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BALTIC

John Akomfrah *Ballasts of Memory*



John Akomfrah, *Precarity*, 2017, Three channel HD colour video installation, 7.1 sound, 46 minutes 3 seconds
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BALTIC is proud to present *John Akomfrah: Ballasts of Memory*, bringing together three seminal works by the London-based artist, whose moving image works have offered some of the most rigorous and expansive reflections on the culture of the black diaspora, both in the UK and around the world. Exploring the development of his practice over the past decade, the exhibition features the European premiere of Akomfrah's film *Precarity* (2017), alongside *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012) and *Psyche* (2012).

Akomfrah began his practice in the early 1980s as a founding member of the influential Black Audio Film Collective, which started in London in 1982 alongside the artists David Lawson and Lina Gopaul, who he still collaborates with today. They were pioneering in their injection of narratives of black British history and culture into popular media through documentaries made for British television. Throughout the 1990s, Akomfrah's subject matter expanded beyond the social fractures of contemporary British society to focus on a wider historical context, from the persistent legacy of colonialism to the roots of the contemporary in classical literature. Moving into the early 2000s, Akomfrah also produced a series of atmospheric works addressing personal and historical memory.

Originally commissioned by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, New Orleans, Akomfrah's film *Precarity* makes its European debut at BALTIC this summer. The piece expands on a number of thematic concerns that appear throughout his entire body of work: the legacies of slavery and forced human migration, the diasporic experience, colonialism, and climate change. In *Precarity*, Akomfrah's signature cinematic style is used to convey the tragic story of Charles 'Buddy' Bolden, a turn-of-the-century cornet player credited as being a part of the origins of jazz music in New Orleans. A legend among early jazz musicians in Louisiana, Bolden's significance to the genre has been excised from history due to his struggle with schizophrenia and subsequent institutionalisation in 1907 at the age of 30. After his hospitalisation, Bolden was never seen in public again and died in 1931.

Precarity is as much a ghost story as it is a portrait of a historical figure. It is also a lyrical exploration of the city that gave rise to jazz – a development that owed itself, in large part, to New Orleans' position as a cultural crossroads between the North and South. The film presents a sonic and visual history of Bolden and his legend, the emergence of jazz and the city of New Orleans. With its constant footage of moving currents, water materialises as a recurring theme in the film. We are reminded of the extent to which New Orleans is a city 'tormented by water'. Sequences depict broken homes, flooded fields and empty warehouses, along with archival footage of breached levées from the 1927 Great Mississippi Flood, which in turn recalls the devastation that was caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The film traces a single life disrupted by the violent forces of racism, state power and the consequences of displacement within the African-American context. Akomfrah's dynamic, yet discontinuous expression of the life and legacy of one individual 'disappeared' and rendered 'precarious' by the violent forces of history and state power, reveals the inability of black individuals to have agency within history.

The Unfinished Conversation explores the personal and public archive of acclaimed cultural theorist and political activist Stuart Hall (1932–2014). For Hall, identity and ethnicity are not fixed, but are the subject of an 'ever-unfinished conversation'. Unfolding over three screens, in the film Hall discusses his discovery of his personal and political identities. Arriving in Britain from Jamaica as a student in 1951, by 1968 he would be one of the founding figures of the new left, a key architect of cultural studies and one of Britain's foremost public intellectuals. Stuart Hall's writings on power and the state, serve as vital texts and an important touchstone for future generations of black artists working in Britain.

Akomfrah weaves issues of cultural identity using a wide range of references that combine his biography with footage filmed in Jamaica, whilst connecting this to historical events. These include references to William Blake, Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf, Mervyn Peake, movements within jazz and gospel, set alongside news footage from the 1960s and 1970s. Identifying with Hall, Akomfrah said: 'To hear Stuart Hall

... speak about what it is to be different in society... gave you a sense not simply of self, but of agency, of what you could do with your life'.

The third work in this exhibition, *Psyche*, explores the importance of the face in film as a means to convey history. 'From the face will come the truth of the event', reads one of the work's titles. Akomfrah presents enduring images of anguish and grief repeated over three screens through a montage of scenes taken from films that have influenced him, such as Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1928 silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, Sergei M. Eisenstein's *Qué viva México!* (1979), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), and Peter Watkins's *Culloden* (1964).

The title of the exhibition *Ballasts of Memory* is taken from a phrase used by Akomfrah to explain why history matters. Speaking about the archive and the role of memory to keep things alive and in the public consciousness, Akomfrah has said 'one does need the ballast of memory, and the historical, just to come to balance.'

Notes to Editors

Press Contacts

Sutton

Fiona Russell, fiona@suttonpr.com

Nicole Sireilles, nicole@suttonpr.com

Images available:

<https://suttonpr.egnyte.com/fl/ywY9gw2gWc>

About John Akomfrah

John Akomfrah is a respected artist and filmmaker, whose works are characterised by their investigations into memory, post-colonialism, temporality and aesthetics and often explores the experiences of migrant diasporas globally. Akomfrah was a founding member of the influential Black Audio Film Collective, which started in London in 1982 alongside the artists David Lawson and Lina Gopaul, who he still collaborates with today. Their first film, *Handsworth Songs* (1986) explored the events surrounding the 1985 riots in Birmingham and London through a charged combination of archive footage, still photos and newsreel. The film won several international prizes and established a multi-layered visual style that has become a recognisable motif of Akomfrah's practice.

Akomfrah (born 1957) lives and works in London. He has had numerous solo exhibitions including ICA Boston, MA, USA (2019); Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon, Portugal (2018); Imperial War Museum, London, UK (2018); New Museum, New York, NY, USA (2018); Bildmuseet, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden (2015, 2018); Nasher Museum at Duke University, Durham, DC, USA (2018); SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA, USA (2018); Barbican, London, UK (2017); Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK (2017); Turner Contemporary, Margate, UK (2016); Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen, Denmark (2016); STUK Kunstcentrum, Leuven, Belgium (2016) and Tate Britain, London, UK (2013-14). His participation in international group shows includes: Ghana Pavilion, 58th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2019); 'Strange Days: Memories of the Future', New Museum x The Store, London, UK

(2018); Prospect 4, New Orleans, LA, USA (2017); 'Restless Earth', La Triennale di Milano, Milan, Italy (2017); 'Unfinished Conversations', Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY, USA (2017); 'British Art Show 8' (2015-17); 'All the World's Futures', 56th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2015); 'History is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain', Hayward Gallery, London, UK (2015); 'Africa Now: Political Patterns', SeMA, Seoul, South Korea (2014); Liverpool Biennial, UK (2012) and Taipei Biennial, Taiwan (2012). He has also been featured in many international film festivals, including Sundance Film Festival, Utah, USA (2013 and 2011) and Toronto International Film Festival, Canada (2012). He was awarded the Artes Mundi Prize in 2017, and has recently participated in the Ghana Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2019.

Forthcoming exhibitions include: 'Vertigo Sea', Base Sous Marine, Bordeaux, France; 'Purple', Garage, Moscow, Russia; 'Tropikos', Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA, USA and 'Mimesis: African Solder', New Art Exchange, Nottingham UK.

FILM CREDITS

Precarity, 2017

Three channel HD colour video installation, (7.1 sound) 46.03 minutes

The Unfinished Conversation, 2012

Three channel video installation, (7.1 sound) 45.48 minutes

Psyche, 2012

Three Channel HD, Colour, Sound, 8.58 minutes

TALKS & EVENTS

Saturday 6 July 2019, 13.00

Artist Talk: John Akomfrah

Venue: BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead

Tickets: baltic.art/akomfrah-events

John Akomfrah discusses the exhibition *Ballasts of Memory*, the ideas and research behind his recent work *Precarity*, and his practice and career, with Alessandro Vincentelli, BALTIC Curator.

Wednesday 23 October 2019, 13.00-17.00

Day Seminar: Akomfrah and the Archive

Venue: Culture Lab, Newcastle University, Newcastle Upon Tyne

Tickets: baltic.art/akomfrah-events

Newcastle University's Film@CultureLab will host a seminar *Akomfrah and the Archive*, in which the artist's distinctive and extensive use of archive material will be explored and used as provocation and inspiration for participants to think about the use of archive footage in their own practice.

Wednesday 23 October 2019, 19.30

Curated Film Screening

Venue: Star & Shadow Cinema, Newcastle Upon Tyne

Tickets: baltic.art/akomfrah-events

The Day Seminar will be followed by a screening of Akomfrah's *Handsworth Songs* (1986), along with related Black Audio Collective films presented in a curated screening at Star and Shadow Cinema, Newcastle Upon Tyne.

About BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art

BALTIC is a major international centre for contemporary art situated on the south bank of the River Tyne in Gateshead, England and has welcomed over seven million visitors since opening to the public in July 2002. BALTIC presents a distinctive and ambitious programme of exhibitions and events, and is a world leader in the presentation and commissioning of contemporary visual art.

Housed in a landmark ex-industrial building, BALTIC consists of 2,600 square metres of art space, making it the UK's largest dedicated contemporary art institution. BALTIC has gained an international reputation for its commissioning of cutting-edge temporary exhibitions. It has presented the work of over 460 artists of 60 nationalities in 220 exhibitions to date.

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