People Who Look Like Me

Mike Phillips

I was sitting in one of the first Tate Encounters seminars about a year ago when I heard one of the other participants use the phrase – 'people who look like me'. She was talking about her first reaction to the gallery, and saying that she felt, in some way alienated because she couldn't see any pictures of 'people who look like me'.   A strange moment, not so much because of what she was saying, but because the formulation had become so familiar – a banality which had turned into a crushingly oppressive piece of self righteous certainty – 'people who look like me'.

Of course the reason that the phrase reverberated in my mind was not much to do with the event. The assertion was, or I assumed, must have been, the beginning of a struggle with the issue of ownership – an attempt to situate herself in an unfamiliar visual landscape. So far, so harmless. The problem was that the formulation itself carried associations, which had far reaching implications for a wide range of issues.   In fact, the formula had begun to take on the status of a mantra, which, over a period of time, subverted the act of seeing, creating subtle and destructive faults in the shape of cultural policy far beyond the world of museums.

The phrase was, of course, a euphemism. Its repeated use coincided with a new phase in identity politics within and around the black communities, beginning roughly two decades ago. Up until that time the politics of identity had tended to be confined within the borders of the community.   Municipal politics, notably the electoral thrust generated by the GLC in London, changed all that. 'Black' identity rapidly segued from being a political to a commercial commodity, bringing with it the arguments and attitudes, which had swirled around the core institutions of black nationalism, such as the Rastafarian movement and the Nation of Islam.

The problem for people who subscribed, however mildly, to notions of racial exclusivity, was to do with language. In a context where they continually rubbed shoulders with whites, and where their claim to equal treatment was based, (whether they liked it or not), on a liberal and integrationist model, the language of racial assertion created difficulties. So, in the assimilationist marketplace of multiculturalism, the euphemism emerged as a way of signaling ideas without

precisely articulating them. 'People who look like me' became a shorthand for communicating disapproval of mixed race relationships, homosexuality, and various kinds of educational processes. The phrase also indicated a catchall defiance of the entire integrationist project.

The problem here was not the underlying attitudes in themselves. The real issue was the sense in which the euphemism served up an imagery which had specific effects on such events as the Black Arts movement, on the emergence of the ethnic minorities as an audience, on the response of white artists, administrators and academics, and most crucially, on the burgeoning strand of cultural policy which was to influence debate and planning in the cultural sector.

To begin with 'people who look like me' is actually one of a number of code words which began outlining a specific position, but the sly circuitousness of the language, was part of a mechanism, that also, opened up a pathway into a maze of visual clues, which turned out to be a cul-de-sac. In the same period, 'people who look like me' helped the early work of some artists to find focus and meaning – take, for instance, Sonia Boyce and Lubaina Hamid. Some photographers, like Charlie Phillips and Ahmed Francis, flourished in this moment. On the other hand, the polemic sketched out in the 'people who look like me' imagery, began to award a peculiar prominence to artists and commentators whose interests in the visual were severely limited and oddly oppressive.

The Black Arts movement and its other offshoots were encapsulated in Rasheed Areem's Other Story exhibition; and the common thread which informed its ideas was their sourcing in the African American experience. This was a visual ambience almost completely dominated by a marketplace of images drawn from American advertising, film, and TV, and largely underpinned by the 'Roots' concept, an idealised, uninformed version of Africa.

Ironically, the story which The Other Story couldn't tell was rooted in a narrative about a different visual landscape and history. That is, the ways of seeing, into which Caribbean migrants (in whose name and for whom the whole enterprise claimed its authenticity), and later on, Africans and Asians, had previously been inducted.

In that sense, the 'new black art', represented a violent break with the tradition which had begun to be established by earlier black artists. Such artists as Aubrey Williams

worked through a number of phases deeply influenced by modernist European and American painting, but he announced his identity by reference to the startling colours and shapes which characterised the flora and fauna among which he had grown up, and which had catapulted him into the world of visual imagery. Much the same could be said of most of the black and Asian artists who had migrated during most of the twentieth century.

At the other end of the scale, visual art trends in the Caribbean itself spoke to a network of values and beliefs which were the product of a Caribbean history, shaped by its history and folk traditions.

Early in the 70s I was writing an article about self taught Jamaican artists – 'the intuitive school'. Chief among them were such men as Kapo (Bishop Mallica Reynolds) and Brother Everald Brown. For all of them painting and sculpture was something more than craft or a skill. They saw themselves as engaged in a vocation to which they had been called by some mysterious spiritual force. Kapo, whose paintings were by then hanging in the most prestigious museums and collections in New York and LA, had the reputation of an 'obeah man' whose visions emerged in his paintings. In much the same way local traditions all over the Caribbean took visual representation to be a merging of the physical and spiritual, a collective vision speaking through the individual.

In this context, the Black Arts moment, reflected a break with traditional modes of representation, but it was more than that, because it offered up a visual polemic focused on skin colour, and in the process, began to redefine the way that migrants could *see* images; and it also began to reshape the way that the rest of the country could *see* the imagery of black people's identity. "Blackness" had been invented - 'people who look like me'.

This was the authentic moment which shaped recent cultural policy towards ethnic minorities in the museum and galleries. Various hints had already begun to emerge from the cultural policy framework. The urban riots of the early 80s had been a sort of wakeup call for the politicians, especially those worked on the coalface of the local authorities. From that moment there had been a new dynamic in which public bodies were concerned with attempting to create linkages between social and cultural policy. In 1989 the Arts Council published An Urban Renaissance: the role of the arts in urban regeneration, firmly linking the arts with social policy. A later Arts Council report in 1993 summed up most of the trends which had been set in motion

during the previous decades. A Creative Future outlined the approach which would come to be described as 'multi-culturalism', defining Britain as a 'kaleidoscope' of cultures. After New Labour took over the reins of government the Culture Minister, Chris Smith, polished the approach and gave it a new authority as the base of new directions in cultural policy. The arts started to be seen in policy circles as an important factor in urban regeneration, a dynamic which was accelerated when the GLA, determined to carry on where the GLC had left off, entered the field. Programmes such as the London Arts Creative Neighbourhoods Scheme fleshed out the policy which converted the arts into an instrument for somehow rescuing 'young people at risk', or resolving issues of racism.

'Blackness' offered a comprehensible and defensible pathway into the marketplace of imageries for everyone concerned, whether or not given communities had to be shoehorned into the formula. It was, in any case, a perfect formula for tying together the identity and interests of the migrants with the socially inflected drift of cultural policy. As a bonus 'blackness' offered an uncomplicated rhetoric which politicians and cultural entrepreneurs of every stripe could use to signal a presumed attachment to the interests of the black and ethnic minority communities.

The new policy directions, however, had specific effects on the museums' struggle to catch up. The ability of bodies like the Heritage Lottery Fund backed up the ACE, to dictate the terms of subsidy concentrated minds in the museum sector on such issues as cultural diversity and access.

Throughout the decade of the 90s and the early years of the 21st century museums debated and argued about representation and its effect on audiences, or, simply about audiences – bums on seats. The migrant presence, or in most cases, absence was the key, and, at the same time there was now a clear and unambiguous direction. Migrant identity had segued into 'blackness', which, under the thrust of local and community politics turned into 'people who look like me', and in the fog of uncertainties this rubric became the framework within which outcomes could be judged.

The result of all this was a network of decisions which locked ethnic minority audiences more and more firmly into the margins of their activities, largely because the answer to any of the questions which could be asked turned out to be 'people who look like me'.

By contrast the most creative black and ethnic minority artists had already left the Black Arts moment far behind. Chris Ofili's Upper Room at Tate Britain sketched out a network of interests which short circuited the concept and offered a return to a more authentic grasp of a post-Caribbean visual identity. Yinka Shonibare played with notions of blackness and assimilation in a riddling, contradictory and subversive fashion. Steve Mc Queen and Isaac Julien simply left.

Museums with a more persuasive intellectual tradition began rediscovering black artists whose work had been eclipsed by 'blackness' – such as Aubrey Williams, Frank Bowling, FN Souza, and Ronald Moody.

We've already written about various other aspects of the background in which Tate Encounters came into being, but a part of what we continue needing to explore is its relevance to the issues buried in 'people who look like me'. How and why do we see what we see? Who gives us permission, or, how do we give ourselves permission to create these visions from scraps of colour and shapes? What has it to do with my life? I keep remembering a piece I wrote for the website this year and I went back and read it - the last paragraph keeps on repeating itself in my mind –

"There was no way that I could see an image fresh and uncluttered by the baggage I was carrying around with me. "*So it's not just about feelings Eddie,*" I muttered as I walked through the car park, "*it's really about seeing, because what you see is what it means.*" Eddie didn't answer, although I wished he could, because I wanted to ask him what he felt the first time he walked into a gallery in London – what was he seeing when he looked at those painters he talked about, Manet and Monet and Mondrian and Picasso? At the time our country was a colony. Did he see this lavish display of riches with awe, or resentment- as part of the power whose secrets we were denied? And did the seeing begin to tell him something about who he was? But like Aubrey, Eddie was an art student, as well as a colonial subject. Something more than men who were fated to run the railways and deliver the post. Were they already addressing Picasso as a brother whose work could guide them to their own solutions? *What you see is what you get*" - people who look like me?