Beyond the Boundary*

The Work of Three Black Women Artists in Britain

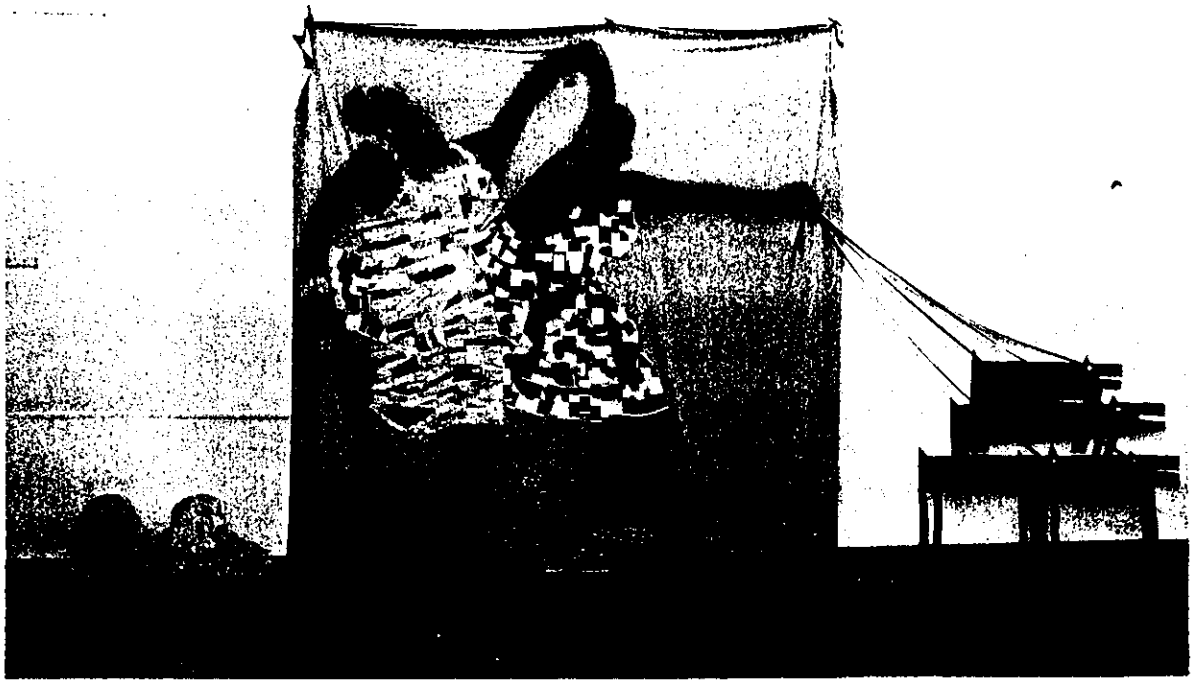
Gilane Tawadros

The artistic practice of gathering and re-using is said to have been invented in Paris in the Twenties by Picasso, a Spaniard. 'Jazz Age' Paris jumped for joy at the 'discovery' of Africa and her artifacts and stole them...(but) gathering and re-using has always been a part of Black creativity...Gathering and re-using is like poetry, a gathering of words, sounds, rhythms and a re-using of them in a unique order to highlight, pinpoint and precisely express. A real poem does not decorate a page it changes a world...Gathering and re-using takes time, measurable in hours certainly but also a sense of time having passed before, a sense of history and most importantly a sense of survival...Gathering and re-using is an essential part of Black creativity, it does not mimic and is inextricably linked to economic circumstance. Each piece within the piece has its own history, its own past and its own contribution to the new whole, the new function. As Black women artists in the Black triangle in the twentieth century we must continue this process of gathering and re-using.[1]

* The title is inspired by C.L.R. James' book *Beyond a Boundary*.

Two black women, their bodies clothed in a patchwork of coloured fabrics, are running across a plain of purple cloth. Ahead of them, beyond the frame of purple are four black dogs, their leads gripped in the hand of the woman who fixes us with her gaze. The heads of two white men, trapped in dense particles of sand, are left behind the running women and their dogs. Lubaina Himid's *Freedom and Change* (1984) is a re-working of Pablo Picasso's *Two Women Running on the Beach* (1922). The small neo-classical image of two white women racing across a de-populated coastline, made by the Spanish artist in the years following the cessation of the Great War, has been appropriated by Himid and transformed. Picasso's appropriations of African tribal masks and ceremonial

1 Lubaina Himid, 'Fragments', *Feminist Arts News*, vol.2, no.8, Autumn 1988, p.8.



Lubaina Himid *Freedom and Change* 1984

is challenged and reversed. While artists like Picasso absorbed the styles and forms of non-European art and translated them into the language of Western avant-gardism, Himid has visibly adapted Picasso's work to draw attention to the wider implications of the European process of gathering and re-using, a process wherein "Euro-American masters have stolen the genre, assimilated the methodology, oppressed the originators and claimed the prize".[2]

2 Ibid.

The significance of Himid's act of appropriation lies not only in the differing ramifications of gathering and re-using as a mode of creative expression but also in the sense of time which frames the work as a whole — a sense of history and a sense of the future — which stands in stark contrast to the consciousness of time articulated by the modern, avant-garde artist. There is a timeless, almost ahistorical quality to Picasso's *Two Women Running on the Beach*, evoked by the neo-classical figures who move through a deserted landscape devoid of any sense of time or place; which thus obscures the specificity of the historical and aesthetic framework in which the painting was made. Reaching away from an unseen past and stretching forward to an intangible future, these women emerge from the distinct context of post-World War One European society. Abandoning the traumatic memories of war which shook Western civilisation, they are running towards a future progressively modern and, at the same time, continuous with the classical Graeco-Roman roots of European culture. In short, Picasso's *Two Women* visualises a period of transition in the social and aesthetic

history of Europe and denotes 'modernity' in so far as that has been defined as "the consciousness of an epoch that defines itself in relation to the past of antiquity in order to view itself as the result of a transition from old to new."[3] Moreover, it pictures a changed consciousness of time which emerged in the course of the nineteenth century and which, according to Jurgen Habermas, characterises the project of 'aesthetic modernity'.

Lubaina Himid's *Freedom and Change* expresses a period of transition from old to new and can be defined as 'modern' to the extent that this transition is articulated in relation to the past. There the similarity between the two works ends. For Himid asserts a very different relationship to the past and the future in her work. The past expressed by Picasso's *Two Women* is an abstract one, not fixed by historical time or place, wherein the contours of classical art are stretched quite literally to accommodate an unspecific and universalising conception of the past. By contrast, the past in Himid's work, defined by the configurations of white men's heads, is designated as a place shaped and presided over by a white male presence. The history of the West, and indeed the history of Western art, has privileged the mark of male individuals and rendered invisible or inferior the place of black peoples (particularly black women) within these histories. Himid's cardboard cut-outs of white male heads point to the privileged site accorded both to the originators of the grand narratives of Western culture and also to the declared origins of Western civilisation, in other words, the past of Graeco-Roman antiquity. The figurative remnants of the old order of Western culture which gave currency to notions of originality, origins and authenticity, have been thus consigned to the depths of the past. While their place in the present has been usurped by two black women who mediate between this past and a future defined by the contours of four black dogs.

Moving across a field of purple, these women designate a reign of freedom and change. As in Alice Walker's novel, the colour purple is emblematic, not of nationhood or national sovereignty, but of black womanhood which defies its relegation to the margins and enters the centre ground to assert its place *in* history.[4] Himid's women displace what Stuart Hall has called the "centred discourses of the West", but this does not imply that the grand narratives of Western culture are simply to be replaced by an alternative, totalising narrative. Rather, this process of displacement "entails putting in question (Western culture's) universalist character and its transcendental claims to speak for everyone, while being itself everywhere and nowhere."[5] Whereas Picasso's women race across a space which aspires to the status of the universal and the transcendental and which paradoxically remains confined within the perimeters of the frame; Himid's women significantly tread a borderline which marks the threshold between real and imagined space, between lived experiences and expressions of that experience. In opposition to the universalising tendencies of modernism, *Freedom and Change* assigns central importance to the position of difference. Himid articulates a "positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, or 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..."[6] The particular place from which Himid's women assert their historical experience is the coastline, an ambivalent site which marks the frontier of slavery, colonialism and migration but which also denotes the positivity of the *diasporan* experience. Like the separate pieces of a patchwork, Himid has embroidered together a number of diverse histories and varying categories of

3 Jurgen Habermas, 'Modernity — An Incomplete Project', in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, London, Pluto Press, 1987, p.3.

4 I refer to Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*, London, Women's Press, 1988.

5 Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in *ICA Documents 7: Black Film/British Cinema*, London, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1988, p.29.

6 Ibid.

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6 Ibid.

creative expression (from drawing as a signifier of the academy traditions of Western art to patchwork as a signifier of domestic, 'feminine' craft) which contest the unequivocal order and monolithic perspective circumscribed by Picasso's earlier work. Himid weaves a web of cultural and historical meanings into the fabric of her work which derive both from the transformation of the original source and also from the assemblage of fragments which together dispute the authority of the established order (both historical and art historical) of Western culture.

What then are the implications of postmodernism for Lubaina Himid's *Freedom and Change*? Is her collage of fragments merely a "random cannibilization of all the styles of the past", as Jameson argues, and thus symptomatic of the "waning of our historicity" and our inability to fashion representations of our current experience? Can Himid's intimations of the illegitimacy of the grand narratives of the West be explained in terms of the death of the individual subject and a crisis of confidence in notions of progress and human emancipation? Or are these prescriptions for a postmodern condition themselves indicative of continuing periodic transformations in European thought? In this context, I would argue, Lubaina Himid's *Freedom and Change* does not substitute a history of aesthetic styles for 'real' history. Rather, in positioning two black women between a specific past delimited by white male individualism and a particular vision of the future defined by the vivid contours of a black presence, Himid situates black women and black women's artistic discourse firmly *within* history. Thus the avowed collapse of the grand narratives of Western culture, makes possible the articulation of black experience at the very centre of history and the history of art. The process of gathering and re-using, far from affirming the fragmentation of the black subject in the terms of postmodernity, attests to the centrality and dynamism of the diasporan experience, of diverse cultural influences and discontinous histories in opposition to the false unities of Western thought which reach their apogee in the 'supreme fictions' of modernism.[7]

The question which then poses itself and which frames this paper as a whole is whether Lubaina Himid's *Freedom and Change* and the cultural production of two other contemporary black women artists — Sonia Boyce and Sutapa Biswas — can be defined in terms of postmodernism and postmodernity. Or alternatively, whether the aesthetic and socio-historical category of postmodernity as a particular moment within Western consciousness merely corresponds with and legitimates the historical and cultural configurations of black experiences and black creativity within the diaspora. These are the central questions which I aim to address within the parameters of the artistic practice of Himid, Boyce and Biswas, although the work of other artists is cited to illustrate specific points or themes.

7 See Hal Foster, 'Postmodernism: A Preface', in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, op.cit., pp.ix-xvi.

MODERNISM AND MODERNITY

The most significant feature of modernism as an historical category of Western thought and artistic consciousness was its self-characterisation as a period of transition and radical change which found expression through metaphors of the vanguard and the avant-garde. The military terminology which framed the artistic production of modernist practitioners was apposite in so far as this indicated the assaults that would be mounted on the fortresses of past tradition and the forays into an 'as yet unoccupied future'.[8] The domain of artistic

practice, it was claimed, would be transformed through stylistic innovation and radical new subject-matter in the same way that the arena of modern life had been transfigured irrecoverably by science and technology. As men "professionally engaged in the present and the future as opposed to being 'representatives of a prolonged and once-glorious past' ", modern artists could see themselves alternatively as scientists, priests or engineers in the construction of a new and better world.[9]

Yet one of the paradoxes of modernity, as both Lyotard and Habermas have pointed out, is that in order to see itself as something essentially new and different, modernity must define itself in relation to the past. Thus the language of avant-gardism and stylistic innovation in modernism is consistently qualified by references and even continuities with the past. So when, for example, the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti launched his programme for Futurism in the form of a manifesto repudiating all the traditional values of the past, he exalted the 'new form of beauty' exemplified by the racing car in comparative terms with the established canon of Hellenic art.[10] In order to understand fully the implications of this and the other paradoxes of modernism, it is necessary to differentiate, as Habermas has done, between the development of modernist European art and the 'project of modernity' to which it is intimately tied.[11] First of all, the concept of modernity itself is not confined to the historical epoch of modernism. The idea of modernity (and the contingent notion of progress) has appeared and reappeared intermittently in Western thought over the centuries since the time of Roman Christendom. What distinguishes modernism as part of the discourse of nineteenth-century Western thought is that rather than expressing itself in opposition to a specific historical period, it defines itself in relation to a vague and indefinite past:

> In the course of the 19th century, there emerged...that radicalized consciousness of modernity which freed itself from all specific historical ties. This most recent modernism simply makes an abstract opposition between tradition and the present.[12]

Aesthetic modernity is historically only a part of cultural modernity, inheriting the project of modernity which involved three main developments: the separation of thought into autonomous spheres of science, morality and art; the institutionalisation and professionalisation of art and its consequent distancing from the wider public; and finally, the expectation that this specialized domain of culture could be utilised to enrich everyday social life.[13] Thus, while the "radicalized consciousness of modernity" abandons fixed historical references to the past, the history of Western knowledge, and specifically, the emergence of cultural modernity in the Enlightenment, provides a historical context for understanding the discourse of modernism, its continuities and its inconsistencies; as well as the paradox whereby modernism characterises itself as progressive and innovative on the basis of its avowed affinity with the 'primitive' and the 'barbaric'.

In a letter to Charles Morice in the spring of 1903, Paul Gauguin, traditionally cast as the founding father of modernist primitivism, declared: "I am a savage. And the civilised foresee it, for there is nothing surprising or confusing in my work except this savage-in-spite-of-myself. For that reason it is inimitable."[14] Artistic originality, it is implied, goes hand in hand with a seemingly visionary identification by the 'civilised' modern artist with the forces of primitivism and the domain of the savage. The boundaries of traditional art would be transgressed, or so it was perceived, by a voyage beyond the established

8 Jurgen Habermas, 'Modernity — An Incomplete Project', op.cit., p.5.

9 Norbert Lynton, 'The New Age: primal work and mystic nights' in *Abstraction: Towards a New Art: 1910-1920*, London, Tate Gallery, 1980, p.12.

10 'A racing car', wrote Marinetti, 'its bonnet adorned with pipes like serpents with explosive breath... a racing car which seems to run on gunpowder is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*'. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, 'The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism', 20 February 1909, quoted by Norbert Lynton, *The Story of Art*, Oxford Phaidon Press, 1982, p.87.

11 Jurgen Habermas, op.cit.

12 Ibid., pp.3-4.

13 Ibid., pp.8-9.

14 Paul Gauguin, Letter to Charles Morice, Atuana, Marquesas Islands, April 1903, reprinted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, California and London, University of California Press, 1968, pp. 84-5

parameters of Western society, whether in a temporal or a geographical sense, into the margins of distance and difference.[15] On the basis of an alliance with the perceived 'Other' of Western society, the modern artist could claim both originality and universal validity for his cultural production as Abigail Solomon-Godeau has written in relation to Gauguin:

> Common to both the embrace of the primitive — however defined — and the celebration of artistic originality is the belief that both enterprises are animated by the artist's privileged access, be it spiritual, intellectual or psychological, to that which is primordially internal...the artist "recognizes" in the primitive or the primitive artifact that which was immanent, but inchoate; the object from "out there" enables the expression of what is thought to be "in there". The experience of the primitive or of the primitive artifact is therefore, and among other things, valued as an aid to creation, and to the act of genius located in the artist's exemplary act of recognition.[16]

As a sub-text to the history of modern art, primitivism has been considered traditionally as just such an "aid to creation" or alternatively as a catalyst in the evolution of avant-garde art in Europe which, according to one art historian, "helped the (modern) artists to formulate their own aims because they could attribute to it the qualities they themselves sought to attain."[17] Thus Picasso's more or less direct citations of African sculpture in his painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) is interpreted as a 'watershed' in the development of modern art, while Mondrian's assimilation of non-Western systems of thought is obscured by the over-riding significance of his innovative pictorial language in terms of the canon of European modernism. What is important here, however, is not the role, catalytic or otherwise, played by African and Oceanic art forms in the cultural production of the avant-garde. Nor is it my intention to rehearse the gamut of traditional art historical analyses and commentaries on modernist art. Rather, I am concerned with what Solomon-Godeau has defined as the 'mythic speech of primitivism', that is, the mystification of actual social and economic relations in the discourse of primitivism (whether in terms of artistic practice or art historical accounts). The process of de-mystification necessitates the articulation, however briefly, of the configurations of power and knowledge within which this mythic speech is articulated and which makes it possible. Far from disturbing the boundaries between Western and non-Western cultures, the discourse of so-called modern primitivism effectively reinforces the separation of spheres of the modern and the primitive which significantly can be traced back to the Enlightenment:

> The primitive has served as a coded other at least since the Enlightenment, usually as a subordinate term in its imaginary set of oppositions (light-dark, rational+irrational, civilised+savage). This domesticated primitive is thus constructive, not disruptive, of the binary *ratio* of the West; Fixed as a structural opposite or a dialectical other to be incorporated, it assists in the establishment of a western identity, center, norm and name.[18]

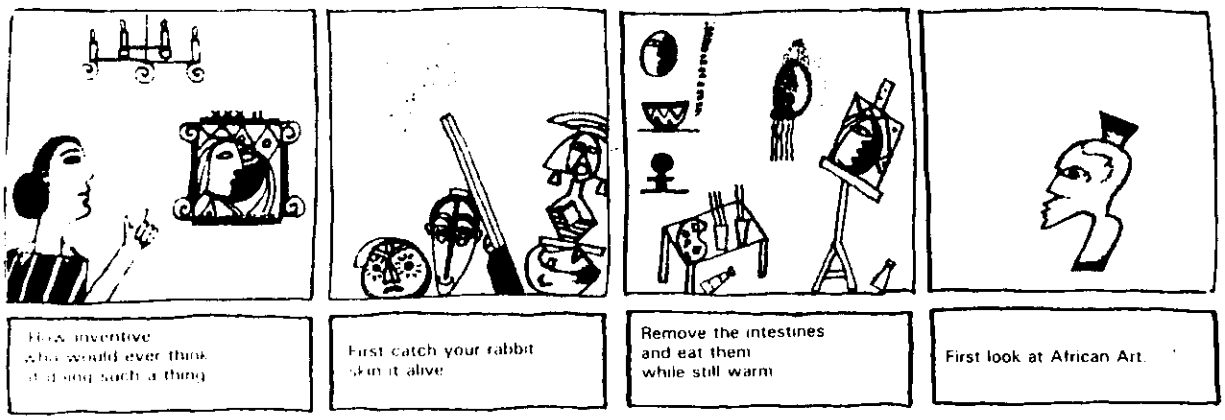
This imaginary set of oppositions between civilised and savage, self and other, superior and inferior operates as a *productive* function of the political and economic relations between European and non-European peoples in a particular historical period. In other words, the history of 'modern primitivism' is bound up inextricably with the history of European colonialism in such a way that knowledge of other cultures and hence their appropriation can be subsumed into the language of modernism precisely because the hegemony of the West is not allowed to be contested:

15 See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Going Native', *Art in America*, New York, July 1989, pp. 118-128.

16 Ibid., p. 120.

17 Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, London, Vintage Books, 1967, p. 253.

18 Hal Foster, *Recodings*, Port Townsend, USA, Bay Press, 1985, p. 196, quoted by Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry in 'Art as Ethnocide: The Case of Australia', *Third Text*, 5, Winter 1988/89, p. 6.



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Lubaina Himid *An A-Z of Picasso* 1988

> The 'primitive' can be put on a pedestal of history (Modernism) and admired for what is missing in Western culture, as long as the 'primitive' does not attempt to become an active subject to define or change the course of history...Primitivism has little to do with the *actual* conditions of the peoples or cultures it refers to, but it is an idea in Western culture by which Others are defined in various periods of its recent history. As a projection and representation of non-European peoples and their cultures in Western philosophy or discourse, it in turn justifies colonial expansion and domination. In other words, Primitivism is a function of colonial discourse...[19] (my emphasis)

19 Rasheed Araeen, 'From Primitivism to Ethnic Arts', *Third Text*, 1, Autumn 1987, p.8.

This point is made clear in a cartoon by Lubaina Himid and Maud Sulter, entitled *An A-Z of Picasso* (1988), which appeared in *Feminist Arts News*.[20] The alleged innovation of a Picasso painting is juxtaposed with a representation which articulates the conjuncture between colonialism and 'culture colonialism'. The barrel of a rifle, wedged between an African mask and a ceremonial figure points to the intersection on a map between the continents of Europe (significantly, of southern Spain) and Africa. The text which accompanies this image and the following representation of the artist's studio, emphasises the dissonance between Picasso's appropriations of Africa art (which signal the progressive development of European modernism) and the Western characterisations of African cultures as savage, barbaric, and essentially backward. The final image in the strip responds to the question posed at the beginning, ''How inventive, who would ever think of doing such a thing'', with the retort, ''First look at African Art''. The discourse of primitivism, Himid implies, and the contingent precepts of originality and innovation need to be located in the historical context of European colonialism. Consequently, the different epistemological status of the perceived other is rendered visible within the cultural map of Western knowledge and, furthermore, as a corollary to the differing political and economic status of non-European peoples within the geographical map of colonial conquest and annexation.[21]

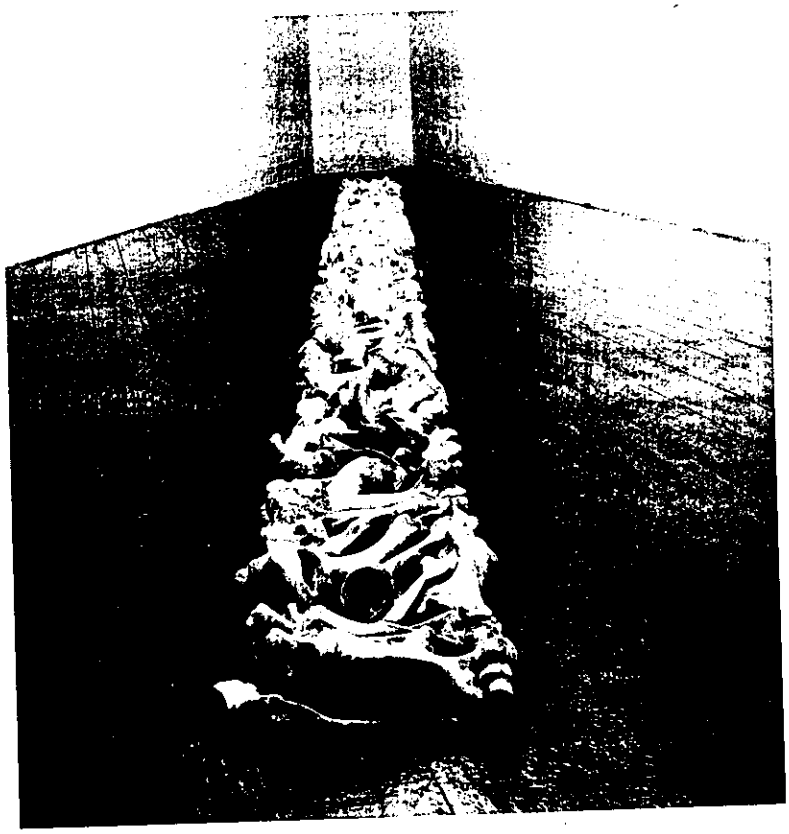
20 The cartoon appeared in Feminist Arts News, vol.2, no.8, Autumn 1988, p.3.

21 See Desa Philippi, 'The Conjuncture of Race and Gender in Anthropology and Art History', *Third Text*, 1, Autumn 1987, p.35.

It is necessary at this point to distinguish between Lyotard's thesis of postmodernity and the diagnosis of modernism and postmodernism put

forward by Jurgen Habermas and which to a great extent informs my argument here. Whereas Lyotard perceived the "decay of confidence" in the suppositions of modernity as the basic condition of an epoch and furthermore, as evidence of the collapse of the 'Enlightenment project' as a whole; Habermas contests this apparent demise of modernity and argues that the configurations of postmodernity rather stem from the fact that the project of modernity has been onesidedly and inadequately realised, that is, essentially incomplete. Consequently, the modernist consciousness needs to be understood as the product of an intersection of historical and utopian perspectives and if this particular model of modernity has been exhausted, this does not imply *a priori* that there has been a collapse of belief in the possibility of progress (or change) as such. The way in which postmodernity is defined or expressed, implies Habermas, depends on the way in which modernity is understood *historically*. Whereas Lyotard and other contemporary theorists have concentrated on the *effects* of modern consciousness and derived from this a prescription for the postmodern condition; Habermas emphasises the importance of articulating the historical processes which determine this consciousness of modernity and which make it fallible and subject to criticism. This assertion of history, he suggests, can provide the necessary structures for understanding the present dynamically in relation to the past and pave the way for a grand narrative which

Rasheed Araeen *White Line through Africa* 1982-88



is "neither 'metaphysical', nor authoritarian, nor insensitive to the complexities of contemporary societies."[22]

In her essay, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', Rosalind Krauss defines postmodernism as a break with the aesthetic field of modernism.[23] She argues that the "bounded conditions of modernism have suffered a logically determined rupture" which is consummated in postmodern artistic practice. According to Krauss, the logic of modern sculpture has led not only to its deconstruction (which she traces back to the late 1950s and early 1960s) but also to the "deconstruction of the modern order of the arts based on the Enlightenment order of distinct and autonomous spheres".[24] The modernist demand for the purity and separateness of the various mediums, she claims, has been disrupted by postmodern practitioners who have dissolved the boundaries between the different mediums of sculpture, architecture, photography and so on. As a direct consequence, the notion of the specialised domain of individual practice has been displaced by 'continual relocation', a sort of 'cultural nomadism' which characterises the contemporary artist's movement across the space of postmodernism. Among the artists she cites as operating within this expanded field of postmodernism is Richard Long who occupies the 'nomadic position' described by Achille Bonita Oliva wherein the contemporary artist not only traverses different cultural mediums but also different cultural traditions, Western and non-Western, at a time when, it is claimed, "the declines of ideology, the loss of a general theoretical position pushes man into drifting".[25] Works by Long such as *Walking a Line in Peru* (1972), however, while contesting the Enlightenment notion of autonomous and distinct spheres of artistic activity, nonetheless, suggest continuities not only with modernism but with the project of cultural modernity as a whole. Where the narrative of Krauss's critical analysis is informed consistently with the precepts of cultural modernity, that is, notions of rupture, innovation and progress; Long's artistic practice perpetuates the modernist model of the white male artist who invades unknown territories (in this case, exemplified by the Peruvian terrain which implicitly shrouds the remnants of ancient Inca culture) to create original and innovative work which defies the boundaries of traditional Western art.

The interrelationship of Long's work with the project of modernity is borne out by two installations by Rasheed Araeen — *Arctic Circle* and *White Line Through Africa* — which dispute Krauss's argument that the expanded field of postmodernist sculpture has broken conclusively with the aesthetic paradigm of modernism. Taking Long's work as a starting point for a critique of the appropriation by Western artists of 'Other' cultures, Araeen himself appropriates Long's interventions in the land of the 'Other'. *Arctic Circle* (1982-88) consists of empty, discarded beer cans and wine bottles arranged to form a complete and geometrically-correct circle. Such an act of dual reference both to modernism and to the high instance of alcoholism among Eskimo peoples, renders visible the interdependency of the singular initiative of the individual artist and the economic and political interventions of Western society as a whole in the terrain of the 'Other'. *White Line Through Africa* (1982-88) more directly challenges the ethos of 'romantic innocence' which cloaks the operations of cultural colonialism in Western art — both modern and postmodern. Composed of a line of bleached bones, thirty-five feet in length, it implicates Long's artistic practice:

> While high technology makes people leave the land and move to the shanties

22 For a full account of the respective positions of Lyotard and Habermas in relation to modernity and postmodernity, see Peter Dews, 'From Postructuralism to Postmodernity', in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Postmodernism*, op. cit., pp.27-40.

23 Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, op.cit., pp.31-42.

24 Hal Foster, 'Postmodernism: A Preface', op.cit., p.xiii.

25 Achille Bonito Oliva, *Im Labyrinth der Kunst*, trans. Isolde Eckle, Berlin, Merve Verlag, 1982, quoted by Desa Philippi, op.cit., p.37.

> move out with their cameras into the "wilderness" to claim the earth again, and for themselves, and they do so in such a way that the act of the former is covered up. The world is touched again, ordered, depoliticised and reclaimed.[26]

The project of modernity, moreover, remains intact since Long's work maintains the implications of Enlightenment thought whereby artistic practice not only retains its distance from the social realities of everyday life but also functions as the cultural rationalisation and mystification of socio-economic relations, in this case, between European and non-European peoples. Where Krauss, Lyotard, Jameson and others argue that postmodern cultural production marks a break with modernism and modernity, the works of Araeen and other contemporary black artists question whether postmodernism in reality expresses a rupture from the *conceptual* fabric of Western modernity (and from the structures of Western knowledge as a whole) as well as from the *aesthetic* configurations of modernism. Along the lines of Habermas's counter-perspective on postmodernity, the work of black artists discussed here, suggests not only a critique of cultural modernity, but also the assertion of a conceptual framework formulated within the diasporan experience, which defies the transcendental, hierarchical and over-simplistic precepts of modernist consciousness. Furthermore the agenda circumscribed by contemporary black cultural practice, as Paul Gilroy has argued, demands a theoretical shift from the restrictive opposition between modernism and postmodernism:

26 Rasheed Araeen, quoted in *Artscribe*, March/April 1989, p.74.

> Approaching contemporary black cultural politics by this route involves a sharp move away from the rigid nexus of modernism and postmodernism...It is a tenacious challenge to the nascent orthodoxies of postmodernism which can only see the distinctive formal features of black expressive culture in terms of pastiche, quotation, parody and paraphrase rather than a more substantive, political and aesthetic concern with polyphony and the value of different registers of address...Postmodernism fever is an ailment identified through symptoms that have been around within modernism for a long while...These ties may be an indication that the grand narrative of reason is not currently being brought to an end but rather *transformed*. Forms of rationality are being created endlessly. Perhaps only European hubris claims that this particular moment of crisis is the fundamental moment of rupture, the new dawn.[27]

The importance which Habermas assigns to establishing the historical roots of cultural modernity in the Enlightenment and hence its continuing presence in the postmodern arena is echoed in Gilroy's implication of postmodernity as merely a historical phase in the ensuing development of Western thought. The important point here, is that it is the assertion of history and historical processes which puts sharply into focus the continuities of modernism and postmodernism with the project of modernity as a whole. It is also history, as opposed to nostalgia for, or reproduction of, the past, which informs and distinguishes the recent emergence of black artistic practice from the configurations of postmodernism. Thus in the face of Jameson's insistence upon the incompatibility of postmodernist nostalgia with 'genuine historicity', black cultural production is about *history itself*.[28]

27 Paul Gilroy, 'Cruciality and the Frog's Perspective', op.cit., p.40.

HISTORY, HISTORICISM AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ART

> Now to talk to me about black studies as if it's something that concerned black people is an utter denial. This is the history of Western Civilisation. I can't see it otherwise. This is the history that black people and white people and all serious students of modern history and the history of the world have to know...I do not

28 See Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Capitalism', op.cit., pp. 65-66.

> know, as a Marxist, black studies as such. I only know the struggle of people against tyranny and oppression in a certain social and political setting, and particularly, during the last two hundred years, it's impossible for me to separate black studies from white studies in any theoretical point of view.[29]

29 C.L.R. James, 'Black Studies and the Contemporary Student' (1969), in C.L.R. James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory: Selected Writings*, London, Allison and Busby, 1984, p.194.

The assertion of history and historical processes in black cultural production can only be defined in relation to the historical narratives of Western society and culture in the same way that the history of black peoples can only be articulated in terms of the history of modern Europe. Against this background, the work of contemporary black artists will be seen to be derived from a 'double consciousness' which not only affirms the interdependency of the histories of black peoples and Western civilisation, but also questions the precepts of modern Western historiography; that is, the ordering of history in terms of the privileged concepts of tradition, evolution, source and origin.

According to Michel Foucault's archaeology of Western knowledge, the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century mark a point of discontinuity in Western thought and the threshold of a modernity that we have not left behind.[30] At this juncture, the theory of representation which throughout the Classical age plays a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture is eclipsed by a "profound historicity (which) penetrates into the heart of things (and) imposes upon them the forms of order implied by the continuity of time".[31] Thus, Foucault argues, the discourses of the modern age are shaped according to the precepts of history and historicity. Hence the emergence of such human sciences as anthropology, psychology and archaeology which not only posit man at the centre of knowledge, but also imply a conception of history which is premised on principles of continuity and cohesion. This particular conception of history which still informs modern knowledge Foucault defines as 'total history' and he contrasts this with the contours and methodologies of an alternative 'general history', predicated on discontinuities, boundaries, differences of level, shifts and chronological specificities. Total history, he maintains, "draws all phenomena round a single centre – a principle, a meaning, a spirit, a world-view, an overall shape", whereas general history deploys "the space of dispersion".[32]

30 See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, London and New York, Tavistock Publications, 1986.

31 Ibid., p.xxiii.

The significance of the conceptual framework of Foucault's general history lies in the fact that, while it maintains continuities with the project of modernity in so far as it sees itself in terms of a rupture from traditional history, it nonetheless contests notions of evolution, teleology and origins, and asserts in their place the principles of dispersion and difference in history. While Foucault's structuralist theory of history (and this applies equally to post-structuralist theory) implies a rejection of traditional history and historicism, black cultural politics insists upon the importance of analysing critically and redefining notions such as progress and origin in order to express history and historicism along the lines of resistance and change. This suggests three main themes or aspects underlying the forms and contents of black cultural production. First of all it is predicated on an awareness of the historical limits of the modern, Western *episteme* which privileges notions of continuity, development, origins and so on over and above notions of discontinuity, dispersion and difference. Secondly, like the diasporan experience of black peoples, the artistic practice level derives from and is created within Western history as well as Western theories of history. Thirdly, the art work, in this context, both involves a questioning of the political implications and 'dubious legacies' of the conceptual framework of European history, and also, implies

32 Michel Foucault, 'Introduction', *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, London and New York, Tavistock Publications, 1986, pp.3-17.

In opposition to the work of postmodern artists which reproduces notions of origins, originality and authenticity based in the forms of classical art, some black cultural artists 'imitate' the work of the 'old masters' in order to dismantle the 'theoretical scaffold' in which they were created. Lubaina Himid's *Michelangelo's David* (1982?), for example, quite explicitly copies the work of the artist who, according to Vasari, epitomises the summit of Renaissance artistic achievement. Her painted wood reproduction of Michelangelos's *David*, however, rather than adapting the specific style of sixteenth-century Italian art in order to celebrate its past glories, deconstructs the conceptual fabric of Renaissance culture. For the figure of David has been subverted by the imposition, in the place of his penis, of a massive Graeco-Roman pillar. The alleged cultural origins of European art and art history, Himid suggests, are the roots of a patriarchal, racist and subjective 'grand narrative' which, by asserting the principles of progress and originality, conceals the historical processes which shape its ascendance in Western knowledge. Craig Owens writes:

> In the modern period the authority of the work of art, its claim to represent some authentic vision of the world, did not reside in its uniqueness or its singularity, as is often said; rather that authority was based on the universality modern aesthetics contributed to the *forms* utilized for the representation of vision...As recent analyses of the "enunciative apparatus" of visual representation — its poles of emission and reception — confirm, the representational systems of the West admit only one vision — that of the constitutive male subject — or, rather they posit the subject of representation as absolutely centred, unitary, masculine.[33]

According to Owens, postmodernism attempts to upset the reassuring authority and universal claims of this essentially modern, male-centred discourse. He argues that at the intersection of postmodernism and contemporary feminism lies the epistemological and political challenge to the 'master narratives' of the past, designated by the dual questioning of the patriarchal order as well as of the structure of representation. Since the issue of feminism and the work of black women is discussed below, I am more concerned at this point to examine the claims made for postmodernism by Owens and poststructuralist theory in general. In particular, the idea put forward by Owens and others that postmodernism signals the West's 'loss of mastery' in the domain of both culture and politics. As a symptom of this recent demise of the master narratives, he points to the resurrection of the 'heroism' of previous ages in art history and contends that contemporary artists at best can only *simulate* mastery and that this simulcra of mastery thus testifies to its loss through the act of disavowal.[34]

33 Craig Owens, 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism', in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, op.cit., p.58.

There are two major questions raised by this assertion: the first relates to the nature of the framework in which this alleged 'loss of mastery' has taken place; the second addresses whether the West in reality has surrendered its hegemony. First of all, where postmodern practice and theory does contest notions of origins, originality and authenticity, the frame of reference appears to remain manifestly Western.

34 Ibid., p.67.

It is in fact a narcissistic and introspective loss which has been proclaimed by poststructuralist theory. The declaration of loss in itself, and the central position which this occupies in contemporary thought, negates the possibility that the Western tradition may have been challenged before and elsewhere, in the margins of European thought. Furthermore, the loss of the grand narratives of Western culture or the death of the white, male subject does not necessarily imply that alternative narratives or other subjects will be fixed within

the centre frame of European consciousness. That is to say, such losses may make possible the recognition of other cultures and theoretical perspectives, but only as one amidst a plurality of cultures, another fragment amidst the debris and 'bric-a-brac' of the global museum:

> When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with the destruction of our own discovery. Suddenly, it becomes possible that there are just *others*, that we ourselves are an "other" among others. All meaning and every goal having disappeared, it becomes possible to wander through civilisations as if through vestiges and ruins. The whole of mankind becomes an imaginary museum...We can very easily imagine a time close at hand when any fairly well-to-do person will be able to leave his country indefinitely in order to taste his own national death in an interminable, aimless voyage.[35]

This narrative which maps out so clearly the space of postmodernism testifies to Habermas's assertion that postmodernity, and poststructuralism also, evacuates from its conceptual field of vision the specific imperatives of history and historical time.[36] The exclusion of history from the theory and practice of postmodernism has several implications. It circumscribes the limits of a discourse which ignores, to a greater extent, the historical roots of concepts such as origins, originality and authenticity, and of modern European thought generally. By ignoring the historical exigencies which contributed to the formulation of these concepts, postmodernism, then, can assert itself as a break or rupture from past tradition and hence fail to recognise the persistance of these notions both *outside* and *within* postmodernism itself. Finally, and most importantly, this evacuation of history enables postmodernism to deny the continuing hegemony of the West, both in the cultural sphere where it still prescribes and legitimates the artistic practice of its choosing and when it chooses, and also in the political sphere where the dispersion and changing forms of Western hegemony are mistaken for economic and political egality.[37] What distinguishes the black artistic practice again from postmodern practice and theory is the assertion of history and historiography unambiguously within the frame of cultural reference. Thus, the citation by Himid and other black artists of preexisting art forms from the history of Western art can be seen to be a part of a coherent political and aethetic strategy based on an interrogation of Western history *through* history.

Martin Bernal has described in detail the ways in which racist ideology and the idea of progress determined the ascendancy of the Aryan Model of history in Western knowledge.[38] These two factors, as other writers have shown also, were bound together inextricably in the *episteme* of nineteenth-century Europe.[39] The notion that historical progress as a linear continuity would pave the way for human emancipation was founded on the belief that the present would supersede the past, but also on a philosophy of European racial superiority. Consequently, there emerged the paradox of Western historiography whereby non-European peoples in the present were relegated to the depths of the past and designated as statistically 'primitive', while the declared Graeco-Roman past of Europe was mobilised as the paradigm of human progress. Racist ideology and the idea of progress intersect in Western knowledge, therefore, at the point where other non-European cultures are fixed

35 Hilton Kramer, 'Does Gerome Belong with Goya and Monet?', *New York Times*, April 13, 1980, section 2, p.35, quoted by Douglas Crimp, 'On the Museum's Ruins', op.cit., p.44.

36 See Jurgen Habermas, 'Modernity — An Incomplete Project', in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, op.cit., pp.3-15.

37 For example, Craig Owens seems to have mistaken the displacement of nineteenth-century configurations of colonialism by contemporary neo-colonial forms as the demise of Western hegemony entirely, particularly where he writes: 'it is clear that what has been lost is not primarily a cultural mastery, but an economic, technical and political one'. Owen op.cit., p.67.

38 Bernal, op.cit.

39 See, for example, Robert Nisbet, *History of the Ideas of Progress*, George L. Mosse, *Towards the Final*

of historical progress. As Partha Mitter has argued in relation to Hegel and art history:

> For Hegel, every nation had a preordained place in his 'ladder' of historical progress and reflected a unique national 'spirit'...The conclusion was that if we were to judge each particular type or tradition of art we must first of all see what particular national spirit it represented and to what particular point in history that nation in turn belonged...Paradoxically, his dynamic principle of history, the dialectics of change, only helped to establish a fundamentally static image of Indian art, its immemorial immutability, its unchanging irrationality, and its poetic fantasy, all predetermined by the characterisation of the Indian 'spirit'. It needs to be repeated here that Hegel's characterisation of the Indian spirit was not based on empirical evidence but determined essentially by India's temporal position in Hegelian metaphysics... It was thus condemned to remain always outside history, static, immobile, and fixed for all eternity.[40]

40 See Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977.

Sutapa Biswas's diptych, *Pied Piper of Hamlyn/Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is*, 1987 (not illustrated) articulates concisely these conceptual ramifications of the Western notion of progress. A plump European man, seated in a rickshaw drawn by an Indian man in one panel of the painting, is followed by a procession of young children in the second panel. In the background to both panels, stand the ancient remains of Indian architectural sculptures, chiselled from the contours of the hills. Such an explicit reference to the European fairytale in which a piper cleanses a rat-infested town by leading the rats to be drowned along the melodic train of his music, implicates the idea of progress as a sinister and misleading one. Through the notion of progress, Biswas implies, Western knowledge has rationalised the relative superiority of European culture over non-European civilisations, in defiance of the physical evidence. The mythology of racial superiority and the contingent concept of progress, like the fable of the pied piper of Hamlyn, erases non-Western cultures from the map of history, rendering them fixed and immobile in an ahistorical vacuum and in the background to the central imperatives of European progress. The price which this mythology and its historical repercussions exacts, is the relative poverty and economic dependency which now engulfs these non-European civilisations.

This alternative conception of history which can be discerned in Biswas's work and in the domain of black cultural production as a whole, implies not only that the histories of black people and Western civilisation are locked together inseparably, but also that history or historicity is a dynamic part of everyday life and human existence as opposed to being a conceptual or aesthetic archive from which specific periods or particular ideas can be invoked haphazardly. This leads me to C. L. R. James's theorisation of Heidegger's notions of 'historicality' and 'temporality' which he identifies in the writings of the West Indian writer Wilson Harris.[41] According to James, Heidegger's concept of *dasein* or 'being there', that is to say, the idea that each man or woman's existence is predicated on a specific and individual consciousness of time — on an awareness of the past and a conception of the future — is particularly pertinent to black cultural experiences in the diaspora. He argues that Heidegger's distinction between 'inauthentic existence' wherein 'truth' is perceived to be in the perimeters of the mind and is pursued throughout the classification of facts and things on the one hand, and 'authentic existence' or *dasein* on the other hand, implies a challenge to the precepts of modern European thought which has always existed in the margins of black experience and knowledge.

41 C.L.R. James, 'On Wilson Harris' (1965) in C.L.R. James, *Sphere of Existence: Selected Writings*, London, Allison and Busby, 1980, pp.157-172.

It is in this context that the concept of the *diaspora* assumes its full significance

in relation both to *dasein* and historicality. In opposition to essentialist notions of race and the linear construction of history as progress, the term *diaspora* embraces a plurality of different cultures and discontinuous histories. Not removed or separated from each other as postmodernism would imply, except in a geographical sense, these cultures and histories are interrelated and are interwoven together in the tapestry of a wider history. More importantly, however, the notion of the diaspora rejects the restrictive limitations of 'origins' and 'essences', as decisively as the European prescriptions for nationhood and progress. As Gilroy writes in relation to black artists in Britain:

> The value of the term diaspora increases as its essentially symbolic character is understood. It points emphatically to the fact that there can be no pure, uncontaminated or essential blackness anchored in an originary moment. It suggests that a myth of shared origins is not a talisman which can suspend political antagonisms or a deity invoked to cement a pastoral view of black life that can answer the multiple pathologies of contemporary racism.[42]

IDENTITY, NATION, RACE

Stuart Hall has argued [43] that the new politics of black representation has a "profound and complex relationship" to the past which does not rely on nostalgia or simple reconstruction but which implicates the past dynamically in relation to the present. In terms of identity and black cultural production in contemporary Britain, this suggests that the identities of the present will be mediated by the ways in which racial and national identities have been and are defined presently in British consciousness. It suggests also that the diaspora as an historical experience will have implications for the ways in which black identity is constructed and represented in artistic practice.

In order to delineate the ways in which race and nation are articulated it should be emphasised that both racism and nationalism are shifting categories subject to historical and geographical transformations. Indeed, while they are able to maintain certain continuities with the past, the discourses of race and nation nonetheless assume new forms and different meanings according to their specific context. Against this background, Paul Gilroy has pointed to the distinctive features of "the new racism" in Britain and identified its relative novelty in terms of its capacity "to link discourses of patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia, Englishness, militarism and gender difference into a complex system which gives 'race' its contemporary meaning."[44] The significant hallmark of the politics of 'race' in Britain today, according to Gilroy, is its grounding in concepts of national belonging and homogeneity which not only "blur the distinction between race and nation but rely on that very ambiguity for their effect."[45] Notions of race and nation are locked together in the fabrication of "imagined communities" whose perimeters are being defined and redefined constantly by racism.

While this contemporary theorisation of race, nation and cultural identity is not the exclusive domain of the New Right, it is here that the perceived conflict between national identity and racial identity is most explicitly stated in terms of cultural difference. According to neoconservative thought, "the nation is constituted by homogeneity of culture, and the problem of race lies in the fact of cultural difference. Alien cultures...necessarily undermine social cohesion."[46] The important point, here, is that the definition of 'race' and ethnicity in contemporary Britain has been articulated on both sides of the

42 Paul Gilroy, 'Cruciality and the Frog's Perspective', op.cit., p.35.

43 Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in *ICA Documents 7: Black Film/British Cinema*, op.cit., p.30.

44 Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The cultural politics of race and nation*, London and Melbourne, Hutchinson, 1987, p.43.

45 Ibid., p.45.

46 Gill Seidel, 'Nation and "Race" in the British and French Right', in R. Levitas (ed.), *The Ideology of the New Right*, Cambridge, Polity

say, 'race' as a cultural identity and not an unequivocal 'biological' category. At the same time national identity is perceived not only as the basis for *cultural* homogeneity, but also as the result of a natural and continuous relationship with a hazy national past. In this respect, the fabrication of national identity and the discourse of 'nation' in contemporary Britain relies upon a nostalgia for a mythical, premodern past neither threatened by cultural difference nor disrupted by the socio-economic forces of modernity.

Jurgen Habermas has linked together the discourses of neoconservatism and postmodernity hence provoking an intense debate in the circles of poststructuralist and postmodern theory. According to Habermas's counter-perspective, postmodernism, like neoconservatism, rejects cultural modernism on the basis of a disenchantment with the historical effects of social and economic modernisation. Neoconservatism, he argues, "shifts onto cultural modernism the uncomfortable burdens of a more or less successful capitalist modernization of the economy and society."[47] In this displacement of discontent and negation onto the shoulders of cultural modernity, he identifies an analogy between neoconservative doctrine and the conceptual field of postmodernity, specifically its antimodernism. The "young conservatives", he states, "claim for their own the revelations of a decentered subjectivity" and on this basis, "they step out of the modern world."[48] This perspective, I would argue, provides a persuasive explanation for the ways in which identity is expressed in postmodern cultural practice. Furthermore, the construction of identity within the framework of postmodernism — as a decentered subjectivity which is located outside of modernity — stands in stark contrast to the concept of identity designated by the diaspora experience which is forged in modernity itself.

47 Jurgen Habermas, 'Modernity — An Incomplete Project', in Hal Foster (ed.)' *Postmodern Culture*, op.cit., p.7.

48 Ibid., p.14.

The notion of a "decentered subjectivity" is expressed most clearly in the writings of Fredric Jameson, and it is worth recapitulating here. The "critical distance" of cultural politics, that is, culture as an autonomous sphere which can distance itself from society, has been abolished in the new space of postmodernism. This is a direct consequence, Jameson argues, of the fact that it has become impossible for the postmodern subject to map his or her place in the postmodern world. That is to say, we are no longer able to locate or define ourselves as individual subjects in the expanded global map of postmodern society.[49] Jameson's diagnosis of postmodernism and that of other postmodern theorists has been criticised elsewhere as a nostalgic longing for a distinct, individual subject who stands out against the structures of modern, capitalist society.[50] However, I am less concerned at this point with Jameson's own position than with the implications of this notion of the 'fragmented subject' for postmodern practice as well as for black cultural practice.

49 See Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', op.cit.

50 For example, see James Collins, 'Postmodernism and Cultural Practice: Redefining the Parameters', *Postmodern Screen*, vol. 28, no.2, Spring 1987, pp. 11-26.

The conception of identity as disconnected and incoherent appears to be reflected in postmodern practice by an aesthetic articulation of the fragmentary and pluralistic nature of nation and cultural identities, as in the work of Imants Tillers. The aesthetic configurations of Tiller's *The Nine Shots* (1985), for example, involves collating different cultural identities in the form of appropriated pictorial fragments to make up a new, fragmented whole. The resulting image, it is claimed, represents a "postmodern allegory of nationhood no longer able to be unified through 'imagined communities'."[51] Yet, this mosaic of fragments merely affirms the existence of several, self-contained and above all, separate cultural identities even if these differentiated identities are presented as a contestation of the symbolic order of a homogeneous national

51 Sandy Nairne, *State of the Art*, op. cit., p.224.

> committed to myself and my neighbour to fight for all my life and with all my strength so that never again would a people on the earth be subjugated. It was not the black world that laid down my course of conduct. My black skin is not the wrapping of specific values.[54]

Frantz Fanon's words articulate concisely the arena in which black identity and 'black arts' have been defined and contested in contemporary Britain. On the one hand, state policy and provision (including arts policy and funding) propose a separate and distinct category of 'ethnic minorities' wherein racial identity is formulated along the lines of cultural and ethnic difference to the extent that 'ethnicity' itself comes to comprise separate categories — 'Afro-Caribbean' as opposed to 'Asian'. On the other hand, black artists and writers have insisted upon the formulation of 'blackness' as a political strategy wherein cultural and racial absolutes are contested by a dynamic 'unity of difference'. Such a conception of identity diverges from postmodern theory and practice at the point where pluralism and hetereogeneity cease to be a set of aesthetic or political codes based on negation — the negation of coherent identities or the negation of fragmented identities — but rather the assertion of the positive and political implications of difference. There is of course the danger that this 'unity through difference' will become the constitutive feature of an alternative totalising notion of identity and this has been addressed by black writers and artists alike. Yet, its potential to designate a new space of identity resides in the fact that unlike postmodernism, it articulates difference and specificity in terms of and through *history*:

54 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, London, Pluto Press, 1986, pp.229-30.

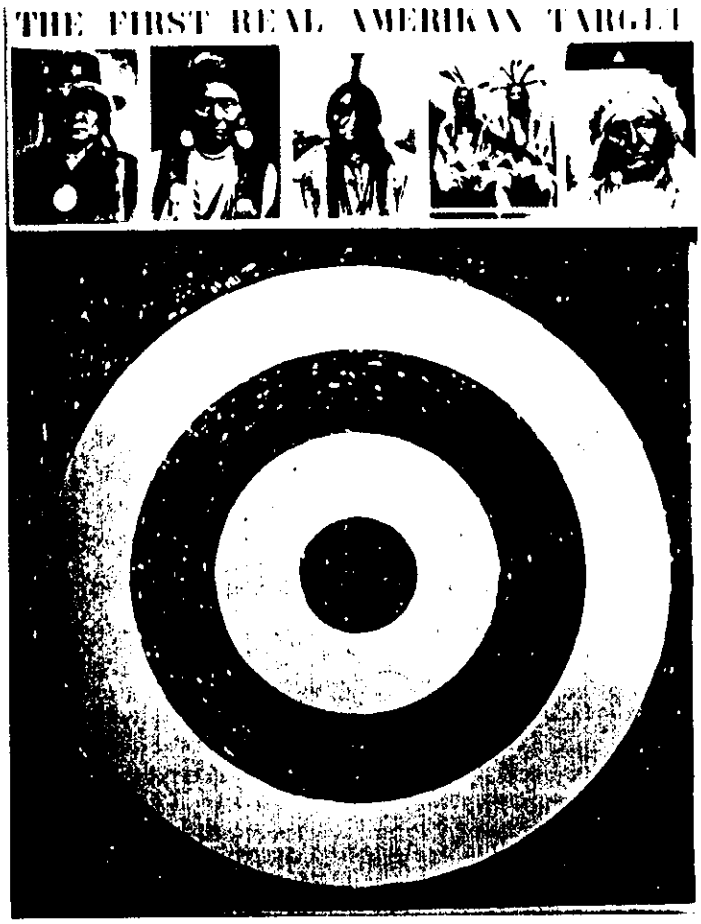
> One is aware of the degree to which nationalism was/is constituted as one of those major poles or terrains of articulation of the self. I think it is very important the way in which some people...begin to reach for a new conception of ethnicity as a kind of counter to the old discourses of nationalism or national identity. Now one knows that these are dangerously overlapping terrains. All the same they are not identical. Ethnicity *can* be a constitutive element in the most viciously regressive nationalism or national identity. But in our times, as an imaginary community, it is also beginning to carry other meanings, and to define a new space for identity. It insists on difference — on the fact that every identity is placed, positioned, in a culture, a language, a history.[55]

The category of 'black arts' also has been defined historically as an artistic practice arising from a specific framework; as the cultural expression of a particular reality, that is the historical and cultural reality circumscribed by the diasporan experience which one artist has described succinctly as — "cultural domination by Western Eurocentricism, and marginality to it; the experience of exploitation, appropriation, slavery, inequality and racism."[56] Significantly, the diasporan experience constitutes a critical distance which Jameson claims has been abolished in the space of postmodern society. This critical distance, however, does not imply that black artists occupy an autonomous sphere, but rather, a radical position actually *within* modernity and one, furthermore, which does not coincide neatly with the contours of the British nation state.

55 Stuart Hall, 'Minimal Selves', *ICA Documents 6: Identity*, London, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987, p.46.

56 Gavin Jantjes, 'Art and Cultural Reciprocity', in *The Essential Black Art*, London, Chisenhale Gallery, 1988, p.44.

The fusion of diverse, non-European elements into the dominant order of British culture contests the notion that cultural expression, or indeed identity, is an univocal, homogenous entity. The cultural language, or more precisely, the cultural languages of the diaspora reflect the intersection of various specialised discourses and dialects. In short, black cultural production reflects a conception of identity — polyphonic, historical and existential — which has always existed in the margins of Western consciousness but which, at this particular historical conjuncture, corresponds with European thought. If



Gavin Jantjes *The First American Target* 1974

postmodern theory and practice has not yet realised the full possibilities and positivities of this alternative formulation of identity, then perhaps the cultural expression of the diaspora can provide the framework of resistance and change as opposed to that of negation and reaction.

Such a framework of resistance and change is predicated, as I have suggested above, on a political and historical conception of identity, such as the one which informs Gavin Jantjes's image, *The First Real American Target* 1974. Appropriating Jasper Johns's *Target with plaster casts*, 1955, Jantjes replaces the row of boxes and plaster casts of fragments of the human figure in the original collage with various photographic images of native Americans. The significance of Jantjes's act of appropriation only becomes fully clear in the light of the image which Johns made directly before this one, namely, *Flag*, 1955. This image which replicates the American flag in the form of a painterly surface projects a wholly ambivalent notion of identity which was an intentional strategy on the part of the artist. The image posed the question, "is it a flag or is it a

important question of whether the image should be read as an "endorsement or a criticism of a certain kind of patriotic sensibility".[57] Whether or not the image is a critique of national identity or nationalism, it remains an equivocal cultural expression which results in foregrounding artistic means at the expense of content. It is this which Jantjes implicates in his work. National identity or the icons of national identity, he implies, are not a self-sufficient critical statement unless this critical statement is informed by a historical perspective. The construction and the mythologisation of American national identity, he asserts, obscures the historical and economic initiatives which characterised the formation of the American nation state. Furthermore, the intersection of the different histories from which 'Americanness' derives become overshadowed in Johns's cultural production by a unitary history of nationhood as well as of art. Finally, John's artistic practice in many ways prefigures the dual formulation of identity by postmodernism — on the one hand, an identity of reconstructed cohesion and on the other, an identity of fragments.

57 Fred Orton, 'Present, The Scene...Selves, The Occasion of Roses', *Block*, 13, Winter 1987/88, p.13.

Sonia Boyce's *Lay back, Keep Quiet and think of what made Britain so great* 1986 again represents a very different articulation of identity. Divided into four separate panels which are linked by the dominant iconography, this image affirms the status of identity as the sum total of the intersection of diverse but related histories and cultures. A wallpaper design, originally conceived as a tribute to the fiftieth year of Queen Victoria's reign has been appropriated and transformed. The red rose, symbol of British nationhood, has been eclipsed by the abiding presence of a *black* rose which appears repeatedly in every panel. The notion of ambivalence which characterises Johns's work assumes a very different meaning in the context of Boyce's image. The equivocal nature of the rose, the fragility and beauty of the flower combined with the sharpness and intractability of its thorns, becomes a metaphor for the ambivalence not only of 'Britishness' but also of 'blackness'. The colonial and imperial character of Britain's past is weaved into the contours of the decorative paper, but so also is the resistance of non-European peoples — the native South Africans and Australians whose figures can be discerned only slightly in its midst. The black woman who stares out at us from the final panel — a self-portrait of the artist herself — suggests that this English rose, as woman or as identity, inherits a history of resistance as well as a history of oppression, that is, separate histories but ones which at the same time are locked together inextricably.

The notion of ambivalance is asserted not in spite of but *because* black artistic practice recognises that identity is a politically and historically-constructed category. As A. Sivanandan writes:

> Creating ourselves in terms of our culture and reshaping our society in terms of that creation are part and parcel of the same process. To abstract our culture from its social milieu in order to give it coherence is to lose out on its vitality. And once a culture loses its social dynamic, identity becomes an indulgence... identity may emanate from the consciousness of our culture, but its operational function can only be meaningful in political terms... A culture that takes time off to refurbish itself produces a personality without purpose. There is no point in finding out who I am if I do not know what to do with that knowledge.[58]

58 A. Sivanandan, 'Culture and Identity', *Liberator*, New York, vol.10, no.6, June 1970, quoted by Juliet Steyn, 'Introduction', *Along the Lines of Resistance*, Cooper Gallery, Barnsley, 1988, p.4.

RACE, GENDER, ARTISTIC PRODUCTION

The process of re-questioning and re-thinking the legitimacy of the 'grand narratives' of the West, according to Alice Jardine, potentially signifies a redefinition of the world in terms of the "*en-soi*, Others, without history — the

feminine''.[59] In the configurations of postmodernity (which she prefers to call 'modernity'), she identifies a development which she has described as 'gynesis' or ''the putting into discourse of woman''.[60] Craig Owens, too, in a slightly different way, sees an intersection between the ''feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation''.[61] Both argue that feminism and postmodernism announce a crisis in the legitimising function of the grand narratives which has shaken the foundation stones of European thought. While it is claimed that both these discourses challenge the structures of signification, I would argue that the deconstruction or dispersion of the dominant order does not in itself serve to question established meanings and identities. However, black women's creativity, it seems to me, proposes an alternative discourse of resistance and change through the articulation of the positive and political function for the periphery.

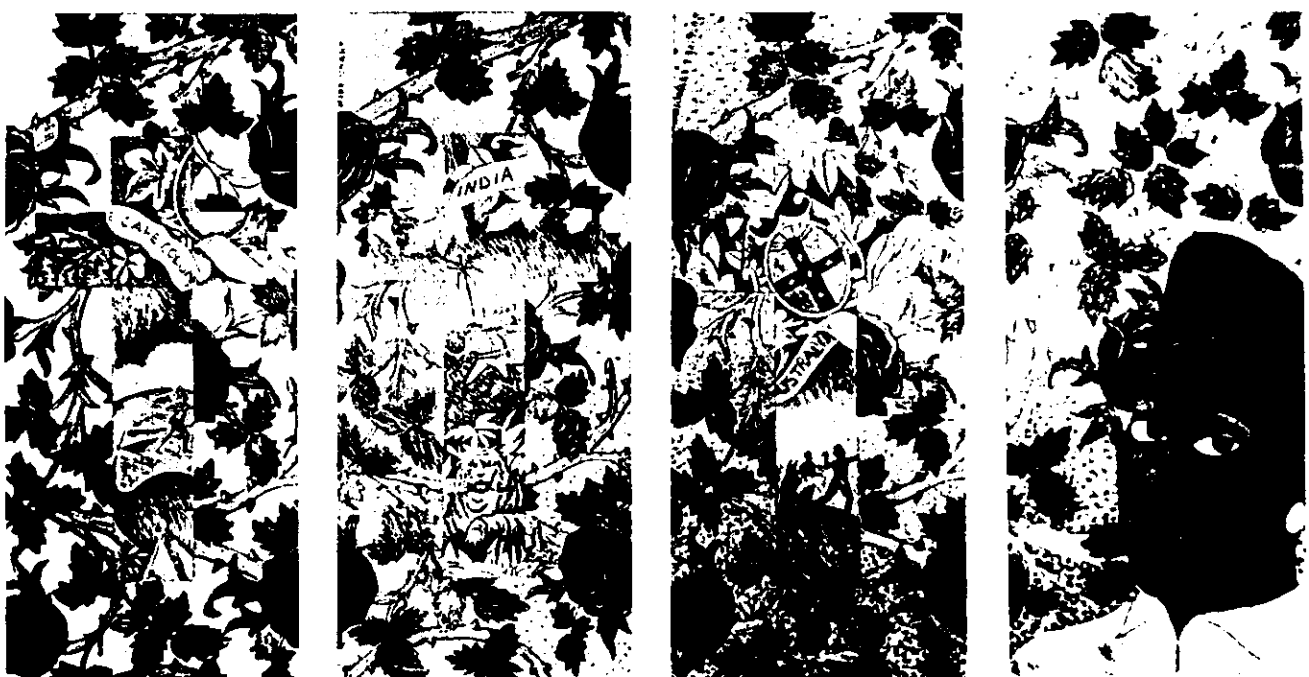
I have suggested the ways in which postmodernism, in spite of its diverse and even divergent aesthetic and political configurations, remains confined to a manifestly Western framework which is contested by black critical practice. The focus of postmodern theory and practice, for the most part, remains circumscribed by the demise of *European* grand narratives and *European* subjectivity so that the relationship between the centre and the periphery persists to greater extent. The same can be said for feminism in so far as that has been articulated in the first instance as a resistance and contestation of patriarchy as a whole. As a direct consequence, feminist discourse often fails to take into account the broader ramifications of a conjuncture between

59 Alice Jardine, *Gynesis. Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1985, p.72.

60 Ibid.

61 Craig Owens, 'The Discourse of Others: Feminism and Postmodernism', in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, op.cit., pp.57-82.

Sonia Boyce *Lay Back, Keep Quiet and think of what made Britain so great* 1986



patriarchal structures and imperial, colonial or neo-colonial initiatives. That is to say, a totalising theory of patriarchy and female oppression obscures the complex relations which pertain to the economic and political hegemony of the West vis-a-vis non-European peoples. In this context, many black women have challenged repeatedly what they have defined as 'imperial feminism':

> A definition of patriarchal relations which looks only at the power of men over women without placing that in a wider economic framework has serious consequences for the way in which relationships within the Black community are viewed... arguments of radical feminists who see patriarchy as the primary determining feature of women's oppression ignores totally the inapplicability of such a concept in analysing the complex of relations obtaining in Black communities both historically and in the present....Our very positions as Black women in a racist society has meant that we have been forced to organize around issues relating to our very survival. The struggle for independence and self determination and against imperialism has meant that for Black and Third World women in Britain and internationally, sexuality as an issue has often taken a secondary role and at times not been considered at all.[62]

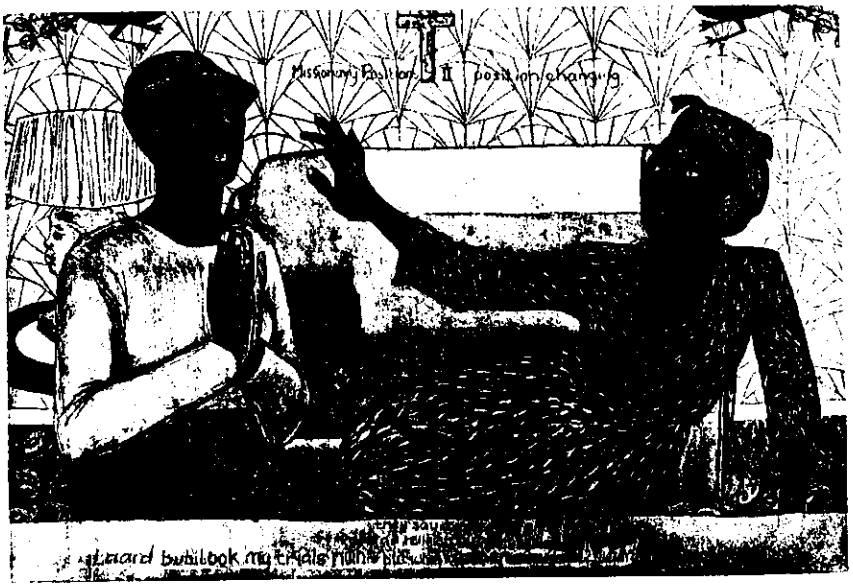
The implications of this is that the identity of black women is expressed not in terms of sexuality alone nor in terms of male-female relations as the primary determining factor. Rather, the identity of black women is represented consistently within an economic and historical context which binds together sexual and racial politics. An excellent example of this would be Sonia Boyce's *Missionary Position II* (1985). Part of a series of images, this picture depicts a black woman, laying down on the floor in a posture of resistance rather than submission, holding out one hand to the kneeling figure of a black man who is praying, his eyes closed. The title and the image itself state explicitly the analogies between sexual and colonial relations and between religion and colonialism. The holy sanctity of a sexual position which imposes submission and capitulation on women, Boyce asserts, finds its equivalence in the application of Christianity as a system of beliefs which justifies the oppression of non-European peoples and the annexation of their lands. The text inscribed on the image reads: "they say keep politics out of religion and religion out of politics. Laard but look my trials nuh — but when were they ever separate? Laard give me strength". Once more, Boyce affirms the notion of ambivalence. In this case, the ambivalence not only of avowed female oppression (the woman depicted here is clearly a source of resistance not submission) but also of religion. In the same way that the languages of the dominant order are appropriated by black people and transformed, religion too is transmuted into a liberating force and becomes the "site of oppositional meaning and collective strength".[63]

The translation of the personal into the political and the assertion of political resistance in Boyce's *Missionary Position II* leads me to the question of the limitations imposed by the postmodernist (and also the feminist) embrace of psychoanalytic theory. Specifically, the ways in which the assimilation of Lacanian theory raises problems for feminism and conflicts with the precepts of black women's work. In a recent article, Sheila Tebbatt has pointed to the ways in which the psychoanalytic framework of Jacques Lacan places women "firmly and squarely in a negative relationship to language and the whole symbolic order".[64] This has resulted, according to Tebbatt, in a situation where women perceive problems in expressing themselves in a 'man-made language' and thus, finding they have no voice, are relegated to a position of silence. Some examples would be the theoretical writings of women like Luce Irigaray, Xaviere Gauthier and Helena Cixous or the creative writing of

62 Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', *Feminist Review*, 17, Autumn 1984, pp. 9-12.

63 Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, op.cit., pp. 213-214.

64 See Sheila Tebbatt, 'Women in Theory', *Ten-8*, Birmingham, no.31, Winter 1988, pp. 22-27.



Sonia Boyce *Missionary Position II* 1985

Marguerite Duras, especially the script for the film *Nathalie Granger* (1972) in which the two main women characters express female resistance quite literally through silence. [65] As a consequence of their negative status, Tebbatt argues, women become "unable to enter [the social world] on any other terms than patriarchal", and furthermore, "without the power to alter it".[66] In opposition to this, she asserts the importance of Valentin Volosinov's conception of language which identifies language as a social construct rather than a fixed process, hence admitting for language and meaning to be redefined through political struggle, that is, to be restructured and reconstituted.[67]

It should already be clear that this is precisely the conception of language and meaning which informs the cultural practice of black artists under discussion here. What Bakhtin defines as the 'carnivalisation' or dispersal of the dominant order pertains to the cultural languages and meanings formulated in the space of the diaspora.[68] In other words, the works of Himid, Boyce and Biswas are not fixed in a negative position in relation to the dominant order, but in a positive position of resistance to and disruption of the prevailing cultural and political system. Their artistic production deos not lie beyond the perimeters of British culture but within it. In short, the cultural politics of the margins represents not a passive spectator but an active intruder, so to speak, into the hegemonic system.

This leads me to my final point which relates to Tania Modleski's analysis of Baudrillard's theorisation of mass culture.[69] By way of summary, Modleski argues that Baudrillard extends psychoanalytic definitions of woman to a political analysis of the masses whereby the "silent majority", according to Baudrillard's definition, are passive and hence "feminine" as opposed to being active and implicity therefore "masculine".

The important point to make here is that black women's creativity does not occupy a passive position in relation to the political and aesthetic structures

65 See Ann Kaplan, 'Silence as Female Resistance in Marguerite Duras' *Natalie Granger*', in *Women and Film*, New York, Methuen, 1983, pp.91-103.

66 Tebbatt, op.cit., p.26.

67 Tebbatt refers specifically to Volosinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.

68 See Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, op.cit., pp.259-422.

69 Tania Modleski, 'Femininity as Masquerade: a feminist approach to mass culture', in Colin MacCabe (ed.), *High theory, Low Culture*, New York, St. Martins

Sonia Boyce's *Missionary Position II* locate black women, and hence the politics of the periphery, at the centre of European modernity. They identify black women as a force of resistance and change as opposed to being a source of 'mute acquiescence'. Moreover, the conception of femininity which emerges from the work of these women points to a notion of femininity which is far from passive or inert. Sutapa Biswas's *Housewives with Steak Knives* (1985) asserts femininity as equivocal, that is, both fragile and strong at the same time. Such a conception of femininity effectively dismantles the binary opposition between 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Furthermore, it contests the delineation of separate spheres between private and public or between personal and political. That is to say, femininity in the space of the diaspora is conceived in terms of an intersection of those distinct and essential absolutes of European thought. In this context, the idea of differentiated and binary realms has been contested by black artists and writers alike, not on the basis of what Baudrillard calls the 'circularity of signalling' at this particular historical moment, but rather on the basis that no such clear division is realised *historically* by the diasporan

Sutapa Biswas *Housewives with Steak-knives* 1985

experience.

Finally, black femininity implies a rejection of such totalising discourses as postmodernism or feminism, which remain confined within the perimeters of European consciousness and which, moreover, draw their often transcendental and globalising conclusions in a conceptual field which in many cases has been evacuated of wider historical and economic perspectives. This last point suggests that neither postmodernity nor feminism are the most appropriate or coherent theoretical structures in which to study black women's creativity. The possibility that there may be alternative and transient 'grand narratives' in the history of Western thought means that the artistic production of Himid, Boyce and Biswas could be understood more meaningfully within an alternative framework. The conceptual framework which I propose is one of 'small narratives' or '*petits recits*' to corrupt Lyotard's original phrase. Such 'small narratives', I would argue, clarify the broader political and aesthetic project which informs black women's creativity and from which it derives.

The iconography of Biswas's image *Housewives with Steak Knives* is the clearest enunciation of the notion of black femininity as a form of creative resistance. The picture depicts a strong multi-armed woman wearing a necklace of men's heads while brandishing a vast steak knife in one hand, the head of a white man in another, and a rose and flag in yet another of her four hands. Here, Hindu mythology is invoked to serve a political content which is quintessentially modern. The image of the goddess Kali, traditionally represented with a garland of men's heads around her neck and the head of a man in one of her many hands, has been appropriated by Biswas as a means of dissolving the absolute distinction and binary oppositions which characterise European thought. In opposition to these false and essentialist categories, the precepts of Hindu culture reflect the ascendency of ambivalence. Thus, the Western notion of 'femininity' as essentially fragile and passive is contested by the ambivalent status of the goddess Kali who is at once both the goddess of war and peace. In adapting the Hindu iconography of Kali, then, Biswas asserts the ambivalence of femininity, both pacifist (as opposed to passive) and aggressive, both 'feminine' in a traditional sense and strong. She also affirms the existence, in terms of the Hindu system of knowledge, of a 'zone of indiscernability', to borrow Gilles Deleuze's phrase, between myth and reality. Thus, Biswas implies, there is an element of the real in the mythologisation of 'femininity', and equally, an element of the myth in the reality of black womanhood. Furthermore, by introducing ancient icons and myths into her work, Biswas suggests a fusion between the past and the present, an intimation not only of the relevance of history to contemporary experience, but also, perhaps, of the abiding presence of black female resistance and creativity. Finally, Biswas's *Housewives* defies the distinction drawn between the private and avowedly 'feminine' domestic sphere, in this case exemplified by the kitchen, and the public, allegedly 'masculine' domain of political action. Resistance to white, male hegemony, it is implied, can be and has been the imperative of black women. Moreover, the domestic environment which black women inhabit, circumscribes a defiant domesticity which reappears in another image by Biswas entitled *The Only Good Indian...* (1985). Here, a Indian woman is sitting watching the television, quietly peeling a potato which has metamorphosed into an uncanny resemblance to the former Home Secretary, Leon Brittan, Kitchen utensils have become the tools of defiance where the domestic space is conceived as the arena in which the hegemonic order is

Sutapa Biswas *The Only Good Indian*, 1985

is a decidedly domestic response to the institution of increasingly exclusive nationality laws. [70]

The white hand (or head) of the Law, whether in the shape of a parliamentary act or of a religious canon, is represented consistently by these artists in the form of incomplete fragments — the cardboard cut-outs of men's heads in Himid's *Freedom and Change*, the garland of heads and the decapitated, sightless head in Biswas's *Housewives*, or the white palm of a hand severed from its body in Boyce's *Missionary Position I* (1985) — which stand in stark contrast to the pictorial and metaphoric centrality assigned to black women. In the specific context of Biswas's *Housewives*, the garland which the goddess Kali wears around her neck symbolising the evil which Kali was to destroy, here designates a more contemporary and allegorical meaning. The dominant order of white, male individuality, it is implied, will be overturned by black creative resistance. Furthermore, the former invisibility and marginalisation of black women in European consciousness will be challenged by an assertion of their presence and their voices, not on patriarchal terms but on the explicit terms of black women's cultural practice and historical experience.

The artistic means of this cultural practice is the distinct process of gathering and re-using by means of which the diasporan experience is reflected through a literal patchwork of experiences, cultures and histories. As Himid writes, this is not an aesthetic strategy isolated from the domain of lived experiences. That is to say, black women's creativity does not represent an autonomous,

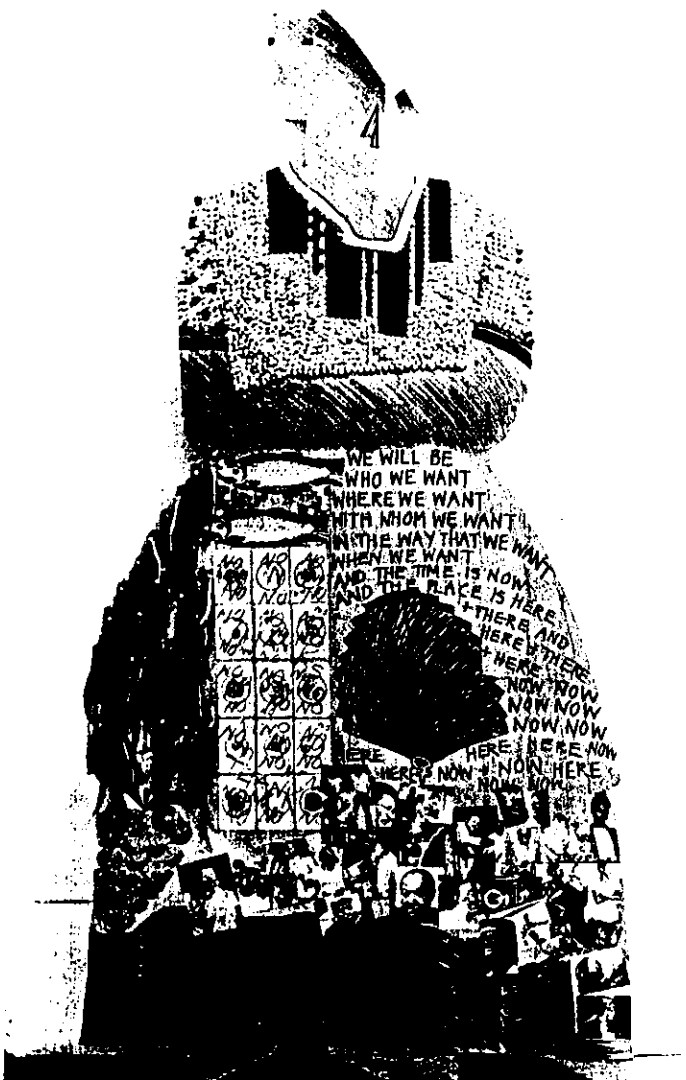
70 I refer to the Nationality Act (1981).

cultural sphere but rather is constituted in and derived from historical necessity which finds its precedent in the activity of quilt-making:

> A quilt made from gathered pieces of cloth takes time to plan, design and make. Often several women have worked on one quilt. It can be made as a testimony to time spent as well as lives lived. It is made to go into the future as a used object for a "family" membership, as a talisman for the years ahead and a reminder of women past.[71]

71 Lubaina Himid, 'Fragments', *Feminist Arts News*, op.cit., p.8.

Lubaina Himid *We Will be* 1983



Thus, in Himid's *We Will Be* (1983), the fabric of the woman's dress is a collage of visual references — decorative patterns, photographic reproductions, images of fish and fruit and a sequence of words — which represent a patchwork of memories, dreams and cultural signifiers. The written script, contained within the contours of the dress, echo the voices of black women, 'talking back', resisting the unity and homogeneity of Western consciousness and the singular progression of a total history, while at the same time affirming the fusion of different times (past and present) and different places (Europe, Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, the Americas) which characterise the space of the diaspora. In this way, Himid's iconography and those of the other artists here, attest to a different mode of enunciation and an alternative conceptual framework which signals an interruption and a reconstruction of the dominant cultural terrain. Above all, they designate a female resistance through and in cultural language, but not in silence. In the words of Bell Hooks:

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppresed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life, and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject that is liberated voice.[72]

The aesthetic configurations of this 'gesture of defiance' are articulated, as I have illustrated above, through an alternative conception of femininity as creative resistance. This takes the material form of patchwork and collage, a re-using of fragments from diverse sources which assume different meanings and create a new frame of reference. It also takes the form of works which use pastels and crayons as the primary artistic means. Both these creative modes have been characterised as the domain of 'women's art'. They are, according to the discourse of nineteenth-century Europe, an extension of women's domestic role in society, that is, ''quintessentially feminine, delicate and decorative''.[73] Yet, once again, black women's creativity assigns a very different meaning to the notion of 'feminine arts' as it does to 'femininity'. The hierarchy of art forms which pertains to the classification and stratification of different categories of art in Western art history, is subverted by the application of 'feminine arts' to a specific cultural and political project. Pastels and chalks in the works of Biswas and Boyce particularly, are mobilised in the service not of quiet, delicate images but of huge and assertive political statements. Like patchwork and collage, the use of pastels by these artists forges links with the history of women's creativity. Furthermore, it sustains the idea of an ambivalent femininity which defies simplistic categorisation as inherently passive and apolitical. And finally, it corroborates the historical and cultural conjuncture of the personal and political and the private and public in the diasporan experience.

It is in this context that the home and the domestic environment can be seen to define the space of black women's creativity. It is a space, first of all, in which the past and the present become fused together, where the discontinuous histories of black peoples and the history of Western civilisation are locked together inextricably. As in the wallpaper which shapes the configurations of Boyce's *Lay back, Keep Quiet...*, history circumscribes the present, it is contained in the very walls of lived experience and domestic relationships. Moreover, the designs which decorate these personal spaces are the means by which links

72 Bell Hooks, 'Talking Back', in *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, no.8, Winter 1986-87.

73 See Rozika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, particularly chapter two, entitled, 'Crafty women and the hierarchy of the arts'.

are forged with the historical past. But, in contrast with the work of Gilbert and George where decorative motifs signify the continuity of an unmediated and unequivocal national past, via modern technology, into the present; in Boyce work, decorative pattern and design signal the ambivalence and dissonance of different histories meshed together.[74] Against this background, the genre of the 'conversation piece' is transformed by intimations of history in black women's creativity. Thus, in Boyce's *Conversational Piece* (1986), the hands of two black women trace in the decorative contours of a kitchen table cloth the proximity and distance of their dreams and memories, a metaphor for the relative proximity and distance of the histories and experiences of black people in the diaspora; or, perhaps, of British history and diasporan history.

Above all, the domestic realm is a manifestly political space where there is no comfort from the configurations of history or lived experience. And at the point where the domestic is seen to be political, the 'feminine' becomes politically resistant. Thus, the woman in Boyce's *In the Comfort of Your Own Home* (1986) metamorphoses into a Medusa-like figure with a serpent's tongue, or more appropriately, a Medea-like figure — the woman of Greek mythology who is marginalised from the hegemonic order of Corinthian society on the basis of her avowed cultural difference. The woman whose resistance, furthermore, takes the form of a transfiguration of perceived notions of 'femininity' and 'domesticity'.[75] Alternatively, as in Biswas's diptych *As I Stood Listened and Watched, My Feeling Were, This Woman Is Not For Burning* (1986), political defiance is the mirror image of domestic comfort.

The domestic environment also demarcates the arena of family relationships and the expression of personal identity, both of which are framed by ambivalence and uncertainty. In Sonia Boyce's *She Ain't Holding them Up, She's Holding On (some English Rose)* (1986), the artist was inspired, significantly, by the Rene Magritte painting *This is not a Pipe*.[76] The ambivalence between appearance and reality which informs the conceptual framework of Magritte's work here serves to articulate the tensions not only between private and public but between past and present generations, imaginary identity and 'real' identity. The picture bears witness to the conjuncture of the notion of family as a structural support and source of cultural identity and the idea that family is also the origin of discontinuity and dissonance. The point at which the woman's hands touch the base of the family unit here marks the point of connection, but also the point of separation. And once again, the black rose which appears and reappears consistently in Boyce's work, here embroidered into the fabric of the woman's dress, signifies the ambivalence of identity, the fusion and disjuncture simultaneously of 'blackness' and 'Britishness'.

Thus, the space of black women's creativity does not designate the impossibility of mapping the black female subject within history and lived experience as Jameson insists is the case with the fragmented subject in the postmodern world. Rather, the work of these artists attests to the importance of charting individual and personal subjectivity within the material structures of history and politics. In this context, the architectural framework or the physical environment which circumscribes the contours of the black subject is imbued with resonances of past experience and contemporary reality. It is not fragmentation which characterises the cultural politics of Himid, Biswas and Boyce, but rather a specific conception of ambivalence. The space of black creativity is, in the final instance, a 'zone of indiscernability' which contests the political and aesthetic absolutes which delineate the conceptual scaffolding of European consciousness.

74 I am thinking especially of photo-works such as *England*, 1980 or *Black God*, 1983.

75 According to Euripides' version of *Medea*, Medea contests Jason's ambitions to assume Corinthian sovereignty by murdering her children.

76 In an interview with the artist by the author, Boyce stated that she was drawn to the surrealist notion of ambivalence between appearance and reality, and particularly, to the surrealist production of Frida Kahlo who is cited by Biswas also as a precedent for black women's creativity within the framework of modernity.

CONCLUSION

Black cultural practice cannot be defined in terms of postmodernism or postmodernity precisely because it does not attempt to divorce itself from the historical and political configurations of modernity. I have argued, following Habermas's counter-perspective, that postmodernity does not constitute a break or rupture from the conceptual fabric of modernity. Rather, it articulates through artistic practice and theoretical structures, a contemporary disaffection with the *effects* of societal modernisation which takes the form of nostalgia for a cohesive and continuous historical past; or alternatively, the assertion of hetereogeneity and fragmentation of contemporary experience. In some respects, even, postmodernism can be seen to represent continuities with the modern project in so far as it remain manifestly within the framework of Western knowledge. The constellation of voices and the plurality of meanings which are postulated by postmodernity serve to obscure its continuities with cultural modernism and suggests, perhaps, that this may not be a fissure or 'new dawn' in European consciousness but merely a transformation of the grand narratives of the West. In this context, the 'populist modernism' of black cultural practice, I would argue, signals a critical reappropriation of modernity which stems from an assertion of history and historical processes.

Black women's creativity in particular expresses the ambivalence of identity and the redundancy of exclusive and unambiguous absolutes. It dissolves the fixed boundaries between past and present, public and private, personal and political. The important point is that the 'zone of indiscernability' which characterises the space of the diaspora and the cultural practice of Himid, Boyce and Biswas does not attest to the primacy of difference and dispersion over and above historical and political exigencies. Rather, the cultural expression of the margins and of the periphery represents an aesthetic and political project which is predicated on resistance and change. That is to say, the banishment of utopian ideals is not a unilateral and self-sufficient contestation of the grand narratives of Western knowledge. In opposition to the theoretical structures of postmodernism, black cultural politics insists upon the ascendency of a broader aesthetic and political project which redefines the agenda of modernity through a critical interrogation of the past and according to the political imperatives of the present. The last words belong to those black women artists who have drawn the 'thin black line' which demarcates the boundaries of European conciousness and the possibilities which lie beyond those boundaries:

The thin black line
is long
is slender (but not delicate)
is cord, not thread
is a long, slender cord
taut when stretched [77]

77 Marlene Smith, 'The Thin Black Line', from the exhibition of the same name, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London 1985.