now lives in London. He first moved to Swaziland, where he was arrested in April 1978, spending almost a year in prison before being released and emigrating to Britain. In an interview with Abroad/Raised in Index on Censorship 1/1989 and 5/1989, from which the above statement is taken, Pitika Ntuli gave a fascinating account of a creative artist's attempt to maintain his sanity while in solitary confinement by using whatever materials came to hand to produce his sculptures and write poetry. These days, living and working in freedom, Pitika has no difficulty commissioning his poems to paper - but, as the four we print below indicate, conditions in his country of origin ensure that prison imagery still permeates his work.'*

**In my country**  
In my country they jail you for what they think you think  
my uncle once said to me they'll implant a microchip in our minds to flash our thoughts and dreams onto a screen at John Vorster Square  
I was scared  
by day I guard my tongue  
by night  
my dreams

**Under the censor's guillotine**  
In my country  
Our war begins when we try to drink the cauldron of sunset  
with our bruised eyes  
hands tied to our backs  
tongues sliced at the root  
our words one with the wind  
raw material of sounds  
we hear echoes before  
thoughts are uttered  
carve answers before  
words strike the cauldron  
our poems coming  
in waves of whispers

**They always ask**  
In my country  
They always ask me why  
I have such a long tongue  
What with the system stretching it  
every day  
searching for words under it?  
They always ask me why we have  
such long ears  
what with us compelled to  
listen to nuances  
for survival  
They always ask why we smile  
even in grief  
What with our absolute conviction  
that we shall deliver ourselves  
from their clutches?

**Links in the chain**  
I painted my finger at the  
passing convoy of death,  
a movable metal armour  
they cut off my finger  
With my dripping blood  
I wrote a poem of hope  
painted the sunset of their death  
They chained me to the wall  
in my cell  
I put my lips on every link  
in the chain  
Whispered my dreams  
Every link a poem... ■

Fig.5  
Left: Leaflet for poetry and performance events at Apples & Snakes, 1992  
Right: Photocopy of four poems by Pitika Ntuli, published in *Index on Censorship* (1986)  
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133768  
© Pitika Ntuli

My uncle once said they would invent a microchip and plant your thoughts onto John Vorster Square, the police station.<sup>7</sup> By day I got my tongue, by night I got my dreams. They will just ask you why I have such a long tongue, what with the South African government stressing it every day, looking for words under it. To hide my words, I had to work with images. As Shaheen already mentioned, recently I have made close to fifteen bigger-than-life-size monuments with Mandela and the Rainbow children as well as Winnie Mandela. We are not interested in monuments of individuals, but in expressing a collective ethos. This takes us back to some of the things one picked up when in Cuba. Seeing the communities making their own contribution under the tree, these collective rituals echoed what happened in the tribal villages where I come from.

Shaheen Pitika, I was going to ask about the trees you refer to – are they the trees where they would hang bottles from the branches?

Pitika Yes.

Shaheen They had sculptural presence, like a community artwork. The light would shine through, and the trees would become a place where people would meet and talk. It was very similar to what happens in Dar es Salaam or even in Kolkata where people meet in a certain place to talk, talk politics.

- Pitika It was very interesting! There were some trees when we went there, with people who were into voodoo, people who were into Candomblé or Santería and some type of African diasporic religion or belief system. All of them coexisted with communism. Coexisting was another thing that made Cuba more of a fascinating place to be in.
- Shaheen In 1989 the streets of Havana expressed a flow of consensus. The streets had their own histories and a way of occupying different types of imagery, stories and ideas. Havana was alluring in the way the communities expressed forms of unity with the artists from the UK. It is strange you talk about coexistence; we were coexisting with Thatcherite ideals in Britain at that time.
- Pitika I remember coming out of the hotel one morning of the festival, and right up the street there was a little traffic circle. There was this old Black guy drawing with chalk near the roundabout, I had a sense the ritual was a form of worship – similar to the Yoruba way to reach their God. I was captivated by the performance on the road, without the fear of police arresting him. And me, being so aware that police arrest you for what they think you think, I was absolutely, you know, captivated.
- Jasmine I think that is interesting that you picked up about the state of Blackness in the biennial and within the biennial; how, despite Cuba having a large Black population, it is often underrepresented in public institutions. The actual hierarchies within the art institutions and the curatorial staff still remain quite white and their opinions, their critiques are the ones that inevitably still define Cuban art and Cuban aesthetics. That also goes all the way through to the governance of Cuba, you know, their presidents, leaders; there is an overwhelmingly white presence there too, even though there are vast communities of Santería worshippers and Yoruba worshippers. And I just wanted to ask what your experiences of that curatorial structure was like.
- Pitika It was very, very interesting because I remember that we even visited some other artists like Manuel Mendive – Mendive was a spiritual person. He was a performer and painter. He brought all of these strengths together, which I found very fascinating. He informs my practice even now. Coming from an African aesthetic and African belief we believe that a group of trees break the angry wind, but a tree that towers above the rest is broken by the wind. I did not want to break my hands and body and my neck, by appearing alone anywhere after visiting Cuba. I had to be sheltered by the likes of Mendive so that we all just went on merrily, merrily, merrily, happily into the spiritual world.
- Shaheen I think the five of us were practicing our form of liberation politics in Britain, whichever way we could. Sometimes, our artworks were mere representations of that ideal. As Pitika said, even the medium we chose to practice differed from the norm. Collage in the case of Al-An deSouza,<sup>8</sup>

Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce, or batik in my case. Pitika especially used breeze blocks and materials rescued from the scrapyards for his sculptures.



Fig.6  
Pitika Ntuli  
*Exhausted Warrior* 1989  
Slide held in the Panchayat Collection  
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133768  
© Pitika Ntuli

Pitika Yes, yes. Pipes and dustbin lids (fig.6).

Shaheen We were repurposing what we knew to create meaning, not only in Britain but outside of it. In that recuperation we were organising our struggle against racism, our political understanding of sexual differences, longings in exile, postcoloniality, disability and feminism. Curating these works for the Havana Biennial was a gift for Cuba, but it was also an admittance that Cuba itself was a gift in our lives. We were situated next to people who have been fighting for decades against an embargo. We were temporarily embedded amongst people who were involved in a collective desire for change.

In the 1980s, it was necessary to participate with models outside of Britain, where we were trapped through colonial transmissions, hidden within Britain's vistas. We were not part of organisations or excelling in our visibility. 1989 was important because it was an attempt to make visible what had been forcefully set aside, blighted by institutions, until finally there was the *Other Story* exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London. The first time a major central space provided a survey exhibition of political Black artists in their country. I think it is important to remember that we were always searching in different cultural landscapes. Myself, Pitika, Sonia, Keith, Al-An – we are absolutely different beings who came out of our diasporas and their particular histories in Britain.

- Pitika We were working with different experiences and in different modes but were joined by our Third Worldism.
- Jasmine Shaheen, would you now like to discuss your work and the three remaining political Black artists at the Third Havana Biennial in 1989?
- Shaheen I will introduce each artist by reading a short description of their trajectory and work to make sense of their practice. Keith Piper's biography is very symbolic of the paths that many political Black artists took. These are his own words:

Keith Piper is a Black British artist, curator, researcher and academic. In the early 1980s, Piper was a founder member of the Blk Art Group, an association of young artists of African Caribbean descent, based in the West Midlands. During this period, he established a research driven approach to art practice, prioritising thematic exploration over an attachment to any particular media. His work has ranged from painting, through photography and installation to a use of digital media, video and computer-based interactivity. Piper currently teaches Fine Art at Middlesex University, London.<sup>9</sup>

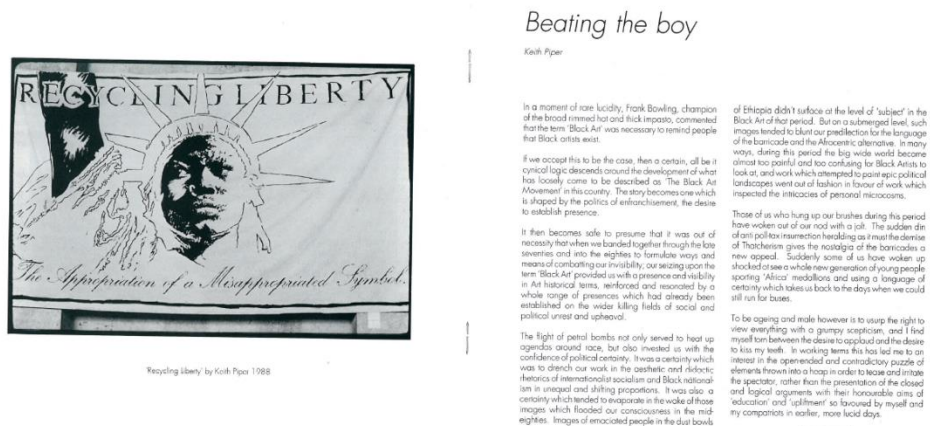


Fig.7  
Two pages from the exhibition catalogue *Distinguishing Marks* (1990), featuring a reproduction of Keith Piper's *Recycling Liberty* 1988  
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08146052  
© Keith Piper

*Recycling Liberty* 1988 (fig.7) is a mural-sized painting on cotton, with a set of inter-texts and subtexts. As with all of Piper's work, it assails through the use of strong, critical vocabulary – in this case, the Statue of Liberty. People enjoyed seeing this work in Havana – not only because of the scale, but in relation to Cuba's anti-Americanism which you find in multiple murals. *Recycling Liberty* was an accompaniment to those sets of images which are part and parcel of Cuban topography. The fact that it could be carried literally inside a bag connected it to images made for

protests. Piper explores the silence around slavery in North American monuments, but also in Cuba. All the works were selected because they were dealing with spectral history; all these artists were dealing with their own ghosts through a cross-genre recasting of the empire.

Jasmine How did people react to seeing this kind of imagery in Havana?

Shaheen Well, I think it goes with issues of Black political struggle, which were part of the mediation and association of the group called the Blk Art Group, which was to work and create solutions necessary to fulfil their aims as Black people.<sup>10</sup> And I think it was warmly received. Our presence as a group of people of African and Asian descent signified the collective endeavour to explore what seems to be erased, tempered or silenced. Westerners create that division spoken through the borders of hatred. The artwork also assailed another division by opposing the binary between political and aesthetic work.

Pitika It is easy to understand that because our civilisation has been underpinned by the Newtonian physics of binary opposites, as opposed to the quantum mechanics of interconnectivity. But we should remember the role played by Black artists in the 1980s. Some of us played a role in Greater London Arts (GLA), championing local government initiatives including the production of *Artrage* and *Bazaar* magazines.

Shaheen Around us at that time was also the enormous scale of violence on Black bodies. It was everywhere, not only in apartheid South Africa. In 1983 the poet Michael Smith was stoned to death in Jamaica, dying of head injuries outside the Jamaican Labour Party headquarters.<sup>11</sup> He was a fantastic, important poet for all of us, and to go in this manner! He was an authentic voice of dub poetry. It was an unrivalled shame that that happened.

Pitika Ultimately, my poetry in the 1980s was to do with the many massacres in South Africa. Massacres in Bhisho city, massacres in kwaMakhutha township. My reaction led to a point that in 1990 I could not even bury my own father, because the South African government, even when I had a passport, offloaded us, me and my two sons, from the plane. Because of the poem where I stated:

I broke diplomatic relations with God and decided to pray to our Prime Minister P. W. Botha. When I said, P. W. Botha is my shepherd. I am in want. He maketh me to lie down in street corner, city steps and my soul for apartheid sake. Yet when I walk through the valley of the shadows of inflation, I anticipate no recovery for he is against me. He prepareth a reduction in my salary, he increases my V.A.T., my expenses runneth over. Surely unemployment shall follow him all the days of his administration and I shall carry my AK-47 forever and ever. And uprisings, Ratata Ratata!

Shaheen Ratata...

Pitika My poetry cost me the denial of my presence in my own father's funeral. But nonetheless here we are.

Jasmine Here we are indeed.

Shaheen Al-An deSouza's work *Skinned I* (fig.8) was another hard-hitting conceptual work. A staggering examination, *Skinned I*, made in 1989, was about the flow of blood and oxygen slowly surrounding the charred remains of the body and the world. It is very difficult to frame and transform the world only through imagery, yet a number of artists used the best of their abilities and imagination to try to do that at the time when there were multiple hostilities and challenges including apartheid, HIV and Aids. There was a tendency, especially within human rights activism, to bring different struggles together in coalition. A large amount of work that Al-An produced allowed the space for multiple trajectories including a place for desire, relationality and space to think about the causalities that emerged through struggle. Pitika, do you remember these works?

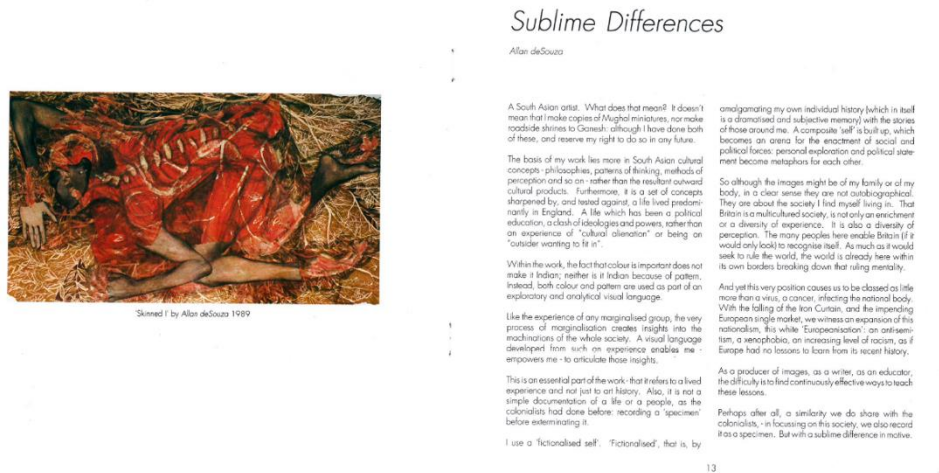


Fig.8  
Two pages from the exhibition catalogue *Distinguishing Marks* (1990), featuring a reproduction of *Skinned I* 1989 by Al-An deSouza (formerly Allan deSouza) and an excerpt of their essay 'Sublime Differences' Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08146052 © Al-An deSouza

Pitika They were very visceral and intense. Every line communicates. Even the back of the leg, you see triangles and teardrops. Stuff I don't even think he was aware of.

Shaheen Absolutely. Each artist in the catalogue that we produced for the *Distinguishing Marks* exhibition (fig.9) had an artist statement or a piece

of writing or poem or whatever they wanted to include. The text led the image or vice versa.

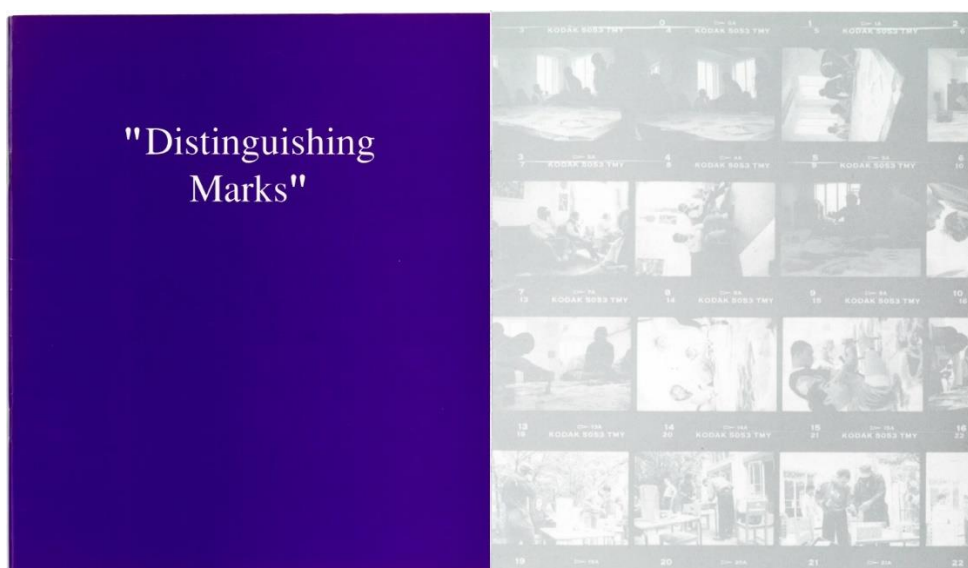


Fig.9  
Cover and verso of *Distinguishing Marks* exhibition catalogue (1990), compiled by Shaheen Merali, designed by Preethi Manuel  
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08146052  
© Preethi Manuel

If we go onto the next artist, Sonia Boyce, she was pivotal for the decade. She refused to shy away from what was regarded as taboo. Within the works were narratives about 'black female adolescence, sexuality, familial life and domesticity, more generally'.<sup>12</sup> What is not represented here nor in the Havana Biennial was an explicit reminder of the unimaginable or uncomfortable truth. This speaking to the truth was the focus in later work by Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas, and became formalised as part of the British art discourse, while Sonia Boyce's work remained important yet paradoxically liminal to the British discourse. This is addressed in the book *British Black Art: Debates on Western Art History* by Sophie Orlando, which includes a chapter called 'Sonia Boyce vs. Sarah Lucas'.<sup>13</sup> She quotes Boyce:

I was going to many feminist art conferences, workshops, and discussions, there was a general discontent with the idea of art practice from Greenbergian thoughts. America was at the centre of the debate while earlier forms of modernism, European modernism still had some currency.<sup>14</sup>

I think it is both brave and important of Orlando to question the historicity of image making. It is imperative when we engage with feminist art history to understand the position of Black women and their intellectual acuity and how it had remained secondary. To an extent the presentism of North American Black art has shifted the important ground which we had explored, mobilised in the brief history of political Black art. Now it is important for us to be aware of the creeping essentialism that places



the North American discussion around race, modernity and advocacy at the forefront. As you suggested, Jasmine, modernity was and remains a westernised fiction, or was Western, and that implies the American Black struggle remains against westernism and the parallel political Black British struggle against the British colonial logic.

Jasmine It suggested that any use of modernism was just borrowing from the Western, that they themselves lacked authenticity – that would be my reading of that borrowing of modernism.

Shaheen Yes, exactly. The systemic lies pre-existing in British art history by silencing exploration of its own systemic and colonial brutality, by distancing from work by political Black artists who started to memorialise and contextualise their knowledge and trauma – their debates remained as footnotes in the British canon.

Jasmine I think that could actually lead quite nicely into some of your work and the framing of the medium that you used, as well as to define these conversations.

Shaheen When I was trying to make work in the late 1980s, I turned automatically to Sivanandan. A. Sivanandan, born in Sri Lanka, living in London, was a British-Sri Lankan novelist and activist and played a key role for my activism, writing and understanding. He was the Emeritus Director of the Institute of Race Relations in the early 1980s. In the following lines I found a number of particular ways that my works attempted to raise consciousness about 'conditions' that chronicle 'minority arts' as political Black art, which was often referred to as the psychological catacomb of relationships that exists between the white communities and the 'history of a community of migrants who came to work in Britain, who struggled to integrate despite the racism they faced, particularly around issues of interracial mixing and housing and who even at this early stage were beginning to organise and politicise themselves.'<sup>15</sup>

It remains important to think through the sociological, economic and migratory culture of immigrations organising under exploitative and undesirable circumstances – these were not just artists organising, these were immigrant workers organising under the banner of Black art, as part of a formation of Black alliance in Britain after the 1965 Race Relations Act. These two batiks on cotton (fig.10) were really made at the time in 1987, 1988 where I was thinking about South Africa and the environmental racism in South Africa as well as the corporate tactics used against workers in the Indian subcontinent. I used the craft tradition of batik. I was interested in challenging the conceptual link that creates images as data. I was also interested in pulling away from a specific way the 'Third World' was being introduced by specific art methods that adopted pseudo-scientific conventions, so both the image and the technique could assemble artistic and political realities from the Indian

subcontinent, Indonesia, and South Africa – realities that were caught in a hierarchy of grief.



Fig.10  
Shaheen Merali  
*Untitled [South Africa – Environmental Racism] 1987–88 and Unilever Strike 1987–88*  
Batik on untreated cotton  
Slides held in the Panchayat Collection  
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133775  
© Shaheen Merali

In this way the curation of works by Pitika, Keith and myself provided overlapping layers of artists managing to give shape to the diaspora working with 'traditional memories'. Pitika's beaten copper panels, Piper's drawing on a large portable cotton sheet and my batiks were traditional renderings which had to be interpreted as part of the discourse of global art history. My subjects for these batiks since 1987, when I had a solo exhibition at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica, were deliberately clawed back from journalism, images that a journalist or documentary photographer would deploy for an article or news story, not necessarily stock images, but world cultures in protest or imagined scenes of resistance.

Corporate reality and impoverishment is nothing new. It is as old as colonialism. Images of the modern commonwealth are the remains that are treated suspiciously in the narratives of its museums and galleries. These fault lines, after 347 years of British rule, are requested to relive their duties in vitrines where they have been glared at by millions of tourists who have no clue how to 'deal with material ethnography in the west ... each context makes us judge context differently'.<sup>16</sup> In the image on the left (fig.10), a young child is abandoned in the chaos of apartheid brutality, which often included retaliation by burning tyres. The image on the right portrays a strike by security workers that took place outside the Unilever Headquarters (Hindustan Unilever Limited) in India, a company that has been in trouble over workers' pay, poisoning and more recently employment rights. Both images' provenances are linked to historical and modern violence 'as a continuum, ranging from small-scale, local actions to full-blown war'.<sup>17</sup> To a certain extent, poetics and politics remain at a valuable distance in Western standardisation.

In many ways most objects from the Third World have been under control and narrowly defined, a trope that remains important to the maintenance of the hegemony of Western modernity. Making these batiks was a refusal of a prescribed visual path that catalogues the contemporary world in a contrasting way as its other. When one thinks about a piece of textile, it is always in relation to a state or a region rather than to a city or movement. So, challenging the colonial grid of cataloguing and challenging the history of aesthetics was a goal embedded in these works as much as they were about the poetics of coalition and the relation to violence.

Jasmine Pitika, what is your take on this medium and how it is communicated across different cultures?

Pitika You know, these works that I was just looking at, I said to myself, 'Are you referring to my country?' I was just seeing all this red because at the time when he was doing these things there were all of these massacres. What was so particularly important for me with Panchayat is that we came from such different places. Shaheen and I are both African, he is an East African, I am a South African, and here we are holding the continent to our ideas. I find this responsibility to the African continent very interesting and absolutely captivating. We all were interested in issues of race.

I want to digress and take us just a little back to our earlier conversation. Why were we surprised to find what we found in Cuba? I want to take us back to Gatwick Airport when we got onto an Aeroflot plane; an old plane that looked like a misused room. And there was a group of women, Cuban women who looked like they were running a workshop on hairstyles and knitting. A Cuban guy came to us, who did not speak English, and I said: 'They have a workshop, why can't we have a workshop, ourselves?' The flight attendant said, 'On what?' I answered, 'We are poets!' Then this guy said, 'We can do a workshop on poetry'. There was a Russian there as well who did not speak English. So we started our workshop. 'Vladimir Mayakovsky!'<sup>18</sup> He said, 'Mayakovsky', you know, 'Pushkin!' Meanwhile the plane took off without warning, no seat belts or anything, we were blessed with a different sensibility. And when we arrived at the José Martí Airport, I presented my passport and the young man disappeared with my passport. When he came back he had put in another face on my passport, of a younger person. I said, 'What is this? This is not my passport.' He said, 'Cuba is a very beautiful country, when you come here it improves how you look'. And then removed the picture and handed over the passport and I knew that I am going to be partly at home here because it just reminds me of something that could only happen in South Africa.

Shaheen We had a wonderful time in Cuba, all of us who went there. The theatre director Peter Brook calls this an invisible golden chain that brings one together when you are close as an actor and an audience.<sup>19</sup> And we were very close as artists to our audience, and to the people from other

countries. We were all together in this particular event and we were welcomed not as artists, but as people who were coming to a planned event. The imaginary freedom that it expressed was also in the chaos. This relationship to freedom expressed between us was fantastic and outside of the commodification of an art fair or a biennial in the West. It did not feel like we were going there only for art, as we had so many discussions and managed to discover so much through each other's perspectives; even if there was a great deal of difference in how we organised, how we (automatically) knew to be convivial to each other. It felt like we were joining a library. That is what it felt like. Furthermore, there were hundreds of amazing works that we all talked about. I talked to the art historian from India, Geeta Kapur, for about an hour over a couple of floor and wall-based works by José Bedia. We had completely different readings of his work, but it took Cuba to bring us together around certain ideas.

Pitika I remember I was given a space in the Centro Wifredo Lam where we ran workshops. I remember young people saying, 'We want you to talk to us about voodoo'. I laughed at them. I said, 'Voodoo! Where? Where?' I mean, I was a South African, you know, Christian but African. For me voodoo was Hollywood voodoo. I had to begin making the connections. They repeated, 'You were talking to us about the unity of spirit and all of these elements, from what you were saying we were catching voodoo. Are you now coming to tell us that voodoo is bad? Voodoo is a religion.' I had to go all the way to Cuba to apologise to them, but they were happy that I had led something very well. When you look at what happened in Cuba, my exhibition, *Return to the Source*, examined exactly that – a return to the nature of art.<sup>20</sup> How does it actually fit within the community, within a culture, within belief systems? Ben Okri came and said to me, 'Pitika you are a sculptor and I know you do it, but I understand sculpture far better than you'. I said to him, 'Just stick to your works and leave me alone'. And he kept repeating the same line. After returning from Cuba and listening to what was happening, examining the diversity of the works, one day, when I was back in South Africa I got Ben Okri's book *Starbook* (published in 2008) and read a chapter about an artists' village.<sup>21</sup> I thought, 'There are indirect ways of knowing and learning'. Ultimately Panchayat, with all our five fingers – I would go one way, my way, Al-An deSouza would go another, someone would go another way. And when we come together and we meet, even as individuals, we are not even aware how much we have been shaping each other into focus, in the spirit, the discourse.

Shaheen Absolutely true.

Jasmine This slide (fig.11) features a letter from Lillian Llanes, the Artistic Director of the Havana Biennial in 1989, to the group of artists who participated from Britain. It was a little bit of a contentious decision at the time if you have read the writings of Coco Fusco, that it was the British artists that were invited and the invitation was not extended to, say, the Cuban-

Americans or, well, the diaspora just to the north of the island.<sup>22</sup> However, I also know from your stories that it was not so much the invitation that was extended, as opposed to the crossing of paths and then it happened in this way. And it did lead to the fourth edition having a specific section which was called 'Diasporas of Western Countries'.

Shaheen Absolutely.

Jasmine So, it was a starting point for a fundamental shift within the Havana Biennial. And as you were both saying, the Havana Biennial being a connection point and a meeting point, where you discover so many similarities across those differences, actually speaks to a lot of Stuart Hall's texts as well about diasporic communities.<sup>23</sup> I think that this experience was fundamental in the way that the biennial eventually developed a new role in diaspora identities, particularly. This next section is based on *Distinguishing Marks*, the catalogue, the words, the event that came out of the biennial where you and Panchayat restaged the event in different spheres of influence.

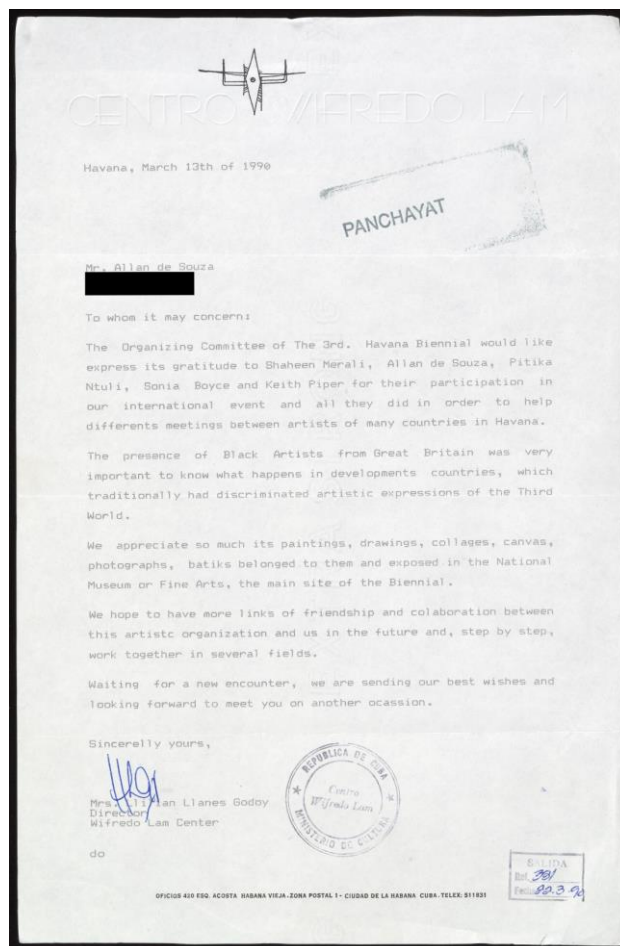


Fig. 11  
Letter of gratitude from Lilian Llanes Godoy, Director of the Centro Wifredo Lam and Artistic Director of the Third Havana Biennial, to artist Al-An deSouza (formerly Allan deSouza), 13 March 1990  
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133655

Shaheen

Absolutely, the biennial was a protection against alienation in Europe. It is really important what happens after Cuba or just before Cuba. My initial visit was in May 1989 and that's where these negotiations with Lillian Llanes, Nelson Herrera Ysla and Gerardo Mosquera began which led to the participation of five political Black artists from Britain at the Third Havana Biennial. In the following year, 1990, I helped organise two exhibitions that were with the same five artists but with different sets of works. *Distinguishing Marks* was held at the Bloomsbury Gallery at the Institute of Education, University of London (fig.12). The five artists were brought back together, to consider the relationship between Havana and London. The exhibition was held in the borough of Camden where a large amount of Bangladeshi people lived and worked, meaning we had a chance to select a different set of works, with similar concerns, similar uses of media and materiality by each artist.



Fig.12  
Installation shots of *Distinguishing Marks* exhibition held at the Bloomsbury Galleries,  
Institute of Education, University of London, 22 May–9 June 1990  
Slides held in the Panchayat Collection  
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library

It was important to relate the experiments with media, context and materiality, to take the opportunity and time to reframe and activate further narratives about labour, work that defines class, caste and coloniality, which we had generously considered at the Havana Biennial.

At this point in time, I would suggest we had reached a notion of political Black which was about an independent culture, coexisting or working, collaborating in coalition with emerging institutions concerned with EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion), not necessarily only through art institutions. We found ourselves working with universities and shaping policies through workshops. The pitfall of such an arrangement was that mainstream galleries or museums, especially in London, continued to ignore the consistency of the arguments. We remained unframed in their programmes, unrepresented in the collections or critically vacant in writing, although our presence increased in the regional spaces which had a history and built a familiarity with the impact of education for the arts. This sense of independent culture working in collaboration with certain institutions was important to build and strengthen the coalition into a network.

The compiled image of the five artists, photographed by Robert Taylor (fig.13), remains a document of our tenacity, the reflective return of the gaze and one that produces a relationship to be able to finally to talk back. A different epistemic privilege. There were several experiments such as Robert's eloquent moment of wanting to represent us as independent of western trace, independent of a nationalism or fashion or British art per se. In the 1990s we felt we had risen in the midst of an immense proximity to erasure. How would you put it Pitika?



Fig.13  
 Portraits by Robert Taylor of artists (from left to right) Sonia Boyce, Keith Piper, Pitika Ntuli, Shaheen Merali and Al-An deSouza, published in the *Distinguishing Marks* exhibition catalogue (1990)  
 Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08146052  
 © Robert Taylor

Pitika When we first received these, we were phoning each other saying, 'What has Robert Taylor done with us?!' Looking at them again, I am reminded of the power of his gaze that forced us to gaze back at him. In between us and him there was absolutely nothing but truth.

Shaheen There is a very strong sense of beauty and sensuality in this image.

Jasmine This links to the *Siting Resistance* poster (fig.14).

Shaheen Second in a series of exhibitions that followed the Havana Biennial, *Siting Resistance* was curated by Ron Benner and assisted by Jamelie Hassan in London, Ontario, Canada. This iteration was particularly heavy – this is where most of the works from Cuba went. The works were shown at the Embassy Cultural House (ECH), London, Ontario between June and July 1990. The exhibitions were in response to research by Professor Phillippe Rushton, who was a faculty member in the Department of Psychology at the University of Western Ontario.

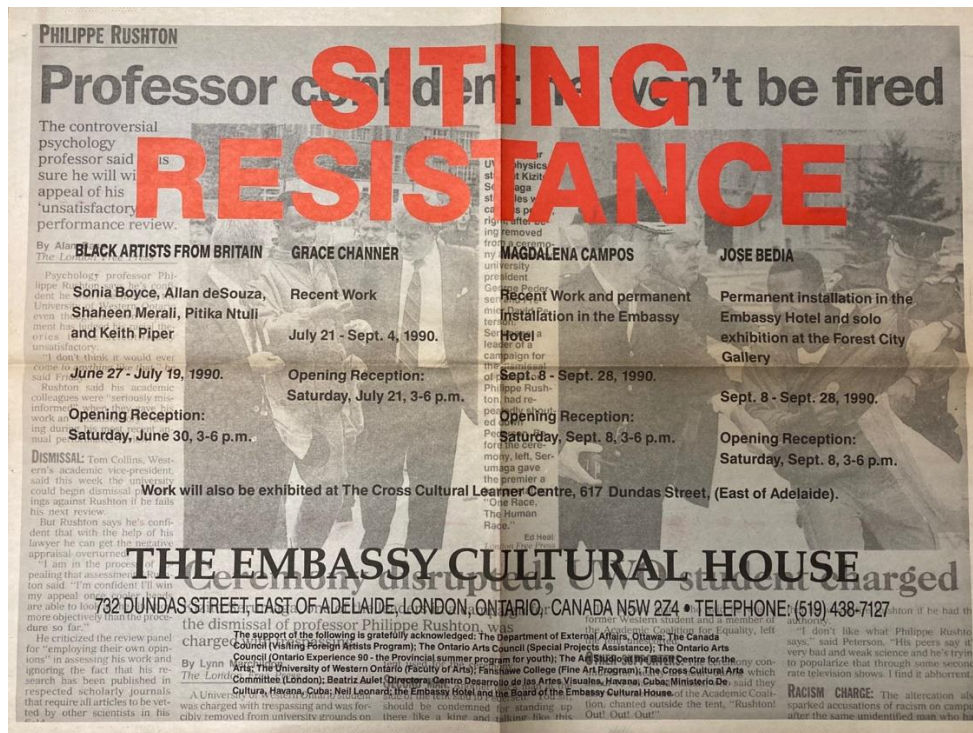


Fig.14  
 Poster for *Siting Resistance*, exhibition programme held at the Embassy Cultural House, London, Ontario, 1990  
 Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133775  
 © Embassy Cultural House

The ECH series *Siting Resistance* was organised by Ron Benner and assisted by Jamelie Hassan in the summer of 1990. In the background is an image of the front page of the *London Free Press* regarding the Rushton controversy. The sequence of two photos in the background is revealing and shows the then premier, David Peterson, having a friendly exchange with a student protestor at Western University campus and the need to fire the psychology professor Rushton for his racist research. In the first photo the Black male protestor approaches the premier and in the second it shows the same protestor being manhandled by the premier's bodyguards and police. An apology from the President of Western's University for the lack of action on Rushton at that time came thirty years later.<sup>24</sup> The work by the five political Black artists from Britain was curated alongside José Bedia and Magdalena Campos from Cuba. Following the Havana Biennial, the exhibition mirrored the place of resistance both as an image and a methodology to combat the alienation that racism creates and causes.

Jasmine This connected the artists running various workshops and developing community skill groups and arts activities as well, which I hope Pitika can explain a little bit more. After returning from Cuba, education came to the forefront through connecting to local communities and working with people from different backgrounds, some with learning difficulties (fig.15).





Fig.15  
Photograph by Samena Rana of Pitika Ntuli leading a workshop at Isledon Training Centre, London, as part of the *Distinguishing Marks* education programme, 1990  
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133768

Pitika

Because breeze blocks were very easy, I used breeze blocks to help people realise sculptural possibilities. There was one participant who I gave a breeze block to, who cut the breeze block into small pieces and made a pipe-like arrangement. Initially, I thought this person did not want to be there. Then I realised he was building a pyramid with pieces of breeze blocks. The guy was doing some conceptual art, and I was not even aware of it because I had already judged him. So, the workshop and the participants were extending our field of experience, we were gaining knowledge about things that we knew so little about. When Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was doing his own plays in London, we would go uptown and many other places to run workshops in the communities. When the plays opened at Africa Centre, they were overbooked, because the people who were experiencing them in workshops (rehearsals) were coming to see the final production. Education which includes workshops allows one to do things differently.

Shaheen

I completely agree. One got to realise that a lot of people were humiliated for who they were in the hierarchy of most societies. Someone with learning difficulties often has a long history of humiliation and 'people of colour' were humiliated for twenty, thirty years through daily abuse. The art field in a sense is a place of naivety thinking that, you know, 'let's have

a pseudo discourse about this and that', without working with anybody who has come from a place where humiliation is in constant production and to understand how their identity has been constructed.

Pitika

When I was working with people with learning difficulties, I asked: 'What does this mean to you, doing what I am asking you to do?' He said, 'You gave me this breeze block and I am making a figure out of this block. And each time I chopped something off from this block, it is something that I do not like about myself, so that what remains in there is something that is me, something that I love about myself.' I had to go back home to start beginning to redefine what art exactly means.

Shaheen

An earlier initiative between Havana and London was a series of events including exhibitions called 'Semana Cubana', held throughout London (fig.16). *Revolution Eyes* was an exhibition I curated and held at the 198 Gallery, Brixton, in October 1989 (opening a few days before the Third Havana Biennial).<sup>25</sup>



Fig.16  
 Left: Flyer for *Santos Y Sonos*, 23 October 1989  
 Centre: Exhibition catalogue for *Revolution Eyes* (1989), cover image by Geraldine Walsh  
 Right: Press release for *Revolution Eyes* (1989), curated by Shaheen Merali  
 Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133775

Having visited Havana earlier in May 1989 and left with the impression that the forthcoming biennial was a vital platform, I had met the original members of El Taller Experimental Gráfica de la Habana, Ana Rosa Gutiérrez and José Contino. Together with the younger Maria Consuelo Mendoza Fortun, they instigated and played a key role in exploring and assisting in the making of the exhibition. Gutiérrez and Contino had been the force behind the setting up of El Taller Experimental Gráfica de la Habana (the workshop facility) in 1962 in the Plaza de la Catedral, Havana. The ethos of the workshop had always remained to provide an active resource for the production of the Cuban lithographic and etching tradition, which had been popular in the nineteenth century, but was in

decline. The presence of foreign artists in the 1920s had assisted in the re-evaluation of Cuban art beyond its indigenous tradition. One of the results had been a resurgence in printmaking.

This workshop, El Taller Experimental Gráfica de la Habana, in many ways was a site and a chronicle of Havana and Habaneros dealing with Blackness, or some parts of its African heritage. This is one of the reasons I thought it was important to bring some of these prints and these artists' works over to Britain. While we talk about Cuba as a multi-racialised place, the material that comes out from Cuba is not multi-racial – a revolutionary image, even tricontinental, but not necessarily a Black mirror. When I met artists Ana Rosa Gutiérrez and Maria Consuelo Mendoza, these intergenerational practitioners who had operated in Cuba for the last twenty, thirty or forty, fifty years (respectively), they had seen how Havana, Cuba had developed in relationship to its fortunes, and a lot of that information was in their imagery.

The continuity of El Taller Experimental Gráfica de la Habana and their struggle was similar to our struggle. It was about the artist embedded into the community, not as an individual artist but with other artists as a community. Returning to what Pitika suggested, that everybody has the artist streak within them. It is not about employing the tools, but allowing them to be communal to create a space for many others to make artwork. Black Cuban artists such as Choco, born in 1949, Maria Consuelo Mendoza, born in 1963, and Ana Rosa Gutiérrez Martínez, born in 1925, have been shown in many places, but unfortunately not Britain. Choco has shown his work in India, Germany and Japan, but never in Britain or in other parts of Europe.

It was important to broaden our understanding of Cuban art and artists. I understood this from my two research visits in Havana. What I did not find in public sculpture, I found in these artists' works. There were relationships to African religions and African traditions that Pitika elaborated on in the instance of the workshops. The participants talked about sensibilities, about race in their relationship to knowledge, not privilege. I was really interested in Cuban initiatives, in publications and design, after visiting the Tri-Continental offices and how the publication initiated a very specific graphic design style, ultimately inspiring Cuban design and aesthetics. The publications and posters were important and relative to the notion of the Southern World majority as the Tri-Continental. I was interested as a curator to bring back to Britain something different from Cuba, its own relationship to and interpretation of its Black citizens, and to share from the only source I encountered, El Taller Experimental Gráfica de la Habana.

Jasmine

With the use of Afro-Cuban symbols in artwork, I do not think it is necessary that one is unfamiliar with them. If you look at one of the biggest names in Cuban art, Wifredo Lam, his work became famous for his use of imagery from Santería and his connection to the Santeros

despite not being a Santero himself – and his relationships with Lydia Cabrera and Alejo Carpentier who were focusing on Afro-Cuban anthropology. That was one of the focuses of Cuban modernism back in the very early 1900s, through artists like Eduardo Abela and [Jorge] Arche and Lam. In that period there was a very focused emphasis on creating a Cuban identity, which I think has still permeated through a lot of the Cuban arts institutions and Cuban art in general.

Shaheen I would argue that a kind of democratic shamanism is what happens with the Cuban relationship to African religions and it is further consumed by surrealism.

Jasmine In my research I concluded that it was a fetishisation, utilised for commercial means in many instances, especially in the arts. Pitika, you returned to Cuba in 2016 or 2017 as part of the South African government's cultural voyage.

Pitika Yes. South Africa and Cuba had a special relationship. uMkhonto we Sizwe, the ANC military wing fighting the apartheid forces, was forced to retreat to Angola.<sup>26</sup> Cuba also sent its own people to Angola. So, we needed to have good relationships and cultural relations with Cuba. We kept arguing for this and finally they sent three of us with a mission to meet the cultural community in Cuba. We met a lot of students who were studying medicine there too. We invited people from different communities and art centres, explaining our position and thanking them for their contribution towards our own struggle. We brought slide presentations which started interesting conversations. We visited murals and met the people who had made them and lived beside them. We took the ambassadors that came from South Africa along with us and made sure they did not just stay in their embassies. It was one of the most beautiful experiences.

Jasmine In terms of the journey of the Havana Biennial from where it was to where it is now, my position is tenuous, and it is difficult for me to make that judgment. I am aware of my own privilege and worried about appropriating voices that are not mine. From my research and from what I have seen, the way that the biennial was established – connected to the non-aligned movements, linked to ideas of internationalism, to reaching out across borders, giving a voice to the voiceless (this is one of their favourite phrases). It was very successful in doing that until around the fourth edition in 1991, or even the fifth edition, where the essence of the biennial began to change. This was down to the context of the biennial within Cuba. It followed the political trajectory of the country.

Cuba was related to these utopian and idealistic notions of Third Worldism or a Global South until the 1990s. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, after losing Soviet funding and falling into total economic hardship, the island nation had to redefine a lot of its notions of communism and solidarity and it became more symbolic than actual. And

so, the biennial evolved and took on elements of tourism and commercialism. The island started to realise that the big loophole in the embargo with the United States was culture. Culture could be traded in the dollar; it could be sold and twenty per cent taxes could be put on works of art. The biennial started to change in response to the legalisation of the dollar in 1993 and the legalisation of the art market. My research looks at how this divided the biennial and created a collateral that eventually went on, sadly, to be far stronger than the official model – those notions of Third Worldism are now outdated. Furthermore, with the hyphenated identities that we have today, they try and attach nationality as a kind of sale tag as opposed to a representation of unity and internationalism.

We will see how the biennial reinvents itself this year (2021–22), because every edition since the fourth has basically had a big question mark over it. And this one is now being cancelled, in the most contemporary sense of the word, because of the political fallout that is occurring between artists, intellectuals and the state, mainly around issues of censorship. There are massive issues of censorship, and several artists are in prison for exercising their right to have a voice, which is ironic considering the background that Pitika is coming from and the connection that you have to Cuba. Now the inverse is happening where the oppression is coming from the state towards the artists there.

There are a number of artists who have been in prison for the last seventy days without trial, without anything, just because there was a rumour going around that one of the artists was going to stamp official bank notes and participate in a piece of performance art.<sup>27</sup> And especially Black artists in Cuba are being treated far more harshly, being mistreated and imprisoned without any information, more so than the white artists. And of course, there is more of an outspoken global reaction when it comes to white Cuban artists than the Black artists. Their presence is fading into the background and the state is using horrible rhetoric, like, 'They're uneducated and they have no cultural value', or 'They are kitsch', or 'All they are doing is being outrageous and scandalous', that 'They're always funded by the United States', despite these artists having next to nothing and there being no proof of this. So, in the light of that it will be interesting to see how the biennial responds and to see how they address that issue. Historically, they do not really. But we will see. I mean, we can only judge after it has happened really.

Pitika

At the same time, Black lives matter. Right? As everything is happening around the world, we have another opportunity to think of what kind of artworks we must make, with whom, how, and how to remove the coloniality from our minds. Moving from the postcolonial to decoloniality, we can come up with a total disobedience of Western and world aesthetics and embrace the truth that is confronting us in our day-to-day lives. My concluding remarks would be to thank you Jasmine and thank you Shaheen. You are the one that dragged me screaming to Cuba and

who knows to what extent it actually changed me. That is why I dragged you into *Azibuyele Emasisweni (Return to the Source*, the exhibition in Bloemfontein in 2022), because it would not have been complete if you were not a part of it.

Shaheen Thank you Pitika and Jasmine. You are both very kind.

Pitika Thank you Jasmine.

Jasmine Thank you both. Being in conversation with both of you is always such a pleasure.

Shaheen The Havana Biennial since 1989 has had to rapidly move from ensuring change towards deepening change through embodying human rights, and respect for the planet. To transcend and overcome historical hardships as well as hardships of this eleventh hour is a tall order. The story of the Third Havana Biennial and the position held by these five political Black artists in British art history has always been central to Panchayat as a collection. Ephemera in the collection paints a vivid and comprehensive picture of political Black British culture in the 1980s both within and outside Britain's borders.

I would like to end by thanking my colleagues Pitika Ntuli and Jasmine Chohan, as well as the invisible hands and minds of Katie Blackford, Jane Bramwell, Anjalie Dalal-Clayton, Christopher Griffin, Maxine Miller, Emily Pringle and Ananda Rutherford. I would like to extend our thanks to the staff of the Tate Library, Tate Research, Tate Publishing, Tate Digital and most importantly the artists and activists for their generous and spirited participation. I welcome you as our audience to listen to these profound histories as it is truly a gift for us to be heard after thirty years of service to the arts.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall, *Critical Decade: Black British Photography in the 80s*, Birmingham 1992. See also A. Sivanandan, 'Poverty is the New Black', *Race and Class*, vol.43, no.2, October 2001, pp.1–5.

<sup>2</sup> 'It was during this pivotal decade that much highly effective and penetrating work, commenting on a wide range of ongoing social concerns, was produced.' Eddie Chambers, 'Coming in From the Cold: Some Black Artists Are Embraced', in *Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain*, New York 2012, p.171.

<sup>3</sup> The legacy of the Black Arts Movement is parallel to the development of the Young British Artists in the 1980s and 1990s. See 'Young British Artists (YBAs)', Tate Art Term, undated, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/y/young-british-artists-ybas>, accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Panchayat Arts Education Resource Unit (PAERU) existed actively between 1988 and 2002 in London. The collection was donated to the Tate Library in 2017.

<sup>5</sup> In 1988 the artist, writer and curator Rasheed Araeen described Black art as follows: 'Black Art is, in fact, a specific contemporary art practice that has emerged directly from the struggle of Asian, African and the Caribbean people (i.e. black people) against racism and the work itself specifically deals with and expresses a "human condition": the condition of black people resulting from their existence in a racist white society or/and, in global terms, from Western cultural imperialism. The condition of diaspora, the feeling of being uprooted and not belonging to the white/Western society one finds oneself living in, being somehow placed by this outside the contemporary culture, has led to a new black consciousness, a black critical position that is fundamental to Black Art.' Rasheed Araeen, 'Essential Black Art', exhibition text, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 1988, <https://chisenhale.org.uk/exhibition/essential-black-art/>, accessed 19 March 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Launched in 1982 with its first poetry performance, Apples and Snakes was located at the Adams Arms pub in Conway Street in London.

<sup>7</sup> Johannesburg Central Police Station is a South African Police Service station in downtown Johannesburg. From its unveiling in 1968 until September 1997, it was called John Vorster Square, after Prime Minister B.J. Vorster.

<sup>8</sup> Al-An deSouza was formerly known as Allan deSouza.

<sup>9</sup> Keith Piper, 'A Short History (ii)', artist's website, undated, <http://www.keithpiper.info/statement.htm>, accessed 28 November 2022.

<sup>10</sup> The Blk Art Group was an 'association of black British art students from the Midlands that included Eddie Chambers, Donald Rodney, Claudette Johnson and Marlene Smith'. 'Keith Piper', artist biography, Iniva website, undated, <https://iniva.org/library/digital-archive/people/p/piper-keith/>, accessed 28 August 2021.

<sup>11</sup> See 'Mikey Smith', Wikipedia entry, undated [last edited 26 May 2022], [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikey\\_Smith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikey_Smith), accessed 15 January 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Celeste-Marie Bernier, 'Sword That Cuts Both Ways: The Celebrity and Disregard of Black British Artists', *International Review of American Art*, undated, <http://iraaa.museum.hamptonu.edu/page/Sword-That-Cuts-Both-Ways>, accessed 28 August 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Sophie Orlando, Rasheed Araeen, Sonia Boyce and others, *British Black Art: Debates on Western Art History*, Paris 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Sophie Orlando, 'Sonia Boyce: Post-1989 Art Strategies', *Critique d'art: Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art contemporain*, no.43, November 2014, <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/15362>, accessed 2 March 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Sivanandan 2001, pp.1-5.

<sup>16</sup> Naman Ahuja, 'Matters of Care Conference: In Conversation with Naman Ahuja', online conference paper, Pitts River Museum, April–May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDK2ZPWOjLo>, accessed 20 November 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Erica Charters, Marie Houlemare and Peter H. Wilson (eds.), *A Global History of Early Modern Violence*, Manchester 2020, p.11.

<sup>18</sup> See 'Vladimir Mayakovsky', Wikipedia entry, undated [last edited 20 February 2023], [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir\\_Mayakovsky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Mayakovsky), accessed 16 January 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, London 2008.

<sup>20</sup> *Azibuyele Emasisweni (Return to the Source)* was an online exhibition held from 2 August 2020 to 31 December 2021, hosted by the Melrose Gallery, London; see <https://themelrosegallery.com/exhibitions/28-azibuyele-emasisweni-return-to-the-source-pitika>

[ntuli/overview/](#), accessed 16 January 2023. A physical iteration of the exhibition was then held at Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein, South Africa from 4 October to 5 December 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Ben Okri, *Starbook*, London 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Coco Fusco, 'The Margin of the "Margin"', in Rachel Weiss (ed.), *Making Art Global (Part 1): The Third Havana Biennial 1989*, London 2011, pp.204–6.

<sup>23</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture and Difference*, London 2003, pp.223–37.

<sup>24</sup> [Jennifer Bieman](#), 'Western University President Eyes Anti-Racism Reform as Philippe Rushton "Harm" Lingers', *London Free Press*, 20 July 2020.

<sup>25</sup> *Revolution Eyes* was curated by Shaheen Merali and held at 198 Gallery, Brixton, 23–29 October 1989, as part of 'Semana Cubana', supported by *City Limits*, GLA, Tait Paper and Lambeth Services. The artists shown were Luis Cabrera Hernández, Choco (Eduardo Roca Salazar), José Contino Pérez, Ana Rosa Gutiérrez Martínez, Orlando Lam Marimón, María Consuelo Mendoza Fortun, Arturo Andrés Alfonso Palomino, Francisco Rafael Paneca Cano, Pablo Quert Álvarez and Othon Suárez de la Torre.

<sup>26</sup> uMkhonto we Sizwe was the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC) co-founded by Nelson Mandela in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. Its mission was to fight against the South African government.

<sup>27</sup> Coco Fusco, 'Now in Exile, Political Cuban Artist Hamlet Lavastida Describes Three Trying Months in State Detention: "My Work Became My Life"', *Artnet News*, 29 September 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/hamlet-lavastida-arrest-release-2015225>, accessed 9 February 2023.



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A full screen-recording of the conversation is available at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cRbGGmvgSM>

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