

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

**Jean Fisher, 'Stuart Hall: the artist who inspired Britain's black intellectuals',
The Guardian, May 20, 2014**

Hall understood his role carried responsibilities for the future – and that changed the trajectory of creators like Steve McQueen

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall was a significant intellectual force among the visual artists and film-makers of what became known as the British Black Arts Movement (Bam) of the 1980s and early 1990s. That he generously gave his support to their projects rendered him a figure of affection and respect, evident in John Akomfrah and Smoking Dogs' film *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013) and their triple-screen installation recently presented at Tate Britain, *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012). Both works provide insights into Hall's intellectual trajectory and his incisive analyses of Britain's loss of imperial and economic power and the changing demographics created by the immigration of previous colonial subjects.

Hall always felt himself to be an outsider, both in his place of departure, Jamaica, and in Britain, where he arrived in 1951 as an Oxford University Rhodes scholar. But perhaps because of this he was a sensitive observer who bridged successive artists' generations with differing cultural experiences and aspirations. Like most artists and writers from the old colonies who arrived in the 1950s, he expected to be regarded as an equal in the intellectual life of the "mother" country.

For Hall, the political turbulence of the times – anti-colonial independence movements, the ideological polarisation of the cold war, the emergent US civil rights movement – meant engagement with what he was later to call a structuralist-Marxist social and cultural politics, from which he forged a unique platform as an academic and broadcaster.

For black and Asian artists hoping to participate in modernist debates, the situation proved rather more precarious. Although they initially enjoyed a modicum of success in the British art world, by the mid-1960s, with the surge in societal and institutional racism and the Americanisation of British culture, optimism turned to disillusionment as they found themselves excluded from the art system (a history ignored until the exhibition *The Other Story*, curated by Rasheed Araeen at the Hayward Gallery in 1989.) This sense of isolation led to the formation of the Caribbean Artists Movement (Cam), intellectually grounded to a large extent in Hall's radical sociopolitical analyses. Cam's list of participants now reads like a Who's Who of the most significant writers, poets and artists of the time.

Hall, however, is less identified with Cam than with the British-born diaspora generation who emerged in the early 1980s, for whom this earlier British black and Asian modernism was largely unknown. The dismal fact is that the prevailing establishment view was that modernism was the domain of white men from which the arts of women and ethnic "others" were to be excluded as inferior derivatives.

The consequence of this discrimination – against a background of inner-city race riots likewise rooted in a racially-inscribed social alienation – was the militant politicisation of young black and Asian artists, for whom Hall became a natural ally and mentor. Thus, in the absence of British art world support structures, the new generation, following the initiative of the BLK Art Group, sought to develop their own galleries, magazines, archives and debates. Hall was a

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seminal influence in this intellectual environment, largely because his post-Marxist or New Left approach to cultural studies enabled us to see how the racialised subject is interpellated into ideological, political and cultural structures of power.

Given the significance of the image in culture, Hall's analyses of the black subjectivity and the politics of representation became a rallying point for the Bam. Nonetheless, as Hall ironically commented at the time, advocates of the postmodern were pronouncing the "death of the subject" at the very moment when the black self was constructing itself as a speaking subject. For Hall, however, like Frantz Fanon before him, subjectivity was a sociopolitical construct and identity was not a fixed entity but in continuous negotiation and transformation with the world.

The charge is occasionally made – somewhat unjustly – that Hall's "sociological" approach led to the self-ghettoisation of black and Asian artists in identity politics. The argument hinges on the febrile relationship between the sociopolitical and the aesthetic in general; namely, that art practice led by sociopolitical concerns becomes a mere illustration of them, which sidelines the insights and knowledge that aesthetic experience itself can produce. And yet art is not produced in a vacuum but responds to the conditions in which the practitioner finds themselves.

By the early 1980s it was clear that the sociopolitical needed to be brought back into dialogue with the aesthetic without sacrificing art's sense. Moreover, this was a critical moment for Britain's diasporas, and, in his reflections on it, Hall noted in a lecture from 1989, the first form of identity politics "had to do with the constitution of some defensive collective identity against the practices of racist society", which included rediscovering roots and suppressed histories.

Was Hall's commentary leading or being led by artists and film-makers, or was the relationship symbiotic? In any case, by then, black practitioners had largely shifted from interrogating racism to exploring diasporic routes and roots. That the energy sustaining the Bam was largely dissipated during the 1990s was as much to do with changes in the political landscape precipitated by globalisation and the commodification of art from everywhere, as with the backlash against Bam's cultural politics signalled by British institutional support for the laddish spectacles of the YBAs.

Hall readily confessed his lack of expertise in matters aesthetic and was mindful of the critical debates that surrounded the supposed influence of cultural studies on the Bam. He responded to them with typical generosity and grace. Hall's legacy and support of British black and Asian artists and photographers was to be enshrined in the Institute of International Visual Art (Iniva) and Autograph ABP at Rivington Place, a building designed by David Adjaye. Hall was instrumental in their initial success, functioning for many years as chair for both organisations; and the library is named after him. But his legacy as an inspirational educator and public intellectual is sustained in more subtle ways.

Of the generation associated with Bam, several artists – notably Sonia Boyce and Keith Piper – have achieved high positions in academia, something unimaginable in Britain 20 years ago. His ability to translate complex discourses into an accessible language and ease in front of the camera is captured for future generations both in his superb series of programmes on the Caribbean, *Redemption Song*, BBC2 in 1991, and in his walk-on and talking heads cameos in the film essays of Isaac Julien/Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collective, whose rich synthesis

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of audiovisual poetics and political analysis inspired the Otolith Group (founded by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar).

Of the black artists who followed the Bam, Yinka Shonibare and Steve McQueen have achieved immense international success through practices that are strategically more subtly political and media-savvy. And yet a pedagogical thread remains: Shonibare runs a workshop for young black aspiring artists in London and plans a museum of contemporary art in Lagos, while McQueen, behind the scenes, works with anti-slavery organisations. They have all acknowledged the precedent set by Hall: that to be a public black intellectual carries with it a responsibility for the future – the always "unfinished conversation".

- This is an edited version of an article that first appeared in Radical Philosophy

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/20/stuart-hall-artist-black-intellectuals>