

# Sonia Boyce: Feeling Her Way at the Venice Biennale

Sarah Messerschmidt

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Sonia Boyce, 'Feeling Her Way', the 59th Biennale Arte, Venice, Italy  
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Sonia Boyce on the steps of the Great Britain pavilion in the Giardini, Venice, 2022,  
photo by Marco Cappelletti, courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia

The inveterate nationalism that structures much of the Venice Biennale is not lost on Sonia Boyce. Being invited to represent Great Britain for the 59th edition of the Biennale Arte might have given rise to plenty of questions, much as it did jubilation for such an opportunity. What does it mean to represent a nation, and how does one genuinely and tactfully approach nationhood through art, while openly recognising that the framework of the Giardini and its pavilions is in direct relation to imperialism and antique (though not obsolete) notions of the nation-state? Boyce is now the

recipient of the Golden Lion award for Best National Participation for the exhibition ‘Feeling Her Way’, one of the most prestigious accolades of the Biennale, and predicated in this case on the successful artist’s national affiliations. She has said before, ‘Growing up in the UK, I was constantly being asked, “Where are you from?” I was born in the UK, and so, you know, spent a very long time having to make a claim for being here, for existing here, not just as an individual, but collectively, “we are here”.’<sup>1</sup>

As a person of African Caribbean heritage, the narrowness of what determines belonging and identity in Britain has been especially but unfairly foregrounded for Boyce, whose parents were of the so-called ‘Windrush Generation’ of émigrés who left Caribbean countries for the UK between the 1940s and early 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Boyce herself was a member of the Black British arts movement in the 1980s, a group that included artists such as Lubaina Himid and Keith Piper, and which addressed racial discrimination and the politics of representation through feminist, anti-racist discourse in art. For the British pavilion in Venice, an edifice she refers to as ‘a citadel of nationhood’,<sup>3</sup> Boyce was interested in interrupting the frameworks that determine certain established norms – the exclusionary nature of popular culture in relation to cultural identity, for example – in lieu of developing a body of work that ostensibly reflects British national characteristics or values. Rather, *Feeling Her Way* directs focus toward narratives that are obscured by the official channels of British history – in this case, the often overlooked legacies of Black women singers in the modern history of the country – both in recognition of the geographic context in which the work is produced (her own, as well as that of the artists she assembles), while also challenging the racism that nests in the prevailing social, cultural and historical assumptions that constitute British heritage.

It is the collective assertion that ‘we are here’ that motivates *Feeling Her Way*. The exhibition is formed of many components, but centres on a collaborative musical performance between four singers, Jacqui Dankworth, Poppy Ajudha, Sofia Jernberg and Tanita Tikaram, who are documented improvising through vocal exercises led by the composer Errollyn Wallen. Across six adjoining galleries, mounted videos of the individually singing women play simultaneously, producing an overlapping, cacophonous and at times disorientating group of sounds. Improvisation and play were fundamental to the production of the videos, which depict the four vocalists responding to prompts given by Wallen, who gently guides the women through interpretive animal calls and melodic phrases, or utterances that transcend language. While mostly sung, the sounds can also be strident or guttural, emanating from somewhere deep in the body of each singer, their diaphragms evidently working to release a yell or a low rumble. Wallen encourages expression that is not pleasant or nice, welcoming atonal notes and dissonance as much as harmony to relieve the performers from the expectation that feminine voices should be polished and pretty. Even so, the

<sup>1</sup> ‘at home: Artists in Conversation | Sonia Boyce and Simone Leigh’ (13:16), in conversation with Courtney J Martin and Paul Mellon, *Yale Center for British Art*, 23 February 2022, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwdCtBmpSkA&ab\\_channel=YaleBritishArt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwdCtBmpSkA&ab_channel=YaleBritishArt)

<sup>2</sup> Large changes to legislation regarding British immigration laws began in 2012, which includes the ‘hostile environment policy’ introduced by the then Home Secretary, Theresa May. Many people of Caribbean origin, resident in Britain for several decades, were treated as illegal residents of the United Kingdom and threatened with deportation. This period in history is known as the Windrush scandal. See ‘Amber Rudd: Windrush generation treatment “appalling”’, *BBC News*, 16 April 2018, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-43780621](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-43780621)

<sup>3</sup> ‘at home: Artists in Conversation | Sonia Boyce and Simone Leigh’ (13:01), op cit

singers possess sophisticated vocal abilities: in one video, notes tumble out of Poppy Ajudha with striking dexterity, while in another, Tanita Tikaram sits at a piano with eyes closed, genuinely ‘feeling her way’ through melody as she conducts an experiment in spontaneous songwriting.



Sonia Boyce, ‘Feeling Her Way’, installation view in the Great Britain pavilion, the 59th Biennale di Venezia, 2022, photo by Marco Cappelletti, courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia

There are also unplanned moments of harmony that build within the general disorder of noise, not only between the recordings of improvising performers in the central gallery, but between videos playing from all six rooms. The sonic interaction of the multiple videos encourages visitors to move freely through the space, lending an enhanced intricacy to an already elaborate, perhaps collaged, auditory experience. Boyce’s only instruction to the performers was to ask them to consider, ‘What does it mean to feel free?’<sup>4</sup> Despite the clamour, or possibly because of it, when in some moments the voices rise in unified crescendo – at Wallen’s suggestion, the women sing ‘I am Queen’, and four individual interpretations begin inadvertently to synchronise – the vocal lift seems to perfectly emulate the sensation of freedom that Boyce probes for. Given that the exercises were unscripted, this unity of voices is especially touching.

The surrounding space of the pavilion is ornamented with bespoke wallpaper designed by Boyce, and made up of collaged image fragments and abstract patterns that reference the day spent recording in the Abbey Road Studios in London.<sup>5</sup> Boyce has been fascinated by repeating patterns

<sup>4</sup> See ‘Sonia Boyce: exhibition brochure’, curated by Emma Ridgway, *59 Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte, La Biennale di Venezia*, 2022

<sup>5</sup> Abbey Road recording studios has been the site of a vast history of music production in Britain – some of the most globally recognisable pop sounds were recorded there. The studios were made famous by the Beatles, whose impact on their millions of supporters has been monumental. In poignant contrast to the singers featured in Sonia Boyce’s *Devotional* and *Feeling Her Way*, the Beatles engaged parasocially with international audiences; indeed, fans of the group typically believe they know each member so intimately, first names are enough to conjure entire public personas. Boyce’s project addresses, from another angle, this same notion of fame and notability, and why or how Black women musicians have been neglected and/or excluded from possessing the same renown.



and the decorative arts for many years, intrigued by how these elements of design interact with and modify physical architecture. She explains that her interest in wallpaper is informed both by the domestic interior of the Caribbean home and by William Morris's textile designs of the Arts and Crafts movement in Victorian England. In *Feeling Her Way*, the patchwork arrangement of images on the walls seems to mimic the simultaneity of several sounds within one space, in reference to the multilateral texture of music, but possibly also in demonstration of the coexistence of difference. To further emphasise the particular relation between sound and space: like wallpaper design, music often follows a pattern. Even when seemingly random, both music and visual patterning adhere to a logic that joins individual gestures into a fluent texture. Like wallpaper, also, music often becomes a backdrop to life, a score to lived experience. As a supplement to the papered walls, geometric formations sprout from various corners of each room, in some cases serving as seating for lingering visitors. They are intended to evoke the mineral iron pyrite, or 'fool's gold', which in the West connotes inferiority or something counterfeit. Yet, in other places the mineral is presumed to have high material value, its lustre sometimes containing small quantities of the precious metal. It is clear that to Boyce there is nothing counterfeit about pyrite at all, and she references the material in order to cast doubts on colonial systems of order that '[judge] by negative comparison'.<sup>6</sup>



Sonia Boyce, 'Feeling Her Way', detail of wallpaper, the Great Britain pavilion, the 59th Biennale di Venezia, 2022, photo by Marco Cappelletti, courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia

*Feeling Her Way* is one part of Boyce's larger initiative to make visible (or audible) the voices of Black British women in music, in a continuation of the ongoing archive *Devotional* that began several decades ago. To describe *Devotional*, Boyce often begins with an anecdote from the project's earliest stages. In 1999, she was invited to work with the women's group Liverpool Black Sisters to create an

<sup>6</sup> 'Sonia Boyce: exhibition brochure', op cit

artwork with members of the charity. As has characterised a great portion of her artistic practice for many years, one that is anchored in social engagement as a means of artistic experiment, Boyce extended the creative power to her collaborators. The first meeting opened with a question: could anyone name a Black British woman singer they loved. The ensuing uncertainty was broken after ten, apparently uncomfortable, minutes with the name Shirley Bassey, yet the shared embarrassment over this lack of awareness led to an endeavour that has since exponentially broadened in scope. *Devotional* is a growing collection of more than three hundred names, which includes paraphernalia, CDs, tapes and vinyl records that publicly cite Black British women musicians, dating from the nineteenth century. Although Boyce carries out the bulk of the historical research herself (she logs many hours in charity shops scanning for second-hand ephemera, and any new discoveries are later investigated through more formal periods of research), the project is sustained in large part through an organic networking of people who contribute data and related material to the growing collection. Information about women singers is transmitted to Boyce informally, travelling through networks of peers and acquaintances who have a genuine enthusiasm for uncovering the activities of Black British women in music. If the *Devotional* project is an exercise in extracting even a fraction of the encyclopaedic knowledge fans are wont to have about popular musicians, it is also to observe the critical gap in knowledge with regard to Black performers, and to do something to confront the inattention.



Sonia Boyce, 'Feeling Her Way', installation view in the Great Britain pavilion, the 59th Biennale di Venezia, 2022, photo by Marco Cappelletti, courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia

Together, *Devotional* and *Feeling Her Way* identify a relationship between sound and memory, mapping the history (and existence) of Black women musicians and their significance to the collective cultural experience. They draw on a mixture of archival materials and public

participation to accentuate alternative histories of music production in Britain. As well as maintaining a participatory and collaborative system of art-making, for several decades Boyce has approached a significant portion of her artistic practice through archival research. Aside from *Devotional*, she managed the three-year Black Artists and Modernism (BAM) research project supported by Middlesex University, as well as the African and Asian Visual Artists Archive (AAVAA), now housed at the University of East London. Boyce's work for the Venice Biennale has a clear lineage. She observes: 'To a certain extent, I think that archival material begs to be reactivated. Not to reinstate its original condition, but surely to keep the items is a promise that in the future they'll be resurrected for future use.'<sup>7</sup> Certainly, reanimating archival material does the work of galvanising new thinking and new ideas, not only to reflect differently on the past – thus challenging narrow ideas that are enshrined in official histories – but also to lay the groundwork for the future to come. The phrase 'Feeling Her Way' implies this assertive hold over the future. Both projects also emphasise the exchange and overlap between collective experience and personal memory, making a case for the ways in which popular music impacts the individual lives of listeners. Sound – music, in particular – has the power to call forth strong association in its listeners. Music is an emotional medium: it is transportive, it is connective, and to experience it, whether as a performer or a listener, can stir and transform an audience. As Brandon LaBelle writes: 'Sound is intrinsically and unignorably relational: it emanates, propagates, communicates, vibrates, and agitates; it leaves a body and enters others; it binds and unhinges, harmonizes and traumatizes; it sends the body moving, the mind dreaming, the air oscillating. It seemingly eludes definition, while having profound effect... [sound] teaches us that space is more than just its apparent materiality... and that to produce and receive sound is to be involved in connections that make privacy intensely public and public experience distinctly personal.'<sup>8</sup>

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**Sarah Messerschmidt** is a writer who works across anthropology, art and critical theory. Her current research examines nonfiction and artists' films as ways of representing experience, particularly those that respond to the colonial past, looking at moving image practices as methods of reinvention and world-making. She has been an affiliated writer with the Maumaus School in Lisbon (2021); 'The Whole Life: An Archive Project', a collaborative research initiative at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (2022); the Writers Residency programme AIR Munich at Villa Waldberta, in cooperation with the Kunstverein München (2022); and she regularly contributes writing to published volumes, journals and magazines internationally.

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<sup>7</sup> 'Collapsing the boundaries between art, sound and collaboration – Professor Sonia Boyce' (11:12), inaugural lecture, Middlesex University School of Art and Design, 25 November 2013 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UA-XWUkw0c&ab\\_channel=MiddlesexUniversity](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UA-XWUkw0c&ab_channel=MiddlesexUniversity)

<sup>8</sup> Brandon LaBelle, 'Introduction: Auditory Relations', *Background Noise, Second Edition: Perspectives on Sound Art*, Bloomsbury, New York, 2015