

# Is art installation Exhibit B racist?

Following accusations of exploitation and racism, the Barbican decided to close down the live art installation Exhibit B. Were the protests justified?

**Stella Odunlami and Kehinde Andrews**

Saturday 27 September 2014 11.00 EDT

*Last week, following protests, the Barbican cancelled all further performances of live art installation Exhibit B due to security concerns. Created by South African Brett Bailey, Exhibit B had previously received five-star reviews for its critique of the “human zoos” and ethnographic displays that showed Africans as objects of scientific curiosity through the 19th and early 20th centuries.*

## **Stella Odunlami, artist**

I chose to take part in *Exhibit B* because I was inspired by the premise of the work. I was to play the role of Found Object Number 2, a 25-year-old Nigerian asylum seeker. At my audition, director Brett Bailey clearly set out his intentions, explaining how the piece was a damning critique of the horrors of the systematic dehumanisation of a people that occurred throughout the era of the European empires; and the far-reaching effects that continue to haunt us. I knew immediately that it was an important production.

Those against the work claim it is simply another exploitation of the narrative of the black community that desecrates the memory of our ancestors. This simply is not true. It honours them, restoring humanity to the faceless, acknowledging the centuries of atrocities upon which Europe is built. It denies the spectator and the performer the luxury of hiding. It forces us to examine the darkest corners of our mind. It is brutal, unforgiving and unapologetic. I decided, as an educated black artist, that it told a story that should be shared with the world, but sadly

that will no longer be the case. My freedom of expression was taken the moment the protesters decided to attempt to storm the venue, causing it to be evacuated and deemed unsafe. It was at that moment that the protesters retained their right to free speech and I had mine taken away.

### **Dr Kehinde Andrews, sociologist and activist**

First, I need to dispel the falsehood that the protest attempted to storm the venue. The protesters linked arms and drummed outside the entrance and there was a significant police presence with not a single arrest. It is shocking (or perhaps expected) that the Barbican has chosen to draw on racist stereotypes of black aggression to give itself an excuse for the cancellation. The protest was the culmination of a national campaign drawing in a 23,000-strong petition, marches, articles, letters and critical analysis. We have to judge whether the exhibit is offensive based on the product, not the misplaced intentions. Bailey has arranged an interchangeable set of black bodies into a tableau of his choosing, rendering them voiceless and passive. I find it difficult to see how the cancellation could take away your voice as a performer, as it was absent to begin with.

SO Would I be right in assuming that you have not seen the work? I agree that when one engages with a piece of art, it should be judged on the finished product. It is unfair to judge a theatrical installation designed to be seen, felt and heard on a crude, two-dimensional photographic (mis-)representation. Most theatregoers know that it is nigh on impossible to try to capture the magic that happens in an auditorium when you feel the actor's gaze meet yours, or feel the heat of their body as they move past you. Charlie Chaplin, one of the greatest storytellers to have ever lived, made audiences laugh and cry through the use of just his body. In *Exhibit B*, the performers were trained to communicate feeling through their eyes from their positions of stillness. The quiet of the space is counterbalanced by the beautiful voices of a choir, creating a reverent and reflective atmosphere. The final space in the installation is the reflection room in which the audience could read the actors' thoughts and motivations for being part of it and record their own responses. To say Brett's intentions are misplaced is to enter the dangerous territory of censorship of an artist.

If we follow your argument and judge the final production, then the articles, essays and letters to which you refer, based on an imagining of the piece, hold no merit. If we are to judge *Exhibit B* on what has been written by critics and those who have experienced it, it cannot be deemed offensive or worthy of censorship.

**KA** I have never, and will never, see a black and white minstrel show, but I am certain they are racist. Our position is based on detailed accounts of the exhibition, and from these I know that I do not want to collude in the piece by experiencing it. If we can't campaign against things we haven't experienced there would be no social movements. The body is an extraordinarily powerful tool in art but, unlike Chaplin, your body was not under your control. The exhibition literally turns the black body into an object. Such objectification was at the heart of the human zoos, and recreating this re-exoticises and reproduces the original racism. This is not a discussion about censorship, but about racism, what it is and who has the power to define it.

**SO** There is past precedent of artists subverting racist iconography in a complex and nuanced way to challenge the negative stereotypes traditionally ascribed to the black body. Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* does so to great effect, Jean Genet's *The Blacks* is a minstrel show written by a white playwright that is highly provocative and charged with racial tension to expose the hypocrisy and deeply embedded racism found at all levels of society.

My body was "under my control" as I opted to take part of my own volition. I was told how and where to position myself, but that is a mere technicality as it's what directors and choreographers do the world over: direct performers!

I am sorry you believe the piece was racist and felt offence but you were under no obligation to engage with it. I find it worrying that you feel confident enough to condemn something that you "refuse to collude in" by viewing for yourself. I reiterate that my fellow performers and I chose to be part of a production that exposed racism then and now. We have had to defend our decision to exercise our freedom of creativity to those who call us puppets. It is not your job to decide what is or isn't good for me; I am capable of doing so for myself. My greatest disappointment is

that the piece has been withdrawn and neither you nor anybody else will now be able to see and critique *Exhibit B* for themselves.

KA Lee's *Bamboozled* and Genet's *The Blacks* are critiques of black and white minstrel shows; they do not simply recreate them. The problem with *Exhibit B* is that it reproduces the human zoo and the racism at the heart of it. The detailed accounts I am basing my position on are from the reviews, accounts and interviews with the director and the artists. I have enough information to make an informed view. The fact that you chose to participate does not mean that you did not surrender control of your body to the director, but my argument here is not about what is good for you personally, and I have avoided direct criticism of individuals for this reason. My concern is with the impact of the piece, and the grotesque parody of the human zoo that it presents is a racist depiction that objectifies, pacifies and fetishises the black body.

The arts do not have the right to racially offend and black artists do not have the authority to define what is and is not acceptable. Black artists have a dubious track record of appearing in and supporting racist art in the past, for example the black and white minstrel shows. In fact, it is difficult for art to fully degrade black people without the participation of black artists. The closeness to the productions and financial concerns can often obscure the view of the performers to the wider implications. The refreshing aspect of the success of this campaign was that a grassroots movement started in the community, rallied widespread support including academics, artists and politicians, and took control of deciding what constitutes racism and the bounds of acceptability.

More comment

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