

# more of an avalanche: Nick Aikens and John Bloomfield transcript

**John Bloomfield** 00:01

Hello, hello, we should we should start. So welcome to Wysing, i'm John Bloomfield, the assistant curator at Wysing and curator of this exhibition, 'more of an avalanche'. Thank you all for coming to Wysing's, what's turning out to be quite a nice day. We're very lucky to have some really brilliant speakers today who are going to help us unpack and explore some of the themes of 'more of an avalanche'. I hope you've had a chance to look around and to see the work that we've really been excited about over the last 12 over the last 12 months. If not, there'll be some time during the break and the exhibition doesn't actually finish until tomorrow afternoon. So if you want to spend the whole weekend at Wysing you, you're more than welcome to do that. So I'm just gonna say a few words about the exhibition before we begin. The first exhibition of the year at Wysing traditionally presents work produced here over the previous 12 months and one of the initial aims of this exhibition was to acknowledge that a lot of the work that goes on here is ephemeral, discursive, experimental or still in development and that an idea pursued in a formal symposium, a kitchen table discussion, or a brief moment during a DJ set could be as important as a material form. So I was very keen that the exhibition reflected the fact that the bedrock of Wysing's program is really made up of these kinds of moments, residence, these retreats, events and a music festival. So it's an exhibition that attempts to temporarily pin things down to take a snapshot of something that's

always moving. And so with that in mind, I'm really excited that today's event will close the exhibition by agitating things and getting them to move again by unfixing things. As you, as you may know, the thematic starting point of the show was to think about sensitivity, and political importance of that and already with today's events we're removed from that, and ready to explore some diverse sub themes such as intergenerational conversation, sickness and crip theory, anti assimilation and the dissolution of spaces for both critical conversation and club culture. So we'll begin by hearing from Nick Aikens a curator at Eindhoven's Van Abbemuseum, co-curator of the fantastic 'The Places Here' exhibition, some of you may have seen at Nottingham Contemporary, South London gallery, or MIMA last year, and curator for a brilliant new retrospective of Rasheed Araeen. Nick and I will have a conversation in which I'll invite him to draw on this research to contextualize 'more of an avalanche'. This will be followed by conversation between Raju Rage and Trishna Shah in the gallery. So we first saw a version of Raju's installation, 'Undervalued Energetic Economy' when Raju was in residence at Wysing last year and the work has been, I would say, absolutely central to the development of this exhibition. So we're really pleased that Raju can be here and can be joined by Trishna, one of the contributors to the interview portion of the work and then following a short break, we will have three presentations expanding on some of the exhibitions themes. Artist Leah Clements will talk about a newly forged network of art practitioners interested in issues around sickness and crip theory, who Leah has invited to be in residence at Wysing later in the year. Leah has brought along a new virtual reality work that explores some of these ideas 'Sick Bed' that you are invited to explore during the break, so that's available at reception. And then current artists in residence Phoebe Collings-James will present research around a new work she is developing with Last Yearz Interesting Negro, Jamila Johnson-Small. This new

collaborative work will be embodied for a symbiotic relationship between dance, music, and sculpture, and will ask what an anti-assimilationist practice might look and sound like in 2018. Following that, we'll hear a presentation from Elijah, a DJ producer and co-founder of the label Butterz and current associate artistic director of the Lighthouse in Brighton. Elijah will be discussing 'Last Ounce' a project he instigated that looks into the rapid changes affecting UK club culture. Finally, we'll have an open discussion which Nick will chair in which will get a chance to connect some of these disparate themes and hopefully to hear from you in the audience. So at this point, I just wanted to quickly mention that we've also been joined in the audience by two of the artists in the exhibition Harold Offeh, who you might recognize from the photo series in the gallery and Zinzi Minott who produced the fantastic 'Gum Fingers and Opaque Bullets' film in the open studio, so we may be lucky enough to hear from them as well. Okay, so just to formally introduce Nick. Nick Aikens has been a tutor at the Dutch Art Institute art practice since 2013. He's currently a curator at the Van Abbemuseum. Recent and ongoing projects focused on the 1980s and specifically the UK Black Arts Movement, and a retrospective monograph on Rasheed Araeen. So the idea of this conversation is perhaps quite perverse, it's to introduce the themes of one exhibition by talking about a completely different project. But I guess the hope is that by revisiting Nick's research into the 1980s in the UK and the Black Arts Movement, we might be able to build up a bit of historical context for what's happening in 'more of an avalanche', and to look at, to look at this show with a longer historical lens and to kind of maybe, draw out some other questions. So, Nick, could you be able to start by saying some brief words about the two projects, research project.

**Nick Aikens** 05:47

Sure. So firstly, thank you, can you hear me? Thank you very much John, and everyone at Wysing for having me. It's lovely to be here, on the last weekend of the show, and congratulations on the show. It's really, it's really wonderful to see having seen the images. And so yeah, as you said, it's slightly slightly strange and one feels slightly uncomfortable coming into a moment where you're celebrating under your show, and then to start talking about one's own projects, which happened elsewhere. But maybe it can conserve to, as you say, pull out some, pull out some threads and give a kind of longer, longer lens. So maybe I'll begin with 'The Place is Here' exhibition, which was a show that began actually in a kind of in another guise in Eindhoven where I work under the title 'Thinking Back: A Montage of Black Art in Britain', and that was part of a larger exhibition that looked at the 1980s from different perspectives across Europe. And the aim of that exhibition was to try and analyze or think about the importance of the 1980s for today. We were working with a number of partners, collaborators in different institutions in Europe, who for different different moments have all arrived at the 1980s or thought about the 1980s, as this moment where this very important change takes place, between how governments and state and civil society, the public, relate to one another. A really important shift seemed take place in the 1980s, where these were where governments and the state started to, governments and the public started to mean different things to one another. And that could happen in the kind of the transition in Spain after the end of Franco's dictatorship, it can happen in the end of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, or it can happen in Thatcher's Britain. So this 1980s is this really important moment where we're kind of we're living with the ramifications of that today. And within that I, being a, being British wanted to think about the 1980s from the perspective of Britain and of course, one begins with Thatcher when one thinks of the 1980s Britain. And so I started this research in the 1980s Britain, reading Stuart Hall's

texts around where he introduces the term Thatcherism. And from there to cut a very long story short, I went on a kind of a journey to discover the group of artists, thinkers, filmmakers, activists, who've become associated with this not unproblematic term, the Black Arts Movement, which none of the artists within associated with it would would adhere to, or conform to, but it allows us to, to kind of group a sort of certain discussion together. And so within within the show in Eindhoven, it was kind of set in context to these other European perspectives. I was then invited to develop that show in Nottingham Contemporary with the director, Sam Thorne. And then it became a kind of standalone exhibition in a very different, very different thing for many different reasons. A, you're not looking at it as this kind of polyphonic to use your term configuration, but you're looking at it as a standalone thing. It's in Nottingham, in the Midlands, where many of these conversations between the artists happened. And of course, it's the most kind of, although there's been lots of lots of work into this period in the 1980s. And looking at Black artists in Britain in the 1980s. It was the kind of most ambitious and largest coming together with some of these artists. So it becomes it becomes a whole different thing, a whole different enterprise and, and quite sort of loaded in a certain way. And one of the premises of the exhibition, both in in the Van Abba and then in Nottingham and then in South London, was to think about this term montage when thinking about the 1980s and to think about montage both as something that happens within many of the artists work. So practices of collage, montage and filmmaking that's happening with the film collectives who are working in the 80s. But also to think about it as a curatorial device as a way of working, how do you bring different elements together to create a, a snapshot of something in a particular moment? And how do you bring different histories together? How do you bring the 1980s together with the present moment? How do you think about this juncture, this constellation of different histories

and moments? And of course, for the artists working in the 1980s, that was really important. How could they? How could Lubaina Himid think about Toussaint Louverture and the first successful uprising in Haiti? How could she think about that in relation to Thatcher's Britain, you know, so this idea of montage of, of history kind of reforming in the present became a very important device within the within the show. And of course, the this, this allowed me to say, okay, this is not about marking a beginning and an end of a movement. It's not about tracking a certain chronology. It's about bringing together a kind of conversation bringing together, bringing together these different elements, and to put them alongside one another and to say, okay, this is not fixed. This is constantly, constantly in flux, constantly in movement. And so in, in Nottingham, we had over 40 artists, over 100 works, a series of archival presentations that were curated by people either working in the 80s, or who have since formed archives, artists like Marlene Smith, Claudette Johnson, Keith Piper, who were working on the Black Art Group research project Lubaina Himid, with her 'Making Histories Visible' archive in Preston. Jim Giovanni, who has a film archive, so to bring those archives with into the show, and to kind of really think about how histories are formed, how they're archived, and to also contextualize some of the material within the exhibition. So that exhibition was in its kind of largest guise, I guess, in Nottingham, and was then reconfigured in the South London gallery, later in the year, and also in Middlesbrough. And what the kind of, I think what was so interesting about having the opportunity to rethink those exhibitions is you could really stress the fact that with different combinations of works, different combinations of artists, different combinations of archival materials, different stories emerge, different histories can be told. And I think that was one of the most important things for me about the exhibition is that we understand history, these histories, histories in toto, as very fluid as things that are always changing, depending

where you're looking from depending who's telling them depending on the context you're in, and I think it's something that is probably resonates with the exhibition here, both in terms of this idea of polyphony, but also in terms of the kind of intergenic intergenerational perspectives that that the exhibition speaks to. So that may be a bit rambling, but that kind of hopefully give some sense of the of 'The place is Here' exhibition. Rasheed's retrospective is more straightforward to talk about, in a certain sense because it was a quite a classic retrospective Rasheed Araeen, who's an artist who has been working for the past 60 years. Since 1964, he's been living in London. He was born just outside Karachi. He has been a is a painter, sculptor, perhaps probably most well known as the founder and editor of The Text journal, really vital contributor to post colonial anti-colonial theory in the 90s and 2000s. And Rasheed's retrospective came out of the 80s show. So when I was doing the 80 show, and Rasheed was such an important figure, for many of the artists working in the 80s. He was an older generation. And he was invited to speak at the first National Black Art Convention in 82 in Wolverhampton. Of course, he curated 'The Other Story' in 89. And I was realizing when researching 'The Place is Here' exhibition that Rashid as an artist, as a thinker as a figure, was was everywhere. And then I started looking kind of looking back at his work into the 70s. His performance work in the 70s. Going back into the 60s, his minimalist sculptures, and even to his paintings in Karachi. And then going forward to more to more recent work and realizing there was this extraordinary body of work, and this extraordinary story of Rasheed's that had never been told. And you know, as a curator working in a museum, this is this is gold dust. Okay, here is you know, here's here's the story that needs to be told this needs to be made public. And so with, you know, I went to see Rasheed in his studio and very quickly it said okay, we need to make this retrospective we need to make this chronology, chronological tracking of, Rasheed's contribution or

Rasheed's Rasheed's story. So the show is divided into five chapters, which roughly demarcate different periods in his life and his work. And we did a big, a big monograph that went with it, which included kind of 500 works to really make public this body of work what it was, because there was bits and bobs here and there, but no one had put it on paper and say, Okay, this is, this is Rasheed Araeen, this is his work and, and that's what's there. The show is just finished in in Eindhoven. And it will tour to Geneva, to Malmo in Geneva. And then we'll come to the UK, it will be in Baltic, in October, and then on to Moscow. So if you're in the north in October, please come and see it. There's my plug. \*laughs\*

**John Bloomfield** 16:12

In that show, which is arranged chronologically, as you said, we see an artist arriving in the UK and facing a form of institutional deflection. So there's a period firstly wherever Rasheed Araeen is rejected by various institutions where he has trouble showing work quite simply. And this is followed by attempts to both kind of change those institutions from within so the kind of correspondence with I think, is it the, is it the Arts Council about organizing the 'The Other Story'?

**Nick Aikens** 16:46

Yeah well, it's with the Southbank Centre.

**John Bloomfield** 16:49

The Southbank Centre. So to change those institutions from within, so organizing 'The Other Story' at the Hayward gallery, but then also to build his own institutions with first Black Manifesto in the 1970s, and then Fair Text slightly later on. So I just wondered for



a bit of context, if you could sketch out the funding and institutional landscape as it was, in most decades, for black asian and minority ethnic artists. So just quite simply, where would the opportunities have been?

**Nick Aikens** 17:22

So I, I'll talk about it from the perspective of Rasheed because now I'm on perhaps safer ground, rather than pretending to be an expert on the minutiae of funding in the 70s. But so Rasheed writes to the Southbank Centre to Andrew Dempsey, in 78, with the first idea to do a survey, a kind of intergenerational again, survey of artists, diasporic artists working in Britain in the post war period. And he and he suggests this show because there's just been in Southbank Centre, an exhibition of all women artists, and he says, this is incredibly important moment for the Southbank Centre in Britain, now is the time to do a show of black artists in Britain and to analyze their their kind of contribution towards modernism. He doesn't get a response for I don't know, six, seven months or so, and it takes 11 years before this exhibition is subsequently realized. Those 11 years in terms of funding possibilities, mark a huge kind of seismic shift in the way places like the Arts Council, Greater London, Channel Four, all start making money available to working with, working with black artists working with different community organizations. So I suppose in the 1970s, you could say that, this was, there was no possibilities whatsoever. And Rasheed's suggestion was, was, as I say, took six months even to get a response to say that this was not a possibility. By 1989, 'The Other Story' takes place at the Southbank Centre, I mean, we can talk about what happens after that actually, which I think is equally important. But through the 1980s, through the GLC through BFI there is a there is a huge shift in terms of resources being being made

available. How they're used, we can again talk about and discuss, but that's when the shift occurs in the 1980s

**John Bloomfield 19:48**

Okay, sort of, so in that kind of initial period of frustration when use again using Rasheed as a case study where was he able to show or kind of get critical feedback about his work? Where would where would work have been shown and discussed.

**Nick Aikens 20:07**

And so in the case of Rashid, the only space really in the 70s was Artists For Democracy. There's formerly Signals which was run by Dave Medalla, where he was doing a really interesting program of international artists. This is where Rasheed had his first solo show in the mid 70s, where he first did the performance, 'Paki Bastard: Portrait of an Artist as a Black Person'. And David Medalla, for Rasheed was, was really significant figure in terms of his kind of political and theoretical education in a way. Of course, when you come to the 80s, and many of the artists working in the places here, they're doing a lot, a lot, a lot of self organizing. So the shows are, they're curating the shows, they're organizing the shows, they're putting them on. Firstly, in, you know, kind of university spaces, they're organizing the convention, like self organization, collective organization is key to the extraordinary energy that's happening at the beginning of the 80s. By the by, by mid 80s, you've got a lot of the galleries. Interestingly, outside Europe, I saw on Raji's diagram London centric was, was the thing that came up a lot of the activities happening outside London, you know, places like Bluecoat, in Liverpool, in Sheffield, these institutions and you'd go to some of the regional collections, they've got amazing work from the 1980s, because they were the ones paying attention. They're the

ones buying it. So again, by the mid 80s, you've got this shift and then of course, you know, in 89, late 80s, you've got the Whitechapel Gallery show 'From Two Worlds', you've got 'The Other Story' in 89, then it's kind of, you know, London, wakes up and takes notice, but it took a long time for that for that to happen.

### **John Bloomfield** 22:11

One of the things that's really, really striking, looking back at that, at the moment when funding starts to be kind of released for groups like him, like audio or sound for film and videos, and just to think about the spaces where those works would be would be would be seen. So, in 'more of an avalanche', there are two works by The Newsreel Collective who work group who worked with young people on the Eastend of London to make kind of educational issue based films. So there's one that kind of really thinks about race and racism, 'Divide and Rule Never', and one 'True Romance, etc', that thinks about sex, gender, and stereotypes. And one of the original members of the group, Paul Morrison came to see the show. And we, I asked him that where would these were these films have been shown, and they were because they were educational, as you might expect, they were shown in schools, but also in all of these kind of spaces, which have, like disappeared now. So like youth clubs, community centers, he said it was quite common to have rooms made available by by local council. And I mean, that's kind of maybe looking at in an educational context. But it was that kind of...did you come across that kind of looking at kind of,

### **Nick Aikens** 23:32

I mean, I think also a lot of the, a lot of the film collectors, for example, Black Audio, cheddar??, Sankofa, they're organizing a lot of workshops, community based workshops

in terms of like how to make film, how to edit film, how to produce film, and a lot of these things, yeah, a lot of these things are happening on quite a low key level. And you've got, that's made possible because in the instance of the film collectives, Channel Four are giving long, long term funding to these organizations, which is extraordinary imagine Channel Four now, giving, like, two three year bursaries to, you know, to a film collective, a young film collective. So and and part of that remit was to go out and do workshops, filmmaking workshops. And so yeah, there was a lot of a lot of activity that was happening away from away from gallery spaces and away from institutional spaces.

**John Bloomfield** 24:38

That's quite interesting. That was a sort of stipulation of the funding that it would....

**Nick Aikens** 24:42

Yeah, exactly.

**John Bloomfield** 24:43

Okay,

**Nick Aikens** 24:44

Exactly.

**John Bloomfield** 24:46

You give a context for the work as one where a generation of black artists who've gone to art school and looking for images of black people in the media and art history, but it only presented with a very white European art history. So in this exhibition, 'more of an

avalanche', many of the artists have been able to look back and see work produced by the very generation that you've researched for those projects. And there are kind of many examples of influence, even direct conversation or pedagogical links between the two, and kind of intergenerational conversation sort of really emerges as a key theme in the show. But I was wondering where ultimately to the generation you researched, have to turn to find what they were looking for. You gave the example of Lubaina Himid looking back at kind of big history, looking at the founder of...

**Nick Aikens** 25:40

Yeah, I mean, I think the the, the story that I was mentioning, this was Claudette Johnson, who ?? talk about a lot of the artists talking about going to their art teachers at art school, and, you know, saying, where are the, where are images of, in Claudette's case, where images of black women and articles, art teachers saying quite simply, there aren't any they're not there. They're not. They're not there. And the and the, and the black artists aren't there in terms of the art history. So this was like a, this was a just a kind of de facto inbuilt exclusion or amnesia or blindness. That was what was there in art schools. And, you know, I think it's, it's also really important to say that when we're talking about these artists, we're talking about many different positions, groups, so not want to kind of give some sort of homogenous overview. But you know, you've got for the, for artists like Eddie Chambers working in The Black Art Group, they're looking very much like what's happening in America, and pan-africanism. They're looking at kind of much more radical thinkers. You've got the filmmakers who are really reliant on a lot of the film festivals coming in, like Third Eye Film Festival, looking at third cinema makers from Latin America from West Coast America. So they're really having to look outside Britain, that's for sure. Except maybe with the case of Rasheed. And they're often

looking to, they're often looking to political activists, to theorists, rather than, rather than artists.

**John Bloomfield 27:36**

Yeah. Yes. And so one of the really crucial kind of key words in 'more of an avalanche' is the word snowflake. So it's a term that relatively recently began to be used as a pejorative and to shut down complaints. So if you call someone a snowflake, you reduce their complaints to whining, and their vulnerability ability to over sensitivity. You tell them that they shouldn't be listened to. So that's the context in which one makes a complaint today. And so much of the work in this show almost anticipates being criticized for over sensitivity. I just wanted to know that climate compares to the period you researched, I know there's kind of there's a precedence in terms like the loonie left or political correctness gone mad. I wondered whether the artists you looked at needed to think about how their work might be received by an audience that would be unsympathetic in this way or wherever, perhaps it wasn't really a concern at all.

**Nick Aikens 28:40**

I think, you know, I think it's probably more than it was that society, in the 70s, certainly in the late 70s, was just more openly racist. You know, I think, you know, Rasheed talks about talks about it in the late 60s, early 70s is, you know, saying racism was was overt and it was legal. So the idea to be sort of called out for your, for your position. You know, it hadn't got to that step yet. It was just still at the stage of, of overt racism. So first, it was about, you know, 1979 in Britain is the year that the most candidates from the National Front are fielded in elections. You know, this is a really it's at the end of the Labour government, which has economically depressed the country. It's a really

fractured fraught moment in Britain. So racism is just everywhere. So it's a, I think it's quite a different context in that sense. So it's a first and foremost it's about having, having your voice heard having your image seen. It's a question of visibility and audibility before it gets to anything near ideas of political correctness. You see what I mean? It's kind of there's a long there's still a long road. Still a long road to go.

**John Bloomfield** 30:10

I guess you kind of maybe see that transition in a work like 'That Rush!' with Isaac Julien, 'That Rush!' which is in the gallery, which looks at how I guess essentially how the right to talk to each other and how kind of racist tactics would have to be kind of hidden camouflaged. How they become more, more sophisticated, kind of when when they go underground.

**Nick Aikens** 30:35

Yeah, exactly. No, I mean, I think seeing that work, which is what like 92, 93?

**John Bloomfield** 30:40

93. Yeah.

**Nick Aikens** 30:42

And it's so resonant today. Now, you can imagine the very similar talk shows happening at the moment in in the US.