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EDITOR'S NOTE

In each issue, the “Theory & Criticism” section invites one of the winners of the Art Theory and Criticism prize, awarded by the Centre National des Arts Plastiques, to test ideas and hypotheses which question, and even go beyond well-marked intellectual paths. This freedom seeks to arouse audacity (in the invited author) and curiosity (in the reader). It is the little “&” which opens up interpretations of the relation between “theory” and “criticism”, be it a theoretical criticism, such as “Criticism in the Face of the Anthropocene” formulated by Vincent Normand (n°42), or rather a critical theory, aware of its challenges and limits. These variable nuances of methods tally with the diversity of the projects undertaken. And yet, on closer examination, we realize that it is probably the relation to history which continuously reverberates, like a rope stretched between all this promising research: be it the fantasies of *Homo ludens* which are expressed in playground architecture, as examined by Vincent Romagny, the extendable time-frame of writing by and about oneself which Sophie-Isabelle Dufour has studied through the writings of Bill Viola, or the deliberately “chopped” and redistributed history of Ray Johnson’s collages, as retraced by Julie Borgeaud. The layers of these different histories are underpinned by legitimizing discourses, and by ambitions and conflicts which need to be revealed. After the shortsightedness of the unicist and linear history of modernism, the 1980s broadened the perspectives, towards a historicization where the “universal”—read, Western—claim was replaced by a relativist and plural criticism, underwritten by a chorus of voices which had for too long been forced to remain silent. Starting out from the case of the British artist Sonia Boyce, Sophie Orlando has had the courage to root her research precisely in this gap, dovetailing the micro- and macro-history of a paradigmatic turn which is still deeply topical.

Antje Kramer-Mallordy

- 1 The work of Sonia Boyce (born in 1962) assumed its full breadth in the mid-1980s, in particular with her paintings and pastels evoking colonial history and the representation of black women in Great Britain. *Missionary Position*, acquired by Tate Britain in 1987, and *Lay Back Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain So Great* (1986), a quadriptych conjuring up the conquests of the British Empire in Africa, India and Australia, acquired in 1989 by the Arts Council, both provide a good illustration. We shall focus our interest here specifically on Sonia Boyce's works produced after 1989. Why? This date is commonly associated with a tipping point in art worlds and in particular in the curatorial discourse, towards a questioning of both the hegemony of western modern art history and its foundations, but also of the criteria which justify the way in which productions belong to a contemporary art history. While the Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette played host to *Les Magiciens de la terre* (18 May-14 August 1989), and while the Wifredo Lam Centre held the third *Havana Biennial* (1 November-31 December 1989), the Hayward Gallery exhibited *The Other Story* bringing together "Afro-Caribbean and Asian artists of post-war Great Britain".¹ Simultaneously, then, Sonia Boyce's artistic output underwent deep-seated changes in terms of nature, techniques and content.
- 2 The artist's early figurative works were in fact part and parcel of the Black Art movement. This latter emerged at the First National Black Art Convention in 1982, a conference dealing with the specific nature of works by Afro-Caribbean and Asian artists born in Great Britain, or hailing from migratory movements since the 1930s. At that time, Sonia Boyce was associated not with the Blk Art Group (1979-1984), the first Black Art collective, but with Black Women Artists,² a group of feminist artists. This latter group was constructed upon the theorization of feminism within 'Cultural Studies', and led, it just so happens, by Hazel Carby (whose pupil Sonia Boyce was) and Prathiba Parmar.³ The issues of the group lay at the heart of tensions resulting from the artistic postures of Jo Spence, Mary Kelly and Margaret Harrison. "I was going to many feminist art conferences, workshops, and discussions, there was a general discontent with the idea of art practice from Greenbergian thoughts. America was at the centre of the debate while earlier forms of modernism, European modernism still had some currency".⁴ Black Women Artists contested the canons of western art history just as much as the predominance of Conceptual art in feminist praxes which got rid of the body, including the black body. By opting for the self-portrait in drawing, painting and collage between 1982 and 1988, Sonia Boyce spoke out against the practices of western contemporary art, then governed in Great Britain by Victor Burgin and Art & Language, but also governed by the legacy of Post-painterly Abstraction and the theories of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. The change in techniques ushered in by Sonia Boyce in favour of photography, installations and then video in around 1989 thus appears as a tactical about-face. What were the reasons for this, and what was its scope in the context of artistic globalization?
- 3 Through an analysis of the relations between the different art players, based on an interactionist perspective (Howard J. Becker, Bruno Latour), but also resulting from Black Cultural and Visual Studies (Kobena Mercer, Sarat Maharaj), this research takes as its subject the conjunction between the international turning point occurring around definitions of art and the writing of its narratives, and the strategic change of an art praxis. Let us dwell for a moment on one of the aspects of this work, in particular the analysis of strategies of utterance, in order to determine the reasons and range of the artist's changes of tactics. Is the change of the place of utterance dependent on the

changes occurring within identity-based policies, and in particular within the deconstruction of identity? What are the effects produced by the rhetoric of Sonia Boyce's declaration about the discourse of/and on art?

- 4 The moment of the break went hand-in-hand with a generational turning point. In 1986-87 Sonia Boyce attended a lecture given by Aubrey Williams: "Is there a Black Aesthetic?" (Artist-Run Space, "Creation for Liberation"). Aubrey Williams declared that he did not understand why the new generations had abandoned the freedom of abstraction and the project of modernity.⁵ In fact, artists associated, like him, with the Caribbean Art Movement (1966-1972) in Great Britain underwrote the modernist project by linking it with a black essentialism. Aubrey Williams introduced Aztec figures into the heart of his abstract painting in order to conjure up the conditions in which modernity had emerged. Sonia Boyce declared: "At that particular moment I realised I had been trying to speak to the older generation, [...] I wasn't saying anything about my own generation."⁶ If the artist's audience was changing, the issues of her work were, as well. The first hypothesis consists in reading the break as a questioning of the place of utterance. Henceforth, Sonia Boyce would ask: "Who is speaking, and to whom?" in an intellectual (and particularly curatorial) context of re-appraising the relations of art to the well-worn concept of "otherness", and in favour of the post-colonial vocabularies of "hybridity" and "Creolization", or "cross-breeding": a favourite lexicon of post-colonial thinking. In 1988, Stuart Hall, a leading Cultural Studies figure, explained during a lecture:⁷ "That is to say 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' artist or filmmaker".⁸ In *Talking Presence* (1988), the last collage-painting produced that same year, Sonia Boyce arranged a couple in the foreground looking at the city of London from the space of an interior decorated with wallpaper and a seascape. For Paul Gilroy, the ship is a trope of the trans-Atlantic circulation of cultures, in which the subjects are caught between what Du Bois called "double consciousness" and the belonging to a double culture, western and African.⁹ The collage, in the manner of the American artist Romare Bearden, fills the urban space, and specifically London, with its red buses, St. Paul's cathedral and the Houses of Parliament. Since 1989, Sonia Boyce has set aside representations of identity-based policies of a specific subject, in favour of a place of collective utterance. The situation of utterance and the situation of the spectator shift. This latter was at the centre of all ways of looking at things when Sonia Boyce produced a wallpaper covering the entire exhibition venue for the show *I Wish You Were Here* (9 September-9 October 1994, London: Bank). A repetitive motif—the applause coming from Martin Scorsese's film *The King of Comedy* (1982)—followed each person and prompted him/her to wonder why people were looking at him: who is looking at him, and how. The body becomes collective in the series *Devotional*, an archive of objects, tapes, disks and albums of more than 200 international black women artists who are often ignored, but have remained in the collective memory. The spectator is invited to contribute to the archive and activate it. Lastly, the dynamic relation which she ushers in with the spectator would be the object of "relational aesthetics"¹⁰ in the 2000s,¹¹ which are asserted in collaborative works associated with sociability (dining, singing), with an impulse fairly akin to an observation of behaviour and tacit interpersonal adjustments, such as the functionalist Erving Goffmann¹² studied in the 1970s.

- 5 Simultaneously, Sonia Boyce carries out a change in the constriction of her representations. The fragmented body becomes the place of her address to the spectator. It is no longer associated with a specific subject (black female artist in London) as in the pastel self-portraits of the artist. It turns out to be the fragmentation of an abstract subject (*Plaited and Knotted*, 1995). It evokes a fetish, a doll, black, desired, with no identity, in the photographic triptych *Three Legs Stuffed with Hair* (1995) made up of close-ups of curly black hair, and hairs caught in the intimate folds of a woman's stocking. The stocking acts as a screen hiding the dark skin, a "racialized" object of desire according to Frantz Fanon in *Peau noire masque blanc*, written in 1952, or a "dark continent" according to the feminist Mary Ann Doane.¹³ The body is caught by a close framing, sign of the desire/rejection ambivalence of racialization. The framing cuts and even decapitates, it separates the subject from her identity. Nurtured by psychoanalysis applied to the post-colonial field (Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha) and by postmodern American theory (Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss), Sonia Boyce links sexual politics to the modernist gesture. The stocking is visible in the work of another British artist associated with the Young British Artists [YBSa]: Sarah Lucas. Her *Bunny* series conjures up Hans Bellmer's doll, place of projection of a male gaze, here inflatable and included in pornographic consumer society. For Sonia Boyce, on the other hand, the mass consumption of the de-personalized and fetishized body (which Kobena Mercer would analyze in *Black Hair Style Politics*, 1987),¹⁴ goes hand in hand with the construction of the desire/fear pairing of the colonial subject.
- 6 Sonia Boyce also wonders: "What is the rhetoric of the declaration? For what effects?". One of the hypotheses of this research is that the artist develops a specific area of negotiation for the authority of the discourse in the works produced after 1989 with regard to the different theoretical deconstructionist legacies (including Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Edward Said, Gayatri C. Spivak) and Black Cultural Studies (Stuart Hall, Kobena Mercer). The object of the negotiation is plural: at once authority over the representations of a community, and observation of colonial representations, then availability of contestatory tools for the representations. In this way, the collaborative video *Oh Adelaide* (2010), using the visual archive of the Black Vaudeville Show of 1936, interposes, between the jazz singer Adelaide Hall (1901-1993) and the spectator, a white surface, an area of indiscernability, a screen which disturbs access to the movements and the body of the singer pirouetting on a stage bedecked with grotesque minstrels. The artist Ain Bailey mixes the voice of the singer of Duke Ellington's *Creole Call Love*. The sound seizes up and produces the noise of a machine-gun, or borborygmus, linking the machine to the organ. In 1988, Stuart Hall observed a change within black cultural policies, shifting from an anti-racist policy in post-war Great Britain, noting a "black experience" and the criticism of these representations, in favour of a policy of active representation, otherwise put a work on systems of representations and the formation of their tools.
- 7 While the artistic strategies of the Black Art Movement (1982-1989), such as localism, the use of identity-based policies and the race, class and gender articulation established by Stuart Hall within Cultural Studies, were developing in the works of the Young British Artists Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, and Mark Wallinger, Sonia Boyce was putting an end to the self-narrative in favour of a work on a transnational subject. Analyzing the British situation after 1989, Kobena Mercer observed the shift from the collectivist 1980s to the individualist Young British Artists, then the pop YBAs of the 1990s as a compromise between "ethnicity and internationalism",¹⁵ that is to say, a middle way between the

debate about black representations, underpinned by Black Art and the seduction strategy of a “local-global” international market of Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas and Damien Hirst. The 1990s played host to works about the hyper-visibility of the cultural history of the masses of blackness (Chris Offili’s *Captain Shit* super-heroes, since 1996) and became involved in a re-evaluation of intellectuals (cf. Isaac Julien, *Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Mask*, 73 min, 35 mm, 1996). With regard to the “new internationalism” and, in particular, the status of “blackness” in British contemporary art, it is important to understand the artist’s change of tactics as the creation of a critical stance. This latter functions by negotiating the authority of the image with the spectator and with the tools of mass culture. Marcus Verhagen thus interprets the change in this artist’s work as follows: “This shift has three crucial consequences. One is that she can examine the workings of the commonplace and undermine it, or at the very least expand and complicate it, from within. The second is that she offers the viewer not an alternative identity but alternative ways of imagining identity. And the third is that her critical interventions cannot be appropriated by mainstream culture because they are in some sense already part of it, because they speak ostensibly the same language”.¹⁶ From a criticism of representations within the canonical modernist history of art and of the postures of conceptual white feminists, the artist has moved to the constitution of critical tools capable of presenting and undoing the stereotype, from the place of utterance of the international mass culture of blackness. By coming up with critical tools capable of deconstructing images and by simultaneously creating an area of ambiguity, or discomfort, for the spectator, Sonia Boyce’s works produced after 1989 develop a line of thinking about and on artistic globalization. Why? They do not form a place of homogenization or differentiation of identities, so they contrast with a “zone of encounter” of cross-breeding or cultural hybridness. They function like spaces of negotiation, authorizing the analysis and then the deconstruction of identity-based models and policies stemming from colonial discourses.

NOTES

1. *The Other Story: "Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain"* (29 November 1989-4 February 1990), London : Hayward Gallery
2. See the catalogue *Thin Black Line(s)*, London: Tate Britain ; UCLAN, 2011-12. Exhibition organized by Lubaina Himid and Paul Goodwin. Members included the artist and exhibition curator Lubaina Himid, and the artists Sutapa Biswas, Claudette Johnson, Ingrid Pollard, Veronica Ryan, and Maud Sulter.
3. See Heidi Safia Mirza (ed), *Black British Feminism: A Reader*, London : Routledge, 1997
4. Interview with Sonia Boyce, 10 January 2013, Tooting Broadway.
5. Interview with Sonia Boyce, *Ibid.* ["In that seminar, Aubrey Williams talked about how he was discontented with this emerging generation. He couldn't understand why they would abandon the achievement of modernism for what he thought of as illustration"]
6. Interview with Sonia Boyce, *Op.cit.* ["Actually it is a deeper question about an aspiration project into the West, the idea of an international style, the question of modernism being a sort

of liberatory language. A generation that would have grown up in the West, through the art system, realising that the West is saying : actually these doors are closed to you”.]

7. Hall, Stuart. “New Ethnicity”, a lecture given in February 1988, published in Kobena Mercer (et al.), *Black Film, British Cinema*, London : ICA, 1988, pp. 27-30

8. Hall, Stuart. “Nouvelles ethnicities”, in Maxime Cervulle (ed), *Identités et cultures politiques des cultural studies*, Paris : Amsterdam, 2007, p. 210

9. Gilroy, Paul. *L’Atlantique noire, modernité et double conscience*, (1993), Paris : Amsterdam, 2013

10. Interview with Sonia Boyce on 4 April 2013 [“Marcus Verhagen said to me "Have you seen this book by Nicolas Bourriaud?". Then I realised there was a name for it”.]

11. Let us mention *Like Love*, 2009-2010

12. Goffman, Erving. *La Mise en scène de la vie quotidienne*, Paris : Minuit, 1973

13. Doane, Mary Ann. “Dark Continents”, in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, London : Routledge, 1991, pp. 209-248

14. Mercer, Kobena. “Black Hair, Style Politics”, in *New Formations*, n°3, 1987, republished in: Mercer, Kobena. *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, London; New York: Routledge, 1994

15. Mercer, Kobena. “Ethnicity and Internationality, New British Art and Diaspora-Based Blackness”, in *Third Text*, n°49, 1999, pp. 51-62

16. Verhagen, Marcus. “An art of the commonplace”, in *Sonia Boyce: performance, Annotation 2*, London : INIVA, 1998, p. 14