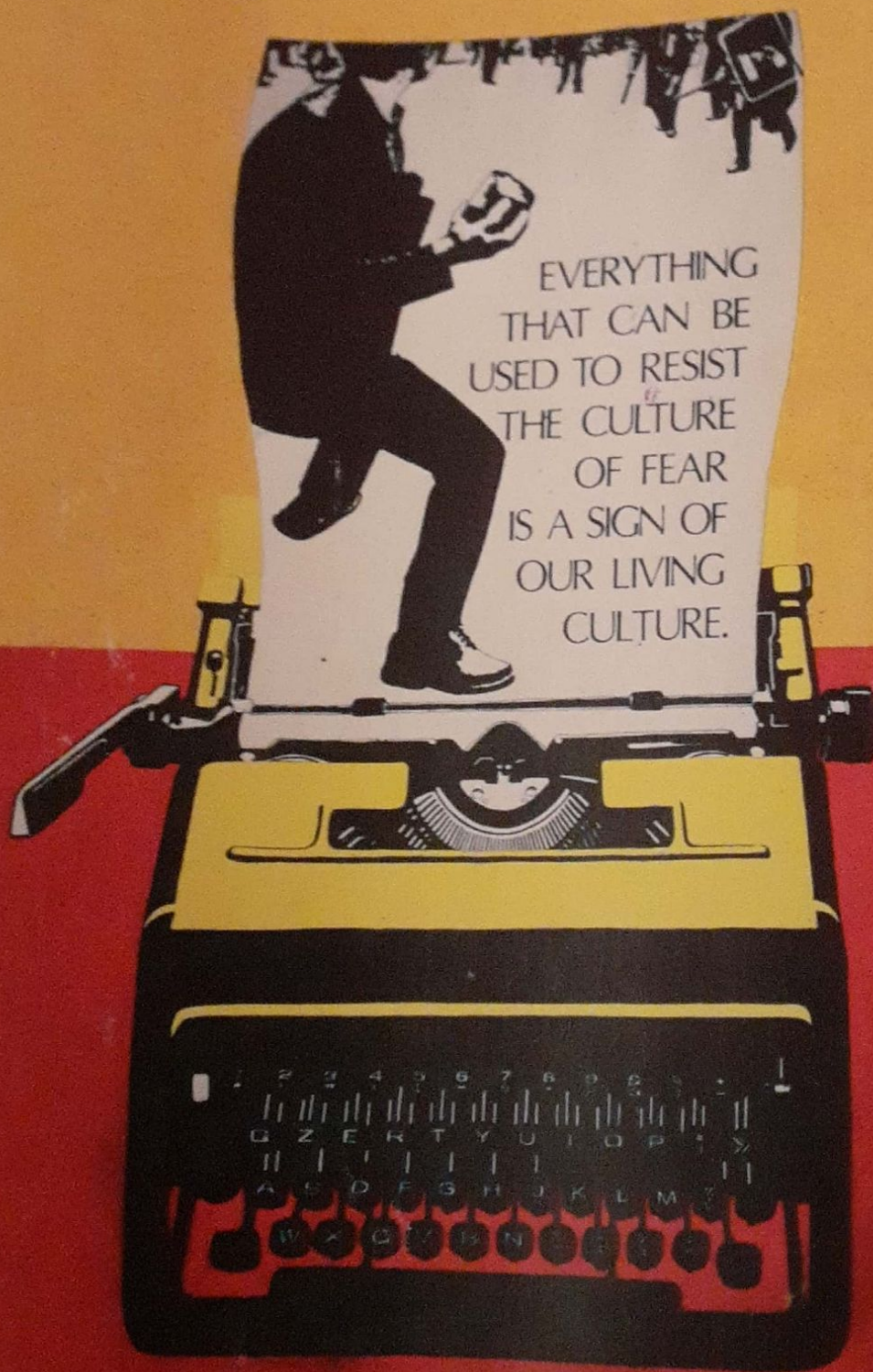


# Why Are We 'Artists'?

## 100 World Art Manifestos

Selected by Jessica Lack



M74 John Akomfrah

*Black Independent Film-Making:  
A Statement by the Black Audio  
Film Collective (1983)*

In 1983 a manifesto by the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC) appeared in the summer issue 3–4 of the political art journal *Artrage: Inter-Cultural Arts Magazine*. Written by John Akomfrah (b. 1957), it explores the question of what 'black independent film-making' is, and should be, in the broader context of a cinema that is predominantly white and Western.

BAFC had been founded the year before by seven art and sociology undergraduates at Portsmouth Polytechnic – Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Reece Auguste, Avril Johnson, Trevor Mathison, Edward George and Claire Joseph (later joined by David Lawson) – who were dedicated to creating complex film narratives that chronicled and questioned life in multicultural Britain. Their first collective work was a tape/slide performance with Akomfrah, George and Mathison reciting extracts from the long prose poem *Notebook of a Return to The Native Land* (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, 1939) by Aimé Césaire, one of the founders of Négritude (M7). Emerging after fierce race riots had erupted in London, Birmingham, Leeds and Liverpool in 1981, they sought to reflect a black experience in Thatcherite Britain and question the way the media represented black British people – not just in the mainstream media, but also in academic discourse and in the creative arts.

BAFC's radical approach to filmmaking – together with a firm theoretical basis informed by the work of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall and artistic influences ranging from Négritude to the

theory of 'third cinema' – resulted in films that broke most cinematic conventions. They challenged racism, stereotyping and social injustice, not with angry social realism, but through a series of visually evocative films that meditated on themes of memory, migration, globalization, loss and displacement. Perhaps most characteristic of the group's films is *Handsworth Songs* (1986), which was directed by Akomfrah and won the British Film Institute's John Grierson Award for Best Documentary in 1987. Its collage of music, reportage, first-hand testimony and archival footage creates an elegiac depiction of the experiences of people caught up in the violent civil disturbances that broke out in Handsworth, Birmingham and beyond, in 1985.

Although the group disbanded in 1998, the fundamental ideas that underpin their manifesto, particularly those to do with the relationships between memory and archives, presence and absence, continue to inform the work of the individual members.

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The area of black independent film-making will soon see the growth of a number of workshops established with the specific aim of catering for black film needs. We will also see a growth in the number of films made by members of these workshops. As in any other field of cultural activity and practice such a development calls for collective debate and discussion. Some of the important issues to be raised will be around the relationship between the workshop organisers and participants in the course. The others should obviously be about the nature and structure of the courses themselves.

Prior to this debate, however, is the task of accounting for the specificity of black independent film-making. What, after all, does 'black independent film-making' mean when present film culture is a largely white affair? And does this posture of independence presuppose a radical difference of film orientation? If this is the case how does one work within this difference?

The Black Audio Film Collective has chosen to take up these issues in a very particular way and this is around the question of the 'figuration of ethnicity' in cinema. Our point of entry is around

the issue of black representation. The Collective was launched with three principal aims. Firstly, to attempt to look critically at how racist ideas and images of black people are structured and presented as self-evident truths in cinema. What we are interested in here is how these 'self-evident truths' become the conventional pattern through which the black presence in cinema is secured.

Secondly, to develop a 'forum' for disseminating available film techniques within the independent tradition and to assess their pertinence for black cinema. In this respect our interests did not only lie in devising how best to make 'political' films, but also in taking the politics of representation seriously. Such a strategy could take up a number of issues which include emphasising both the form and the content of films, using recent theoretical insights in the practice of film-making.

Thirdly, the strategy was to encourage means of extending the boundaries of black film culture. This would mean attempting to de-mystify in our film practice the process of film production; it would also involve collapsing the distinction between 'audience' and 'producer'. In this ethereal world film-maker equals active agent and audience usually equals passive consumers of a predetermined product. We have decided to reject such a view in our practice.

Underlying these aims are a number of assumptions about what we consider the present priorities of independent film-making should be. These assumptions are based on our recognition of certain significant achievements in the analysis of race and the media. It is now widely accepted that the media play a crucial role in the production and reproduction of 'common-sense assumptions' and we know that race and racist ideologies figure prominently in these assumptions. The point now is to realise the implications of these insights in creating a genuinely collective black film culture.

Such a programme is also connected with our awareness of the need to go beyond certain present assumptions about the task of black film-making. We recognise that the history of blacks in films reads as a legacy of stereotypes and we take the view that such stereotypes, both in mainstream and independent cinema, should

be critically evaluated. This can be connected to a number of things that we want to do. We not only want to examine how black culture is mis-represented in film, but also how its apparent transparency is given a 'realism' in film. It is an attempt to isolate and render intelligible the images and statements which converge to represent black culture in cinema. The search is not for 'the authentic image' but for an understanding of the diverse codes and strategies of representation.

It could be argued that all this is stale water under a decaying bridge and that we know all this stuff already and that black filmmakers already accept their responsibility and are aware of these problems. There is a lot of truth in this. Others may say that as long as we are making films and gaining exposure of our work we are keeping black film culture alive.

To place our discussion in a relevant and meaningful context the Black Audio/Film Collective in conjunction with Four Corners cinema will be organising a number of screenings to run with the Colin Roach photography exhibition at Camerawork Gallery.

The series of films and discussion will run under the title of *Cinema and Black Representation* and will deal specifically with the complexity of black portrayal in films. The main aim here is to see how film can contain 'information' on race, nationality and 'ethnicity' with (Presence) or without (Absence) black people in films. With this in mind we hope to cover a number of films and themes ranging from prison movies like *Scum* to Hollywood social criticism films like *Imitation of Life*. What we will be attempting will not be to push all the films into one category of racist films but rather attempting to examine what specific responses these films make to the question of race and ethnicity.

In the end we realise that questions of black representation are not simply those of film criticism but inevitably of film-making. These issues need to be taken up on both fronts. With this in mind we are also making preparations with the GLC Ethnic Minorities Committee to organise a number of courses on some of the themes outlined in this article. Neither the dates for the screenings nor

*A Statement by the Black Audio Film Collective (1983)*

film courses have been finalised – both will be advertised when they are.

I am indebted to 'The Core' – Eddie George, Lina Gopaul, Claire Joseph, Trevor Mathison – for discussion which led to this transcription.

## M72 Eddie Chambers

### *Black Artists for Uhuru (1982)*

In 1980 an association of young black artists came together for an exhibition to be held at Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 1981. All of the exhibitors – Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers, Dominic Dawes, Ian Palmer and Andrew Hazel – were children of Caribbean descent who had been raised in the industrial landscape of the West Midlands. As were two other artists who joined later: Claudette Johnson and Donald Rodney while Marlene Smith, who was from Manchester, was studying at Wolverhampton Polytechnic. Their first exhibition in June 1981 was called *Black Art an' Done*, and questioned what black art was and what it could be, while also confronting endemic racism in British society.

Inspired by the wider Black Arts Movement that grew out of the Black Power movement in the United States (see M46), the group spent the next four years exhibiting under the title 'The Pan-Afrikan Connection', highlighting the difficulties black artists faced in being taken seriously by the global art world and actively seeking to exhibit in galleries which were normally the preserve of white artists. They exhibited in a wide range of media and were not tied to one aesthetic, although all the art confronted trauma with powerful vitality. They held conferences, most notably the First National Black Art Convention in Wolverhampton in October 1982, where they discussed the 'form, function and future' of black art. Guest speakers included the prominent black activist artist Rasheed Araeen (M59); the conference was also attended by members of the Black Audio Film Collective (M74) and the artist Sonia Boyce. The association eventually became known as the Blk Art Group. One of the founding artists, Eddie Chambers (b. 1960)

published the manifesto 'Black Artists for Uhuru' in the fifth issue of *Moz-Art: The Arts Magazine of the West Midlands* (March-July 1982). Published the year after race riots in London, Birmingham, Leeds and Liverpool had shocked the UK, its revolutionary rhetoric appeals for a socially and politically engaged black art (*uhuru* means 'sounds of freedom' in Swahili). The manifesto concludes with a quotation from the prominent African-American activist Ron Karenga's essay 'Black Cultural Nationalism' (1968).

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Some of them, of course, are being heard and felt: in particular I salute Rastafarian orientated/influenced work which has helped to create within some of us a new vision of self. However, even Rastafarian art cannot completely avoid the risk of becoming stagnant and predictable; but the vast majority of our artists, where are they? Well I'm afraid that they are primarily where our tormentors (including the ruling classes and the so-called 'liberals') would have them to be: in their studios. Furthermore, they are doing what our oppressors can only regard as 'safe', producing lame ineffective work.

I don't make this accusation lightly, but most of us (especially those outside art schools) are made to feel that our activities are positive, enhancing race relations and educating the ignorant as to the form and functioning of our Afro-Caribbean culture. We're too busy being 'ethnic' and 'cultural' (cultural in the historic sense of the word) to realise that we are near enough completely politically ineffective.

At this particular period of time in the history of Black people in Britain, I find it necessary to make this appeal to the Black artists and art students of our communities here in the West Midlands. Though white artists/art students reading this article would do well to note, and strive to emulate our vocal, resolute, and articulate producers of 'political' art.

This appeal stems from my concern for the wellbeing of the better people of our race who constantly find themselves drawn towards positions of both attack and defence where the battle is hottest: on the streets of our communities.

It seems that most of our artists and their student counterparts



desire no great role in the contemporary struggles of Black people, choosing rather to concern themselves with the vogues of art for art's sake and with subjects which, at the very most, are secondary to the quest for liberation, in fact, our struggle for survival as Black people.

I myself shun the word 'ethnic' though I have no doubt that its users are mostly well intentioned. I choose rather to call our art what it should and must be: BLACK ART!

As for most of us in art schools, one would not for a minute consider us to be members of a race who have been systematically enslaved in the most brutal forms of slavery ever, if not merely for the colour of our skins. By this I mean the work we produce gives no indication of our experiences, past or present.

The Black art student, by the very colour of his/her skin, should find him/herself drawn towards the nerve points of social and political tension and unrest choosing to respond in this situation by producing work which voices their dissatisfaction with the offending bodies or people, offenders who may at one point in time or another include the police, the state, the educational system, the church, and so on. This work, in its clear, resolute, and eloquent terms cannot fail in the strength of its impact.

Black art students! You have a growing obligation to acknowledge our race and the fundamental elements which characterise our existence in and through your work.

Black art, at the very least, should indicate and/or document change. It should seek to effect such change by aiming to help create an alternative set of values necessary for better living, stronger communities, contemporary cultural identity, and so on, otherwise it fails miserably to be art befitting the black community. Black art, like everything else in the Black community, must respond positively to the reality of revolution: revolution seen in earnest on our streets last summer.

A Black American writer has written 'let our art remind us of our distaste for the enemy, our love for each other and our commitment to the revolutionary struggle . . .' So let it be.

EDDIE CHAMBERS