

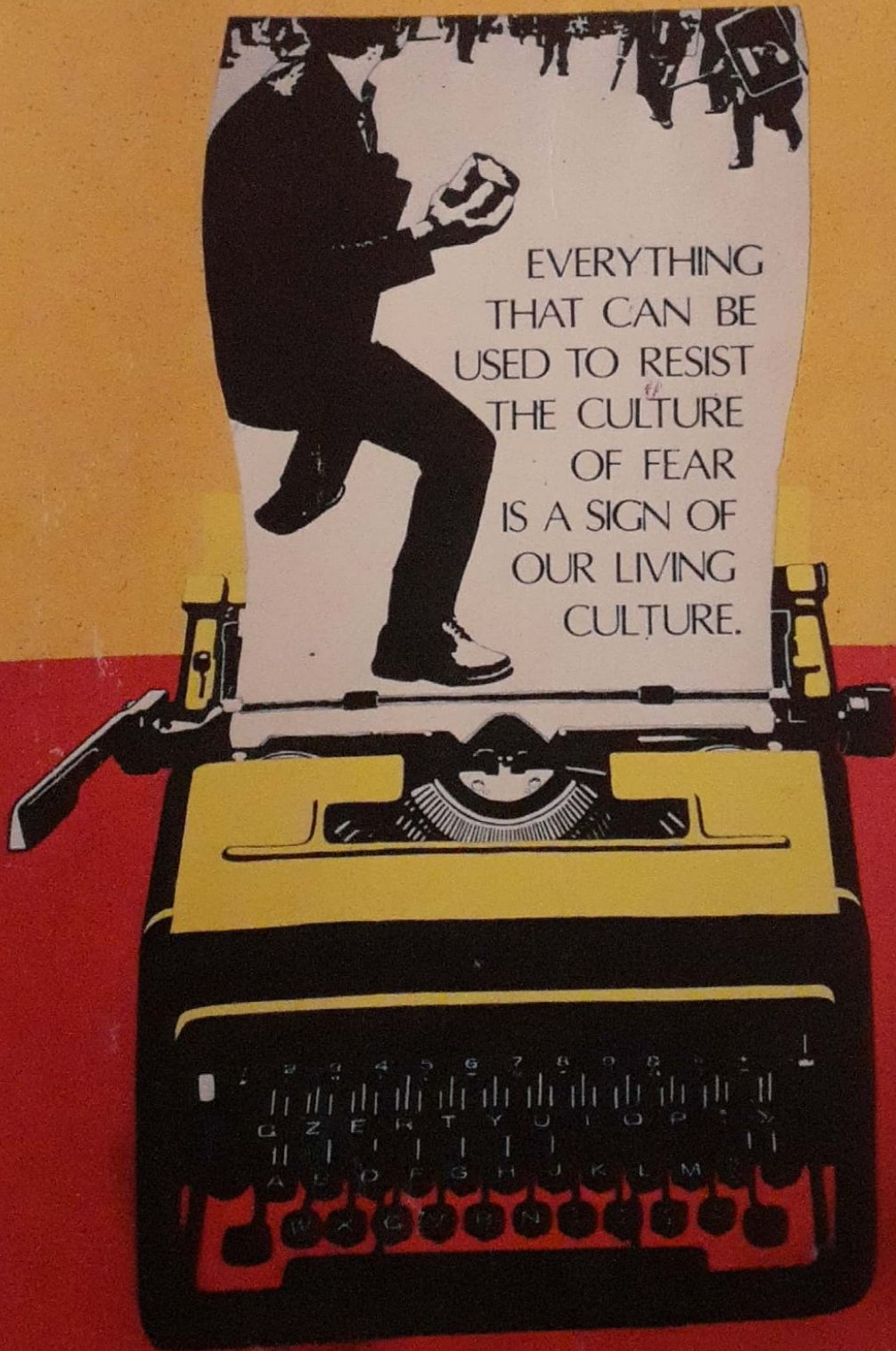


MODERN
CLASSICS

Why Are We 'Artists'?

100 World Art Manifestos

Selected by Jessica Lack



EVERYTHING
THAT CAN BE
USED TO RESIST
THE CULTURE
OF FEAR
IS A SIGN OF
OUR LIVING
CULTURE.

M59 Rasheed Araeen

*Preliminary Notes for a BLACK
MANIFESTO (1975–6)*

The Pakistani-born, London-based conceptual artist and author Rasheed Araeen (b. 1935) wrote his ground-breaking essay 'Preliminary Notes for a BLACK MANIFESTO' between 1975 and 1976. The roots of the manifesto lie in a profound identity crisis the artist underwent in 1971, when, having read the Caribbean philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's essential text of the black liberation movement, *The Wretched of the Earth (Les Damnés de la terre, 1961)*, and become affected by the killing of a young Nigerian man in Leeds by the police, Araeen began to make art that confronted the socio-political realities he was witnessing in Britain. Employing performance and multimedia, he created artworks like *Playing Anguish (1974–7)* – an eighteen-minute tape/slide sequence – and the performance *Paki-Bastard (Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person) (1977)*, which tackled the lived experience of racism in the UK. He became an active member of the Black Workers Movement and joined David Medalla's (M29) Artists for Democracy, which encouraged artists to support liberation movements throughout the world.

Araeen's manifesto drew attention to the white supremacy endemic in the international art world. Calling for a radical 'Third World' art that confronted neo-colonialism and sought to change old power relations by rejecting reactionary ideas such as the concept of the individual artistic genius, he argued that black artists should seek to serve the interests of ordinary people, avoid

isolation and separatism, and challenge the presiding Western version of the history of art.

Araeen conceived his manifesto as an artwork in its own right. It was originally published in the first issue of the cultural journal *Black Phoenix*, which was launched by Araeen and the poet Mahmoud Jamal in January 1978 as a much-needed platform for artists from a non-Western background, and it has been reprinted on numerous occasions since.

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Introduction

The problems of contemporary art in the Third World today are part of its socio-economic and political predicaments, resulting from colonialism and its present relationship with the West. We must therefore go beyond formal and aesthetic considerations and look into the historical factors which influenced or suppressed artistic developments in the last few centuries, as well as those forces which are today predominant, in the Third World.

By Third World, we mean Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. But we *must* also include in it all those non-European peoples (whom we shall collectively call 'blacks' or 'black people') who now live in various Western countries and find themselves in a similar predicament to that of the actual Third World.

What concerns us here specifically is the situation of contemporary visual art in the Third World. But we cannot meaningfully deal with the problems of visual art alone isolated from the cultural context. What affects culture as a whole is also reflected in art activity.

A cursory glance at the Third World today shows that, even after years of 'independence', its contemporary cultures in general and the visual arts in particular remain what could be described as the stagnant backwaters of western developments or what Paulo Freire* calls the 'culture of silence' of the masses.

* For Paulo Freire's works see *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Cultural Action for Freedom*, both published by Penguin, London.

There does exist, however, an increasing awareness of the situation and efforts are being made to confront the problem. We must therefore look into how this problematic situation is actually being dealt with. **How are Third World people trying to enter the modern era or/and create their own contemporary history? If their voice is muted or not heard at all, what are the underlying causes? And what are the actual alternatives open to them?**

The awareness that the Third World must now find a direction which is different from that imposed on it by the West has been growing; and, in fact, organized attempts pointing towards this goal have recently been made. But these efforts* have either remained confined within different regions or lacked a clear (ideological) perspective. They have not therefore made any impact on the overall situation or offered a real challenge to those forces which have been responsible for the present predicament of art and culture in the Third World. This is partly due to the lack of *direct* communication of ideas within the Third World. And the problem has been further compounded by the extremely oppressive political situation in many Third World countries; which is, in most cases, the legacy of past colonialism or/and the result of continuing Western imperialist domination.

Although there does exist an opposition to imperialism and questions are being asked about the growing dominance of Western culture, the general situation *in practice* remains West-oriented. That is, even when there is a strong tendency among many Afro/Asian countries to maintain the continuity of their own traditions, resulting in the preservation and revival of old forms – particularly their reintroduction in contemporary works, the actual result or its underlying criterion often tends to conform to the standards created in the West. This could be explained by the fact that it is not

* Although the activities of CAYC, Buenos Aires, Argentina, have been confined to Latin American situation and those of *Artists for Democracy, London*, tend to centre around particular political issues, they both are worth mentioning here. FESTAC '77 was in fact the most important and spectacular event of 'Black Arts' which took place in Lagos, Nigeria, in January/February 1977.

wealth and resources, by hook or by crook, as a result of which the West was able to become what it is today. As Frantz Fanon has rightly said: 'This European opulence is literally scandalous, for it has been founded on slavery, it has been nourished with the blood of slaves and it comes directly from the soil and from the subsoil of that under-developed world. The well-being and the progress of Europe has been built up with the sweat and the dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians, and the yellow races. We have decided not to overlook this any longer.'^{*} (italics added).

While the West flourished during colonialism, Western art also flourished along with the emergence of its various institutions. The historical developments of Western art of the modern era took place not because of the 'mental superiority' of Western artists (as is commonly believed in the West), but due to the advantage they had by being placed within the complex totality of developmental forces of an historical process. And this was made possible to a large extent with the material resources from the Third World. While the historical process in the West provided Western artists with necessary incentives or driving force for their creativity, colonialism suppressed the developments of indigenous art and culture in the Third World by preventing the historical development of its productive forces of its peoples.

For this reason the history of Western art over the last few centuries also becomes an issue here; not only for the fact that its developments took place at the cost of Third World people, but more essentially because of the West's assertion today that its history must be accepted as the mainstream of human development and that in the light of this all human achievements must be seen as THE ESTABLISHMENT OF EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION AS THE MAINSTREAM IS ONE OF THE MOST CATASTROPHIC DEVELOPMENTS THAT HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN HUMAN HISTORY, DESTROYING OR SUPPRESSING OTHER CULTURES AND CIVILIZATIONS. And today this European MAINSTREAM is used to measure

^{*} Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Penguin, London; p. 76.

achievements of the peoples whose very historical developments were suppressed by it. It is therefore not a surprise that the West either ignores other peoples' contributions to human knowledge or history, or it allocates them an inferior status determined by an attitude that sees all non-European phenomena as ahistorical.

This is, of course, a fundamental feature of the dominant ideology that perceives the world in terms of its different parts arranged in a hierarchical order, so that this system serves the interests of those who control it from the top. As such, the West sees the rest of the world as its own appendage and expects all the world resources, natural as well as human, to serve the interests of Western civilization alone. THIS WESTERN PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD HAS REDUCED TODAY THE WHOLE WORLD INTO A 'GLOBAL VILLAGE' WITH A VULGARLY AFFLUENT WEST AT ITS CENTRE SURROUNDED BY STARVING PEOPLE WITH BEGGING BOWLS IN THEIR HANDS.

Moral double standards, arrogance, hypocrisy, and racism are some of the manifestations of the ideology which maintains that Western people alone have a civilized existence and that they should constantly maintain and protect this even at the expense of other peoples' humanity. WHILE EUROPEANS ARE HAILED AS PATRIOTS, FREEDOM FIGHTERS AND HEROES, OTHERS ARE DENOUNCED AS BLOODTHIRSTY TERRORISTS. The various attempts of some pseudo-scientists to prove the 'superiority' of the white race, is also part of the same apparatus which deliberately perpetuates lies about non-European peoples. And these attempts to give scientific respectability to racism only reveals the hideous designs of those who are an integral part of the Western imperialist domination of the world today.

The present state of affairs in the Third World is not the result of the 'natural laziness' or 'a lack of imagination' of its peoples, as we are often told by the West, neither is it the legacy of the devastation of some oriental 'barbarian'. It is in fact the direct consequence of the colonial pillage by the 'civilized' West whose pretentious claims to all humanity have now turned out to be no more than a mask to hide its pathologically excessive greed and which has today

reached dangerous proportions. The Western obsession for more and more material wealth (mostly in the form of consumer goods), which in the West is euphemistically called 'a higher standard of living', cannot be perpetually fulfilled without further exploitation and appropriation by the West of resources *which are not its own resources*. These resources actually belong to Third World peoples who themselves should now utilize them to fulfil their own needs, by developing their own productive forces and rebuilding their own socio-economic, political, educational, cultural and artistic institutions *which must be free from foreign domination*.

Against this historical background, therefore, we must place the present predicaments of our art and culture. We must recognize that as long as we allow the West (and for that matter, anybody else), willingly or unwillingly, to dominate our lives, we will only be exploited. As long as our physical and mental resources are under its direct or indirect control, our development will either be suppressed or used for the benefit of the West alone, its art and culture, and its civilization. In other words, **we must free ourselves from foreign domination before we can create our own contemporary art and culture.**

But this does not mean that we have no option open to us at present or that we cannot carry on an art activity. Of course, if we continue accepting the general situation today which demands our subservience to the West we are doomed as a people. On the other hand, we can and must stand on our feet and oppose those alien values, as well as our own, which obstruct radical change by preventing the development of internal dynamism of our people; and in the process of confronting these values we can and shall discover new art forms that will authentically reflect our own reality today. However, before we proceed further to look into possible alternatives, we must examine here the various aspects of those forces which are holding us back.

The Third World Today

One of the most important features of colonialism was and is to violently suppress the indigenous culture of the colonized country

and then impose its own cultural values on the colonial people. In many instances, colonialism imposed an actual ban on native cultural practices, taking away by force from the people their cultural artifacts. The loot was then transferred to the West. As a result, most of the Third World heritage is today either hidden away stored in the basement lockers of Western Museums* or insolently displayed in their glass cases as part of the evidence of the West's pride and precious possessions. AFTER EXTERMINATING MILLIONS OF PEOPLE AND THEN LOOTING THEIR BELONGINGS, THE WEST TODAY HAS THE AUDACITY TO CALL ITSELF THE PROTECTOR OF THE ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE WORLD.

At the same time, colonialism created and creates a native bourgeoisie by giving some of the native population Western colonial education, and by awarding them some socio-economic privileges and a share in political power. In turn, this native class, to quote Amilcar Cabral, 'assimilates the colonizer's mentality, considers itself culturally superior to its own people and ignores or looks down upon their cultural values.†

With the coming to power of *this* native bourgeoisie, after 'independence', colonialism is only replaced by neo-colonialism; which in fact is a general phenomenon in the Third World today. One of the most important characteristics of neo-colonialism is the perpetuation of Western imperialist domination in the 'decolonized' countries through Western cultural penetration, against which the native bourgeoisie cannot and does not act as a shield. On the contrary, its own lifestyle facilitates further propagation of Western values, which openly relegate the indigenous cultural life. In effect, it virtually becomes an instrument through which Western

* A short film *You Hide Me* by Ghanaian film-maker Kwate Nee Owoo (Ifriqiyah Films, London), has thrown some light on the storage of thousands of artifacts in the basement lockers of the British Museum. In addition, there are about two million artifacts, looted mostly from the Third World, being stored in a warehouse in Woreditch, London, and to which the public in general has no access.

† Amilcar Cabral, *Return to Source*, Modern Reader, New York/London; p. 45.

culture is projected as civilized and progressive vis-à-vis the 'primitive' and 'backward' native culture.

It is therefore no surprise that, immediately after the Second World War, Western imperialism under the leadership of its most powerful country, the US, unleashed an unprecedented cultural propaganda in the major cities of the Third World, particularly in Asia and Africa, through its control of mass media (films, TV, glossy publications, etc.). The whole purpose of this propaganda, which constantly assaulted people's senses with alien images of the values of Western life, was to inflict their minds with the illusion of a better life (in the West) and to lure them into believing that they could also possess this life, if only they would abandon their own values; thereby making them develop a sense of their own inferiority. The aim of the cultural aggression, in fact, has always been to make the dominated people totally abandon their own values and accept the projected superiority of the imperialist culture, turning them into passive objects of Western domination, since, as Amílcar Cabral has pointed out, 'with strong indigenous cultural life, foreign domination cannot be sure of its own perpetuation.'^{*}

At a time when people were trying to recover from their colonial past and were looking forward to a new future free from foreign domination, this new onslaught from the West not only caused further loss of national cultural identity among the native bourgeoisie, who thus fell in love with 'Babylon' called AMERIKA, it also disturbed, if not shattered, the sense of direction among the urban 'intelligentsia' who could otherwise have played a positive role in the post-colonial reconstruction of the country. The native bourgeoisie who were supposed to offer a new direction, leading to a better and prosperous life which it had promised to all its people during their anti-colonial struggle, instead became an instrument of an accelerated superficial change whose main driving force has been to turn the major native cities into centres of native bourgeois life based on vulgar imitations of the West. It set in motion a process whose consequences can be seen today in the Third World cities &

* Ibid., p. 39.

skyscraper rising from/above poverty-stricken shantytowns has become a symbol of 'progress'.

One only has to cast a glance to see the absurdity of present developments in most Third World countries based on the Western prescriptions. Instead of improving the land and waterworks to produce more basic and essential food, either the land is used to produce exportable commodities or the peasants are recruited into the factories where, for example, motor cycles, blue jeans, platform shoes, etc., are assembled/manufactured mainly for the teenage kids of the affluent urban classes. Instead of improving livestock to increase milk production, Coca-Cola factories are set up everywhere. Instead of creating an incentive for the fishermen to catch more fish by providing them with better boats and equipment, the sea-shore is transformed into a holiday resort for the native, as well as international, leisure class and the inhabitants of the surrounding villages are turned into waiters, domestic servants and entertainers. Consequently some Third World cities have become exotic brothels for globe-trotters.

The basic priority, the development of an indigenous economic infrastructure serving the basic needs and interests of all the people, has been virtually ignored. Instead, the country's wealth has been appropriated by the few, through trickery, deceit and bureaucratic corruption, and spent mostly on the importation or production of Western consumer goods and sophisticated military hardware which cannot, of course, fill the hungry bellies of the masses. It simply maintains the Westernized lifestyle of small native elites and their political power.

Any human development which is based on foreign values – unless these values are absorbed through a critical process as part of the indigenous development – disturbs and suppresses the imagination and creativity of people, thereby destroying any incentive for the creation and development of new and original ideas. Instead, it perpetrates/perpetuates imitation, submission and apathy, which in fact characterizes native bourgeois life today. The native bourgeoisie thus ends up trapped in its milieu protecting its selfish interests, incapable of providing any leadership or support for the

positive and progressive forces of the people. Instead the people are fed with illusions, vulgar fantasies, religious fatalism, and populist slogans; all this leading to a life pattern which becomes insensitive to its own environment. And if all this is not enough to keep the people contented and/or silent, they are mercilessly put down by the sophisticated machinery on which the native ruling classes end up spending most of the country's wealth.

It is therefore clear that the native bourgeoisie, which virtually becomes an agent of imperialist domination, cannot and does not protect the real interests of the people. It gives almost a free hand to the multinational foreign companies which not only exploit the people indiscriminately but cause great damage to indigenous cultural life. The following example, which is typical as well as topical, illustrates how an apparently innocent commercial operation persuades people to abandon their own cultural values and take up Western ways in the hope of improving their life, whereas the actual result is a disaster, economically as well as culturally.

In most parts of the Third World, even today, breast-feeding is not only a common traditional practice, but also an important part of its socio-economic reality. And it cannot be replaced by any other method without a real change, *brought about by the conscious efforts of the people themselves*, in the economic forces, creating a socio-cultural environment in which acts like bottle-feeding, and its various implications are fully grasped by the masses. An imposition of bottle-feeding on the other hand, particularly through an aggressive cultural propaganda (euphemistically called 'commercial ads') would in the present Third World environment naturally create dangerous health hazards and without giving much economic benefit. To say that the Western companies do not understand this simple act, would amount to calling them idiots, which they are not. They couldn't care less as long as they make money. If their actions cause malnutrition among children, poverty and starvation, and even deaths, they do not consider it their moral or human responsibility.

It is well known now how Western baby-food producers have been persuading the women in the Third World into giving up

their traditional breast-feeding in favour of modern bottle-feeding, simply to sell their products. In the hope that it would help their children grow better (as suggested by the ads), many poor women switched on to bottle-feeding, even when they did not lack their own milk. It not only deprived them of their hard-earned small income which they had to spend to buy the manufactured baby-milk, it also caused malnutrition, and a disease, unknown before, among these children. As a result, many of them died.

The debate here is not about the merits or demerits of breast-feeding or bottle-feeding. Neither is it the question of a 'failure' of women in the Third World to grasp the new reality of bottle-feeding. It would be very easy, of course, to accuse these women of a 'lack of awareness' of the problems of hygiene in bottle-feeding, but would anybody blame the mothers of the Thalidomide children for their lack of scientific knowledge?

The issue here really is the immorality of the whole money-making operations of the multinational companies in their total disregard of human life. Their aggressive commercial and cultural propaganda deceives people into believing that they can buy a better life by purchasing consumer products (which do not contribute to their welfare but only further their poverty), and undermines people's cultural values which would otherwise protect them from such vicious traps.

The paradoxical situation in which the native bourgeoisie finds itself after 'independence', must also be recognized. On the one hand, its own lifestyle betrays its acceptance of the supremacy of Western cultural values. On the other, it cannot totally ignore the national aspirations of the people and their own culture. A resurgence of interest in indigenous art and cultural activities therefore occurs. But this development, which in most cases is manipulated by the native bourgeoisie to consolidate its political power by making it part of the populist demagogy, often fails to go beyond the level of mere entertainment or a reminder of past glories.

The exuberant colourful tribal dances at Nairobi Airport, Kenya, welcoming the arrivals of international celebrities, is an interesting example of a manipulation of indigenous culture by a

native bourgeoisie which prides itself on dressing up in European three-piece striped suits even on hot days.

This is not to say that indigenous national art and culture should not play any role in international affairs. International diplomatic relations alone cannot provide a real dynamic for the historical development of national art and culture in the Third World. In fact, if this becomes the only basis for the preservation or continuation of indigenous art and cultural activities – as is the fact in most cases, the result is their degeneration into an exotic entertainment for those whose actual allegiance lies with foreign culture.

Although the wearing of indigenous dress does not necessarily reflect a genuine commitment to the development of national culture today, in view of the fact that indigenous dress is still an essential part of the masses in the Third World, the European dress of the native ruling classes can only project their separateness from the masses, if not an elevated status whose roots are embedded in European soil.

It is the masses who actually retain and protect the values of their own culture which, in the face of colonial domination, either remains in a state of 'hibernation' or **continues maintaining its dynamism by resisting foreign domination**. Indigenous culture in fact plays an important role in national struggle. But when the native bourgeoisie comes to power and offers foreign prescriptions for the country's post-colonial development, the dynamism of indigenous art and cultural life is either arrested or misdirected. Only the establishment of an indigenous socio-economic and political system, which genuinely serves the needs and interests of the people, can enable the people to develop their own contemporary art and culture as an expression of the new dynamic of a liberated life.

Western Art v. Third World

The people's struggle to move forward in history today cannot be successful until they become, or are made, fully aware of their role in the historical process, which requires their **full participation on every level**. This also requires their consciousness of the

particular historical position from which they want to move forward, and which must be linked to their historical past, their own cultural values and material conditions. The aim of foreign domination, on the other hand, is to take the dominated people out of their history or/and dislodge them from their particular historical position, thereby destroying their *sense of direction*. In other words, the imposition of an alien history on the people demands that they should renounce, if not denounce, their own history, their own cultural values, their right to think and determine their destiny as free people; and that they must instead accept their subservience to foreign values so that they may not be able to lift a finger against their exploiters.

The knowledge of Western art history as part of colonial education must have existed in the countries under colonialism. But the aim of its post-war accelerated propaganda as part of the overall Western cultural onslaught, which pretentiously projected Western art as a higher and universal expression of human life, was to re-establish or perpetuate its pretended supremacy in order to prevent the emergence of indigenous forces in the 'decolonized' countries. And, to a large extent, the West has been successful in re-imposing its history on Third World peoples when they were desperately looking for a new direction to move forward into the future and assert their independent existence as part of all humanity.

When young artists in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean were trying to emerge from the fog of colonialism, they found themselves in something of a dilemma. On the one hand, there was an awareness that their own traditional forms should play a fundamental role in contemporary developments, reflecting not only the spirit of the independent country but their time as well. On the other, they found themselves surrounded by Western forms which were becoming more and more intrusive in the post-independence period. And since most of them were alienated from the people and were actually aspiring to become part of the newly developing urban socio-cultural milieu in which Western values started to play a predominant role, the Western models not only offered them a more attractive alternative but also promised lucrative careers. It

is therefore no wonder that so many Third World artists should fall for Western art so easily and without understanding its historical developments.

What we see today in general is either the third-rate imitation of various Western styles (from Cubism to Pop Art), or a hotchpotch of Western techniques and native imagery; the aim being the creation of modern works of art which also *look* ethnically original. The content of these 'experiments' (which can be termed *neo-colonial art*) reflects the confusion and divided loyalties of the native bourgeoisie on which the artists are dependent for their survival, economically as well as socially. The prevalence of *neo-colonial art* today also depends on the fact that it is largely recognized and encouraged by Western Embassies' staff and Western tourists who flock to the capitals of the Third World looking for exotic entertainment and souvenirs.

There also exist considerable forces that defy the above situation, but they are not yet fully recognized. On the one hand there is a strong tendency now to renounce Western art altogether and return to what many Third World artists consider their own heritage. (It is too early to pronounce any critical judgement on the outcome of nationalist tendencies in the Third World. But, since it is part of the overall process which tends to create its own independent identity, it is an important step towards the realization of an indigenous development.) On the other, the isolation of Third World artists is a big danger; and is in fact being created by the aggressive role which Western art/propaganda plays on an international level. As such, many Third World artists have been forced to retreat behind their national frontiers. This not only deprives them of an opportunity to expand beyond their own boundaries, it also makes them look exclusively and nostalgically to their old traditions.

Other Third World artists have taken an entirely different direction, by accepting the challenge of this modern age. While conscious of their own indigenous cultural backgrounds (which are sometimes reflect in their work), they recognize the technological nature of various developments in the West. They consider it their

legitimate right to make use of contemporary knowledge in their own work (and without feeling any indebtedness to the West), just as Western artists were able to benefit, and are still benefitting, from their knowledge of Afro/Asian traditions (African Sculpture, Islamic Art, etc.). What is singular about these artists is that they are innovators. Thus they contribute to contemporary developments in their own right, by their own original ideas, concepts and synthesis/antithesis; and more importantly they offer a challenge to Western domination by defying the hegemony of art styles perpetrated and promoted internationally by the *transatlantic* gallery circuit of the Western world. But since these artists also defy the expectations of their native bourgeoisie, who would instead like them to be part of its *mediocre* and *vulgar* life, many of them are not recognized in their countries of origin or in the West, where they often end up living as self-exiled residents or 'citizens' of Western countries. (This phenomenon is not only limited to the artists of course. Many Third World scientists, engineers, doctors, architects, teachers, etc., also end up living in the West.)

Some Latin American artists are recognized for their pioneering works in the post-war development of art in the West, particularly in Kinetic Art. But since their contributions have been widely acknowledged in the West and subsequently in their own countries of origin (perhaps because of their European descent they did not find their identification with the Western mainstream, as well as their own acceptability by the West, problematic), they are outside the scope of this work.

Under consideration here are in fact the underlying causes of the general and predominant phenomenon of mediocrity in the Third World today, as well as the general non-recognition of the activities which avoid this *mediocrity* in defiance of cultural imperialism.

But before we go further, the term *mediocrity* should perhaps be clarified. We do recognize the different levels of developments in different parts of the world at a particular time in history. But it is not an issue here, because there are peoples who are not free to develop their capabilities. They are in fact deliberately deprived of

the opportunity of their historical developments, thereby condemning them to a pattern of life in which *mediocrity* takes up a *predominant* position that eliminates all the forces which would/could give the life a new dynamic for its radical change. However, the phenomenon of mediocrity is not exclusively confined to the Third World, as one might think. It is actually international, varying in form and degree in different places. In the case of the Third World, its causes are primarily external, while in the West they are internal as well. In the Third World today, mediocrity is comprised of forms created by the imposition of alien values which create stagnation in the indigenous process of development. In the West, it becomes a formalist transformation (formal innovations, frequent stylistic changes, fashion, trendiness, gimmicks, etc.), whose real content, in effect, mostly remains the same, sustaining the system that gives it driving force and which is produced by the system's capacity to dominate and exploit people nationally as well as internationally.

This brings us to the crucial question of the dominance of Western art in the world today. Is Western art really international (in its spirit and expression) or only an instrument of propaganda? Is the 'internationalism' of Western art (and culture) at this juncture in history beneficial to all mankind? If the purpose of internationalism is to bring different people nearer to each other and create a better understanding between them, why should it be monopolized by the West? Why aren't the people in/of the Third World playing any significant role in the development of so-called international art?

The question here is not really 'of the lack of thought given to the position of Third World artists in *western* discussions of art' (italics added), as Caroline Tisdall has put it (*The Guardian*, 26 April 1975), but of the exclusion of Third World people from the contemporary developments, controlled and dominated by the West. **Third World artist is not seeking a position in Western art but his rightful place in the contemporary world which is being denied to him.** If Western art was confined to its own national boundaries or within the Western World and it made no claims at all to supremacy in the world, it would not have bothered us at all.

Since Western art is pretending to be international, spreading its vicious tentacles all over the world, it is necessary to question its real content and the motives behind its international expansion.

Now let us take the example of American Pop Art. What international significance is there in the images of Coca-Cola, Marilyn Monroe, Pin-ups, the American Flag, Hamburgers, etc.? These images are, of course, the *ethnic* images of American culture and there is no reason why they should not play a role in the development of her art. But when these very images are *universalized* through an international projection, their function changes. They are no longer the 'harmless' images of the popular culture or the innocent ambassadors of American art and culture abroad. Their international function is to propagate American consumer culture, through its glorified celebration by Pop Art, in the 'underdeveloped' world, and thus to undermine the indigenous values and their contemporary developments in the Third World.

No wonder that the *ethnic* art of modern 'icon-makers' of American 'high religion' (Pop/Consumer Culture) is considered international art and is reverently placed in the so-called historical mainstream, while the work of Mexican artist Diego Rivera, for example, is either ignored by the 'international' art pundits or relegated to 'non-history'. The only 'crime' he seems to have committed is that he defied Western cultural/art imperialism by rejecting the hegemony of art styles created in the art centres of Europe alone. Instead of merely serving the interests of Western civilization and history, he returned to his own people and committed himself to their reality. His work is a reflection of the socio-cultural, economic, and political environment in which he lived. Instead of understanding him in the context of his own historical forces, his work has been dismissed by the Western art pundits as mere propaganda.* We do not necessarily agree fully with the populist and propagandist philosophy in art, but **is Pop Art not propaganda?** If the West is only concerned with narrow boundaries of stylistic

* Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, Thames & Hudson, London, Revised edition; paperback p. 8.

evolution within its own history and considers only the developments taking place within its metropolises, at the expense of other contemporary developments, **what right has it to champion the cause of internationalism in art and culture?**

The myth of the internationalism of Western art must now be exploded. The fact is that there does not yet exist an art which truly reflects international spirit of Man and Woman today. Western art expresses the particularity of the West alone and does not reflect upon the material condition of the world. It can therefore be said that WESTERN ART IS NOT INTERNATIONAL; IT IS MERELY TRANSATLANTIC ART. IT ONLY REFLECTS THE TRANSATLANTIC CULTURE OF EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA. The present 'internationalism' of Western art is no more than a function of Western politico-economic power and the imposition of its values on other people. Therefore, in an international context, it would be more appropriate to call it IMPERIALIST ART.

We are not playing here with semantics. If by internationalism is *only* meant an expression of a phenomenon taking place in more than one country, an art movement emerging simultaneously at more than one place across national boundaries as a reflection of their cultural interrelationship, we would have no hesitation at all in accepting the 'internationalism' of Western art. A style of wood-carving is still being practised in many places across *national* boundaries of most African countries, but would anybody call this an international style? In the present world context, the word *international* implies *more than just a few Western countries*, unless we accept that these few Western countries (which constitute about 25 percent of mankind) represent the whole world.

Internationalism is now an expression of a global phenomenon, and we are sure Western artists/critics do not disagree with us here. What they may still point out (which many often do, and not without arrogance, to justify their claim of internationalism) is what they consider a *natural* influence of Western art in the world today, which in fact must be placed in the context of cultural imperialism.

However, even when a particular artistic development

influences or accelerates developments elsewhere, the former does not by virtue of its influence become a reflection of internationalism. African art, for example, influenced many European artists (some of them even imitated it) at the beginning of this century, giving rise to one of the most important movements in the West, Cubism. But African art did not, as Europeans would themselves say, become international art, nor did the European artists become Africanized.

The fact is that the Western mainstream draws material from all sources, sucking knowledge from other traditions and cultures into its own continuing development, often for *change for the sake of change*. Western 'avant-gardists' can now even appropriate the forms which were created hundreds/thousands of years ago by the peoples whom the West would call primitives (they were in fact more aware of the social function of these forms), and with the magic stick of ART HISTORY turn the 'demonism' of ancient tribes into their own 'avant-garde' art.

On the other hand, if Third World artists make use of modern methodology, creating original works that reflect their own contemporary reality, they would often be reminded of their indebtedness to the West, if not looked down upon as if they have actually stolen 'Western' property. It is not uncommon for the Third World artists who use contemporary techniques in their innovations to be seen *on the margin* or as followers of Western art. Instead of accepting them in their own right or as part of what is considered to be an international movement, they are often *Westernized* through a weird logic that can only be a reflection of imperialist mentality.

Nevertheless, the actual influence of Western art in the world today cannot be considered constructive. The nature and pace of the movement of Western art as part of Western cultural penetration in the Third World (facilitated, of course, by the native bourgeoisie) cannot offer an opportunity to the people in general to examine it critically. This is not to say that Western developments do not have positive and progressive aspects which, once analyzed and grasped, may benefit other peoples. But the aggressive propagation of Western values in the countries which are economically/

technologically underdeveloped, and particularly when as a result of this the indigenous productive forces are suppressed, it is very difficult, if not impossible, for the people to benefit positively from Western developments. It is no surprise that those countries which have understood the real motives behind Western cultural propaganda, have rightly closed their national borders to Western ideas, so they could generate their own developments without foreign interference.

The international expansion of Western art is not incidental, nor is it due to its natural attractiveness. It is in fact part of the West's missionary zeal to 'civilize' the 'primitives' of the Third World. The history of the last few centuries makes us see that behind this mask of civilizing other people, there actually exist insidious intentions whose only purpose could be, and is, to keep the Third World people as an appendage of the West, so that their physical and mental resources are used for the perpetual development of Western civilization alone, creating a vicious circle in which the West continues THINKING, CREATING and PRODUCING, while the Third World remains in a state of APATHY and its people turn into mere IMITATORS and CONSUMERS.

Of course, Western art propaganda *alone* cannot produce these results. But it functions as part of the West's economic, political and cultural operations on an international level: the aggressiveness of Western art/propaganda is actually that of the dominant system. Specifically, the function of Western art *domination* is to deny the Third World peoples of the indigenous developments of their contemporary art, and also to prevent the emergence of a unifying contemporary art movement other than in the West, in order to perpetrate/perpetuate the pretended supremacy of its own art and culture.

It is therefore no coincidence that America was suddenly awoken, after the War, to a realization that she also had her own 'geniuses'. It was a time when America, in order to establish her leadership as the most powerful of imperialist countries, launched a massive world-wide propaganda, projecting herself as the most civilized country of the world. Clinging to her cultural resources

were her artists, among other things, particularly *action painters* (later followed by *Pop artists*), who thus reached as far as her propaganda could penetrate. As a result, these artists in no time became internationally known, turning many of the newly emerging Third World artists into third-rate Abstract Expressionists (it was also a time when donkeys and monkeys also became 'abstract artists'). It would be an exaggeration, of course, to say that everybody turned to paint-throwing. But it certainly had an enormous impact (since it was so easy to splash the paint around) on the development of what has already been described as neo-colonial art.

The close relationship between Western concept of *international art* with international monopoly capital is obvious. As such, Western art is *mainly* developed and produced in the capitals of the most powerful of Western capitalist countries and by (white) Western artists (for they are the ones acceptable to Western art establishments), and then sold, through the *transatlantic* gallery circuit, at highly inflated prices that turn it into a precious product. Market price thus becomes signifier, content and criterion, which entitles a work of art to a place in 'history' books (propaganda books would be though a more accurate description) that are sent around the whole world for people to read about Western 'geniuses'. Once art is elevated to the position of a precious object through speculation and international publicity, it produces capital for its further propagation as a 'unique object of universal significance', and in turn this adds further to its preciousness, and so on. And since all this takes place exclusively within Western historical and cultural contexts, it enhances Western civilization and contributes to its dominating power.

The whole process of the acceptance (or rejection), evaluation, elevation, propagation and signification of art, is maintained by an economically powerful art market which operates like a stock exchange in the capitals of the Western World – capital, publicity and speculation being its basic and essential tools. It also creates a privileged class of artists who in turn serve this market and its function in the system. Having been elevated to the 'pedestal of genius', these artists not only become trapped in a privileged

socio-economic milieu believing in their 'semi-god' status and their 'superhuman' power (like Midas turning *everything* into gold – Picasso comes to mind here), but more importantly they contribute to Western cultural domination by thus becoming instruments of its international propaganda. Their 'superhuman' and international status is in fact no more than an illusion created by all that money which flows into their bank accounts and their elevations as superstars on the world stage.

The numerous and frequent claims of internationalism by the Western artists who are internationally known (the so-called radicals are not exceptions here) are as ludicrous as the very concept of an international art based exclusively on Western values and developments. The fact is that this facade of internationalism is essential for many of these artists to maintain their self-esteem, by being elevated to a position from where they can look down upon the rest of the world. Their neo-colonial mental attitude is nurtured by the politico-economic power of the imperialist West, which provides them with all the material incentives for futile and self-indulgent activities.

If we appear so condemning in our attitude towards the West, it is not because we are against Western people (they are, in fact, also the victims of the same dominant ideology) or that we are envious of their progress/affluence. Neither are we turning our backs on everything Western. But, in the present context of our relationship with the West, it is difficult for us to be more charitable towards those who are always endeavouring to accuse us of laziness, lack of imagination/incentive, and so on, thereby obscuring their own misdeeds against humanity by perpetual reiterations of their pretentious claims to all human progress and civilization through their massive international propaganda.

Those apologists of the system who cynically reproach us for not yet creating our own contemporary art with our own values (and of so-called international standard), must now get off our backs. **AND STOP TELLING US WHAT WE MUST OR MUSTN'T DO, OR HOW WE SHOULD DEVELOP OUR ART.** Instead they ought to examine their own roles in the process and context of cultural imperialism and get rid of their own

deliberate ignorance and patronizing attitude (is it asking too much?), so that they may also see the world in its true perspective.

It should be made clear here that by 'West' we do not mean a monolithic West – or for that matter Third World. We recognize that there are both reactionary and progressive forces on both sides of the dividing line. But although the fundamental relationship between the West and the Third World remains as that of between the dominant and the dominated respectively, **our criticism is not meant to be directed at the progressive forces in the West.**

Blacks in Britain

Imperialist domination does not end with exploitation of Third World people in their own countries. It forces ordinary workers and peasants to leave their homes and search for a livelihood in the alien environment of its socially hostile metropolises. In addition, imperialist cultural propaganda, as well as specific recruitment, effectively lure many educated and trained young men and women into believing that they can find a better and more happy life if they leave their own countries and live in the West. The actual situation in which people from 'underdeveloped' countries thus find themselves living in the advanced industrial societies of the West, does not differ much from one Western country to another. We shall, however, confine ourselves here to our own predicament in Britain, but we do recognize that a similar pattern of racism and exploitation exists in other Western countries employing foreign labour,* not forgetting, of course, the US and those Afro-Asian peoples who are still living under the yoke of racist colonial/imperialist rule.

Black people in Britain today cannot be treated in the same way as 25 years ago when we, after being uprooted from our native soils, were rail-roaded into menial jobs. The aspirations of the younger generation of blacks, particularly those born in Britain, are very different. We cannot, and will not, accept only shitwork. If society cannot fulfil our expectations just because it does not wish

* For the predicament of migrant workers in Europe, see *A Seventh Man* by John Berger; Jean Mohr, Penguin Books, London.

to see us rising above our present existence at the bottom of the heap, we shall continue fighting for our rights. If some black kids are in the street, and a few have become what the establishment calls 'muggers', the fault does not totally lie with them but with the society.

HOWEVER, TWO MILLION BLACKS AREN'T GOING BACK HOME. BRITAIN IS OUR HOME AND WE WILL NOT ACCEPT OUR SECONDARY AND INFERIOR ROLE IN THIS SOCIETY. WE SHALL CONTINUE FIGHTING FOR OUR EQUAL HUMAN STATUS. THROUGH THIS WE ARE IN FACT CONTRIBUTING TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS SOCIETY INTO A BETTER ONE FOR ALL TO LIVE IN.

What must concern us is not only the blatant manifestation of racism by right-wing fascists who are now demanding our return to the countries of our origin after we have been milked for 25 years as cheap labour, but also the subtle racist attitude that prevails in every field and at every level of British life.

... and I certainly wouldn't like to see a Negro minority ruling over this country. A lot of nice bus conductors running to government isn't my idea of a sensible way out ... In Osborne's above comments (*The Observer*, 7 July 1968) on black people are, in essence, not very different from the hysterical outburst of Enoch Powell. Besides the subtle racism and paternalism of his remarks, his contempt for working people, both black and white, is clear. The absurd notion that blacks are 'taking over the country' reflects the paranoia of his privileged lot. How could half a million 'Negroes' take over a country of about 55 million people, which is still considered to be one of the most powerful in the world? Racists can indulge in such absurd fantasies!

That Mr Powell is a racist is not even doubted by many white people. What one can't perhaps do is accuse him of hypocrisy. Mr Powell has so far said, and we are sure he will say it again, that he is not 'against' black people but only our number. He would like to accept a small number of us amongst his white society.

mental jobs). In other words, he would welcome a considerably reduced number of blacks who, because of their numerical disadvantage, would remain docile and not overstep their roles defined by him, and thus would find themselves unable to confront this society with its racist philosophy. But how does Powell's attitude differ from that of Osborne who doesn't appear to like black people demanding more than the crumbs offered by his society?

We have quoted John Osborne *only* because his remarks even today typify a liberal attitude, and that of the establishment, characterized by hypocrisy and paternalism. We are often told that this society is not really racist and that it does offer FREEDOM OF CHOICE, THE SAME INCENTIVES and EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES to ALL its people. NICE WORDS! BUT ARE THEY ALSO MEANT FOR US? Of course, NOT. We must stick to bus conducting and let THEM write plays or produce works of art. It is no coincidence that black people are often portrayed in the media as waiters, objects-of-fun, exotic/ethnic dancers and entertainers, muggers, smugglers, gangsters, etc., perpetuating the racist myths of *intrinsic* inferiority and criminality of black people.

We have made this country our home. We cannot be pushed around or persuaded to leave. The above attitudes can only perpetuate antagonistic black-white relations. The positive alternative to this would be to accept the legitimacy of black-white conflicts and make concerted efforts to create a process in which these conflicts are constructively resolved for the betterment of the *whole* society. This could only be achieved through openly questioning the historical background and the present roots of racism, and at the same time exposing and confronting the system's manipulation of people's fears and insecurity under capitalism.

We cannot, however, go into all the problems we face here. What we intend to show specifically is how we are prevented from participating in the cultural life of the country which we have now made our home. If our argument is confined only to black artists, whose presence in the country has been deliberately ignored, it is not because the problems facing black artists are more important

than those of black people at large. The problematic situation of black artists, in fact, reflects a social attitude which affects all of us black people. We cannot therefore separate black artists from the total context of blacks in this country. THE DOOR WHICH IS SHUT IN OUR FACE BY A WHITE LANDLADY IS ALSO THE DOOR WHICH OPENS TO THE ART ESTABLISHMENT.

Now, how does the attitude of the British art establishment towards blacks differ from the general one? This would be better understood if we recognize that the art establishment in general, and its official/public bodies in particular, act as a mechanism to regulate art and cultural activities and thereby assert control over them. Therefore, the function of the art establishment cannot be separated from the ideology of the system. In other words, if racism is part and parcel of the system, it cannot be absent from the components that regulate its art and cultural activities.

Kenneth Coutts-Smith, writing in the catalogue introduction to 'Second Commonwealth Biennial of Abstract Art', Commonwealth Institute, London, 1965, said: '... Some years ago commonwealth artists were arriving in London to work and establish a name, and found themselves in somewhat of a difficult position. Except in very rare instances they were receiving little or no support from the Art authorities in their home countries. At the same time the official bodies in this country, by the very structure of their charters, were invariably unable to do much beyond offering encouragement.' (Emphasis added).

This structure, we believe, still exists and it cannot be other than *the support structure* for the promotion and the development of art in Britain. In other words, it is the main function of the British art establishment, particularly its official bodies, to encourage, support and thus promote the art activity of its people. The question now is: whom does it actually consider *its people*? The answer to this would be, of course, the British people. But this does not answer everything, because the crucial part of the whole question is: what are the various components that make up British society? Are we black people considered part of the society or merely looked

open upon as immigrant workers? Enoch Powell provides us with an answer when he says: "They don't belong to this society. Do you?" (ITV, 3 January 1976). We believe that the art establishment does not really disagree with Powell. This becomes evident when we look into its indifference towards black artists, denying them any recognition for their art activities in Britain for the last 20 years or so years. This was confirmed at the Third Regional MAAS Conference on Ethnic Arts, London, 19 June 1976. In answer to a complaint from a black person, one of the Arts Council's representatives, Ruth Marks, bluntly remarked that the Arts Council was a traditional British institution whose function was to support its own professional artists. The implication here is very clear. Black artists are considered neither British nor professional by the Arts Council - and that must go for the whole art establishment.

When we speak of the British art establishment, we mean the whole art establishment - art galleries, museums, art magazines and books, art schools, and what have you, official and private. But we are more concerned here with the Arts Council of Great Britain and the British Council, which are the main official bodies that support and promote art and cultural activity at home and abroad respectively. These bodies are financed by public money which does surely include the tax money from black people in British society. This means WE BLACK PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY CONTRIBUTING TOWARDS THE COST OF RUNNING THE OFFICIAL ART BODIES AND THUS TOWARDS THE SUPPORT AND PROMOTION OF ART/CULTURE IN BRITAIN. But what do we get OURSELVES in return? NOTHING, or maybe SOME CRUMBS sometimes.

The official bodies would say that they do not discriminate on racial grounds. Of course, they don't have to hang a 'NO BLACKS PLEASE' board outside their doors. But how many black artists have ever managed to get through? If no door was ever shut on them, IT WAS ONLY BECAUSE NO DOOR WAS EVER OPENED TO THEM. The facts speak for themselves: no black artist has ever been included in any official exhibition or survey representing the various developments of visual arts in Britain

since the time we have been here, not to mention any individual show or representation abroad.

If the *absence* of black artists from *what is recognized* is any indication of the real situation in Britain, then it would either mean that there are no black artists – which would again mean that we black people are not interested in art activity – or that black artists are not good enough for any consideration by the art establishment. The truth is that the official bodies, as well as the art establishment at large, have turned a blind eye to the very presence of black artists in Britain and to their actual contributions. Furthermore, the fact that black people also need, and must have as *our right*, official support for the development of our art and cultural activities, has been *deliberately* ignored. Any suggestion here that the work of black artists might not have been, or may not be, of high standard or any significance, would be nonsensical. There is enough evidence that the work of black artists can be compared with that of their white contemporaries who are recognized both nationally and internationally, *in spite of the fact that black artists have to work under conditions (physical as well as mental) which few white artists would be able to bear for long.*

The art establishment does not have to have an open and declared policy which discriminates between white and black artists. But that does not necessarily mean that a mechanism of control, or an attitude, which denies black artists their access to the art establishment and their rightful recognition does not exist. We must not forget that the institutional structure of official bodies was considerably developed and nourished at the time when Britain had a colonial Empire. And since its old structure has not been changed to come to terms with the fact that blacks in Britain are no longer colonial subjects but British citizens, those controlling the official bodies (and the private ones as well) still act, consciously or unconsciously, with a colonial attitude towards black people.

We can understand this better when we appreciate that there is still an imperialist power (in a neo-colonial sense) which are promoted abroad as part of its international cultural propaganda. Its promotional pattern is still based on cultural

