Re-reading the Postcolonial Archive & Britain (London, 13-14 May 27)

Whitechapel Gallery and The Courtauld Institute of Art, London, UK, May 13–14, 2027
Deadline: Jan 4, 2027

Noelle Derksen

Re-reading the Postcolonial Archive and Britain: Art, Praxis and Theory (1978-2002).

Edward Said wrote Orientalism (1978) as a Palestinian in exile. He described the book as, in part, a personal inventory, in Gramsci's phrase, of the traces that the history of empire had left on him. Theory here begins as an attempt to understand displacement through the historical structures that produced it. This conference takes Said's publication as its starting point and follows the critical period as “postcolonial” became institutionalized beyond the theoretical through artistic practice, dominating the cultural imagination of the long 1980s and 1990s before globalization became the overarching paradigm for contemporary art practice. Okwui Enwezor’s Documenta 11 (2002) culminates the period bracketed by this conference regarded as the groundbreaking moment that situated postcolonial discourse in the contemporary art world.

Over these two decades, theorists including Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Ranajit Guha produced the texts that would form the canon of postcolonial theory. In Britain, this work was first made in a specific political period defined by Thatcherism and neoliberalism, the 1981 British Nationality Act, the uprisings of 1981 and 1985, and a struggle over Black and Asian representation in British institutions. Within visual practice, these theoretical interventions were also made alongside, and sometimes against, artists, filmmakers, curators and editors who contested those institutions directly and engaged in the politics of difference. They included the BLK Art Group, Black Audio Film Collective, Iniva, Sankofa, Autograph, Third Text (founded 1987) and The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain (Hayward Gallery, 1989).

On the occasion of the Whitechapel Gallery’s forthcoming major exhibition, Through Holes in the Clouds: Artists and the Postcolonial Imagination (17 March - 5 September 2027), this symposium asks whether the theoretical debates and turns of this critical period offer new resonance, traction and meanings worth revisiting in our contemporary world? What do these critical texts and their widespread impact between 1978-2002 reveal about what theory could do within and against the institutions of the museum, the gallery, the MFA program, and the university? As the multiculturalism of the 1990s absorbed the vocabulary of the 1980s, how did these structures remain largely unchanged, upholding systems of exclusion, just as Anglo-American institutions of higher learning began to absorb, anthologize, hire, and simultaneously, critique these theorists? How does postcolonialism now stand in relation to anti-Blackness, decolonial critiques, and contemporary Black studies, which often define themselves against it? What determines who enters histories of Bri-

tish art and postcolonial thought, who remains marginal and who determines the terms of inclusion?

We invite contributions that take up the stakes and methods of postcolonial thought across Britain and its former empires, its analysis of a crisis from within, rather than its nostalgia. We welcome proposals from art historians, curators, artists, archivists, and scholars in cultural studies, literature, history, film and related fields, at all career stages.

Topics might include, but are not limited to:
- Re-reading 1980s and 1990s publications against their reception, circulation and use, for example: The Third Text Reader (2002)
- Black British art and cultural politics: artists, collectives, exhibitions, journals and institutions
- Political Blackness and its contested boundaries: racialization, solidarities and differences in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, within and beyond African, Caribbean and South Asian artistic formations
- Historicizing region, nation, post-nation and its discontents
- Institutional histories and interventions: funding, staffing, collecting, archives and governance
- Policing, uprisings, moral panic, protests and the visual in Britain
- Re-imagining the colonial archive, its historiography, and the impact of Subaltern Studies
- Hybridity and its constellations: praxis, methods and their legacies
- Theory in the gallery/museum: catalogues, collaborations and the authority of the postcolonial theorist with or against the postcolonial artist
- Exhibitions, conferences and theory, for example: The Other Story, Magiciens de la Terre, Shades of Black, Cities on the Move and Documenta 11
- Anti-Blackness, decolonial thought and contemporary Black studies
- Contemporary artistic practice and curatorial returns to the 1980s and 1990s
- Canon formation and its exclusion in British art

HOW TO SUBMIT
Please send an abstract of up to 250 words for a 20-minute paper, with a short CV (no more than two pages) to: rereadingthepostcolonial@gmail.com.

Proposals are due by January 4, 2027. Applicants will be notified by January 31, 2027.

An honorarium as well as a contribution towards travel and accommodation will be offered to all speakers.

Organized by Indie A. Choudhury (Courtauld Institute of Art), Devika Singh (Courtauld Institute of Art), Steve Edwards (Courtauld Institute of Art), Wenny Teo (Courtauld Institute of Art) and Caroline Fowler (Clark Art Institute).
Manton Centre for British Art at The Courtauld, Whitechapel Gallery, London and The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA.

Reference:
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