

## AMNA MALIK ON VIEWING THE PAST THROUGH THE EYES OF THE PRESENT

A challenging exhibition offers an opportunity to re-examine the origins of globalisation and the myth of inclusion which has been shattered by the result of the EU referendum

# 1980S

## DIE ERSTE BOMARDIERUNG!



## LAIBACH ÜBER DEM DEUTSCHLAND

Laibach: Die Erste Bombardierung über Deutschland (The First Bombing Over Germany) 1985 poster

Why have the 1980s become the focus for a collective critical re-evaluation? Quite apart from the recycling of the past that is a predictable dimension of popular culture, the decade also seems to have acquired increased attention from artists, curators and art historians of late. What is gained and what is lost by positioning it at the centre of attempts to periodise 20th-century and contemporary art? These are some of the questions raised by 'The 1980s. Today's Beginnings?', an ambitious exhibition staged at various venues in Istanbul, Madrid, Ljubljana and coming together in a single venue, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, curated by Nick Aiken and the museum's archivist Diana Franssen. In my role as consultant for one section of this recent exhibition, Black British Art, I engaged in dialogue with Aiken as part of a consortium of museums across Europe entitled 'L'Internationale'. The exhibition existed spatially in one venue and temporally as a sequential structure with a second installation in July in which Istanbul, Madrid and Catalonia featured primarily through archival documents. What follows is less a review of this exhibition and more a questioning of the pitfalls and advantages of attempting to historicise a decade that was so contentious and which also is still very much within living memory.

The recognition that what is inadequately understood as globalisation came into being during the 1980s is, of course, the basis of this privileging of the 1980s, and what becomes evident in 'Today's Beginning?' is the emphasis on the media as an alternate public sphere that, in hindsight, art historians wedded to institutional critique have come to concede as the political framework through which the question of power and the institution should be understood. From the vantage of the cultural politics of Black Britain, inaugurated through anti-racist campaigning in 1981 and consolidated in the publication on race and racism in the 1970s of Andrew S Thompson's *The Empire Strikes Back*, 1982, the question of media control and representation was central to the critical position adopted by artists, filmmakers and cultural theorists alike. In recent

years that history has been subject to considerable critical reflection, not least in various strategies to position the work of the artists of the 1980s within a wider historical purview.

As someone engaged in precisely such a project and committed to a transnational approach to that history, the complex political factors that constituted Black Britain, though experienced locally from a particularly British colonial history, appear to me to be too close to be fully comprehended.





**Moniek Toebosch**

*And this ladies and gentlemen was the destruction of six Thonet-chairs tied with a rope into a circle and several eggs 1984 performance*

'The Ministry has Blood on its Hands', demonstration on 1 December 1995, part of *¿Archivo Queer?* photograph by Andres Senra

If the mantra of inclusion is the myth perpetuated by globalisation then this myth has been shattered by the results of the EU referendum, exposing tensions that have long been in existence but predictably only capitalised by the far right. The needs of capitalism have forced this mantra to become a branding of modernity, whereby the historic tensions of difference are conveniently elided rather than thought through and fought through. With this appropriation of the language of difference in the service of capital comes a refusal to address very real inequalities, across all categories of race, class and sex. To this extent, we have not been able to harness the benefits of the politics of the 1980s when such differences could productively be seen as the site of dialogue and negotiation. At the centre of this historical understanding is, of course, the archive, and the question of artists' involvement with preserving this history in the absence of institutional support. From the perspective of critics such as Benjamin Buchloch, institutional

critique was the prevailing preoccupation, one which continues, in the writings of Andrea Fraser, to inform approaches to socially engaged art. However, looking back at the wider cultural framework that informed key issues and debates by artists, what comes into stark relief was the need for institution-building in the face of establishment apathy and benign neglect. The tendency to romanticise or personalise this contentious decade is evident in quite different but equally problematic films: Phyllida Lloyd's *The Iron Lady*, 2011, Matthew Warchus's *Pride*, 2014, and Steve McQueen's *Hunger*, 2008. In almost all instances the politics of the period are rendered as a lifestyle choice or seen through the lens of individual political agents in a way that is very much screened through the filter of the present. This emphasis on the privatisation of the subject began at that point but it was actively being resisted on all sides by collective organisations, a resistance that, with its emphasis on collectives and a curatorial staging of multiple perspectives, is addressed successfully in 'Today's Beginning?'. The curatorial project underlying the exhibition,

created by a consortium of curators and museums, also speaks to a collective impulse rather than an individual vision, and perhaps for that reason there are certain difficulties that come with such an approach, the most evident being the kind of politics that is on display and why, and the implications of that for thinking back to this decade.

On first viewing, the section on Amsterdam in the 1980s appeared to be the most compelling for someone who is engaged in a transnational perspective. Seen from the vantage of the Squatters Movement and, within it, from the perspective of radical lesbian and gay activists, one sees a correspondence with the upheavals experienced by working-class communities in London's Docklands area when it was taken over by Margaret Thatcher to become the heart of a new financial centre. A central thread throughout the project is the archive of feminist collectives in Slovenia, Netherlands, Turkey, Spain and the UK. What emerges is a sense of multiple perspectives and positions that do not easily constitute a coherent narrative and which the curators foreground as a deliberate strategy. But when is multiplicity a means of critically dismantling homogeneous structures and when does it descend into a proliferation of relativist positions that can become disabling? This is the lasting dilemma of the postmodern as a defining category for this period and its potential significance for contemporary debates on globalisation.



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This brings me to the most troubling aspect of the exhibition: the section on NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst), the Slovenian collective, and particularly Laibach, an artists' collective that, on the face of it, suggests a flirtation with fascist symbols, songs and ideas. The most troubling dimension of its many performances, in film, through song, posters etc involving military costumes, symbols such as a black cross that could be a Kazimir Malevich abstract painting or an evocation of Christian dogma, is the total and deep immersion by its members in a fascist ideology that is so sustained as to be beyond parody. It becomes clear very quickly that there is no ironic distance between the protagonists and the history they are dealing with: a complex relationship to both German and Russian historical occupation of the country has left its mark in these conflicted signs of affiliation.

Of course, as an art historian my thoughts turned to the rise of neo-expressionist painting in the 1980s, which was mostly endorsed by white male artists from the US, Scotland and Germany. The triumphant tone of the curators of 'The New Spirit in Painting' exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1981 and the conservative return of German Expressionism via a tortured male white subject made the nostalgia for authority and power within this group clear. Yet, as part of NSK, Laibach was also closely connected to other collectives, such as the feminist group Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre and IRWIN, which aimed at documenting these activities. Examining this aspect of a Europe that we had little knowledge of during the 1980s, and at a moment when postmodern concepts of parody and pastiche were popular and in which ambiguity prevailed, NSK's mode of working – described as 'overidentification' with the state – draws out the limitations of such ambiguity when dealing with the political realm.

The replacement of NSK and Ljubljana with Istanbul and Madrid in July further complicates the initial perspective afforded by the exhibition. The establishment of the Video-Nou organisation in Madrid in 1977 and numerous activist modes of resistance to the establishment of free market economics tied to repressive social policies in Istanbul make for another set of voices, perspectives and histories. Alongside NSK, the illegibility of cultural difference becomes compounded, created in part by language barriers; while some of the videos and broadcasts could be understood, many remained beyond my comprehension. Since the emphasis is on a research-based curatorial approach, with journals, magazines, posters and documentation of events as the primary focus in which textuality prevailed, I was only able to access the information to a limited degree.

The wall texts were in this regard crucial and very helpful, printed in both Dutch and English

Central to this historical perspective of the 1980s is the place of the collective, a subject which, in the light of contemporary resistance movements, has become prevalent in art-historical analysis as much as in art criticism today. One can draw certain conclusions from this which point to some of the shifts and changes that have come about since the 1980s. Examining the entire exhibition, beginning in Eindhoven and including the primarily archival focus of the latter two displays centred on Istanbul and Madrid, creates a shift in perspectives.

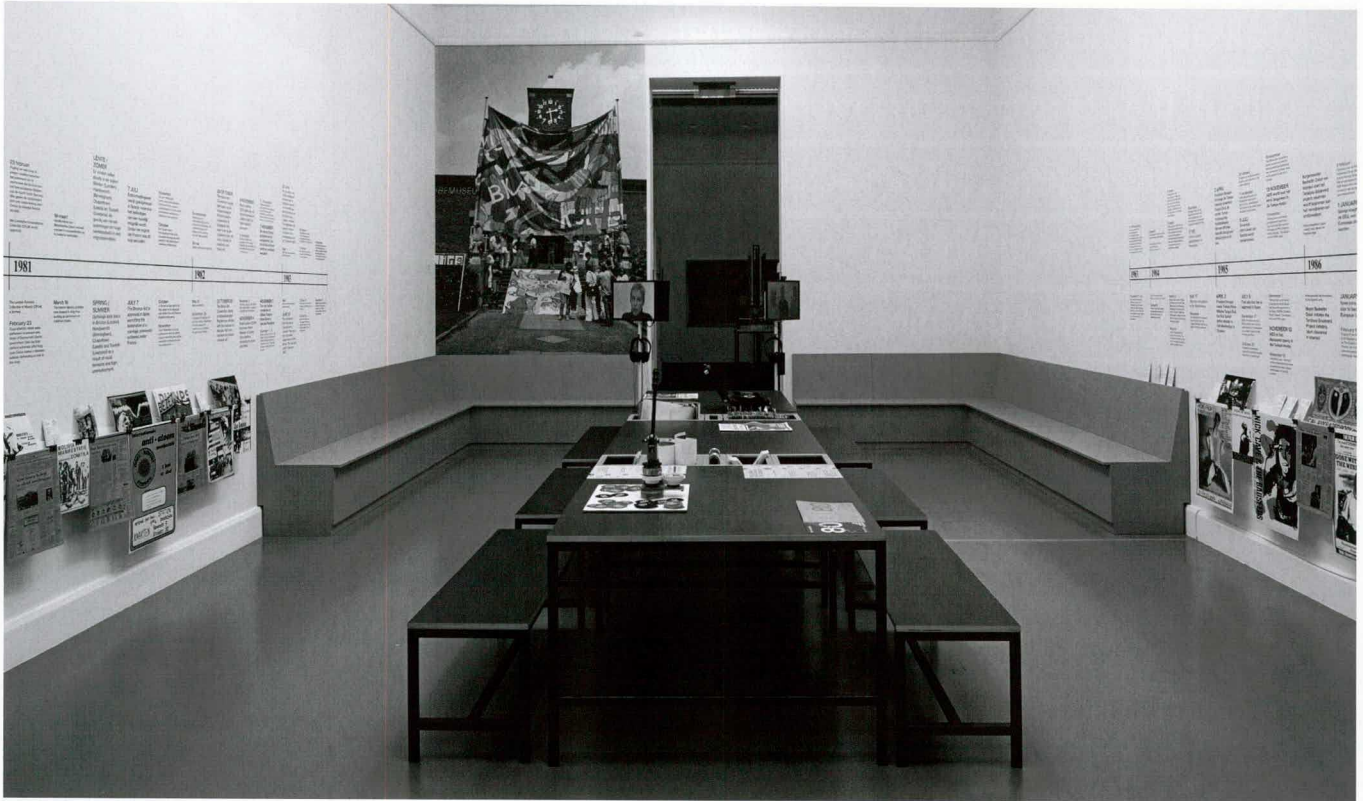
Most of the archival material in the Amsterdam section is drawn from Franssen's own personal archive from her involvement in the Squatters Movement and its connections with the sexual politics of the era. As an art student she found herself at first to be part of the establishment but on graduation she realised she was positioned on its margins. This history of personal participation had the additional benefit of providing a lens through which the questions of colonial legacy and gender could be explored in relation to feminist collectives based in the Netherlands, which have received limited critical attention. This draws out a curatorial parallel with the notion of 'participatory art practices' in which art, activism and the museum are intertwined rather than set apart.

Yet there was still a sharp distinction in the 1980s between high art and popular culture. The apparent collapse of this distinction has made it possible to stage displays in a museum that are replete with documentation of events and media broadcasts alongside what we might call 'art' objects. This shift is, of course, historically located in the mid 1990s with the rise of documentary practices in the globalised art world, witnessed initially with Catherine David's Documenta X and continuing in her curating of such practices among contemporary artists from the Middle East. In other words, it suggests that perhaps the fine art-popular culture continuum that Lawrence Alloway identified as a signal shift in cultural production in 1959 arguably did not in reality materialise on the cultural plane until the 1990s.

This distinction between the global impetus behind 'Today's Beginnings?' and the hierarchies between art and popular culture in the 1980s is perhaps what sets it apart from the 2013 exhibition 'Keywords: Art, Culture and Society



'The 1980s. Today's Beginnings?' installation view at the Van Abbemuseum



in 1980s Britain' curated by Grant Watson and Gavin Delahunty at Iniva and Tate Liverpool in 2014.

Of course, the contrasts couldn't be greater, and the latter was heavily criticised for its dependency on a publicly owned collection of works which were nonetheless only available to the public at a hefty price and at a time of massive cuts to the arts sector, a problem that the international consortium behind 'Today's Beginnings?' clearly does not suffer from, or at least not to the same degree. Yet, what did come into sharp relief in 'Keywords' was the complex range of artistic voices in the UK in the 1980s. For Lubaina Himid, such a curatorial strategy was perhaps disarming because it placed her installations, with their emphasis on the humble use of materials such as cardboard and paper, against the monumentality of large-scale British sculpture of this period by artists such as Anthony Caro, Anish Kapoor and Tony Cragg, against whom she had occupied a counter-position.

Such tensions speak to the heterogeneity of cultural production during the decade which sat uneasily along political lines of left and right, the wholesale suppression and marginalisation of minorities and dissenting voices when issues concerning sexuality and race needed to be addressed from all sides.

This aspect of the decade has been perfectly encapsulated by 'Today's Beginnings?'; its attention to the place of popular culture is at times riveting and it includes compelling illustrations of the hegemonic dimensions of culture that owe much more to Antonio Gramsci than to Alloway or even Raymond Williams. Yet, despite the undoubtedly significant interventions made by Alloway and Williams in challenging the hierarchies of cultural forms in the 1950s and 1960s, these were largely class-based analyses of popular culture, speaking in different ways to the monolithic position occupied by classical Marxism and remaining largely within the terms of print media.

In 'Today's Beginnings?' the mid 1970s is the point of rupture when television has become an instrument for the construction of consensus by the state, and is therefore rapidly harnessed to alternate means by artists and grass-roots political organisations alike. The rough and ready video footage by La Radical Gai of an underground gay club in Madrid in the early 1990s becomes a powerful historic document of the counter-hegemonic potential that such events, and the political

groups behind them, speak to. Footage of such moments becomes significant when we note, in the timeline provided in a central room of the exhibition, that the Spanish government prohibited men dressed in drag from working as performers on nightclub stages from March 1981 onwards. The necessity, then, to deploy cultural forms as modes of resistance, when such subjects have no legal rights that are recognised by the state, as evidenced through archival material in the exhibition, seems to dramatise Gramsci's complex understanding of power: cultural acts such as dressing in drag become politically mobilised forms.

While this emphasis on archival display of modes of political resistance have the most to offer us in any consideration of how we can move forward from the past, it also raises other concerns, the greatest being that, in returning to this decade in whatever capacity that may be, whether as a curator, an academic or an artist, the place of art and the place of politics have come now to occupy positions inside the establishment rather than outside it. Whereas once marginalised voices of resistance spoke for those whose rights the law did not recognise, today, as Judith Butler has argued, the recuperation of dissent by the establishment has led to the manipulation of such marginalised voices as evidence of a progressive and liberal society. Returning to my concern at the outset with the mantra of inclusion, the appropriation of the subject under neoliberal capitalism and its shattering by the EU referendum in June 2016, which has implications not just for the UK but Europe as a whole, prompts me to ask how, and in what way, we can remain international. If there is anything to be learnt from this view on the 1980s, it is that only collective organisations that take seriously the voice and position of dissent, rather than seeking to silence it, can offer a route forward. ■

'The 1980s: Today's Beginnings?' is at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven to 25 September.

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