

Appropriation & Control

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*A Photographic Exploration
of Black Images*

by David A. Bailey

Part of the *THE OBE BLACK & ETHNIC ARTS ARCHIVE*
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Appropriation and Control

A Photographic Exploration of Black Images

HISTORICALLY Black peoples have been the preoccupation/subjects/objects of photographic discourses. It has always been a medium that has misrepresented us in the construction of its images.

It is beyond the frame, beyond the photograph which needs to be examined. These are the issues that some Black practitioners have taken on board, questions that we are asking ourselves, and the Black communities we are part of – to forward/hasten a critique for themselves and for ourselves.

It is beyond the frame, beyond the photographs boundaries/image that we need (for ourselves) to question. It is not just important to look, but to question *how* one looks at 'us' / 'others' / 'Blacks'. There is nothing natural/authentic/realistic about photographs, as we know. The Blacks are not *really* savage/bestial/exotic/dangerous – these images are all a social construction – socially produced – myths/ideas/stereotypes about what they think of us.

In an article by Michelle Cliffe *OBJECT INTO SUBJECT: Some Thoughts On The Work Of Black Women* she argues and quotes observations made by Lillian Smith and Lorraine Hansberry.

'Smith argued the practice of objectification is an absolute necessity in the racist effort to oppress. (I use the word "effort" because it is and has been so; one which has been carried on on every level of this society, against constant, historic opposition.) Through objectification – the process by which people are dehumanized, made ghostlike, given the status of Other – an image created by the oppressor replaces the actual being. The actual being is then denied speech; denied self-definition . . .'

This is the historic point at which David A Bailey's exhibition changes/breaks traditional misrepresentation, and addresses these concerns within photography. It is the beginning – along with film/video makers, artists – of a spirit/generation of cultural activity of young Black peoples defining ourselves for ourselves.

A Black Renaissance period in cultural activity for Black peoples in Britain? Certainly a desire to challenge/promote/explore our understandings of ourselves.

David A Bailey's use of text marks an attempt to engage the audience, to question as they look – an attempt to interrupt the spectators' voyeurist gaze(s). By doing so it allows us to participate critically, rather than make commonsense assumptions about Black representation.

SANKOFA FILM AND VIDEO

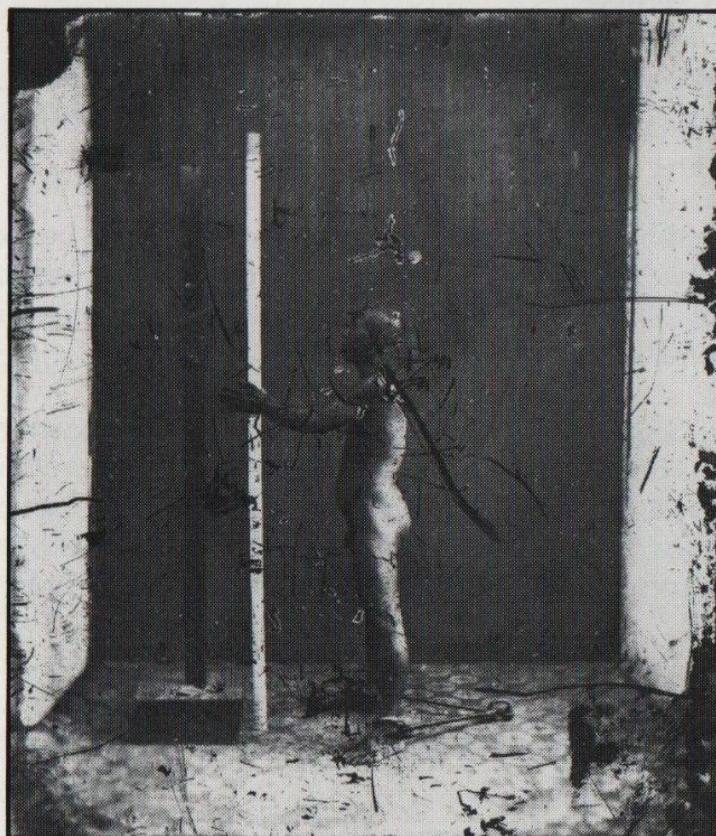
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"Photography was invented as an instrument of the evolving Western world and has ever since been associated with technically and economically advanced societies. Thus, photography, as an expensive and originally exclusive commodity has become a symbol of the West. It is the eyes of the privileged that knowledge is gained from photographs and it is through the eyes of the privileged that we gain photographic knowledge of the sufferings, customs and exotic, commonly associated with the colonized, the Third World, The Others."
(Issac Julien)

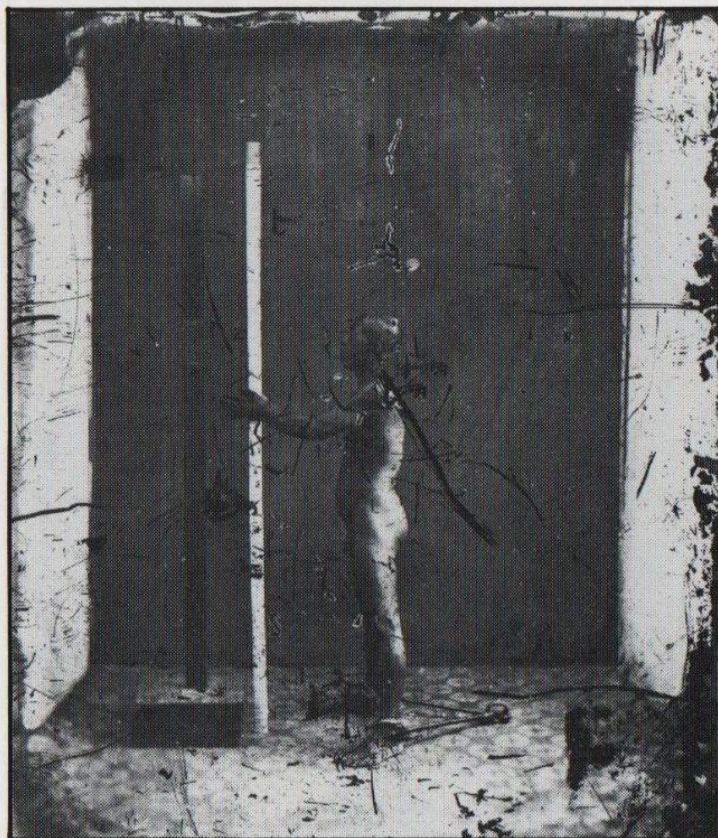


INTRODUCTION

Appropriation and Control is part of a continuous debate around the issues of photography and representation of the Black subject which began with the Positive Images Of Black People exhibition. In some ways Appropriation and Control is a reconstruction of the Positive Images exhibition. However, if the spectator only looks upon the exhibition in this manner then he or she will lose the overall meaning that the exhibition is trying to convey.

In analysing photography it is important that the concepts of appropriation and control are discussed – for these issues are crucial aids to help us understand the underlying processes that operate within photography. Appropriation in this context is used to describe the way photography extracts and fixes an image from its social and political context, with the concept of control questioning who is controlling these appropriations and what happens when Black people are given back this control. To clarify these complex issues of appropriation and control the exhibition will be divided into three main areas but before we describe these three sections I feel it is necessary to explain how this exhibition differs from other exhibitions.

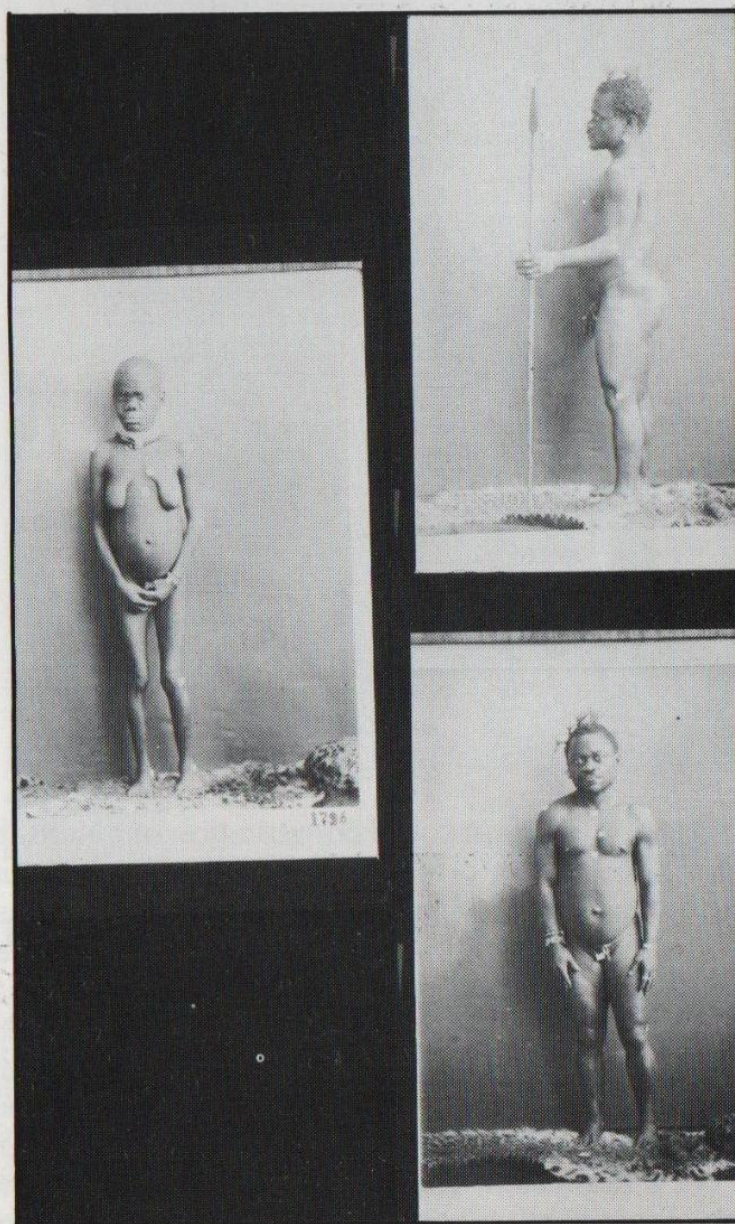
The exhibition offers a semiological or questioning analysis when looking at images of Black people. For photography has become one of the most easily accessible mediums in our society – if we do not own a camera we can have access to one – and the fact that we are surrounded and bombarded by images to the point where most of us consume these images means that most of us take these images for granted. This point is important, for by the act of looking people are not just consuming photographs but are consuming particular messages, signs and codes.



This idea that photography is merely a social construction of messages, signs and codes means that photography always distorts reality and does not capture the real. Photographic images have no substance and are only ghost images in the sense that so many meanings are attached to photographic images and so many power relations are obscured that no knowledge is gained from photographs. The only knowledge that is gained is the knowledge the spectator attaches to the images which is fundamentally influenced by the dominant culture. For photography is not neutral and the power it wields is not its own – this power can only be wielded by those who have access to the means of photographic production. For images do not speak for themselves; there is an underlying/invisible social process going on, a process of social construction which transforms the human Black subject through objectification and stereotyping into an inhuman exotic savage. This stereotypical imagery is dependent on the person who took the photographs. For it is through the photographers' voyeuristic desires which are influenced by the dominant racist culture that we can see how photography reinforces racial stereotypes and contributes to the construction of Blackness. It is these issues in photography which has led me to use text/writing and photo montage in the exhibition to convey a particular theme, make people question these issues and depict how much the text as well as the social context can change the meaning of the photograph. The use of contact strips in the exhibition questions the process in photography whereby the final image becomes a distorted image taken away from its social and political context – a process that is related to the way in which Black people are photographed.

SECTION ONE

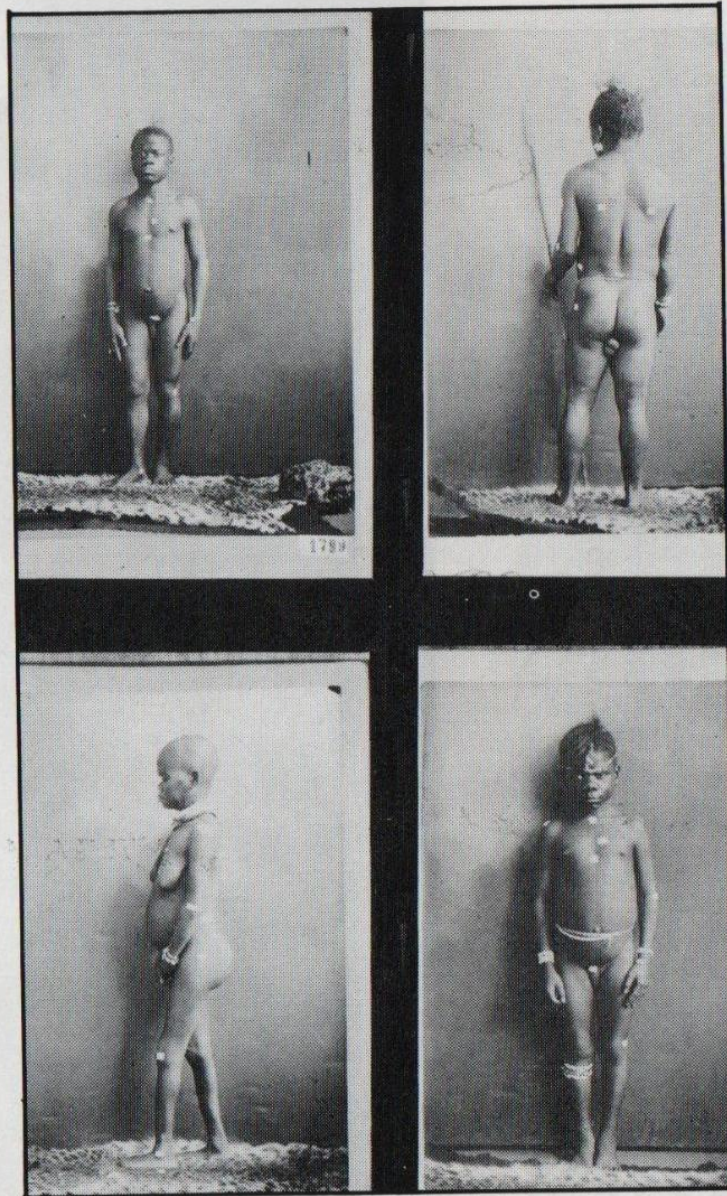
The photographic process from the contact strip to the final image symbolises the underlying structure of appropriation and control within photography. Photographic images are framed/cropped then photographically shot, selected from the contact strip cropped/recropped and framed to the final image. This process symbolises the way images are socially constructed with the photographer selecting/fragmenting and constructing a particular area of Black culture. To understand the essence of this process we have to look at the origins of photography in relation to the functions of the state and colonialism.



The conception of photography as a neutral/objective medium capturing the real was based on its original function as a tool for the state in nineteenth century England where photography was used by the police and medical professions. However, it was in Anthropology in the colonial era using photography as a means of surveillance to categorise, identify and control subject nations that the functions of photography as a means of appropriation and control were beginning to reveal themselves. For it was through the voyeuristic perceptions of the West that we acquired images of Black people as exotic savages reinforcing the dominant West hegemony – a process which is still maintained today.

"The otherness of black was perceived in a variety of different ways but it was ultimately in the dominant myth of the 'savage'. The persona of the savage was developed as the 'other' of civilization and one of the first evidence of this otherness was the nakedness and visibility of sex. This led Europeans to assume that the savage possessed an open frank and uninhibited sexuality – unlike the sexuality of the Europeans which was considered to be fettered by civilisation."

(GAY BLACK GROUP – On White Gay racism)



These images of Black people as criminals and dancers are not merely a legacy of colonialism but are part of a complex colonial discourse which historically fixes the image of Blackness into a form of 'otherness' where there is a psychological phobia of Blackness as a threat (seen in the images of criminalisation and savagery) and a voyeuristic desire to see Black subjects as objects of desire in the form of musicians and dancers – posing no threat at all. This colonial discourse comes into play in the act of looking and taking images of Black people which is why we only see the myth and not the human being when we look at Black people.

"... that the place in the human mind she called "mythic": that place where dreams, fantasies, and images begin: where they continue and take form as art, literature, politics, religion. The mythic mind is a source of psychic energy – it contributes the motion necessary for sustained thought. But the mythic mind needs a structure in which to function, so that its products will be understood. This structure is provided by reason. Reason, Smith argued, is merely a technic, an enabler; its sole purpose is to create the form which will support the ideas moving out of the mythic mind. Reason is incapable of moral judgement, and therefore will support any idea or image, regardless of its moral basis.



When the mythic idea of whiteness, the obsession with skin color which is the irrational and immoral basis of racism, is given a construct from which the myth takes its form– i.e., the philosophy of white supremacy– the result is cultural or institutionalized racism, contained in the politics, literature, art, and religion of the dominant culture. An insane idea now exists within a reasonable reality, not an irrational dream,"

(OBJECT INTO SUBJECT: Some thoughts on the work of Black Artists-by MICHELLE CLIFF)

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SECTION TWO

This section relates the process of taking stolen images to the themes of appropriation and control. Stolen images are images where the subject was unaware that the photo had been taken. For most photographers stolen images are natural images because of the idea that the subject is not posing but is in so-called natural/normal state. Yet this relationship is questionable. Although these stolen images present alternative images of Black people it has to be stressed that the fact that photography does not capture the real makes the concept of naturalness within stolen images problematic.



For a stolen image can be seen as a cold and inhuman process where the voyeur has the ultimate power to construct and select a particular image – in other words to appropriate and control a person’s image. It is this voyeuristic relationship that this section questions, looking at how the photographer can reduce the distance between subject and spectator. For when the subject is aware of the photographers’ presence there is a reciprocal relationship where the ‘gaze’ or power of the ‘look’ can change a passive subject into an active one. Whether or not these ‘gazes’ or ‘looks’ are active (identifying with the photographer) or passive (questioning the photographer’s motives) remains problematic. It is these images which are rarely seen in the mainstream media due to the way they challenge the stereotypical imagery of Black people which should be welcomed but not without questioning the processes involved in taking these images.

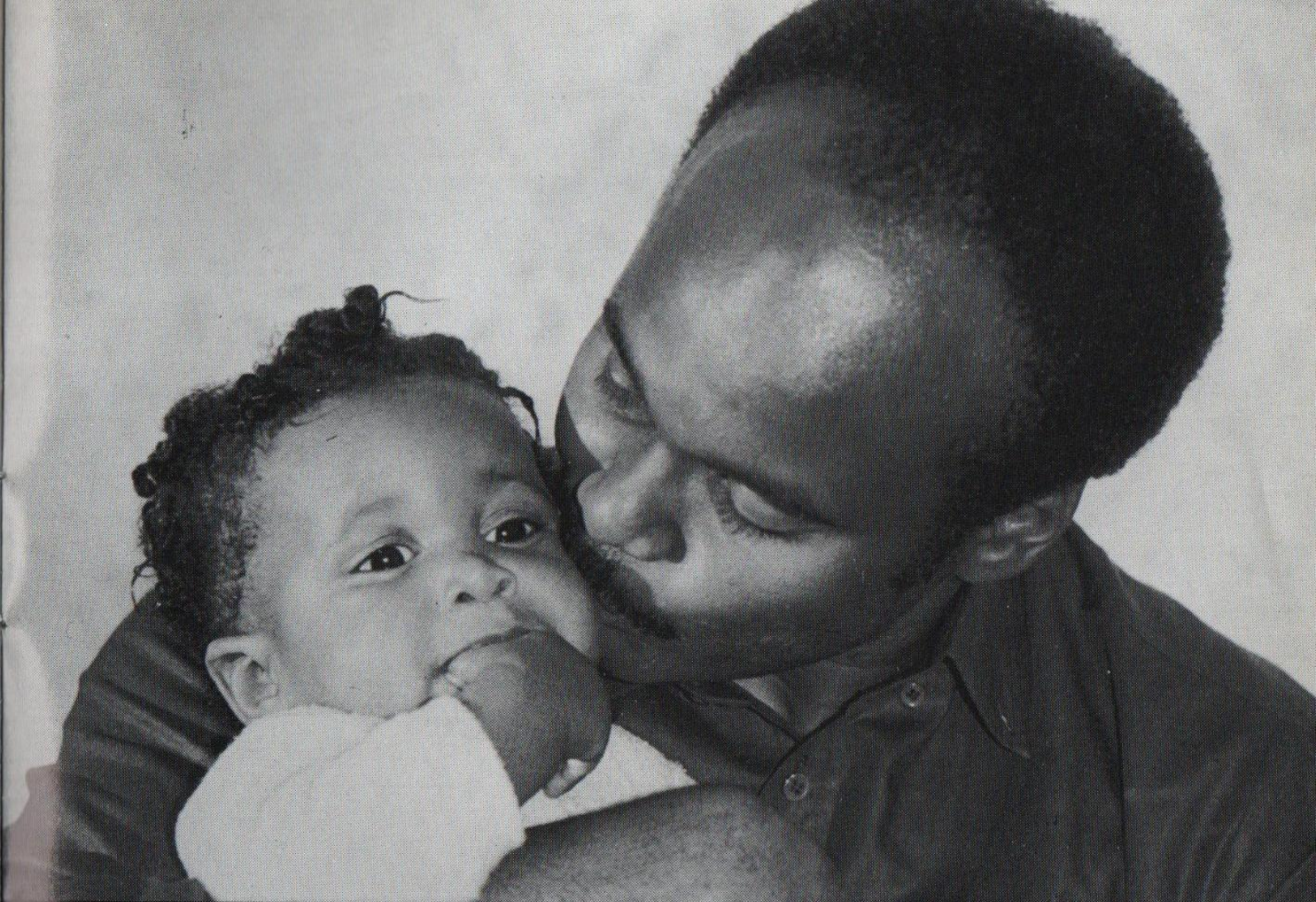


SECTION THREE

In this section the selection, cropping/recropping, framing and social construction is (to a certain extent) given back to the subjects. For instance, Hewie the computer engineer prefers to be photographed with his daughter and Gloria prefers to be photographed speaking at an anti-racist conference than in her office. These images question and present alternative images to gender with Gloria in an active role and Hewie in a traditional passive one. For it is important to look at questions of gender construction when discussing racial representation in the context of appropriation and control.

The subjects not only have access to the photographic means of production through selecting and cropping; these subjects also have access to the control of their own 'looks' and 'gazes' stealing their own images. This point is depicted in the images of Hewie and Gloria but also in the images of the children from Efra school in Brixton where they take the photographs themselves – inverting the early anthropological images of Black people.

Out of all the images in this last section it is the Black Women and Representation Group image that is the most important and it is the image that I leave last. Not only does the image and text combine the ideas and concepts that were discussed in the exhibition. The image also challenges and confronts traditional images of Black people – especially women.



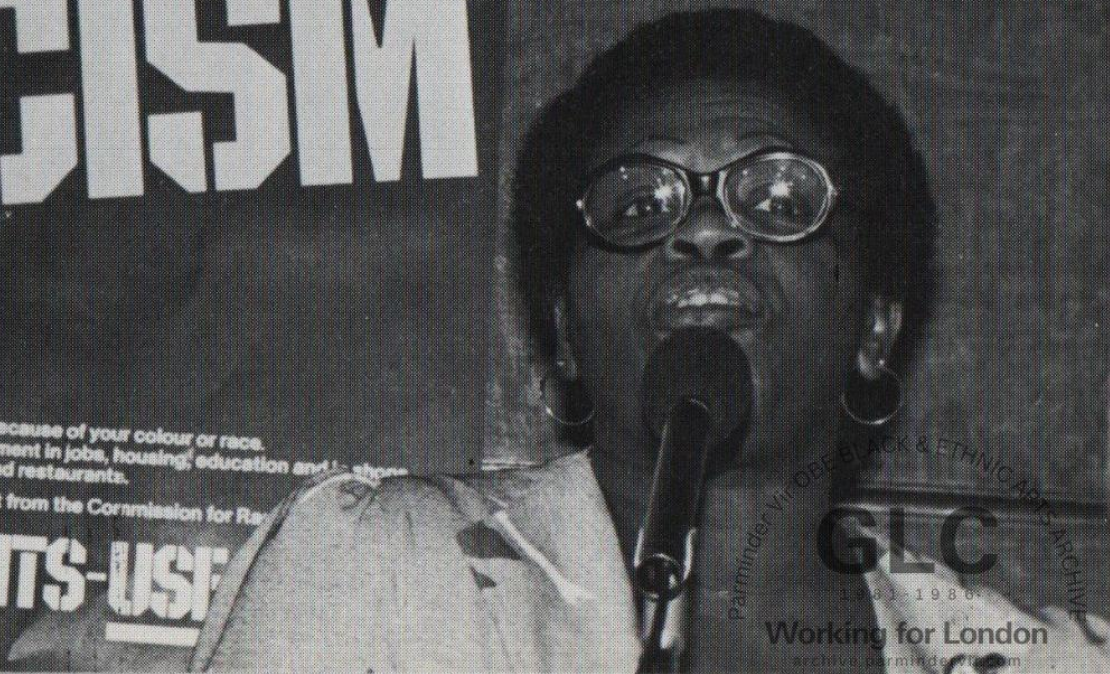
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No one can hold you back because of your colour or race.
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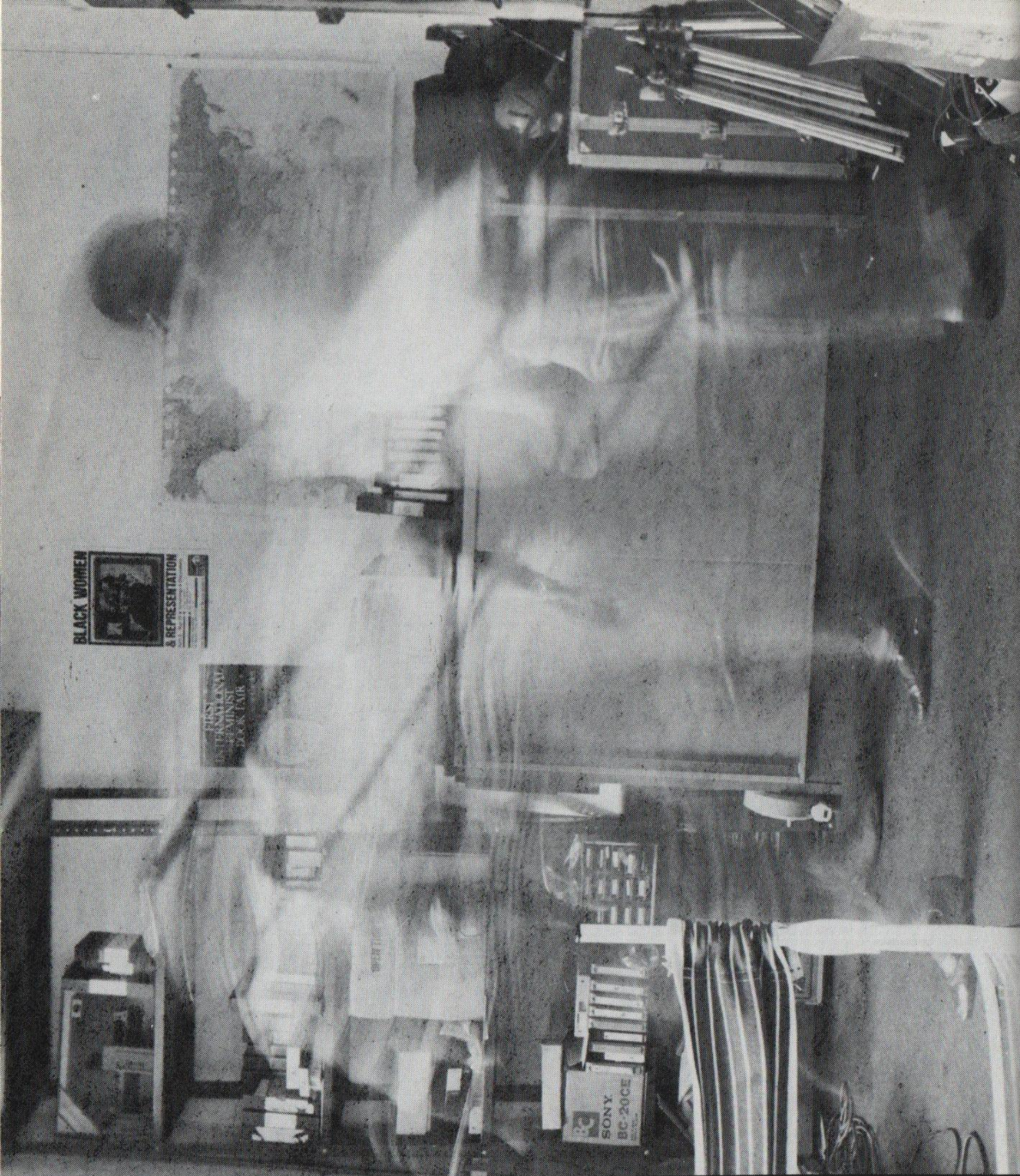
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"Not the photograph . . . But the meaning the spectator associates with the image. Progressive meanings can only come out of a society with progressive values . . . Untill then we will continue to look at media images without fully seeing . . . Without fully understanding"
Black Women and Representation Group Statement.

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