SCHIRN
KUNSTHALLE
FRANKFURT

JOHN AKOMFRAH
A SPACE OF EMPATHY
NOVEMBER 9, 2023 – JANUAR 28, 2024

WALL PANELS OF THE EXHIBITION

A critic once described the British artist John Akomfrah as one of the best social archaeologists of the present day. It is certainly true that the urgent sociopolitical issues of our times are at the heart of Akomfrah's opulent video works. The Anthropocene epoch, which is characterized by the immense influence of human beings all over the world, plays a recurrent role in his filmic exploration of complex human identities and ecological and climatic phenomena.
Rather than offering didactic solutions, Akomfrah's works raise questions and establish associations between lifeworlds, epochs, and experiences: to what extent are neocolonial structures and the climate crisis related? Why are marginalized communities disproportionately affected by environmental injustice? How essential is a respectful approach to other creatures for cultivating environmental awareness in the future? These are questions that impact us all.
Now, for the first time, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is dedicating a comprehensive solo exhibition to this British artist's impressive works, featuring three large video installations from recent years. John Akomfrah was born in Accra in 1957 and raised in Great Britain. This was where, in 1982, he cofounded the pioneering Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), which had a decisive influence on media narratives of the history of Black people in the UK. In his works *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), *Vertigo Sea* (2015), and *Becoming Wind* (2023), Akomfrah presents loud natural spectacles side by side with quiet archive recordings, time-lapse scenes, or calm and almost static images that tell of contemporary crises and past upheavals.
Using simultaneous narrative structures with very specifically applied sound, he interweaves his own film recordings with historical documentary material to create multilayered, associative collages. His video works break with the notion of linearity as much as they do with the illusion of there being *one* sole truth. For Akomfrah, it's all about the complexity of perceptions and a collaboration with his audience. The space for negotiating these discourses is, in his opinion, like a theater of understanding, a *Space of Empathy* where the consequences of individual and collective actions can be constantly questioned anew.
His video installations feature certain recurrent images and elements: threatening ticking clocks; the element of water in the form of the all-encompassing oceans; a person, alone and insignificantly small in majestic nature. It is no coincidence when looking at Akomfrah's works that the viewer is so often reminded of pictures from German Romanticism – take the figures in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, for example. The most important landscape painters of the Romantic era depicted people as lonely creatures of nature, never superior to nature, but instead on the way towards the most elevated Romantic transcendency.
"To immerse oneself in Akomfrah's installations feels almost like hopping on a carousel," writes cultural and media theorist Nelly Y. Pinkrah. "Soon, as the carousel gains speed, the world around becomes a blur of light, shadow, and motion. […] The rider must revisit what felt familiar after each round, then reconsider and reconstruct."

OPEN READING ROOM

This room marks the start of the exhibition, *John Akomfrah: A Space of Empathy*. At the same time, during the museum's opening hours, it is freely accessible to visitors who are not going to see the exhibition and can be used for various activities – for browsing, for being lost in thought, or

for conversations. Creative reading sessions and other formats will also take place here as part of the SCHIRN BOOKCLUB, which is open to all.
John Akomfrah's works are invariably preceded by extensive research. In addition to archive material on film, books have always played an important role for the British artist. The laboratory-like reading room you are currently in brings together publications that are, both directly and by association, related to Akomfrah's work and his recurrent themes. These are books from the artist's own library, which curator Julia Grosse has supplemented with further volumes. The selected publications are intended to expand on the themes and inspire questions that might even ultimately turn out to be related. What does protection of the climate have to do with traces of colonialism? Can forests think? And what do cultural theorists bell hooks and Stuart Hall discuss in the slim volume *Uncut Funk*?
This room is not intended to fulfill a didactic role, and there are no instructions or an "A–Z"-type logic for the right way to dive into the books. Just choose a work from the shelves and take it into the exhibition, and then later you can put it back on an entirely different part of the shelves or just leave it on one of the benches.
If you look around, you'll discover another layer of texts on the walls: an absorbing conversation between John Akomfrah and Julia Grosse in which the artist explains his relationship to empathy and his decades of dealing with archive material. Entirely in the spirit of an *Unfinished Conversation*, and in a similar manner to Akomfrah's video installations, this conversation does not begin at any obvious point on the walls. You can decide for yourself where you wish to embark on the story, what you read, and where you want to stop.

THE UNFINISHED CONVERSATION
It is often impossible to determine a distinct beginning or end to John Akomfrah's works. The title, *The Unfinished Conversation*, even suggests as much. In this video piece, Akomfrah documents the life and work of British sociologist Stuart Hall. This homage to one of the most influential cultural theorists of recent decades is also an unfinished conversation. Hall always rejected fixed categories in his work, arguing instead for broader, more open standpoints on factors such as identity and belonging. Akomfrah's 2012 work thus speaks of changeable perspectives, of being in the process of becoming, and of the flexible approaches adopted by a social observer whose extreme precision borders on dissection.
Akomfrah and Hall had known each other for a long time, and it is this close acquaintance that underpins *The Unfinished Conversation*, a sensitive and almost poetic exploration of film material from sources including Hall's own archive. The audience receives moving insights into Hall's personal life, his youth spent in Jamaica, and his first few years in Great Britain. Over and above this, the work consistently directs a complex and critical gaze at British society.
The Unfinished Conversation can be read as an experimental expansion of a documentary aesthetic as much as it can be perceived as a comprehensive, critical visualization and questioning of a one-dimensional narrative of the realities of life in Great Britain for Black people. In some respects, the work is connected to *Handsworth Songs* (1986), the first film by the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), of which Akomfrah was a cofounder. *Handsworth Songs* focuses on the unrest that broke out in reaction to the repressive police presence that targeted Black communities in London and in the Birmingham district of Handsworth in the 1980s.
Stuart Hall cofounded the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in 1964, around the same time as many of the people who would later go out on the streets in London and Birmingham were born. John Akomfrah is part of this generation, too. "At some point, we became aware of the fact that Hall had been studying the cultural phenomena that surrounded us since our births," he says in an interview with curator Julia Grosse. This recognition started a conversation that would endure until Hall's death.

VERTIGO SEA

In *Vertigo Sea*, John Akomfrah uses a combination of archive material and more recently filmed elements to focus on the sea and the centuries-old structures of exploitation associated with it. He deals with themes such as whaling and the abduction of millions of Africans during the era of the transatlantic slave trade. The tragic drownings of refugees attempting to cross the sea in recent times similarly play a role. Premiered at the 56th Venice Biennale, *Vertigo Sea* is one of Akomfrah's standout pieces that also influenced later projects. In this filmic work, beauty and terror go hand in hand in tightly edited images. The historical material draws on contemporary perspectives in a manner that is sometimes subtle and, in other cases, more tangible.

This work is distinguished by stomach-churning images of polar bears that are shot for their valuable fur, skinned on the spot, and left lying there as if they were useless trash. Then there are the dozens of birds that dive into the deep, while another screen shows a scene from a movie in which large groups of enslaved people are thrown from a ship into the Atlantic Ocean. As in many of Akomfrah's works, what is, in some cases, an unsettling juxtaposition of scenes reflects a challenging and complex present.

A central figure repeatedly appears in *Vertigo Sea*, wearing a historical uniform and gazing out on the vast expanse of water. It embodies Olaudah Equiano (1745–97), who was abducted from Nigeria as a child and enslaved, but then, after his later emancipation, became a key campaigner against the slave trade. Interweaving biographies in this manner is a typical tactic for Akomfrah, who often shifts the focus to the unseen, untold, and unheard aspects of our history/ies. Another recognizable stylistic device in *Vertigo Sea* is the intersection of genres, epochs, and perspectives, which the artist uses to create unexpected associations and disrupt our notions of linear narration.

BECOMING WIND

In *Becoming Wind*, John Akomfrah creates an allegorical representation of the Garden of Eden. On five large screens, he dives into a past when an abundant diversity of plant and animal species still existed on the planet. At the same time, he directs his gaze to the precarious ecosystem of the Anthropocene by weaving images from the current epoch of climate change into his work. The video also accompanies trans* actors and activists in their everyday lives and traces the deep need to provide spaces for one's personal and social identities in settings that are becoming increasingly complex.

Akomfrah endeavors to put across multiple perspectives in his work. The questions that accompany him along the way are complex: how do we recognize and respect differences? Where do elements such as *race*, gender, and the climate intersect in the context of social justice? Can these questions inspire each other, and where do any unexpected starting points arise? Is it possible that, ultimately, people and animals share an abundance of experiences of suffering and energy-sapping attempts to stay alive?

Akomfrah is concerned with exploring the specific societal realities of Black people's lives, for example, and investigating whether paradigms of ecology and of what is yet to come can be read from them. In an interview, he says: "In some ways, our specific realities are always suspended in this space of things to come – usually not very good things. All Black lives are predicated on this suspended or deferred present." The flexible identities of the future will have to face unprecedented challenges, and Akomfrah recognizes that they intersect with the dramatically changing ecological spaces we will have to adapt to. "We almost need to become wind-like to get there," adds the artist, giving us an insight into his outlook on the rapid changes occurring today.

SCHIRN
KUNSTHALLE
FRANKFURT

JULIA GROSSE IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN AKOMFRAH

Julia Grosse: The immersive experiences you create exist on several levels and screens. How crucial is the process of montage in getting very different types of sound and image to collaborate with each other in these near feature-length durations? It all seems so complex yet effortlessly done …

John Akomfrah: I occasionally joke that I consider myself more of a choreographer than an artist. There is a level of seriousness to that, because the default you need to have as a time-based artist is to be attendant to the rhythms of your content, the character of things. The recognition that these contents have multiple distinct characteristics suggests that, at some point, artists need to find a way of bringing them into a conversation with each other. I always unearth a lot during my processes and I have the desire to throw everything into my projects. This is where the question of choreography matters, because there must be some filter to withhold certain things, to establish a certain balance. Each of the collaborators I edit projects with has become really fed up at some point, because I just want to throw everything in! I have such a hard time letting go of my material. Firstly, because I like the democratic ethos of saying "Okay, everything has a chance." And secondly, I am fascinated by how the content needs to justify its *raison d'être* in the project. If certain ideas can't have a conversation with the other material, then they don't belong. But thoughts and details can come back, so the montage is certainly the most diplomatic of the functions: bringing everyone to the table while being aware of one's own role as initiator. I think I've paid a lot more attention to that as I've grown older because the other bits have become easier.

JG: What do you mean by "the other bits"?

JA: The other bits that you need to have in place – the ability to see, to frame, or research – those things get easier. They're like muscles, and as you use them over the years, they become more exercised. But the choreographing function doesn't get any easier. It remains constantly problematic. The challenges are always new. Even though I work with themes that come up repeatedly in different projects – migration, climate, colonial legacies – I've never made two pieces that were the same in terms of the montage.

JG: Have the increasing technical possibilities over the past 30 years made the choreography in your work even more complex?

JA: As things become more loaded with stuff, it becomes more difficult for sure. But one reason for it becoming more difficult, ultimately, is that I'm always interested in whether I can be surprised by something or not. When the exhilaration that comes with surprise is missing, I won't ever be happy with a project. This explains why the montage has become more and more difficult because of increasing problems of surprising myself – finding a new way of saying something or finding a new voice. But I always try.

JG: When does the surprise moment kick in?

JA: When I watch *Handsworth Songs,*[i] a film we produced as Black Audio Film Collective [BAFC] in 1986, I see the moments when the project turned a completely unexpected corner. Partly, this had to do with the innocence of our position; we just didn't know a huge amount about how to put things together. And what I'm still looking for today is that innocence – I just want to put myself in a

position of ignorance. That has its dangers, obviously, because sometimes people are just like, “Oh, he doesn’t know what he’s talking about” or “He’s made a fool of himself.” Whatever the critique is, it’s usually because I’m trying to put myself in a space of vulnerability as a way to be surprised by the material itself and by the decisions that I come up with. I’m not going to pretend that it’s always possible or successful to recreate this magical moment of innocence. It can sometimes feel as if I’m trying a bit too hard to achieve that, but I can tell you with absolute honesty that’s always the desire: to define that space of innocence from which to speak because, otherwise, nothing new comes.

I’m also very keen to speak from a certain space of vulgarity. I’ve always been told that there’s too much of something in my work: “Oh, your projects are too loud, too *musical*, too excessive!” But part of the excess was always about just throwing everything in and then wading in the mud, because there’s no point wading in clean water! The mud is much more interesting. That’s where the gold is.

JG: Watching *Becoming Wind* (2023), I felt addressed as a Black person and as a human being when it came to climate-related questions. Especially through some of the phrases used, like “We need to be quick.” I’d like to ask you who that “we” could be?

JA: It’s a question I have asked myself. Because, on one level, the project is very specific – almost all the participants are trans* actors and activists. So, the focus was on one group of people. On the one hand, I was talking about a specific experience, from which, on the other, one could convey something clearly universal: the urge and the necessity to express one’s identity in such a way that feels suitable to satisfy individual needs.

It was also important to see the ways our lives, Black lives, can be transformed into paradigms of ecology, paradigms of things to come. Because in some ways, our specific realities are always suspended in this space of things to come – usually not very good things. All Black lives are predicated on this suspended or deferred present. It struck me that there’s a way in which that sense of the impossible-identity-to-come fits the impossible ecological spaces that we need. We almost need to become wind-like to get there.

JG: In *Becoming Wind*, I loved what I read as the analogy of paradise: the scene with two children playing in the waves.

JA: I was very keen to do something about the aspect of innocence I mentioned. Growing up in the 1970s and ’80s, the mismatch between the discrimination that I and many people I know experienced and how society ignored it always felt incredible to me. My late friend Greg Tate spoke a lot about this, about the ways in which Black lives mirror certain genres of movie-making – either science fiction or horror. In horror films, the person about to be demolished often says, “Look, I see this thing!”, and everyone goes, “No, there’s nothing, relax. You’re seeing ghosts” – just before a knife-wielding hand comes slithering across the floor …

JG: And you’re like, “Turn around! It’s right behind you!”

JA: Black life in the 1970s felt like that for me. What was clearly obvious to me seemed as if it wasn’t to anybody else. Or, to put it in other words, it seemed as if I lived in a phantom land, as if I were the kid from M. Night Shyamalan’s film *The Sixth Sense*, seeing ghosts everywhere. “Do you see ghosts? Do you see racism?” “Yes, yes, I saw racism!” “What did it look like?”

I was interested in that moment when, even though I was least equipped to answer these questions, there still seemed to be a kind of clarity about what was wrong. The more I knew about society, the more complex it became to name things and to specify them. Whereas, when I was younger, I seemed to be able to nail it. I didn't necessarily have the analytical tools to tell society or even myself how to overcome things, but I had the affective map, the emotional ability to put my finger on the "thing". I think that, without this ability, most of us would have gone slightly insane. There's a sort of "becoming wind" feature that we all possess, I believe almost innately, as a species. The ability to just float through situations and sense areas of danger.

JG: Time plays a big role in your work. Historical narratives from Western perspectives, especially present-day ones, treat time as mostly linear, but obviously it is not. How do you approach the complexity of past, present, and future?

JA: The American intellectual Cedric Robinson called it the *racial* regime, which has very, very particular things to say about time and temporality. One of Robinson's most famous ideas is that Black people, being often considered as the "people from the elsewhere", exist outside time, as in the Hegelian proposition of us not having a history. To be told you don't have a history is to be told you don't exist in time. And yet, paradoxically, the insistence on "the others" existing outside time is simultaneously a re-insistence that they are completely imprisoned by time. The people who tell me I don't have any history also insist on calling me a "savage", which suggests that I haven't escaped time at all – quite the contrary! I'm locked in time, locked in the past, I haven't made it to the present.

JG: Yes, and no to the future, obviously.

JA: I'm obsessed with the confounding expectations temporality imposes on the *racialized* body. Sometimes they are contradictory, sometimes they make sense, sometimes they're baffling, sometimes they're humorous. With *Arcadia* (2023), one of the things that fascinated me was the attempt to ask when this map of modern time was instituted. There was a moment in the fifteenth century when something called the quattrocento[ii] perspective encouraged people to see depth. We accept very easily that our senses of space change, and have changed, and changed very dramatically. But for some reason, we don't accept it with time. So, one of the things I was trying to point out in *Arcadia* is how the change of perspective and space in the quattrocento is mirrored by a transformation in our sense of time. Many of the things that became universal demarcations of either civility or barbarity involve accepting a demarcation between nature and culture, and this demarcation is not even a spatial construct; it's a temporal one. You start off as the "savage" in nature, and the assumption is that, at some point, you can migrate to culture. The "jungle" is not just a space, it's an emblem of time. The "jungle" is where the "thing" lives when it's not civilized, when it hasn't come into culture. That's why *Arcadia* became this gigantic thing with clocks everywhere …

JG: Your works repeatedly bring to the table the entanglements between migration, colonial legacies, climate change, globalization, and economics from a historical but also a very acute, current perspective.

JA: There are so many thoughts on this. But I suppose the one that would help the most here comes from Angela Davis. In Manthia Diawara's film,[iii] it suddenly becomes obvious that, at the heart of Davis' critique of modern American capitalism, there is an interest in the abolition of the

carceral regime, the prison-industrial complex. This interest in abolition, which takes us to the beginnings of the Reconstruction era, has been a permanent feature in thoughts about Black lives: how can one dismantle structures of oppression that are already in place as one comes into being? The attendant ethic of abolition isn't hugely far from an interest in how people live and in the qualities of their lives. The minute you start to think through the qualities of Black lives – whether it's about the water crisis in Flint that transformed into a huge public health crisis for Black communities,[iv] or about what it really means to specify the so-called Global South as a productive place – it becomes clear: abolitionist thinking spaces have existed for quite some time now, but we still miss the opportunities to use them effectively for questioning power dynamics and oppression techniques.

So, on the one hand, I feel incredibly solitary in some of the work I'm doing, but on another level, I feel completely connected: to my parents' anti-colonial struggles, to figures in the '70s whose texts I've read on abolition, to the civil rights groups of the early '60s concerned with questions of emancipation and equality. The "environmental" is not a separate issue from our asking for land. Asking for freedom was also asking for land, land to be free in.

JG: "How can I create moments of empathy – how can I really shake people up?" Is this a question you ask yourself in the context of a project?

JA: All the time. There are many people, even friends, who tell me that my work lacks political gravity if it's "just" about creating empathy. But I'm afraid that, for me, it's enough. The people who say it's not enough underestimated the value of the ethical. One example: as a kid, I was really terrified of snakes. I found their silence terrifying; I was afraid of the unseen figure in my life. My mum used to say, "If you go to the garden you could get bitten by a snake!" And it took me a long time to come to the realization that being scared doesn't give me the right to destroy the things I fear. In *Becoming Wind*, it was crucially important to me that the snake and I should both have a frame for each other. The snake had to be there. It was a sign to clear our human spaces for all habitation and to also perceive these spaces as places for "the other".

JG: You mention the idea of finding frames for cohabitation, for sharing spaces, and bearing the others' perspectives. I have the feeling, with your video installations, that you are always trying to bring not only several but endless perspectives to the table.

JA: In a conversation I recently had with Kodwo Eshun of the Otolith Group, we were trying to talk through precisely this question. The point I was trying to make was that, when we come up with big categories like colonial, post-colonial, or imperial, they usually have implications for more than just humans. So, if someone in fifteenth-century Peru says "This now belongs to me", they're not just talking about the people, they're talking about the land, the trees, the animals. So, if the Incas or the Maya say no, they're not just saying no for themselves; they're saying no for the land, which includes all living beings and inanimate objects. The anti-colonial movement wasn't just a fight against *racial* subjugation.

JG: You said you have developed a routine over the years in your research practice. But what is the starting point – is it a theme, a topic? Do you start with researching it, or do you find it through your research?

JA: All of it. I am always in several states of departure and arrival. Some are to do with commissions, with being asked to write a text, or with giving an interview. Right now, I'm about to do an interview for a publication on the sound work of one of my closest friends and collaborators

from the BAFC, Trevor Mathison. So I'm thinking about the sonic now. I'm always in various stages of flight and landing.

In its purest form, the work would start with just a series of images – nothing profound. Those images themselves don't necessarily make it into the final piece. Or it might be just a couple of sounds. I remember making a film called *Who Needs a Heart* (1991) as a collective. That work started with listening to Tina Turner's "What's Love Got to Do with It?", which led to discovering a poem by Ntozake Shange called "Who Needs a Heart". Somehow the striking resonance of two Black women asking questions about the heart became the jumping-off point for the project. It can be as indirect as that. I try to leave myself in a space of complete vulnerability or openness. To be as unguarded as I can, because I know that the source of insight into the project can be very small or quite large. It can be a speck of a thought as well as a torrent of ideas. So, I try to just be attentive, but from a non-judgmental place.

JG: Which is difficult for all of us – to leave the thoughts at home.

JA: It's difficult, but it's the difficulty I like. With everything that I can remember doing, the form it finally took was never where it started. Absolutely never. One example is that of the two figures in *Peripeteia* (2012).[v] I first came across them in the early years of BAFC, in 1984 or '85, whilst working on a series about Black lives from antiquity to the present. We had noticed that there was a certain kind of narrative of Black lives in Britain – a narrative that was probably the same in most of Europe. People spoke about groups of individuals who got together, sometimes even formed communities, and were able to sustain precarious existences, on occasions for a long time, decades even. And then they were gone. My favourite image in this context is that they lived on a kind of flat Earth, walked to the edge, and sank into oblivion. It's one of the distinguishing features of diasporas: people are caught in a dialectic of making and unmaking, of appearance and disappearance. When you don't have a settled status, it's precarity above all that defines your life.

In 1984, we started thinking about a project on Black Britain, but it didn't happen for one reason or another. Yet those images stayed. And not only did they stay, but there were several moments when I thought that I'd found the right vessel or vehicle for them, only to find that they weren't going to work. Then they came back for *Peripeteia* and said, "Actually, we will be useful to you here." And once things reappear in such a way, they then very quickly open portals into our present. They open windows and, before you realize it, your whole work is done in a matter of weeks. There's a kind of enigma in an arrival; once the arrival happens, it has a unifying logic, it resolves the unspoken, and it ties all kinds of things up in an extremely interesting way.

JG: This leads nicely to the importance of the archive in your work. Just as back then with the BAFC, you still bring together newly filmed material with archival material …

JA: I am interested in the idea of the archive as a verb, as a noun, and as an adjective. I'm interested in the question of the untold and the hidden and the margins – how things migrate from the unknown to notoriety and presence. The diaspora is formed at this cusp of utopia, where people want to become – and they think, sometimes rightly and sometimes wrongly, that if you form communities you will survive. Well, one of the things you have to contend with when you form these communities and a diaspora is the question of the archive. Because the archive goes to the heart of sovereignty – of who is allowed to be. And it goes to the question in different ways. The archive addresses the fact that Black life is formed by a slightly schizophrenic dialectic: on the one hand, it says that it is formed and governed by discourses of the present. Yet, at the same time,

that it is completely formed by the historical, because the very act of naming Blackness relies on previous narratives. We are named either as an emblem of freedom or as a problem.

JG: There are many layers to archives. Dominant archives give us rather one-sided narratives, whilst there are hidden archives that are not easy to access. Which archives are you referring to, which are you interested in?

JA: I quickly realized that the academic way of talking about the archival, with demarcations between official and unofficial history, makes very little sense. A lot of the time, you have to discover the unspoken and the unofficial inside the interstices of the official. The vast majority of the moving image archives I have used over the past 40 years do not come from a hidden source. Most of it is in plain sight – it's in the vaults of the BBC, for instance. You have to find it *within* the official pantheon. But it is hidden in the sense that the *racial* regime is very much in place in the selection and categorization process. This material is invariably hidden in the vaults of programmes regarding social problems, traffic problems, or crime.

JG: The dreaded hidden corners!

JA: Yeah! Their absolute alterity does not lie in their hiddenness but in the difference with which they have been treated in the official idiom of television. In these realms, Black people just don't exist as free people at all, so the excavation of certain narratives is partly about trying to refuse the protocols by which the material is organized. When we access the archive, the first thing we do is switch off the sound, because nine-tenths of the problem is the discriminating wording. Switch it off! It's incredible sometimes. There was one film, for instance, that I got from the BBC, shot and put together by their Current Affairs department for one of those programmes that come out with bad news – pristine, wonderful 35-mm footage that we used in the sequences of arrival at the beginning of *The Nine Muses* (2010).

When we turned off the sound, I realized that something was happening in the image – something that the people who were filming didn't think was possible. They were filming people arriving in Britain from the West Indies getting off the boats, and it never entered their minds that the people they were commenting on were also making comments about them. If you watch very carefully, one of them says, "Look 'pon that idiot there." We could read his lips, but only because we turned off the sound. Suddenly the subaltern was speaking, as Gayatri Spivak phrases it. And he certainly had a point of view. Because what idiocy is it that you would film some people and immediately frame them as a problem? Without this man knowing the film crew's agenda, he was able to point out the absurdity of the situation to his friend. This is one of the pay-offs of working with the archival – something always emerges. Even if it was hiding in plain sight.

It's one of the things that surprised many people when BAFC started with *Handsworth Songs*. Until then, they had been used to a certain standard default for radical oppositional cinema. The dominant society says this, and you say that. What people didn't quite get their heads around was that you could take what they had been watching their whole lives and transform it. It never struck anybody that you could use seemingly distinct media images to speak about questions of intimacy, of Black becoming, or of the search for home. These are the normal literary narrative questions that you would ask of anything, but they had never been asked in relation to these images. It was rather: who are these people, where are they coming from, what do they want? But why would anybody make a journey of so many thousands of miles just to become a problem? If you can assume that they might have a reason, then at some point you're going to have to ask

what those reasons are. We can't just assume that the default is a kind of nihilist one: "I'm getting on a boat to be a migrant and cause problems."

JG: Was this a point of departure for BAFC in the early 1980s?

JA: Very much. I always said our questions are not formal enough to qualify as avant-garde. Our work was rather about some very real things with profound philosophical implications. There were what the philosophers call epistemological questions: how do we know who we are? You knew that if you asked questions about backgrounds, this would somehow translate to other people. Because it was clear that society was grappling with the same questions.

The first thing we did was a tape and slide project that was called *Expeditions One: Signs of Empire* (1983). And one of the phrases that runs through this work is a disingenuous reply by a Conservative Party member of parliament to a question about how young Black kids find room in British society. The voice says, *"I don't think they know who they are or what they are. And really what you're asking me is how one gives them that sense of belonging."* I mean, all the disingenuousness of post-imperial Britain is in that one phrase! This is a man whose forefathers owned plantations, and he doesn't know who we are or *what* we are. We're going to tell you exactly who we are. And not in the kind of language you expect to hear from us. We're going to tell you in the language that the culture that has given birth to us has taught us. While society has been wondering who or *what* we are, it has given us – not many of us, but quite a few of us – incredible educations. And we've got to use that to tell you what we've learned about who we are. It will surprise you because it will tell you a lot about yourselves as well.

So all that was the *raison d'être* for our collective. And I'm glad our work developed in the ways it did, I'm glad that it worked. There are now many, many things that my son takes for granted about being a person of colour in this country, in Britain.

JG: We talked about the effect of turning the sound of archival material off and seeing more without it. Still, sound plays a significant role in your work.

JA: Sound started acquiring its current centrality as part of a project aimed at deconstructing the archival. As we began to remove the so-called original soundtracks that came with much of the archival moving-image material, we felt a need to find sonic alternatives for it. I think this partly came from the unique place that the sonic occupies in Western European culture. I can speak specifically for Britain, because I've grown up here, where the sonic anticipated many of the movements of decline. The outliers of the post-industrial, for example, the sonic understood that first. When you first heard punk or post-punk, especially Joy Division, you instantly felt that something had stopped working; something was disappearing. The sonic gave you insight into the abyss – the things to come. We've tried to mine that, to excavate in that void, for a very long time. It seemed to me as if all that was to be new needed to come from a place of the unthought, the unformed. The sonic has a really dramatic way of identifying that.

JG: In a way, I have always seen you as a sound artist too.

JA: There were many things that we learned from improvised music at BAFC, especially from free-form jazz. It told us about how to present a kind of impossible script. Improvised language idioms, wherever you find them, always imply the same thing: "We're going to propose something that seems clear at the outset, and then we will wander away into the unknown, the elsewhere. We will

wander away, and for the duration that we're gone, we'll try to converse with our place of departure; but what will be clear from the beginning is that the arrival point is most important to us. Even if it's just a restatement of where we've just come from, you will hear it slightly differently."

Sound became important not just as noise or music but as an instance of possible narration: as the ability to hold all kinds of things that don't appear to have any relation to each other. Wandering away but endlessly conversing, talking to each other.

The Estonian composer Arvo Pärt is a great influence in that respect. His work has been a study of distillation, organized by an ethic of subtraction, of minimizing things until only the absolutely essential is left. Even though the sonic sphere of my work feels maximalist, it's in fact animated by a very minimal credo. The idea is to work with just what is necessary, even if it feels very loud. Minimal, for me, has always meant: the absolutely essential. But the absolutely essential can play itself out in a very discursive, noticeable, and heterogeneous way.

Almost everything that I do now starts silent. I don't even shoot synced sound anymore. Occasionally, we still record something from a certain place and then add it to the image afterwards, but very, very rarely. Everything sonic, we literally build layer by layer by layer.

JG: The waves, the sound of animals, rustling leaves – all that is built from scratch?

JA: It's completely sound designed; it's a lot of work. Many of the sounds are based on a sense – sometimes a very definite sense – of what certain images would sound like. If you could speed up the sound of fungus growing, then we would try to match it within the film. The sound is dependent on what the textures are: growing through stones, coming up through the ground soil, or dried leaves crumbling.

JG: In *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012) – an exploration of the memories and archives of the acclaimed British cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall (1932–2014) – the focus is strongly on language, on Hall talking. Did you think about working with or about Stuart Hall for a long time?

JA: Good question! Yes and no. He was one of the few people who saw the assembly edit of *Handsworth Songs*. We invited him to come and look at it and then talk to us about it, because Stuart had this very unique space in Black British life.

From 1959 to 1963, he was a member of the New Left. But he was also one of the founders of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in 1964, which is exactly when many of the kids who would be rioting in the streets of Birmingham in *Handsworth Songs* were born. In 1985, all these kids were 18 or 19 years old, so Hall had been observing the emergence of my generation from the beginning. He was there, watching us be born and grow up. The book, *Policing the Crisis*, which he co-authored in 1978, was about us.[vi] Many of the kids arrested for mugging back then were age 15 or 16. At some point, we became aware of the fact that Hall had been studying the cultural phenomena that surrounded us since our births. So we started to talk to him initially about doing a project that might focus on a so-called *Century of Race*, collecting material, and discussing it with him. He was in quite poor health, so it was clear that he might not make it to the end of the film's production. He was able to see it but died shortly after we finished.

JG: The *Unfinished Conversation* also had a big impact on Black German perspectives. It's a piece that goes beyond the context of Britain and really touches diasporas everywhere – people who are still finding their place, their identity, and where they belong.

JA: I remember in the 1980s, a number of Afro-German groups and individuals, especially feminists, had very deep connections with people here in the UK. Women such as May Ayim[vii] and Audre Lorde.[viii]

JG: Yes, the 1980s were a very important phase for Black German identity-building, and important voices such as May Ayim's were the initiators of the Afro-German movement who created visibility for Black people in Germany with their works.

JA: There was a sort of shared dialogue, especially in the context of the International Black Book Fair in London between 1980 and 1985. Speaking at those conferences, May knew a lot of the Black feminist groups here, so there were conversations across the room. I mean, obviously, we were not talking about the same things as today. When you had a conference with Black artists or on Black art then, the number of people in the room would be 30 or 40. If you hold an event like that now, it will be big!

---

[i] *Handsworth Songs* (1986), an early work produced by the Black Audio Film Collective, was filmed during the 1985 riots in Handsworth (an inner-city area of Birmingham in the West Midlands) and London that erupted in reaction to the repressive policing of Black communities. The BAFC, founded in 1982 and active until 1998, comprised seven Black British and diaspora filmmakers: John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Edward George, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, Claire Joseph, and Trevor Mathison; Joseph left in 1985 and David Lawson replaced her.
[ii] The quattrocento is the term historians and art historians use to refer to the collective cultural and artistic events that took place in the fifteenth century in early Renaissance Italy.
[iii] Manthia Diawara (dir.), *Angela Davis: A World of Greater Freedom*, 2023, Portugal, two-channel video installation, 4K to HD, 43:40 min.
[iv] The public health crisis in Flint, Michigan, USA, started in 2014 after the drinking water in the city was contaminated with lead and possibly *Legionella* bacteria.
[v] *Peripeteia* (2012) takes as its starting point two drawings by Albrecht Dürer: *Bildnis eines Afrikaners* (1508) and *Katharina* (1521).
[vi] Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*: *Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London, Macmillan, 1978).
[vii] May Ayim (1960–96) was a German poet, educator, and activist in the Afro-German movement.
[viii] Audre Lorde (1934–92) was a US-American writer, radical feminist, professor, and Civil Rights activist. From 1984 to 1992, Lorde spent several months each year in Berlin.