

JOHN

AKOMFRAH

HAUNTOLOGIES

5 Oct. – 8 Nov.
2012

Introduction

Hauntologies is John Akomfrah's personal meditation on disappearance, memory and death; on the ways that past events, even if unrecorded, haunt and influence the present.

This exhibition marks a shift in Akomfrah's practice, moving away from television and cinema contexts in which he has been operating since the 1980s, to return to his earlier experiments in the gallery space. Here, installation, image and sound expand and acquire an autonomy from each other, coexisting in a dialogue as they invoke past existences.



Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz / John Akomfrah

Interview with John Akomfrah on *Hauntologies*

BÁRBARA RODRÍGUEZ MUÑOZ Let's start with the title of the show, *Hauntologies*. Where does it come from?

JOHN AKOMFRAH The idea of *Hauntologies* comes from Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. In this text he was gripped by the idea of ghosting, of how the other invades and structures the self. I find it especially resonant because it alludes to questions of mourning and memory, to subjectivity as a scene of being possessed by the past and what he also called spectrality: the way in which the past haunts the present. It is not that the term absolutely fits what we are trying to do here, but it gives you an indication of the ideas and processes I'm hoping will come out of the show. Derrida has been a very important thinker for me for years, a silent partner; with this title I publicly acknowledge him as an ally in my work.

BRM So you mean how the past is influencing the present?

JA Absolutely, but this might not be apparent. It's spectral, it's the way that the present is over-determined by a series of absences, which are not necessarily tactile but they are active, they have agency.

BRM So you are invoking these specters in your works. Do you think that you can materialize them, give them a shape, a face?

JA Well, you don't want to play God, to pretend that you can make the immaterial material, but you do want to suggest that there are ways in which they can be invoked, find ways of corralling boundaries in which they might exist and their presence might be felt.

BRM Let the specters perform?

JA Yes, the performance of history is very important for me. I am trying to invoke

narratives that have the possibility of activating the present. By doing a show around the theme of hauntologies I aim to see how many connections I can build using influences and experiences from the past. In a way I'd like to say "I am ready for the phantom, I welcome it".

BRM This makes me think of history as a circle, rather than a line, and how it repeats itself and how the struggles of the past occur again in the present. So it's important to understand them because they keep coming back.

JA They do. I suppose this is what one could call a tragic vision of history, one that is never completely vanished or lost. Tragic in the Greek sense; these are forces that don't go away and most importantly they are not apparent. There might be the history of a black presence, for example, in this country stretching over 2,000 years, but people don't necessarily know it. The fact that they exist or co-exist with the present is not a guarantee that they will be consciously felt by anybody.

BRM Your previous works have been mostly conceived for cinema and television, with the structural and time constraints that this entails, although you have always managed to challenge and push these conventions. However, your most recent works have been conceived for the gallery space. What prompted this shift?

JA This is a good question because I'm thinking about this shift quite a lot these days. I have chosen effectively to turn back to the place where we started in the early 1980s. When the Black Audio Film Collective initially went into television we were arguing for excluded and marginal voices to be part of the mainstream, and at that time television provided the space for proposing these questions. We – together with other artists and experimental filmmakers – occupied a sort of fringe of television: Channel 4, midnight... I don't think that this space exists anymore. This is not necessarily negative, but our work seems to have met the needs and interests of television at a particular time.

Here the question of migrations is important; the set of sensibilities that initially migrated from the margins of society into the mainstream, and the hope that some of our concerns will stay, and I think that they have. However, I am not interested in the institutions themselves but in the questions. So it feels to me that the ways I want to reconsider these questions now are best suited outside the spaces of cinema and television. It's not to say that I've given up on them, but it will have to take something very interesting to bring me back.

BRM How does this shift affect the way you work?

JA The way we are starting to work now means that I can create my own space and can begin to respect the temporalities of the process. A good example would be *The Unfinished Conversation*. The kind of time I've taken to make this film would be impossible now in TV, nobody would give me a year and a half to play with the material. And imagine to be asked "are you sure you know where this is going to?" and for me to say "no". I need

a space that will license a process, rather than a product. My next projects will be research based, long-form and long-term. And the outcome will change as a result of what I discover, of what begins to suggest itself as I go along. Also television would not be able to show a three-screen piece!

BRM What are the challenges of the gallery space then?

JA There is a spatial challenge, how one houses a set of questions, how one migrates a practice which has been single screen based and showed in one particular platform, such as film and television, into the gallery space in its discursivity. Besides, suddenly it is not necessary to force one aspect of the film to live with the rest anymore.

BRM You can expand the films?

JA Yes, and each element – sound, image – can have a kind of relative autonomy within the space and yet connect with each other.

BRM This brings us to the audience experience in the gallery, a dynamic experience in space, rather than the experience in time of the movie theatre, as Raymond Bellour explained in the conversation with Eulalia Valldosera we hosted at the gallery last July.

JA Yes, it is. The other point he also made – which I think is interesting but I am not sure I completely agree with – is that the classical experience of cinema always involve collectives, sharing a moment, and that the minute one migrates from the cinema you have a post-cinema practice. That might be true but it seems to me that moving image artists who are particularly concerned, as I am, with the histories of cinema and trying to take ideas from it are aware that they are working in a post-cinematic way.

In the cinema the experience of temporality is concentrated, you can't leave (well, if you don't like the film you can always go) but the contract is – and I think that Raymond said this as well – that you are going to get a concentrated dose of time which is deciphered partly by your own associations. I guess that in the post-cinematic space there are these concentrations, but they are more discursive.

BRM Perhaps even more intuitive...

JA Yes, I think so. There is a militarised regime in cinema which involves yourself, your friend and your mother ... and don't make any noise, don't complain and we'll do our magic, while the gallery might sometimes approach this level of puritanism, but not wholly. I am scared of saying this, but the gallery feels to me a more democratic space in its offerings, not necessarily in its content; it implies a different relationship to the body, which is allowed to run. So I am fascinated to see what happens when one walks from *Perepeteria* to *At the Graveside of Tarkovsky*, it's perhaps a more Wagnerian experience.

BRM From your very first work *Hansworth Songs* in 1985, you have been working with

archival material and incorporating it into the films. What is it that interest you in digging into archives?

JA *Hansworth Songs* is almost certainly the first film that the collective and I made entirely by ourselves. But the reason why archival material fascinated us and became an obsession goes back years ago, to the experiments with colonial fantasy when it became apparent to me that a lot of the distinctions that people were using to make sense of themselves were based on archives that pre-dated us, that were not present in our encounter with others.

BRM You mean archives as systems of classification?

JA Yes, because they rely on an imaginary library of references, which are always related to questions of masculinity, colour, texture, physiognomy ... and the values that are ascribed to those features, which are very old. This applies not only to race but also to all kinds of identity. The minute you meet somebody you can call on a reservoir of assumptions and narratives that are the archive of our subjectivities.

People come with their own baggage, but they also make individual choices, we are not prisoners of the archives. But we can unearth these archives so more people can understand that they are making choices that are informed by these past narratives, so they can intervene in changing perceptions.

I was fascinated to discover that characteristics we thought to be European were actually formed in the encounter between Europeans and their "others". There are many books about the founding of European Modernity in which you feel that Europeans didn't necessarily arrive at the periphery fully formed. When they realised that there was a difference, they also realised that they had a position and an identity. In the archives there are in fact the same processes that went on in the formation of identity. This is what we have learnt from psychoanalysis: that somehow the Ego and the "I" comes into being by recognition of the other.

BRM As I understand, in this archival search there was the aim to find traces, to fill in the voids in history.

JA For us there was a sense that we were products of a lacuna, a void. There is a recurring phrase in *Signs of Empire* – one of the first films we made – in which a politician says, referring to the second generation of young black people: 'they don't know who they are and what they are, and really what you are asking me is how one gives them a sense of belonging'. Growing up in the '70s there was the sense of being lost to history. So part of the thrill was to discover that we were not an oddity, to discover that four hundred years ago there was a black kid that was baptised in the same church as me. We wanted to unearth something that was apparently impossible and that has been an obsession ever since. However, it's now taking different forms. When I was eighteen it was an existential quest, I wanted to find mirrors in history; now the considerations are more ethical and philosophical. What do you do about the past? How do you invoke memory? And by doing so, what uses do you want it to be put to?

BRM The new film *Peripeteia* takes as its starting point two portraits by the sixteenth century artist Albrecht Dürer, which are believed to be one of the earliest Western representations of black people. How did you come across the drawings?

JA If I hadn't gone into making films I would have gone into art history, which was one of my main obsessions when I was a child. I discovered these two particular drawings about twenty years ago in a very famous collection called *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. It's a five or six volume monograph, a huge monumental survey. So over the years I have become obsessed with this idea and the enigma of disappearance. These drawings are highly charged for me, almost totemic in what they mean: they are quintessential examples of the violence of history. Because these two artifacts, which attest to an existence at some point, also suggest that we don't live on a round planet but a flat one. Because everything about them looks like it went to the edge of the world and it fell off into oblivion. And I think that there are powerless and marginal figures like troubadours, religious groups, migrant communities, whose histories suggest that we live on a flat earth because their narratives and stories have just disappeared. So when you come across vestiges of that presence, one or two things that at the very least you try to achieve is an act of rescue. But it's a complicated one since I am not by any means suggesting that this is the truth, but I am trying to construct the kind of wall of affinity in which my interests, subjectivity and desires are pinned on at the same time as their drawings. As I said I am not playing God, I can't make them come back alive, but I can say they mean something to me, or that the idea of their existence suggests something to me.

They do shock you. I've looked at them so many times, so intensively that I know almost everything that a face can tell you. I can tell you for instance how old she is, that one of her eyes is damaged, that she is in her pre-puberty and she is preoccupied with something. It looks like this is not necessarily how she would dress, she looks uncomfortable, out of her zone. Now it feels like their past and what we have done with them in the film have fused, and they have an identity for me. The act of making the film transforms both myself and the artifact.

BRM The characters wanderings in the landscape are juxtaposed with close ups from Hieronymus Bosch's masterpiece, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

Why did you choose this Bosch painting?

JA For pretty much the same reasons as the drawings. It's clear when you look very closely that the black figures have been made out of some acquaintances with black subjects, that there was an encounter. Whether or not it's there to function as an allegory of excess and decline, for me this painting has always depicted a utopia, because it suggests that the Adamic space of our emergence was multicultural!

BRM We were all together...

JA Yes, always together from the beginning. It might be an allegory of lust, a morality tale, but actually the materiality of the work suggests otherwise, and this is the fascinating

thing about making images and paintings: they have a life that is independent of what they were supposed to say. It now exists as a record of a certain European encounter with the other. But there is still the mystery of who these people could have been? Where did Bosch meet them? What was their status? I always accepted them not as realistic representation but as real ones, they are not products of a fantasy.

BRM Could you talk about the possible life of the characters portrayed in *Peripeteia*? Who are they?

JA I suppose I want them to be pretty much like me. The most important thing is that they suggest an interior life. What could this interior life possibly be? This is when the archival photographs we finally used of their possible "origins" came in. The girl stands by a cliff and remembers two women who could be her mother and aunt, or they might be older people from the village she came from. But the fact is that if this young woman existed – and I think she did – and if she at any point in her life in Europe thought back – and I think she would have done so several times – and if she had imagined where she came from, these found photographs would have been a vision. We are giving them a plausible interiority and this inner chamber is populated by many possibilities: happiness, sadness, memories... And beyond that, once they acquire an ontology they are then free to move on.

BRM I believe that costume-dramas have been very influential in your practice. Why do they interest you?

JA Costume dramas are a staging of history. It is one of the first genres going back to Méliès and the Lumière brothers. Moving image came alive as a way of staging the spectacular, and one of the spectaculars is the past; the necessary fiction that an audience is offered so that in watching an image you are in the past. Cinema tells you all sorts of lies, such as the persistence of vision, which is a delusion that we buy partly because of our complicity with it. And costume dramas are to a certain extent the same; they offer this idea, this fiction, that one can have an unmediated access to the past. But this fiction isn't specific only to cinema. I am interested in exploring the theoretical and visual components of costume drama, and this exhibition is the beginning of this exploration.

BRM This brings us to your new work *Psyche* composed of fragments of films like Kevin Brownlow's *Winstanley*, Eisenstein's *Qué Viva Mexico!* or Straub and Huillet's *Ana Magdalena Bach*, among others. Is this new work a homage to these references?

JA Yes, it's a mixture of things. These are films that have been very important in my formation and that as I get older I keep watching more and more. So yes, again I want to credit a silent partner in this project. But I am also trying to select the paradigmatic documents from this archive of costume-drama that lay bare the questions I am interested in.

BRM By selecting the films or fragments of them?

JA Both. I want to unveil certain obsessions, patterns, pre-dispositions, preoccupations, which suggest that the genre is making demands on what one can do with it. I am using genre in a broader sense, we think of it as some sort of inert vehicle that you jump on and drive it and go where you want.

BRM But you don't...

JA Exactly, when you look at costume dramas you realise that there are certain inherent demands and conventions that are now so fixed that we don't even realise.

BRM Is this a way to critique or to reveal these conventions?

JA It is a way to make them apparent, because in these processes what I am also suggesting is how the rigidities of the genre reveal processes and patterns that we all undergo in real life, they are generic. So I am interested in the metaphorical value of costume drama. You can see how they all invest in the same thing, for example the face.

BRM Like in *Joan of Arc*?

JA Yes, because the face can speak of the past, how it could have been felt in the past.

BRM Let's talk about your new installation *At the Graveside of Tarkovsky*, which integrates excerpts of soundtracks from Tarkovsky films in a Tarkovsky-like environment, including a floor covered with pebbles, a concrete monolith, and a slide projection of different landscapes. This installation is also a new departure in your work.

JA Yes, it is a very new departure, but it is also a return to the very first thing I was involved in with Black Audio when we did a multimedia piece with a Martinican poet called Aime Césaire, who wrote a magnificent book called *Return to My Native Land*. This time I wanted to go back to sound, sounds as noise, as narrative, as a body. And I wanted it to talk to the images in a space of equality, not as subservient, not as a prisoner, or as the hidden cousin.

BRM But you are also giving it a shape with the installation?

JA Yes, this is what I am hoping will happen: that a renewed relation of equality between the elements will take place in the gallery in which there will be texture, sound and image, none of which will have the protagonism, but they will all be in some dialogue. The Tarkovsky piece has just about everything that I want to do now: it is a homage to a filmmaker who was very important to me; it not only uses elements from his films, but there are projected images that I've shot over the years and that have never found a home, and it is a collaboration with the one constant of my practice since 1982, Trevor Mathison, a figure that despite where I go, is always there. So it's a way to bring together all these elements in some relation in a gallery setting, and I hope that they will coexist without

discord and acrimony. I don't mind if they argue, but I don't want them to get hysterical in the argument.

BRM I am curious to see how the people are going to experience the soundtracks to Tarkovsky without the images and the narrative of the films. Listening to the sound, even if I don't see the images I can imagine them.

JA Yes, and I am forcing people to relocate those memories onto a new visual setting in which the images might have a relationship with Tarkovsky's universe but they are not Tarkovskian landscapes in the obvious way.

BRM They are evoking Tarkovskian landscapes...

JA Yes. Most of Tarkovsky's films were made in Russia, and the Russian landscape that he worked in was a very particular one, with a sense of decay which was really important to him, of ruins.

BRM Coming back to ghosts...

JA Exactly!

BRM In the exhibition, you are also presenting a new edit for *The Call of Mist* (1998), which was initially a BBC commission. What prompted you to make this new edit?

JA I had accepted a commission from a company called Illuminations to make a film about the first hundred days of Tony Blair's government. Dolly, the cloned sheep, was very much in the media at that time and I decided to do something about genetic engineering and cloning. But on the eve of my trip to the Isle of Skye my mother died and suddenly the question of mortality that the cloning debate raised became a private one for me. I am a clone of this figure who was leaving me, so what do I have that is unique? Because we were so close it never entered my head that there might be anything different between us, it's strange to say this but not even the gender difference registered with me. My father died when I was young, so I guess I didn't have the other to compare to. The piece became one for exploring questions of inheritance – genetically or otherwise – questions of mortality, what remains when somebody dies, and when something new is created what has it got that is unique to it, which were questions around Dolly's debate.

The main restriction I had was that it had to be ten minutes long, so all the biographical material about my mother was left out. At the time it felt like a betrayal to her, so I want to bring her back into the film. This also plays with the ideas of disappearance and death that we are exploring in the show.

BRM Closing in this way the circle of the exhibition...

Psyche Series

John Akomfrah's installation *Psyche* blends fragments taken from costume-dramas that have influenced him. Whilst *Psyche* pays homage to these films, it also creates an archival study of the genre's patterns and conventions, presenting them as paradigms of broader systems of representation.

To accompany the exhibition, a selection of five films that are directly related to *Psyche* will be screened in the gallery. Two of the screenings will be followed by discussions involving Akomfrah and guest speakers.

**Booking essential as places are limited:
carrollfletcher.eventbrite.co.uk**



Wednesday 17 October, 7pm

Kenneth Macpherson: Borderline

UK, 1930, 71 min

Significantly influenced by the psychological realism of G W Pabst and the montage techniques of Sergei Eisenstein, *Borderline* is a matrix of racial and sexual tension moving between the boundaries of black and white, male and female and the conscious and unconscious.

Produced by the Pool Group in Switzerland, this silent film with English inter-titles, is primarily noted for its handling of the contentious issue of inter-racial relationships, using avant-garde experimental film-making techniques. The film is now a central part in today's curriculum on modern cinematography.



Wednesday 24 October, 7pm

Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo: Winstanley

UK, 1975, 92 min

Based on the 1961 David Cauter novel *Comrade Jacob*, the film deals with the life story of the 17th Century social reformer and writer Gerrard Winstanley. Along with a small band of followers known as the Diggers, Winstanley tried to establish a self-sufficient farming community on common land at St. George's Hill in Surrey, but was quickly suppressed. As one of the world's first socialist living experiments, it has left a legacy of ideas that have inspired subsequent generations of socialist theorists.

The film's prologue was filmed in 16mm, and the rest in 35mm; most of the roles were played by non-actors and great efforts were made to produce a film of strict historical accuracy, including original battle armour and home-made huts and costumes, as well as virtually extinct breeds of cows, pigs and birds, and a barn transferred from Essex piece by piece.

The screening will be followed by a conversation between John Akomfrah and Mike Sperlinger, Assistant Director of LUX.



Sunday 28 October, 4pm

Carl Theodor Dreyer: The Passion of Joan of Arc

France, 1928, 110 min

In this silent film based on the historical transcripts of the actual trial of Joan of Arc, Dreyer's startling and innovative camera-work recreates the abusive atmosphere of the Inquisition, emphasising the actors' facial features by using close-ups to reveal the ulterior motives behind each question and each answer.

The Passion of Joan of Arc is widely regarded as a landmark of cinema, especially for its production, direction and Renée Jeanne Falconetti's performance, which has been described as being among the finest in cinema history.



Wednesday 31 October, 7pm

Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub: Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach

Germany, 1967, 94 min

Huillet and Straub's first full-length feature film consists of excerpts from Johann Sebastian Bach's works, presented in chronological order and linked by a fictional journal written by his second wife, Anna Magdalena Bach. Each work is typically presented in a single, often immobile take, with the musicians performing in the locations where many of the works were premiered, dressed in period costumes.



Wednesday 7 November, 7pm

Sergei M. Eisenstein: Qué viva México!

Soviet Union, (1931-32) release
date 1979, 90 min

In 1931 Soviet directors Sergei Eisenstein and Grigory Alexandrov and photographer Eduard Tisse began filming a highly stylized documentary on the people and volatile social climate in Mexico. Unfortunately, the lack of funds prohibited the film's completion until in 1979, when Alexandrov assembled the most definitive version.

With sequences devoted to the Eden-like land of Tehuantepec, the savage majesty of the bullfight, the struggles of the noble peasant and the hypnotic imagery of the Day of the Dead, *Qué Viva México!* is a vivid tapestry of Mexican life which, thanks to Alexandrov's careful restoration, takes its rightful place alongside Eisenstein's other legendary works.

The screening will be followed by a conversation between John Akomfrah and writer and critic T.J. Demos.

John Akomfrah

Alongside John Akomfrah's successful career in cinema and television, his work has been widely shown in museums and galleries including the Liverpool Biennial; Documenta 11, Kassel; the De Balie, Amsterdam; Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Serpentine Gallery and Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. A major retrospective of Akomfrah's gallery-based work with the Black Audio Film Collective premiered at FACT, Liverpool and Arnolfini, Bristol in 2007. His films have been included in international film festivals such as Cannes, Toronto and Sundance, among others. In 2008, he was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) and in March 2012, he was awarded the European Cultural Foundation's Princess Margriet Award.

Peter Watkin's *Culloden* (1964), which is also included in Akomfrah's *Psyche*, is being screened at **Tate Modern** on Saturday 6 October at 7pm as part of *Peter Watkins: Films, 1964-99*.

Culloden is a landmark of historical filmmaking that established the director's pioneering approach to fusing documentary technique and dramatic reconstruction. The film adopts the newsreel format to eschew the conventions of the period film, highlighting the reality of The Battle of Culloden to a contemporary audience at the height of the Vietnam War.

For more information please visit:

www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/eventseries/peter-watkins-films-1964-99

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