



Teacher Resource Notes

John Akomfrah

THE UNFINISHED CONVERSATION

Exhibition open Sat 17 Jan – Sat 7 Mar 2015

Mon – Sat 12 noon – 9 pm

FREE ENTRY



The Mead Gallery is committed to increasing understanding of, and engagement with, international contemporary art. Through our exhibition programme, we encourage young people to engage with key themes and ideas relating to the world they inhabit and offer opportunities for them to meet and work with artists. Every exhibition is supported by a programme of artist-led talks and discussions, workshops and other events. Details are available on our website: meadgallery.co.uk

These notes are designed to support your visit to the Mead Gallery, including planning prior to your visit and suggestions for follow up discussion and activities. They are aimed at all key stages, enabling you to develop them to suit your needs and inspire discussion and practical work.

This resource is designed to

- * **help you with planning and preparing your class visit to the exhibition**
- * **support you on your visit**
- * **provide information about the artists and their work**
- * **provide ideas for follow-up activities**
- * **encourage individual and collaborative creative work**
- * **encourage cross-curricular work**

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Introduction to

The Unfinished Conversation

by John Akomfrah

“How much do we retain and how much do we give up of our cultural identity in order to be ourselves?”

Stuart Hall

The Unfinished Conversation is a complex, visually rich, multi-layered film installation by British artist, film-maker and writer **John Akomfrah**. Investigating notions of culture, ethnic and personal identity the work unfolds simultaneously across three screens. It uses carefully selected images showing British society in flux, rebellion and resistance in the decades following the 1950s. The work includes archive footage, personal photographs and interviews, along with music, poetry and literary texts and could be described as an individual’s memory landscape.

As viewers we are constantly being asked to make connections – between images and sound, the personal and political, contemporary and historical. This is a work where, throughout its 45min duration, we are required to be active rather than passive consumers.

Akomfrah’s installation is about Stuart Hall, the Jamaican-born academic and champion of cultural studies. Hall came to Britain as a student in 1951, studying at Oxford, and soon became caught up in British politics. *The Unfinished Conversation* explores his personal archive to highlight how identity is a product of history and memory:

“Identities are formed at the unstable point where personal lives meet the narrative of history. Identity is an ever-unfinished conversation.”

Stuart Hall

The installation incorporates the writings of William Blake, Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf and Mervyn Peake as well as jazz and gospel music. Jazz was important to Hall who once said:

“Miles Davis put his finger on my soul and it never went away.”

Who was Stuart Hall?



Stuart Hall was the darkest-skinned member of an aspiring middle-class Jamaican family of mixed Portuguese-Jewish, African and English descent.

“I was three shades darker than anyone else in my family...I was too black... an outsider from the time I was born.”

Stuart Hall on *Desert Island Discs*, 2009

He continued to feel alienated as a student at Oxford among the British upper classes, where he came after winning a scholarship to study English. It was only when, in 1968, he decided to define himself as Black, as opposed to merely West Indian, that Hall really began to understand his own personal sense of identity.

The Unfinished Conversation moves between Hall’s voice, ideas, memories and insights, and immerses his biography in significant historical events. Akomfrah describes the work as an exercise in spectropoetics – a re-visitation of the ghosts that haunt a life, and an interrogation of the transformations that those hauntings ultimately produce. He felt a strong connection to Hall who provided, in a sense, a

soundtrack to Akomfrah’s own experiences growing up in Britain. In an interview about the installation the artist states:

“Stuart Hall was a kind of rock star for us; a pop icon with brains whose very iconic presence on this most public of platforms – television – suggested all manner of ‘impossible possibilities’. By just being there in our bedrooms and living rooms, he opened up pathways into that space that he has referred as the place of ‘the unfinished conversation’, that space in which the dialogue between us and the external world begins, that place of identity. With him and through him we began to ask the indispensable questions of that conversation: who are we, what are we and what could we become.”

Stuart Hall died on 10th February 2014. He was an Associate Fellow of the Centre for Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick and the presentation of this film at the Mead Gallery forms part of the University’s 50th anniversary celebrations.

Background on the artist

John Akomfrah

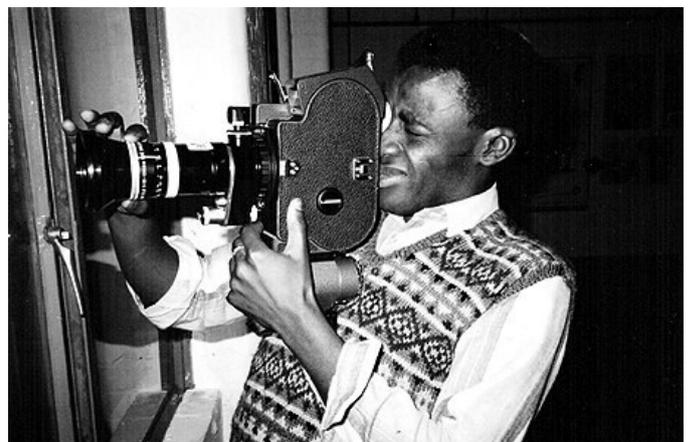
John Akomfrah is himself a migrant who was born in Ghana in 1957 but moved to Britain when he was four. He struggled for decades on the margins of the film industry as an avowedly black director. He is well known for his work with the London-based media workshop Black Audio Film Collective, which he co-founded in 1982, with the objective of addressing issues of Black British identity. In 1986 he received critical success with his debut film documentary, *Handsworth Songs*, documenting the 1985 disturbances in Handsworth and Broadwater Farm. Since 1998, Akomfrah has worked primarily within the independent film and television production companies Smoking Dogs Films (London) and Creation Rebel Films (Accra). He lives and works in London.

For the last 30 years John Akomfrah has been committed to giving a voice and a presence to the legacy of the African Diaspora in Europe; drawing on historical archives to create film essays and fictional stories about past lives. His poetic films create sensual visual and audio experiences while developing a filmic language to understand the trauma and sense of alienation of displaced subjects and to unpack the complexities of identity. Other previous films include:

The Nine Muses (2010), *Mnemosyne* (2009), *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993).

A major retrospective of Akomfrah's gallery-based work with the Black Audio Film Collective premiered at FACT, Liverpool and Arnolfini, Bristol in 2007. His films have been included in international film festivals such as Cannes, Toronto and Sundance, among others.

Now, aged 55, he is an OBE and is hailed as one of the country's major cultural assets. His work is considered amongst the most pioneering, intellectually rewarding and distinctive in the contemporary British art world.



Key Themes and Links to the curriculum for KS3 and above

The activities in this pack will enable young people to explore and develop key areas of the current National Curriculum with a focus on **Art & Design, History and English**. There are activities that allow them to work on their own and to collaborate with others in small groups

In the **Art and Design** curriculum they will support pupils to:

- * produce creative work, exploring their ideas and recording their experiences
- * evaluate and analyse creative works using the language of art, craft and design
- * create sketchbooks, journals and other media to record their observations and use them to review and revisit ideas
- * use a range of techniques to record their observations in sketchbooks, journals and other media as a basis for exploring their ideas
- * analyse and evaluate their own work, and that of others, in order to strengthen the visual impact or applications of their work
- * Learn about the history of art, craft, design and architecture, including periods, styles and major movements from ancient times up to the present day.

In the **History** curriculum the activities will, in part, support pupils to:

- * know and understand the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative, from the earliest times to the present day: how people's lives have shaped this nation and how Britain has influenced and been influenced by the wider world
- * gain historical perspective by placing their growing knowledge into different contexts, understanding the connections between local, regional, national and international history; between cultural, economic, military, political, religious and social history; and between short- and long-term timescales
- * gain understanding of how our knowledge of the past is constructed from a range of sources, and that different versions of past events may exist

In the **English** curriculum the activities will support pupils to strengthen the following skills:

- * develop ideas thoughtfully, describing events and conveying their opinions clearly
- * acquire a wide vocabulary, and begin to vary their expression and vocabulary
- * ask relevant questions to clarify, extend and follow up ideas
- * elaborate and explain clearly their understanding and ideas
- * talk and listen with confidence in an increasing range of contexts



Pupils should be taught to:

- * read and appreciate the depth and power of the English literary heritage through:
 - reading a wide range of high-quality, challenging, classic literature and extended literary non-fiction, such as essays, reviews and journalism.
- * understand and critically evaluate texts
- * make an informed personal response, recognising that other responses to a text are possible and evaluating these.

ICT skills will also be supported in pupils' use of digital cameras and/or iPads to record observations.

Knowledge and Understanding

Questions, Discussions & Activities to Explore — KS3 and above

Before your visit

- 1. What does IDENTITY mean to you?**
Can you create a visual 'map' of your own identity in relation to your family history; places you have lived and influences that have helped shaped who you are.
- 2. What can you find out about immigration in Britain from the 1950s?**
Do you think there has been any change in the often negative attitude towards 'immigrants' between then and now?
- 3. Make a timeline of significant political events taking place between 1950 and the present day in both the UK and the US. What are the similarities and differences between the two countries?**
Discuss.
- 4. Research some of the popular writers and poets producing work in the late 1950s through to the late 1960s in the UK.**



At the exhibition

You will need sketchbooks or paper; pencils, pens, and, if possible, a camera and/or iPad (or you could use your phone).

1. ***The Unfinished Conversation*** uses an artistic device of layering images, sound and words to get across complex messages. Write a stream of consciousness page (uninterrupted flow of thoughts) about your initial response to the work – emotionally, artistically and intellectually.
2. By using three screens Akomfrah is constantly making connections between different images. Plan a portrait of a friend with their image as one of a triptych and then think of two other images you could use to tell the viewer more about them. If possible use your phone, a camera or iPad to create the images in and around the gallery.
3. On a number of occasions Akomfrah uses the colour red in his three screen projections. What do you think this colour – in all its variations of red - represents in the context of the work?



4. There are moments in *The Unfinished Conversation* where Akomfrah uses symbolic imagery, such as the photographs and dresses hanging from the trees. Working in pairs, talk to each other about what you think the artist is trying to get across to the viewer by using this imagery, then share your ideas with others in your group.

5. The following list of words is inspired by the installation:

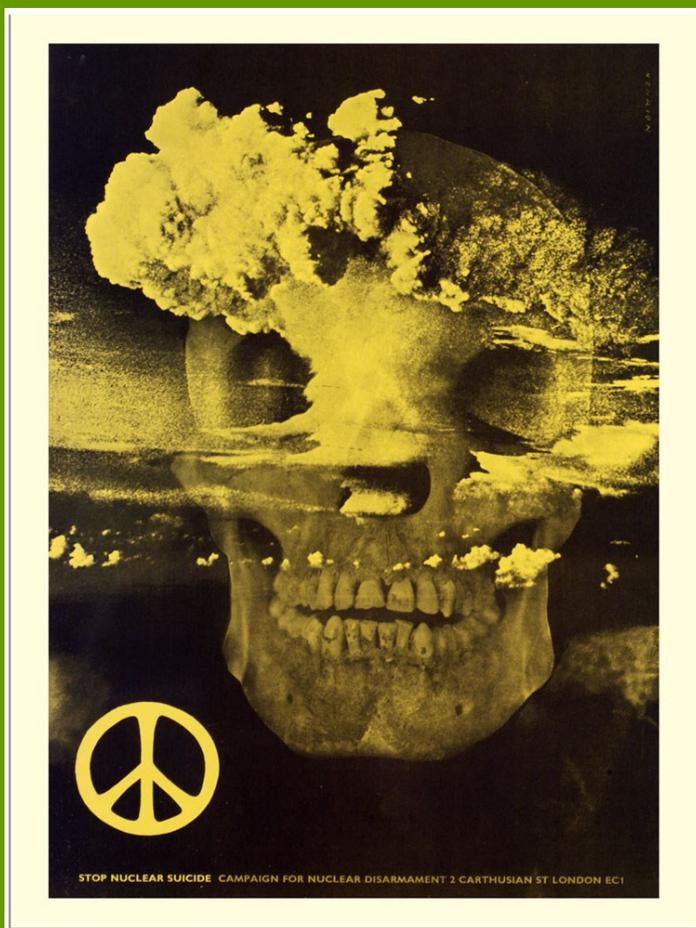
Identity
Change
Interpretation
Connections
Juxtaposition
Exclusion
Difference
Blending

Select three of these words as a starting point and create a poem or word association that expresses what you have learnt from the installation or explores questions that the work raises for you.

Exploring and Developing Ideas

Follow Up Activities - KS3 and above

The following questions focus on British History with links to Art



Stop Nuclear Suicide. Photomontage by FHK Henrion 1963

1. In 1957, Stuart Hall joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and it was on a CND march that he met his future wife. A few years later artists using photomontage played a significant part in raising awareness of the nuclear threat to the country and promoting CND's cause. One of these was German born FHK Henrion – a giant of British graphic design who was granted British nationality in 1946. Henrion's work often used elements of photomontage as well as collage. He pioneered the use of Surrealist compositions within the language of visual communications and advertising in Britain. His work sat alongside that of famous photomontage artist Peter Kennard.

Task: Explore political and propaganda artwork of the 1960s. Can you think of (and find) any equivalent imagery that is used today?



2. Look at the photograph above of Stuart Hall (far right of the picture) with fellow members of the New Left Review, the magazine of which he was the founding editor in 1960.

Question: What can you find out about the paper and events taking place in British history at this time that contributed to the importance of this publication?



The following questions focus on the Art Curriculum with links to History

1. John Akomfrah, when talking about *The Unfinished Conversation*, describes our identities as being

“formed at the intersection of the political and the personal... therefore they are constantly in the process of ‘becoming’, never finished”.

He sees individuals as multi-layered and multifaceted and uses the three screens in his installation as a device to explore this overlap, suggesting the way that, in life, things tend to run on parallel tracks.

Task: Choose a well know person e.g. celebrity, politician etc. and create an artwork to explore their multi-layered identity, using references from their personal history, the present and significant links to the world around them.

2. Music was significant to Stuart Hall and plays an important role in all of John Akomfrah’s films.

Task: Create a simple 30 – 60 second filmed self portrait using music that has been significant for you as your soundtrack.

The following questions focus on the English Curriculum

1. In Akomfrah's installation there is reference made to William Blake's famous poem *The Tyger*.

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

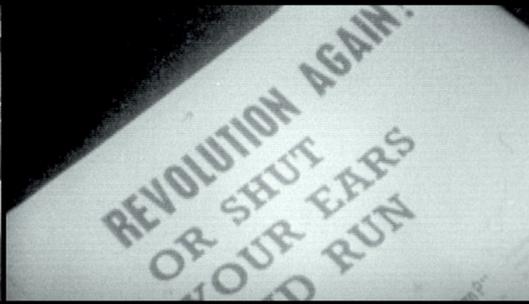
What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

The artist Akomfrah's description of his own work is about "*the question of monstrosity – the monstrosity of this historical narrative*" and Blake's poem is significant to him as it's about recognising, understanding and then resolving the contrary nature of things — of existence and life.

Task: Analyse the poem further and then create your own visual interpretation with reference to current events.



2. Akomfrah describes *The Unfinished Conversation* as being about

“the traffic of history, between the past and the present of ideas, of identities, how we move in time.”

Task: Write a poem or short piece of creative writing that explores an idea that you find interesting that has developed over time and has influenced you in some way.

Further Links

John Akomfrah

<http://www.carrollfletcher.com/artists/40-John-Akomfrah/overview/>
<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/display/bp-spotlight-john-akomfrah-unfinished-conversation>
<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/jan/20/john-akomfrah-migration-memory>
<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/467761/>
<http://www.smokingdogsfilms.com/01home.htm>
<http://www.soundandmusic.org/features/sound-film/interview-john-akomfrah>
<http://vimeo.com/65409141>
<http://autograph-abp.co.uk/exhibitions/the-unfinished-conversation>
<http://autograph-abp.co.uk/exhibitions/the-unfinished-conversation-london>
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/9609361/The-Unfinished-Conversation-by-John-Akomfrah-a-beautiful-paean-to-identity.html>
<http://gerryco23.wordpress.com/2012/11/22/john-akomfrahs-the-unfinished-conversation/>

Stuart Hall

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/aug/18/professor-stuart-hall-multiculturalism-film>
<http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/feb/11/saturday-interview-stuart-hall>
<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/feb/10/stuart-hall>

<http://newleftreview.org>

Linked work

<http://www.peterkennard.com>

<http://www.creativereview.co.uk/cr-blog/2013/november/henrion-complete-designer-unit>

Planning Your Visit to the Mead Gallery

Contact Details and Opening Hours

Mead Gallery

Warwick Arts Centre

University of Warwick

Coventry CV4 7AL

Box Office: 024 7652 4524

Open Monday – Saturday

12 noon – 9pm. Free Entry.

For group visits, it is advisable to book in advance. The Mead Gallery is exclusively available for school group bookings Monday – Friday, 9am – 12noon by prior arrangement. Staff and resources are available to support these visits.

Parking at Warwick Arts Centre

Daytime parking on campus can be difficult so please allow plenty of time. For directions to Warwick Arts Centre, go to <http://www.warwickartscentre.co.uk/your-visit/getting-here/> For a map of the campus, go to <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/about/visiting/maps/campusmap/>

Coaches

Coaches can drop off and pick up on Library Road. Please follow the signs for the short walk to the Arts Centre. Please inform our Box Office if you are arriving by coach so that effective and safe arrangements can be made with campus security.

Cars

Charges apply for all University of Warwick car parks during the day. The nearest to Warwick Arts Centre is CP7 (free if arriving after 6pm). CP7 has no lift.

Minibuses

CP4 and CP5 (1hr max stay) are not height-restricted. Charges apply. After 6pm, please use CP4 or CP5, which are both free.

Lunch

If necessary, rooms are available where pupils can eat their packed lunches. Let us know in advance if you want us to book one.

Toilets

Public toilets are available in the Arts Centre.

Risk Assessments

Risk Assessments are available from the Arts Centre's Education Team. Contact Brian Bishop on 02476 524252.

Before Your Visit

We recommend a preliminary planning visit and are happy to discuss your requirements with you.

Adult supervision of students under 16 is required at all times. An adult student ratio of 1:5 for under 5s, 1:10 for 5-11 year olds, 1:15 for 11-16 year olds and 1:20 for 16-18 year olds is required.

During Your Visit

Teachers/group leaders and accompanying adults are responsible for their group's behaviour whilst at Warwick Arts Centre.

Unless you are told otherwise, please take extra care to ensure that your group follows the Gallery guidelines at all times:

No running

No touching

No leaning against walls or plinths

No photography

Drawing

The Mead Gallery has some drawing materials available and can supply a certain amount of clipboards. Please contact Gallery staff on 024 7657 3732 to discuss your needs. We regret that we cannot supply drawing materials with little or no notice.



lightsgoingon[®] exists to make contemporary art accessible, run by Gill Nicol who has over twenty five years experience of working with contemporary art and audiences.

This pack has been written by Gill Nicol and Kamina Walton. It has been commissioned and designed by the Mead Gallery.

lightsgoingon.com
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