

Smithsonian Magazine  
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## Smithsonian MAGAZINE

AT THE SMITHSONIAN

### Artist John Akomfrah Is Having a Moment

The works of the recently knighted filmmaker address contemporary issues in two different Smithsonian museums



John Akomfrah at his London studio, 2016 © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery. Photography by Jack Hems.

Our daily immersion in a bombardment of images, in repeated patterns, at a fraught moment in contemporary history, makes the multichannel work of the artist [John Akomfrah](#) both familiar and especially compelling.

And the Ghanaian-born, London-based filmmaker is getting noticed for it. Already this year Akomfrah [has been](#) knighted—and [chosen](#) to represent Great Britain in the 2024 Venice Biennale, where he's been featured twice before.

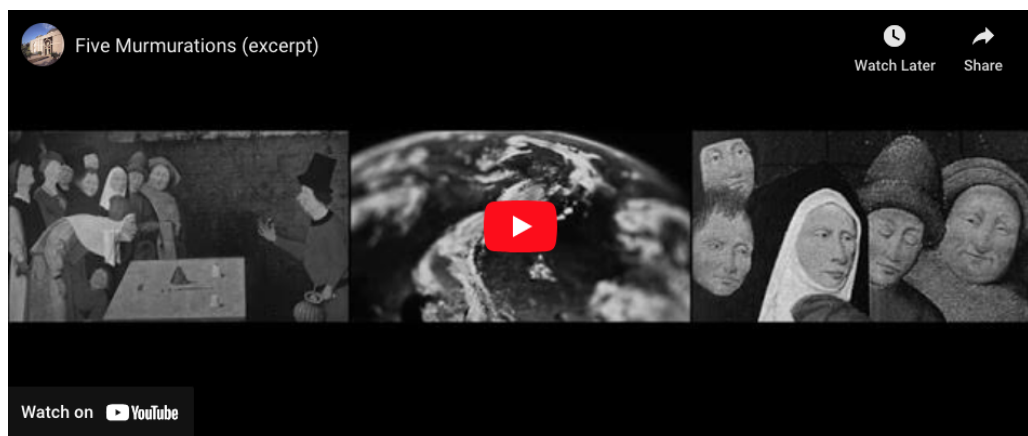
In 2023, his work is being featured in three different exhibitions in Washington, D.C. alone, including at two Smithsonian museums. The 1986 [Handsworth Songs](#) was on view earlier this year in the exhibition "This Is Britain: Photographs From the 1970s and 1980s" at the National Gallery of Art. The 2017 video installation [Purple](#), which the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden purchased in 2021, opened last November and continues to run for the rest of the year. And this month, his 2021 [Five Murmurations](#) went on view at the National Museum of African Art.



Installation view of *John Akomfrah: Purple* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Photo by Ron Blunt © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.

The immersive, six-screen *Purple* deals with the environmental crisis, balancing cinematic scenes of solitary figures standing in nature with the encroachment of smoke-belching factories and power lines. Photography from Alaska, French Polynesia and Greenland is juxtaposed with archival images of industry, political movements and even scenes of life and death, with the sounds of burbling brooks and birdsong heard amid spoken word and occasional song (from Billie Holiday).

*Five Murmurations*, by contrast, is a black-and-white meditation on the recent era of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter, depicting scenes of handwashing and isolation with those of protests following the 2020 murder of George Floyd, whose final minutes, as viewed through the smudged lens of a police camera, are accompanied by Floyd's haunting cries for help. Disturbing scenes of past colonialism pop up. And seen intermittently throughout the production are kaleidoscopic flocks of birds, flying and changing directions together in a synchronous act that ornithologists call murmuration—a strategy that wards off predators.



The weight of being represented in a single year by three concurrent showings on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.—each addressing the era's largest concerns—is not lost on Akomfrah.

"Growing up poor in Accra is a very different experience than being in Washington," he told a crowd at a Hirshhorn artist's talk in April. "So the politics of location, the question of location, seems to me to matter a huge amount."

"It's not entirely coincidental that the two [Smithsonian] museums are in the center of the greatest power on earth," he said. "Nor is it a coincidence that when I was asked to do something I was like, 'Yes!'"



It was in 1982 that Akomfrah, who had moved to the United Kingdom with his family as a child, co-founded the Black Audio Film Collective. One of the collective's significant early works was the single-channel piece *Handsworth Songs*, which Akomfrah directed. Like the artist's other works on display in Washington this year, it runs about an hour.

"I spent about ten years in television making documentaries, and one of the things that I hated, because it seemed so old-fashioned, was what they called the 'cradle-to-grave' documentary," Akomfrah said at the Hirshhorn. But he soon realized that the format, so overdone in documentaries, might actually work in an art piece.

So for the ambitious *Purple*, he said, "I set out consciously to create what could be called a cradle-to-grave structure: Start off with people being born, and you watch them grow and die in the Anthropocene. That's the point of view."



John Akomfrah, *Purple*, 2017, 6 channel HD video installation with 15.1 surround sound, Dimensions variable, 62 minutes © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.



John Akomfrah, *Purple*, 2017, 6 channel HD video installation with 15.1 surround sound, Dimensions variable, 62 minutes © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.

The Anthropocene, the term for the current geological epoch, is defined by the human impact on the planet's ecosystems. "The reality is that we as a planetary entity, human beings, have suddenly found ourselves in a place where, since 1945, we are apparently, we have left an imprint on the planet," Akomfrah said. "We're on the verge of extinction but we don't know what catalytic roles we have played in all of this. *Purple* starts from this recognition."

*Purple*, so named for the traditional color of mourning in Ghana, includes his own memories, growing up in southwest London next to a power station spewing out smoke and carbon. Did the power station's toxic output affect an entire generation that breathed it in? Did it help cause their generational rebelliousness?

"The two things were completely understood as being mutually exclusive," Akomfrah said. "So *Purple* is also about trying to make these connections, which were not apparent as I lived through it."

The film also includes clips from a 1960 movie, *Sons and Lovers*, adapted from the semi-autobiographical novel by the English writer D.H. Lawrence. "I was really interested in finding a way to register grief, and mourning, and the sense of loss in some way." And the fact that both his mother and Lawrence grew up in Nottinghamshire—the heart of coal mining in England—was compelling, he said. "All of those things suggested that it was willing to participate in this conversation."

It is the conversation between the moving images on the various channels that create the art, he pointed out. "In order for any multichannel piece to work, every sequence, every image, is made up of units that are prepared to participate in some kind of conversation with each other," Akomfrah said. "So the process of arriving at what would work usually involves trying to find things that can talk to each other in some way."

That's what happens, too, in *Five Murmurations*, though in some ways the works are quite different. One stretches out on six screens; the other, three. One is in color; the other, black and white. And the issues they address, though contemporary, are different.

"Partly what accounts for the difference between the two is obviously the pandemic," he said. "Suddenly, many of us in the studio found ourselves unable not only to work together, but to go anywhere at all."





*Purple* was completed in 2017, a time when his team could travel to locations all over the globe and shoot in high resolution, back “when the world still felt like you could roam it unchallenged,” Akomfrah explained. But, by contrast, *Five Murmurations* was made with far more basic equipment, often on still cameras.

The isolation of the Covid-19 era was reflected in shots that included the artist himself, captured dourly in mirrors.

The catalyst was the killing of George Floyd. Even with the pandemic putting a halt to so much human activity, “It felt naturally that that should be what we did something on,” said Akomfrah, “as a kind of act of homage, as a remembrance, as a monument.”



John Akomfrah, *Five Murmurations*, 2021 National Museum of African Art



John Akomfrah, *Five Murmurations*, 2021 National Museum of African Art

Culling from art history, the artist juxtaposes the ominous and consequential crowd-captured footage with the unsettling 1502 painting *The Conjurer* by Hieronymus Bosch, as well as the 1483 piece *Lamentation Over the Dead Christ* by the Italian Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna, featuring a dramatic angle and perspective that in turn reminded him of the death footage of Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara.

“I couldn’t see the Floyd images—especially the very last bit, where his head is on the ground, and the officer’s knee is on his neck—you can’t see that and the Mantegna without seeing some similarities between them,” Akomfrah said.

Certainly, the museums’ presentations of the works, in darkened rooms with couches, invite viewer contemplation as they take in the images and sounds.

Of his upcoming work at the Venice Biennale, Akomfrah said “there will be some continuities” with his previous work. But, he added, “the way in which you’ll experience that pavilion will be very different to how you have seen it used in the past. I promise you that.”

*“John Akomfrah: Purple” continues at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. through January 7, 2024.*

*“John Akomfrah: Five Murmurations” opened October 14 at the National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. Its closing date hasn’t been determined.*





# LISSON GALLERY

*Present Space*  
June 14, 2023

**present    space**

**"Traces, residues and aftershocks" How artist and filmmaker John Akomfrah confronts the present through the past**

In conversation with Ellie Brown, June 14, 2023

Motion — Art, People, Film



Five Murmurations (2021)

Back in January 2023, it was announced that John Akomfrah would represent the UK at next year's Venice Biennale, and when we speak over Zoom in late April, the artist and filmmaker is in the city on something of a reconnaissance trip. Though Akomfrah has had time to let the news sink in, the announcement was something that could have blown him away. "Anybody who tells you that they're not absolutely over the moon about being chosen for something like this, is lying. Because it's great!" Akomfrah will be taking charge of the British Pavilion for the Biennale's 60th edition, and it's an opportunity that he says, "feels important in one really significant respect. It's like someone has said to you, "We've watched what you're doing and we'd like you to come and do the same again in this setting – one of the biggest settings on the planet."

Next year won't be Akomfrah's first encounter with the Venice Biennale however; his three-channel installation, *Vertigo Sea* first premiered there in 2015, as part of the *All the World's Future* exhibition curated by the late Okwui Enwezor, while another three-channel piece, *Four Nocturnes*, was shown at the inaugural Ghana Pavilion in 2019. And as much as the British Pavilion represents one of the biggest stages in the art world, Akomfrah intends to approach the task in much the same way he would any other work: "The project is the process, and the process is the project," he says. "I'm here now, and I'm not doing anything different to what I would normally do. You just commune with a space, and ask it what it wants and it hasn't quite told me yet!" At the time of our call it's his final day in Venice, though Akomfrah will return to Venice at a later date to get a sense of what the space has to say.

Searching for voices that resonate and communicate with Akomfrah is a defining element of his work. Since the early 1980s, when he was working with the Black Audio Film Collective, the artist and filmmaker has been drawn to the sounds and stories that reach out for archival and found footage. The collective, formed by a group of students at Portsmouth Polytechnic in 1982, produced a number of documentaries, films and tape slide works that sought to grapple with Black British and diaspora identity, as the children of immigrants to the country in the post-war decades (Akomfrah moved to South London from Accra as a young child).

*Handsworth Songs* (1986) is one of the collective's defining works. Part-documentary, part-montage, it examines the aftermath of "riots" occurring in Birmingham and London in 1985. It's a documentary inasmuch as it presents footage shot by the collective on the ground, but equally, by drawing on archival footage, newsreel and still photography, *Handsworth Songs* is also an exercise in searching for something that wasn't visibly, or physically, present at the scene. That's to say that the collective were searching for the ghosts of the past that were haunting Birmingham in the mid-1980s, while also giving those same ghosts a voice.

The approach taken in *Handsworth Songs* was shaped by the work of the late cultural theorist, Stuart Hall - someone whose ideas, Akomfrah says, the collective and others working in the Black art movement in Britain at the time sought to emulate. From the early 1960s on, Hall was a defining figure in the emerging field of cultural studies, and his writing on identity (and in particular defining a sense of Black British identity) remains central to this day. This provided the framework, then, for the Black Audio Film Collective's approach. As Akomfrah explains, "we understood this place [England], but we also understood the *elsewheres* that our parents came from; I knew London, but I also knew Accra - and these Janus-faced features of your life seemed to suggest that you needed a very unique kind of person who might tell you about this double-faced, double consciousness. And Stuart was that - he seemed to understand the racial dynamic that was powering our lives, and he understood the class dimensions of that."

Hall was also a well-placed figure to help contextualise what the collective sought to achieve with *Handsworth Songs*; it had been in Birmingham where he had co-founded the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964. “And so in a very real sense,” Akomfrah says, “he watched the evolution of the kids [who were later in Handsworth in the mid-1980s]: he was there when they were born, he saw them going to school.” The collective approached Hall for his guidance on *Handsworth Songs*, and though he didn’t agree with everything they were doing, Akomfrah says, that was something that they appreciated – support and guidance (Hall famously defended *Handsworth Songs* from criticism by author Salman Rushdie in the letter pages of *The Guardian*).

After the Black Audio Film Collective was wound up in 1998, Akomfrah went on to found the Smoking Dogs Films production company with Lina Gopaul and David Lawson, who were also members of the collective. Through Smoking Dogs, Akomfrah worked directly with Hall on two works that explore the cultural theorist’s life. The first, *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), is a three-channel video installation that situates Hall’s ideas within the wider cultural and political landscape of the time through a montage of footage. *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013), a feature-length documentary soundtracked with songs by Miles Davis, is more introspective; though it broadly follows the same structural narrative, it emphasises how this titan figure in twentieth-century cultural theory was himself shaped by the environments he sought to understand. While Akomfrah mourns the loss of a friend and collaborator (Hall passed away in 2014), he notes that it would be “interesting to see what an equivalent figure – younger, more agile, more mobile – would be like in the present.”

Over the past decade, Akomfrah has created a trilogy of multi-channel works starting with *Vertigo Sea* and ending with *Four Nocturnes*, that examine histories of migration through the natural environment. *Vertigo Sea* takes something of a metaphorical approach (relating, for example, the whaling industry to slavery and colonialism), in which the ocean is both central to the planet’s ecology and the setting for institutionalised cruelty and brutality. The second of the series, *Purple* (2017), is a six-channel installation commissioned for the Barbican’s Curve Gallery, and co-commissioned by the TBA21—Academy; the Bildmuseet Umeå in Sweden; The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; the Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon and the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow. It is Akomfrah’s largest work so far - both in terms of scale and focus. As a step further into the artist’s investigation into the environment as a linchpin for human life, *Purple* is an immersive portrayal of how climate change is impacting the planet told through a montage of footage - archival and new - that examines the uneven experiences of the Anthropocene.



Though the explicit subject matter of Akomfrah's work has shifted over time, the ideas that define his oeuvre are largely unchanged. Indeed, even the images he draws upon reappear in different contexts. In *Handsworth Songs*, a brief black and white clip of a Black man working in a factory is seen, sandwiched between an audio clip warning of the threat to Britain's national identity caused by an "army of total strangers - immigrants" which is reaffirmed by another clip of Margaret Thatcher speaking of the fear posed by the "swamping" of the country. This same clip reappears in Akomfrah's later film, *The Nine Muses* (2010), an examination of post-war migration to Britain which foregrounds the journey of migration through the lens of Homer's *Odyssey*.

At one point during our conversation, Akomfrah neatly surmises what it is I am getting at with the questions I put to him, as the "hangovers and overlaps between projects." Those overlaps, Akomfrah acknowledges, remain unspoken by him. In much the same way that Akomfrah gives form to the ghosts of the archive that reach out to him, the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale will afford the filmmaker and artist the chance to communicate the ideas that have defined his work to date.



Five Murmurations (2021)





Five Murmurations (2021)



Five Murmurations (2021)

#### Present Space

In *Vertigo Sea* you use the environment and environmental destruction as a metaphor for migration and recall some of the language that is heard in *Handsworth Songs*, in which the then-Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, can be seen describing the fear of the country being “swamped by people of a different culture”. Are there parallels for you in discussing migration through the language of nature - whether as a metaphor or through language?

#### Present Space

There's a quote in *Handsworth Songs* that "there are no stories in the riots, just the ghosts of other stories", which made me think about whether you see that film as becoming a kind of ghost itself in the years that have passed since the film was released?

#### John Akomfrah

Of course, it should have struck me then that, if we were saying that the present was overdetermined by all sorts of traces and residues of the past that, at some point, we would also become part of the past. But it never entered my head to be honest – I mean frankly, it shocks me that the work is as old as it is. It feels like it was yesterday. I think it's the inevitable logic of the position taken by *Handsworth Songs* that, at some point, it itself would be rendered phantom-like; that it would hover over the present in pretty much the same way as the discourse that we were trying to talk about. From the [start of] the Black Audio Film Collective in '82, we were fascinated by ghosts, or the ghosting process by which events are kind of hollowed out by the historical present day. There were small things that seemed to suggest that there might be unseen guests, if you like, sat at the tables of our lives. We're all working with these unseen guests: the person clutching their handbag or the old man moving away from you has certain presuppositions - let's call it that. And those presuppositions clearly had origins elsewhere, other than in the present. The logic of *Handsworth Songs* was this archaeological logic of seeing how many narratives that were overdetermining the quote-unquote "riots" at the time [in Handsworth and London] one could track back [into the past], and how far back one could trace them. And it seemed in the process of doing that, that quite a lot could be traced quite far back. They were not always necessarily bad things - that was the point of *Handsworth Songs*. We wanted to understand the kind of utopian dimensions of that present as well, because of course everybody who is on the streets revolting, in both senses of the word, was a product of some kind of utopian moment.

John Akomfrah

One of the important strands of *Handsworth Songs* was its attempt to understand the process by which, by the time Thatcher and that new right project gets going in '77 - '78, race [was being used] as a sort of mirror for the multiple crises of Britain. And, of course, there's a striking resonance of that theme in the present, in the ways in which certain politicians are beginning to use that again. *Vertigo Sea* [came] at the time when journalists, certain right-wing journalists, were talking about migrants as cockroaches, vermin, and people who had these invasive, parasitic qualities to them. And I thought, "that's interesting – how do we wrestle with this?" Because in order for the migrant or the refugee to be completely accepted as a problem (not even a person but a *thing*) you have to hollow out the actual reality of refugeeship and migranthood. The thing you have to get people to forget is the utopian quality of migrantship and refugeeship, because nobody leaves their home to go anywhere with the intention of being a problem. People leave because they think they're going to go somewhere and make a contribution, not just for themselves, but to where they're going. There's a massive amnesiac machine at the heart of the anti-refugee, anti-migrant rhetoric, which is built on forgetting certain very, very positive things. And that for me is the most important thing to bear in mind. That's why we started *Vertigo Sea* to say, "Look, these things were started at the same time: hunting for whales, for oil, and hunting people, for enslavement, have a joint history. And they were both incredibly profitable."



Testament (1988)



Present Space

*The Airport* (2016), a multi-channel installation which focuses on the history of Greece in the context of the country's financial crisis, will be shown at the Lisson Gallery in Beijing this summer as part of your first solo exhibition in China. So, I wanted to ask you about what it means to exhibit existing works in new locations, and whether different settings can change the meaning or intention of a work?

John Akomfrah

In some ways, the relationship between cinema and the screen, audience and viewership, is really quite specific. The screen says, "I am this portal and I can be planted anywhere," and you have a relationship with *that* portal. In a way, the environment doesn't matter because it's a didactic one between you and the screen. I think most gallery work says almost the exact opposite in a way, [where] the space in which the image announces itself is important. It does believe that, somehow, the relationship between screen, environment, character matters (though that's not to say that you want that relationship to be prescriptive). The work is animated by a series of democratic impulses, which are very important for me: one is that you should be able to absolutely loathe it [laughs], and not think it has any value at all. Providing you've spent the time with it, that seems to me a takeaway that you are perfectly entitled to walk away with. You are absolutely entitled to say to yourself, "I'm only interested in what's taking place in the middle screen, or the third screen; I'm not really interested in any of this stuff because there's something there that I can follow." Equally, if you thought that, especially with the multi-screen pieces, that there's a sort of conversation between them that you're interested in, fine. It's an engine of empowerment, and your agency is important. I really do like it when people from different parts of the world write to me about their experiences, even the negative ones. You think, "Okay that's great", because at least they've turned up.

Present Space

I remember reading in a previous interview in which you discussed how *Handsworth Songs* resonated with people who had no connection to Birmingham, or even the UK. There are elements in your work that reach beyond the specifics of the footage.



John Akomfrah

*Handsworth Songs* is playing at MoMA in a show called *Signals* at the moment. And the question of location has now taken on an additional quality that I think is really important to follow because it isn't just about the space it's also about what [people] can get out of it. MoMA wanted to do a closed-caption version of *Handsworth Songs* – because if you're hard of hearing, the overly auditory quality of the film might not necessarily be to your taste. So, if people can plug into the film in a slightly more intimate way than just standing and watching an image, let's do that. Let's enrich that location.



Handsworth Songs (1986)



Handsworth Songs (1986)



Handsworth Songs (1986)

#### Present Space

When it comes to using archival footage, what draws you to certain voices or certain images that you then tease out?

#### John Akomfrah

There was a point when it became clear to a whole group of artists, not just the Black Art Collective, that we needed to understand our collective past. We needed to understand the ways in which our lives have been shaped by the past. We wanted to decode it because there's a kind of impossible fiction at the heart of race – an impossibility about how it works. The present of race wants to deny that it has any efficacy, but it's clear by the aftereffects of one's feelings that there is a sort of elsewhere dimension to it. So part of the attempt to demystify this rhetoric of race (which says the past is unimportant, when in fact it's quite clear that the past is central to the present) was to try and find ways to render intelligible the processes which seem to narrate the present. And the archival, both as a repository of the past, as well as a kind of embodiment of the past, seemed important. There are traces, residues and aftershocks that the archival, both as a repository and an embodiment, comes to stand for and is standing for. It was important to get to grips with that – obviously in different ways, because one of the things you reminded me of is the *becoming archival* of the practice itself! When you're in your 60s and you've been doing this since your 20s, you also leave a trace and a kind of pathway. But I'm not following it, I'm just doing it – I'm not concerned about what the pathway is.



Triptych (2020)



Triptych (2020)




*Inside Climate News*  
18th March 2023

## Inside Climate News

### John Akomfrah's 'Purple' Is Climate Change Art That Asks Audiences to Feel

An hour-long multimedia exhibit about climate change, now at the Hirshhorn Museum in D.C., inundates viewers with sound, imagery and emotion.



By Kiley Bense   
March 18, 2023



A general view of John Akomfrah: Purple exhibition at The Curve, Barbican on Oct. 5, 2017 in London, United Kingdom. Credit: Anthony Harvey/Getty Images for Barbican Art Gallery

As visitors enter the gallery now housing the climate artwork **“Purple”** by **John Akomfrah** at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., they are greeted by a light sculpture made out of dirty plastic bottles suspended upside down from the ceiling. The bottles illuminate a hallway that is carpeted and lined in deep purple, the color of mourning in Ghana, where Akomfrah was born.

Akomfrah is a celebrated British artist whose work about memory, migration and the environment has been exhibited around the world, including at the Venice Biennale. Before opening in D.C., “Purple” was shown in London, Madrid and Lisbon.



Around the corner, visitors to the gallery are confronted by six huge screens and a cocoon of shifting sounds: singing, rainfall, church bells, speeches, train whistles, car honks, tap shoes. The imagery is pulled from across time and space; 20th-century archival newsreels are set against sweeping contemporary shots of the natural world. Collaging the past and the present together, “Purple” spins a narrative about climate change and the post-industrial age, a story about cities, technology, manufacturing and pollution that is punctuated with footage of wilderness and the sublime, landscapes that arrive like gulps of air.

Sitting on the benches arranged in front of the screens, it isn’t possible to absorb everything. The audience can really only focus on three of the screens at one time, and they are continuously changing, flickering from spring water running clear over pebbles to a tailpipe spitting exhaust to a woman’s palms, cradling a plant. The soundtrack includes orchestral music and sirens; the staid tones of broadcasters delivering scripts and the drone of highway traffic.

Critics have noted the panoramic scope of “Purple,” and how the immersive 62-minute work, which combines six screens of video with sound and music in the darkened gallery space, mimics the incomprehensible scale of climate change as it unfolds across the planet.

“It’s hard to take in the whole work at once,” said Marina Isgro, associate curator of media and performance art at the Hirshhorn, who worked to acquire “Purple” for the museum. “Depending on where you sit in the gallery, it can feel like a slightly different work. It’s this experience of information overload. You’re constantly having to choose where to direct your attention.”

Experiencing “Purple” might feel like stepping inside a film-reel kaleidoscope, but somehow, it isn’t overwhelming. Its moments of horror and calm, of poison and beauty, of indifference and care, are transfixing in a way that an onslaught of grim video might not be. There were children in the gallery when I was there, and while some of them whispered to their parents about what they were seeing, mostly they were rapt, staring around the room as the screens blinked from one snippet to another.

“You never know how long people are going to spend with a piece,” Isgro said. “It’s a cliché that everyone’s attention span is really short these days. But I think ‘Purple’ is the kind of work that really pulls people in.”

Part of what makes “Purple” so engrossing is that it’s not purely made of panic, damage and dread. We scrutinize scans of miners’ blighted lungs and plumes of toxic smoke and uncomfortable close-ups of animal dissections. But we also see and hear joy: newborns and birds and parades, dancing couples and clean water and ripening sunsets. The effect comes much closer to the messy, changeable reality of life on Earth than any montage of global doom. “It makes us sit with this ambiguity,” Isgro said. “On the one hand, it’s showing us the violence or destruction that we have enacted on our planet. And on the other hand, it’s reminding us of what out there is worth fighting for.”

“Purple” considers what “progress” is—and weighs its gifts against its costs. The film opens with babies and children and ends with coffins, carried through narrow streets. In between, we see factories, fossil fuels, cars, medicine, planes and war. In an interview with [the Guardian](#), Akomfrah spoke about the need to complicate the Western ideal of industrial development. “The great shifts in human progress that are made possible by technology can also cause the profoundest destruction and suffering,” he said.

This kind of progress is one that Akomfrah is familiar with. “I’m a child of the fifties, so I’m a child of that moment of high hopes, one of which involved the bright hope associated with industrialization that came with a much darker narrative that remained unspoken,” he told an interviewer in 2017. “I grew up in west London in the shadow of [Battersea Power Station](#), at a time when it still worked producing electricity.” Once a coal-fired plant that supplied a fifth of London’s power, Battersea was closed in 1983. (It’s since been turned into what [developers](#) are calling “London’s most exciting new shopping and leisure destination!”)

“I remember its iconic chimneys and the smoke billowing from them, which was, in truth, beautiful,” Akomfrah said, in 2017, of Battersea as he knew it. “No one ever said to me or to any of my friends, listen: you’re being poisoned here, and this is a byproduct of the life you’re living, walking down the King’s Road.” That disconnect—about what industry promises and what it destroys—informs “Purple” and our present, a current that runs beneath the rolling tides of modern history.

Although its title and color scheme suggest that “Purple” is an elegy, because the film plays on a loop, a few minutes after the funeral processions and overcast graveyards are gone, we are back to the beginning, to birth and first breaths. Perhaps progress is not a line but a circle.

The film’s images of nature are sometimes foregrounded by white-coated figures who stand with their backs to the audience. Wind ruffles the edges of the coat. We follow their gaze outward over snowy mountains, dense jungles and open fields, in places as far-flung as Alaska, Greenland, Scotland and French Polynesia. We observe these landscapes through their eyes, looking over their shoulders, though we often can’t see their faces. As “Purple” progresses, we lean over a railing on the deck of a ship, ride with a bounding dog sled team, climb an icy cliff and walk on a beach. In some of the scenes, the person at the center of the screen is surrounded by litter or silhouetted against the smokestacks of a towering factory. When the white-coated characters do turn around to look at us, it feels less like judgment than a question: Do you see what I see?

“In a way, this is a person of color’s response to the Anthropocene and climate change, which is not just a white, European fixation, though it is often presented that way,” Akomfrah told the Guardian. “We need to start looking at climate change in radically different ways, not just as part of a western-based development narrative.”

Akomfrah wants to encourage those radically different ways of seeing, but he never intended to present a persuasive argument; “Purple” is not a lecture. Unlike so much content about climate change, Akomfrah’s piece is “emotional and authentic rather than didactic,” Isgro said, a work that doesn’t endorse any specific policy or politics. Like its creator, “Purple” is not interested in telling you what or how you should feel. It only asks that you do.



*The Art Newspaper*  
24th January 2023



## THE ART NEWSPAPER

### John Akomfrah to represent Britain at 2024 Venice Biennale

The British-Ghanaian artist is well known for searing video installations examining issues ranging from climate change to colonialism

Gareth Harris

24 January 2023



John Akomfrah in his London studio

The filmmaker and artist John Akomfrah, known for his searing video installations exploring issues such as climate change and post-colonialism, will represent the UK at the 60th Venice Biennale next year (20 April-24 November 2024). Skinder Hundal, the global director of arts at the British Council and commissioner of the British Pavilion, says in a statement: "The quality and contextual depth of his artistry never fails to inspire deep reflection and awe. For the British Council to have such a significant British-Ghanaian artist in Venice is an exhilarating moment."

Akomfrah says in a statement: "I'm grateful to be given a moment to explore the complex history and significance of this institution [the British Pavilion] and the nation it represents, as well as its architectural home in Venice, with all the stories it has told and will continue to." Last year, he spoke to *The Art Newspaper* on our [A Brush With](#) podcast about his influences—including writers, musicians, filmmakers and other artists—and the cultural experiences that have shaped his life and work.

Akomfrah was born in Accra, Ghana, in 1957 but has been based in London since he was a child. He came to prominence in the early 1980s as part of the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), a group of seven artists founded in 1982. From his early years with the BAFC to his recent works as a solo artist, he has explored charged social issues—including racial injustice, colonialist legacies, diasporic identities, migration and extreme weather events—through a distinctive approach to memory and history. He was knighted in the King's New Year UK Honours List for 2023.



John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*  
© Smoking Dogs Films. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Akomfrah has participated in two previous Venice Biennales. His *Vertigo Sea*, the first part of a trilogy focused on the destruction of the planet, was a talking point at the 2015 biennale organised by the late Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor (*All the World's Futures*). The three-screen film installation fused images of marine life from the BBC's Natural History Unit with archive footage of whale hunting and the slave trade along with new material, to reflect on various aspects of humanity's relationship with the ocean.

The second part of the epic project *Purple* (2017), shown in the Curve gallery at London's Barbican in 2018, is a six-channel video installation that gives the artist's own nuanced, penetrating take on the insidious threat of climate change. In 2019, he showed the third work in the trilogy, *Four Nocturnes*, at the inaugural Ghana Pavilion in Venice which focused on humanity's destruction of the natural world via Africa's declining elephant populations.



John Akomfrah's *Four Nocturnes* (2019)

© Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.

In 2017, Akomfrah won the biennial Artes Mundi prize with his 40-minute, two-screen video, *Auto Da Fé* (2016), which muses on the theme of mass migration over a 400-year period. "I wanted to focus on the fact that many people have to leave because something terrible is happening, it's not just about leaving for a better life, many people feel they have to leave to have a life at all," Akomfrah said.

In an [interview in 2018](#), we asked Akomfrah if he felt pressure to keep raising the bar with each project. "I have wondered that. I honestly don't think so, but it's clear there is a dialogue between the commissions and what I'm asked to do," he said.

The UK representative at the 2022 Venice Biennale, Sonia Boyce, [won the Golden Lion prize for Best National Participation at the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia](#).



*Artnet News*

24th January 2023

## artnet news

### British-Ghanaian Filmmaker John Akomfrah Will Represent the United Kingdom at the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024

"It is without a doubt one of the most exciting opportunities that an artist can be presented with," the artist said of the commission.

**Taylor Dafoe**, January 24, 2023



John Akomfrah at his London studio, 2016. Courtesy of Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.

John Akomfrah, the British-Ghanaian artist whose ambitious films and screened installations have tackled colonial legacies, climate change, and immigration, has been selected to represent Britain at the 60th Venice Biennale, set to open in April 2024.

The nomination was announced today by the British Council, which has been responsible for the British pavilion at the Venice Biennale since 1937.

In a statement, Akomfrah called the commission a "huge privilege and an [honor]," adding that "it is without a doubt one of the most exciting opportunities that an artist can be presented with."

Akomfrah, 65, is widely regarded as one of the most influential video artists of his generation.

Born in Accra, Ghana, in 1957, the artist's family fled to Britain when he was just four. In 1982, he was one of seven founding artists behind Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), a group formed with the goal of increasing the representation Black British communities on screen. The collective's first film, *Handsworth Songs*, won the BFI John Grierson Award for Best Documentary in 1986.

Since then, Akomfrah has consistently turned to his chosen medium to explore topics that are both timely and universal in scope. Among the highlights are *Mnemosyne* (2010), a film about the experiences of post-war migrants living in the U.K.; *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), a poetic portrait of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall; and *Purple* (2017), a 62-minute, six-channel video installation that explores the effects of changing climate patterns on human communities and natural ecosystems across the globe.



John Akomfrah, *Four Nocturnes* (2019). © Smoking Dogs Films. Courtesy of Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.

Next year's presentation will mark Akomfrah's third turn at the Biennale, following, most recently, his presentation of the film *Four Nocturnes*, which was commissioned for the inaugural Ghana Pavilion at the 58th iteration of the show in 2019. The artist's *Vertigo Sea* (2015) was also included in the Okwui Enwezor-curated main show in 2015.

Other artists to have represented Britain at the prestigious expo in recent years include Phyllida Barlow, Sarah Lucas, Cathy Wilkes, and Golden Lion winner Sonia Boyce. As with those figures, who were all over the age of 50 when commissioned, it seems the British Council panel of nominators prioritized Akomfrah's long history of artistic triumphs. Though the list of Akomfrah's recent accomplishments is impressive too: in 2017, he won the Artes Mundi prize, the U.K.'s biggest award for international art, while just this month, he was knighted as part of the King's New Year Honours List for 2023.

"John's inspiring style and narrative has continuously evolved, revealing key ideas and questions about the world we inhabit," Skinder Hundal, the British Council's Global Director of Arts and the Commissioner of the British Pavilion, said of the artist's nomination.

"The quality and contextual depth of his artistry never fails to inspire deep reflection and awe. For the British Council to have such a significant British-Ghanaian artist in Venice is an exhilarating moment."



# ARTnews

## British Artists John Akomfrah and Grayson Perry Knighted



BY **SHANTI ESCALANTE-DE MATTEI**  January 3, 2023 12:33pm



John Akomfrah attends the John Akomfrah: Purple exhibition at The Curve, Barbican on October 5, 2017 in London, United Kingdom. Running until the 7th January 2018

PHOTO BY ANTHONY HARVEY/GETTY IMAGES FOR BARBICAN ART GALLERY

British artists **John Akomfrah** and **Grayson Perry** were knighted as a part of the 2023 New Years Honours, in which more than a thousand people across England and beyond were recognized for their work in their respective fields and communities.

David Sutherland, an illustrator, was also recognized with an OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire) award, the **BBC** reported last week.

Akomfrah, who left Ghana in 1966 as a nine-year old, following intense political unrest, has focused much of his work on displacement, imperialism, and slavery as well as intense meditations on environmental harm. He works primarily with **art films** and multi-screen film installations. Akomfrah joins Isaac Julien as one of the few black artists to have been knighted.

Grayson Perry is a much-beloved British artist whose television show *Grayson's Art Club* began airing on Channel 4 in 2020. The conceit of the show was to provide some relief to the British public as it weathered successive COVID-19 lockdowns. Each week, Perry would ask viewers to submit a work of art they made on a theme he had chosen. Over the ensuing three years, the show has received tens of thousands of submissions. But Perry has a long history in the arts previous to this TV, having won the Turner Prize in 2003.

In years past, not just artists but art-world figures have been recognized. **In 2020**, for example, Stephen Deuchar, former director of Tate Britain who also worked at the UK's Art Fund for ten years, was knighted alongside Christopher le Brun, who had been the president of the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

The honors include regular people in addition to notable politicians, athletes, researchers. 60% of the honorees are citizens who have received British Empire Medals for their work in their communities through volunteering or charity.

*The Guardian*  
16 May 2022

# The Guardian

Interview

## John Akomfrah on Stuart Hall: 'When I first read him, I thought he was white'

Colin Grant



📷 'It is not easy being black' ... John Akomfrah. Photograph: David Levene/the Guardian

**The artist is revisiting his three-screen film about the legendary thinker and activist, which takes in jazz, Vietnam, and the family trauma that haunted Hall**

**T**wo years before his death in 2014, [Stuart Hall](#), the cultural theorist, political activist and founding editor of radical journal the [New Left Review](#), collaborated with the artist and film-maker [John Akomfrah](#) on *The Unfinished Conversation*. The extraordinary filmic art installation, projected on a triptych of screens, attempted to evoke and translate Hall's life and ideas until [1968's cultural revolution](#). Akomfrah adopts an approach that has become his signature, weaving together voiceover with music, newly shot footage and TV and film archive material. On its 10th anniversary it is being remounted at the [Midlands Arts Centre](#) as part of Birmingham 2022 festival.

Even on a Zoom call, Akomfrah is luminous; he's an intellectual without pretension and his blue, French workman's jacket looks lived in. Behind him are cabinets with each drawer identified by a single photo. More artwork and paraphernalia are propped up on the walls. Laughter prefaces all the answers to my questions, especially the mischievous ones. I start by asking what drew him to Hall.



“It was Stuart’s questioning of blackness in his early 1970s writing,” he says. “Its evolution in this country, its multiple transformations. When I first read him, though, I thought he was white. Only when I saw that campaign against racism in the media programme he made with Maggie Steed in 1979, *It Ain’t Half Racist, Mum*, did I realise: Oh, the brother’s black!” Prescient and excoriating, *It Ain’t Half Racist, Mum* revealed how the overt racism of British TV comedy and light entertainment shows was also broadcast more subtly in current affairs programmes.

“What I wouldn’t understand until later was that Stuart had many struggles, conflicts, and conversations himself on this question of blackness,” Akomfrah continues. “It wasn’t a given for him either.” When Hall arrived in Britain in 1951 on a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford University, he found that white Britons did not distinguish between the classes of pioneering Caribbean migrants; he was considered just another irksome black man and faced even greater hostility when he married Catherine, a white woman.



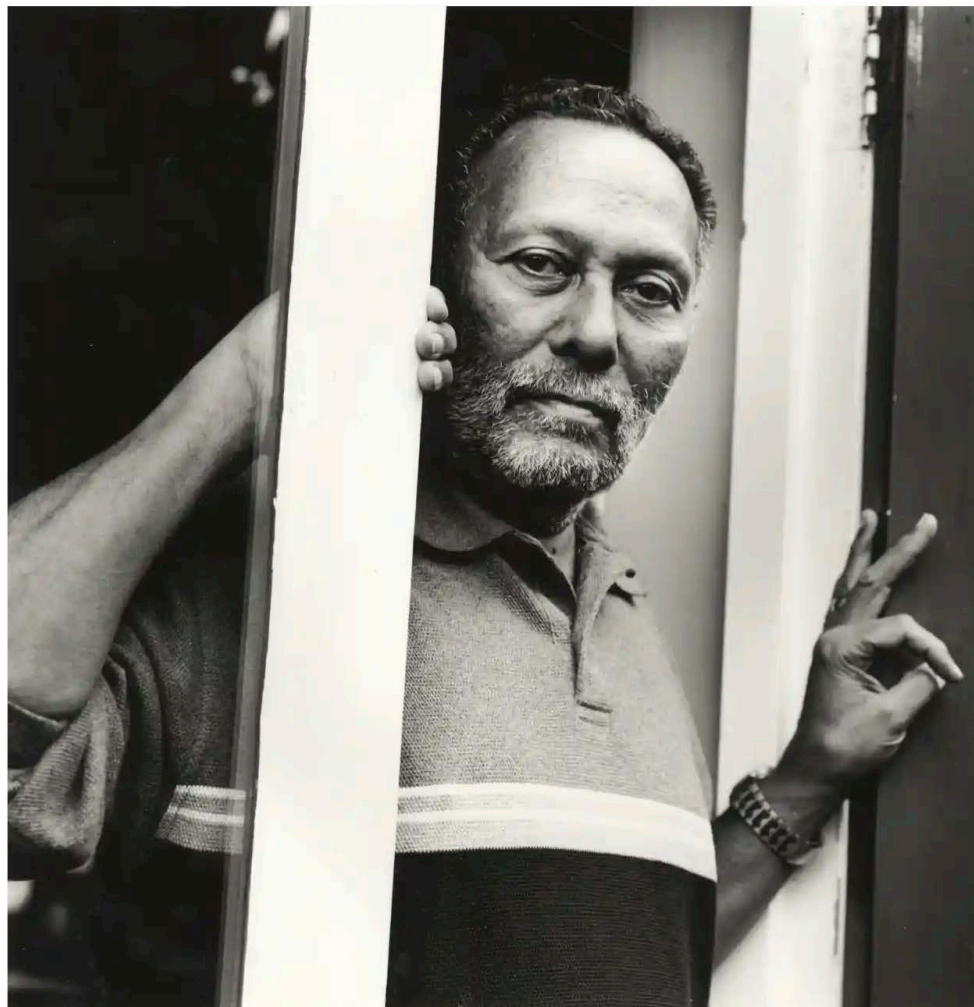
📷 A poignant portrait ...  
Akomfrah's installation *The Unfinished Conversation*.  
Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid  
toni@thphotos.com/Courtesy  
Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson  
Gallery

With its evocative use of Miles Davis’s music and archive footage marking the defining moments of Hall’s political activism - the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) protests, US attack helicopters firing into the Vietnam rainforest, Russian tanks on Hungarian streets, Hall addressing crowds and protesters - I see Akomfrah’s triptych as a poignant portrait of Hall’s personal and public life. Akomfrah agrees, mostly.

“Its central conceit, which emerged in discussions with Stuart over many months, was that identities are constructed, at these crossroads of the historical, the imaginary and the psychic. Stuart was a perfect illustration of that; the question of identity had been a flowing river in his own life.” In the film, Hall describes himself as three shades darker than his family and how he felt like an outsider in a colonial society that promoted whiteness and its fair-skinned brown approximation. “But a portrait on its own wasn’t enough,” says Akomfrah. “We also needed to rummage through the history of the last century to make sense of the vicissitudes of race and the fortunes of the New Left.”

In the 1950s and 60s a broad collection of leftwing activists, student radicals and intellectuals came together as the New Left; it was a movement opposed to colonialism, imperialism and orthodox communism, and its revolutionary challenge to find a “third way” culminated in 1968 in mass protests in western Europe and North America. Akomfrah, who remains impressed by the New Left Review takes issue with the notion that its influence has diminished. “There was a time when people talked about the focus of the New Left - a social democratic anti-imperialism - as if it were an entirely white and European affair, even though we were embroiled in racial and cultural aspects from the beginning,” he says. “And that’s why in *The Unfinished Conversation* I revisited the crises of Suez and Vietnam.”

Akomfrah’s sense of common purpose with the New Left was expressed in his early films, such as *Handsworth Songs*, made in 1986 with the *Black Audio Film Collective*, illuminating the hostility directed at black people in Britain. His sympathies still reside with the New Left. “Even today, if you read New Left Review, reflecting on the current crisis in Ukraine, you’d see it’s always been good at identifying how the immediate past has a bearing on the present. So, where people see the disappearance of the New Left, I see longevity.”



📷 'I think he's haunted by questions of complicity' ... Stuart Hall. Photograph: Eamonn McCabe/the Guardian

Moving from the secular to the sacred I suggest that the triptych form, exemplified in art history in *Hieronymus Bosch's The Garden of Earthly Delights*, has a devotional quality. Akomfrah accepts the point but argues that his triptych offers, “both, in its visual and musical form, a way of making discursivity manifest, visible. Focusing on a figure [Hall], a time, a history, a political movement and shifting identity; the triptych could survey and embody that panorama.”



In one early scene, underscored by nostalgic 1950s jazz and Hall's silky-smooth voiceover offering social observations, on the central screen is Super 8 home video footage of an unidentified person relaxing in a swaying hammock on a Caribbean porch. There are two further screens, one on each side: one shows a colourful, perhaps colourised, photo of elegant colonial-era cars in Kingston, Jamaica, with the Blue Mountains in the background; the other is of commuters, captured in black-and-white BBC archive footage, emerging from London trains. Slowly, almost imperceptibly the voiceover gives way to the sound of rolling thunder announcing a coming storm. What, I ask Akomfrah, governed the alignment of images?

"I wanted to get a centre-screen story right and then find counterparts for the left and right panels. It's a portrait of a life in transition as well as a mirror to historical transformations that have some relationship with that life. I'm trying to suggest spaces in which a set of elective affinities overlapped and took place." There's warmth and candour in Hall's testimony but I wonder whether Akomfrah felt any hesitancy in highlighting Hall's mother and the nature of Jamaica's caste system. Colonial Jamaica prejudicially consigned the majority black population to the footstool of society, such that, as recounted by the journalist and scholar Vivian Durham, "it was the ambition of every black man to be white."

At one point Hall remembers his mother moaning about "awful black people who are spoiling Britain with their presence; they should be driven off the pier with a big broom". More than snobbishness, perhaps there's self-loathing, I ask Akomfrah. "The question of a caste system or pigmentocracy is central to the formation of Jamaica and to Stuart. I included it because it seemed to say something quite profound about his life."



It was key that we brought not just the ideas but the look of the ideas into the present ... The Unfinished Conversation. Photograph: Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

Hall was critical of his mother's snobbishness and prejudice. "And the tragic story of his sister who was forbidden by her mother from marrying a doctor because he was too dark-skinned ... Stuart revisited this again and again, to the point where it was almost like a primal scene. His own role in it is what haunts him. He tells you the story but at some point you think: mate, what did you do? I think he's haunted by questions of complicity."



Like many artists, Akomfrah always finds fault looking back at his work, but 10 years on he's still content with the look of the triptych. "We went into the BBC archive and tried to transfer everything useful from the original material into something pristine and viewer friendly. It was important that we freed the archival material from the overarching tyranny of degradation because with it comes a set of assumptions. 'Oh, it's old, from the past, looks crappy, and therefore of no value.' It was key that we brought not just the ideas but the look of the ideas into the present."

Akomfrah is glad Hall got to see *The Unfinished Conversation* before he died in 2014 and recalls its poignancy. "We started working together from the very beginning; he was a seen and unseen guest, if you like. He seemed to be moved by *The Unfinished Conversation* ... which was important to me. But in the end it's a kind of failure," he says wryly, "since the project was about trying to keep him alive." Ten years on, does Akomfrah feel his work has resonance today? "This was made before the Black Lives Matter explosion, that whole becoming of blackness as a sort of public spectacle of protest and affirmation that we've lived through. There's a prophetic echo of those themes in *The Unfinished Conversation*. It is prescient and timely."

When I tell Akomfrah the title of my forthcoming memoir, *I'm Black So You Don't Have to Be*, he nods and laughs heartily, recognising its irony. "I hear you. This is one of the central governing conversations of blackness. What do you let go and what do you allow to define you? Neither of us are ever going to claim that somehow we've reached some moment of transcendence, where we've escaped the freedoms and tyrannies of blackness. And I don't say that out of pride because nobody wants to hang on to shit that's about causing you grief. It is not easy being black."

Finally, he switches back to my earlier question of the devotional. "I don't think it's possible to speak about the question of blackness without also, in some way, reaching into the space of the spiritual. *The Unfinished Conversation* has that spiritual or hymnal quality." I say amen to that.

● John Akomfrah: *The Unfinished Conversation*, 2012, is at [Midland Arts Centre, Birmingham](#) as part of Birmingham 2022 Festival until 26 June.

# Prospect

## How John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Film Collective reframed empire

*In works such as *Signs of Empire*, the Collective preferred elliptical questions to militant slogans*

By **Sukhdev Sandhu**    **March 3, 2022**



**John Akomfrah (left) and the Black Audio Film Collective**

Mass unemployment, IRA hunger strikes, race riots: the early 1980s was a turbulent period. In response, seven young black Britons at Portsmouth Polytechnic banded together as the Black Audio Film Collective. The filmmaker John Akomfrah, son of exiled Ghanaian radicals, was their charismatic spokesman, but each had their own interests—anti-colonial politics, sociology, psychoanalysis, post-punk

music. What united them was a desire to make work rooted in British, rather than black American, aesthetics. Until they disbanded in 1998, their experimental films were closer in spirit to seminar rooms than soapboxes. They preferred elliptical questions to militant slogans and were as likely to be screened in art galleries as in high-street cinemas. These days you can find them on Amazon Prime or YouTube.

Black Audio began work on their remarkable first film *Signs of Empire* in 1982. Originally exhibited as a tape-slide production, it's an eerie and unsettling exploration of the iconography of British imperialism. There are lingering images of statues and monuments commemorating Victorian heroes, close-ups of the soldiers who propped up British dominion, hundreds of sepia photographs of proud Englishmen standing beside flayed colonial subjects or tiger-hunt spoils. Trevor Mathison's sound design is a ghostly mix of loops, musique concrète and distorted samples, including Tory MP Ronald Bell asserting that one need only look at the faces of immigrant children to see that "they don't know who they are, or what they are."

*Signs of Empire* suggests connections between a colonial past and a postcolonial present, but what these might be remain deliberately opaque. Many images are overlaid with elegant calligraphy and phrases made using Letraset that wouldn't look out of place on the sleeves of arty record labels. The film delves into the nation's dark past but, perhaps confoundingly, looks beautiful. It's more moodscape than agit prop, less interested in fist-waving anger than melancholic ambiguity.



These days it's hard to move for polemical histories auditing British imperialism. *Signs of Empire*, though, preceded the rise of postcolonial studies and critical race theory. When I talk to Akomfrah, now a celebrated filmmaker, he recalls: "Black Audio were very conscious of the fact that many of the categories and the concepts we were throwing up — 'palimpsests,' 'the hinterlands of narrative,' 'the rhetoric of race' — were speaking to a theory-to-come that hadn't been born. Even though we were very young, we just knew it was a matter of time before people would start to question restricted ideas about national identity and whiteness. We knew the long postcolonial fire would reach our shores, would burn. But we needed to push for it, to push for that complexity."

*Signs of Empire* feels resonant because of its attention to statues. Black Audio zoomed in on details that made them look fragmented and ruined. They tilted them, made them look rusted, dented their grandeur. Akomfrah has fond memories of filming at the Mall and the Albert Memorial: "as filmmakers you have to get pretty close to them. Sometimes sit on them. The fact that we were a ragamuffin, motley crew of young black kids meant that everyone who saw us assumed we were up to no good. We were supposed to be busying ourselves with chasing old ladies and taking their money!" This proximity was crucial, though. "I love the Albert Memorial. It's a profound work. But it's when you're in the statues' presence that you have to have the argument with the fiction they propose—the argument about the brilliance and excellence of empire."

What went through his mind when he saw slave trader Edward Colston's statue in Bristol being torn down? "I saw the triumph of ethics. The so-called defenders of tradition

inaugurate this enormous thing called 'the law.' They forget that before the law there's the ethical. You know, having slaves was law; it doesn't make it right! Many of those young activists understood this. They understood that Colston's statue was something monstrous. Toppling the statue freed us. It freed the nation from this slavish adherence to the immoral in the name of justice."

The Colston controversy made Akomfrah reflect on the changes in British society over the last 40 years. "You can take a camera and deconstruct statues and pull them down that way. But if, back in 1982, we had done what those protesters in Bristol did, we would have served life prison sentences. Literally. So that's how much things have changed. These changes are both absolutely necessary and completely heartening. It is possible now to challenge some of these monstrous legacies in the language of the ethical and—possibly—win in a court case. It certainly wasn't possible in 1982."

L I S S O N   G A L L E R Y

*The New York Times*  
1 September 2021

# The New York Times

## An Artist Who Brings Order to Chaos

John Akomfrah's films have shaken up official narratives around Black identity and imperialism. His latest tries to make sense of life in the pandemic.



John Akomfrah said he wants his new work "five murmurations" to engage viewers in a conversation that is "animated for sure, occasionally convivial, occasionally heated." Adama Jalloh for The New York Times

**By Elizabeth Fullerton**

Sept. 1, 2021   Updated 6:21 a.m. ET



LONDON — Shortly before the artist and filmmaker John Akomfrah left Ghana for Britain after a 1966 coup, the nine-year-old-boy had a final encounter with his grandfather, the High Priest of the Akomfrah clan. The venerated old man wore a ring that had passed down through generations, representing the power to bring order to life's chaos. It seemed like a perfect parting gift for his eldest grandson.

Instead the old man swallowed it.

Akomfrah always assumed this gesture signaled that the ring's powers had ended with his grandfather, but when his friend, the filmmaker [Arthur Jafa](#), heard the story, he instantly felt it meant something different.

“What his grandfather did as a High Priest was a perfect fit for what John does as a filmmaker,” Jafa said recently by phone: Akomfrah's films also bring order to chaos, he said.

“When he swallowed the ring,” Jafa added, “that meant, ‘You have to apply what I’ve taught you in a radically new context. I’m so confident that you’re prepared for this task that I can take from you the material affirmation of it. Because I know you’re ready.’ ”

Akomfrah, now 64, is too modest to call himself a High Priest of cinema. Yet for the past 40 years, he and his collaborators have shaken up official narratives around slavery, Black identity, imperialism and the environment with boundary-pushing films that seem timely today, even if they were largely ignored by the art world until recently.

These mosaic-like films retell marginalized histories, from his raw 1980s documentaries about race to his exploration of mankind's destructive impulses in immersive multiscreen epics such as “Four Nocturnes,” which impressed critics at the 2019 Venice Biennale. After years of being sidelined, Akomfrah is enjoying newfound recognition.



“Five mururations” intercuts archival material with black-and-white footage that is pared back to “an absolute basic of light, shadow and texture,” Akomfrah said. Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

His latest work, “five mururations,” a three-channel film, will show at Lisson Gallery in New York from Sept. 9 through Oct. 16. The work is an attempt to make sense of some momentous events of the past 18 months: the coronavirus pandemic, and the murder of George Floyd, which sparked global protests in support of Black Lives Matter.

“It felt like there were almost two pandemics, overlapping, jostling and clashing with each other,” Akomfrah said recently in an interview at his airy London studio.

Conveying this sense of overlap, snippets of text like “Am I safe?,” “Fear” and “Dying helplessly” float in and out of focus throughout the film, obliquely linking shots of cozy domestic interiors with footage of masked protesters and police violence.

“I wanted to find a way of speaking about how generalized the sense of threat felt,” Akomfrah said.

Like Akomfrah’s previous films, “five mururations” draws visual connections across media, time periods and geographies, creating echoes and affinities that allow new insights to emerge. In one kaleidoscopic sequence, for instance, stills of the police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on Floyd’s neck are juxtaposed with archival photographs of the executed revolutionary Che Guevara and the Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna’s “Lamentation over the Dead Christ.”

“There’s something really Christlike about George Floyd’s aura in death,” Akomfrah said. “Part of it is just the very public nature of the death: The banality, the stupidity of it — the sheer awfulness of it — seemed to transform him into something else.”

Akomfrah’s montage style has been his signature since the beginning of his career, enabling him to present multiple contrasting perspectives at once. Montage was more than just a method, he said: It reflects the fragmented nature of modern existence.

“All of us have this kind of jumble of experiences and emotions, they’re not whole,” he added. “For me the ethical task is to try and make these disparate themes, elements, forms, narratives, sit — not necessarily comfortably, but just sit momentarily with one another, long enough to form a story.”



Akomfrah said his work brings together “disparate themes, elements, forms, narratives,” that “sit momentarily with one another, long enough to form a story.”  
Adama Jalloh for The New York Times



This layered approach defined Akomfrah's earliest works, made with the Black Audio Film Collective, an artists' atelier he formed in the early 1980s with six friends while at college in Portsmouth, England.

Lina Gopaul, Akomfrah's long-term collaborator and partner, who was with the collective from the start, said the group "wanted to explore these questions of identity, how race is formed and who fixes it." As well as making films, the group organized screenings, distributed other artists' work and put on symposiums.

David Lawson, who was also in the collective, said its members absorbed diverse influences, including French New Wave cinema and the works of Akira Kurosawa and Andrei Tarkovsky. The collective wanted to show that "there were different ways of making Black cinema, that were not just didactic or angry, but could be more poetic, more reflective, more meditative," Lawson said.

Its [1986 documentary essay "Handsworth Songs,"](#) about riots that broke out the previous year in London and Birmingham, England, offered an insightful take on the complexities of race relations in Britain. Through newsreel and original footage, overlaid with a sound montage, it told of immigrants from Britain's former colonies arriving here full of hope, only to face police harassment, economic hardship and a willful amnesia about the country's violent imperial past.

Tina Campt, a professor of media and modern culture at Brown University who studies the African diaspora in Europe, said in a phone interview that Akomfrah's films challenge an "official narrative" about Britain's empire as a source of comfort and security. "When you look at how unstable that actually is, and on whose backs that stability was waged, earned, perpetrated, that is the most terrifying thing," Campt said. "And he does it very gently, in a way that seduces us."

Black Audio Film Collective works played at the Cannes and Berlin Film Festivals and were broadcast on British television, yet the London art world showed little interest. For many years, Akomfrah worked primarily on television documentaries: first with the collective, until it dissolved in 1998, then with its successor, Smoking Dogs Films, made up of Akomfrah, Gopaul, their son Ashitey and Lawson. A turning point in how Akomfrah's works are regarded came when [Okwui Enwezor](#), the Nigerian curator of the 2015 Venice Biennale, commissioned Akomfrah to make the immersive video installation "Vertigo Sea" for the exhibition.

An elegy to lives lost at sea, the film assaults the senses with rapturous shots of roiling oceans across three floor-to-ceiling screens. Historical footage of sailors harpooning whales is spliced with news clips of Vietnamese refugees onboard a sinking boat and staged shots of manacled Black men crammed into a ship's hold. Akomfrah's team traveled to Norway, the Faroe Islands and the Isle of Skye in Scotland to film striking tableaux with a cast of costumed actors, and also drew on footage from the BBC Natural History Unit.

"Vertigo Sea" announced a shift in focus, the artist said. Instead of privileging humans in the narrative, Akomfrah assigned equal, or even greater, importance to the sea and the whales. Years of thinking about what race means had led him to challenge other artificial distinctions, he said, like those between humans and animals. "Not that long ago if you were an enslaved African, or a serf in rural Russia, you were definitely not human for most of the people in power," Akomfrah explained.

Landscapes, such as the sea, have taken on an increasing significance in Akomfrah's work since 2008, he said, when he had a moment of clarity while filming in Alaska, near the site of the 1989 [Exxon Valdez oil spill](#). "You start to think, 'There are things that this place wants to say and it might not necessarily want to be just a playground for a human drama,' " he said. "It might have ancient wisdoms to offer."

Nature vies with built environments in the six-channel film "Purple" (2017), which was filmed in 10 countries and contemplates humanity's impact on the planet from the industrial to the digital age; images of belching oil refineries, frenzied factory production and traffic-choked highways suggest a civilization in overdrive.

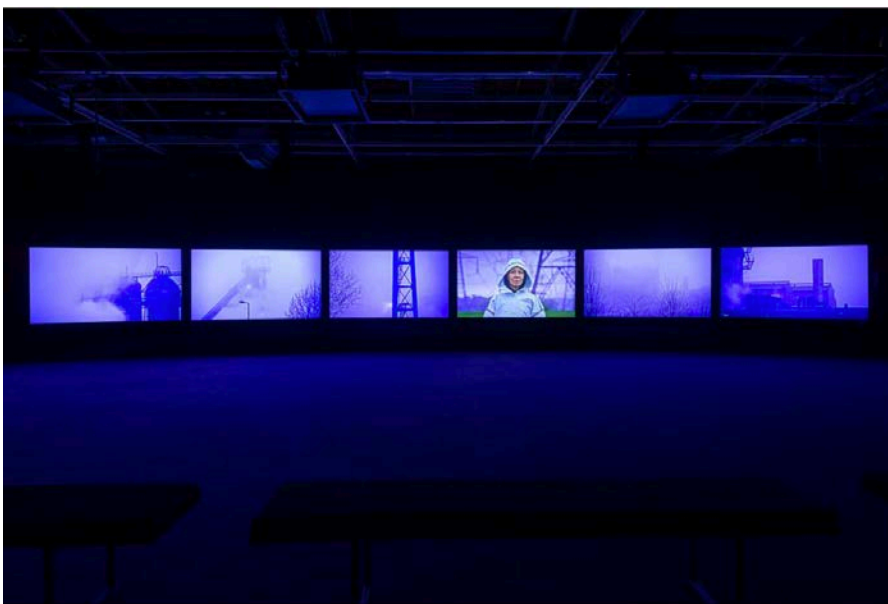


An installation view of Akomfrah's three-screen film "Four Nocturnes," at Lisson Gallery in London. Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery; George Darrell





A still from "Vertigo Sea," which was commissioned for the 2015 Venice Biennale. Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery



"Purple," a 2017 work by Akomfrah, at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Smoking Dogs Films and Palais de Tokyo; Marc Damage

"Vertigo Sea" and "Purple" form a trilogy with "Four Nocturnes," which was Akomfrah's contribution to Ghana's inaugural pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale: All three ruminate on time, memory, progress and, above all, humanity's barbarity.

"You get a sense of a historical sweep and vastness that you associate with 19th century realist writers like Charles Dickens, or Victor Hugo," said Massimiliano Gioni, who co-curated a [2018 exhibition](#) of Akomfrah's works at the New Museum in New York. "But it is achieved ultimately through a deeply postmodern language, which is that of the collage and fragment," he added.

"Five murmurations" retains Akomfrah's fractured approach, but it looks starkly different from his recent works. In the original material that intercuts the archival footage, there are no high-end visuals filmed in spectacular locations. Pandemic-mandated restrictions forced a complete rethink of his approach, Akomfrah said.



Shot largely in black-and-white in the homes of friends and family during last year's lockdowns, these sections are pared back to "an absolute basic of light, shadow and texture," Akomfrah said.

Besides recording the events of history unfolding, "five murmurations" also portrays the individual experience of life in the pandemic. "A lot of it is really people trying to document moments of solitude and isolation," he added.

The aim, as with all his films, Akomfrah said, is to engage viewers in a conversation that is "animated for sure, occasionally convivial, occasionally heated."

"I'm not trying to save the world or anything," he added. "I am trying to speak to it."

#### The Work of John Akomfrah



#### On Multiple Screens, John Akomfrah Deftly Weaves Tales of the African Diaspora

Aug. 23, 2018



#### 15 Documentaries That Get Inside an Artist's Head

April 16, 2020

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 5, 2021, Section AR, Page 11 of the New York edition with the headline: Making Sense of Life's Chaos. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

## FINANCIAL TIMES

FT Magazine John Akomfrah

+ Add to myFT

### John Akomfrah: 'I want to say something about ordinary blackness'

The artist and film-maker's new show explores themes of race, myth and memory



"The British brought people over from Africa and the Caribbean to work. Then my generation got born. An unintended consequence, I suppose," says artist and film-maker John Akomfrah. Born in Accra, Ghana, in 1957, he has lived in the UK since he was a child after his family had to leave for political reasons: "We kids, nobody knew quite what to do with us."

For Akomfrah and other young African and Afro-Caribbean men, London in the 1970s was a dangerous place. "I would say, for example, that a white man said something to me, and I was told that it didn't happen. Just didn't happen." There was an attempt, he says, "to clean up the streets of black men. It wasn't safe. I wasn't safe. I got off the street."

The unexpected consequence of this was that the teenage Akomfrah started to go to the local repertory, the legendary [Paris Pullman](#), not far from where he grew up in Parsons Green. It showed, among others, [Bergman](#), [Antonioni](#), Renoir, Bertolucci, Oshima, Fassbinder. "They had Raoul Walsh one day, [Jean-Luc] Godard the next. I was safe. Nobody else was there. I always felt free and on my own. It was glorious.

“Then one day I realised something. I realised that Godard, [François] Truffaut and all the rest were in a kind of private conversation that didn’t include me. That not including me was actually the point of the conversation. I took up the camera. It was for me, a kind of shield.”



Akomfrah photographed on the roof of his London studio, October 2020 © Adama Jalloh



“

**One day I realised that Godard, Truffaut and all the rest were in a kind of private conversation that didn't include me. That not including me was the point of the conversation**

That led him into his long career and his latest show, *The Unintended Beauty of Disaster*, at London's Lisson Gallery: an exploration of the themes of Akomfrah's life — beauty, race, all the media of film-making.

“I started in the 1970s with a bunch of mates doing O-levels. We went through the system and just decided to stick together,” he says. Sticking together led to the creation of the influential *Black Audio Film Collective* in 1982,

with artists such as David Lawson (who joined in 1985) and Lina Gopaul. Akomfrah continues to collaborate with them.

The Collective's first film, *Handsworth Songs* (1986), examined the events and the lives involved in the social-justice uprisings in Birmingham and London of the previous year. For black film-makers and artists especially, *Handsworth Songs* was as influential as Godard's *Breathless*. It was quite simply, for us, a new way of seeing.

Stills from 'Handsworth Songs' (1986) by John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Film Collective



© Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery



© Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery



The debut by the Black Audio Film Collective mixed newsreel, still photos and archive footage to look at the forces driving civil unrest in 1980s Britain © Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery



*Handsworth Songs* uses a combination of newsreel, still photos and archive footage. This way of making film is one of the hallmarks of Akomfrah's technique: an accumulation of image and sound and feeling. It generates one of his goals — the discovery of unintended beauty. His work does not lecture, does not harangue. It is witness. It is his encounter with real ancestors, but also with those he calls imaginary ancestors — the ones he takes for himself. Without apology.

“

**There is always, for me, this kind of discontinuity and continuity. I try to figure out the spaces in between**

“I picked up these imaginary ancestors like [artist JMW] [Turner](#). It's his cinematic eye. I love that about him. So he and I would have this private conversation. Then the time comes when you have enough imaginary ancestors, and knowledge, and you go out on your own. Your journey.”

The show at Lisson examines Akomfrah's journey, his encounter with the world outside and his interior world, a *mélange* of questions and searching. Always searching.

*Four Nocturnes* (2019), commissioned for the inaugural Ghana Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, is the third part of a trilogy of films that explore the intertwined relationship between the destruction of the environment and the destruction of humanity. The film meditates on loss and mortality, myth and memory, using the rapidly declining elephant population of Africa.



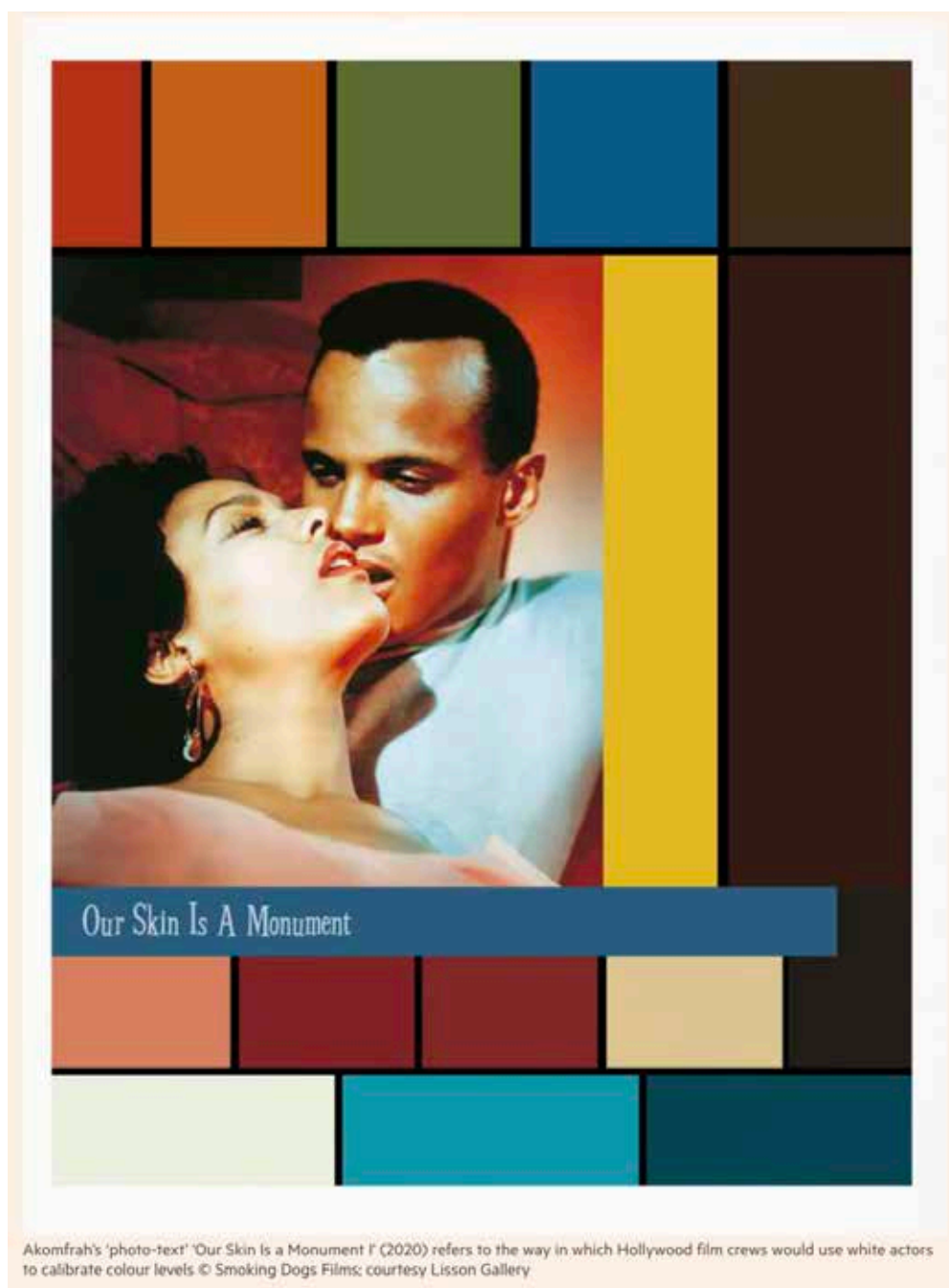
'Four Nocturnes', Akomfrah's commission for the Ghana Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, examines humanity's impact upon the environment © David Levene

Fragments are a motif of the film-maker: “I'm used to being made up of fragments. Deposits. Sometimes people ask me what it's like being on the 'inside'. I have relatives



on the ‘outside’. So I’m not completely ‘inside’. I can work with these fragments of myself. Because for me, it’s about The Work and serving The Work, and helping others to work.”

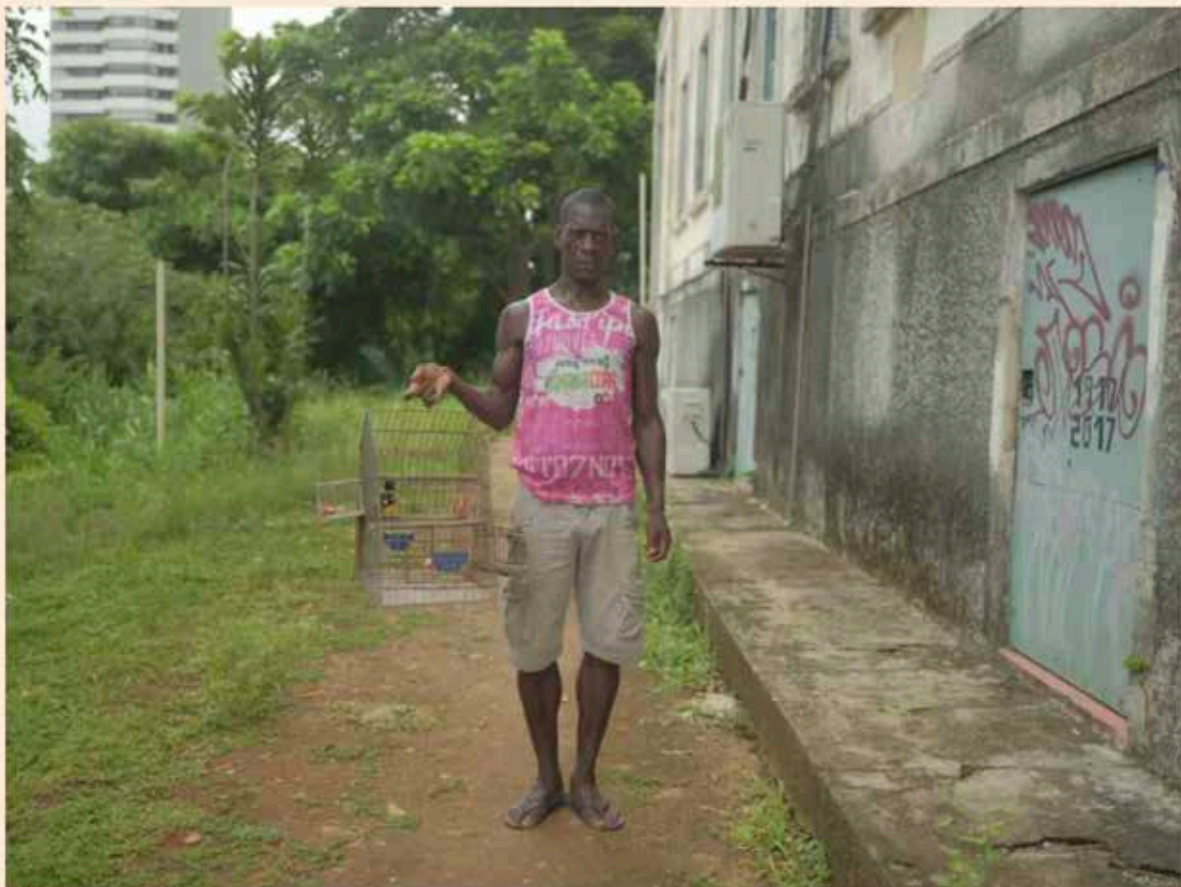
The show also features new photographic works based on Akomfrah’s recent [“Our Skin Is a Monument I”](#) (2020), part of whose proceeds support emerging UK-based black and ethnic-minority curators. The piece referred to black Hollywood stars and how film crews used only white actors when considering colour levels during shooting. The photographs are an example of Akomfrah’s continuing interest in monuments — the title is taken from [an essay](#) published in The New York Times in June this year in which the African-American writer Caroline Randall Williams suggests that the skin of black Americans is the real monument to the Confederacy, the pro-slavery side of the US Civil War, in the way that it embodies histories of enslavement and abuse.



“I wanted to make this film in the USA, in Lowndes County, in the South,” says Akomfrah. “I wind up on this small black farm. And it could have been rural Nigeria, the faces, the voices. Everything. There is always, for me, this kind of discontinuity and continuity. I try to figure out the spaces in between.”

The [Black Lives Matter](#) protests, which spread across America and then around the world, have occupied Akomfrah’s imagination too. A new three-screen film work at Lisson Gallery entitled *Triptych* responds indirectly to the social-justice movements of 2020. “I kept looking at these pictures of Breonna Taylor. She was just an ordinary person. An ordinary woman. And then comes this extraordinary violence. Extraordinary. I want to say something about ordinary black folk. About ordinary blackness.”

Stills from ‘Triptych’ (2020)



© Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery





© Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery



In his new three-screen film work, Akomfrah alludes to Black Lives Matter and the social-justice movements of 2020 © Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery

*'The Unintended Beauty of Disaster' opens in January at Lisson Gallery, 67 Lisson Street, London NW1. From November 9-22, John Akomfrah's 'Signs of Empire' is on the gallery website, [lissongallery.com](http://lissongallery.com)*



L I S S O N   G A L L E R Y

*The Guardian*  
15 April 2021

# The Guardian

## Apocalypse now: John Akomfrah's The Unintended Beauty of Disaster

Adrian Searle

🐦 @SearleAdrian

Thu 15 Apr 2021 11.24 EDT



▲ "We are witness to a darkening of the world" ... Four Nocturnes, 2019 (film still). Photograph: Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

### Lisson Gallery, London

With a relentless video onslaught, Akomfrah confronts colonialism, slavery, migrants and the obliteration of the natural world with astonishing results

**T**he images slide across three screens in relentless succession. White birds flap over the wetlands and a boy in the burning sun. Elephants move through the scrub. One thing after another, and then another, and then something else. Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and a fleeting glimpse of Malcolm X. Someone playing sax. A rhino quivering in death. Whenever you dwell on one thing, something else calls for attention. Big game hunters climb down from a dead elephant with no more thought than if they'd slid from a bonnet of a truck, all caught in some souvenir black and white footage from their safari.

We see old, framed black and white stills of slaves in chains, subjugated women and children and further horrors, the picture frames hung from trees or half-submerged in streams and in the tide of a rocky headland. Then there are appalling glimpses of beatings and murders (did I really see that?), and a marvellous clip of a hippo, mouth agape, in the surf at the edge of an ocean. There's no stopping and there's no going back. The stars wheel overhead and there's thunder in the clouds.



▲ John Akomfrah *Four Nocturnes*, 2019 (film still). Photograph: George Darrell/Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

One always has a feeling of missing as much as one grasps in John Akomfrah's often lengthy multiscreen videos, although one should trust one's subconscious to pick up more than one realises. Even so, you can't always be sure if what you recall isn't a false memory. Premiered in [the Ghanaian Pavilion](#) at the 2019 Venice Biennale, Akomfrah's *Four Nocturnes* is now at Lisson Gallery, as the centrepiece of his new show, *The Unintended Beauty of Disaster*. Fifty minutes long, *Four Nocturnes* returns to his themes of our relationship to the natural world and to ourselves, to the histories of colonialism and slavery, to politics (everything is political) and to migrations, both human and animal.

Not for nothing is the work described as a series of nocturnes. Fierce and blinding though the light often is, we are witness here to a darkening of the world, as relentless and unstoppable as the dust storm that rolls in from horizon to horizon at one point in the work, obliterating everything. Later, we come to an astonishing image of a dune in a room. Seeing this work a second time, after two years away from it, I am familiar with far more than I had realised. This is a mark of the power of Akomfrah's work, and of course of the wildlife film-makers and others whose archival footage and images he has sampled and woven together in unexpected, often seamless ways.





▲ John Akomfrah *Four Nocturnes*, 2019 (film still). Photograph: Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

Akomfrah folds his material together with staged scenes of migrants heaving their ubiquitous plastic laundry bags of possessions under desert suns and along empty highways, pausing in the midst of some great emptiness beside a windblown fence or under marching pylons. I find some of this jarring and a bit mannered, while the footage of elephants mourning their dead, and fondling their bones is both intensely moving and also feels somehow intrusive. These images haunt me.

Akomfrah plays fast and loose with time and place, the real and the constructed, to make larger, more complex narratives. A second three-screen video, *Triptych*, set in an unnamed location, is a panoply of street portraits. The title is taken from a track by jazz drummer and composer [Max Roach](#), from his 1960 album *We Insist! Roach's wonderful Triptych: Prayer, Protest, Peace*, which provides the soundtrack, with singer Abbey Lincoln keening and wailing wordlessly as Akomfrah's camera glides and pauses. Practitioners of Candomblé, transgender people and queers of all sorts, street musicians, sassy kids and game old ladies, families, friends and passersby pose and smile for Akomfrah's camera. Towards the end, we see an overhead shot of a vast portrait commemorating [Breonna Taylor](#) (shot dead by US police in her home in March last year), covering two basketball courts in Annapolis, Maryland.





▲ Time and place ... a still from *Triptych*, 2020. Photograph: Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

Mostly shot in Bahia, northern Brazil, once a centre of the slave trade, *Triptych* shows black skin, black faces and bodies in all their variety. Along with two new series of prints, Akomfrah's latest work takes its cues from Caroline Randall Williams' 2020 New York Times essay [You want a Confederate Monument? My Body is a Confederate Monument](#) - her call for the removal of confederate monuments has unassailable gravity and moral power.

Set among photographic details of the monumental sculptures at the base of the Albert Memorial in London's Kensington Gardens are a number of printed definitions: Brique - with Light Skin and Reddish, Woolly Hair; Albarazado - A Child of a Lobo and an Indian; Barcino - Child of an Albarazado and Mestiza; Cuarterón - a Child of a white and a Morisco; Quintroon - of one-sixteenth African Ancestry. This dubious and racist nomenclature, all these Mulattos and Mustefinos sit alongside photographs of carved elephants and bare-breasted women, hoards of tusks and other spoils of empire. Numerous stoic colonial subjects, from India, Africa, the Middle East and who knows where, are memorialised in the white marble, but only as stereotypical, ethnographical stand-ins.



▲ The Monuments of Being Series No Three. Photograph: George Darrell/Smoking Dogs Films, courtesy Lisson Gallery

Akomfrah's *Monuments of Being* is in part a response to Randall Williams and also to the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol last year. Ever since his work with the [Black Audio Film Collective](#), Akomfrah has been asking us to look again at where we are and where we come from, what we value, what we ascribe to; and who is this “we” in any case? Filled with questions, wide-ranging, at times astonishing, lyrical, troubling and passionate (and I write this, not always loving everything he does) Akomfrah often gives us too much to grasp. The difficulties multiply, but that's the world for you.

- [John Akomfrah: The Unintended Beauty of Disaster](#) is at Lisson Gallery, London, until 5 June.

*Evening Standard*  
12 April 2021

## Evening Standard

### John Akomfrah at Lisson gallery review: enveloping, enthralling, sublime

This first show to open after lockdown is a brilliant reflection on resistance



A still from *Four Nocturnes* / Smoking Dogs Films

#### Review at a glance

★★★★★

**E**nveloping, enthralling, sublime: *Four Nocturnes* (2019), the centrepiece of *The Unintended Beauty of Disaster*, Lisson Gallery's new show by the British artist [John Akomfrah](#), is part of a trilogy of video installations that stands among the great bodies of art produced this century. Like *Vertigo Sea* (2015) and *Purple* (2017), it collages — or “choreographs”, as Akomfrah puts it — original and archival footage across three screens. It weaves together the big themes of our times — [climate change](#), [migration](#) — with legacies of colonialism and slavery.

Elephants and their decline in Africa provide a leitmotif and symbol through *Four Nocturnes* — wandering across the vast, cracked desert earth; working in the logging industry; mourning their dead kin; and being captured as trophies in colonial hunting photographs. Meanwhile, young migrants roam the unforgiving desert amid toppled pylon. Archival footage of pan-African heroes like the assassinated Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba haunt the film. The imagery is impressionistic, impossible to consume at once, yet precise in its emotional impact: it's an urgent, devastating appraisal of the causes and effects of humanitarian and environmental crises.

By [Ben Luke](#) | 2 days ago





A still from Triptych, 2020 / Smoking Dogs Films

As well as photo and text works, Akomfrah shows *Triptych* (2020), a new film made amid the Black Lives Matter protests. It's a study in portraiture: a series of Black faces meet our gaze across the three screens. It follows the three-part structure of its soundtrack, the civil rights-themed jazz classic *Triptych: Prayer, Protest, Peace*, made by singer Abbey Lincoln and drummer Max Roach in 1960.

*Prayer* begins slowly, Lincoln's haunting notes allied to Akomfrah's images of oceans, archival images washed up in the surf, and the first lingering, beautiful portraits. In *Protest*, Akomfrah films people dancing, but their joyousness is made precarious by Lincoln's primal screams, a raw, unforgettable moment. In *Peace*, Akomfrah shows us why. With Lincoln subdued and elegiac, a different kind of portrait appears: the Maryland mural of Breonna Taylor, the woman killed by police in March 2020. A stomach-punch moment in a brilliant reflection on resistance and precariousness.



A work by Jade Montserrat / Jade Montserrat

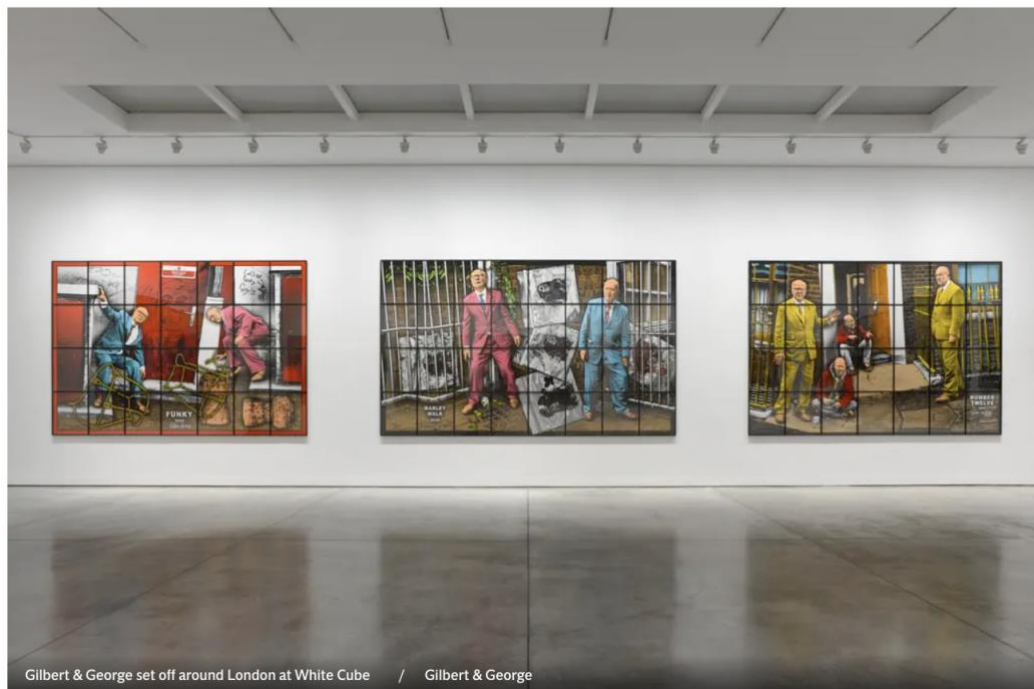
At the other Lisson space up the road is *Infinity of Traces* (★★★★), an Ekow Eshun-curated show by Black artists, emergent and established, seen as a “conversation” with Akomfrah, weaving around his themes in diverse artistic languages. Among many superb moments are Jade Montserrat’s delicate yet affecting combinations of poetry and image in watercolour, and video works with distinctive visions of Black bodies and social space, from Rhea Storr’s film on Bahamian Junkanoo carnival culture, to Ayo Akingbade’s short film about cities and social housing (“let’s get rid of the ghetto”, she repeats) and Evan Ifekoya’s 2014 video *Disco Breakdown*, from series of works about blackness, queerness and nightlife. Their repeated refrain — “I want to be dancing at the discotheque/Up so close I can feel you sweat” — has gained a whole new meaning.

*Evening Standard*  
10 April 2021

## Evening Standard

### Art lovers, get set! The exhibitions to see when London galleries open

Not long now guys!



**T**he terrific accidental wheeze which means that, as ‘non-essential retail’ (argue that one, philosophers) commercial art galleries are able to open on-slash-not-before April 12 is a boon to those of us who have sorely missed strolling round white spaces looking at things we don’t quite understand and are mildly terrified to find out the price of. In all seriousness, there’s a fantastic crop of exhibitions coming up at London’s stellar for-profit art spaces, and they’re absolutely free to wander into. From Damien Hirst (inevitably) to John Akomfrah, Sandra Mujinga to Thomas Demand, these are the shows you should be seeing come the first week of the spring awakening.



## John Akomfrah: The Unintended Beauty of Disaster



A still from *The Unintended Beauty of Disaster* / Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

One of the most consistently interesting artists working in video today, John Akomfrah creates meditative reflections on our collective consciousness (his *Stuart Hall Project* is still one of my favourite artworks of all time which is a lot for a 96 minute film about a cultural theorist). This new body of work, featuring footage filmed over the last six months, responds directly to the events of 2020, most notably the Black Lives Matter protests and demonstrations against imperialist monuments.

*Lisson Gallery, April 13 to June 5*

# LISSON GALLERY

*Culture Whisper*  
8 April 2021

## CULTURE *Whisper*

### 10 unmissable exhibitions as London's galleries reopen

CW

By CW Contributor on 8/4/2021

London's commercial galleries are reopening from 12 April with the gradual easing of lockdown and we can't wait to don our walking shoes. Here are our top exhibition picks. But remember to check the gallery websites before visiting, as many will require pre-booking ahead of your visit.



## Lisson

On April 13 the space on 67 Lisson Street will present a selection of **John Akomfrah's** photographs and videos. Akomfrah's work explores collective consciousness – whether it manifests as the fear of ecological disaster or the emotional aftermath of a post-colonial world. This exhibition will pay particular attention to race and the idea of 'skin as a monument.' From 13 April at 27 Bell Street you can see *An Infinity of Traces*, a group show featuring the work of UK-based black artists, exploring race, history and belonging. The Mayfair gallery space at 22 Cork Street will house an exhibition by **Julian Opie** best known for his bold, graphic style in both painting and sculpture.

*Wallpaper\**  
12 April 2021

# Wallpaper\*

## Physical art exhibitions to see in London and beyond, from April 2021

As England's physical art scene gradually regains its pulse, these are the in-person art exhibitions to squeeze into your post-lockdown diary, in London and further afield around the UK

**S**pring is in full swing, and with it, new life will soon emerge on London's long-fallow art scene.

Though many countries are still in the throes of lockdown restrictions, England will see curbs on non-essential retail lift as part of the government's roadmap out of lockdown. From 12 April 2021, commercial galleries will have the chance to open their doors to physical visitors, while public museums and galleries in England are permitted to reopen from 17 May 2021.

For many, it will mean the first in-person art experience of 2021. For others, it will be months of show postponements and uncertainty coming to a tentative end. Ultimately, this will provide an alternative to viewing art via pixels, which – recent NFT dramas aside – just hasn't quite offered the same thrills.

As our diaries begin to cautiously fill, these are the shows, in London and beyond, worth pencilling in.

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### London art exhibitions



**Exhibition: John Akomfrah: 'The Unintended Beauty of Disaster'**

**Gallery: Lisson (67 Lisson Street)**

**Dates: 13 April - 5 June 2021**



John Akomfrah, *Triptych*, 2020 (film still). © Smoking Dogs Films, courtesy Lisson Gallery

John Akomfrah's latest body of work is a direct response to the events of 2020. In 'The Unintended Beauty of Disaster,' the celebrated artist, filmmaker, lecturer and writer reflects on the Black Lives Matter protests, demonstrations against imperialist monuments and the rethinking of historical narratives. New works include a three-screen video installation, *Triptych* (2020), an homage to a track on the radical album, 'We Insist!' (1960) by jazz musician Max Roach. Elsewhere, Akomfrah will present a series of new photo-texts exploring colour, race and following on from *Our Skin Is a Monument I* (2020), an edition created in support of the Frieze Emerging Curators Fellowship for UK-based Black and POC emerging curators.

[lissongallery.com](http://lissongallery.com)

*The Art Newspaper*  
12 April 2021



## THE ART NEWSPAPER

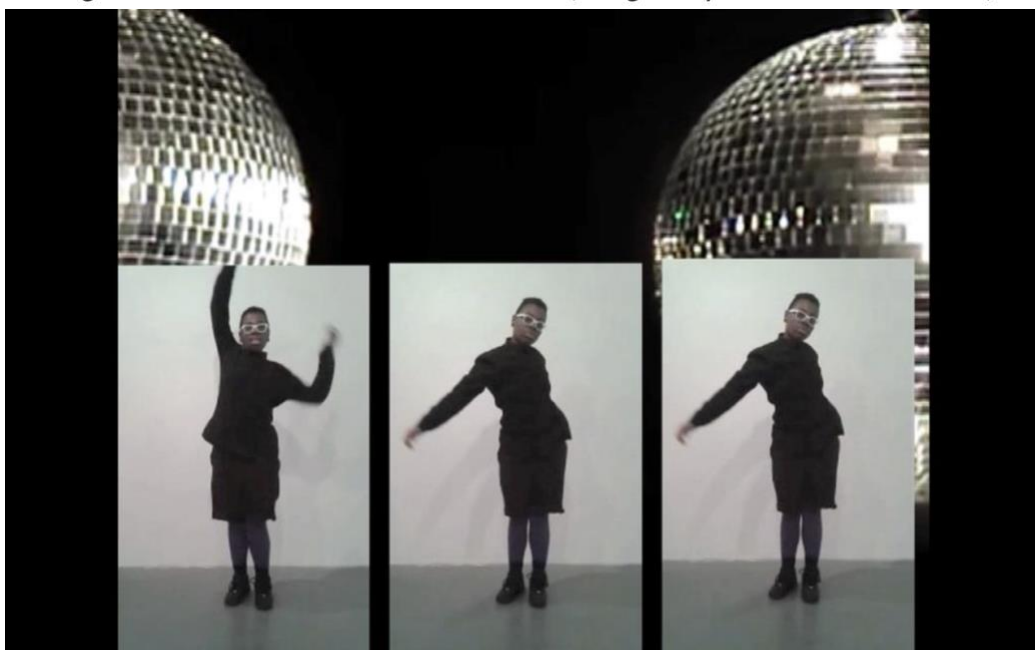
### Lockdown easing: the best gallery shows to see in London right now

Eerie wooden cabins, rural quiltmakers and dismembered, tentacular dolls are among our highlights from the city's commercial exhibitions

ANNA BRADY, GARETH HARRIS, KABIR JHALA, ANNY SHAW,  
TOM SEYMOUR

**12th April 2021 12:25 BST**

At long last, today London's commercial galleries can reopen to the public (we've been here before but let's hope it goes better this time). Arm yourself with coffee, masks and sensible shoes, and take in our pick of shows that all launch this week, some of them having languished unseen for months. It's boring but remember to book in advance (see gallery websites for details).



Evan Ifekoya, *Disco Breakdown*, 2014 (film still) © Evan Ifekoya, courtesy Lisson Gallery

**Lisson Gallery, *An Infinity of Traces* ↗ (until 29 May)**

This exhibition includes works by 11 Black non-binary and women artists—including Ufuoma Essi, Rhea Storr and Ayo Akingbade—that reflect on the complex question of Black identity in the UK. Through a variety of mediums from sculpture and installation to video, it aims to provide new insights into the loaded issue of Britain's imperial past, examining a myriad of issues from queer sexuality to marginalised histories. Running alongside is an exhibition of the British artist John Akomfrah, *The Unintended Beauty of Disaster* (until 29 May), which includes a new three-screen video installation alongside a series of new photo-text works. (book via the gallery website) G.H.



## Blackness and Post-Cinema: John Akomfrah and the Otolith Group in Conversation

During the turbulent summer of 2020, the filmmakers met to discuss contemporary filmmaking and decentring the human

+2

BY JOHN AKOMFRAH AND THE OTOLITH GROUP IN FEATURES | 23 SEP 20



**John Akomfrah:** The post-cinematic does not involve a rejection of cinema – it's steeped in insights and knowledges and affinities with the cinematic tradition – but it clearly wants what Althusserians would call an 'epistemological break' with its practices.

**Anjalika Sagar:** I think of the post-cinematic in terms of evocation rather than explanation and effects more than causes. Post-cinematic affect allows a more complex relationship to multiple non-narratives that contribute to not-yet-articulated structures of feeling.

**Kodwo Eshun:** For me, it's not only a question of screens or phones or apps. What's useful about the term post-cinematic is its agnosticism towards narrative. It's a way of stepping away from narrative. In the UK, cinema carries with it this imperative to narrate the nation. There is an unspoken expectation, whenever a Black British film is released, that it will tell the untold story of Black Britain. To me, the post-cinematic side-steps this cruel optimism of cinema. *[Laughs]* It implies an unspoken promise to open up an imaginative dimension of post-cinematic Blackness.



*Vertigo Sea*, 2015, film still. Courtesy: Courtesy: © John Akomfrah, Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery, London

**JA:** If you're Black and British, and you live in the UK, there's a hierarchy of expectation about how you enter the cinematic frame. There's a way in which Blackness is positioned vis-à-vis the cinematographic machinery – especially in terms of exhibition strategies or curatorial policies. And so, the minute you say, 'I don't really want to do this anymore,' you're changing the way Blackness is framed. More people have asked me why I don't make cinema any more than they ever did when I was trying to make cinema and not getting anywhere. [*Laughs*] It's as if some detail of Blackness is missing in the cinematic frame, and they would quite like it back. And I think: well, I'm not sure I want to give it back to you, you know? [*Laughs*]

**KE:** That's what happens when the post-cinematic encounters Blackness. It's the question of the unthought. What makes people uneasy is the sense that you've wandered off the path, you've broken the contract without being asked. That's why they see something missing. Because it's not there yet. [*Laughs*] It's still being invented.

**JA:** In its potentially destabilizing effect on settled norms and assumptions about Black agency, the post-cinematic calls into question all these certainties. The main thing is the courage that it takes on our part to embrace the unthought – a courage that is not acknowledged enough.

**AS:** When we consider the idea of the unthought, it hasn't come out of nowhere. Some of that courage comes from a longstanding affinity between us. One of the reasons we are having this conversation in the first place is the continuities of thought we share that are fundamentally transnational and which operate outside of the institutional stewardship of Blackness in the UK.





The Otolith Group, *O Horizon*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: © The Otolith Group

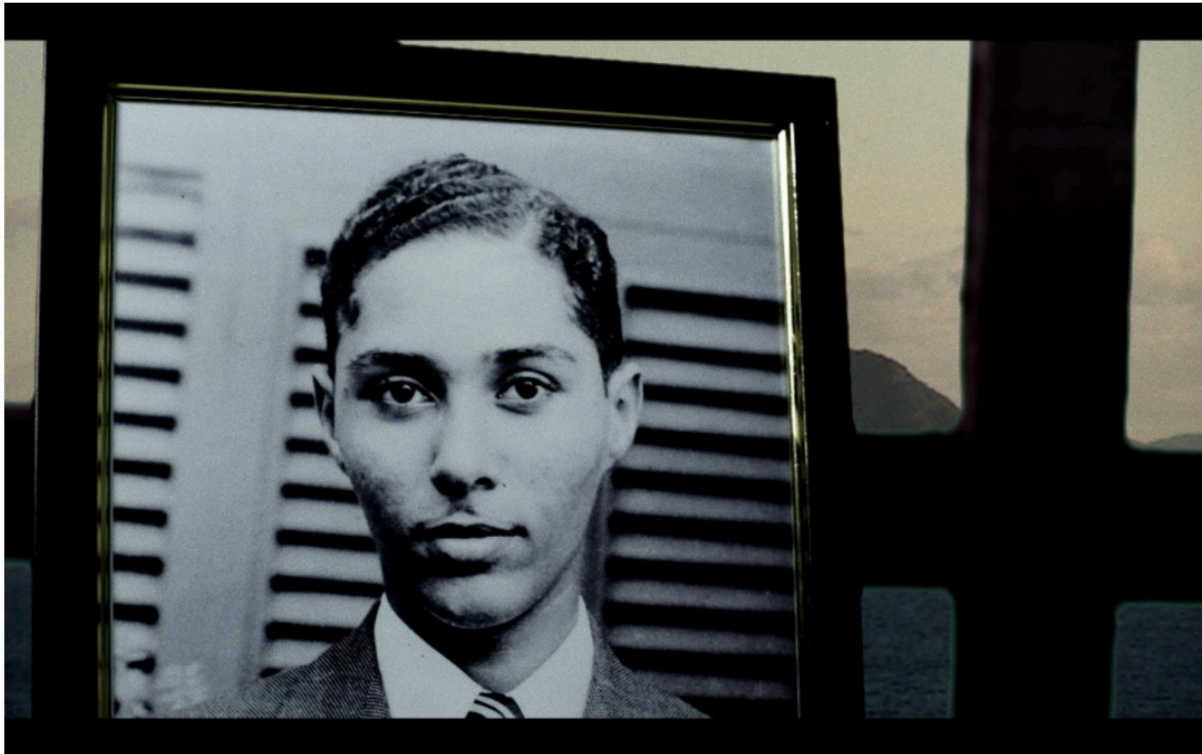
**JA:** I couldn't agree more with everything you've just said. This is to do with manifold forms of trespassing, which become possible because we have said to each other many times: 'Let's go here.' Knowing full well, in advance, that the place you wanted to go to was not supposed to be for you. *[Laughs]* You could use the autobiographical confirmations that we've had from each other as the driving force of these trespassing journeys. I believe very strongly in the fact that we have known each other for so long. I'm indebted to the many insights that I've arrived at as a consequence of knowing you. It wouldn't have been possible for me to be who I am without those encounters. It's important to acknowledge these things, to speak about them in spaces that affirm them.

**KE:** This is as serious as our lives, as Val Wilmer says<sup>1</sup>. One of the gambles of moving into the post-cinematic is the experimentation with the sonic potential of the image. It's almost as if this dimension were repressed by standard cinematic language, as if there was something about cinema that works against it. When you multiply screens, or frames within frames, then the potential for orchestrating antiphony expands.

**JA:** You could say that there was a way in which we acquired these habits for licensed transgressions because of the immersive relation that we had with certain musical traditions. To say to the world: 'You said this was not the right way to put an image together: three minutes of a figure speaking, without any nod to Aristotelian narrative conventions. Well, fuck you. We're going to do it anyway.' It's not arrogance; it's just this acquired, almost prophetic sense that having a figure speak for that long feels right. If you have the same voice repeated at the



beginning and end of a work, as you do in your *The Third Part of the Third Measure* [2017] – an audiovisual installation that documents the work of composer Julius Eastman – how the hell do you know that’s going to work? There’s no handbook telling you this is something you can do. Yet, not only did you know it, but you did it. *The Third Part of the Third Measure* is just so wholly unto itself, you know? It has a unique ontology that is completely itself. I can’t think of anything like it [Laughs]. I’ve never seen anything like it.



John Akomfrah, *The Unfinished Conversation*, 2013, film still.  
Courtesy: © John Akomfrah, Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery, London

**AS:** You know a work is complete when it’s alien to you. Perhaps this is a spiritual state of abstraction of the unthought. An example of this indeed are the spoken pieces in *The Third Part of the Third Measure*, we wanted a voice to perform the introduction of his concert that Julius Eastman gave at Northwestern University in 1980. We needed female and male vocal performers but ran out of time, and we had approached the eminent vocal artist Elaine Mitchener who knows Eastman’s work well. But the idea to front and back-end the work with a second figure was something we had to do. A friend at the eleventh hour recommended the celebrated poet and author Dante Micheaux. Dante, also a great admirer of Eastman, solemnly recites his speech which skilfully queers the terms ‘gay’ and ‘guerrilla’ as well as other terms; Mitchener performs the same words with an improvisational and strident tone. This attempt of polyvocality was something we continued investigating in *O Horizon* [2018], with different voices and singers, and in *INFINITY minus Infinity* [2019], with this multi-headed, Black Asian goddess, whose thoughts cannot be contained within a single head. [Laughs] In *INFINITY minus Infinity* there is a sense of polyvocality in the recitations of Una Marson’s poetry and fragments of text by Édouard Glissant that allude to our *Glissantbot* [2017], which tweets four Glissant quotes per hour every

day. How do these fragments speak to each other in a space of affinity that is simultaneously dissonant?

**KE:** That relates to the question of situating Black figuration within a post-cinematic frame. With *The Third Part of the Third Measure*, the impulse was to stay in the non-space of the studio, in which a certain strategic abstraction emerges from digital Blackness. The performers exist in a time distanced from the spectator. To me, the post-cinematic allows an interscalar extension across time and space. What strikes me about your work, John, is the transhistorical time and cosmic frame within which you position your figures. When we see the performer that plays jazz musician Buddy Bolden in *Precarity* [2017], he is framed against the elemental expanse of the open sky.

**JA:** There is a sense in which the human is just one of many ‘resources’ being marshalled to speak about the historical or the temporal in my recent work. I’m increasingly interested in those possibilities outside and beyond the solely human. I’ve worked in television and cinema for many years and, in those spaces, there is always a certain fiction in operation, in which everything you see in the frame is only there to make ‘real’ what the human does, says, believes. It’s complete horseshit because there is always more than that going on. [Laughs] The minute you start to give power to the other active elements inside the frame, something else starts to happen – something more pagan, less humanist. And this is not just an aesthetic question, but an ethical one, too, because it has real implications for how we operate in the world. Even the term ‘storytelling’ itself carries these problems, because there’s the assumption that everything you see in the piece is about the humans in it.



John Akomfrah, *Mimesis: African Soldier*, 2018, three-channel video installation still. Courtesy: © John Akomfrah, Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery, London

**KE:** The elephants in *Four Nocturnes* [2019] or the whales in *Vertigo Sea* [2015] or the sun that begins and ends *The Unfinished Conversation* [2013] or the banyan trees in *O Horizon*: none of these is framed as background. There is an effort to foreground them. In each of these projects, I see an effort to demote or decentre the role of the human so as to pay attention to the migration of elephants or the murder of whales or the process of desertification. In Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger* [1975], Jack Nicholson plays reporter David Locke, who fights the Chadian desert and the desert wins. In *Mimesis: African Soldier* [2018], your figures are not struggling with the desert. It's not clear that they are human in the way in which Antonioni wants to persuade us Nicholson's character is human. It is as if your characters exist on a diagonal between the living, the dead, the undead and the unliving that renders them agnostic entities.

**AS:** There is an absorption going on that compares with the free jazz of Ornette Coleman. The screens feel like a weave in which sounds and images absorb each other. Is it even montage? [*Laughs*] It feels more like a process of interrelation between everything in the wider scheme of things. The fact is humans cannot sustain themselves without a complex relationship to other forms of life. So, what does that look like politically or technologically? You have to explore this as a way of thinking the unthought.

**JA:** To return to the question of the post-cinematic, it seems to me that one of its strengths is that it can recognize these gestures of demotion or absorption. It's about questions of agency – multiple registers on the one hand and new relations on the other. In East Africa, colonial domination wasn't just over people; it was about insight into how one husband's space. That cultural formation had an impact on the implication and 'uses' for animals, humans, land, weather systems, water, etc. If the colonial project had just been about people, then there wouldn't have been the need to dominate the land. For *Four Nocturnes*, I looked at hundreds of images of landscapes in which colonial figures supervise fields cultivated by elephants and human beings. You might assume the elephant isn't really doing very much but, actually, most of the time, the human is sitting on an elephant who is, in fact, doing the work. The post-cinematic allows us to reconfigure the cluster of forces, ontologies and agencies at work in a given landscape in a way that wouldn't make sense in the cinematic.

**KE:** What I find compelling is that the ambition to decentre the figuration of Blackness requires a kind of mutism for everything else to flourish around it. That's one of the most challenging elements in your work.

**JA:** You're completely right. I've got problems with the idea that, when someone walks from A to B, the transformations they go through have implications for everything in that frame, including the figures themselves. I don't want to dismiss the ways in which – in a Fanonian sense – the Black body bears these burdens of misuse and therefore needs the conceptual violence of pushback. But I definitely don't want to say that, as a consequence of this misuse and abuse, the frame must always privilege 'action'. Let's just say that there are certain expectations of the Black body and muting, as you call it, is one way to circumvent some of those expectations.





John Akomfrah, *Four Nocturnes*, 2019, three-channel video installation still. Courtesy: © John Akomfrah, Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery, London



The Otolith Group, *INFINITY Minus Infinity*, 2019, film still. Courtesy: the artists

**JA:** I love the way that Eshun speaks. It's not acting and it's not reading. It's fabulous and beguiling. This point you raise concerning racism as weather ties in with Eshun's mode of address in her performance. Anyone who thinks that the environmental and the racial are separate, discursive regimes clearly hasn't read the UK Conservative Party policy on immigration because, you know, they say it very clearly on the tin: 'hostile environment'.<sup>3</sup>

**AS:** Exactly.

**JA:** Geosocial pressures can be brought to bear on living conditions in order to change the climate or the way we breathe – as you highlight in *INFINITY minus Infinity* – to the point where we can't breathe. The killing of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police incurred, once again, the union of those two words. Racism isn't some self-contained gesture; it impacts and explodes and takes all kinds of forms and shapes in environments. And it creates environments. So, the idea that environmentalist discourse should be alien to Black people is like, well, sorry: you haven't been listening. [*Laughs*] Slavery took place on plantations. They weren't just businesses, they were environments, agricultural spaces. Slavery licensed varieties of rape and all manner of nutritional propensities and regimes. Calling it racist doesn't tell you enough, you know? You need the optics of space and environment and climate to fully grasp its totality. Anyone who's looking at the projects I'm working on, at the work that you've been making, can see that questions of the climactic are tied up, for us, with questions of the gestural.

*This article first appeared in frieze issue 214 with the headline 'The main thing is the courage that it takes on our part to embrace the unthought – a courage that is not acknowledged enough.'*

*Main Image: John Akomfrah, The Unfinished Conversation, 2013, film still. Courtesy: © John Akomfrah, Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery, London*

1 Val Wilmer, *As Serious as Your Life: Black Music and the Free Jazz Revolution, 1957–1977*, 1977, reprinted by Serpent's Tail, London, 2018

2 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 2016, Duke University Press, Durham

3 The UK Home Office's 'hostile environment' policy was launched in 2012, under the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government, by then-Home Secretary Theresa May. It was designed to make it as difficult as possible to stay in the UK for those who do not have leave to remain.



Art Review  
18 June 2020

## ArtReview

### Work of the Week: John Akomfrah, 'Handsworth Songs'

Oliver Basciano   Work of the Week   18 June 2020   [artreview.com](http://artreview.com)



Black Audio Film Collective, John Akomfrah, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986, single channel 16mm colour film transferred to video, sound, 58 minutes 33 seconds. © Smoking Dogs Films. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

#### **The ghosts of the artist's 1986 film – available to watch this week – have not been exorcised**

“There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories.” So said a local woman to a journalist pestering her for an eyewitness account of the 1985 Handsworth Riots. The dialogue is retold in the Black Audio Film Collective’s *Handsworth Songs* (1986), directed by the British artist John Akomfrah, which follows the unrest that burned for three days through the Birmingham neighbourhood, in a loose documentary format. That year, black communities came out onto the streets across Britain to protest heavy-handed policing, police killings and the racist politics of the Thatcher government. A few weeks after Handsworth, Brixton in London erupted when a black woman, Cherry Groce, was shot in the course of a police raid, as did the Broadwater Farm estate in the north of the city following the death of Cynthia Jarrett in another house search.

The ghosts that haunt those street fights, and hang heavy in Akomfrah’s film, which was [made available online for a week](#), are of poverty, colonialism and the betrayal of the Windrush generation. The woman being interviewed amongst the



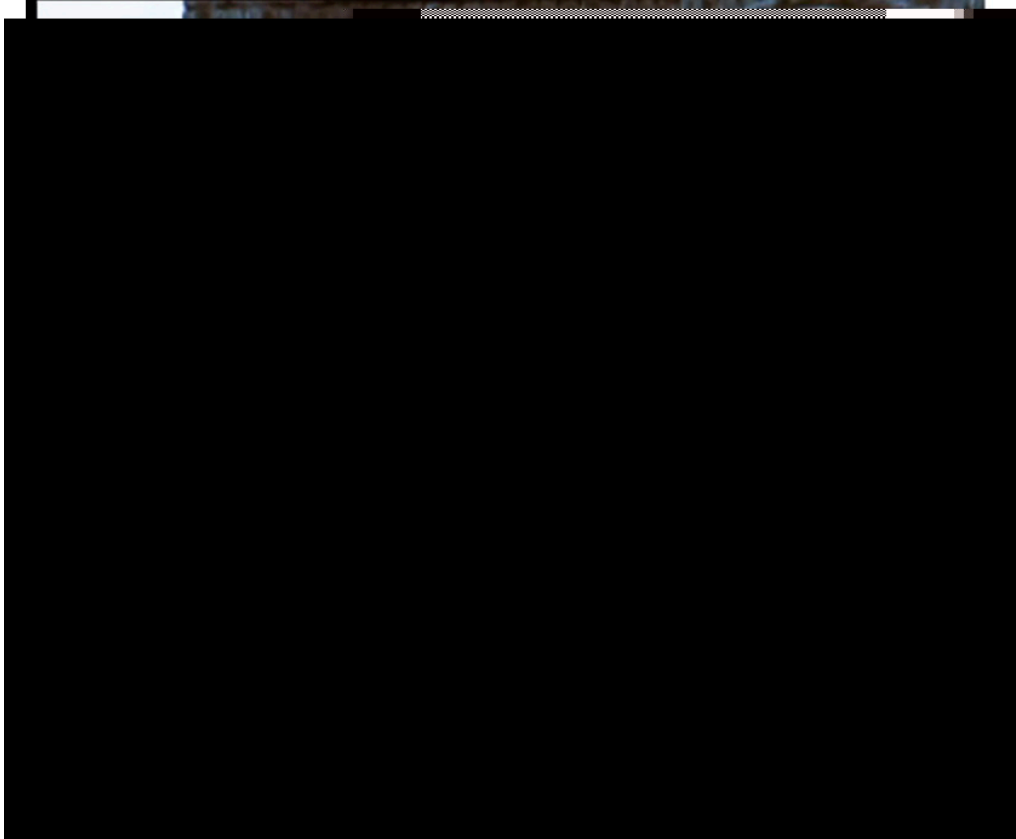
debris recalls the racist rhetoric of Enoch Powell; she remembers when Malcolm X strode through the grey streets of Smethwick, in the West Midlands, in 1965, just nine days before he was assassinated. Akomfrah records less dramatic racism, but every bit as insidious: Douglas Hurd, then home secretary visits the scene, broken glass still underfoot, and sympathises with a white crowd of bystanders. “It must have been a scary experience,” he says. Margaret Thatcher, in an interview, warns against further immigration: “The moment a minority gets a big one, people get frightened.” A young Asian community worker describes how a new police commissioner, intent on getting tough on hard drugs, has initiated a tsunami of searches of young black men and raids of predominantly black pubs and parties, without evidence or success. “It’s obvious, you can’t have young rastas flying over to India and Pakistan collecting heroin. Afro-Caribbean and young Asian youth don’t have the kind of money to push those types of drugs. Those drugs are being brought in by organised, criminal, businessmen.” The police continued their harassment, evidence be damned.



Black Audio Film Collective, John Akomfrah, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986, single channel 16mm colour film transferred to video, sound, 58 minutes 33 seconds. © Smoking Dogs Films. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Yet they are ghosts that have not been exorcised. Originally commissioned by Channel 4 in the UK, 25 years later, in September 2011, Tate Modern showed the film again. That event was programmed in response to a wave of protests and riots across the country after the police shot Mark Duggan, a black man in north London. Akomfrah, alongside his collaborators, Lina Gopaul and David Lawson, took part in a conversation with the academic Kodwo Eshun as shops were destroyed across the city and justice was demanded. The late theorist Mark Fisher was in the audience, later writing for *Sight & Sound*: ‘Watched – and listened to – now, *Handsworth Songs* seems eerily (un)timely. The continuities between the 80s and now impose themselves on the contemporary viewer with a breathtaking force: just as with the recent insurrections, the events in 1985 were triggered by police violence; and the 1985 denunciations of the riots as senseless acts of criminality could have been made by Tory politicians yesterday.’ Lisson, the gallery which represents Akomfrah, uploaded the film this week, nine years on, 34 years after it was first shown, as Britain’s streets are once again – *again* – filled with anger at the racism that lingers in every facet of the country. This time it was the death-by-cop of an American, George Floyd, that amplified the call that Black Lives Matter in Britain too. Tory politicians and commentators once again lined

up to denounce the protests. Prime minister Boris Johnson urged people not to protest, claiming that the movement had been ‘hijacked’ and would likely ‘end in deliberate and calculated violence’. The toppling of Edward Colston’s statue in Bristol, a man who made his money in the slave trade, was ‘utterly disgraceful’ decried home secretary Priti Patel. Akomfrah once again put in conversation, this time in a [Zoom discussion](#) conducted this week.



Akomfrah’s work was broadcast (back when Channel 4 broadcast such things) in the white heat of the Handsworth unrest, but its subject is not confined to the events of those three late summer days. Instead it tracks how we, Britain, got there. And how we got to where we are now. It’s a vital film, not just for its reflections of the myth of the ‘good immigrant’, of integration (the “h’integration” that the Black-Brummie comedian Lenny Henry would [claim](#) his mother saw as being of paramount importance), but it also throws up the nuances that separate the history of British racism from its American mode. Akomfrah’s film does not just feature black and white faces (the latter always in positions of power: police, politicians, reporters, clergy) but gives voice to the area’s Asian community too. They speak as victims (two Asian men, Kassamali Moledina and his brother Amirali, died in a fire; many Asian people owned shops damaged in the protests) and mediators. In a [recent essay](#), Gary Younge noted the dangers of Europe focusing its attention on American racism at the cost of its own. ‘Well into my thirties, I was far more knowledgeable about the literature and history of Black America than I was about that of Black Britain, where I was born and raised, or indeed of the Caribbean, where my parents are from. Black America has a hegemonic authority in the black diaspora’ he writes. America is racist because it owes its foundation to religious zealots determined to make a new world even more puritanical than the old one they had left, a new world they built off the back of black slavery. Britain is racist because we got in boats, sailed far from our own shores, to murder, pillage and enslave peoples in Africa and Asia. When the exploited nations started to turn up on this country’s doorstep, it was as if the ghosts of its past had arrived for a reckoning. *Handsworth Songs* is a brilliant work; but its return, its own haunting – rerun time and again as our rotten history is never resolved – is as unwelcome as it is necessary.

# LISSON GALLERY

*Financial Times*

3 May 2019

## Ghana arrives at the Venice Biennale, bringing new narratives with it

With the country's first appearance at the event, curator Nana Oforiatta Ayim is testing out what a national African pavilion can be



Ghana pavilion curator Nana Oforiatta Ayim



There's no more fitting place to work with plaster than Venice, the stucco-lined city. But the interiors of Ghana's exhibition spaces at the 58th Biennale are unlikely to resemble the shimmering walls of a 16th-century palazzo. Along with Pakistan and Madagascar, this is Ghana's first appearance at the Biennale, and under the guidance of the architect David Adjaye, soil has been imported from Ghana. Made into a render the colour of dark sand, it will line a series of elliptical chambers containing the work of six artists.

"You really will be in Ghana when you walk in," Adjaye says, referring to the materials used as well as the pavilion's formal quality, derived from the country's regional architecture, where cooking, sleeping and other activities take place in these individual, chamber-like spaces. "We're testing out what a national African pavilion can be, creating the context of a sub-Saharan country."

It's not always easy for African nations to have a presence in Venice, for reasons ranging from the economic and the geographic to the complexities of the Biennale system itself. In 2017 Nigeria came, but as a private initiative; it is not returning this year, and Algeria has dropped out at the last minute.

The Ghana project, by contrast, is entirely supported by the ministry of tourism. Both [Adjaye](#) and the pavilion's curator, Nana Oforiatta Ayim, have been consulting with the Ghanaian government for several years about the creation of new national museums and art initiatives (Adjaye is building a new national cathedral in Accra, both are working on the transformation of a 16th-century castle into a museum). It seems that their influence has comfortably extended to taking messages about Ghana's contemporary cultural position further afield.



Film-maker John Akomfrah © Smoking Dogs Films/Lisson Gallery/Jack Hems

Oforiatta Ayim's initial impetus was to create a show that threw the spotlight on a single contemporary artist living and working in Ghana. But advice from Okwui Enwezor, curator of the 2015 Biennale and a consultant on this project until his death in March this year, changed her mind. "He said, 'You have to come out all guns blazing'," she tells me over the phone from Venice, as the installation is nearing completion.



As a result, the six artists cross generations and genders. Felicia Abban was Ghana's first female professional portrait photographer, who worked for its first president following the country's independence from Britain in 1957. [El Anatsui](#) is the continent's most bankable artist, with his largest bottle-top works fetching up to \$2m at auction. The painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye has won numerous prizes, including the Pinchuk Future Generation award in 2012, and was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2013. International acclaim has been delivered in spades to the film-maker [John Akomfrah](#) in the past decade. The younger [Ibrahim Mahama](#) and video-maker Selasi Awusi Sosu perhaps represent a more current and urgent view of the country's artistic practice.

“

**We're testing out what a national African pavilion can be, creating the context of a sub-Saharan country**

David Adjaye

Oforiatta Ayim sees pairings between the participants. The politics of representation and portraiture shared by Abban and Yiadom-Boakye, for example; stories of memory, loss and restitution in the work of Akomfrah and Sosu; the reappropriation of existing objects into new narratives on the part of El Anatsui

and Mahama (the latter often using tattered jute sacks to tell the story of colonial trade).

The fact that only some of these artists actually live in Ghana is tied to the country's colonial past. Akomfrah was born in Accra, but moved with his family to the UK after the 1966 coup. Yiadom-Boakye was born in Britain, and, according to Oforiatta Ayim, hasn't been to Ghana for 20 years or so. "But it is part of her identity. When we're together we talk a lot about growing up Ghanaian in Europe," she says. The curator herself grew up in Germany and the UK, though with frequent visits to Ghana, and speaks English, German, French, Russian and Twi (a Ghanaian language).

In 2011, however, she moved permanently to Accra. "It sometimes feels like everything happens in the diaspora," she says. "That's important and it's part of who we are. But now we need to focus on evolving work in our continent."



Adjaye agrees. “The idea of colonisation lingers, but it can’t be ‘bad past, bright future,’” he says. “We have to bring the past and present together now.” His and Oforiatta Ayim’s Venice installation — a classical regional architecture brought into service to show several strands of contemporary art — is a start.

*May 11-Nov 24, [labiennale.org](http://labiennale.org)*

*Frieze*

22 January 2019

## frieze

Opinion /

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BY OSEI BONSU  
22 JAN 2019

### John Akomfrah Commemorates the Colonial Soldiers Who Fought for a Cause that Was Not Theirs

100 years on from World War I, the filmmaker's latest work 'Mimesis: African Soldier' remembers the faces we seldom see in history books



In the opening image of John Akomfrah's *Mimesis: African Soldier* (2018), we are confronted by a row of black and brown faces who smile nervously and knowingly into the camera. They represent the faces we seldom see in war documentaries or history books; their smiles evoke a quiet sense of unease and foreboding. Once the colonial subjects of empire, they will soon assume their positions on its invisible front line. Following on from Akomfrah's previous works, *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012) and *Vertigo Sea* (2015), *Mimesis* is split across three screens, allowing for multiple stories to be revealed simultaneously. Refusing to commit to a singular narrative, the film splices archival footage and sound with newly filmed sequences to create an impressionistic, multifaceted perspective. Visualizing the complex experiences of colonial soldiers during World War I, Akomfrah commemorates those who fought, served and died for a cause that was not theirs.



John Akomfrah, *Mimesis: African Soldier*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Imperial War Museum, London

You would be forgiven for thinking that the nations of Africa did not take part in World War I. However, between 1914 and 1918, millions of unknown and undocumented African soldiers served in long campaigns that contributed toward European victories. More often than not, their efforts were overshadowed by conflicts between European powers. For instance, few know that the first shot fired by British forces on land was discharged by an African, Alhaji Grunshi, at Kamina; or that the last engagement between British and German forces took place on African soil. Neither is it common knowledge that more than two million colonial soldiers, labourers and carriers served in British, French and German forces on the western front, where they experienced the widespread racism of the early 20th century. In *Mimesis*, Akomfrah brings this global reality into view, illuminating a history that has yet to be fully recognized or understood.

Fracturing a grand historical narrative, the film is characteristic of Akomfrah's cinematic practice, in which he refuses to obey historical chronology. Excising archival footage from the narratives in which it is typically embedded, he cuts and combines images in highly poetic ways. In the lush imagery that comprises the opening sequence of *Mimesis*, European and pan-African flags are used symbolically, hovering between a dual sense of loss and victory. In one scene, they are strewn across an empty battlefield like the blood-stained rags of wounded soldiers; later on, the same flags wave resiliently in the desert winds, imposing national identities onto the natural landscape. Throughout *Mimesis*, powerful images such as these are accompanied by one-word titles ('Discontent', 'Distress', 'Disgust'), each distilling the psychological effects of war. Gaining nuance in their specificity, the words speak to what Akomfrah calls 'the ambiguities of colonial disenchantment' at the heart of the soldiers's loss of identity and dispossession of self.



John Akomfrah, *Mimesis: African Soldier*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Imperial War Museum, London

As the film develops, we are introduced to a group of soldiers who wander the abandoned battlefields and deserted shorelines in search of their former homelands. Their earthly possessions and fading family photographs appear submerged under streams of water. While the ocean is presented as a repository of memory that washes the soldiers's belongings ashore, it is also the vast zone of human movement in which colonial exploration and the transatlantic slave trade took shape, as well as the crossroads of many contemporary migrations between territories and continents. In *Mimesis*, the soldiers's memories seem to have become faded, deformed, abstracted as the existential threat of the ocean rises.

At points, Akomfrah reveals his hand not only as a powerful filmmaker adept in the art of reconstructing historical reality but as a masterful storyteller who draws attention to the human condition. Throughout the film, traditional African and Asian song imbues the imagery with the sense of displacement so often associated with the formation of a diasporic subject. As in earlier works, such as *Handsworth Songs* (1986), sound is used as a memory trigger capable of traversing time and space. Much like the images, this music is sourced from a vast media archive that the artist has assembled over the years. As cinematic strings begin to pour into the moving image, the group of soldiers can be seen standing stoically, waist-deep in the ocean's tide. On another screen, streams of water continue to engulf their belongings together with their memories of home. Here, a cacophony of sound and image transforms our reception of history, suspending past, present and future at once.





John Akomfrah, *Mimesis: African Soldier*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Imperial War Museum, London

When the soldiers finally return to an unspecified African country, they come to realize that they will never reach home. Unable to fully reconnect and reunite with their loved ones, they must accept the defeat of victory. The same empires that had carved up Africa, have now turned many parts of it into a wasteland, leaving behind a path marked by death, plundering and deserted villages. With cinematic qualities bordering on those of a wartime epic, the scenes of wreckage and decay can feel more directly illustrative than allegorical. At times, *Mimesis* risks becoming a pastiche, with the floating corpses of the dead and the cries of a newborn appearing to oversimplify the film's complex narrative order. However, the moral tone of Akomfrah's memorial work ultimately yields to the clear-eyed precision of the film's visual intelligence.

Having crossed the sea to meet their indeterminate futures, African soldiers could smell death in the air, as the sound of exploding bombs and machine guns became deafening. Some feared they would never return home, while others suspected they would eventually be sold into slavery. Remarkably, Akomfrah's film never loses sight of the complex history of African participation in World War I, forcing us to question the conditions under which these men fought and lost their lives. Not only do the archival images and sounds attest to these African fighters' existence, they speak for all those whose histories have no visible monuments.

As the soldiers in *Mimesis* walk the deserts, the ocean continues to wash over their memories as the flags of nations wave ceaselessly in the distance. In the film's final, dreamlike sequence, the notion of the museum is brought into the frame as the soldiers enter a series of dimly lit rooms in which their earthly possessions are returned to them. It is a contemplative, hopeful ending, providing a utopian vision of return – albeit unrealized. In this light, Akomfrah's *Mimesis* does more to dignify the life of the African soldier than any tangible monument is ever likely to do, because it allows the dead to wander across the borders of history and into living memory.

John Akomfrah, *'Mimesis: African Soldier'*, runs at [Imperial War Museum, London, until 31 March](#).

Main image: John Akomfrah, *Mimesis: African Soldier*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Imperial War Museum, London

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#### OSEI BONSU

Osei Bonsu is a curator and writer based in London, UK, and Paris, France. He is a contributing editor of *frieze*.

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LISSON GALLERY

*Art in America*  
1 October 2018

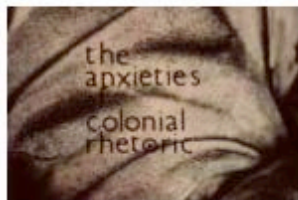
# Art in America

MAGAZINE Oct 1, 2018

## Memories of Underdevelopment

by [Ratik Asokan](#)

View of John  
Akomfrah's *The  
Unfinished  
Conversation*, 2012,  
three-channel video  
installation, 45 minutes,  
48 seconds. © Smoking  
Dogs Film, courtesy  
Lisson Gallery.



In 1950 in London I was at the beginning of that great movement of peoples that was to take place in the second half of the twentieth century—a movement and a cultural mixing greater than the peopling of the United States.

—V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*, 1987

These are for those to whom history has not been friendly, for those who have known the cruelties of political becoming, those who demand in the shadows of dying technologies, those who live in the sufferings of defiance, those who live among the abandoned aspirations which were the metropolis, let them bear witness to the ideals which in time will be born in hope. In time let them bear witness to the process by which the living transforms the dead into partners in struggle.

—Black Audio Film Collective, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986

PAULETTE WILSON MOVED from Jamaica to the UK in 1968, attended primary and secondary school there, raised her daughter, Natalie, there, and now helps raise her granddaughter. She worked for much of that time in the restaurant sector, at one point serving members of Parliament at the House of Commons café. At her retirement, Wilson could show over three decades of National Insurance payments and a long history of tax slips. So it must have come as a surprise, when, in October of last year, she received a deportation notice from the Home Office. The government was sending her “back” to Jamaica, an island she hadn’t been to since she was ten.

Wilson’s is one of the many cases that emerged earlier this year as part of the *Guardian*’s investigation into the Windrush Scandal: named after a ship, the HMT *Empire Windrush*, which brought an early group of Caribbean migrants to the UK in 1948. It turns out that many West Indian migrants who moved to Britain in that era never formally naturalized or applied for a passport.<sup>1</sup> Half a century later they were deemed illegals.<sup>2</sup> Several were threatened with direct removal; others were denied care at hospitals; others still were turned out of their jobs and homes.

You invite your imperial subjects to rebuild your economy; you use their labor for over fifty years; then you wipe the slate clean and send them packing “home.” As a fable, the Windrush Scandal nicely catches the tedious persistence—and potency—of colonial amnesia. “I grew up with the National Front around my area,” Sarah O’Connor, another victim, recently told a reporter, referring to Britain’s proudest nativist group. “I thought those attitudes had been stamped out. I think that the government has stoked it up again.”<sup>3</sup>



If the latter half of the twentieth century is now seen as the great era of decolonization, it may also be remembered as the period when the issue of immigration, and anti-immigrant sentiment, was stitched in the cultural fabric of the formerly imperial West. It's hard to imagine now, but for two decades after World War II, Commonwealth citizens—Kenyans, Nigerians, South Africans, West Indians, Indians, Pakistanis, Australians, New Zealanders, and so forth—were free to travel to and from the UK and had the right to work there. But Britain lurched rightward in the late 1960s, culminating in the passage of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which restricted entry to people who were born in the country or who had one parent or grandparent born there. The same period saw the rise of figures like Enoch Powell, whose overtly racist “Rivers of Blood” speech turns fifty this year. (The Tories were necessarily in the lead here, but Labor—Labor parliamentarians at any rate—soon followed suit.)

By the '70s and '80s, the legacy of empire had taken on a curious double quality, a sort of split personality. On the one hand, there was the phenomenon of Raj revivalism: the cinema of Merchant Ivory and David Lean; soap operas like *The Far Pavilions*; countless coffee-table books that looked back fondly at the white man's burden.<sup>4</sup> On the other, the presence of people of color in the country was increasingly taken to be incongruous. If Asians were simply mocked, black youth, especially black men, came to be described in the mainstream British press as agents of social disorder, kids who were in some way fundamentally different from the white locals, and indeed untethered from history itself. “If you look at their faces, I think they don't know who they are or what they are,” Tory MP Ronald Bell infamously said on the BBC news show “Panorama” in 1981, gesturing at footage of riots in Brixton, a predominantly black London suburb. “And really, what you're asking me is how the hell one gives them the kind of sense of belonging young Englishmen have.”

This statement is heard in *Expeditions One: Signs of Empire* (1983), the debut work of the Black Audio Film Collective. A twenty-six-minute slide-tape piece, it is a sort of atmospheric, historically suggestive picture show. Rummaging through assorted archives—back issues of *National Geographic*, colonial textbooks, old catalogues—members of BAFC compiled a procession of images that in one way or another evokes what theorists today would call the “colonial imaginary”: imperial statuary and painting, old maps, snapshots from the Raj album, a photo of elephants transporting Lipton tea. The latent violence of the proceedings occasionally comes to the surface: there are a few images, for example, of mutilated Africans. Over all this plays a dense soundscape, driven by chamber music and moth-eaten by tape delays, that circles around two sound bites—Bell's, and another from Labor party leader Hugh Gaitskell, who extolls the “multiracial” Commonwealth—sound bites that seem to constrict the vast and complex history of empire into a pair of clichés.

*Expeditions One* and its sister film *Expeditions Two: Images of Nationality* had modest opening runs. They screened at a few university film clubs and progressive art galleries. But their daring, insight, and sheer novelty as works of political art were more widely acknowledged.<sup>5</sup> Here were polemical films that didn't stoop to the conventions of agitprop or didactic social realism. Instead, BAFC had trapped the howling voices of empire in a sort of cinematic seashell.

Over the next fifteen years, BAFC would emerge as one of the key players in the British Black Arts Movement: a circle of painters, filmmakers, photographers, and curators loosely mentored by cultural theorist Stuart Hall.<sup>6</sup> Manning the barricades of representation, these artists of color looked back at a racially intermingled history of empire and forward to a truly multicultural society. Their work—their self-definition of “who they are and what they are”—amounted to a cumulative response to Bell.

Within the Black Arts movement, BAFC stood out for its formal restlessness and scholarly inclination. The group was founded in 1982, at Portsmouth Polytechnic, by six undergraduates: John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Reece Auguiste, Avril Johnson, Claire Joseph, and Edward George (Joseph left in 1985 and was replaced by Trevor Mathison). Second-generation immigrants with roots in Africa and the Caribbean, they were brought together by their passion for movies, music, radical politics, and theory: disciplines they would go on to unite in more than a dozen unclassifiable essay-films, many of which were made for public television.

In these hybrid works, archival footage and found photos rubbed shoulders with new documentary material, mainly interviews, and the occasional in-studio dramatic segment modeled on street theater. A soundscape made from snatches of music and miscellaneous sound bites, stitched together by Mathison, the collective's brilliant audio designer, was key to each film's drama and atmosphere. The general mix of expression and sampling, of self and society, speaks to the influence of theory, particularly cultural studies. “Identity is formed at that point where the unspeakable stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture”: Hall's iconic formulation could serve as a sort of manifesto.<sup>7</sup>

BAFC variously addressed the major cultural issues of the day, and race was an abiding interest. *Handsworth Songs* (1986) is a seminal insider account of the Handsworth riots of 1985; *Who Needs a Heart* (1991) blends fiction and biography to chronicle the rise of the British Black Panthers; *A Touch of the Tar Brush* (1992) explores the history of Liverpool's black community. Later, BAFC would make films about America, such as *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993), a semi-fictional biopic, and *The Last Angel of History* (1995), an overview of early Afrofuturism.

JOHN AKOMFRAH (b. 1957) directed most of BAFC's films and is today the group's most visible alumnus. Born to Ghanaian parents—his father was killed in the CIA-assisted coup of the Kwame Nkrumah government<sup>8</sup>—he was brought up in London in a milieu of West African exiles. From a young age, Akomfrah was a radical nerd: organizing student sit-ins, prowling film clubs, reading voraciously.<sup>9</sup> He befriended future collaborators Auguste and Gopaul in high school (characteristically, he met Gopaul in a feminist theory seminar). Later, he was to become something like the group's spokesman. "In television interviews, [Akomfrah] was—and remains—both plummy and incisive, adept at discussing Althusser and Antonioni in the same sentence, brilliant at joining the dots between structuralist cinema and revolutionary politics," observes Sukhdev Sandhu.<sup>10</sup>

BAFC closed shop in 1998, after which Akomfrah sidestepped—solo—into the art world.<sup>11</sup> His breakout moment came in 2002, when Okwui Enwezor screened his films at Documenta 11. Since then Akomfrah has become a regular figure on the biennial circuit and is now represented by Lisson Gallery. Over that period, and perhaps this is the art world's influence, he has taken to multiple-channel installations. Recent projects—*The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), a magisterial biopic of Stuart Hall; *Vertigo Sea* (2015), an investigation into the "aquatic sublime"; and *Precarity* (2017), about the legendary New Orleans cornetist Buddy Bolden—have involved three screens. The upgrade in equipment has made for cinema that is more technically complex and expansive; the possibilities of montage are exponentially greater when footage is spread across a triptych.

"John Akomfrah: Signs of Empire," on view this summer at the New Museum in New York, was the filmmaker's most comprehensive US exhibition to date. The show occupied the museum's second floor, which the curators turned into an elegant little cineplex, screening four films—*Expeditions One*, *The Unfinished Conversation*, *Transfigured Night* (2013), and *Vertigo Sea*—in separate galleries. (Four older BAFC films were also screened periodically in the building's basement theater.)

It's a wide time span: thirty-two years. you can tell as much from the technology. *Expeditions One*, with its patient roll call of 35mm Ektachrome tape slides, captured on a rostrum camera, seems positively dinky when set beside a later mega-production like *Vertigo Sea*, an HD video installation that washes over you like a breaker. Yet, for all the material differences, Akomfrah's key techniques—a nonnarrative, montage approach; the mix of found and new footage; quotations from literary texts; a taste for highly wrought visual surfaces—have remained constant throughout his career. Above all, he has retained an energetic and colossally patient commitment to archival research, and a corresponding, almost mystical belief in the evocative power and political significance of old footage and images.



This tendency, which dates back to the early days of BAFC, has complex, personal roots. Akomfrah addresses this in an interview with New Museum curator Gary Carrion-Murayari:

I've spoken a lot about the discovery, this business of how one discovers the doppelgänger, the phantom that stalks our lives as teenagers, and also about that mirror moment when you suddenly realize that actually, this figure, this ghost that you've been trying to run away from . . . the fiction of the black figure, was in fact, and is in fact, you. . . . You suddenly realize that all the news accounts and the TV reportage—about a young man or woman who is causing trouble, and who you were trying to avoid because you were trying to be a good British subject—were talking about you. You became aware of that in spite of all your disavowing gestures, something has been pinned on you. . . . And that immediately throws up this question of the historical, to the extent that you are not responsible for these stereotypes . . . and mythologies around you. . . . And slowly you think, well, one might need to look at this question of construction, of representation, and of narratives that precede you and that are the stage of the present before your arrival.<sup>12</sup>

There is a distinctly psychoanalytic elegance to this reflection. Not for nothing does it recall Fanon. The trauma, as it were, comprises growing up black in a racist country. The (self)diagnosis is the belated recognition that this society made you a therapist. Here's where the archive comes in. The archive is the master key to your complexed, dyed-in-the-wool relationship to the society. It is the archive that keeps you sane, and it is the archive that keeps you sane. A devil in the details, a devil in the details, a devil in the details, fear that search it out. The visual history of imperialism deconstructs the archive you reflect

It's immediately clear how it applies to *Expeditions One*. To an extent, it flavors all Akomfrah's work. Over time, however, his interest in the archive has taken on a more complex texture (if it hadn't, he would be a pretty boring artist). The change seems to have been prompted by Akomfrah's encounter with video footage of early immigrant life in Britain: ethnographically tinted films made by the BBC, news clips from smaller outlets such as British Movietone news and Yorkshire television, other miscellaneous footage found in provincial libraries and government archives. These were portrayals of immigrants, not self-depictions. And yet Akomfrah came to feel that they were not merely catalogues of surveillance and domination—even if that's what they were initially intended to be. On the contrary, he sensed that there were forms of popular life and consciousness embedded in these documents that escaped official narratives.

His task as a filmmaker, then, would be to assemble a sort of counter-history. Marriage records at city hall, news clips of immigrants disembarking on English shores, footage of the black poor at home or black toddlers at preschool or black demonstrators in the street: all such material was double-sided. It might have been made to keep the immigrants in their place, but, with some creativity, it could be used to narrate the immigrants' own stories.<sup>13</sup>

IF *EXPEDITIONS ONE* amounted to a subversive genealogy, Akomfrah's mature films might be described as séance sessions or exercises in ancestor worship. He uses a range of cinematic tactics to radically reposition or open up archival material. An amazing example of this happens near the beginning of *Handsworth Songs*, which was screened downstairs at the New Museum.

Originally made for the Channel 4 series "Britain: The Lie of the Land," *Handsworth Songs* was released in 1986, a year after the titular riots in Handsworth, a predominantly black suburb of Birmingham. The film was a response to the mainstream coverage of the events, which were crassly interpreted by the press as an outburst of senseless black criminality.<sup>14</sup> Akomfrah cuts against this discourse by offering something like an insider account. This is achieved partly through interviews with community leaders, who discuss the neighborhood's economic problems and history of over-policing. More relevant is how Akomfrah's agenda works at the level of style.

The film opens *in media res*, with footage of the riots and its aftermath shot by BAFC: police lines and burning cars; jostling reporters and cameramen; a white politician surveying the wreckage; emptied-out side streets. Having established the setting, Akomfrah then turns to archival footage.

First, a montage of screeching newspaper front pages flashes across the screen: “Riot of Death,” “Racial Fights Could Take Over City,” “Face of a Bomber,” “Torch of Hate,” and “The Bloody Battleground.” This is the mainstream narrative of the event. It’s anxious, ill-informed, tinged with racism. And the general sense of claustrophobia is amped up by the metallic percussion on Mark Stewart’s dub track “Jerusalem.”

From here the film makes a double movement: back in time and closer to the inner life of the community. The transition is signaled sonically. As the screen slowly fades to black, an aching beautiful track, minor key synths over a patient, funky bass line, seems to pull us away from the unforgiving gaze of the media. A procession of black-and-white wedding photographs floats past on-screen, young Caribbean men and women smiling giddily; images of hope, aspiration. As the song settles into its rhythm, we shift to old, faded footage shot at what seems to be a 1950s or ’60s immigrant dance hall where black and brown and white couples are doing their best to sex up a ballroom number. These could be the parents of the young men and women that *The Daily Mail* would like to present as inveterate criminals. They crossed the ocean, in the most adverse circumstances, hoping to make a better life for themselves and their children. The narrator seems to commune with their memories:

He said to her . . . Remember the nights of Coruba cocktails and Curuba sour, their secret pregnancies, your wet nursing and me nappy-washing. It is about time we had our own child. Our own master George Hammond Banner Bart.

Thus we come to imagine the stories of Handsworth that lie hidden behind the media coverage, that are hidden by the media coverage.

It bears repeating that this effect owes everything to editing and sound work (not to mention the lyrical script). On its own, the ballroom footage would have had little narrative or emotional significance, at least for the majority of viewers who have no personal connection with it. It has been made to speak through an inspired act of historical stereoscoping.



As the narrator continues her story, the visuals take us further back, the dance hall giving way to footage of life on the Caribbean—a man cutting sugarcane, a washerwoman smacking wet clothes with a little wooden bat—scenes of everyday struggle amid wretchedness. It is a brief and painful flash of insight; the camera soon returns to the dancers. But this much is enough to set another narrative in motion. Indeed, by this point we have lost control of the visual movement of our imagination, which sloshes backward and forward, from memory to premonition. Now it is impossible for us to watch the crass television coverage of the riot, which is introduced later in the film, without thinking of the previous generations that settled in Handsworth and tried to make a life there. Our mind keeps skipping: from the anger and desperation of the young rioters to the whittled aspirations of their working-class immigrant parents, from their immigrant parents to their grandparents in the Caribbean . . . As the narrator says later in the film: “There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories.”

THOUGH *HANDSWORTH SONGS* travels great distances, the film constantly returns to the same neighborhood, burrowing deeper and deeper into its psychohistory. It is a fundamentally local undertaking, and this is part of its great appeal. Something similar can be said about much of BAFC’s output. *Seven Songs*, for example, is a loving evocation and historical excavation of central Harlem. *A Touch of the Tar Brush* takes the temperature of race relations in Liverpool. And in a more personal film like *The Call of Mist* (1998), which was shot on the Isle of Sky, landscape is studied for the memories it evokes—in this case, memories of Akomfrah’s mother, whose passing the movie commemorates.

By the late ’90s, however, and especially after he entered the art world, Akomfrah’s films grow more global in scope. He begins to think laterally, geographically: drawing parallels between histories—national, social, personal—that do not necessarily intersect.

This approach finds a tremendous success in *The Unfinished Conversation*. Mixing news footage of major postwar political and cultural events with snatches of Hall’s own television appearances and more intimate photographs, the installation, entirely assembled from archival sources, is an expansive bildungsroman that charts the influential scholar’s journey from provincial Jamaica to the helm of Britain’s New Left. It is exemplary for how it gives equal billing to the “life” and “times,” or, more precisely, for the ways in which the latter are shown to impinge on the former (for example, Hall’s participation in the anti-war movement follows clips of Vietnam war newsreels.) That said, the distribution of footage across the three channels never feels obvious, not least because snatches from jazz performances—Hall was a great admirer of Miles Davis—keep breaking in.

Near the middle of the piece, around the mid-1950s, there is a long sequence in which scenes from British blue-collar life—men and women operating machines on the factory floor, workers tossing coal into a smelting furnace, panoramic shots of smokestacks and power plants—play over a reading from the famous Coketown section of *Hard Times*.<sup>15</sup> This is a bitter homage: Dickens’s great nineteenth-century novel of factory life reminds us of the ongoing deindustrialization of Britain. And the lament is echoed by Hall, whom we soon hear discussing his early days as an activist with groups such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: “I went up and down the country, speaking at CND meetings for about three years. . . . You could still see the smoke coming out of the chimneys and there was still textile mills.”

As a self-contained section, this is straightforward. Then Akomfrah dramatically reframes the matter. Industrial Britain gives way to the Global South, as a sort of greatest hits montage of decolonization, 1940–60, unfolds across the three screens. (This viewer recognized Nkrumah waving to an audience, Castro’s guerrillas on horseback, and policemen “lathi-charging” Indian protesters. There were surely other episodes. In any case, the focus here is less on the narrative details than on the overall atmosphere.) Hall’s voice, from the 1962 BBC radio show “Equality Between Nations,” takes over from Dickens:

“**I wanted to question the very sharp opposition which you make between the concepts of liberty and equality. It seems to me not only an ethnocentric way of looking at it, but a particularly British way of looking at it. Because I don’t think these two concepts are as clearly distinct if you put them, say, into the context of the nationalist revolutions of the underdeveloped territories. I think it has been the idea of equality of one sort or the other that has mobilized people to support nationalist movements of one kind or other. What they were facing were in fact inequalities: whether they were economic or human or social or racial, they were essentially inequalities. I think they impinged on their lives as inequalities. Therefore, when they said we want to be free, what they meant was we want to be free not to be unequal.**

“Intersectionality” is too dry a term for what’s happening here. True, there are echoes between the internal class dynamics of British society and the larger system of imperialism. But Akomfrah knows this didn’t lead to any meaningful solidarity. Later in the film, for example, we learn how Hall was often abused on the streets of working-class Birmingham for appearing in public with a white woman (his wife). The cultural theorist worked in the shadow of this social failure, and so does his biographer. Akomfrah’s poignant subject is the possibility, now perhaps lost for good, of an alliance between the British proletariat and the anti-colonial Global South.

Actually, the alliance did come to fruition: in the figure of Hall and the anti-colonial British Left more broadly. A modest legacy, to be sure, and one that’s easy to dismiss. Yet a profound awareness of its limits is precisely what saves this film from bombast. To put it another way, Akomfrah makes no large claims on world history. Laying out his archival footage with extraordinary tact, he limits himself to pursuing one person’s lived experience of impersonal historical events. As Enwezor writes in his generous catalogue essay, Akomfrah’s films “address what it means to be a subject, and how the subject can be an agent of historical recall, interrogations, and analysis.”<sup>16</sup>

This observation can be taken, *ex negativo*, as a criticism of the other two works screened at the New Museum. *Transfigured Night* is a perplexing film. Archival footage and photographs from the history of decolonization—Nkrumah’s speech on nonalignment stands out—are set against languid, rather woozy shots of tourists ascending the Lincoln Memorial, and a lugubrious staged tableau showing an African politician, presumably a head of state, looking out his window at the skyline of a Western metropolis (Enwezor describes this last as a “backdrop of neocolonial imperium and global capital”<sup>17</sup>). The “idea” here is clear enough, but there’s something debilitatingly academic about Akomfrah’s take on it. He seems to approach the issue from an Olympian position; there is little sense of lived experience or memory.

*Vertigo Sea* suffers a more extreme version of the problem. Here the notion of a “subject” dissolves all together. The three-channel work, which was the show’s centerpiece, is described in the catalogue as a “social history of the ocean.” The piece has something for everyone. Nature: large swatches of underwater footage from BBC’s Natural History unit. But also culture: quotes from Melville and Woolf and Nietzsche and Heathcote Williams. History: henchmen of Argentine dictator Jorge Rafael Videla dumping corpses in the ocean; Vietnamese boat people fleeing to Hong Kong; more recent deaths in the Mediterranean; the testimony of a Nigerian fisherman. But also fiction: campy staged shots of black and white figures in period dress.



Sections of the film are, of course, deeply affecting: how could they not be, when there is so much to choose from? Yet the overall effect is slick and machined. Perhaps this has to do with the installation's sheer visual opulence. Akomfrah has always been a careful craftsman, but the extravagant production values of the film — which was partly funded by the Sharjah Art Foundation — smother all other cinematic effects.

It would be one thing if *Vertigo Sea* and *Transfigured Night* were experiments or outliers. In fact, they represent a new tendency. Over the past decade or so, Akomfrah's films have grown grander and more amorphous, with thicker passports and older histories, and they are increasingly likely to present "poetic" connections between disparate, complex subjects.<sup>18</sup> His stories were always global, but now they just seem broad. He doesn't offer a sharp or even a meaningful system to bring the material together.

There has been a similar dilution at the level of form. Works like *Handsworth Songs* and *The Unfinished Conversation* demand to be actively read and deciphered. They operate as montages in the true dialectical sense of the term. As viewers we were invited to intervene in the narratives of history and the direction it was taking. ("The only interest in history is that it is not truly wrapped up . . . another turning is waiting to happen," Stuart Hall says in *The Unfinished Conversation*.) By contrast, *Vertigo Sea* and *Transfigured Night* simply bathe viewers in affect. These films resemble harmonious collages. Like the worst abstract painting, they "can mean whatever you want them to mean."

ALL THIS HAS led to an unfortunate depoliticization of history. Akomfrah's new films tend to leave you with a mix of melancholy, confusion, and cosmic faux-awe. There's no spur to thought and little real feeling. If anything, you catch a whiff of the maudlin internationalism so typical of the globalized intelligentsia: the world is complex, interconnected, and terrible; the best we can do is celebrate its diversity.

To be fair to Akomfrah, he seems aware of this danger, or of something like it. "I know the archival stuff is old and inscrutable," he wrote in these pages, in 2014, referring to his film *The Nine Muses* (2010):



**But my wish is to extend its afterlife, to have the embers burn a little bit longer. At the same time, the material always suggests something that you haven't seen or heard before. That's the quality I want those pieces to have. If they don't, that's cool, I made the fucking effort. I'm not concerned principally with whether all of the pieces translate. It's not one of my obsessions.<sup>19</sup>**

The overly combative tone here—“I made the fucking effort”—is telling. The trouble is not with “old and inscrutable” material: as films like *Handsworth Songs* prove, even the most obscure footage can be made to speak eloquently. The trouble, rather, is that Akomfrah is no longer doing enough with his material. If his films are still carefully scripted and designed, as the New Museum catalogue essays seem to suggest,<sup>20</sup> his formal decisions no longer feel significant in the sense that Clive Bell meant that term.

Perhaps Akomfrah deserves more patience. Back in 1987, Salman Rushdie famously attacked *Handsworth Songs*, which he found too abstruse, experimental, and generally self-involved.<sup>21</sup> There is every chance we are repeating his mistake.

Yet it might be that the art world has finally caught up with Akomfrah. BAFC came to prominence at a time when few artists or filmmakers were mining postcolonial archives. The situation could not be more different today. Over the past decade or so, there has been a spate of archival art from or about the Global South. (A partial list of the more visible figures would include Walid Raad, Emily Jacir, Naeem Mohaiemen, Yto Barrada, the Otolith Group, and Taus Makhacheva.<sup>22</sup>) These artists share a few things in common. They are broadly members of the international left, or fellow travelers, looking back at its historical defeat. Though born outside the West, they tend to live and work in western capitals. Most important, they self-consciously address a global art audience: that is, they approach their subject from a distance, as if it were a footnote in some grander, long-settled history, and they assume very little knowledge—let alone intimacy or investment—on the viewer’s part.

Seen from this perspective, films like *The Nine Muses*, *Transfigured Night*, and *Vertigo Sea* take on a new complexion. Akomfrah’s recent works seem less like messages from the future of cinema than reflections of the present condition of contemporary art. We might grant him some critical leeway on the grounds of his prior achievement. A similar leniency need not be awarded to his colleagues.

Consider the oeuvre of Naeem Mohaiemen, who has been shortlisted for this year’s Turner Prize. A Bengali from Bangladesh who lives in New York, Mohaiemen makes films about obscure and generally wretched episodes from the history of the global left. “The Young Man Was (No Longer a Terrorist),” 2011–16, is a four-film series in which pivotal moments in Bangladesh’s history intersect with larger geopolitical events—inevitably with unhappy results. Mohaiemen’s approach in these films was to self-reflexively dramatize his research: so, for example, in *Abu Ammar Is Coming* (2016), about a few Bangladeshi fighters who joined the PLO, we see Mohaiemen’s gloved hands comb through evidence on a table: photographs, news clippings, postcards.

Very interesting in outline, but what does it all amount to? The film resembles nothing so much as an outtake of a BBC documentary. There are tidbits of left history, some oblique on-the-ground footage (Mohaiemen visits Lebanon), and finally a spot of emotion—an audio sample of a Bengali folk song about Arafat; the faltering of the narrator’s voice—to wrap the story up.

All that said, these short, explicitly political works are far preferable to his debut fiction feature *Tripoli Cancelled* (2017), which was the centerpiece of “There Is No Last Man,” Mohaiemen’s 2017 solo show at MoMA PS1 in New York. This impressively self-centered movie, which was inspired by the experiences of the artist’s father, follows the eccentric daily rituals of a man stranded in Athens’s abandoned Ellinikon Airport. It is like cross between an absurdist drama and a piece of ruin porn; there is no character development, no montage or exercise in style, and little in the way of meaningful reflection (unless you count a few cryptic comments about Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben).

As it happens, Akomfrah’s 2016 film, *The Airport*, was filmed at the same location. It too has elements of absurdist drama. Costumed characters from very different eras—men and women in Edwardian dress, a rather folksy guitarist, an astronaut, even the ape from *2001: A Space Odyssey*—walk past one another, sometimes interacting, otherwise basking in the general aphasia. Greece itself, not an individual, seems stuck in a morass. Akomfrah’s film might be heavy-handed in parts, but it at least strives towards something meaningfully political.

“Leftwing melancholy” also plagues the London-based Otolith Group, which was nominated for a Turner Prize in 2010. Founded in 2002, the group comprises Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun, who operate at once as filmmakers, curators, and theorists: a two-person alternative film culture as it were. (One of the sadder and more revealing aspects of contemporary archival practice is that it never comes alone. The artists tend to double as hype-men or village explainers.) The group’s well-regarded “Otolith Trilogy” (2003–09)—a mishmash of found footage and photographs, silly live-action sci-fi segments, narrative voice-over, and old Bollywood songs—is an antic journey through post-Independent India’s lost socialist and collectivist aspirations. The Non-Aligned Movement, Le Corbusier in Chandigarh, the leftist National Federation of Indian Women all feature—this last having a special personal interest: Sagar’s grandmother, Anasuya Gyan-Chand, was once president of the organization.



It's true that socialism, Nehru's guiding light, is today almost entirely out of favor with the country's elite and ascendant middle class (it's very much alive in the various marginalized demographics). But this sushi-board approach is no way to excavate a lost tradition. What's desperately missing here is any sense of the immense consequences, both political and philosophical, of India's turn toward neoliberalism. At best the film amounts to an exercise in historical fetishism. It's a sort of academic show and tell.

Other names could be cited. These have special interest: Mohaiemen speaks freely about his debt to Akomfrah, while the Otolith Group curated a major touring retrospective of BAFC's films in 2007.<sup>23</sup> (Eshun, by the way, is one of the talking heads featured in *The Last Angel of History*.)

If their work bears the mark of the older filmmaker, which aspect of his legacy are they extending? Certainly, the guerilla documentary work and stormy montages of early BAFC have been done away with. Rigor of thought might be stressed on the surface—and at the seminars—but it's mutated into something hipper and less demanding. What's proved seductive to contemporary archival artists is the opulent surfaces, high production values, diffuse globalism, and general twilight atmosphere of late Akomfrah. Their work might have histographical value, but not for the reasons they think.

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**theguardian**

**Video art**  
The Observer

## John Akomfrah: 'Progress can cause profound suffering'

For the British artist, global warming, the subject of his ambitious new video installation, is a process rooted in technology and exploitation



John Akomfrah: 'One of the complex questions I am asking is about the relationship between our locality and the bigger issue of how we belong on the planet.' Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

[John Akomfrah](#) grew up in the 1960s, in the shadow of Battersea power station in south London. As a child, he remembers “feeling as if I was enveloped in something whenever I played on the street. You could sense it in the air, you felt it and saw it, whatever was emanating from the huge chimneys. We were being poisoned as we played, but no one spoke about it. The conversations in the pub tended to be about football rather than carbon monoxide poisoning.”

Fifty years on, the local has become the global. Akomfrah's latest art work, [Purple](#), is an immersive, six-channel video installation that attempts to evoke the incremental effects of climate change on our planet. Shot in 10 countries and drawing on archive footage, spoken word and music alongside often epic shots of contemporary landscapes that have been altered by global warming and rising temperatures, *Purple* eschews a linear narrative for an almost overwhelming montage of imagery and sound.

Like all of Akomfrah's work, it requires the viewer to surrender to sensory overload, while remaining alert to the often oblique connections being made throughout. "I kept thinking back, while making this work, to the local, working-class community I grew up in and how innocent we were in terms of trusting authority. One of the complex questions I am asking is about the relationship between our locality and the bigger issue of how we belong on the planet. Who can we trust with our collective future?"

Akomfrah's ambition is nothing less than epic, the timespan of *Purple* stretching from the industrial age (images of factories, mills, machines and mass employment) to the digital revolution and beyond (the possibilities promised by biotech research, artificial intelligence and genetics). The looming threat of ecological disaster is implicit throughout, most ominously in the recurring appearance of lone, white-coated, hooded figures who gaze silently at landscapes threatened or already blighted by human progress.



 'Sensory overload': a still from *Purple*, Akomfrah's immersive, six-channel video installation about global warming. Photograph: © Smoking Dogs Films; Lisson Gallery



"The kind of work I make is essentially time-based," says Akomfrah, who is working on a new film project in New Orleans. "For that reason alone, I felt I had to widen my focus to take in the bigger narrative we are now all caught up in. Once you become aware of the implications of climate change for future generations, it is almost as if you have to respond. But I'm not a scientist or a campaigner, I'm an artist. I'm interested in the philosophy of climate change rather than the hard science."

More than once, Akomfrah describes *Purple* as "a response to [Anthropocene](#)", the term coined by scientists for the geological age in which we are now living, a period defined by the influence of manmade activity on climate and the environment. A major source of inspiration for *Purple* is a 2013 book called [Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World](#). Written by Timothy Morton, an English academic, it posits the idea that global warming is the most dramatic illustration of a "hyperobject" - an entity of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that it baffles our traditional ways of thinking about it and, by extension, doing something about it.



In a perhaps unconscious way, Akomfrah's overwhelming film evokes that very dilemma: our apparent helplessness as individuals in the face of rising sea levels and temperatures, droughts and melting icecaps. Against a stirring contemporary classical soundtrack, his film begins by summoning up the momentum of industrial England, a world of mass production that signals - but is utterly unlike - the hyper-reality of contemporary globalism and digital interconnectivity.

"I'm fascinated by the strange interregnum that stretches from the post-industrial to the digital present," Akomfrah explains. "Right now, as I speak to you, I am looking at the outlines of oil refineries and sugar factories on the horizon. They are still there, still pumping out their poisons, but they seem to belong to a different age. Their numbers have dwindled, but they still have an impact on the environment and they still speak of a history of technology and exploitation. They cast a long shadow."

This notion of the past - and, in particular, the colonial past - haunting the present is another recurring theme in Akomfrah's work. It is there in the raw, turbulent montage of images and sound that marked his debut film, [Handsworth Songs](#), which he made in 1986 as part of the Black Audio Film Collective. Its subject was the race riots in London and Birmingham the previous year and, in its blending of archive footage, still photos and newsreel, it set the tone for much of what was to follow, creating a formal signature known as *bricolage*, the creation of a new work from the layering and juxtaposition of various existing sources.



John Akomfrah with his art work Auto Da Fé, for which he won the Artes Mundi prize.  
Photograph: Polly Thomas/Rex/Shutterstock



Akomfrah, who is of Ghanaian parentage, grew up in Britain and was influenced by the late [Stuart Hall](#), arguably this country's most influential black academic and cultural theorist. Hall's writings on memory, time and identity in the wake of colonialism inform Akomfrah's earlier films and he remains an abiding, if not so obvious, presence on *Purple*. "In a way, this is a person of colour's response to the Anthropocene and climate change, which is not just a white, European fixation, though it is often presented that way. When I stand on a street in Accra, I can feel that it is a city that is literally at boiling point. It is way hotter than it was in the 1960s or even the 1980s. We need to start looking at climate change in radically different ways, not just as part of a western-based development narrative. It's a pan-African concern of great urgency, but how long it will take people to see it as such is a whole other problem."

In 1989, Akomfrah had what he calls “a major turning point”, when he travelled to Alaska to make a documentary for the BBC about the Exxon Valdez oil spill and its disastrous impact on the Alaskan ecosystem. “The destruction of the livelihoods of the Inuit community immediately resounded with me because it recalled the worst excesses of colonial exploitation. It felt like I was in a post-colonial space that was very much haunted by the past.”

In 2015, Akomfrah’s three-screen film installation, [Vertigo Sea](#), marked another turning point, a shift in tone and scale that signalled the grand ambition of *Purple*. In contrasting the brutality of the whaling industry with the experience of generations of migrants who crossed the sea out of necessity in search of a better life, he was struck, he says, “by the realisation that everything overlaps at some profound level, that the great shifts in human progress that are made possible by technology can also cause the profoundest destruction and suffering”.



John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*. Photograph: © Smoking Dogs Films. Courtesy Lisson Gallery



All these big themes are embedded in *Purple*, but may remain elusive to those unfamiliar with the tropes of conceptual art and experimental, non-narrative film-making. I was baffled, for instance, by recurring appearances of those mysterious silent figures who stand mute before often elemental landscapes on Alaska, Greenland and Skye. “In a very real way, I’m present in the film. I’m the figure in the brown shirt who gets rained on,” says Akomfrah, laughing. “It sounds a bit mystical, but for me everything starts with place. Wherever we filmed, it began with me asking the landscape the same question: ‘What can you tell me about the nature of climate change?’ As an artist and film-maker, I’m dependent on the responses I get from the environment.”

Is he aware, given the often bitterly contested nature of the public climate change debate, that a multiscreen, non-narrative conceptual art film that provides no answers may be greeted by a degree of scepticism, if not outright dismissal, from those on both sides demanding hard facts and evidence? “Well, I’m an artist. I make work for a gallery. I’m not attempting to make a science documentary. I’m coming at it from a different perspective by asking the question: what is philosophically, ethically and morally at stake here if we continue on this course? I don’t think you need to be licensed by the scientific community to ask that sort of question about the times we live in or to reflect on the anxiety many of us feel about the future of the planet. My son is old enough to become a father. On a purely personal level, it certainly felt like the right time for me as an artist to be asking these questions.”

[Purple](#) is exhibited from 6 Oct to 7 Jan at the Curve, Barbican, London



## ArtReview

### John Akomfrah wins Artes Mundi 7 prize



**B**ritish contemporary-artist John Akomfrah OBE has been chosen from a shortlist of six artists to win the UK's most valuable prize for international contemporary art, Artes Mundi 7. Ken Skates, Welsh Government cabinet secretary for economy and infrastructure, announced Akomfrah as the winner of the biennial award, and its £40,000 prize, at a ceremony held at National Museum Cardiff on Thursday evening. The other shortlisted artists were Neil Beloufa, Nástio Mosquito, Lamia Joreige, Bedwyr Williams and Amy Franceschini/Futurefarmers.

Over more than three decades, Akomfrah's film and video work has explored the experiences of global diaspora, history, memory, colonialism and its legacy. His recent two-screen film *Auto Da Fé* (2016), on show at Nation Museum Cardiff as part of Artes Mundi 7, uses the aesthetics of period drama to consider the historical and contemporary causes of migration, focusing on religious persecution as a cause of global displacement.

Karen MacKinnon, director of Artes Mundi, said: "The Artes Mundi 7 Prize was awarded for Akomfrah's presentation of *Auto Da Fé* and for a substantial body of outstanding work dealing with issues of migration, racism and religious persecution. To speak of these things in this particular moment feels more important than ever." Oliver Basciano, International editor of *ArtReview* and chair of the judging panel, commented: "Over his long career, Akomfrah's practice underlines how art has the unique ability to reflect on and shape the human condition, principles fundamental to Artes Mundi."

Of the award, Akomfrah said: "I am absolutely touched by this and enormously grateful for the chance it offers to finally finish off something I have been planning for over a decade. Over the years, Artes Mundi has chosen some very brilliant artists for this award: all were important artists doing challenging and engaged work, and to join that group is a huge honour and responsibility."

Artes Mundi is the UK's most valuable prize for contemporary art, established in 2002 by the Cardiff-based Artes Mundi organisation. Artes Mundi supports visual artists whose work engages with social reality and lived experience. Previous winners have included Theaster Gates, Teresa Margolles, Yael Bartana and Xu Bing. The judging panel comprised Arts Council Collection curator Ann Jones, artist Phil Collins, curator and academic Elvira Dyangani Ose, curator Carolyn Chritov-Bakargiev and Nick Aiken, curator at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.



LISSON GALLERY

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# APOLLO

THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

REVIEWS

## Akomfrah and Turner make for a potent mix in Margate

Martin Oldham

1 NOVEMBER 2016



*Margate* (1826–28), J.M.W. Turner. Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

‘J.M.W. Turner: Adventures in Colour’, the major exhibition recently opened at Turner Contemporary in Margate, ends in disaster. The final gallery is dominated by *The Deluge* (1805), Turner’s dark, dramatic image of watery cataclysm, in which he hurls a writhing mass of naked humanity into the path of a vast tsunami. The painting is an abrupt departure from the rest of the exhibition, which explores the artist’s experimental use of colour throughout his career, and also surveys his lifelong engagement with that most un-apocalyptic of seaside towns, Margate. It is a show that brings out Turner’s versatility across a variety of media and genres, but there is nothing to forewarn us of this final doom.



*The Deluge* (1805), J.M.W. Turner. Tate, London

*The Deluge* has been included to act as a bridge between the Turners and a contemporary film installation being shown concurrently in an adjacent room: John Akomfrah’s *Vertigo Sea*. Partnering historic and contemporary art is a risky business that has a tendency to work better in theory than in practice. But on this occasion it is a potent combination; the Turners and Akomfrah’s work play off each other in surprising and illuminating ways. *Vertigo Sea* explores the sublime beauty and horror of the sea, and yet more than holds its own alongside the storms and seascapes of Turner – Britain’s greatest marine painter.



*Vertigo Sea* is an installation of three large screens on which is projected a shifting montage of film clips that combine to present a prolonged meditation on man's troubled relationship with the sea. No summary can do justice to the range of imagery that appears in the piece. Much of it is extremely beautiful footage of the oceans, natural landscapes and wildlife made by the BBC Natural History Unit. Interwoven with this are archive news clips that add a human dimension: refugees in boats, arctic expeditions and whaling voyages, for example. And added to the mix are a series of *tableaux vivants* which show actors dressed as historic figures who act as onlookers to the other scenes. The imagery is restless, washing back and forth across the triptych of screens in a rhythm that is reminiscent of the sea itself. At times compelling, perplexing, or appalling, it maintains an uneasy mix of beauty and horror, and avoids settling into a consistent aesthetic or single narrative.



Still from *Vertigo Sea* (2015), John Akomfrah



There's a lot going on here. Migration is a recurrent theme, and particularly the fate of refugees forced to make perilous ocean crossings. People drown, and their bodies wash up on the shore. Similarly, there are references to the slave trade and to the human cargoes that were thrown overboard for commercial gain. The whaling industry also features prominently, presenting humanity in a different relationship with the sea, but one equally marked by cruelty and exploitation. Through the film's different modes of witnessing – wildlife documentary, historical recreation, news reportage and imaginative literature – it calls into question our position as impartial observers to the ocean's dark and violent history.



Installation view of *Vertigo Sea* (2015), John Akomfrah. Photo: Stephen White

Akomfrah describes his approach to filmmaking as bricolage – the mixing of fragments of history and memory in order to allow new meanings to emerge. With *Vertigo Sea* he is addressing current questions about displacement, migration and the refugee crisis. He speaks in particular about the dehumanising rhetoric that allows migrants to be described as a contagion, or as ‘cockroaches’, a development he describes as amnesia, a deliberate forgetting of the historical context in which these current events should be seen. But *Vertigo Sea* is effective because it does not broadcast a message. It presents a vivid and overwhelming visual experience, but leaves space for the viewer’s imaginative response to the film’s imagery.



*Study of Sky, Sea and Shore, Margate* (c. 1844–45), J.M.W. Turner. Private collection

*Vertigo Sea* has obvious resonances with Turner's work. Akomfrah recalls visiting Tate when he was a child and being inspired by Turner's storms and shipwrecks. For Turner, the sea was a stage for human drama, where man's vulnerabilities were laid bare. And he too made slave ships and whalers his subjects. But the sea is not the dominant theme of the current Turner exhibition: more important here are the elements of air and light, and the way Turner developed radical, and often controversial, uses of colour to capture the effects of light through air.

Surprisingly, this is the first major exhibition to explore Turner's use of colour. It is a well-curated show, bringing together over 100 works, some rarely seen, others well-known masterpieces, but here looked at afresh. However, next to Akomfrah's work, the theme of colour takes on an abstract, dispassionate quality. Returning to the Turner exhibition after seeing *Vertigo Sea*, I found myself ignoring Turner's colour, but seeking out instead the human figures that populate his paintings. They are often lumpen, unlovely creatures – Turner was, and is, often derided for the way he painted people – but they are essential to his art. Look again at the shivering girl in *Frosty Morning* (1813), the crooked gleaners in *Calais Sands at Low Water – Poissards Collecting Bait* (1830), or the flood victims in *The Deluge*, and we remember that he was an artist who was concerned with more than sunlight and vapour. He felt a deep sympathy for vulnerable humanity and its struggle in the face of the overwhelming forces of history and nature.





*Calais Sands at Low Water - Poissards Collecting Bait* (1830), J.M.W. Turner. Bury Art Museum, Greater Manchester

**‘JMW Turner: Adventures in Colour’ and ‘John Akomfrah: Vertigo Sea’ are at Turner Contemporary, Margate until 8 January 2017.**

# LISSON GALLERY

Artforum

01 October 2016

# ARTFORUM

## John Akomfrah

LISSON GALLERY

In 1982, Ghana-born, London-based artist John Akomfrah cofounded the Black Audio Film Collective with fellow students at Portsmouth Polytechnic, aiming to kick-start a specifically black culture of politically and theoretically attuned moving-image work in the UK. The group's landmark 1986 film *Handsworth Songs*, which Akomfrah directed, employs a characteristic mix of broadcast news footage, still photography, and audio montage to deconstruct the riots that had taken place in Birmingham, UK, and London the previous year. BAFC disbanded in 1998, but Akomfrah has continued to collaborate with former members Lina Gopaul and David Lawson in addition to producing his own work for a variety of contexts. His output is typically focused on themes of migration and displacement, especially that of the African diaspora in Europe and the United States.

While still featuring sound from television and radio broadcasts, the two video installations that formed the main part of Akomfrah's first major US exhibition depart from their maker's established methodology by being composed entirely of original footage. And what footage. There's a picturesque lushness to the imagery and sound design of *The Airport* and *Auto Da Fé* (both 2016) that keeps one watching and listening in spite of the works' slow-moving, elliptical narratives and extended running times. (The two works are fifty-three minutes long and just over forty minutes long, respectively.) The artist makes practiced use of multiple channels—*The Airport* is spread over three



John Akomfrah,  
*The Airport*, 2016,  
three-channel  
HD video installation,  
color, sound,  
53 minutes.

screens; *Auto Da Fé* two—to immerse the viewer in contemporary settings populated by historical or otherwise incongruous characters. And while there's a generically portentous tone to Akomfrah's accompanying music, and a few too many picture-perfect shots of silhouetted figures, the overall impression was undeniably striking.

*The Airport* is a poetic meditation on Greek history in which the titular location, while in reality close to Athens, appears as a kind of interzone, abandoned and decaying. An astronaut, face obscured behind a visor, looks on as various characters traverse the otherwise deserted site en route to and from elsewhere in the country and other points in time. Among them are an old man in a tuxedo, a succession of figures lugging bags and suitcases, and a man in a gorilla costume. The last, in conjunction with the video's expansive compositions and nonlinear chronology, is a nod to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), while the astronaut, plodding around the ruined location, evokes J. G. Ballard's nostalgia for an already exhausted vision of the future. All movement is slowed, the characters stunned and haunted by the weight of their country's past tragedies.

*Auto Da Fé* has a similar look and feel—characters are distributed across scenes like the petrified château guests in Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), enacting a cryptic dance of stylized gesture and pose. The narrative traces eight instances of historical migration, from the movement of Sephardic Jews from Catholic Brazil to Barbados in 1654 to contemporary exoduses from Mali and Iraq. As in *The Airport*, clear incident is sidelined in favor of mournful atmosphere, with traumatized individuals standing in for the experience of millions. Again there are one or two uncomfortably hackneyed moments (dolls washed ashore), and the glacial pace can be a test. But against the worrisome backdrop of Brexit in Europe and election-year fearmongering in this country, there's no denying the continued pertinence of Akomfrah's interests. Any attempt, however earnest or aestheticized, to situate these phenomena within a broader context now feels vital.

—Michael Wilson



# FILMMAKER

## “We Will Be Fine. We Will Absolutely Be Fine”: A Conversation with Artist and Filmmaker John Akomfrah

By Ashely Clark



*The Airport* (Copyright Smoking Dog Films; Courtesy of Lisson Gallery)

In the early 1980s, the Ghanaian-British artist John Akomfrah became a founder member of the innovative, seven-strong Black Audio Film Collective, who curated programs of avant-garde world cinema and made their own work using slide-tape texts, film, and video. Their serious-minded, multifaceted output, much of which was directed by Akomfrah, alighted on subjects from the causes of race-related inner-city U.K. unrest and its media representation (*Handsworth Songs*) to the origins of Afrofuturism (*The Last Angel of History*).

The group disbanded in 1998, but Akomfrah has since operated extensively across film, television, and galleries, often in collaboration with former BAFC members. His expansive work — including post-colonial essay film *The Nine Muses* (2010), and last year's Venice Biennale hit installation [Vertigo Sea](#) — has broached themes of international migration, the interplay of national and personal memory and the crucial importance of interrogating officially-sanctioned histories.

Last month, at Chelsea's recently-opened Lisson Gallery, Akomfrah launched his first major solo U.S. exhibition, which takes the form of two multi-channel video installations. In the first, the elliptical, immersive three-screen effort *The Airport*, a spaceman lands in contemporary, financially-ruined Athens, makes his base a disused airport, and proceeds to silently encounter various disparate figures throughout different eras in Greek history. The second piece, *Auto da Fé* (which translates as *Act of Faith*), is a stately, stylized diptych which reimagines a number of historical migrations over the past four hundred years, beginning with the little-known flight of Sephardic Jews from Catholic Brazil to Barbados in 1654 and ending with contemporary exoduses from Mali and Iraq.

On the day before Britain cast its historic vote to leave the European Union, *Filmmaker Magazine* sat down with Akomfrah in an echoey back room of the gallery to discuss his new work, his thoughts on working in myriad different mediums, the perils of international migration, and a great deal more.

**Filmmaker:** This is your first major solo exhibition in the US. Why do you think it's taken so long for it to come together?

**John Akomfrah:** There are logical reasons. One is that I joined the [Lisson Gallery in London](#) year ago, so they felt something should happen. I did have another exhibition, slightly smaller scale, at Michigan's Broad Gallery, just over a year ago, which may have been the catalyst. Part of the problem that people might have had [with my work] is its ceaseless movement across borders and platforms: "Is he really from television, does he do cinema, or is he from the gallery world?" What I do know is that over the years — certainly since the 1980s, from *Handsworth Songs* (1986) onwards — the works themselves have done that. Everything we've done has had a life here, whether in a gallery or a museum. The works have always found the porous spaces in the joins between platforms, and have seeped through into each other. I'm very happy that this [exhibition] is happening, and it feels like a new thing because it has my name on it, but not completely new. I've been here over the years several times for group exhibitions.

**Filmmaker:** Have you detected any clear distinctions in the way that your work is viewed and discussed here compared to Europe?

**Akomfrah:** Yeah. Weirdly enough, in the very beginning of the work [of BAFC] in the 1980s, we found an immediate audience and set of allies here. There were festivals across North America where the films found a space in the cinema. Over the years, occasionally,

they've found room on television. The gallery has sort of been running alongside that. That's meant, over the years, that we've had people who felt that the work spoke to their broad interests: what is Afro-diasporic, or what constitutes a black aesthetic, experimental work and so on. At the time, that wasn't quite happening in England, weirdly enough. There was media and critical brouhaha over *Handsworth Songs*, but then there was a passage between *Handsworth* and the later work of the 1990s when we didn't quite get the same sort of... not so much accolades, but pieces written about the work. But there were also overlaps, because this was happening at the time of what was then called the "Black Cultural Studies" project. It was migrating to the US, and you had the likes of Paul Gilroy and Kobena Mercer moving into the American academy. In a way, we were seen as part of that general black British cultural studies wave. There was a sense in which we were known more inside the American academy than the British one. Now I'd say it's pretty even, because I get as many requests to speak about things in England as I do in the US.

**Filmmaker:** You speak of working in spaces with porous boundaries. It seems now we're in a time of increasing malleability with methods of media consumption and delivery. Across TV, the internet, and film, things seem to be rapidly diversifying and less encoded. Maybe things have come around to you?

**Akomfrah:** I feel that. Normally when I get somebody either from the art world or the cinema world asking me "Why are you doing this? Why are you doing that?," I kinda look at them and think "Have you not realized what's going on in the world yourself?" One minute Todd Haynes might be working on *Carol* and before that will be doing a series for TV. The sense that somehow these borders are fixed and permanently in place, which characterized certain parts of the '80s and '90s that I knew, doesn't feel to be the case any more. Many people have noticed the freedom that we've bought for ourselves to trespass across different lands. That comes with a cost, because it does mean that you're not permanently ensconced in one field or another, so your ability to attract funding from one area isn't quite as fixed. But it was a choice worth taking because we were interested in all the platforms. We were interested in seeing how different projects can be niche ones carved specifically for spaces, but which then had the possibility of afterlife. Very few of the early single-screen BAFC works stayed in one space, whether I wanted them to or not. That wasn't a choice we were making. That had a lot to do with the dearth, as well, of "black stuff," to put it crudely. If you wanted to program something on Afro-disaporic themes, we were there, regularly and routinely making it. Even if the work was made for



and funded by television, it didn't seem to matter because festivals like Toronto needed material. I think that will be less and less, because artists of color, and other groups, have seen their ranks grow exponentially since the 1980s. There's just a lot more people working, and so more specialisms are taking place. I know people who specifically work in *just* television or *just* cinema. It's a mistake, for me — but, hey, if you're making it work for you, fine.

**Filmmaker:** Even though you've exhibited work for many decades, do you still get nervous when you're putting on a new show?

**Akomfrah:** I get nervous at two very telling moments. I get really, really nervous just as we're about to embark on something, because it doesn't matter how well-prepared you think you are. There's something unnerving about the sense that in just a couple of minutes, hours, days, you're going to face a new space, a new set of people. And then of course there's the moment of opening itself. It doesn't matter how many times you say to yourself "I don't care, I'm an avant-garde artist!" It doesn't matter how many layers of self-protection you adorn. The fact is that we do what we do because we want to have a conversation with someone: 3, 5, 5,000; it doesn't matter, but we do want to have that conversation. The thought that it might not happen is a source of permanent anxiety. I think anyone who works in time-based media in general would be lying if they said otherwise.

**Filmmaker:** As someone who's made films that audiences are supposed to sit down and watch from beginning to end, how do you feel about the inherent transience of the gallery space?

**Akomfrah:** It's another of the permanent anxieties — whether people who are interested in and inquisitive about your work will give you the time. All you can ask is that people turn up, and then it's kind of up to you to gently nudge them to stay. If they don't, that's OK. It's a democratic offer — the offer says, "I will make this informal contract with you if you can acknowledge that duration is important in reaping unexpected rewards, but I'll understand if you can't." It's one of the things that you have to respect. When someone pays to go into the cinema, they sort of know what they're going to get, they're told in advance. One of the pleasures of the gallery experience is that stroll, the wander into a space you don't know. There are attendant considerations for people. They might just have fifteen minutes to do this before they've got to go and pick up a child. I don't have a totalitarian wish on this!

**Filmmaker:** Not tempted to lock the doors?

**Akomfrah:** I know an artist — who must not be named! — who has that approach: once you're in, the doors are locked!

**Filmmaker:** It's funny, isn't it, how these spaces are coded differently, implicitly?

**Akomfrah:** I recently went to a cinema in London, and before the film started, people were very cognizant of the need to share that space of silence, democratically. It's almost enforced on people, most people don't talk. That premium on the collective doesn't seem to be one you find in the gallery. People do it anyway; they sit down and watch it without talking. But if you did talk no one's going to come up to you and say, "Shut up, I'm trying to watch something," because they don't feel it's their call to make. There are certain inherently democratic outliers to the gallery experience, so one wants to respect that, but the ontology of the work has very specific claims on your time.

**Filmmaker:** To move on to your new work: *Auto da Fé* is concerned with flight and forced migration. What with the ongoing crisis in Europe, and the way the subject of [immigration has been harnessed by the Leave campaign](#) as the key reason to vote for Brexit, against any demonstrable fact, it feels horribly of the moment.

**Akomfrah:** It suddenly struck me that one of the themes of all narratives of emergency is to shatter a certain continuity. [Now-former UKIP leader and Leave figurehead] Nigel Farage has to persuade us that when [he puts up a poster of 150 people trying to get into Britain](#), this is a flood. More importantly, that this is an *exceptional* flood, and even more importantly that this is an *unusual* flood. Well actually Nigel, no. Not since the Norman Conquests. This is not exceptional. For the people involved, those images that he's chosen, they are caught up in something that is obviously absolutely unique for them. If you're a refugee running away from Syria you don't need to know that what you're doing is taking flight in the same way as a Sephardic Jew trying to escape the Catholic Inquisition, or the Auto da Fé in Brazil did 350 years ago. But it is a fact. It did happen, and it did happen in exactly the same way. My task is to offer people these narratives — it's not trying to deny that they have uniqueness or specificity — so that they don't appear strange, or as aberrations. I think they are forebears, they have antecedents, they have other phantoms stalking them in pretty much the same way as Nigel Farage speaking in that tone. He's not unusual. He may say he is, but there are others, whether it's [Oswald Mosley](#), [Lord Haw Haw](#), these bogey idiot, right-wing nutjobs, we remember them.

**Filmmaker:** "Bogey idiot, right-wing nutjobs" has a certain ring to it.

**Akomfrah:** I'm not interested that much in Nigel Farage but I am interested in rescuing from oblivion a certain way of living in the world which is characterized by flight, and flight from spaces of disorder and chaos. I think there's a way in which one can see this as a grand regime running alongside the slightly more recognizable one of the Pilgrim Fathers and the Vasco de Gamas, in other words: the flights which are utterly sanctioned, completely safe.

**Filmmaker:** And lionized, too. These noble movements that are taught in schools.

**Akomfrah:** When Isabella of Spain is saying in the 1490s to blacks and Jews, "leave Spain," she's also blessing the seafarers who'd go on to "discover" The New World. These are happening at exactly the same time. One will be lionized and treated as objects of the sacrament, and others are to be banished.

**Filmmaker:** Can you talk about connecting past journeys with the present in *Auto da Fé*?

**Akomfrah:** With regard to the Sephardic Jews fleeing Brazil, one sees these people before their disappearance, and one knows that there's an after-the-fact that was long enough for them to die and be buried in a cemetery in Barbados. You know that much. The question then is how do you make these people talk to each other? I know there's not supposed to be some commonality between Sephardic Jews in the 16th century and Syrian refugees in the 21st, but there is. There are certain outliers and features of their lives in common, and I don't care whether that's something you're supposed to mention or not, but it's important to say that in a way that doesn't demean, or demonise, or make illegal any of those people. It's important that they are seen as part of a narrative continuum that runs alongside a much more revered one — the narrative of victors and the anointed. They matter as much.

**Filmmaker:** It strikes me as heartbreaking that we should still need to "humanize" people who migrate.

**Akomfrah:** A lot of the work that's been done over the last 20 years by social thinkers like Judith Butler has alerted us to the precarity, the bare quality, of certain forms of existence, and we forget that at our peril. There are communities that exist permanently in these precarious states, and the first thing they fucking need is for us to recognize their humanity. Because if we don't, they'll be treated, and are already being treated — [as some](#)



[journalists have called them](#) — as cockroaches. And this space for the subhuman is a dangerous one for any subject. If you can be rendered subhuman anything's possible, licensed. I feel this especially coming from the family I do: they arrived in England from Ghana as political refugees in 1966 thinking, "Where are we going? How are we going to get there? What's going to happen to us?" I remember that. I was born with that kind of anxiety as part of the DNA, when you know that life is precarious, on the edge, it could just go. When you watch your parents live that, it becomes something that you pick up. You know how soul-destroying it is, so it matters to me on that very basic autobiographical level, because the ability to assure someone like that — either as a state, or a community, or as an individual — that actually things will be OK, is half the task. Most of those people you see in these boats, they just want the assurances of history, they want the assurance that things will be better. You can't be completely sure that you'll survive this, so when they do, they deserve a little bit more than just being called rats or cockroaches.

**Filmmaker:** Moving on to *The Airport*: I was struck by the James Baldwin quote at the start, which in part reads, "Music is our witness, and our ally. The beat is the confession which recognises, changes and conquers time."

**Akomfrah:** The quote is very important to me. Baldwin always had this ability to succinctly convey in short spaces—a paragraph or so—what it took WEB DuBois to do in the space of a whole book like "The Souls of Black Folk"! He always had this way of making things absolutely clear. There's a moment in [Horace Ové's film Baldwin's Nigger](#), after Baldwin has finished this 27-minute monologue. Dick Gregory turns and says, "Damn, Jimmy!" I always feel like that with him.

**Filmmaker:** And use of music in your film — the traditional Greek song alongside all the very ominous sound design — is central to creating a sense of national history.

**Akomfrah:** The thing I love about Baldwin's quote is about how music commandeers history as an ally, how we can use music as an ally in wearing history comfortably. And that's important for me because I'm an outsider. I am a spaceman in Athens a year ago, and I'm trying to make sense of something called a "crisis." And I know instinctively that the idea of a crisis is a kind of ruse, a MacGuffin. What Greece has been told is, essentially: your state is fucked. You've had it. You've had a century of experimentation to make your nation and you've failed. That's what they're being told but it's not how they're being told it: it's, oh, you're in debt. You owe. I thought, how can I deconstruct this notion of crisis as a way of dismissing a century of government experiment? Slowly, I thought one possible

way is via the song, because songs encode a certain type of utopia either for solidarity, solitude or union. These are all the things that matter in the airport. The multiple ways in which people try to live, being weak, in a century. Traditions and taboos that they're trying to run away from, loves they've wanted to have and messed around and messed up on. Journeys they took when they were walking on their own towards freedom and they were walking down a road that somebody else laid down for them and they didn't realise. I wanted a way of talking about those things, and music — specifically the Greek folk song — provided me with the clues as to how to do it. It's not that the music itself does it, but it becomes an ally for certain historical moments or events in which one can construct a feature of Greek life across a century.

**Filmmaker:** There's something haunting and tragic about the airport itself. It struck me that there are few greater metaphors for failed dreams than a destroyed, disused airport.

**Akomfrah:** This is the thing which got me about the airport: When you first see it, it is absolutely stunning, like one of the best modernist projects I've seen. And so in that sense the airport in its inception embodies a certain wish, a fantasy, nationally, if you will: we'll make our life whole. It boasts the fact of that ambition as well as the myth of that ambition that takes place in people's heads. If you're stuck in a village and you're told you can't leave, you're too poor, the idea of flight itself can be symbolized by the airport, as the ambition of betterment. From the airport, one can literally take flight into real places or imagined and fantasy spaces. You just have to see [the airport] to see that. You sit there and think, yeah, life's gonna get better. In five hours I'll see the wife, the kids, a new country. It was those things. I thought, fuck, until you see an airport empty, you don't realize that's what it is, what it props up in the national psyche.

**Filmmaker:** You make fascinating, and frankly unsettling use of the three screens. There's a sense of voyeurism of characters watching each other and being watched, and you pull off these chronological leaps without even knowing, as the viewer, that you've traversed through eras.

**Akomfrah:** I was trying to think of a way of doing our own version of a sensory ethnographic project. A way of alerting people to the fact that the spaceman is doing what we're doing. He is us. We are rummaging through a series of discrete events from the past, albeit fiction, but alluding to things we're not in complete control of, which we don't understand, that we're always outside of it looking in. The paradox of it is that without that figure, none of this would come out. Without me doing this, literally, we wouldn't be here. I

am rummaging as an outsider, a space cadet, through chapters of the Greek past in which the opacity of things to me need not necessarily be the same to someone else watching it. My involvement in it is part of the act. My place in it is part of what you're watching, and that's important. I stand in the airport, and this is the place where allied forces would land, hear those voices....

**Filmmaker:** The spaceman figure actually reminded me of the "Data Thief" who travels back through black cultural history in *The Last Angel of History*, and the silent observers on the fringes in *The Nine Muses*.

**Akomfrah:** Yes. This figure gets me into an unusual amount of trouble. There's always someone who says, "Oh it's too romantic," and by "romantic" I think they mean that it's over-reverential. It doesn't feel like it to me, because the history of romanticism that I'm attached to is romanticism as it points to the volatility of things, and the complicity of the human being in this space without the gods. That's not a comforting thought, it's not a palliative. It's just a statement of a certain turbulence of things. It may not look that way — I'm not shaking the camera about, making things scary! But I don't think anyone should assume that those images are benign in ambition anyway. They might be in effect, but certainly not in ambition.

**Filmmaker:** Lastly, and on a slightly different tack, I wanted to bring up Stuart Hall, who pioneered methods of "decoding" the media for its implicit use of stereotypes and perpetuation of racist and sexist ideas. Something I've noticed recently in my [too] many hours of Twitter use is that a younger generation seems to be really adept at doing this — calling instant bullshit on things like police mugshots being used by mainstream media for unarmed black people getting murdered by cops.

**Akomfrah:** Yes, we're all the better for this kind of engagement. Occasionally, as you're about to succumb to this melancholia — "Oh, everything's terrible!" — you'll see someone that breaks down a film or an image in a way that you hadn't quite thought about, and you think there is life after all, and it will be fine. Even to watch young nieces and nephews play games in a way that even if I try now, I couldn't. I just don't think that fast. These are good things. We will be fine. We will absolutely be fine.

["John Akomfrah"](#) runs at Lisson Gallery, Manhattan, through August 12.



# LISSON GALLERY

Artnet News

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**artnet**news

**On View**

## John Akomfrah on the Tricky Line Between Art and Cinema

The British filmmaker makes his US debut this month.

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Henri Neuendorf, July 4, 2016



John Akomfrah. Photo: Jack Hems © Smoking Dogs Films, Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

After several hours of preparing his first major exhibition in the United States at Lisson Gallery's Chelsea space John Akomfrah needs a cigarette. And the British artist and filmmaker briefly rushed outside, and flicked the lighter on.

Akomfrah rose to prominence in the 1980s as a founding member of the radical and influential Black Audio Film Collective, and today is known for his multi-channel video works exploring the themes of history, memory, migration, and post colonialism. Utilizing combinations of archival footage and still photography with newly created material to create captivating and enthralling imagery, Akomfrah has found a unique perspective in contemporary time-based art.

At Lisson he presents two new works: *The Airport* (2016), a three-channel film that explores the significance of empires presented through the architectural ruins, and *Auto Da Fé* (2016), which examines migration and relocation. The film addresses and critiques a host of contemporary issues while employing the perspective of a 17-century period drama.

After returning from his cigarette, Akomfrah meets me in a private viewing room in the rear of the cavernous gallery to start the interview.



Installation view of John Akomfrah's *Auto Da Fé* (2016) at Lisson Gallery, New York.  
Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

**How would you describe yourself? Are you a filmmaker, an artist, both?**

I'm certainly a filmmaker, in the sense that I make predominantly time-based work. Recently I think that my time-based work qualifies me to adopt this other category of artist.

**Where do you draw the line between art and cinema?**

In my case I see cinema not just as movies but as a set of philosophies about the marriage of sound and image. It seems to me that my baggage is now an inheritance, it's not just a way of working. And if it's an inheritance one can migrate it to other spaces other than the cinema. So for me the line would be a fairly straightforward one.

Generally cinema one makes for a set of institutions, such as studios and picture houses. They're very clear institutions, and within those institutions there are certain expectations, markets that need to be hit, success or lack of it with audiences. All of these things are not clichés, they're necessary in modern cinema. But those institutions don't contain and control all the implications of cinema, and if they don't, that means you can take them somewhere else. So it's not that I don't believe that there is a line, and that line is defined not so much by my work, but rather the expectations and environments in which one is working. In the art space the regulatory frameworks that define the work are not quite as apparent as they are for me working with the cinema.

One side of it is an interesting philosophical discussion about the limits of the different modes, and I'm not saying that shouldn't happen, that's an important conversation to have, but behind that there are other things that are not so abstract, which are very real, like financial agreements, cinema ads, and so on. Those tell you very clearly when you're in one and when you're not. Very, very clearly! (laughs)

**What is it about the medium of film that caused you to settle on this format of creation?**

The plasticity of film, the possibilities, and its ability to manufacture are all important things for me. Plasticity means that I can commandeer the language and the practices of film to make statements about a whole variety of things in a way that I can't with other forms. I'm just talking about myself —other people can do the same with just stone or something. For me it's this plasticity, the way in which you can bend details to fit things.



Because of that philosophy, there's a century of thinking about how images work that I feel that I'm calling upon. When I'm standing in front of a landscape and a camera, I'm not there on my own, I'm with Godard, Tarkovsky and all manners of filmmakers who've done exactly the same thing as me before. So the conversation isn't just between me and the landscape, it's also between me and these other guys who are all saying "shoot it like this," or "shoot it like that," and you hear these internal voices. That's what cinema does, and when I say it's a philosophy that's what I mean. Those questions, ways of seeing, are important, and that's just filming. When it comes to editing it is exactly the same. You have all these people saying "cut it quick! That's the way to go." Or it could be John Ford saying, "no don't cut it, just let it breath," and it could also be Angelopolous or Antonioni or Terrence Manning, a lot of voices, trust me!

It's like a tradition of shamanic insight and it's there because you've watched it. I've seen all of this stuff, I've talked to all of these directors, at night, or in my sleep, or awake when I was out for a walk. So we're now one, and part of this thing. And the difficulty is trying to remove yourself from it, because you're permanently possessed, contaminated by it—in a good way.

And that's why for me the distinctions are difficult to make. It's a little bit like having been brought up by a certain kind family in a town. The fact that I leave to go live elsewhere doesn't change my past, I can't get rid of that now. I'm John Akomfrah brought up in London in the '60s and '70s by an exiled African family, and I've learned other things, but that bit is part of me, that doesn't go away. Everything else adds to that or chips away a little bit. I'm just an accumulation of things.



Installation view of John Akomfrah's *The Airport* (2016) at Lisson Gallery, New York.  
Jack Hems © Smoking Dogs Films, Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

### **To what extent does politics shape your work?**

I don't set out to make political work. I know that seems weird but it's true, but I do set out to make works which are reflections on the political. And I certainly set out to do works that interrogate what could be called political narratives.

But the desire is not to make a political work, for me that's a contradiction. There has to be a work and the work has to have its own ontology. *Auto Da Fé* (2016) is a two-screen piece on refugeeism. That's what it is and it's made up of evidence, historical fragments, sonic snippets, dialogue, archival pieces, etc. That's the work. And that work is not trying to be and is not calling itself a political work. But of course the implications of bringing all of these elements together means that the work resonates politically.



John Akomfrah's *The Airport* (2016) at Lisson Gallery, New York. Copyright Smoking Dog Films, Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

### **Will you take me through your role within the Black Audio Film Collective?**

In Black Audio I was one of eight. We were roughly the same age, but I was one of the elder ones. When you're 17 or 18, one or two years is a major thing, by implication that meant that I had more of a say and a voice.

It was a collective in the sense that it worked on the assumption that there were eight people all of whom had different kinds of expertise, different ways of doing things. So some were great with taking photographs, others were great with working with found footage, some were fantastic at making sonic pieces and the desire was to bring that all together.

We were part of that great wave, that bulk of of second generation of postwar migrants born in England sometime between 1958-59 and 1968-69. We didn't have an elsewhere except that place, and that was very much a bond. The bond was both to take this as a blessing, and a responsibility, and a gift. You have insights into a place by virtue of this that other people don't. So since that's the case what the hell can you do with it? What can you say both to yourselves and to the broader culture, about itself and you?



And so race, yes, was important in that sense. You've got to remember as well that narratives are weird things because narratives come into being because they reach a certain kind of critical mass. "Black people, are not good people because they are all immigrants and thieves," or whatever. I think we were aware of that very quickly. We were aware that counter-narratives were very important. I may come from a migrant family, but I'm not an immigrant. Little things like that were important as a way of getting a kind of cultural autonomy or legitimacy for certain identities.

The sort of insights that people take for granted about England, "Oh, it's multicultural", "Oh, it's so different from the rest of the world." Well, it's different because lots of different people fought for it. Different doesn't just happen. And it's in that sense that race is important. It was important as an insight, as a burden, as a responsibility, and we took all of those on board. We really liked certain things for ourselves, and that was pretty much Black Audio, and it's not that I think all of that is in the past because the group finished, but four of the eight are still working together, we found a way of working that suited us.

**Your new work deals extensively with history. What's behind your preoccupation with the past?**

I'm very interested in the notion of ghosting, of having phantoms and how cultures are populated by unseen guests. It has to do with the question of what one might call a racial identity. When I was much younger in the '70s in England; you were aware that you led this life with a doppelgänger. There was this figure who looked like you and that behaved not quite like you, but you were aware that when other people spoke about that figure, they were trying to speak about you.

That's the language of race—coming to the realization that this fiction of separation that you thought you had is because you had already been ventriloquized by this already existing thing, this phantom called "the black person as trouble." And slowly you start to work out how it is that you might make work that interrogates these factors. By opening certain doors, "Aaah, there they are, that's where you are."

Especially in the '70s and '80s when you met somebody else, usually a figure of authority—let's say you met a policeman on the street—you were aware that standing around you, behind you, were all kinds of other guests; the kid he arrested the day before behaved in a certain way, what he thinks your propensities are. And you are the same. You heard that policemen are usually inclined to frame you.

They're the ghosts of past embodiments of you. The interest in the historical is partly just an attempt to slide away the burden of history, by just understanding it's presence one could liberate oneself from it.



John Akomfrah's *Auto Da Fé* (2016). Photo: Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

**Your new work addresses the themes of migration and movement of people. Is this your response to the current migration crisis in Europe?**

It is only in the sense that it forced me to deal with all kinds of other things. *Auto Da Fé* (2016), for instance, I made specifically because I started to think through what the current crisis means now. There's a timeline that goes back to the dawn of our modernity, look at the narrative. In 1492 Queen Isabella says to Vasco da Gama, "You have my blessing go and see the world," but at the same time that she's telling the Sephardic Jews, "Leave this land because you don't belong here."

The two things are separate motions almost at the same time. Part of the rhythm of modernity is this endless churning over of people having to flee, or take flight because they are deemed to be surplus to requirements, or deemed to be unfit to be in a place. We've been with this mantra for half a millennia. A very long time.

So I was keen to try and do something on the current crisis but not to take its currentness too seriously. Somebody always says "Oh, yes, well the Sephardic Jews fleeing Brazil to go to the Caribbean, that was new." Well no, it's not new, because the same community fled Portugal to go to Brazil, and then for the same reasons they left Brazil to go to the Caribbean and then probably for similar reasons left the Caribbean to go to the United States.

But this is not an isolated incident, the same dialogue is taking place now. If you take the displacement of Sephardic Jews, it's five centuries old, it is not new. To endlessly be telling people "Oh, this is unusual," is flawed. It's not unusual at all, actually, it's the default of our modernity. There have to be narratives of flight because these narrative co-exist with narratives of settlement, and have a profound dialogue with each other. That's what I'm interested in and am trying to excavate.



LISSON GALLERY

*Interview*

27 June 2016

*Interview*

FILM

## JOHN AKOMFRAH AND THE IMAGE AS INTERVENTION

*BY* HALEY WEISS





Images and their authors construct our collective memory. What we've seen, often, is what we believe we know. That supposed knowledge is a subject that British filmmaker John Akomfrah, OBE, is acutely aware of. Since his time at university in the early '80s, when he formed the Black Audio Film Collective with fellow students at Portsmouth Polytechnic, he's been steeped in the archival. Images have been his tool for historical intervention, their recontextualization taking form as a subversive act and challenging repeated inadequacies and inaccuracies of representation.

"It's as if there's now an intangible bank of images that most people carry," Akomfrah says when we sit down in New York. "The cinema has colonized our unconscious. It's difficult to not see through the ghostly presence of those who've had a major say in how you've lived your life with the image. We don't go naked into the conference chamber of making images without that chip [of archival images] inserted somewhere in our cerebral cortex," he continues. "The archive has migrated from my shelves imperceptibly into my head, I suspect into all of ours."

As of late, Akomfrah's work consists entirely of original footage, which is a shift from his previous works, such as his montage documentary *The Stuart Hall Project*. He remains consistent in his use of visual allusions, though, cracking open fissures in history to fill with images anew. Last Friday, two of these recent, multi-channel film works—*Auto Da Fé* (2016) and *The Airport* (2016)—arrived stateside at Lisson Gallery, marking Akomfrah's first major solo show in the U.S., simply titled "John Akomfrah." Both works are haunting historical meditations, with *Auto Da Fé* achingly addressing the history of the migrant experience and *The Airport* delving into Greece and its debt crisis. While they're poetic and certainly surreal, their efficacy hinges upon the realities they echo. They are accompanied by a set of photographs in which the characters from the films, including an astronaut, reappear, seeming all the more still in their moving counterpart's presence.

HALEY WEISS: I know that migration has been a huge theme in your work. I've been thinking about the current refugee crisis, how it's being characterized, and how you said that there's amnesia about migrant crises over time. How do you see the current migrant crisis fitting into the history of the migrant experience?

JOHN AKOMFRAH: It fits in two ways, but what's important for me at the moment is to try and find a narrative through which the current crisis makes cultural and emotional sense. What I'm very keen to do is to provide people with a narrative setting in which the current crisis—far from being an aberration—segues into a five-century history of movements that have been somehow engineered by crises. I then begin to suggest that this [current crisis] has a flavor of necessity and

legitimacy about it. When you think about our understanding of the "New World"—the Americas for instance—yes, of course, there's the conquistador myth and narrative, which is about people voluntarily coming over, but actually quite a lot of people in this part of the world are here because of some kind of crisis involuntarily. They could be Pilgrims, Sephardic merchants from the Iberian Peninsula, or Huguenot persecuted minorities in Northern France; there is a whole range of people who made large sections of the "New World" possible because multiple crises in the space in which they would have probably happily stayed made it impossible for them. When Queen Isabella of Spain declared in 1492 that all Moors and Jews should leave, you had to go.

This is a near five-century history. What that means to me is that there is an affinity between what's going on now and other forms, other moments, other events which were engineered by crises to the point where you can see that far from this being like an accident, it's almost a norm, a feature of our modernity. There are moments when difference is not acceptable in a certain space and migration is the only possibility, either forced or voluntary. That's really what I'm concerned with at the moment, to rescue the legitimacy of the Yazidi, Afghani, Syrian, and Palestinian migrations that have been force-fed a certain kind of "radiophonics of emergency" by the space that they're in. There's an announcement that says, "You die or you leave," and that's a fairly compelling argument for flight.

WEISS: Your parents lived in Ghana when it was under British colonial rule and known as the Gold Coast, and were involved in the independence movement in the '50s. I wonder how their experience of being under colonial rule, and your family moving to England when you were four-years-old, has informed your understanding of colonialism.

AKOMFRAH: The interesting thing is that both of my parents lived in one of those seismic shifts that happened to very many parts of the world, three quarters of the world in fact, between '44 and '64. Large sections went through these convulsions where their identities changed radically. The Gold Coast is one of the first because that transformation happened in '57, the year I was born, which means that for the generation before me, my parents, they knew an old world and a new one. I lived in Ghana at a time when there was only the new, when the promise of the new was still bright and shiny. But I think pretty quickly it became clear that there were certain "radiophonics of emergency," as I call it, in the air—military coups, assassinations. We were about to enter the postcolonial. In a way, my parents knew three conceptual leaps—understandings of the afro-space—and I lived two. Well, now a third, because in a way there's a swing back to something else.

That emergency is very similar to one that people leaving, let's say Syria now, will understand. I certainly understand. I was very young but I still remember that moment when I thought, "Okay, this is not safe." Something in the air just tells you, "You might not be okay for much longer." I felt it as a kid so you can imagine what the grown-ups in my family felt; it was very palpable, it was tangible, the sense that your time was up. A line had been drawn that if you lived beyond that, you were then going to be in a space of peril. I think that's what emergency means for most people in these moments of great upheaval. You're aware that there's a line that you're about to cross and once you cross that line, by staying, all the guarantees that underscore your previous security, comfort, certainty, etcetera, are about to be either erased or function under erasure. I think part of the capacity, the cognitive faculty that we have as humans—one [reason] why we've survived for so long—is our grasp of that sixth sense, the knowing of the really intangible signposts. You feel when you're not safe, when flight is the only option.

I'm trying to join my own understandings and feelings about this with what is going on now. If you're a conservative with a capital "C" pundit or political figure in England, it's very easy, in fact



cheap, to call people who are under the spell of the emergency "rats" because you've never lived it. But when you have, like me at a much earlier age, it seems that there's a certain ethical compunction to say otherwise, to begin to construct a counter-narrative by which lives that have been plunged into a kind of pre-human or post-human space can be rescued and made sense of again as human accounts, as narratives. That's what you lose. [There's] a danger of becoming a statistic in a war of anxiety, especially in Europe, where one feels this sense that we're about to be overwhelmed by something unknown, "rats." It's actually not fucking true. We're not about to be overwhelmed, but every time that moral panic is raised, the consequence of that is to render someone's life or a chapter of the lives of people from another region of the world meaningless. It's as if they only exist to be contagion. I'm very keen for the utopian dimensions of new migrant lives to make sense and by utopian I simply mean a sense people have that there might be a future, and that that future could be better than the one they're living at present. It doesn't take very much to have that utopian feeling when you're living in a war-torn space. Anything is utopian compared to the dystopian space that you're in. People get on these boats or rafts because they want their lives to have a future. How you translate all of that into [film] is something else, but those are some of the emotional, intellectual ambitions behind the work.

WEISS: You received a lot of criticism in the '70s and '80s because your films weren't *cinéma vérité*. It seems so odd that your work was perceived as fictitious just because it was constructed, because even *vérité* is constructed.

AKOMFRAH: A lot of the conversations in which those criticisms appeared were really productive because they helped you refine what it was that you were about. Half of the time when you start something it's not exactly clear to you what you're doing. You feel a certain compulsion to do it but you're not sure intellectually why you're doing it. Now, looking back, it seems to me that three things were going on. One was that people like myself had a certain kind of impatience with what had been the normative procedures for engaged practice, militant practice, and political practice. [We] felt that the things that we had inherited were becoming a stereotype of themselves and that it was in need of renewal. We were very clear that it was always a generational necessity for reforming it. The second thing was this certainty of what I would call the ethnographic approach, which was reaching a certain kind of end. There were anthropological procedures that in documentary filmmaking said, "There is a truth out there and the only job that we need to do as filmmakers is to point the camera at it and it will reveal itself." Something about it just didn't feel true. The final thing was even more nebulous but also present at the time, which was it felt to my colleagues and me as if a certain post-war contract between image-making and "the real" was coming to an end. It felt as if the horrors of the Second World War had guaranteed a certain way of working, a fidelity to what was available, because suddenly we were aware that we didn't know the full scope, range, reach, and darkness of the human heart, and that we needed to get back to basics.

That contract, which image-making had entered into, was coming to an end because we were about to undergo something else where in fact that idea was going to be manipulated by conglomerates and corporations, [saying things] like, "It's really real," "Just do it," and, "Get out there and be yourself"—all of that shit. [laughs] I think all three regimes were converging at the same time. It was very difficult when you were in it to see that this was going on, that in fact we weren't raging against one machine but a number of overlapping narratives, which were creating these machines. Now I'm very comfortable with it but at the time it was worrying. You thought, "Am I really a pariah?" We weren't entirely comfortable with that position but something felt worth exploring.

WEISS: What medium are you most interested in working with now? Also, when you have a film in

a gallery setting, people will walk in and out when they want. Is that lack of control something you take into account?

AKOMFRAH: Absolutely—one of the things, which I've started to enjoy, is the way in which the more discrete pieces seem to chime with a tape that I think has been there all along. Take the [Black Audio Film Collective], one of the dreams behind it was to make something that was inherently democratic, for all people, [where] people could see their own world, or make images themselves, etcetera. The minute you get into more discrete [gallery] pieces you become aware that there's a manifesto of some of these democratic precepts; people engage with it how they want, they come in, watch what they want, and leave, and that has to be part of the offer because otherwise, make cinema. [laughs]

I'm still interested in cinema, I go in and out of it, and I will still probably make one or two more things specifically for television. Both have certain narrative requirements [and] occasionally I think of something that fits those requirements. For instance, if you wanted to do a commemorative piece as I did on the March on Washington in 2013, [titled *The March* and narrated by Denzel Washington,] there's no better space than television. There you say, "I want to listen to a range of people bearing witness." That has a certain economic [value] that can't be met in a gallery setting or a more discrete setting. And then there's television's sense of a collective address, which is also necessary for that... That's why I do it, not for me as an artist, but for an audience. With cinema, there are certain narrative demands that are best met when a group of people for a moment in time can say to each other, "We will forgo something called an individual take for this collective experience," in which we will all agree to a minimum set of rules: we're not going to talk, we'll sit alone in the dark, but we will be together and somehow, the experience of this moment will be enhanced by the fact that we're a collective. Those are not by any means possibilities that explore all of the available range of image experiences. Now, the desire is to see how many more spaces you can work them into because it's necessary, it feels right, it feels timely, and there's no reason why we shouldn't.

WEISS: You've spoken about the significance of the archive as a space for intervention. What do you find most vital about intervening in history through the use of archival material?

AKOMFRAH: That is a big question. [laughs] It seems to me that there's something about the existence of footage that suggests that from its inception, it had a role, a purpose, a destiny, and one of those was that it should be seen. The intentions of those who gathered it, organized it, cut it into whatever tale, story, or news report it was, are not always clear. Sometimes it's clear, they simply wanted to say, "That group of people are a problem." The archive, especially the moving image archive, comes to us with a set of Janus-faced possibilities. It says, "I existed at one point and it's possible that I could exist differently." But in order to find that you need something else, which is not in the archive, which is the philosophy of montage. Montage allows the possibility of reengagement, of the return to the image with renewed purpose, a different ambition. So I'm interested in the archive firstly because of that possibility of return but I'm also interested in its indexical time; it feels always as if it is in some ways a fragile, contingent deposit of lost time, of a moment, and I like working with those Proustian possibilities. But I also like it because if you come from a space, community, or group that isn't represented by all forms, by monuments, one cannot discount the possibility of the archive as a repository of memory. Precisely because one can't discount it, it is always worth investigating.

"JOHN AKOMFRAH" WILL BE ON VIEW AT LISSEN GALLERY UNTIL AUGUST 12, 2016.



John Akomfrah Summons the History of Migration in Chillingly Beautiful  
New Films  
By Tess Thackara



Photo by Jack Hems, ©Smoking Dogs Films. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

On June 21st, two days before Britons went to the polls to decide on Brexit, Ghana-born, British artist John Akomfrah, OBE, was in Manhattan installing two video works for his new solo exhibition at Lisson Gallery. We met in a cavernous back room of the gallery, where our voices echoed slightly off the walls. “Brexit is one of those reminders for people like me that one can’t afford to be too Hegelian about questions of white supremacy and racial privilege,” he said, when asked. “You can’t afford to think there’s some curve that’s endlessly leading to a state of affection, because just when we think that, what disappears is a certain kind of vigilance. It serves to remind you also of the perils of assuming that narratives die.”

This idea lies at the heart of Akomfrah’s work—that stories live on, embedded within human memories, places, records, and fictions. The stubborn fictions underlying the U.K.’s movement to leave Europe are those espoused by the country’s far-right nationalist party, UKIP, which holds that migrants arriving in the country are curtailing the prosperity and freedoms of native Britons. “It’s like listening to an argument amongst drunks,” Akomfrah says. “It feels like such a backward conversation, but you can’t ignore it.”



Akomfrah has probed ideas of migration and postcolonialism for some 35 years through the numerous feature-length films, documentaries, and video installations that he has brought to life over his career. He was a founding member of the Black Audio Film Collective in 1982, which garnered attention for the extraordinary *Handsworth Songs* (1986), a documentary that burrows deep into the U.K. race riots of 1985. It's a haunting blend of newsreel and still imagery, overlaid with manipulated sound.



Still from John Akomfrah's *Audo Da Fé*, 2016. Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

Akomfrah has always operated at the nebulous borderland between document and artifice. But “artifice” isn’t quite the word for it. The imaginative work he engages in strives toward a conversation with viewers about the way we experience history—a truth about human memory. “As time has gone on,” he says, “it has become clear to me that the distinction between what is ‘archival’—or the elsewhere—and what constitutes an original image becomes blurred, in the sense that every time I bring a camera out I’m always aware of the unseen guests that are there, whether it’s other filmmakers, artists, or narratives. You’re aware that there’s a historical bleed into what you’re constructing.”

In *Vertigo Sea* (2015), Akomfrah harnessed this bleed through a combination of archival footage of the slave trade, the whaling industry, and migrant crossings at sea; references to literature such as Melville’s *Moby Dick*; and stagings of migrants in period dress gazing out at the ocean, or a child’s pram washed up on a rocky coast—all interspersed with moving images of tempestuous, sublime seas and played out across three screens. (The film debuted last year in Okwui Enwezor’s exhibition “All The World’s Futures” at the 56th Venice Biennale.) It’s a sort of visual symphony in which the ocean is imagined as a repository for human history, a moral witness that receives stories and acts upon them.



Installation view of work by John Akomfrah at Lisson Gallery, 2016. Photo by Jack Herns, courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

With his two new films at Lisson, Akomfrah has further embraced the subjectivity of history, moving away from archival material completely. *The Airport* (2016) and *Auto Da Fé* (2016) are composed entirely of his own footage. He stresses, though, that these draw from different kinds of archives—those absorbed by places. “I’m fascinated by different kinds of records,” he says, “the ways in which landscapes or locations also retain their own kinds of memory, or their own vestiges of lives. In those instances, the question is: What siren songs can I hear? Can you trust the gestalt of place enough to say, okay, I hear you, now talk to me.” This is why, when Akomfrah was drawn to Greece during last year’s economic crisis (and as migrants poured into the country from the Middle East), he decided to shoot in the abandoned Athens airport, Ellinikon. “I wanted to do something on involuntary memory, in the way Proust describes it, where one thing—emergency or debt—sparks off a chain of associations.”

The resulting work, *The Airport*, on view at Lisson Gallery, is a gorgeous and surreal meditation on time and space. A gorilla, an astronaut, and various other human characters pass time in waiting rooms, converse, gaze out the airport’s panoramic windows, or sit in disembodied airplane chairs on an empty runway. “It was very much a conversation with that space, and the desire to see how the airport can both be a fiction as well as a literal place,” says Akomfrah. “The sense that there’s a place that you can go where you’re free from the shackles of history. The airport can stand for that because it’s a kind of embodiment of national—maybe even personal—ambition. The space where flight, or dreams, or betterment, can happen.”

Akomfrah invokes two earlier filmmakers, Theo Angelopoulos and Stanley Kubrick, in the piece; the latter’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is summoned through the gorilla and astronaut. “Kubrick or Angelopoulos are not references now, they’re indications of the temporal,” the artist

says. “In a work that is a rumination on lost time, the very fact that you have something in it that makes people remember Kubrick is itself the point. It’s to give people a way of accessing different forms of temporality. *2001* is not just a moment of cinema history, it’s an embodiment of time.”



Still from John Akomfrah’s *The Airport*, 2016. Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

In *Auto Da Fé*, Akomfrah again calls forth multiple timescapes, tracing—through period dramatizations—the emigrations of eight different peoples that have fled religious persecution throughout history, from the 17th-century migration of Sephardic Jews from Brazil to Barbados, up to today’s exodus from Iraq.

Akomfrah’s films are lavishly beautiful and poetic, but can also be deeply unsettling, recalling chilling narratives that—looking around at the world today—have yet to die. “I want to have a dialogue with single states, single beings,” he says. “The ambition is to reawaken different senses or to reconfigure how one relates to the image, and to have that relationship stand for new forms of reflection.” In effect, Akomfrah’s films are inviting viewers to renegotiate their relationship to history—to listen to the unseen guests that are always in the room.



the dislocation of the diasporic experience and the brutality of colonialism. To a collaged soundtrack that includes quotes from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, various jarring tableaux appear on screen: a black man in a ruff and breeches watches modern frigates ply the water; a robed African with chalked face sails past a rain-drenched landscape aboard a vessel laden with exotic spoils.

Ghosts of the past also pervade *The Airport*. In this three-screen work an abandoned airport in Greece becomes the stage on which men and women in Edwardian dress, musicians, an astronaut, even a person in a gorilla suit—in a clear nod to Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)—glide between past and present. Lingering takes and fluid temporal transitions pay homage to the Greek film director Theo Angelopoulos, lending a dreamlike feel.

The third film, *Auto da Fé* (Acts of Faith), considers eight historical migrations that have taken place due to religious persecution. Beginning with the flight of Sephardic Jews in 1654 from Brazil to Barbados, the film winds through Huguenot times to present-day Mosul in Iraq. Although it resonates poignantly with the ongoing refugee crisis, *Auto da Fé* is the least successful of the three films, dependent as it is on fleeting intertitles and period costumes to make sense of the continuous flow of migrations. Certain imagery feels heavy-handed, such as shots in which a broken doll and historical photographs of the Ku Klux Klan are shown washed up in the surf, to underscore the common tragedy of persecution across cultures.

As an ensemble, the three works maintain an emotive poetic dialogue with one another—and with *Vertigo Sea*—through a mirroring of imagery and motifs. Figures, often burdened with bags, sacks and valises, stare across the centuries and out to the sea—that age-old symbol of escape and danger, transition and uncertainty. From raging ocean to lapping turquoise waves to English drizzle, the motif of water threads through these films and seems to engulf the viewer.

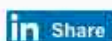
Akomfrah has been preoccupied for the past 30 years with identity, colonialism and the diasporic condition. Recently nominated for the Artes Mundi award, he is at an important crossroads. His project remains political, yet, as he has claimed in interviews, the gallery setting has given him a new freedom, allowing for even greater experimentation. His new films, with their sequences of beautifully composed, painterly images and open-ended tone, ask existential questions, about time, alienation, memory and man's barbarity to man. Akomfrah offers no answers but provides a compelling journey.

—Elizabeth Fullerton

## Art Radar

### 'Vertigo Sea': Ghanaian-British filmmaker John Akomfrah – interview

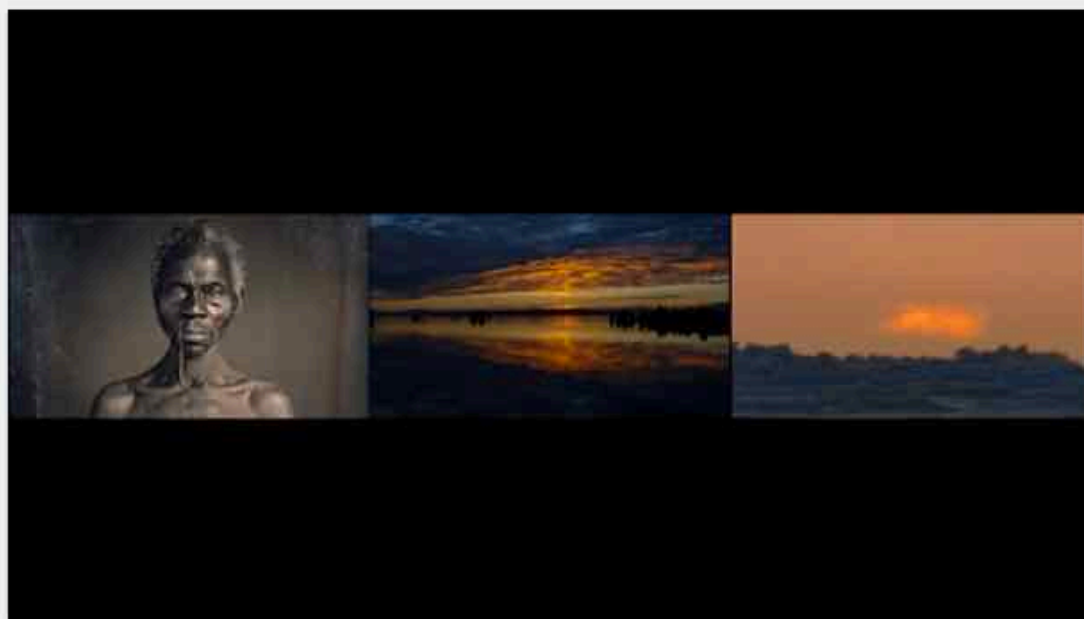
Posted on 29/03/2016



★★★★★ 5 Votes

**Renowned Ghanaian-British filmmaker speaks with *Art Radar* on his career, his work and what he is looking forward to next against the backdrop of the UK debut of his work *Vertigo Sea*.**

*Art Radar* speaks with John Akomfrah to learn about how he got his start as a filmmaker, the power of biennials, what he is currently working on and what filmmakers he follows.



John Akomfrah, 'Vertigo Sea', 2015. © Smoking Dogs Films. Image courtesy Lisson Gallery.

John Akomfrah (b. 1957, Accra) is one of Britain's most talented and respected filmmakers. With a reputation that has pushed well beyond the confines of his hometown, London, Akomfrah has most recently participated in the **56th Venice Biennale** curated by **Okwui Enwezor** where his 2015 film *Vertigo Sea* made its international debut. At the top of this year, *Vertigo Sea* made its UK debut at **Arnolfini** in Bristol where it will be on display until 10 April. Akomfrah's work has exhibited widely in museums, biennials and film festivals in Asia, Europe and North America.

*Art Radar* spoke with the Ghanaian-British filmmaker to find out more about his practice and his thoughts on art and film.

### Could you describe the circumstances under which the Black Audio Film collective was created?

I suppose there are three things one has to say about the conditions or the existence of the collective. One has really to do with questions of friendship. All of the members, all of the people who went on to become members of the collective, all of us were either friends, or saw the setting up of the collective as a way of developing friendships. Now that doesn't sound like a huge amount but in 1980s Britain that was a big ask because of the fact that we were in a place where basically all of us were coming from different walks of life and had got used to this notion that we may be the first – you know – the first black artists. So there was a sense of shock when you realise that actually there may be not that many, but one or two of you were interested in cultural production and wanted to get together. So the idea of the collective was in a way about trying to deepen what felt immediately like axels and all bonds of affinity.

The second is obviously the context because you're talking about us being kids of the 1970s really, people who grew up in this country in the 1970s, which made us the first generation – the first post migrant generation; the first group of young people of colour especially people of African descent whose parents had come over in the 1950s and 1960s and we were en masse the first sort of demographic, post-war diasporic group of young people born and raised in England. And that was an especially important point for us because you sensed that there was a need for us to come into voice to find forms by which we might visualise, represent and acquire discourses of self-affirmation. And all of those seemed best done in a collegiate, convivial collective space.

The third, I think, has to do with the question of cultural production itself. I mean, all of us were interested in that diverse range that make up cultural production: fine arts, cinema, television, et cetera. We were all either profoundly keen to be involved in those spaces or were training, quote unquote, to be absorbed by those spaces and I think all of us were also aware that there was a profound absence of predecessors in this space. Like there was just not that many people of colour at all, nevermind African diaspora people in those spaces. So part of the impetus for wanting to create this thing was to try and use a kind of unity strength type approach to force our way into these spaces, which were actively working to keep you out. These were not welcoming spaces so you realised that you needed rhetorical, political and cultural strategies that privileged what you were first and foremost, and that privileging of black voices or black representation was something that we felt we had to use as a banner for our work because otherwise we were going to disappear essentially.

And that cluster of concerns, historical circumstance, probably explains more how we came together. I mean, I think if you speak to everybody they'll have their own different reasons. People will probably tell you, "I was into cinema and I wanted to make black films", "I read about the Black Arts Movement in the States and I wanted to set something like that up". So each person would come to it existentially with their own set demands that they were making of themselves but those were the sort of broad general reasons I suspect we found it useful to come together.



John Akomfrah, 'Vertigo Sea', 2015, installation view. Photo: © Stuart Whipps. Image courtesy Arnolfini.



### What were some of the initial projects the Collective worked on?

I mean it's interesting, we became known very quickly for making time based works, films. But actually for the first three years between 1982 and, I'd say, 1985, we were pretty much more in the art world proper – the art world of the 1970s and 1980s, which is not the same post **YBA** (Young British Artists) that came into being in the nineties. So we were making quite a lot of installation based work. We were working a lot on forms and with equipment that we could afford: take slides, photo texts, performative pieces. We did quite a few performances of, by then, forgotten black classics: Aimé Césaire's "Return to My Native Land" was one of the performances we did; sonic work mainly for underground magazines; the occasional music video, you know just a range. But very little of it saw itself as belonging and immediately to either of the three broad worlds that we ended up being in and these being the gallery world and the world of the cinema and on television. That sort of came pretty much from 1986 onwards and with the first film that we did called *Handsworth Songs* that pretty much propelled the practice very, very violently towards narrative work and time based practice: making films and video, using film and video.

So *Handsworth Songs* was this sort of south side of Birmingham and Handsworth was where the people of colour were basically congregated for two or three decades. It had a major riot, quote unquote, in the 1980s and the film *Handsworth Songs* uses that riot as the sort of springboard, if you like, to then look at questions of migrant memory and whatever it might be made of.



John Akomfrah, 'Vertigo Sea', 2015. © Smoking Dogs Films. Image courtesy Lisson Gallery.

**The way you work with the archive, the historical record, particularly looking at the "Stuart Hall Project", is intriguing. Many artists when they look at a historical archive as a source of inspiration, or point of departure for their work, often have a subversive intent, but that doesn't always have to be the case. When you consult these historical works, this archive so to speak, is your intent being subversive? If so, could you build on that? If not, what specifically is your intent in using those as a point of departure for your creation?**

I'm interested in the fossils, fragments, debris from the past for two reasons: one, the interest is to do with the question of context. These are contested legacies in which the fragment in question has usually been used to speak a certain absolutist truth. "This is England", for instance, "and England was always white". Or "This is England and England is mono-cultural" or "This is England and it was a great power, which civilised savages." You're aware that when you enter into the debate with the historical record there are, in other words, a set of contested narratives that you're confronted by. So part of the project is simply to take seriously this question of context, to see in what ways fragments from the past can be commandeered to speak more ambivalently about the present and about how the present became if you like.

But there's a sort of, for me, a more pressing, personal question because I think generally when you are a figure of a diaspora what that says is that you are in a space in which very few of the monuments that write that place into being acknowledge your presence. There's no Trafalgar Square for people of colour in this country. The historic fragment in its archival variety becomes paradoxically one's inheritance, one's heritage. It's one of the few spaces where you find things that attest to your presence. So if you look at 17th century England generally the things that attest to there being an African presence in this country at the time will be books or paintings or, very rarely, buildings or towns. So it becomes imperative for the artist, or for the figure who enters into the archive to be aware of the Janus faced nature of the archival past, the residues of the archival past, because they both speak an official memory.

Shakespeare is the English language's greatest poet but Shakespeare is also, in the *Tempest*, one of the few texts from that period that hints at this sense that what we understand to be England may well have been forged by an encounter with the Caribbean. Both are important, in a way, to the practice. It's not that I want to suggest that Shakespeare is just a great white male and he isn't any good for me, or that he needs to be replaced by something I like. I think he's that too but there's other stuff there that one could work with.

So that is generally my interest in the archive. It's about looking, using it to look at spaces or contexts, using it to look at ways in which one might reinsert a black subject into a narrative in which he or she is assumed to be absent from. And those come with ethical implications. It's like when you try to put people in something – nations, groups, identities – the question of why you do it is important. And those ethical questions are as important for me as the aesthetic ones.





John Akomfrah, 'Vertigo Sea', 2015. © Smoking Dogs Films. Image courtesy Lisson Gallery.

***Vertigo Sea* has now debuted in the UK but it was also a part of the most recent Venice Biennale curated by Okwui Enwezor. It would seem that there is a certain set of feelings and understandings that one has when one's work is in one of the most obvious, biggest markers of the art world, which is the Venice Biennale. Now that the Biennale has been over for approximately four months, how are you feeling personally about the work as it moves along this trajectory? Have you seen the responses to it change as it has left the ecosphere of the Biennale and now moved into the UK?**

It never ceases to amaze me just the power and the reach these huge biennials have. They are essentially go-to ecosystems or ecospheres. Everybody across the planet who feels they want to intervene in curating or collecting, or just about everybody makes it to these huge things and so the minute a work transitions into that space, it just flies off. It's aided by the slip stream of that to fly off in directions that are completely not anticipated by you. I just wouldn't have believed that I would have received so many letters and emails and requests from one space because I've been in biennials but this was the most prominent because usually the work has been shown or in side bars as films and so on. This was the first time that the work had appeared in one of the premier European biennials.

I've been pleasantly surprised. The change is, obviously, that once you move from that biosphere, things become slightly more local. Responses to it are more local so at the moment the *Vertigo Sea* is installed in Denmark, it was in Sweden just before that and so you go and you speak to people there and there's always a slightly different take on a place and it makes you realise what biennials do. They centralise opinion but once the works leave that central terminus, the local flavourings of that centring become more apparent. You suddenly become aware that one of the reasons why people in Denmark might be interested in it is because they have this whaling past. Or the reason that an African curator might want to put it on has to do with what we're saying in it about Algerian history. Or the Vietnamese curator who wants it, wants it because of the take on the boat people from the 1970s.

The work itself suggests there might be a general language we speak and that general language takes place in the collegiate atmosphere of the biennial. Once it leaves there it starts to then get unpicked and people hone in on the aspects of it that best interest them, which is what would make them either find the money or the energy or the resources to mount it in their own place. That's the main difference that I've noticed. If I'm in Denmark we speak much more about whaling. When I speak to American curators, we speak much, much more about *Moby Dick*. In France, it's the relationship with Algerian and the colonial past. Each space a specific question that they want to raise to the general tone of the work, and that's been interesting.



John Akomfrah, 'Vertigo Sea', 2015. © Smoking Dogs Films. Image courtesy Lisson Gallery.

**There's a portion of a statement you made in an interview published on the British Film Institute site last summer, in reference to television and cinema. There was a comment that you made at the end that says, "There's not much trust in the viewer right now. One of the reasons it would be great to be alive in fifty years time is to be able to look back and see what the meaning of the archive is and what is in it. I hope someone gets to do that." What did you mean by that?**

I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s on a particular kind of diet of moving image work: independent film, art film, to a certain extent new Hollywood cinemas, the kind made by Monte Hellmann and Martin Scorsese, that sort of work. The organising motif running through all of that work is the sense that you could come to works with an intelligence, which would not be insulted by the work. It wouldn't assume you were an idiot and talk down to you and it wouldn't try and treat you as part of a mass because it felt that you had something to gain personally from that encounter. And I think that sense, that you were first and foremost a reader, a subject or a citizen is very different from the overwhelmingly monetised idea of you as a consumer. The sense of you as a consumer presupposes that you be served a certain kind of diet as part of a mass, part of a huge sway of people and that's a major difference for me.

So when I say there's not much trust in the viewer it's not so much that anyone is sitting anywhere thinking that people shouldn't be trusted or that they're necessarily idiots, but I think most of the means by which we come to experience and observe narratives now, whether they're television or the cinema, does work with the assumption that people are more consumers than citizens or subjects. And I, there's nothing I can do about that, that's just the moment we happen to be in. But I don't think it's the only way in which one could make stuff or that one would treat dialogue between screen and subject. I think there are other approaches and I'm part of one of those other approaches and I think that's probably what I am trying to get at. Moving image work doesn't all have to be structured like a movie, a present day movie with these slightly predictable scenarios.

I mean that's part of the pleasure of watching movies, recognition of genre and so on but I'm interested in taking people in other sorts of journeys, maybe not quite as predictable.



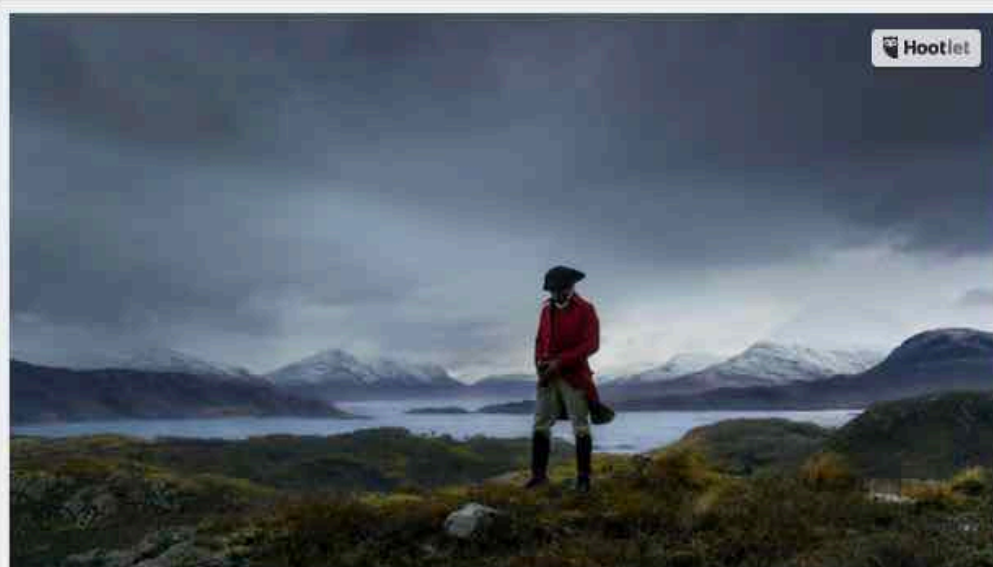
John Akomfrah, 'Vertigo Sea', 2016, Installation view. Photo: © Stuart Whipps. Image courtesy Arnolfini.



**Speaking of these other kinds of journeys, if you're willing to speak of it, what are you working on now that you have *Tropikos* and *Vertigo* out there?**

Part of what I'm trying to do, or what I try to do in most of the work, is to connect recurring obsessions of mine having to do with the African past or questions of memory or the archive. So that's ongoing and unfinished and something will for sure come out of it. Right now I'm trying very hard not to think of one because I need to get a break. I need to really stop for a bit. So lot's of things on the table at the moment, lots of requests, for commissions and other estimates that I'll probably take the next month off and come back at this fresh. It's really important to do that because otherwise the works just segue one to the other and you think you're doing something different but actually just continuing the last one because you haven't really declared the cessation of hostilities with it or signed the divorce papers or whatever metaphor for closure one wants to use, it hasn't happened. So it's really important to manage that closure and say to a work, "it's really been nice knowing you but I've got to go." And sometimes the works themselves tell you that. They just say, "Ok John, you're done now. You can go. I'm ok. I can look after myself now."

So I'm slowly just sort of trying to get those works out of my system. All the works involve partnerships of different forms or another. People have given you things, interviews you've had with people, you research, loads of stuff, it's a bit like an iceberg. They're the works that tip and there's this huge submerged tip of engagements with people and records and institutions, just managing to slowly just say sayonara to all of those, takes awhile. So I am almost at the end of it now, returned the favours the compliments the photographs, all of that and I'm just going to take it easy for a month and then see where to go.



John Akomfrah, 'Vertigo Sea', 2015. © Smoking Dogs Films. Image courtesy Lisson Gallery.

**Who are you watching in terms of filmmakers? What do you think is being done really well aesthetically and conceptually? Who are really excited by who is working in the film genre?**

It's so interesting that question because increasingly I'm looking at, relooking at people who I had either studied or enjoyed being with when I was younger, and going back quite far actually to the work of the German director Murnau from the twenties and thirties. I'm looking a lot at the moment at the early cinema, the silent classics, a hell of a lot. But there are things in the present that also fascinate me enormously. The man who won for, I think, the third time the cinematography Oscar, Emmanuel Lubezki, "The Revenant". I love his work. Pretty much anything that he touches I would watch because there's always something of interest and value.

You know it's a great time for time-based work in the gallery world as well. There's a lot of people doing really, really interesting work, just too many to mention. Broadly those areas: early cinema especially the silent period is a source of interest at the moment. The edges of mainstream especially the work being done by people who are interested in exploring images digitally. I'm very keen on that. And multi-channel pieces by people like Isaac Julien in the gallery world is interesting for me. Just a range. My taste for moving image work has always been catholic, diverse and I will continue to do that moving into spaces finding things that feel interesting regardless of whether it's supposed to be "for me" or not. Like I know an artist is not supposed to be watching mainstream films and enjoying them but there's quite a lot that I enjoy. Just that range. They're way too many to mention.

**Negarra A. Kudumu**

## WAVES OF MIGRATION

NORA M. ALTER ON JOHN AKOMFRAH'S RECENT WORK

**WATER PERMEATES** the recent film installations of John Akomfrah. Productions such as *Vertigo Sea*, 2015, *Tropikos*, and *Auto da Fé*, both 2016, are replete with shots of rippling waves, crashing surf, winding rivers, and babbling creeks, intermixed with images of lakes, inlets, bays, lochs, and oceans, whose shores retain their natural, undeveloped topographies. Clips featuring flowing liquid, the currents of which parallel the sinuous movement of film through a camera, are mixed with theatrically staged tableaux or archival footage, music, and other sounds to craft intense siren songs whose splendor, terror, and magic beckon the spectator.

Sound, like water, moves in waves. It is also in perpetual flux; it needs motion in order to exist. The sonic





Opposite page: John Akomfrah, *Vertigo Sea*, 2015, three-channel HD video, color, sound, 48 minutes. Installation view, Central Pavilion, Venice, 2015. From the 58th Venice Biennale. Photo: Cristiano Corte.

Right: John Akomfrah, *Auto da Fé*, 2016, two-channel HD video, color, sound, 40 minutes. Production still.



has a physicality and a point of view. In Akomfrah's work, sound also often has a disruptive function in its relation to the visual. Cinematic imagery is molecular: It operates according to a structure of singularization. One scene follows another; one cut, then the next. But, for Akomfrah, sound complexifies that logic; its waves reject the static elements, the particulars, making plain that stability is a myth and that the essence of life is movement. In this sense, sound and water parallel time and memory, both of which, like quicksilver in the palm of one's hand, are impossible to grasp.

In Akomfrah's new productions, the ocean functions as a reservoir of memory, a place where stories of the past, present, and future are suspended and preserved. Yet access to these narratives can only be attained indirectly: "Oblique Tales on the Aquatic Sublime," reads the subtitle of *Vertigo Sea*, a highlight of last year's Venice Biennale. Akomfrah's stories are about migrations across time and space, about the currents and winds that transport humans and goods across latitudes and longitudes. Some have traveled

to these places of their own free will; many others have not. But they all share the experience of diaspora, of dispersion—often over water—from one land to another.

The psychic condition of migrancy provides a glimpse into the complex dynamic of identity. The effort the migrant must make to fit into his or her new culture largely mimics the universal process of acquiring a sense of self. Identity is impossible without memory. An essential prerequisite to being, it acts as a powerful counterbalance, a ballast, to the turbulence of dislocation. But there are very few tangible memorials to center the diasporic subject. In their absence, the migrant is left to conjure up specters of things past.

Akomfrah's films summon ghosts—animating them, giving voice to their songs and unspeakable stories. *Tropikos* is staged in the mid-1500s, during the early period of British imperial exploration and conquest. The principal setting is Plymouth Sound, from which many expeditions were launched (other sequences take place in sixteenth-century Guinea and





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Sierra Leone), and the many scenes of stately life there are punctuated by sequences shot on a boat laden with products from abroad slowly making its way up the River Tamar. New World staples such as corn, potatoes, and beans are arranged alongside a display of tropical fruit, totem carvings, precious stones, and two indigenously clad African men, evidently brought back to be trafficked and exhibited like the other foreign merchandise. Characters in period costumes of imported velvet and silk, stitched in gold thread and embedded with pearls and sparkling gems, bespeak the opulence of the affluent in Elizabethan England; their garb is testament to the way exotic treasures of all kinds were incorporated into the culture.

In contrast to the colorful costumes, the gray stone edifices that provide the architectural support for empire are anachronistic. Some are in total ruin; others in various states of disrepair. A cast-iron railing in an arch bears the date 1862, a twentieth-century cement jetty marks the ebb and flow of tides, modern buildings line the riverbank, and a nautical sign reads SPEED LIMIT 10 KNOTS. Toward the end of the piece,

the camera focuses on a black figure, now in Elizabethan costume, who looks out across the sound. His gaze spans more than four hundred years, as the contemporary is brought together, uncomfortably, with a past built on plundered goods and slavery. A twenty-first-century battleship cruises slowly by.

Sixteenth-century Plymouth is thus presented as a conduit to modern Britain. It is a contact zone between the local and the global, the old and the new; a crossroads where white matrons first exchanged glances with black slaves and smartly dressed white men coupled with beautiful African women. Just as corn, potatoes, and other previously unknown goods soon became staples of the European diet, so too were the people brought back from the far reaches of the empire forced to take root in new environments. *Tropikos* touches on the moment when these new historical conditions produced their first subjects.

In *Auto da Fé*, Akomfrah continues his long-standing investigation of the transmutations brought about by relocation. The installation elaborates on a series of scenes projected onto two fifteen-foot-wide screens. The focus is Barbados. Taking up the cultural

theorist Stuart Hall's self-identification as part Portuguese Jew in his documentary film *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013), Akomfrah evokes a little-known mid-seventeenth-century event: the expulsion of Sephardic Jews from Brazil during the Inquisition and their consequent dispersion throughout the West Indies. The circuits of migration, like the oceans in which they run, are thus vast: from Europe and Africa to South America and the Caribbean, and sometimes, as Hall's biography attests, back to Europe. "If the notion of the Western is now inherently unstable," Akomfrah has argued, "then so are its 'pure opposites.' They are no less 'unsullied' and 'uncontaminated' by this instability." Probing the way pure terms are historically constituted is crucial to his project. Categories, from this perspective, are relational; terms such as *white* or *black* are comprehensible only if one determines what the other constitutes as well. Akomfrah's films fly in the face of Western and non-Western perspectives. They transcend dualistic understandings that posit a clear and principled split between the local and the global and construct independent accounts of each.

Opposite page: Three stills from John Akomfrah's *Tropikos*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 36 minutes 40 seconds.

Right: John Akomfrah, *Auto da Fé*, 2016, two-channel HD video, color, sound, 40 minutes. Production still.



A powerful chapter of *Auto da Fé* features six figures, two men and four women, who, with the exception of one who wears a sari, are clothed in mid-twentieth-century semiformal Western attire. The figures glide like ghosts through the gray stone remnants of an abandoned town. The effect is that of a slow-moving tableau, a theater piece staged in a now-desolate outpost. The solid stone structures we see—a ruined two-story building and a relatively large church—suggest that the site may once have been a relatively prosperous settlement, perhaps a plantation.

At one point the camera pans slowly across the scene, capturing the characters looking downward into their open palms as if they are reading from books. In a land with few memorials, where official history is narrated from the perspective of the colonizers, local accounts remain oral and are rarely recorded. One important exception to this is the writings of George Lamming, who, while working in England in the 1950s, penned several volumes that articulate the stress of everyday life in mid-twentieth-century Barbados and the utopian hopes many harbored for a better future on the mainland. His memories lay bare

the stitches of the quotidian and present the tapestry of colonial experience in Barbados as a series of uneven patches. But would these stories have been written had Lamming not relocated to England? Was it not his own migration to an environment rife with records, memorials, and archives that prompted him to narrativize his memories of life in the colony?

The call of a horn boldly announcing the imminent departure of a transatlantic steamer pierces the sound track of *Auto da Fé* at regular intervals. Lamming, like Hall, moved abroad in the aftermath of World War II, a time of mass global migration. Today, too, many people are on the move. However, their passage is anything but fluid. Not just border controls, but also patrol boats, aerial surveillance, and barricades of all kinds have been mobilized to block their movement. Meanwhile, the human casualties have been enormous. Corpses have been found piled up in trucks, rotting in deserts, and washed up on beaches, while the “lucky few” have been placed in holding camps from which they may well be deported.

The opening of *Vertigo Sea* brings this nightmare into harsh relief. Over the roar of waves and against

a backdrop of pounding surf projected on three large screens, a news broadcast reports that more people drowned fleeing their homelands for Europe this past year than ever before. Another voice cuts in, desperately pleading, “Jesus save me, Jesus save me.” *Vertigo Sea* touches on these contemporary horrors, connecting them to earlier moments of modernity when people lost their lives at sea. As do *Tropikos* and *Auto da Fé*, *Vertigo Sea* symbolizes the ocean as an intermediate zone between the past and the present, the particular and the general, the local and the global, and as an oblique site of memory for the modern diasporic subject. But even more than in these other projects, the ocean in *Vertigo Sea* serves as a requiem for the cruelty of modernity—a watery memorial for all those whose pasts were either lost, forgotten, or taken from them, in the process of migration. □

*Tropikos* and *Auto da Fé* are on view at Lisson Gallery, London, through Mar. 12, in a solo exhibition of recent work by John Akomfrah. *Vertigo Sea* is currently installed at the Arnolfini in Bristol, UK, through Apr. 10.

A PROFESSOR OF FILM AND MEDIA ARTS AT TEMPLE UNIVERSITY IN PHILADELPHIA, NORA M. ALTER IS COEDITOR, WITH TIMOTHY CORRIGAN, OF *ESSAYS ON THE ESSAY FILM*, FORTHCOMING FROM COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

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John Akomfrah

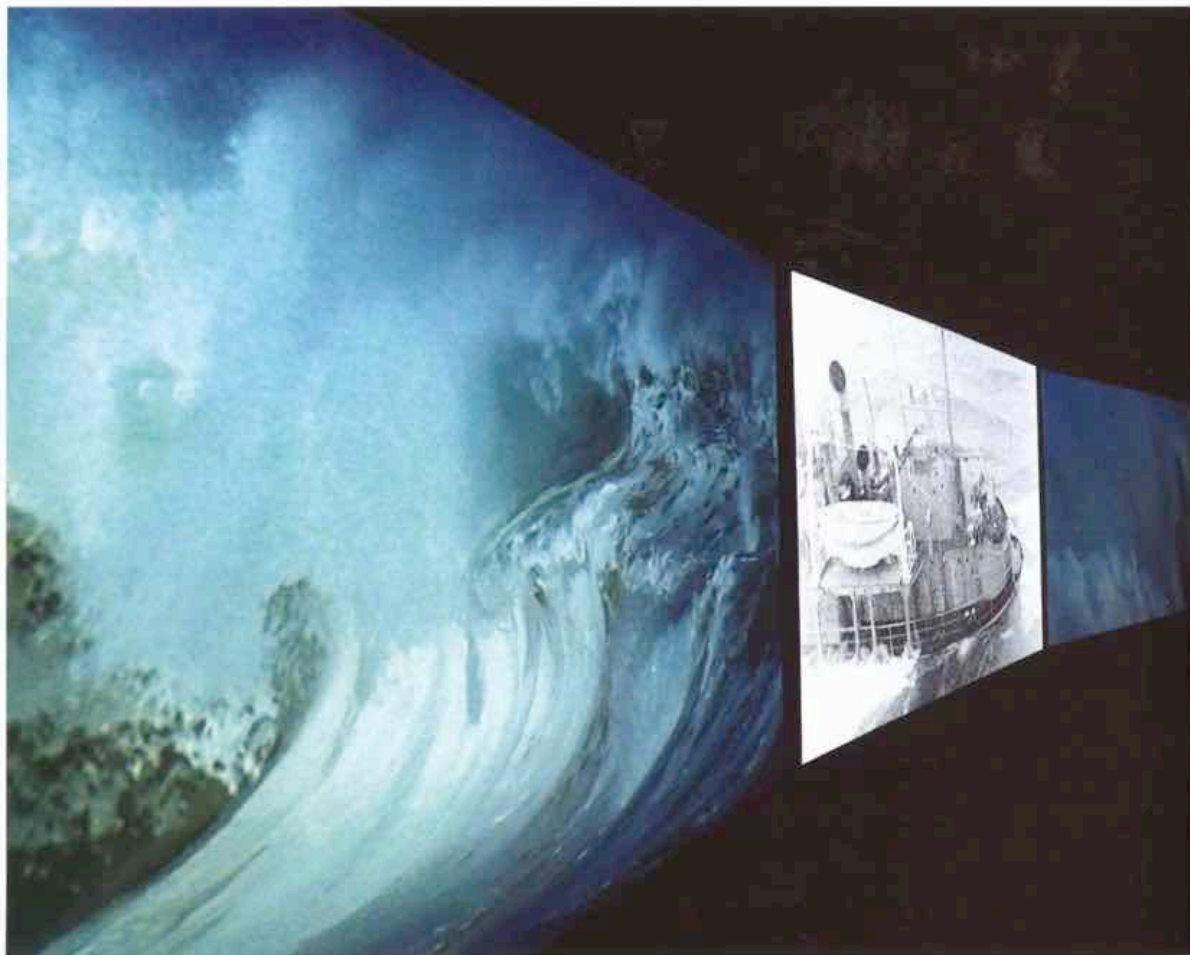


Future Greats – the artists to look out for in 2016



# The Oceanic Ecologies of John Akomfrah

*by Erik Morse*



New screenings of the British filmmaker's  
work highlight his long fascination  
with an identity politics of the (post-)human



*facing page and above* Verity Soe, 2015, three-channel video installation,  
original format HD colour, video, sound, 48 min





Among the standout works in Okwui Enwezor's *All the World's Futures* at last year's contentious – and occasionally overwrought – Venice Biennale was experimental filmmaker John Akomfrah's subdued cine-paean to the ocean, *Vertigo Sea* (2015). A 48-minute, three-screen installation bringing together material sourced from thousands of hours of archival footage, screened alongside various austere, Victorian-inspired tableaux of the littoral, Akomfrah's film explores a difficult range of histories – from whaling, nuclear testing and deep-sea executions to the recent Mediterranean migrations – all under the heading of what he calls 'oceanic ontologies'. On view through April at Bristol's Arnolfini for its UK premiere, *Vertigo Sea* has been released in combination with a career-long retrospective of Akomfrah's work at Lisson Gallery, London, both of which highlight the auteur's sui generis image-making of political identities.

"There's a little-known biographical detail," he explains when we begin discussing the particular origins of *Vertigo Sea*, "which is that I almost drowned twice in [the ocean] as a kid. Once, just escaping, because someone saw me at a beach in Accra being pulled under and swam out and got me. So, in the back of my mind there's always been this reverence and to some extent a fear of that space."

It is this acute attention to collective memory and the personal – traits that have imbued all of Akomfrah's work, beginning during the 1980s with the avant-garde Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC) – that elevates *Vertigo Sea* from mere wildlife documentary to a dense, philosophical meditation on eco-poetics and the posthuman condition. Echoing something of Peter Sloterdijk's recently translated *Spheres Trilogy* (originally published in German, 1998–2004) – which uses images of the bubble and foams as phenomenological leitmotifs – and Martin Heidegger's post-*Being and Time* (1927) essays on ecology, *Vertigo Sea* builds upon the contention that the story of globalisation, in both its political and geographical connotations, commences with the sea and the utopian urge to bisect and 'conquer' its frontier.

"Even in conventional understandings of settled identities, one should at least acknowledge that one arrives at this epistemological or ontological idea of settlement by engaging in the process of flight to the other," Akomfrah explains of the film's metahistorical roots. "... [T]he 'here and there' were intimately bound up with each other."

Interspersed over *Vertigo Sea*'s soundtrack of burbling spume, news reports and whale songs are bardic recitations of Friedrich Nietzsche and Heathcote Williams, as well as Herman Melville's transcendental seafarer's tome *Moby-Dick* (1851), which supplied the project's initial, ecological springboard. "It's sold to you as a novel, and of course it is a novel," says Akomfrah. "But it's also this vast, philosophical speculation about aquatic space, and the way in which that space [poses] questions of mortality, of becoming, of relativity, the demarcations of human and nonhuman. And, of course, the coming of *multicultures* and how they are formed. All of these are the speculative shape of *Moby-Dick*... There's a discursivity to it, of those protean forms and shapes that most authors get into over 10 or 20 novels."

*Vertigo Sea*'s thematic emphasis on Melville's urtext on the American colonial imaginary also complicates what might be assumed, at least initially, to be a film directed towards the more doctrinaire

tenets of postcolonial Marxism. Certainly *Vertigo Sea*'s numerous images of vivisected whales, brutalised West African slaves and migrant corpses littering the Greek shoreline epitomise some of the most heinous atrocities committed by the West under the aegis of Empire. But Akomfrah's knotty portrait of sea life, of whale and whaler, slave and slave-trader, is neither completely romantic nor intransigently macropolitical. Rather, he frames its contents, and actors, as bound by a certain utopian resolve within an oceanic ontology – a frontier of the human *oikos* in which identity formations are determined by continuous diaspora and what Akomfrah calls the sea's "mesh of rhythms and mortalities". It is not surprising, then, that he will partner Melville's incantatory Liberalism with the speculative poetics of Williams's *Whale Nation* (1988): 'Free from land-based pressures: /... Larger brains evolved, ten times as old as man's... / The accumulated knowledge of the past; / Rumours of ancestors, /... Memories of loss'.

"If you say you're interested in formations of identity, and those formations of identity could be either of the racialised or sexualised or gendered variety, then at some point the space of the aquatic binds certain subjects together," he explains. "So how does one find a way to talk about the Vietnamese drowning at sea in their thousands in the [19]70s with political prisoners being dumped at sea by both the French in Algeria and the militant junta in Argentina? Once you start

to connect those things, you begin to think that if a politics of identity as opposed to 'identity politics' has any value then surely at some point it might be important to dwell on the question of sentence itself as a kind of register."

This acuity for metahistory is reflected in the film's various intertitles,

'I almost drowned twice as a kid. Once, just escaping, because someone saw me being pulled under and swam out and got me. So, in the back of my mind there's always been this reverence and to some extent a fear of that space'

which jump from fifteenth-century Newfoundland to 1970s South Asia, an ambitious trek made all the more profound by its recurring allusions to the current Libyan sinkings. No doubt part of the present European immigration crisis stems from a First World state of amnesia, Akomfrah contends. A condition that owing to its urban complacency amid schematic transportation technologies has ceased to acknowledge the embedded cosmopolitan impulse of the human to move, escape and resettle.

Akomfrah's focus on events, themes and characters of the African diaspora originate with his cofounding in 1982 of BAFC, which included current collaborators Trevor Mathison, David Lawson and Lina Gopaul. Akomfrah, himself, had fled with his mother to London from Ghana immediately following the country's 1966 coup, and his own experiences of both migration and multicultural identity informed the collective's aim to merge a black, British urban politics with a radical, modernist aesthetic. The latter was, for the aspiring director, represented in the filmworks of Dziga Vertov, Andrei Tarkovsky and Sergei Eisenstein, among many others, which he first encountered while studying sociology at Portsmouth Polytechnic.

Akomfrah's first directorial feature with BAFC, *Handsworth Songs* (1986), chronicles the riots in that area of Birmingham with just such a hybridity of social realism and formal experimentation, displaying 'the serene confidence of its experimental essayism', according to Mark Fisher, writing in a 2011 issue of *Sight & Sound*.

facing page *Vertigo Sea*, 2015,  
three-channel video installation, original format  
HD colour, video, sound, 48 min

'Instead of easy didacticism, the film offers a complex palimpsest comprising archive material, an empathic sound design and footage shot by the Collective during and after the riots.' Subsequent films like *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993), *The Last Angel of History* (1995) and *Riot* (1999), many of which were broadcast on Channel 4 as the last vestiges of 'workshop'-era cinema, followed a similar experimental structure, combining assiduously researched archival footage with formalist interventions of sound, elliptical storytelling and dramatic reenactments.

The end of the BAFC in 1998, however, marked a distinct shift in Akomfrah's aesthetic, one that would turn away from what critic Brian Winston calls a 'Griersonian' model of empiricist documentary towards a utopian ideal, in which explicit questions of place-ness, nomadism and posthumanism would take precedent. "I think the urban paradigm was eating itself as a cliché," he explains. "Because I just felt it was necessary to try and avoid this kind of cul-de-sac we could potentially find ourselves landing in. You want to find another way of coming at the same questions or even ask yourself different questions... [And] part of it is this turn from the dystopian scenarios of *Last Angel*, for instance, to the utopian scenario of *The Call of Mist*" – alluding to his 1998 short film that meditates on the death of his mother alongside topics like cloning, technology and landscape.

*The Call of Mist* and *Memory Room 451* (1997) also signal the filmmaker's deployment of neo-expressionist tableaux and a saturated, digital colour palette. Their focus on narrative and phenomenological abstractions, blending rich chromatic sequences with references to various memories, dreams and myth-structures, anticipate

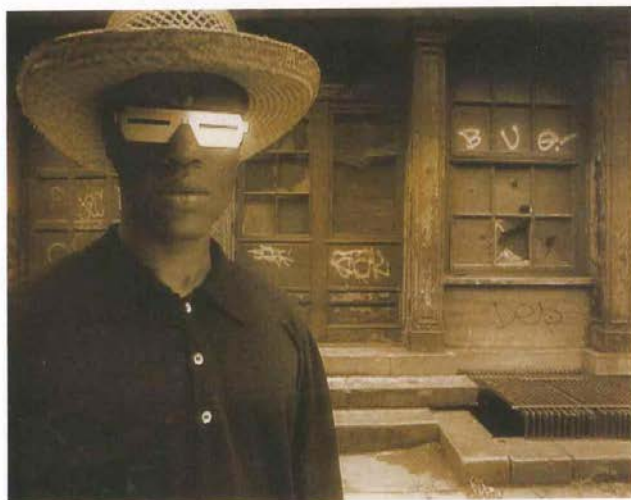
Akomfrah's Romantic figurations of liquid and other natural ecologies, which come to supplant the dominant urban topos situating most of the BAFC projects. Similarly, *The Nine Muses* (2012), perhaps Akomfrah at his most densely literary, pairs extensive footage of the Alaskan tundra and English Shires with bricolaged recitations of Homer, James Joyce and T.S. Eliot to evoke a sense of the sublime in the perambulatory histories of migration and settlement. "Underpinning all of that is a deeply felt need to return to some 'big questions,'" he concludes. "And to pose the question of identity inside those larger questions of being and becoming." For Akomfrah, the human is not only a rational animal, he is also an assemblage of climates, cartographies and languages, both inhabiting and resisting the territories across which he ceaselessly moves.

As the consummation of this intensifying eco-poeticism in his filmography, *Vertigo Sea* shifts the conventions of social documentary from the purview of the human agent to that of the earth, exploring an ontology in which global man is placed in service of the sea. Its rich, aqueous panoramas, spread from screen to screen, remind us of *Whale Nation*'s closing verse: "From space, the planet is blue / From space, the planet is the territory / Not of humans, but of the whale." In capturing this world, Akomfrah reorients the possibilities of identity politics from conventional sociocultural categorisations of race, gender and sexuality to a politics of being itself. **ar**

*Vertigo Sea* is on show at the Arnolfini, Bristol, from 16 January to 10 April. John Akomfrah's work is also on show at Lisson Gallery, London, from 22 January to 5 March



*Handsworth Songs*, 1986, original format  
single-channel 16mm colour film, sound, 59 min



*The Last Angel of History*, 1995.  
single-channel colour video, 45 min  
all images © Smoking Dogs Films.  
Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London, Milan & New York