

## **Gilane Tawadros' keynote speech at the first European Cultural Challenge**

*Amsterdam, 15 May 2018*

It is a great honour to be invited by the European Cultural Foundation to be here at such an extraordinary gathering of artists, researchers, advocates, journalists and policy-makers at the first edition of the European Cultural Challenge and the ECF Princess Margriet Award for Culture. I am extremely grateful to the European Cultural Foundation for inviting me to participate and for the great honour of inviting me to give today's keynote address. The Foundation's vision to rethink and build Europe as an open, inclusive and democratic space is critically important, now more than ever, when the political and social stakes are so high.



Dawoud Bey, Portrait of Stuart Hall, 1998. Photo courtesy of Dawoud Bey. Commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery in conjunction with Autograph ABP

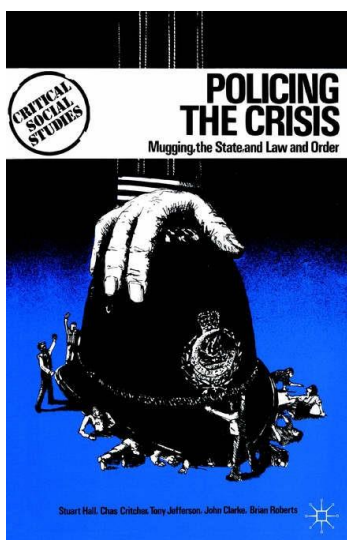
A decade ago, the teacher, cultural theorist and public intellectual Stuart Hall delivered his acceptance speech on the occasion of being recipient of the ECF Princess Margriet Award for Culture. In his speech, Stuart spoke about how important it is to 'recognise and learn to value difference' and how we need to learn how to negotiate difference ' , slowly and sometimes painfully.' At this particular historical and political juncture, not just in Europe but all over the world, the need to value difference and to negotiate difference has never been more necessary and more urgent. We are living through a period of rapid and momentous change. There is a sense that there has been an acceleration, an intensification and depth to the changes in the political and social landscape which some find exciting and liberating and others find ominous and disturbing. These changes have been punctuated by a sequence of events which seem to be indications of more systematic and even seismic shifts in our social and political reality: the Isis-inspired attacks in Paris, Brussels, Berlin, London, Manchester and elsewhere; the assassination of the British politician Jo Cox by a right-wing extremist; the Brexit referendum vote; the election of Donald Trump in the US; the increasing popularity of far-right political groups across Europe who have had significant electoral success in Italy, Hungary and also here in the Netherlands. Although these are very different events with different actors and locations, they have all been framed by questions of race, nation and identity; more specifically, they raise the question of living or rather not living with difference.



front page *The Guardian*, Saturday 12 May 2018

This Saturday's *The Guardian* newspaper carried a front page story on Professor Tendayi Achiume, the UN special rapporteur on racism who spent 11 days in Britain investigating the impact of Brexit on racial equality and concluded that there has been a "Brexit-related growth" in "explicit racial, ethnic and religious intolerance" including "extreme views" that have gained ground in mainstream parties of the left and right.

Perhaps one of the most tangible effects of the current historical conjuncture is the overriding sense of fissure not only in terms of a break in the cultural consensus but equally of a divide between different communities and constituencies. In the context of a violent backlash against all kinds of difference – racial, sexual, ethnic and religious – one of the key challenges we face today is how we can create a space in which we can learn to recognise and value difference and negotiate each other's differences. What makes this difficult and uncomfortable is that truly recognising and valuing difference means acknowledging that difference cannot be assimilated, resolved or erased. What Stuart Hall reminds us in his writings is that Europe's historical entanglements beyond its shores – through slavery, colonial relationships and imperialism – were founded upon racial and cultural difference and upon unequal relations of power. Being courageous citizens in the C21st therefore depends upon us recognising and negotiating difference on equal terms.



Stuart Hall et al *Policing the Crisis* (front cover)

In the 1970s, Stuart Hall was working as a professor at the Centre for Cultural Studies in Birmingham where he and his colleagues carried out research into race, mugging and crime which resulted in a book published in 1978 called *Policing the Crisis*. The book was produced in the context of a deepening political and social crisis in the 1970s in Britain and the rise of a new right-wing, free market politics which was spearheaded by a politician called Margaret Thatcher. The book is a forensic study into the different contributing factors which gave rise to the moral panic about mugging – crime statistics, media reporting, the courts, police attitudes to young black men in Britain’s cities – all of which contributed to this moral panic and provided the opportunity for the new Right in Britain to assert itself as the means by which order and authority could be restored.

It’s important to emphasise that the deepening political and social crisis at that time was not all about race but race was a recurring motif and race and crime was at the centre of what Thatcherism – Stuart coined the phrase – could focus on as a way to try to roll back the social democratic consensus in western Europe in the post-war period. By studying the rise of new right politics and the increasing authoritarianism of the state through the lens of race, Stuart was able to identify before many others how Margaret Thatcher’s rise was not just a political victory for the new right - but critically - that this marked a profound change in political culture and marked a shift to a new historical conjuncture. As Stuart correctly identified, Thatcherism was not simply a British manifestation, it was the beginning of globalisation and a ‘new stage in the global capitalist economy.’

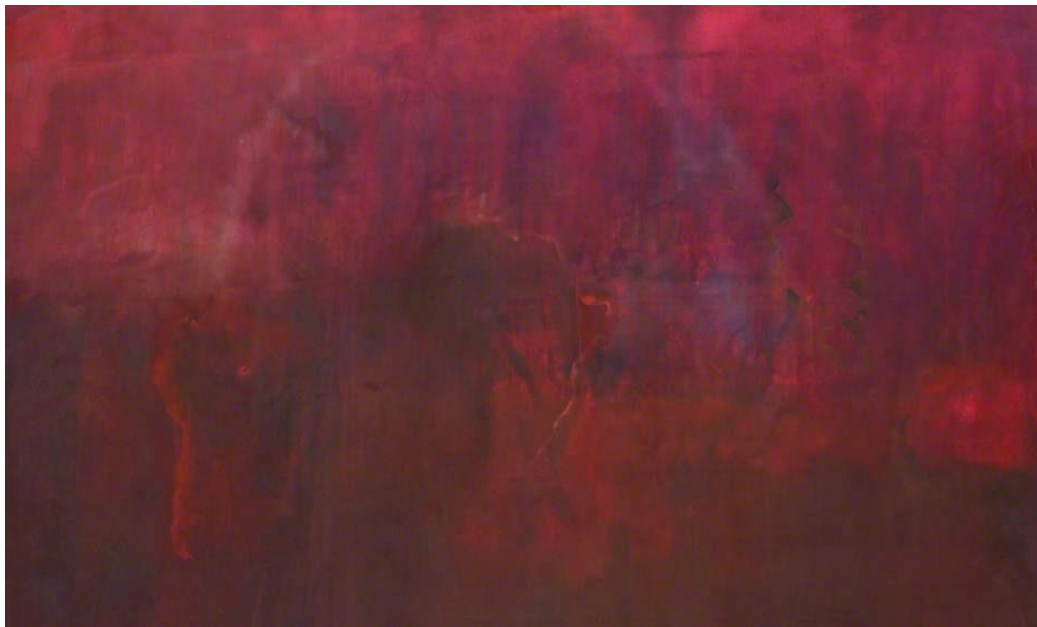
Here in the Netherlands, the sociologist and political scientist [Merijn Oudenampsen](#) who is a postgraduate researcher in the cultural studies department at Tilburg University has drawn parallels between the moral panic in Britain in the 1970s described in *Policing the Crisis* and recent developments in the Netherlands where he identifies a similar moral panic in relation to crime and Dutch Moroccan youth who are seen to be a threat to societal values and interests, prompting a *Marokkanendebat* - a debate about Moroccans in the Dutch parliament a few years ago.



Michael Landy, *Breaking News*, 2016

How can we make sense of the current social and political juncture in Europe through the prism of race – and more specifically through the prism of attitudes to migrants to Europe and to European citizens who are Muslim – the people whom the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte described last year in the run-up to the Dutch general election as *allochtoon* - ‘Dutch strangers’? Can we, as Stuart

Hall did, turn the mirror back onto ourselves and interrogate how the different elements of our social and political reality have been constructed block by block to create the conditions in which we now find ourselves? We did not arrive at this current situation overnight. Although it sometimes feels as though events have been unfolding rapidly over a short time-frame, the reality is that changes have been taking place slowly over an extended timeline during which we have seen the emergence of neoliberalism as ‘a new epoch in the world’ which has profoundly transformed social and cultural relations across the globe, leading to conflicts, displacements, migrations, the suppression of human rights and dramatic inequalities in the economic conditions of millions of people around the world. Throughout Europe, a pervasive anxiety grips indigenous communities. Those who have been cast adrift by the forces of globalization and neo-liberal economics feel alienated and disenfranchised in their own homes. In response, they turn nostalgically to an idea of a homogenous national identity which has probably never existed; and turn against those whom they consider to be strangers in their midst. Coupled with this turn against the stranger, the outsider, the migrant, the refugee, is what Stuart describes as a profound historical forgetfulness about Europe’s past and its entanglements with other parts of the world through its histories of slavery, empire and colonialism. Europe lives in the shadow of this past.



Frank Bowling, *Marcia H Travels*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas. Dallas Museum of Art, TWO x TWO for AIDS and Art Fund, 2014.53

So how does culture fit into this picture?

Let us return to Stuart Hall: in the same way that race provided him with a lens through which to see bigger shifts and changes in society and culture at large, culture too was important to Stuart as a means by which to understand deeper currents in society and to address questions which could not be articulated easily in other contexts. He recognised that ‘culture is a dimension of everything’ and that as he so succinctly put it, ‘everything both exists and is imagined’. If we want to penetrate into the area where deep feelings are involved, which people hardly understand, he advises us, we have to look at culture.

*“If you want to learn more, or see how difference operates inside people’s heads, you have to go to art, you have to go to culture – to where people imagine, where they fantasise, where they symbolise. You have to make the detour from the language of straight description to the language of the imaginary.”*

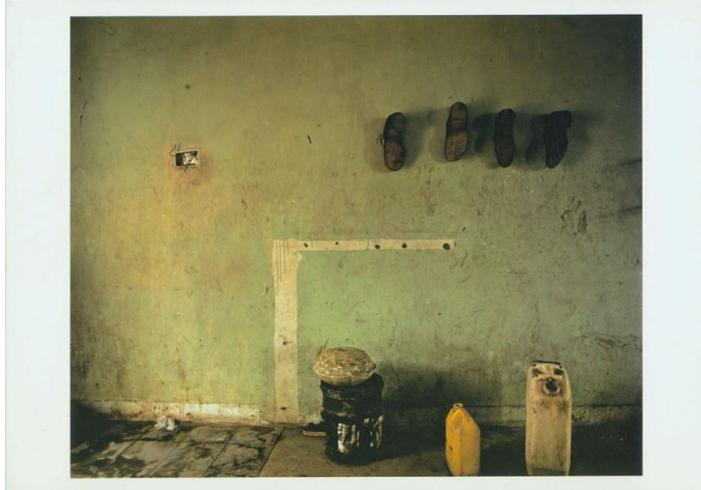
I now want to make my own detour to the imaginary and consider what it means to be an artist and intellectual in this present political moment. I want to consider what role, if any, the artist and intellectual has at this time of social, economic and political turbulence?



Fiona Tan, *A Lapse of Memory* (2007). Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.

In 2006, the artist Fiona Tan made a film called *A Lapse of Memory* (2007). The film imagines a solitary and lonely man shut up inside the Royal Pavillion – an extravagant, ostentatious palace built in Brighton on the English seaside by the C18th regent Prince George. Tan's protagonist Henry is an eccentric, living in voluntary exile and completely oblivious to his luxurious and extravagant surroundings. He talks to himself constantly, unable to distinguish past from present, reality from fiction. Henry's mind appears as confused as the décor of the Royal Pavillion with its hybrid quotation of Indian, Chinese and Japanese styles. It appears as if Tan's eccentric old man has been shaped irrevocably by the culture from which he is a recluse and which, perhaps, have been the cause of his delusions.

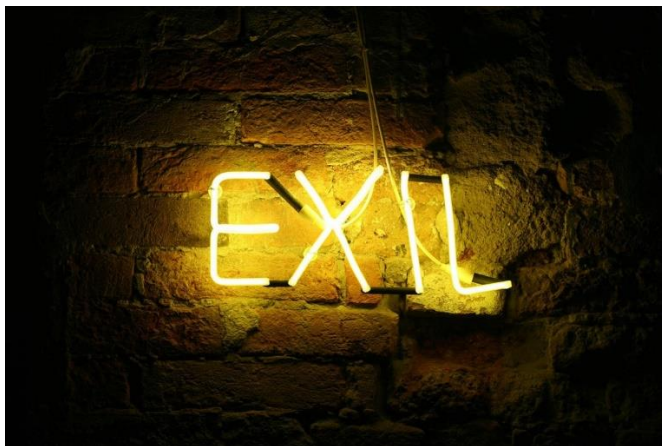
In his memoir, *Familiar Stranger*, Stuart Hall talks about his strategic self-exile from his place of birth Jamaica and how he lived – as he put it – on the hinge between the colonial and post-colonial worlds. The diaspora experience shaped Stuart's ideas. It enabled him to think differently – or as he put it - to think diasporically. Diasporic thinking involves seeing the world from multiple positions simultaneously, both geographically and temporally. It entails understanding the present moment through the prism of the historical past. I believe that this current political moment requires us all to think diasporically: because the past – in terms of Europe's historical entanglement in slavery, empire and colonialism - continues to haunt the present. And because in this globalised world, what happens over *there* beyond the shores of Europe, has an impact and effect *here*.



Zarina Bhimji, *Memories Were Trapped Inside the Asphalt*, 1998-2003

The family of the artist Zarina Bhimji was amongst thousands of Ugandan Asian families who arrived in Britain in the 1970s. In 1972, President Idi Amin ordered the expulsion of Ugandans of South Asian descent from Uganda. As has happened repeatedly throughout history, the expulsion was a means to detract attention from the country's political and economic problems and to scapegoat a minority who were given 90 days to pack up and leave their homes.

These works by Zarina Bhimji which relate to her monumental film *Out of Blue* address the experience of forced exile and its residues in a poetic and elliptical way. The works are almost an anti-archive in the sense that they do not elicit any factual information from what has happened in the past or organise the fragments of the past into any ordered, meaningful way. Rather these haunting, melancholic images speak of cataclysmic events that appear to have been forgotten or neglected. Bhimji has described the works as being concerned with 'learning to listen to "difference", the difference in shadows, microcosms and sensitivity to "difference" in its various forms. Listening with the eyes, listening to changes in tone, difference in colour...it is about making sense through the medium of aesthetics.'



Adel Abdessemed, *Exil*, 2003. © Adel Abdessemed

In his Reith Lectures in 1993, the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said talked about what it means to be an intellectual: 'The challenge of intellectual life,' he says, 'is to be found in the dissent against the status quo at a time when the struggle on behalf of under-represented and disadvantaged groups seems so unfairly weighted against them.'

For Said, being both an intellectual and an exile brings with it distinct advantages. The condition of marginality which accompanies the exile (and we can also add the immigrant and the refugee) frees the intellectual from “having to proceed with caution, afraid to overturn the apple cart.’

The two worthy recipients of this year’s ECF Princess Margriet Award for Culture – Forensic Architecture and Borderland Foundation– are artists and intellectuals whom both Edward Said and Stuart Hall would have admired. Forensic Architecture’s approach, drawing upon a number of different disciplines and tools of research to dig beneath the surface of the available evidence and to shine a light on the state’s manipulation and concealment of the truth, reminds me of the approach which Stuart and his fellow researchers adopted in *Policing the Crisis*. While the Borderland Foundation’s strategy of reclaiming and redefining national culture opens up the possibility for us to contest the increasingly narrow articulation of national cultures in Europe. Both of these groups understand that the question of who is represented and who has the authority to represent us is the pressing political and cultural issue of our time.

*“To be as marginal and as undomesticated as someone who is in real exile,’ says Said,’ is for an intellectual to be unusually responsive to the traveller rather than to the potentate, to the provisional and risky rather than to the habitual, to innovation and experiment rather than the authoritatively given status quo. The exilic intellectual does not respond to the logic of the conventional but to the audacity of daring, to representing change, to moving on, not standing still.”*



Sutapa Biswas, *Birdsong* (2004). Detail. 16mm film transferred onto 2 dvds. Dual screen projection – with a 5 second delay programmed in installation and viewing between the left hand side screen and the right hand side screen. Colour, no sound. Duration: 9 minutes 28 seconds. Dimensions: Variable. Copyright Sutapa Biswas. All Rights Reserved DACS 2017

The space of art and culture presents the opportunity for a radically different model of enquiry based on the proposition that, unlike science, religion, politics and many other fields of our intellectual and social lives, contemporary artistic practice is concerned with posing questions about the world around us, rather than offering up answers or solutions. Because, until we understand fully the questions that we are asking – in a profound, critical and self-reflexive way – then we are unlikely to find the right answers.

Let us think about making sense through culture and thinking diasporically; that is, seeing the world from multiple positions simultaneously, both geographically and temporally. We are gathered here in Amsterdam over the next twenty-four hours for the European Cultural Challenge and to reflect on what it means to be ‘courageous citizens.’ I’d like to propose that the challenge and the opportunity of this current conjuncture is for all of us – artists, intellectuals, policy makers - to embrace fully the conditions of marginality and exile and in doing so, to challenge the status quo; to take risks; to innovate and experiment; to move on...imagining a different future to the present in which we find ourselves, and thereby transforming it.