

## PHENOMENAL DIFFERENCE

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# Phenomenal Difference

*A Philosophy of Black British Art*

Leon Wainwright

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## Introduction

This book offers a detailed philosophical account of art by individuals of black and Asian backgrounds who have worked in Britain at one time or another over the past four decades. It explores a vivid range of intimate, bodily encounters with art, involving the senses, perception and the emotions, and so emphasises the affective relations between works of art, their viewers and the world at hand. Black British artists have for a long time worked in ways that complicate and unsettle the more familiar frameworks of critical theory that have been applied to understanding their art and from which their art-making has in part drawn. As such, this book projects what may become the future basis for seeing black British art, by tackling the historical over-reliance upon such key terms as identity politics, representation, cultural difference, ethnicity and diversity, showing how cultural theory may be rethought and reinvigorated with the benefit of an 'ontological turn'. Consequently, this book presents a detailed case for recognising the role of black British art and artists in shaping a more layered and contemporary account of aesthetics as a field of social practice. It takes the distinctive approach of showing that works of art do not simply have continuing relevance for advanced theoretical thought, but are themselves a sort of philosophy.

By the time I began research on this book in 1997, the chief vocabulary of cultural criticism associated with black British art was already quite established in academic discourse, and its appeal was widening into more accessible and popular sorts of writing. Travelling through Verona airport a few summers later, I came across a work of science fiction by the Australian writer Greg Egan entitled *Diaspora* (Egan, 1997), translated into Italian. I found it equally remarkable that the book took the word 'diaspora' for its title and that I had found it when killing time at an airport, on a carousel of books destined for travellers' laps. But, of course, what more apt place to find *Diaspora* than at a nodal point of modernity and geographical movement such as an airport? A machine

for channelling migration and processing the need for connectedness among communities on the move; on the flipside, it is also an organ of restriction, discrimination and 'security'.<sup>1</sup> Evidently, the widening arc of circulation for the term 'diaspora' is itself an example of a diaspora-redolent uprooting, dispersal and localisation. The concept is demonstrably both moveable and adaptive to contexts beyond academia (and much beyond Anglophone publishing), compelling in its metaphors for how cultures flourish and continue following their sometimes violent displacement. The discourse surrounding diaspora culture leaves a wide margin for the imagination too. Egan's *romanzo di fantascienza* is a tale of exodus, travel and (post)human adaptation in outer space, a biotechnological leap into the void where relationships are worked out in a yet unexplored, extraterrestrial distant future (the year 2975 CE).<sup>2</sup>

Just as the specialist term diaspora was finding new discursive sites in the late 1990s, not least in the science-fiction publishing mainstream, its centrality for black British art was beginning to slip and shift. In the same year that Egan's *Diaspora* was published, the British artist Keith Piper assembled a series of digital compositions that he entitled *The Fictions of Science* (fig. 1). One of its montages enlarges Piper's own face, putting a ruler to his cheek, clamped in place to measure the distance between his left nostril and his ear. This was an artist's response to a certain problem: how to explode a myth – by drawing attention to the fiction of its claims – surrounding the vaunted disinterestedness and boasted objectivity of scientific thought and practice. The primary operative fictions here are the findings of racial science, and by fabricating and parodying the somewhat clinical morphology of his own anonymised head, Piper had pressed art into a field of politics. Yet while Piper focused on science itself as a fiction, his work set me thinking about an artist's standpoint on the production of knowledge in another, adjacent manifestation of epistemic thought: the social sciences, more specifically, the domain of cultural theory and its rubric for an analysis of difference, migration, exile and hybridity.

Deploying the diaspora concept has been dynamic and politically worthwhile, helping to think through, and to dignify, the histories and

- 1 On this latter issue of airports, territory and mobility, focusing on responses from contemporary artists, see Jim (2014).
- 2 Egan has also written, ostensibly much outside the 'hard-sf' genre, on the plight of asylum claimants held at Australia's immigration detention centres, in his 'The Razor Wire Looking Glass' (2003). Published at <http://www.gregegan.net/ESSAYS/RAZOR/RazorWire.html> (accessed 8 February 2016).



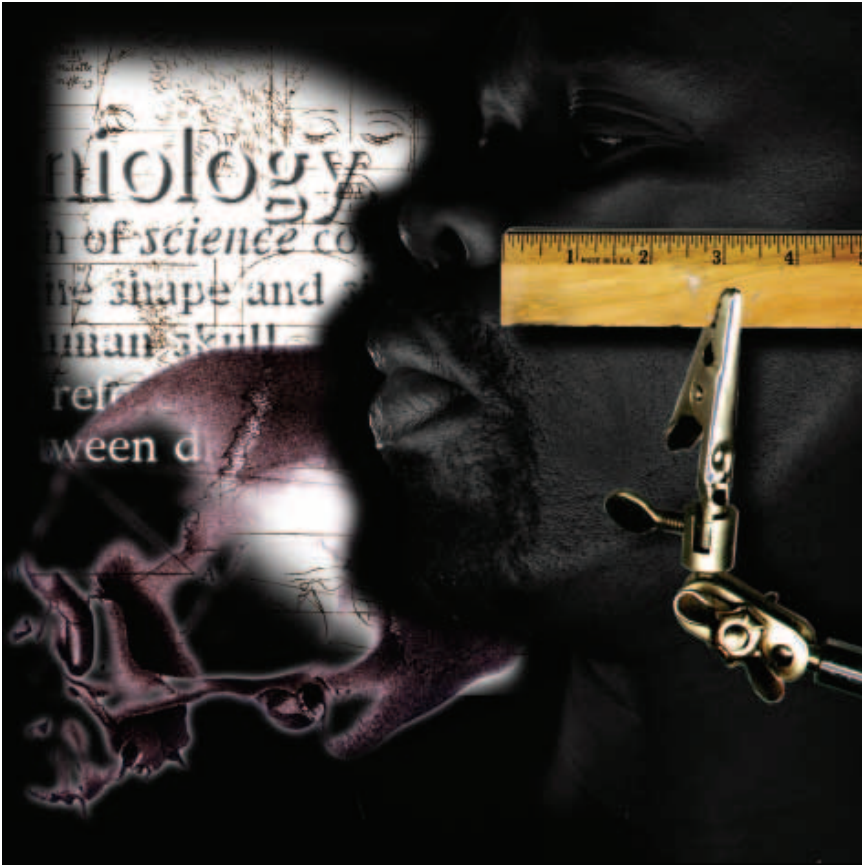


Figure 1: Keith Piper, *The Fictions of Science*, 1996, still image from video.

contemporary experiences of African, Asian and Caribbean people and their descendants in Britain. It is vital for elucidating the psychic and discursively intricate workings of modern subjectivity under conditions of displacement and cultural transmission. It has helped to establish a debate on national cultural identities and how they may be disrupted or countered by black British subjects. But that interest has also risked their art being allocated a separate and even a rather precarious place in the field of attention to contemporary British art. The study of black British art has drawn upon just a handful of theoretical paradigms. It has inspired writing that by some accounts strains to move in step with developments in art practice itself, which exceed the present scope of concerns with the cultural politics of 'race', ethnicity and nationhood.

The very language of definition and conceptualisation that was devised to assist this art and to lend its artists agency seems to have helped in creating some of its own barriers to thinking about art's wider and more lasting value.

Perhaps far too much is shared between critical theory and the ruler and crocodile clip of anatomical itemisation pictured by Piper. This art is less likely to be overlooked by scholars of culture than unduly encumbered by the terms and tactics that were devised to understand and celebrate its significance. While such art has played a role in resisting the marginalisation and exclusion of diaspora communities from a nation-space such as Britain, the danger of reducing art to its discursive content is considerable. There is nothing to be gained from abstracting aesthetic experience and translating it into a single critical lexicon. And if black British art may have largely secured its entry in a historical record of national culture, it may have simultaneously lost its place in a more contemporary and diversifying humanities.

Suffice it to say that Keith Piper's intervention against an initially Victorian fascination for the lumps, bumps and proportions of the human head is a signature piece for an extended problematising of cultural analysis in the field of diaspora and black British art. The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty famously noted that 'science manipulates things and gives up living in them' (1964a: 159), and 'objective thought is unaware of the subject of perception' (1962: 207). In breaking away from such abstractions of scientific thinking, works such as Piper's *Fictions of Science*, along with much other art featured here, set the tone against a stultifying (social) science fiction in favour of a more emancipated mode of philosophy.

### **Uncomfortable paradigms**

Before engaging with the possibilities offered by philosophy, it is important to uncover how black British art has become confined to demonstrating the 'language, textuality and signification' paradigm (Hall, 1996c: 271) of post-structuralist thought and subjected to what Barbara Stafford has called the 'ruling metaphor of reading' (1995: 6). This metaphor seems to suggest that encounters with art are made by a mind somehow removed from its body, so that training our attention too closely on art's significations alone may lose a sense of its broader, perceptual virtues. The reader of art takes visual objects as displaced spaces where meaning is constructed in complex, simultaneously

arbitrary and conventional ways, but nonetheless always diminishing the power of materialisation by rendering it secondary to language. The main motivation for taking art to be an encoded medium of communication – for rendering the visible legible – is one of trying to remove the element of chance, the ambiguity, discontinuity and sheer messiness of the imagination: ultimately, to try to clear up any doubt about the social value that art may have. Despite a general postmodern and postcolonial shift towards analysis of cultural indeterminacy, fluid identities and cultures ‘in-between’, such commentary has been quite frustrated in its efforts. Where it has tried to refuse fixed categories of cultural experience, it has nonetheless contended with the misunderstandings and pressures that circumscribe black British art. The most potent among these is the myth that such art subsists in an entirely separate sphere of cultural production or is accessible only by way of a particular route map or method.

This book speaks back to such outlooks on black British art, taking issue with an emphasis on the significations of difference that such artworks are presupposed to offer. I have identified elsewhere how this tendency has an impact on how such artists are framed and studied in the university and art school curriculum (Wainwright, 2010). Plainly they occupy a place well outside the main thrust of attention to modern and contemporary art and aesthetics, serving instead in the compromised role of a pedagogical resource with which to explore the recent histories of British multiculturalism, struggles to decolonise art history and so on. Black British artworks are often diminished in status, pushed back on to a grainy backdrop illustrating a surrounding nation fitfully working away at its race relations, such artworks being deployed as an idealised emblem of inclusivity and ‘tolerance’. At the same time, commentary has pointed to their potential for assaulting an ideology of ‘British culture’, while blithely ignoring how art and artists have already seriously undermined its hegemonic structure. A side effect within this economy of images is that artists in the notional ‘community’ of black British practitioners come to be interchanged all too easily with one another, since there is little to attune commentary to the discrepancies of vision that animate the diversity among artworks.

The problem stems from a general overdetermining choice about what is to be identified as cultural material in the first place. Indeed, I suspect that black British artworks are at a loss from a too narrow view of ‘the cultural’ and ‘the historical’. They sit in a far less plurivocal or differentiated intellectual space than they deserve, with little room left to wonder

about the alternatives. What expressly *philosophical* frames may come into use that would accord with the political desire for social agency that has been vested in the production of black British art? This book is an extended meditation on that question. It asks whether the current epistemology of art has not brought some adverse political consequences, and gauges the extent to which intellectual work on black British art has succumbed to a worrying degree of conformity. Might such art be seen with new eyes or according to new currents of curiosity and attention beyond those of cultural and historical contextualism?

The title *Phenomenal Difference* refers to making a difference to this field by working otherwise from the familiarly existing terminologies and research methods around black British art, by taking up phenomenological approaches as the starting point for such a transformation. The debate pivots on the original conceptualisations that may be found to bring us into an intimately perceptual relation with artworks, and reconnects to the creative ambitions of numerous black British artists who emerged at the end of the twentieth century, and those still practising today.

### Presence

What would happen if, as I propose, understanding of this art – as a visual register of language and textuality – were put at least momentarily to one side? One answer is that we are left with the *presence* of artworks themselves – in David Summers's words, 'that which is not simply before us but which "stands out" and concerns us, that to which we are in a sense subject' (1996: 6; cf. Maniura and Shepherd, 2006). To explore such a presence is important and timely for apprehending the art of black Britain. Indeed, black British artists can be meaningfully approached in terms of what David Freedberg has located as 'the effectiveness, efficacy and vitality of images themselves' (1989: xvii). This makes for a direct, perceptual and bodily embrace of artworks, showing how they have brought their viewers and makers into distinctive moments and modes of engagement. Focusing on the materiality and immediacy of artworks then becomes a way of seeing how their viewers enjoy complex encounters that are fundamentally aesthetic in character.

What follows in this volume is a search for the means to appreciate art and artists of African, Caribbean and Asian backgrounds in Britain both *within and without* the standard models of cultural analysis. Certainly this means looking at art that has circulated within a vigorously contested

cultural context: that of the struggle for belonging and nationality in Britain in the face of marginalisation, exclusion and racism, and more particularly, the rights of black British artists to belong and to be remembered and represented in canonical histories of art. But the value of art extends beyond what it may reveal about contexts of production and circulation, and so it is surprising that, for all the repeating theorisation of the 'relative autonomy' of contemporary art, hardly noticed are areas in the current exegeses of black British artworks that may unwittingly weaken its sovereign status. Black Britain's cultural politics of representation needs less reiteration than 'transposition' into a fresh understanding that is attentive to artworks and can augment their criticality. This is a fruitful arena of philosophical inquiry, its very starting point being the aim to reverse art's reduction to a theme of critical discourse, while seeking to build respectfully on the remains of a long-running campaign to take this art seriously and keep it open to intellectual scrutiny.

### Perception

I began the research for this book by talking to black British artists about the interconnected histories, ambitions and disciplinary locations of their art. Perhaps because I am from the first generation of scholars for whose training in postcolonial and critical theory came to be so central, I was not always well prepared for their responses. Many of those I spoke with would suggest that their material history – the art they had assiduously produced – had actually been buried under the weight of the same cultural analysis that ostensibly promotes black British art. Others would highlight, more simply, the gap between their visual practice and the record of debates about Britain's so-called 'black arts sector'. They saw that gap as a challenge to go further and apply the tools of black and diaspora cultural criticism to previously overlooked, uncharted artworks and artists.

A smaller set of artists took the longer view, suggesting that academic thought was so many steps behind the actually unfolding history of art. Art itself points the way for new intellectual work of a kind that neither the academy nor the wider world of exhibition curating had yet fully countenanced. If only we took the time to review artworks with the appropriate individual attention, setting them apart from the general background of analytical 'noise'. It was a crucial instant for me when the range of artists' voices that I had heard came to persuade me of one

thing: to stop disavowing my primarily *perceptual* relationships with their art and to take licence to begin embracing them. At which point, what moved to the middle of my vision was the multilayered experience of art, the rich interplay of thought and deed which so motivates artists, and which they can be so effusive about. I then could see why artists had felt the need to hold on to the right to make art. Based on my dialogues with artists, I resolved to find out how such a primarily phenomenological interest can reassert that sense of self and purpose (thereby unburdening a growing weight of disappointment), and to show why it is now high time to give black British art its pointedly philosophical due.

### Labelling

The same considerations about recognition extend to the naming of these artists, honouring personal choices made within the vortices of historical consciousness, art and politics. There are several contested terms used in my text that are pertinent to fraught issues of labelling and identification. These deserve to be customarily marked with inverted commas, but I have kept these to a minimum for the sake of clarity and to avoid testing the reader's patience. Rather than hide behind typographical devices, however (or casually suggest that we read such terms as if 'under erasure'), I have tried to tackle matters of disagreement more openly. There is a convention for grouping all diasporas in Britain (African, South Asian, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, East Asian and so on) under the term *black*, which was long ago established by authors in the field of black British cultural studies (see, for example, Gilroy, 1993a; Mercer, 1994). I have taken up this usage as a shorthand, and to indicate how this book has some of its roots in work in that area. But whether or not this conventional tactic of naming serves to bring actual political or social advantages for the individuals described is the very issue up for debate; and the same question could be asked about the effectiveness of identification with the diaspora concept.

Distinguishing this volume is its use of the terms black and diaspora to indicate only those individuals who have conceded to such descriptors (of course reserving the right to change their minds at any time). Obviously this has been hard to judge in some cases, and I took care over what artists were comfortable with in the course of our conversations, or what they have declared to be their associations through showing and presenting their works, organising, supporting or writing about themselves and other artists, giving permission for reproduction of their

works and so on. This is less easy than it sounds and in such idiosyncratic circumstances there are no guarantees of appropriateness or accuracy. Artists of Caribbean and African descent may in fact be less keen to pass under the black or diaspora label than those who identify with South Asian, Chinese or Middle Eastern backgrounds, especially if this means that their artistic interests will be undermined or circumscribed by critical attention to ethnicity and cultural differences.<sup>3</sup> And a generalised feeling of fatigue, and then of dismay, if not suspicion, has also formed towards the *black British* label. Understandably, many artists feel that the designation brings reductionist or anachronistic patterns of identification, akin to where certain American artists and thinkers have gone in the effort to move 'beyond black representational space' (English, 2007). In response, a chief aim of this book is to problematise such a proclivity and to respect the currents that make this such a sensitive terrain. It shows that a consideration of 'race' or ethnicity is not something we should leap to in trying to understand this art.

### Origins and the phenomenal

The alternative conceptual compass for this book, which orients my entire discussion, is the *phenomenal*. The phenomenal has a special part to play in understanding since it cannot be isolated merely as a theme of black British artists' practices, but is actually relevant to all of their artworks. Nor is the phenomenal something that we can expect simply to find *in* their works (nor as a meaning somehow 'behind' their art); rather it *is* their works, they are phenomena. Phenomena, or 'that which appears to us', are issues of perceptual and phenomenal experience relative to diaspora artists and their art which pinpoint the presence of artworks themselves, the depositions of material they have left behind, which discloses their histories in a particular and immediate way. This is not a separable or singular 'black British experience' (to which such art unproblematically corresponds), nor a cultural 'background' or 'inheritance', or any other euphemism for art as a representative sample or artefact of a static and bounded culture. Instead, black British art

3 The ground of this discussion, understandably, does not stay still. Dilip Hiro noted in 1992, specifically in relation to Asian Britons, that the term 'Asian' was the most appropriate label despite understanding Asians as 'politically black' given that they are racially 'disadvantaged and oppressed' (1992: viii). According to R. Victoria Arana, artists with a background in 'India, the Middle East, and other places' have been unsympathetic to the black label (2009: x).

itself is the primary visible and physical foundation for a material analysis whose deeper history is marked by Heidegger's sense of the work of art's 'origin' ('The question concerning the origin of the work of art asks about its essential source', writes Heidegger, reprinted in Krell, 1978: 143), yet in a quite different way from our more everyday use of the term.<sup>4</sup> It is pressing to consider perception as the means to apprehend the phenomenal in its primacy, through a philosophy of concrete experience that identifies the importance of origins through the lived body. The lead is offered by Merleau-Ponty,<sup>5</sup> especially the theme typified in his comment that 'Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them' (1962: x–xi). What emerges are the contours of a vividly corporeal understanding of works by black British artists, suggesting a critical sense of the intimate and entwined relationships between the phenomenal value and the representational capacity of their art.

### Artworks themselves

Any successful illustration of the purpose of such a phenomena-centred analysis largely depends upon being able to convey what it does. Part of my task is to avoid all constructions and impositions placed upon the experience of black British art in advance, which in this case would apply primarily to the theoretical character of the existing perspectives on them. Adopting such an attitude raises awareness of any prejudicial influence that might issue from the conceptual language and assumptions that have structured this field, avoiding any easy complicity with its terms, theoretical claims and pronouncements. Crucially, this is not directed by a struggle somehow to dis-embed the authority of those accounts, as would be the case for a mundane interventionism in which a single critical paradigm is displaced in favour of another. Instead, by moving

4 I should point out at the same time my sense of ambivalence and caution towards Heidegger, which is widely shared: 'Heidegger's unrelieved world-historical gloom falls within the kind of late-Hegelian totalization I have tried to avoid on principle, and, dangerous as the modern world has been and remains, and acute as Heidegger's critique of it has been, it still offers positive choices we must learn to make in terms of the values rooted in a revised being-in-the-world' (Summers, 2003: 19; cf. Boetzkes and Vinegar, 2014).

5 Merleau-Ponty first names the project of a 'phenomenology of origins' in the preface to his book, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962: xviii).



through the steps and stages of phenomenological thought, my aim is to augment the distinctive character of critical work on black British artists, namely by returning to artworks themselves.

Such an attitude of avoidance can only be adopted provisionally, it should be noted, and only as a philosophical procedure. The already circulating theoretical schemes applied to diaspora artists have held a role in the production of these artists' experiences, and so cannot simply be avoided unproblematically, as if there were some essential division to be made between how their works have been theorised and some other, more pressing reality. Indeed, such theoretical interests are writ large in the diverse views and opinions of those who populate the histories of black British art – the artists, critics, curators, arts organisers, archivists – and in the informed perspectives of many others. This book is designed to evaluate those established discourses of explanation while undergirding them with a more phenomenal understanding. This requires an ontological distinction to be made between theoretical discourse and black British art: a wavy line that allows us to recognise the linguistic and the material without overlooking their interactions and overlaps, and moreover the intellectual difficulties that their coexistence may pose.

Any desire to account for the social significance of black British artists must first face up to that material or thingly element of their histories – the artworks themselves – and the question of how they might be grasped through perception, as physical deposits that vie for primacy within the wider social imaginary. This direct inquiry into the material nature of art has the character of setting aside plainly social questions until a later stage of analysis – the exact pattern of the philosophical arc running through this book. Although drawing into view the notion that artworks present a codification of meanings (and are socially mediating by virtue of that ability to signify), a contrastingly phenomenal-styled account tackles in greater detail how these works exist for us perceptually. In other words, I consider how black British art discloses a rich phenomenal experience which must be levelled with assumptions about its roles as social or cultural media. This is an argument best made by turning to artworks through rich description, a detailed review of precisely *how* black British artists have created their works, how the complex fabric of this art enables the marking of cultural meanings in a more intersubjective mode.

While it is commonly recognised that cultural life in general consists of various significations of experience (through which diverse realities come to be articulated, commented upon and understood), by comparison,

the accompanying *experience of signification* is less often considered. Experience is transposed into signification, and vice versa, a relationship that consists through black British art being a field of practices. This art may be conceived as phenomenally present, indeed it may have *presence* as such,<sup>6</sup> and this attitude takes art to be a primary locus and the foundation for social questions about black British artists from the starting point of their art. Using such an intellectual aperture launches a debate about the oppositions and interactions between a phenomenal analysis and a more critically positioned account of black British art as a site of visual representation. The current approaches taken in studies of diaspora culture in Britain are based on the cardinal concepts of signification and discourse, and draw on theoretical terms generally operative in the discipline of cultural studies. There, scholars tend to explore the realm of ‘natural language’, or ‘the discrete instrumentality and systematic objectification of experience abstracted from experience for general use’ (Sobchack, 1992: 12), that is, a kind of both everyday and scientific use of language which circumvents experience itself through abstraction. Quite crucially, phenomenology opposes the view that these are the grounds for inquiry into embodied experience, and instead devotes attention to the processes of existence *before* the imposition of such systematic explanation. Focusing on the phenomenal gives way to an understanding that is not permitted by critical attitudes and helps in grasping the dynamic perceptual concerns of diaspora artists. The phenomenal relations made possible by their artworks are in turn levelled with the realities faced by black British artists.

The chapters of this book deal sequentially with these issues and problems. They show why it has become urgent to consider phenomenological themes across a range of visual works made by black British artists, including sculpture, installation, photography, video and digital art, painting and drawing. Chapters 1 and 2 (‘Representation’ and ‘Affective relations’) dynamically and graphically state the purpose of the book, from the starting point of vivid descriptions of signature artworks by Perminder Kaur and Manjeet Lamba. Lamba’s watercolour entitled *Arrival* pairs a colonial Briton with an elderly Indian man, contrasting the former’s calfskin shoes and signs of imperial power with the homespun cloth and

6 In doing so, I take up the combined sense from David Summers’s definition of presence: ‘*Praesens* is a participial form of *praesense*, “to be before,” which it means in two senses: the first is simple, spatial, prepositional location; the second involves precedence or command, being higher in rank, more important than’ (1996: 6).

respectful comportment of the latter, in a play of asymmetry and opposites. Kaur's installation, also entitled *Arrival*, is an entirely non-indexical rendering of potentially similar themes, loosened from such a reading by its aesthetic exploration of two clusters of steel arrows, spiked rods driven into the wooden floor of a gallery, topped with fragile, hand-cut glass containers. In their divergent creative approaches – and high potential to trigger a critical reading of their convergent meanings – these works serve to underscore the case for a careful philosophical treatment of this art. The tools for such work can be found in Heideggerian and Merleau-Pontian thought, assisted by ideas from more recent thinkers such as Jacques Rancière, Zygmunt Bauman, Hal Foster, Rasheed Araeen, Alfred Gell and Jean Fisher, as well as by black and Asian artists, curators and critics who have been integral to shaping the British context. With their contributions in view, these chapters launch a discussion of the dynamic interaction between phenomenological and critical approaches that forms this book's theoretical architecture.

Chapter 3 ('Placing the past') explores the consequent shape of an alternative theorisation of this art, in which artworks operate as both signs and things in a productive 'making present' of diaspora historical consciousness. It shows how artists have looked to the past as a strategy for inscribing themselves in the present and for contesting their contemporary circumstances. This discloses a range of experiences that phenomenological initiatives may equip us to understand more fully. A case study of Keith Piper's installation *A Ship Called Jesus* becomes the focus for overlapping concerns with personal memory and post-memory, for the intersecting histories of the black Church, plantation slavery and group resistance through image-making. Memories of childhood, elicited in Sonia Boyce's celebrated pastel drawings – often mistaken for painted portraits – are cardinal to forms of visual efficacy that allow the celebration of individual and shared histories. Through them, these artists have practised a form of 'visual historiography' that touches on both personal and collective pasts – whether historically 'evidential', imagined or fictive. My close descriptions of these works in this chapter recommend the primacy of a distinctively 'phenomenal' response to the central question of how to grasp the emotional and perceptual dynamics of this art.

Chapters 4 and 5 ('The body and perception' and 'Equivalence') pursue a phenomenal analysis along several specific avenues, by thinking about the body (e.g. the 'body image') in the making and experience of a range of visual works. These chapters examine the perceptual relations between vision, colour and touch, showing how black British

artists have treated hair, hairpiece, body parts, both animal and human, medical collections, preserved food and a spectrum of other ephemera. Chapter 4 features Vanley Burke's black-and-white photographs of ecstatic bodies in charismatic worship, locked in the drudgery of manual work or exploding in protest at a street march; *The Traveller* by Shanti Thomas, her mother and child wrapped in diamond-blue cloth, breathing sooty air at a train station; Juginder Lamba's water-smoothed wooden assemblage *The Cry* and his toiled-over *Pod* series of organic vessels and filaments; Mona Hatoum's endoscopic journeys around her own body; Zarina Bhimji's *Vulnerable and Sticky*, disgorged brains on silk; and Sonia Boyce's *Afro Blanket*, a curly patchwork carpet of scalps. The analysis is set in motion by an account of the South African painter Johannes Phokela, recounting his technique during an interview in the studio he uses when domiciled in London, and his unfinished painting *Mortal Diptych Surmounted by Cameo Emblems*, a response to Rubens and a litany of Flemish masters. 'I felt like a surgeon making it', he told me: 'I laid the canvas horizontally and bled paint through the slashes from behind'. This attention to the body, tactility, texture and sight is germane to these artists' otherwise critical artistic interests and, as I will show, it results in a special aesthetic fabric that interweaves vision and touch.

The discussion in Chapter 5 pursues such processes further by showing how Asian British artists have sometimes used image-text relationships in languages other than English to represent themselves in distinction from their African and Afro-Caribbean diaspora peers. I expand in particular on the significance of the language that accompanies Bhimji's discarded hair clippings, dropped on to soft white muslin, and her appropriated Mughal miniatures in the work *Live for Sharam, Die for Izzat*, a photo and text series; and Yeu-Lai Mo's jars of cooking ingredients – black fungi, bean sprouts, radishes and raw eggs. Mo's series of works 'begins with an obsession', as she told me, of her intriguing layered and undulating landscapes of gravy and noodles, and opens up an important emotional field. Building on this account of the overlapping of the senses, these two chapters draw on a long history of philosophical debate about the inseparability of perceptual experiences from 'making sense' as such. This should be of particular interest to historians of art who are seeking to entwine Cartesian models with more sensory registers of inquiry.<sup>7</sup> With the benefit of detailed descriptions of

7 For instance, by attention to the work of Peter de Hooch (see Bernstein, 2003).

individual artworks, chapters 4 and 5 debate the phenomenological idea of ‘equivalence’ (suggested in the early work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty), in order to suggest an identifiable scheme for embracing the perceptual along with the linguistic parities of such art.

Chapters 6 and 7 (‘Reversibility’ and ‘Interwinning’) advance the argument in order to deal with the analytic of ‘reversibility’ and ‘interwinning’. Such terms are suggested in the posthumously published work of Merleau-Ponty, and this chronological development in his thought bequeaths a structure to the book and its contribution to a philosophy of the experiential relations of black British art. Specifically, these chapters show how artists have established through art-making what the anthropologist Alfred Gell had called ‘personhood’. This process is evaluated and cross-examined by describing artworks that both disclose the presence of their makers – their bodily proximity to the image, for instance – and have a certain ‘presence’ of their own. Examples of such phenomena in Chapter 6 include Chila Kumari Burman’s colour-saturated cibachrome photographs, procedures based on intimate items from her wardrobe and garden; and Sonia Khurana’s videos and performances, her hypnotic screen projection *Breath* and her celebrated *Bird* sequence, in which she presents her nude, voluptuous body in a moment of failed flight; and the nuzzling and kissing of her own face, made possible in the split monitors of *Lone women don’t lie*. Chapter 7 features Mona Hatoum’s *Jardin Public*: the animation of steel furniture through the introduction of organic, hairy matter; and Sonia Boyce’s bare lovers against a London skyline, her graphic *Talking Presence*. The result is a detailed, interlinked debate that grounds such exemplary artworks in a philosophical discourse about their presence and efficacy, and discloses their status as worldly phenomena that demand serious perceptual attention.

Chapter 8, ‘Art and mediation’, and the book’s Conclusion, ‘The phenomenal as practice’, explain how all these close analyses bring the entire field of black British cultural studies on to fresh and original ground. I estimate the potential impact of the book upon current scholarly attitudes as well as the political climate in which artists live and work. A focus on the concept of ‘mediation’ allows me to raise the issue of how to examine the public display of art, and draws together works made by black British practitioners with several by individuals from outside the United Kingdom who have been shown alongside them. And by thinking about phenomenology as offering another ‘theory of practice’ – in which artworks are analysed as a mode of social agency

through the materialising of ‘affect’ – irreversible shifts can be made in current knowledge about black British art and political representation.

Chapter 8 leads with a discussion of *Alien Nation*, a touring exhibition which was among the last of its kind in Britain, commissioned when public funding for the promotion of ‘cultural diversity’ had not yet suffered the significant cuts that followed the global economic crisis that erupted in the last decade. What made it significant was how the exhibition attempted to hold a mirror to the expectations – indeed, the burden of representation – placed on artists of diverse backgrounds, through which state arts policies are articulated to the wider political agenda of ‘social inclusion’. While such art was in part treated as a medium of communication (through the paradigm of ‘art as media’, still promoted *inter alia* in the field of writing on black British culture) because of its shared interest in artworks and film, it nonetheless allowed visitors to experience the specificities of this art, through complex three-dimensional and site-specific installations. I alight on this development to explain why particular scrutiny of the ‘art–media’ coupling is urgently needed in the arena of black British art, in an effort to remove the obstacles to a more considered exploration of these artworks, one that centres on their intellectual contribution and historical significance.

Contemporary artists of many ethnic and creative backgrounds (addressed in this chapter are Hew Locke, Henna Nadeem and Kori Newkirk) have worked on aesthetic projects that promote in-depth interrogation of any monolithic conception of the aesthetic means and motivations of contemporary art. Even so, such artworks have been presented in curatorial projects that focus on an understanding of black and diaspora subjectivity that hastens a minimising of the role of art to that of messaging and visual communication alone. Although such conceptualisations of diaspora culture and identity have at times worked in favour of black British artists, as circumstances have altered with lessening public support for them, the problems and legacies of these older critical frameworks have come into clearer view.

The Conclusion sets out these issues in summary, going on to discuss what such art seems now to need: a radical rethinking about its value, through a newly positioned, expressly philosophical response. The close descriptions given in the chapters of this book show up the necessity and the measures to be taken for considering simultaneously the complex perceptual and emotional as well as intellectual, historical and social relations that pertain to the art of British subjects of a range of marginalised ethnicities. The book closes by revisiting Rasheed Araeen’s

historical criticisms about the failure of historiography and exhibition curation to recognise the value of this art beyond a limited lexicon. It is a point developed by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's insights about the militant assertion of cultural identities in globalised, metropolitan cultures, which I take up with contributions from Rancière, Latour and other thinkers.

### **Phenomenology at work**

I would suggest trying to challenge the prevailing critical preoccupation that sees black British artworks as markers of ethnicity, as discursive and signifying, by engaging with the processes of correlating and mobilising subjective experience through a broader, sensible world of aesthetic materiality. Such art should be embraced for the way that its artists locate themselves within the British artistic milieu, and shared aesthetic and philosophical traditions, in an effort to transcend the legacies of marginalisation and exclusion. Recognising this while building on critical commentary requires a carefully approached form of 'strategic phenomenology' (Wainwright, 2003) that is focused on diaspora culture. I name this approach as such since the aims and the results of this book are far from a 'pure' phenomenology, but rather a transformative turn to attend to art's phenomenal presence, putting phenomenology to work, pressing it into better service. A firmer sense of the skein of relations between artists, art audiences and artworks themselves comes simultaneously with a view of art's critical and phenomenal presence: its embodiment of values, its social agency and cultural politics, and its sensual and affective power.

As such, this book approaches creative work by black British artists in order to understand how their art objects offer multiple sites in which language, signification and discourse intertwine with vision, touch and the perceptual. It is an understanding intended to enhance considerably our sense of this art as important historical and material depositions which problematise the primary allocation of art to the conditions and discourse of difference. There is a need for a firmer and balanced sense of how diaspora artists' practices are perceptually present in the first place (how they have *presence* as such), while at the same time being culturally specific and contingent. This is at least one possibility for understanding the 'peculiar relations between persons and "things"', as Alfred Gell put it (1998: 9) in the setting of the art of several diasporas in contemporary Britain, re-examining them through what has come to be called the 'new

materialism'. These theoretical pathways lead to a space of debate about the political need to assess and assert such relations, which asks, in the special case of black British art, what we might want such accounts to deliver. This book's resolutions, such as there are, point to how such original approaches to art practice and diaspora culture can reverberate outwards, issuing first from a context of topical particularity in the black British milieu before making a wider phenomenal difference.