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Module: Ways of Perceiving ADAD4019 - Curation Essay (John Pugh/Martin Bush)

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I intend to curate an festival in London with the title 'Rise', centred around the theme of black culture and the continuing fight for equality. The title is inspired by the poem 'Still I Rise' by the black poet Maya Angelou, who was an inspiration to black communities around the world. The Brits 2020 performances this year by the black rap artists Stormzy and Dave were appreciated by audiences and viewers black, white, young or old and this positive reaction and discussion arising from their performances seems to demand the need for something similar on a larger scale, acting the role of the curator according to sociologist Bauman - a 'pusher, inspirer, brother, community maker' **(1)**. This would be an ambitious event to curate but here I will explore some of the ideas for such an event.

As the event would be exhibiting a range of musicians, speakers, poets who demand justice for those who have been discriminated against and ignored by the government in many cases, the space to be utilised for this festival will be the site of the Grenfell Tower Estate, currently being demolished in order for a remodelled residential area **(Figure 1)**. Grenfell Tower sits at the Northern end of the Lancaster West 1 Estate, in the Notting Barns Ward of North Kensington. The Estate consists of the tower and three "finger blocks" – Testerton, Hurstway and Barandon Walks – 3 and 4 storey linear residential blocks which extend 150m south from the Tower enclosing two large green spaces.

Relf **(2)** describes the importance of a sense of place, exploring a circular connection between the spirit of a place and the sense of place for visitors. This influenced the choice of Grenfell as it symbolises a 'last straw' for the already discontented black communities and pushed dominant figures like Stormzy to push for change. This space should help create what Relf calls 'a remarkable spirit of place'. The *'local geography of Grenfell Tower and the surrounding Lancaster West Estate revealing an astonishing landscape of inequality across the borough of Kensington and Chelsea.'* **(3)**



Figure 1

The theme of inequality is often given a stark backdrop when the colour scheme is black and white. I mean to adopt the black and white colour scheme throughout the festival with three large, white performance tents, a food tent and also an exhibition tent for an exhibition of black and white photographs, including part of the emotive collection which in 2015 appeared at the V & A exhibition in London (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2

The sense of belonging such iconic photographs will imbue relates to the term artist Iwan Bala uses of 'custodial aesthetics' - the importance of art which reflects the collective memory of a people and place (4) and these images will be selected on the high walls surrounding the festival area which will be white and featuring hundreds of black silhouettes of birds in flight, signifying freedom. (**Figure 3**) Trencsenyi argues that 'the artworks presented 'under the roof' of a theatre or festival ... contribute to the narrative the organisation is creating about itself'. (5) The future needs to feel positive for black communities.



Figure 3

There would be four large tented areas in total, one containing a food hall, one the photography exhibition, one the central music stage and one slightly smaller tented area for speakers ranging from spoken poetry performers such as Raymond Antrobus and speakers/poets keen to celebrate the black culture at this venue. The stage area could be influenced by the stark stage used by Pia Maier Schriever for *Roméo et Juliette* by Sasha Waltz, a large folded white metal backdrop with black whisp-like strands visible at the corner. **(Figure 4)** This could reflect paint splashes of resistance being offered up by the speakers, highly visible and intrusive - as it should be - on a mainly white landscape.



Figure 4

The staging in the main music tent would continue the black and white theme, with a more obvious theme of resistance and rebellion, in keeping with the often combative lyrics of the rappers who would perform there. An inspiration would be the Glastonbury stage design for Stormzy's performance in 2019, with the use of barbed wire, scaffolding and caging - a more industrial feel, familiar to many inner city black communities. **(Figure 5)** Stormzy had chosen this industrial style as it ties to his London roots with visual nods to Croydon's [Brutalist](#) architecture. Open cage doors, ripped barbed wire and scaffolding planks would be indicative of freedom and a refection of barriers placed on BAME individuals in society. This would lead to what Lawrence Grossberg terms 'effect', **(6)** a personal and deeply felt sense of recognition and would apply to many in the audience who had felt oppression of any kind, not just the black experience.



Figure 5

The third tent area would house the seating and stalls for refreshments: an eclectic mix of food offerings inspired by black cultures within Britain. This tent would be black and white externally in line with the rest of the festival but once inside, the senses would experience a colourful and vibrant onslaught. Large wooden backdrops to the stalls would feature artwork inspired by Nigerian culture and Jamaican Culture, similar to those depicted here (**Figures 6, 7, and 8**). The artworks chosen here would enhance the experience of those visitors immersing themselves in the tastes and smells of such colourful cultures and visitors would be reminded that black culture has much to offer the fish and chip traditions of the UK. In January 2020, Belgian Rapper and Artist Baloji curated a collection of film shorts which brought together short bursts of African cinema and his part of the 2020 London Short Film Festival was a vibrant affair, full of sound and attacks on the senses. He was keen on a 3D effect where festival goers are immersed in both sight and sound. My festival experience would therefore include screen backdrops surrounding the food area with bursts of vibrant colour and music from a range of multi-cultural communities across Britain. As part of the 2020 festival, Baloji also performed music with his band of 10 years. Combining Congolese guitars with urban sounds, electronic and hip-hop, his lively shows incorporate plenty of cross-media visual elements. He explains: *"I've been trying something visual most of the time. You don't only do the sound. You can't pretend like the other senses don't exist. I think it makes sense to see everything as a whole, to make the experience more complete."* (**7**) Inspired by his choices here, podiums throughout the food hall would feature music of black cultures which are something alternative to the rap scene. This festival is not only about resistance, but also celebration, and that is what the food hall vibe should focus on.



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

The paths through the tents will be lined with white metal trees, and on the benches will be the black figures of birds. There will be placards nailed to the trunks with quotations from a range of black poetry, including quotations from the festival title linked poem, Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise'. (Figure 9) These quotations and continuing emblems of birds could then be uplifting and inspiring for spectators and seating areas will be placed amongst the trees. Ranciere states that the 'spectator observes, selects, compares, interprets' (8) and the combination of the birds in flight on the walls surrounding the festival ground and the notion of escape in the main music stage, along with the celebratory mix of food cultures in the food hall will hopefully be interpreted as a path to a more positive future. Food and drink will be consumed in these tree lined areas. Ultimately, the expectation is that the festival goer will leave feeling proud and uplifted by the whole event, wherever they are in the space.

STILL I RISE – By Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own back yard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Figure 9

Figures

Figure 1 - Photograph from <https://grenfellactiongroup.wordpress.com/2017/06/22/grenfell-tower-fire-the-forgotten-forgotten-victims/>

Figure 2 - Photographs from an online article <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/staying-power-photographs-of-black-british-experience>

Figure 3 - Wall Art from a collection at Etsy

Figure 4 - Stage design for operatic version of Romeo and Juliette by Pia Maier Schriever https://www.deutscheoperberlin.de/en_EN/calendar/production/romeo-et-juliette.1153748

Figure 5 - stormzy-glastonbury-set-design_dezeen_2364_hero-2-1704x959.jpg

Figure 6 - Judy Ann MacMillian 'Ackee And Breadfruit' 2006 Oil On Canvas 30' x 20'

Figure 7 - Alexander Cooper 'The Coffee Pulper' Oil On Canvas 1989 18' x 24'

Figure 8 - image by Toluwalase Raymond Awolaja, also known as Tolu Raymond, is a contemporary Nigerian visual artist.

Figure 9 - Copy of Still I Rise, by Maya Angelou

Bibliography

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- (2) Relph, E., 2007. Spirit of Place and Sense of Place in Virtual Realities: *Techné Res. Philos. Technol.* 10, 17–25. <https://doi.org/10.5840/techné20071039>
- (3) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327784074_The_Grenfell_Tower_atrocity_Exposing_urban_worlds_of_inequality_in_justice_and_an_impaired_democracy
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- (5) Trencsenyi, K. (2015) *Dramaturgy in the Making*. Bloomsbury, London.
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- (7) (<https://inews.co.uk/culture/film/baloji-london-short-film-festival-2020-tickets-programme-zombies-films-1359333>)
- (8) *Ranciere, J. (2011) The Emancipated Spectator. Verso, London*