

What Should White Culture Do? Art, Politics, Race

A public symposium
Royal College of Art, Battersea
Saturday 11 November 2017
11.00–19.30

11.00

Introduction

Kiera Blakey (Curator, Art on the Underground)

Daniel C. Blight (Visiting Tutor, Critical & Historical Studies, Royal College of Art; Lecturer in Photography, University of Brighton; Co-editor, Loose Associations, The Photographers' Gallery)

11.30–13.30

Panel I: Contemporary Art, Popular Culture, Race

11.30

Performing the space, performing histories – gender, race, class and subjectivity in relation to visual practice

Sutapa Biswas (Artist and Reader, School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University)

This paper will explore ways in which questions of labour, race, gender, class and time have informed the aesthetic language in the work of artists Howardena Pindell, Sutapa Biswas and Adrian Piper. It will address how learning metaphorically the art of 'knocking over the apple cart', from Manet's Olympia to the present, became a means to survival.

12.00

On Cowboys and Indians:

History, Fantasy and Southwest Kitsch

Dr Anthony Faramelli (Mental health recovery worker, Single Homeless Project, London; visiting lecturer in Film & Screen Studies, University of Brighton)

In the United States the Southwest (Arizona and New Mexico) is a region marked by a particular relationship to Native Americans. Home to a violent and brutal history of settler colonialism that has led to a present-day uneasy relationship between white populations and the indigenous populations where the division is demarcated by geopolitical borders between cities and reservations, the region nevertheless aesthetically identifies itself by appropriating indigenous cultural symbols to create a particular form of kitsch art. This aesthetic has since been exported (marketed) throughout the world, often by so-called "new age" cultures and insidious "festival clothes," manifesting as a white cultural fantasy of Native American culture. In this semi-autobiographical paper, I will argue that America's refusal to confront its history of genocide has created a global metonymic figure of the "good Indian" as a way to nullify guilt or culpability with fantasy. This fantasy, however, becomes untenable when confronted with the realities of the reservation system. Beyond the problematic discourses on recognition, I will argue that American and

European cultures need to confront the history of genocide and reject the Southwestern aesthetics marketed around the globe.

12.30

What Will White Culture Have to Do?

Jade Montserrat (Artist)

Taking my project 'The Rainbow Tribe' as a creative starting point, in this presentation I will address the key question: What collective strategies might we enact in resistance to structural racism? The project's title is taken from Josephine Baker's pivotal 20th-century experiment 'The Rainbow Tribe' in which a group of 12 ethnically-diverse children were adopted by Baker. The project explores Baker's fairy tale-like ideas of a modern mixed-race family within the climate of global 21st-century issues surrounding cultural diversity and political freedom, within the context of the Imperial movement. 'The Rainbow Tribe' project defines itself as a "cultural mix of peoples" who are "advocates of free movement". The Rainbow Tribe project questions our collective agency, responsibility and commitment as global participants on a worldwide stage.

13.00–13.30

Panel Discussion

Chaired by Sunil Shah (Artist and writer)

13.30–14.30 Lunch Break

14.30–16.30

Panel 2: Contemporary Art, Migration Studies, Race

14.30

What crisis? Whose crisis? Power and knowledge production on Mediterranean boat migration

Dr Nando Sigona (Senior Birmingham Fellow, Senior Lecturer and Deputy Director of IRiS, Department of Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology, University of Birmingham)

The paper looks at the production and reproduction of the 'crisis' narrative surrounding recent boat migration across the Mediterranean and the main actors involved in the process. Drawing from extensive empirical research carried out in 2015–2016 in the Mediterranean region as part of the ESRC-funded MEDMIG project, the paper offers new insights into how the story of Europe's 'migration crisis' unfolded and its consequences today.

15.00

To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light

Oliver Chanarin (Artist and Professor of Photography, Hochschule für bildende Künste (HFBK), Hamburg, Germany)

Jean-Luc Godard famously refused to use Kodak film during an assignment to Mozambique in 1977, on the grounds that the film stock was inherently "racist". Indeed, the history of film and photography is inextricably linked to the narrative of whiteness and in particular the civil rights movement in America. The title of my presentation derives from a phrase used by the Kodak Corporation to describe the capabilities of a new film stock developed in the early 80's to address the inability of earlier products to accurately render dark skin. Adam Broomberg and I worked with so-called "racist film" on a project in the West African country of Gabon and later in South Africa, where we explored the collusion of the Polaroid Corporation with the Apartheid state. Through the presentation of these and other related projects I will argue that technology cannot help embody the ideology of its own epoch.

15.30

Visceral Canker – Migration, race and bodies

Dr Yasmin Gunaratnam (Reader in Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London)

'Visceral Canker' is an installation created by the late British artist Donald Rodney, who died of sickle cell disease in 1998. The sculpture is a sensational animation of the crossing-over and circulation of various structures and histories of pain and disease (slavery, diaspora and deadly blood). Taking my inspiration from Rodney, I will draw from my work with the cohort of post-war migrants to England who are now ageing and dying, as well as more recent research on immigration policing. I want to lure out connections that have been whited-out through a discussion of the entanglements between whiteness and racialisation. In this context migration and the work of hospitality is a political rather an ethical issue, refracted through black and brown bodies and their sedimentations in British infrastructures as much as in Mediterranean ocean beds. National borders have always been devices of race-making. Through a long lineage of violation, racially marked bodies have been repeatedly deselected from humanity because of whiteness as a shape-shifting structure of domination. And so an underlying argument is that whiteness should be indefinitely detained.

16.00–16.30

Panel Discussion

Chaired by Dr Ben Burbridge (Senior Lecturer in Art History, University of Sussex)

16.30–17.00 Break

17.00–19.30

Panel 3: Critical Whiteness Studies and White Subject Formation

17.00

Whiteness: privilege or plague?

Dr Richard Seymour (Author, commissioning editor of 'Salvage')

This talk takes its cue from James Baldwin's famous: "As long as you think you're white, there's no hope for you." The question is what people might be getting out of the ideology of 'whiteness'. The language of 'privilege' can only take us so far, and may be losing whatever subversive force it once had, being all too readily available for a politics of bourgeois civility which is implicated in the conservation of white-supremacy. Politely acknowledging inequalities, this politics ritualises the administration of guilt and thus the fortification of the defences. Yet we can't simply dismiss the concept, or the effects it describes; it is, indeed, as real as its investments. I will propose that these investments are largely to be found in the unconscious fantasies structured around racial signifiers, which appear to make a spurious 'sense' of the nonsense of race. These, I argue, are visible in several recent episodes in British politics covering over the last year, from Thomas Mair's pre-Brexit murder of a 'traitorous' member of parliament to the Grenfell fire and its aftermath, wherein 'whiteness' discloses itself as a form of madness, a plague on its adherents, witting and unwitting. How do we free ourselves of this plague? How do we dissolve these unconscious investments?

17.30

What can we do about Black beauty shame?

Dr Shirley Anne Tate (Professor of Race and Education, Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University)

Black women are imbricated in experiences of transgenerational Black beauty shaming events and Black beauty shame scripts on a daily basis. They/we are also caught in a loop of the negative affects aligned with shame (Munt, 2008) These Black beauty shaming events and shame scripts are laid over the surface of the body as a discursively constructed, circumscribed and transgenerational 'second skin' (Cheng, 2010) which conditions the politics of hypervisibility of Black and Black-white 'mixed race' beauty. The operation of Black beauty shame's 'second skin' has far-reaching impacts on subjectivity as shame becomes all one can see, all one can feel, whether that shame emerges from the Black Nationalist or white ideal. These ideals as second skins occlude Black beauties and reproduce them as lack so that women have to resist a 'self-hate journey'. Black beauty shame extends across interpersonal, political, social and cultural relationalities. Doubt, fear and shame create powerful affective attachments to or detachments

from, those despised objects of dark(er) skin and non-straight hair as hyper-visible signifiers of Black African descent or lighter skin and straighter hair as signs of Black mixed racedness. Black women's conversations on beauty shame produce teachable moments on how to get beyond it.

18.00

Keynote Lecture: Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Breakdown of Whiteness

Dr George Yancy (Professor, Department of Philosophy, Emory University)

In this keynote address, I will critically think through the problematic ways in which the Black body has been stereotyped, stigmatized, and criminalized through the white gaze. I argue that the white gaze is structurally binary and thereby the white gaze feeds off Black bodies and bodies of color to survive. In other words, the Black body functions, as James Baldwin recognized, as a fixed star according to which the white gaze/white identity formation depends. I will explore examples of this. I will also explore what this means in terms of confronting the white gaze/whiteness. I propose that the white gaze/whiteness must breakdown, and must un-suture, as a way of relating to Black people and people of color. The aim of the talk is to challenge white people to be more human, especially as whiteness is a practice and an ideology that is anti-human.

19.00–19.30

Panel Discussion

Chaired by Daniel C. Blight

19.30 Drinks Reception