

## Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

### ‘Reading Collections’: the African-Caribbean, Asian and African Art in Britain Archive reading group

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#### Abstract

This case study discusses the innovative ‘Reading Collections’ reading group, which uses primary source materials (ephemera) from the African-Caribbean, Asian and African Art in Britain Archive, housed at Chelsea College of Arts Library, UAL. In addition to supporting discussion around the significance of primary documentation in the research process and the curation of collections and archives in relation to the representation of potentially marginalised groups, historical narratives and decolonisation, the group was designed to be non-hierarchical and interdisciplinary, encouraging the participation of people from a wide range of backgrounds including students from all levels as well as teaching and other staff.

#### Keywords

reading groups; archives and special collections; African-Caribbean art; Asian art; African art; British art; Black Art; decolonisation

#### Introduction: the African-Caribbean, Asian and African Art in Britain Archive (ACAA)

The ACAA was established at Chelsea School of Art (now Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London) in 1985 by librarian Liz Ward in response to a set of specific circumstances. Among these was the perception among Black students and others that the work of contemporary Black artists was not being documented (*A conversation about recordings*, 2018), and that information and resources related to the history, theory and practice of African-Caribbean, Asian and African art and artists, and of British artists of African-Caribbean, Asian and African origin or descent, were not available in academic or other institutional art libraries.

The ACAA include a wide range of primary source material documenting exhibitions and events (including invitation cards, press releases, listings, posters, small catalogues, reports and other ephemera). The archive also contains contextual material about the work of contemporary artists practicing in Britain and of African-Caribbean, Asian and African descent from the 1970s until the 2000s. The strength of the ACAA is the 1980s, with in-depth coverage of this period, it is one of the most comprehensive in the UK, and includes the archive of The People’s Gallery (1984–1987) and of *The Devils Feast* exhibition.

These holdings are complemented by and closely connected to other Special Collections held at Chelsea College of Arts Library, such as the Ephemera Collection (of individual artists’ files, including extensive collections of ephemera related to artists of African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian background), the Exhibition Catalogues Collection (a major international collection of individual and group exhibition catalogues) and the Rare Periodicals Collection (with comprehensive coverage of titles like *Artrage*, *Bazaar*, *Black Arts*, *Black Phoenix*, etc). The Archive is related to other collections and archives established in the 1980s, including the Panchayat Archive (now at Tate Archive), the

African and Asian Visual Artists Archive (AAVAA) and others. It is also contemporary with the Women's Art Library (now at Goldsmiths, University of London). The ACAA has had a close relationship with the Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva) since its establishment in 1995.

Published materials within the Archive, such as monographs, catalogues and periodicals, are listed on the UAL library catalogue, and the publication *Recordings: a select bibliography of contemporary African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian British art* (Keen and Ward, 1996), documents and provides multiple indexes to its content up to 1995. Compiled and edited by Melanie Keen and Liz Ward and co-published by Iniva and Chelsea College of Arts in 1996, this book was the product of a significant research project. Not just a bibliography, it includes a chronology of key exhibitions, events and publications (1971–1996); a dictionary of artists with date and place of birth information, group and solo exhibition information and a bibliography; thematic bibliographies; and author, title, subject and gallery indexes. Information that has great value. It is still a key reference resource on Black Art and artists of African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian descent working in Britain from the 1970s to 1995.

Publishing is a key way to increase access and activate collections in different contexts, including learning and teaching. Digitisation projects assist in achieving this aim. In 2017 UAL Library Services decided to digitise *Recordings* and to make it available on the UAL website (Keen and Ward, 1996). This was a way of responding to increased demand for access to the ACAA as well as interest in the publication, which was by then out of print. It is now freely available for reuse under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial licence. This facilitates use of the publication and the archive for research, teaching and learning, but also for establishing new projects engaged in social and political activism.

To mark the digitisation of the *Recordings* book, UAL Library Services commissioned the film, *A conversation about Recordings*, as a companion resource (2018). Made in October 2017, the film features a conversation between the book's co-editors Melanie Keen, Director of Iniva, and Liz Ward, former Librarian of Chelsea College of Art, and is structured using a list of questions provided in advance by the current archive's curator. They discuss and contextualise this important publication, the African-Caribbean, Asian and African Art in Britain Archive, and the documentation of Black Art in the 1980s and 1990s, through to today.

### **Using the ACAA in learning and teaching**

Use of the ACAA by researchers and curators has grown rapidly over the last few years, with numerous requests for access from internal and external researchers, many international, and for exhibition loans of materials, such as for several major retrospectives on 1980s Black Art organised in recent years in the UK and abroad, for instance at Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands and Nottingham Contemporary, amongst others.

Alongside this activity, the Library has made it a priority to promote and facilitate use of the ACAA in learning and teaching, and to embed it in curriculum design and delivery. It is also highlighted in introductory sessions about Special Collections given to all new students at Chelsea College of Arts and a range of courses based at other UAL colleges, by arrangement. As with other Special Collections such as the Artists' Books Collection (Grandal Montero, 2012), the ACAA is used in a range of curriculum enhancement activities in the library at Chelsea. This supports academic and creative/studio work by integrating practice and research (Appleton, Grandal Montero and Jones, 2017). Independent learning is also supported by weekly drop-in sessions and one-to-one sessions by appointment, and individual use of material in the library.

Specific seminars are based around the contents of the ACAA, and the library also provides general introductions or tailored to specific requirements or topics, for example Black Art exhibitions in the 1980s. Taught sessions are tied in with course briefs/projects, and are arranged on demand. Most of

these teaching sessions are delivered or led by the curator of the Special Collections or other specialist library staff and held in the room where the collection is housed, for ease of access to the material. Examples of this type of use include projects with MA Curating and Collections, in connection with the *Re-recordings* exhibition at Chelsea College of Arts (2015) and with MRes Art: Exhibition Studies students from Central Saint Martins, exploring *The Devils Feast*, revisiting this exhibition that took place at Chelsea School of Art in 1987, presenting the work of important Black artists, including Zarina Bhimji, Chila Burman, Jennifer Comrie, Allan de Souza, Keith Piper and Donald Rodney. It was the first Black-artists-only exhibition in an art school in London. This project led to an archival exhibition curated by Rahul Patel in 2015.

The Archive is also used in collaboration with the Arts Students' Union (Arts SU) and students generally, to support student-led initiatives and peer-to-peer learning as well as social and political activism, particularly decolonisation initiatives. Regular Arts SU-led visits are part of this ongoing partnership, as well as participating in 'Liberate my Curriculum' campaigns and the *Decolonising the Arts Curriculum* publication (Jethani, Panesar and Patel, 2018) and related series of events and exhibitions.

In addition to these collaborations with courses and students, college library staff have worked closely with Library Services and Academic Support colleagues across UAL, to develop and deliver a range of projects including exhibitions, displays, workshops, the digitisation of *Recordings* and the production of the film *A conversation about Recordings*. These partnerships have also made possible the creation of a reading group focused on the ACAA itself, called 'Reading Collections'.

### **Reading groups and the establishment of Reading Collections**

Reading groups are well established in universities. They are often associated with research level postgraduate and PhD students but are common at other levels, and also include literary reading groups who undertake reading for pleasure in addition to academic reading. Although there is a small pool of literature on literary reading groups in public libraries and elsewhere (Open University, 2019), very little has been published on the use of reading groups in higher education. In our view, the common key elements to all these groups are the social and dialogic nature of their interactions, within flexible, often non-hierarchical structures.

Reading Collections was set up as a pilot project for the academic year 2016/17. It formed part of a wider series of projects based around the ACAA initiated by Jess Crilly (Associate Director Content and Discovery, Library Services) and its curator, Gustavo Grandal Montero (Academic Support Librarian, Library Services). The project has been funded and supported by Library Services and Academic Support, which are both part of the Library and Student Support Services Directorate. Rahul Patel (Lecturer and Academic Support tutor) was invited to co-lead the reading group with Gustavo Grandal Montero. Having staff with complementary sets of expertise, including library skills, curatorial, art theory and history, race and post-colonial studies, has been key to establishing an interdisciplinary approach to discussions.

Three pilot meetings during 2016/17 took place at Chelsea College of Arts and at Iniva, in the Stuart Hall Library. These were followed by five meetings in 2017/18, one at each UAL college, with five more planned for 2018/19. Moving between colleges enables the group to maximise exposure and facilitate access. We have found that moving around UAL's campuses and colleges has enabled us to reach students who would not usually travel to Chelsea College of Arts, as they attend a local session within their home college, then travel to other sessions at different locations.



Figure 1: Reading Collections meeting at LCC (UAL). 14 March 2018, Twitter (Chelsea Library, 2018).

A key characteristic of the reading group has been to focus on primary source material (invitation cards, press releases, listings, posters, small catalogues, reports and other ephemera), as opposed to the more common use of secondary texts: as described on the publicity for the meetings,

...all the readings are taken from the Archive, and participants will gain an understanding of the reasons for its establishment, its content, and the significance of primary documentation and its curation in relation to the representation of potentially marginalised groups. They represent critical arguments, and relate to important exhibitions, publications and other interventions in Black British art in the 1980s.

(UAL Postgraduate Community, 2017).

The group is open to all members of the UAL community and sessions aim to develop:

- a greater understanding of the significance of primary documentation in the research process and the development of research skills and criticality (critical reading, analysis and discussion skills);
- insights into the curation of collections and archives in relation to the representation of potentially marginalised groups, the development of historical narratives and decolonization;
- awareness of Black Art and other important art developments in Britain from the 1970s, and the historical and current critical and political discourses associated with them.

The group was explicitly designed to be non-hierarchical, encouraging and valuing contributions from all participants, with an emphasis on peer learning. It takes place in a context in which hierarchical relationships are excluded, sitting outside course and other university / UAL structures. It is attended by students from all colleges, involving people from a wide range of disciplines (including design, fashion, spatial design, graphic design, journalism, curatorial studies, architectural, fine art, film,

performance). The level at which people are studying and working is also varied, and sessions have involved undergraduates and postgraduates, academic staff and staff in professional roles. The combination of students and staff has ignited discussions that would not have necessarily taken place in a more traditional tutor and student framework. Everyone is on an equal footing and has something to contribute as well as something to gain. The reading group is also a way of ensuring an inclusive space where students of colour are represented and have a voice.

An important aim of the group was to contribute to the expansion of the awareness and use of archives and special collections in teaching and learning at undergraduate and taught postgraduate level, particularly in independent learning and peer-led learning, and to explore the pedagogical possibilities of reading groups. Further groups based around other UAL collections are currently in development.

Black Art and other historical developments documented in the ACAA can serve today as referents for students of colour and other students, often unaware of these histories, as potential anchors to their thinking and practice, not only in Fine Art but also Design and other disciplines. In addition to critical and historical debate, there is also space for personal responses and reflections. The reading group operates as a safe space for discussing difficult and personal issues.



Figure 2: Poster for Reading Collections, Spring/Summer term 2017/18 (UAL, 2017).

**Reading Collections' first year programme and future plans**

Meeting five times a year during BA term (every 6 to 8 weeks), the reading burden is managed by close reading in the session to encourage wide participation and to avoid having to prepare in advance. The texts are selected and made available in advance via Academic Support Online at the beginning of the year, this pre-selection by the curator were based on subject, topicality, format, context and were then reduced to the final five documents by the co-lead.

**Table 1**

Readings 2017-18	Readings 2018-19
<p>Keen, M. and Ward, E., eds. (1996) <i>Recordings: a select bibliography of contemporary African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian British art</i>. London: INIVA and Chelsea College of Art &amp; Design. [Recordings: an introduction (pp.1-7)]</p> <p><i>The First National Black Art Convention</i> (1982). [Selection of documents (poster, open call, programme) from the conference held at Wolverhampton Polytechnic in Oct. 1982.]</p> <p><i>The Thin Black Line</i> (1985) London: ICA. [Texts by Lubaina Himid and Chila Burman.]</p> <p><i>The Devils Feast</i> (1987) London: Chelsea School of Art Gallery. [Introduction text by Zarina Bhimji, Chila Burman, Jennifer Comrie, Allan de Souza, Keith Piper and Donald Rodney.]</p> <p>Jantjes, G. (1983) The words about us, <i>Arts Libraries Journal</i>, 8(4), p.14-22. [Revised version of a paper delivered at the ARLIS/UK event 'Visual art documentation for a multi-cultural society', Commonwealth Institute, London, in Nov. 1983.]</p>	<p>Ward, L. (1985) St Martin's School of Art Library: Collection development, <i>Multi-ethnic education review</i>, 4(1), pp.23-25.</p> <p>Araeen, R. and Jamal, M. (1978), Editorial, <i>Black Phoenix</i>, no.1.</p> <p><i>Caribbean artists in England</i> (1971) London: Commonwealth Institute; and Ronald Moody ephemera. [An evening with Ronald Moody, <i>Jamaican Journal</i>, 1972].</p> <p><i>Five Black Women</i> (1983) London: Africa Centre.</p> <p><i>The Devils Feast</i> (1987) London: Chelsea School of Art Gallery. [video documentation; and review by Eddie Chambers].</p>

Before each session participants were sent an electronic copy of the text, which is also available in hard copy on yellow paper, double spaced and in size 14 font for accessibility. During the sessions, the original documents were passed around the room, to introduce the physical artefact (and concepts of object literacy) into the discussions, in addition to the content of the text. Both co-leads gave a brief introduction to each session, including its format, providing some contextual information about the selected document. The Academic Support tutor moderates the discussion. Participants are invited to read aloud part of the selected text, to encourage participation. The sessions last for two hours, allowing us to balance the needs and contributions of all participants.

Inevitably, during the course of the sessions, discussion centred around the contemporary. Participants often attempted to formulate and understand today's settings and the difficulties faced by marginalised groups. Critical discussions centred sometimes on the words and contexts of texts in the various documents. In the past we have had discussions around words such as Africa, African art, neutrality of art, design education, cultural identity, colonial construction, indigenous, cultural

appropriation, colonialism, post-colonialism, new internationalism, globalisation, euro-centrism, ethnography, visual art documentation, Black art / artist, artists as activists, and many more.

The reading group is advertised via a range of channels, including social media (Twitter, blogs), posters, Academic Support Online (used also for bookings), Moodle (pilot period only), email and word of mouth. Attendance has been high, with 20-25 attendees per session (around 100 in total), including a high proportion of regular participants. In addition to providing an element of continuity, a reading group community has started to emerge, and on various occasions discussions have led to interventions outside of the meeting, in both college and museum exhibitions. For instance, Abbas Zahedi's installation at Wolverhampton Art Gallery used left-over printouts from the session on the Black Arts Convention that he attended, which then became part of the exhibition *Diaspora Pavilion: Venice to Wolverhampton* (Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 10 February – 29 April 2018).



Figure 3: Abbas Zahedi's installation at Wolverhampton Art Gallery. Photo: Zahedi (2018).

Feedback from attendees has been gathered in a number of ways. Two in-depth reviews of meetings have been published on *Shades of Noir* by a current student (Shaleigha D'Clark, 2018a, 2018b).

Feedback includes the following comments:

- 'The session was inspiring – particularly as the sessions attract different generations of students, staff, researchers and artists. It is brilliant to access historical data and have rich discussions that are a mixture of memory and new perspectives.'
- 'It was really life enriching [...] especially for some coming from an East Asia background.'
- 'I would just like to say that the session was so interesting, and you should all go to the next reading, it was very informative and inspiring! Congratulations, see you at the next one.'
- 'Having some additional texts on the table was a very good idea. An excellent turnout, some previous attendees and some new, felt that the Group is really finding its feet.'
- 'I was interested to see how having a programme as a reading would go, as opposed to a more traditional text, but it went well.'

In the summer of 2017/18, we decided to set up an experimental workshop related to, but independent of, the reading group meetings. The workshop aimed to integrate object based learning, including the use of artworks, within the Reading Collections reading group format. Designed and delivered with Jhinuk Sarkar (Academic Support lecturer), it focused on the connections, similarities and differences between archival documentation and artworks, and explored selected material related to the artist Yinka Shonibare, taken from the Ephemera Collection, the Artists' Multiples Collection, and the African-Caribbean, Asian and African Art in Britain Archive, all of which are part of the Special Collections at Chelsea Library.

Open to students and staff, it was a participatory session. The first half concentrated on reading and critical discussion, and the second half explored object-based learning and sensory perspectives. Although the workshop was well attended and received, discussions were limited due to time constraints but also the differences in approach and method within one session, which could be challenging. We decided that in the future we would separate the workshop into two sessions to allow for more in-depth explorations of both materials and methods.

### Conclusion

Since its creation in early 2017, Reading Collections has introduced a new and innovative approach to the reading group as a tool to achieve its original aims. The group aims to (1) increase understanding of the significance of primary documentation and development of research skills and criticality; (2) provide insights into the curation of collections and archives in relation to the representation of potentially marginalised groups, the development of historical narratives and decolonisation; and (3) share awareness of Black Art and other important art developments in the UK from the 1970s.

The group has also contributed more generally to expanding awareness of and use of archives and special collections in teaching and learning, particularly in independent learning and peer-led learning, and to exploring the pedagogical possibilities of reading groups in these contexts. Finally, it has connected the historical content of the ACAA with current social and political activism, particularly in relation to decolonisation. Although it is situated outside of course structures, the reading group contributes to the ongoing discussions questioning and challenging course curricula and delivery.

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## Biographies

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