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WHO
DO
YOU
TAKE
ME
FOR ?

Institute of Modern Art

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WHO DO YOU TAKE ME FOR ?

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Who Do You Take Me For ?

curator

Clare Williamson

artists

*Sutapa Biswas
Franco di Chiera
Anthony Gatt
Joy Gregory
Sunil Gupta
Rhona Harriette
Mona Hatoum
Roshini Kempadoo
Peter Lambropoulos
Peter Lyssiotis
Milan Milojevic
Pratibha Parmar
Dina Tourvas
Edite Vidins
Rhonda Wilson*

text

*Dawn Langley
Clare Williamson*

*PUSHED INTO CIVIL,
FORCED BACK INTO
CIVILISATION,
THIS I REMIND YOU,
IS WHERE WE ALL
COME FROM,
IN THE HEAT, THE
SWEAT, THE
TENSION,
ANOTHER GOLD
RUSH IS ON.*

*BACKSTABBERS,
LOOTERS, LOAFERS,
LOOK AT ME CAN
YOU SEE WHAT I AM?
LOOK DEEPER INTO
MY SOUL, MY EYES,
MY SPIRIT,
CAN YOU SEE A
RISING SUN?*

*I WOULD LIKE TO
DEDICATE THIS
EXHIBITION TO ALL
OPPRESSED SISTERS
AND BROTHERS AND
CHILDREN ON THIS
EARTH.*

Rhona Harriette

Who Do You Take Me For ?

Who do you take me for? is an exploration of photo-based work by British and Australian practitioners whose work deals with issues of their 'otherness' as perceived by the dominant culture in which they live. The primary theme of this exhibition is that of marginalisation as it arises from perceptions of cultural identity. However, important sub-themes are marginalisation of identity for reasons of gender, sexuality and class. These aspects of identity have become increasingly intertwined and cannot be treated as individual, hermetically separate concepts.

The exhibition is not primarily concerned with Black or non-Anglo art practice (for want of better terminology).¹ While the majority of work presented is certainly produced by Black or non-Anglo artists, this exhibition deals with a very specific aspect of work which some of these artists choose to produce, namely, a content based directly on identity and marginalisation. A significant number of the artists represented were born and educated in Britain or Australia but have lived their lives feeling or being told that they belong elsewhere. One artist comes from a strong white Anglo background but produces work which questions the dominance of this culture over all others.

A growing concern over recent years has been the issue of identity, generated to a great extent by the questioning symptomatic of the postmodern predicament. Kobena Mercer points out, 'One thing at least is clear - identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty'.² This exploration of identity, now found in contemporary practice, is often motivated by or developed in response to the increasingly conservative push for a monoculture and its attendant centralising of power.

Some artists in this exhibition have experienced the displacement and dislocation which occurs when one is raised in one culture and relocates to live in another.

Others have been born and continue to live in Britain or Australia but identify culturally with the country of origin of their immigrant parents. A sense of living in two or more cultures at the same time, or of belonging to neither, is expressed in their work.

Marginality and otherness have become fashionable concepts in the era of postmodernism. But, as concepts, they have tended to be raised within the broader postmodern debate concerning the end of meaning. Lucy Lippard writes:

I have become much more sensitive to, and angered by, the absence of meaning in many of the most beautifully made or cleverly stylised art objects. When it is fashionable for art world insiders to celebrate meaningless and parodists operate on the same level as the parodied, perhaps only those who have been forced outside can make a larger, newly meaningful contribution.³

The West has managed to classify more than two-thirds of the world's population as 'minority'. Its position of power is consciously maintained through the promotion of such a binary system of self/other.

The perception of otherness is not just one of difference but inherently one of hierarchy. Whom do we identify as others? Not those we identify with, but those we believe inferior or superior to us, or potentially subservient or dominant. Others are significant to us, even if our rhetoric seeks to deny that significance, because it is through our construction of them precisely as significant others that we situate ourselves. ...In the binary system there is a clearly differentiated single other to be seen as a threat, a group to dominate or be dominated, another in reference to which the self is constructed. In the non-binary system otherness is plural, and sociopolitical relations resemble coalition politics much more than in a

*dichotomous system of political control.*⁴

A cultural politics which promotes difference rather than a homogeneous 'other' can provide means of dismantling these hierarchies of inequality and discrimination and opposes essentialist and monoculturalist systems.⁵ As Stuart Hall explains, a true postmodernism would celebrate and thrive on the 'meaningfulness' of cultural difference:

*What is involved is the splitting of the notion of ethnicity between ... the dominant notion which connects it to nation and 'race' and ... the beginning of a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery ... a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position as 'ethnic artists' or film-makers. ... But this is also a recognition that this is not an ethnicity which is doomed to survive, as Englishness was, only by marginalising, dispossessing, displacing and forgetting other ethnicities. This precisely is the politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity.*⁶

Issues of cultural difference cannot be considered in isolation from other aspects of identity. Cultural identity is refracted through many other factors, including class, gender, religion, age, sexuality and political viewpoint.⁷ Through a range of artistic strategies, many artists are challenging the notion that a work of art by one individual can or should be representative of the experiences or concerns of a whole social or cultural group. For example, an issue-based artwork produced by an Italian Catholic is likely to be very different from that produced by an Italian lesbian.

The principle danger of essentialist policies is that they promote social division by encouraging different groups to play off against each other instead of forming alliances and working for change. 'It creates a kind of essentialist identity politics in which one group will say, "the women's struggle is the most important and your struggles are secondary", and another might say, "no, the black struggle

comes first": different groups tend to compete in terms of rival claims to be the most oppressed and hence the singular, privileged agent of social change.⁸ Binary systems have an ironic tendency to link groups which are in fact directly opposed to each other. For example, racists and anti-racists share a concern with and common dislike of multiculturalism, with both groups heading towards theories of 'ethnic absolutism'.⁹

*The politics of race has changed. The idea of a narrow Anti-racism, for example, is no longer tenable. This situation has not come about because racism is less pernicious or because the long term goal of racial justice is any less worthy. ... It is the issue of culture and the failings of anti-racist practice to deal effectively with the cultural dimensions of racial politics ... that confirm its redundancy.*¹⁰

The significance of work produced by artists of the Diaspora, such as those represented here, lies in their rejection of such binary approaches. Alternative practices are being developed which open up a third way beyond essentialist theories of culture. 'I'm inclined to welcome any approach that destabilises, sometimes dismantles, and looks to the reconstruction or invention of an identity that is both new and ancient, that elbows its way into the future while remaining conscious and caring of its past.'¹¹ By refusing to be identified as the other, these artists are able to destabilise the very self-definition of their oppressors.

Work which is particularly effective in this regard is that produced by lesbian, gay and women artists who are Black or non-Anglo. Perceived as the 'other' on two or three counts, their art cuts across any neat binary division. A new positive identity is put forward which refutes the marginal position assigned to them by the dominant centre. This work is created '...not "in relation to", "in opposition to", "as reversal of", or "as a corrective to" ...but in and for ourselves'.¹² Sunil Gupta's series, '*Pretended*' family relationships, deals with issues of both homosexuality and cultural identity. Colour portraits of lesbian and gay couples are juxtaposed with texts and black and white 'reportage' style images of lesbian and gay rights activism.

In reality, Black artists in Britain and non-Anglo artists in Australia are not marginalised and have, individually, made significant contributions to the history of art of those countries. However, they have been and continue to be marginalised by the dominant art establishment which clings to an image of artists as white, predominantly male, and middle/upper class. Visual art continues to serve as an important battleground for these broader social strategies because aesthetic judgements and issues of 'quality' are powerful and subjective weapons. When *The Other Story*, a major exhibition of Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain, opened at the Hayward Gallery in London, conservative critic Brian Sewell argued that the reason why this body of work had been previously overlooked by the British art

establishment was because it was 'simply not good enough'.¹³ When asked about art world racism, one major New York art critic recently pronounced that he was not interested in 'minority structures', that non-white artists had their own institutions that were set up to 'take care of them', and that he was only interested in 'quality'. The individual critic in question has a record of curating exhibitions which are one hundred percent white.¹⁴ The fact that the majority of curators and gallery directors in Britain and Australia are Anglo is obviously a major factor. Notions of quality continue to be based on narrow conventions of good taste.

*Such sheeplike fidelity to a simple criteria for good art - and such ignorant resistance to the fact that criteria can differ hugely among classes, cultures, even genders - remains firmly embedded in educational and artistic circles, producing audiences who are afraid to think for themselves.*¹⁵

Australia's earlier policies of assimilation and of a white Australia, and Enoch Powell's famous speech in Britain in 1968 in which he demanded the return of the new Commonwealth peoples to the countries of their origin, have done nothing to encourage the art establishment to embrace the art practices of other groups. But the situation is slowly changing, largely as a result of the efforts of artists themselves. Multiculturalism is becoming a catchphrase of the 1990s and art institutions are being forced to begin some soul searching: about their exhibitions, their programmes, their staffs and their audiences.

It will be a long time, however, before artists are exhibited solely on the strengths of their work, regardless of cultural identity, gender or sexual orientation. Current attitudes towards multicultural arts practice are still embedded in the 'melting pot' mentality which tends to blur distinctions between the many different cultures, and also promotes a sort of 'folk tradition' of expression. Multicultural arts are often placed under the umbrella of community arts for the purpose of funding and programmes. This increases the difficulty faced by these artists in gaining access to the venues for so-called mainstream art. 'The rhetoric of Multiculturalism is in place, but the attitudes of key people have not changed qualitatively. ...When funded art is produced in a context defined as multicultural and does not contain perceptibly overt or even obscure ethnic or migrant concerns in form or content, the expectation that it would or should is a matter of concern'.¹⁶

Why should Black or non-Anglo artists represent their communities? We don't expect this of white Anglo artists. Part of the reason lies in the fact that, after so many years of struggle, these artists are finally being given a public voice. This exposure is still relatively small, therefore there is undue pressure on those who do gain access to venues for art to produce work which is 'representative', and which somehow tells the whole story. Martina Attile, a former member of Sankofa, a Black film collective in Britain,

comments on this 'burden of representation':

*There was this sense of urgency to say it all, or at least to signal as much as we could in one film. Sometimes we can't afford to hold anything back for another time, another conversation or another film. That is the reality of our experiences - sometimes we only get the one chance to make ourselves heard.*¹⁷

Black and non-Anglo artists must also decide whether to ignore or admit to white Anglo audiences. Should their work celebrate pride in their own culture, or should it address the racism inherent in the wider Anglo audience, or should it feel any responsibility to do either? Obviously, this begs some questions here about the specific works selected for inclusion in *Who do you take me for?* This exhibition has been generated by content, rather than any notional category of producer. The inclusion of work by a white Anglo artist in an exhibition of work primarily by first and second generation British and Australian artists consciously prevents discussion of the exhibition as purely about a Black or non-Anglo art. The choice of content which deals fairly specifically with marginalisation of identity and cultural politics was a deliberate strategy to raise issues for interrogation which have generally been left off the postmodern agenda, especially in Queensland. It should be seen within the broader programme of the Institute of Modern Art, which has also presented exhibitions such as *Second Language* which showed the diversity of concerns of artists from one cultural group in Australia, and solo exhibitions by artists such as Hiram To.

Some artists who were invited to participate declined for various reasons. Their positions included the view that 'It is problematic when curators define work before discussion with the artist'.¹⁸ Another wrote, 'The reason why I have been successful is that I have avoided allowing myself to be ghettoised as a BLACK ARTIST. ...There is a line from my friend Isaac Julien's (British Film-maker) film *Looking for Langston*, "Black art keeps black art and artists in their place." I refuse to be kept in my place,

otherwise I could never progress as an artist if I did.¹⁹ The issue of whether exhibitions such as this actually ghettoise artists is an important one. The position here is that such exhibitions will continue to play a role in raising issues concerned with marginalisation until artists are no longer discriminated against for these reasons. As Rasheed Araeen states:

My own position is against monocultural or exclusive exhibitions. It would be nice to see the question of race eliminated from the debate about art so that it does not 'interfere' in what one does as an artist, critic or curator, but the situation in Britain has not yet changed to the point where this is realisable without one succumbing to the benevolence of the 'white' status quo.²⁰

Some artists are dealing with racist positions of exclusion by asserting their place within definitions of national identity. By broadening the base for belonging, these artists are dismantling concepts of ethnic absolutism and providing opportunities of reconstruction.²¹ Artists who have been born and raised in one culture, but identify with their family's different cultural heritage, are in a special position to explore these issues. As C.L.R. James has said of the situation in Britain:

The black man or woman who is born here and grows up here has something special to contribute to Western civilisation. He or she will participate in it, see it from birth, but will never be quite completely in it. What such persons have to say, therefore, will give a new vision, a deeper and stronger insight into both Western civilisation and the black people in it.²²

The experience of these artists can be likened to a radical sense of homelessness, an absence of belonging. Hanif Kureishi's description of his visit to Pakistan evokes much of these feelings:

When I considered staying in Pakistan to repair more of my past and complete myself with it, I had to think that that was impossible. Didn't I already miss too much of England? ...So there was always going to be the necessary return

to England. I came home to my country. This is difficult to say. 'My country' isn't a notion that comes easily. It is still difficult to answer the question, where do you come from?²³

Roshini Kempadoo also finds home in a number of places, having a mixed East Indian, West Indian, Amerindian and European heritage. In much of her work, she explores ideas of fragmentation and dislocation in an endeavour to develop a wholly inclusive identity for herself. In a photographic piece from 1989 she included the following text:

I wonder if it is possible to position myself from both
HERE and THERE?
No one experience
no one history
but from this an identity
in constant change²⁴

The fact that a sizeable number of Black and non-Anglo artists choose to address issues of marginalisation of identity in their work is a reflection of and response to the stereotypical and negative pictures presented by the mainstream press. People of non-Anglo background are only allowed to speak within certain narrowly defined boundaries. Actors auditioning for television roles are often caught between looking 'too ethnic' or 'not Chinese enough'. Actors of one cultural group are selected to portray those of many others, the assumption being that, at least as far as television and films go, 'ethnics are ethnics.' For centuries, Asian people, in particular, have been depicted as an exotic other. Today the media perpetuates these myths and compounds them with tactics of fear: fear of an Asian invasion which will (conveniently) become the primary cause of high unemployment. Earlier this year, after a handful of Chinese refugees were found wandering in rugged bush in 45° heat, the Sunday Mail ran a major article headed 'ASIAN INVASION SCARE IN NORTH'. Part of it read:

As three more survivors from the party of Asians shipwrecked on the remote Kimberley coast reached safety yesterday, fears were raised in Canberra that a massive influx of boat people was already under way. Locals are amazed how 43 of the original 56 Asian boat people struggled through snake-infested and rugged bush. Wyndham police Sgt Michael Harper said if the group had done what they claimed, 'they would make Superman look like a sheila'.²⁵

The media generally tends to represent people from Asian, African and southern European cultures as either picturesque exotica, as starving beggars, as natives fighting each other, or as victims of natural disasters. Western viewers are encouraged to develop a relationship of either charity or pity. Pratibha Parmar, a video artist

based in Britain, has analysed the depiction of Asian women in the British press and has come up with recurring images of 'Exotic air hostess, "erotic" prostitutes, unwilling brides of "backward" and "barbaric" arranged marriages, sari-clad women at Heathrow airports's terminal three, or on the picket lines, estranged wives and mothers, victims of deportations'.²⁶ Parma goes on to stress the importance of photo-based art practices being developed by Asian women in Britain to counter these images. She and other artists, such as Sutapa Biswas, are devising strategies to create their own self-images and to address issues of racism. Sutapa Biswas incorporates images of Hindu mythology and art into her photographs to reaffirm the source of her own identity and to challenge her viewers about their own assumptions.

The dominance of the media on perceptions of people from different cultures makes photography a particularly appropriate medium for expression by artists concerned with these issues. Studio-based construction, manipulation and the incorporation of text are employed to challenge photography's claim to truth and objectivity.

In contemporary art theory, dislocation - the ability to reside everywhere and nowhere at once - is frequently regarded as an intrinsic feature of photography. ...Because of its attendant ability to undermine 'the authority of the object', photography has become the medium of choice for artists engaged in the postmodern project of dismantling the truth claims of representation. A high-stakes enterprise for artists committed to social change, this deconstruction of images ostensibly involves unhinging the lopsided power relations between those who traditionally view and those who are traditionally viewed, while simultaneously exposing the pretensions of representational illusionism.²⁷

The incorporation of text in some of the work, such as that by Sunil Gupta, Roshini Kempadoo and Rhonda Wilson is both a means of emphasising a statement and a reflection of the contexts in which photographs are generally experienced. Techniques such as collage and montage by artists such as Peter Lyssiotis and Rhona Harriette, replace assumptions of traditional photography as factual and unchanging with images which convey multiplicity, flux and dislocation. The construction of large-scale colour studio-based images ascribes to the tenets of postmodernism. However, the artists here go beyond merely associating with postmodernism and use these features in the service of their more specific intentions.

Video has also become an important vehicle for expression in this media-saturated climate. The emergence in Britain of Black film collectives such as Sankofa Film and Video, and Black Audio Film and Video Workshop, has heralded a new wave of creative self-representation within the Afro-Caribbean and South Asian communities.²⁸ Mona Hatoum, Pratibha Parma, Sunil Gupta and Peter Lyssiotis all choose

to work in this medium as a direct response to images presented by mainstream film and television. Mona Hatoum's videos are closely related to her performance work. They convey a sense of dislocation, loss and separation from her family.

In much of the work included in *Who do you take me for?*, the artist acts as both creator and subject. Depiction of the self is obviously central to explorations of identity. These images, however, are more than acts of self-portraiture. The artist is subject and protagonist, a participant in a process which questions appearance as much as it records it. Joy Gregory's photographs, titled *Autoportraits II*, are depictions of the artist but are deliberately taken from angles which heighten a sense of mystery rather than reveal her physical appearance. Rhona Harriette photographs herself, eyes closed and cropped by the picture's edge, against walls of images of Blacks found in art and the media. In the final image, we see her in full, gazing confidently at the viewer. Peter Lambropoulos and Anthony Gett both enact private performances before the camera, in which they explore and search for their own self-identity. In the work of Sutapa Biswas and Dina Tourvas, the body is a political site. As Tourvas states, 'To understand one's position in such a society is to become mobile and audible. To apprehend one's body is to become visible, to become imminent.'²⁹

The family snapshot occupies a special place in one's sense of self. Either of one's own past, or of one's family history, the snapshot survives as a signifier of memory which has no real historical value to the outside viewer. Its very banality often gives it the power to emotionally move the viewer and to trigger associations with the subjects. Both Edite Vidins and Milan Milojevic use snapshots taken by their images. This recapturing of one's own (both individual and collective) history is an important step towards a positive reclaiming of identity. The artists in this exhibition do so with anger, passion and humour. Their voices are a challenge to the silence expected of them as the 'other'.

By choosing to produce work which consciously challenges the narrow identities placed upon them by the dominant culture, these artists are forcing their viewers to rethink, to question and to discuss. They are speaking for themselves rather than being spoken for.

In that transient moment she traversed that space between the consciousness of victim to that of the survivor.³⁰

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Endnotes

1. Any term which is used to group or classify particular artists is problematic. For the purpose of this essay I have chosen to use two terms for want of better ones. I use the term Black artist to refer to an artist who is based in Britain and who was either born in Britain or who came to Britain, and who identifies with Afro-Caribbean or Asian culture. I use the term non-Anglo artist to refer to an artist based in Australia who was either born in Australia or came to Australia, and who identifies with other than white Anglo culture. This is a far from satisfactory term. As a negative, it is indicating who these artists are not, as opposed to affirming who they are. The term Diaspora refers to artists who are located in a society or culture other than the one to which they feel that they belong.

2. Kobena Mercer, 'Welcome to the jungle: identity and diversity in postmodern politics', in Jonathon Rutherford, ed., *Identity: community, culture, difference*. Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1990, p.43.

3. Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: new art in a multicultural America*. Pantheon, New York, 1990, p.23.

4. Virginia R. Dominguez, 'Of other peoples: beyond the "salvage" paradigm', in Hal Foster, ed., *Discussions in Contemporary Culture Number 1*. Bay Press, Seattle, 1990, p.131.

5. Jonathon Rutherford, 'A place called home: identity and the cultural politics of difference', in Rutherford, *op.cit.*, p.10.

6. Stuart Hall, quoted in Sneja Gunew, 'Ethnicity and excellence in the arts', *Artlink* 11 (1 & 2), Autumn/Winter 1991, p.4.

7. Sneja Gunew, *op.cit.*, p.4.

8. Kobena Mercer, interviewed by Lorraine Kenny in 'Travelling theory: the cultural politics of race and representation: and interview with Kobena Mercer', *Afterimage* 18 (2), September 1990, p.7.

9. Kobena Mercer, 'Black art and the burden of representation', *Third Text* 10, Spring 1990, p.63.

10. Paul Gilroy, 'Art of darkness: Black art and the problem of belonging to England', *Third Text* 10, Spring 1990, p.45.

11. Lucy Lippard, *op.cit.*, p.14.

12. Pratibha Parma, 'Black feminism: the politics of articulation', in Rutherford, *op.cit.*, p.101.

13. Kobena Mercer, 'Black art and the burden of representation', *op.cit.*, p.61.

14. Howardena Pindell, 'Art world racism: a documentation', *New Art Examiner*, March 1989, p.32.

15. Lucy Lippard, *op.cit.*, p.7.

16. Steve Routoulas, 'Metaphors of multiculturalism', *Artlink* 11 (1 & 2), Autumn/Winter 1991, p.33.

17. Martina Attile, quoted in Kobena Mercer, 'Black art and the burden of representation', *op.cit.*, p.62.

18. Maxine Walker, letter to Clare Williamson, 31 January 1991.

19. Tracey Moffatt, letter to Clare Williamson, 24 June 1991.

20. Rasheed Araeen, editorial comment in Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, 'Organisational apartheid', *Third Text* 13, Winter 1990/91, p.88.

21. Paul Gilroy, *op.cit.*, p.46.

22. C.L.R. James, quoted in Gilane Tawadros, 'Other Britains, other Britons', *Aperture* 113, Winter 1988, p.41.

23. Hanif Kureishi, excerpt from 'The rainbow sign', in *Fabled territories: New Asian photography in Britain*. Leeds City Art Galleries, Leeds, 1989, p.9.

24. Roshini Kempadoo, quoted in Kellie Jones, 'In their own image', *Artforum* 29, November 1990, p.134.

25. 'Asian invasion scare in north', *Sunday Mail*, 19 January 1992, p.3.

26. Pratibha Parmar, 'Hateful contraries: media images of Asian women', *Ten* 8 16, 1984, p.71.

27. Judith Wilson, 'What are we doing here? Cultural difference in photographic theory and practice', *SF Camerawork* 17 (3), Fall 1990, p.27.

28. Portia Cobb, 'Disputed identities: video', *SF Camerawork* 17 (3), Fall 1990, p.15.

29. Dina Tourvas, artist's statement, 1991.

30. Pratibha Parma, 'Emergence 2', in Kwesi Owusu, ed., *Storms of the heart: an anthology of Black arts and culture*. Camden Press, London, 1988, p.50.

Contemporary photographic practice in Britain

Contemporary photography in Britain reflects, as elsewhere, the almost endless potential of the medium. There is undoubtedly within this spectrum, extreme polarities, however two areas are still dominant.

a. Straight or pictorial photography. The mainstay of the documentary tradition.

b. Experimental photography. That which is directly altered and/or constructed. This draws its influence from painting, graphic arts, advertising and printmaking. The photographer is generally representing a personal point of view.

Historically, British issue-based photography was reliant upon the straight representation - documentary practice became the tool of campaign work and social comment. In the late 1970s, a crisis developed. As a practice that was committed to objectivity, photography sat in contradiction to the need for individuality, and the variety of styles that were developing.

Two further ingredients added to a growing dissatisfaction with the dominant forms:

a. Critical arguments against documentary film were brought to bear on photography.

b. State funding became increasingly conservative and unpredictable. It became more difficult to find a place for photography - particularly that which was politically or socially based.

Within issue-based photography, mainstream representations have been subverted and challenged, the fundamental purpose being to directly involve those people who have been disenfranchised in other areas of their lives.

There is now much debate being created by those directly responsible for making this provision possible. Those people and organisations, responsible for creating and initiating an alternative visual culture, are very much bound up in socialist and cultural politics.

Photography is still seen as having the potential for social change, but clearly this is not an ideology adopted by central government, and as such, must take into account the society in which it is attempting to create such changes.

It also serves to highlight, as does this exhibition, that no single photographic practice can be seen as the 'right' way to achieve this. It is now the case that a palette of practices has been created from which one can draw and combine different methods.

Current work taking place on the photographic representation of race, disability, gender, class etc., indeed, draws on advertising, photo-therapy, montage and other techniques.

No longer hiding in the light of realist documentary, Afro-Asian photographers have prised open new perspectives on Black British experiences and identities. Indeed the most salient characteristic of 'Black representation' in recent photography has been its emphatic diversity.'

In this area it is not so much the techniques that are important, although the images must stand strong in their own right, and survive in a culture of mass-centralised information - what is essential is the power base from which they emerge. The common link between the work in this exhibition is the fact that the artists have had the courage to create imagery that speaks of being 'disempowered'.

Organisations such as Camerawork have been working to ensure that the knowledge and skills for understanding the production and consumption of photography, are put into the hands of the communities (both geographic and interest-based) and those currently disenfranchised.

This diversity of approaches is tied up in, and influenced by, the society in which it operates, and is bound up in broader issues of arts and social policy making. Society has a direct effect on what is available to consume/participate in; how it is to be consumed; what finances are available to sustain such provision; and even how people are able to come together as communities.

I would argue that the foundations of the work in this exhibition stem from a particular ideology bound up in notions of cultural democracy. Cultural democracy should allow for the individual to fully develop their potential while creating an awareness of the individual's links within their communities and the wider population.

On the whole, the Establishment's involvement with photography in Britain has been an un-coordinated one. As a medium it took a long time to be recognised by the major institutions, and even now it is often seen in terms of Old Masters, genres, historical ordering, and

uncontentious contemporary forms. These venues are not active social spaces. The 'gallery' still carries the connotations of High Art elitism that defy light relief or active involvement.

Much of the visual work in Britain that deals with oppositional or radical issues - particularly photographically - is in the form of posters, postcards, hoardings and installations. These forms either have a limited life span or are not accepted as having any form of credibility beyond the popular.

To escape the problems associated with the traditional forms of practice, artists have adopted new visual strategies, often using segments of conventional techniques and playing them off against each other: the use of image/text, juxtaposition of images, and analysis.

A further method is to create new contexts for familiar styles, drawing from film, advertising, even the family snapshot: encouraging people to take a second look and not to take these forms on face value.

What is necessary today, is a set of disruptive, dialectical, modes of presentation, which do not alienate the viewer, but defy the easy painless consumption of the well-constructed classic photograph.'

Developments in issue based photography, and consequently the work of the included artists have been influenced by two main determining factors - The Thatcher (and now Major) years, and developments in state funding.

The Greater London Council (GLC) arts policy of the mid-eighties 'pushed back the tide of market force dominance of cultural or artistic practice'.³ This policy developed in favour of an alliance of the dispossessed. Producing support for the disparate elements of Black arts, Disability arts, Lesbian and Gay arts, and so on.

The underlying philosophy was that it was necessary to start opening up the white, male dominated labour movement, as well as society in general. There was, as a result, a shift away from solidaristic to privatised politics. From this the only kind of empowerment that could be created was at the very passive point of consumption.

Also emerging from the GLC, were the equal opportunities statements, adopted initially by funders and then their clients. The GLC had set in motion an access programme which increasingly could not be delivered by other funders. With state funding being squeezed centrally and regionally in accordance with the 'enterprise' culture ethic, project expansion, or the increased representation of a particular group could only come about by the cutting of another equally oppressed group.

³Grants to Black artists may have increased, but the

provision of salaried support for Black administrators shows a very different pattern'.⁴ Conservatism (with a capital 'C') allowed what they saw as arts social work to develop, because it offered no real threat to their political power base. Thus the artists shown in this exhibition have developed in spite of funding priorities, rather than because of them. The actual beneficiaries of the GLC arts funding policy were, as always, the white administrative middle-class.

Further dilemmas were created by the total denial of class issues, - levels of access became all important, whereby disabled people, lesbians and gays, women and so on, were seen as homogenous groupings, existing more or less, on the same economic and cultural levels.

Unfortunately, equal opportunities exaggerated this growing disparity - for the photographers featured, it was heralded as the first step in the struggle for full civil rights. For those in administrative power, it became just another tick box on a grant application form.

Many of the most successful British cultural practitioners are now making use of the body in their artistic forms. They are moving beyond the barriers, to create a radical practice, clearly located within the constituencies they refer to.

Such work may contain the notion of breaking out of the gallery, to take on new issues, and find new audiences.

Douglas Crimp states, of AIDS cultural activism in the United States:

What counts in activist art is its propaganda effect; stealing the procedures of other artists is part of the plan - if it works we use it.'

It is by no coincidence then in British photography, that Rhonda Wilson's work alludes to advertising techniques; that David Hevey's disability imagery uses the high production values of the commercial studio; that the Photo Co-Op safe sex poster campaigns would sit comfortably in Cosmopolitan magazine; or that Sunil Gupta's images evoke a theatrical, filmic quality.

For too long now the visual rhetoric of the right in Britain has easily surpassed that of the left. As photographers and cultural activists we could not expect our campaigns to have the desired levels of success, because we were not using adequate techniques to compete.

This type of photography no longer stands in isolation. It is being taken up by the various political movements, as a valid site for cultural activism. Visual representations and identities have been formed by the Right with little to challenge them, until now, from the Left.

Cultural politics still stands on the fringes, but we are becoming united within broader movements and returning to solidarity. This determination is serving to continue the almost unique role of issue-based photography in Britain. We have found that few gains are made while socially based photography continues to operate in isolated pockets; dominant ideologies are still in a position to erode any achievements made.

Thus it is now more common to find photographers who work in tandem with the trades and labour movement, health and social service organisations, and the education sector, as well as with galleries and other cultural institutions.

Much of our cultural activity has, probably because of state funding, constrained us to our homogenous groups - disability, race, gender, etc. We are only now learning to make the cross-cultural links, that I believe are vital to our survival.

Radical photography has two tenets:

a. The ideology that people have the right of access to the means of communication within their society, and the right to acquire skills necessary to use these means of communication.

b. The notion of co-authorship, i.e. people coming together to co-produce. So the concern becomes not only training in techniques, but also critical understanding of process, and the context in which images may be used, as seen through the work of the various public photography workshops throughout the country.

Such organisations (there is a small national network), and their resulting work, take up the experiences of the photographer and those they work with, placing them in a broader context so that people can come together and develop potential power. Ultimately these groups can begin to challenge existing ideologies and representations on their own terms.

British issue-based photography tries to link theory and analysis, bringing them together in cultural working practices - moving beyond what could be seen as a sole concern with content.

There is a danger in this area of practice, that photographers produce work which only deals with the structural problems, and not with challenging the problems that arise from our social organisation where they occur - a self-defeating process. This kind of information can become as bewildering and fragmented as that produced centrally.

Camerawork tries to develop working practices which are rooted in the notion that production, distribution, reception and consumption are all inseparable parts of a larger process. Rhonda Wilson takes this on by producing posters that can as easily be seen in a Citizens Advice Bureau as a gallery.

Mass media images succeed in their role as a result of the methods by which they are distributed, presented and received. For socially based photography to succeed, we have also had to take on similar considerations.

Much of this has been achieved through the provision of state grant aid, which though in itself is not a bad thing, is usually combined with conditions that render it problematic. 'There is no such thing as a free lunch'. We should be able to refuse grants if they do not uphold our aims, in the knowledge that we may do less, but that those activities which we are achieving are more substantial and aimed at long term effect.

The struggles addressed by social photography are part of a fight for cultural democracy, aimed at reuniting those areas of production and consumption split by capitalism. We are creating alliances which are endeavouring to make us more than salaried rebels with little or no power.

The photographers in this exhibition are not just involved in stepping in and out of the activist arts movement when a campaign is required, they are part of an on-going critical analysis of contemporary consumerist society.

I believe that Owen Kelly sums up the role of issue-based photography, within its broader context:

*The point is not that we once had an active cultural democracy, and it slipped away from us. Rather, we are in a position to achieve cultural democracy, we could have it and we should have it.*⁶

Dawn Langley
Director
Camerawork, London

Endnotes:

- 1.K. Mercer, *Bodies of excess*, Ten:8 Publishing, 1991
- 2.S. Bezencenet, *Photographic practices*, Comedia, 1986
- 3.D. Hevey, *Notes for class and community photography*. Lecture notes. 1991 Projects UK
4. *ibid*
- 5.D. Crimp, *Aids demographics*, Bay Press, 1990.
- 6.O. Kelly, *Community, art and the state*, Comedia, 1984.

Biographical Details

Sutapa Biswas

b.1962, Bolpur, India
1966 Arrived in Britain
Educated in Britain
Lives and works in London

Franco di Chiero

b. 1958, Waroona, Australia
Educated in Australia
Lives and works in Sydney

Anthony Gett

b.1968, Brisbane
Educated in Brisbane
Lives and works in Brisbane

Joy Gregory

b.1959, Bicester, England
Educated in Britain
Lives and works in London

Sunil Gupta

b.1953, New Delhi, India
Educated in Canada, USA and Britain
Arrived in Britain 1983
Lives and works in London

Rhona Harriette

b.1964, South London
Educated in Britain
Lives and works in London

Mona Hatoum

b.1952, Beirut, Lebanon
1975 Arrived in London
Educated in Britain
Lives and works in London

Roshini Kempadoo

b.1959, Crawley, Sussex, England
Educated in Britain
Lives and works in Leicester

Peter Lambropoulos

b.1971, Brisbane, Australia
Educated in Brisbane
Lives and works in Brisbane

Peter Lyssiotis

b.1949, Cyprus
Educated in Melbourne
Lives and works in Melbourne

Milan Milojevic
b.1954, Hobart, Australia
Educated in Australia
Lives and works in Hobart

Pratibha Parmar
b.1955, Kenya
Educated in Britain
Lives and works in London

Dina Tourvas
b.1940, Greece
1959 Arrived in Australia
Educated in Australia
Lives and works in Sydney

Edite Vidins
b.1960, Melbourne, Australia
Educated in Melbourne and Brisbane
Lives and works in Brisbane

Rhonda Wilson
b.1953, England
Educated in Britain
Lives and works in Birmingham

List of Works

Sutapa Biswas
From the series *Synapse* 1990-91
Four gelatin silver photographs

Franco di Chiera
A change of face 1988
29 minute colour video
Co-Directors: Luigi Acquisto
Georgia Allen
Tracey Moffatt
Sophia Turkiewicz
Executive Producer:
Barbara Mariotti

Anthony Gett
Untitled 1991
Four type C colour photographs

Joy Gregory
Autoportrait II 1990
Series of eight gelatin silver photographs

Sunil Gupta
'Pretended' family relationships 1987-88
Six images from a series of twelve type C colour
photographs, black and white photographs and text (poems
by Stephen Dodd)

India postcard 1988
Colour video 4 1/2 minutes

Rhona Harriette
As a photographer 1989
Series of four type C colour photographs

Mona Hatoum
Changing parts 1984
24 minute black and white video

Measures of distance 1988
15 minute colour video

Mona Hatoum (cont)
So much I want to say 1983
5 minute black and white video

Roshini Kempadoo
Impressions passing 1991
Series of eight gelatin silver photographs
credits: 1. Inset photograph: A. Baratti
Text: photographer
2. Inset photograph: V. Sella
Text: photographer
3. Inset photograph: 'Sunday' magazine - News of
the World newspaper, 1989
Text: Lola Young
4. Inset photograph: Oxfam poster, 1970's
Text: Aime Cesaire
5. Inset photograph: Daily Mirror
Text: Aime Cesaire
6. Inset photograph: Blitz magazine Nov. 1989
Text: photographer
7. Inset photograph: photographer
Text: Stuart Hall, 1989
8. Inset photograph and text: photographer

Peter Lambropoulos
... lost in a sea of maps ... 1991
Type C photographs on aluminium panels

Peter Lyssiotis
If life is something then it must be in something (from
Industrial woman series) 1979-91
Type C photograph of photomontage

Meat factor (from *Industrial woman* series) 1979-91
Type C photograph of photomontage

To those lands who have machines workers will be given
(from *Industrial woman* series) 1979-91
Type C photograph of photomontage

The Occupant
video of extract from 16mm colour film, original 25 minutes

Journey of a wise electron and other stories
Limited edition artist's book, 148 pages, black and white ills.
Champion Books, Melbourne, 1981

Industrial woman
Artist's book, 208 pages, black and white ills.
Industrial Woman Collective, Melbourne, 1986
Text: Jas Duke and Vivienne Mehes

Three cheers for civilization
Limited edition artist's book, 96 pages,
colour ills.

The harbour breathes
Limited edition artist's book, 64 pages,
black and white ills.
Sea Cruise Books and Masterthief
Enterprises, Melbourne, 1989
Text: Anna Couani

Milan Milojevic
Arrival 1991
Screenprints and gelatin silver
photographs

Pratibha Parmar
Emergence 1986
20 minute colour video

Sari red 1988
12 minute colour video
Made in memory of Kalbinder Kaur Hayre,
killed by three fascists in 1985.

Dina Tourvas
Untitled 1991
Direct positive colour photographs

Edite Vidins
Livs circa 1985
Computer-generated bubble-jet
photocopy

Rhonda Wilson
*A sense of place: women and
homelessness* 1988-89
Series of fourteen offset posters,
duotoned