

# Living through Archives: The socio-historical memories, multi-media methodologies and collaborative practice of Rita Keegan

Jessica Boyall

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'Rita Keegan: Somewhere Between Here and There', South London Gallery, London, UK  
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In March 1997, the London-based African and Asian Visual Artists Archive (AAVAA), then headed by Eddie Chambers, staged, in collaboration with *Third Text*, 'The Living Archive' conference at the Tate Gallery with the aim of initiating fresh ways of thinking about the meaning and purpose of an archive of African and Asian artists – or, more precisely, 'to explore not only the question of institutional policy but also the notion of a "living archive of the diaspora"'.<sup>1</sup>

In a paper delivered at the conference, Stuart Hall emphasised the significance of archival methodologies to postwar diasporic cultural production, identifying two stages as key to the development of artistic practice. The first is the moment of creation: the point at which a work of art is made and distributed via exhibitions, press releases, catalogues, and so on.<sup>2</sup> The second stage is when the artwork becomes, however informally, archived, thereby conceived of in retrospect as an 'object of reflection and debate' and thus imbued with a legacy and metamorphosed into a *living* entity.<sup>3</sup>

Underlining the cruciality of both phases to diasporic cultural production and contextualising this production within the vexed racial politics of the postwar British art establishment, Hall asserts the 'need to pay particular tribute to all those who have been involved over the years, often in very informal, personally taxing and under-funded ways, to secure in one place slides of the works, catalogues, exhibition notices, reviews and other texts relating to the artistic production of the black and Asian diaspora'.<sup>4</sup> Both Rita Keegan and the Rita Keegan Archive Project (hereafter abbreviated as RKAP) – namely Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski, Lauren Craig, Dominique Zenani Barron, Gina Nembhard and Naomi Pearce – are amongst those due this tribute.

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<sup>1</sup> David Bailey and Sonia Boyce, 'An introduction', in *Third Text* 54, Vol 15, 2001, p 87

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Constituting an archive', in *Third Text* 54, Vol 15, 2001, p 89

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

Keegan, a creator and therefore an occupant of Hall's first phase, deftly understands the importance of documentation in representing Black female identity, and more than this the significance of systems involved in this praxis. She articulates this comprehension in practical terms, declaring it a necessity for Black Women to 'work from' and 'celebrate ourselves'.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, Keegan's career has been defined by the navigation of multiple contexts: she has sat on Arts Council panels, curated exhibitions, administrated archives and written for numerous journals. She has, in short, worked simultaneously on multiple fronts, a condition identified by artists Sutapa Biswas and Marlene Smith in a 1988 article for *Spare Rib*<sup>6</sup> as endemic to women of colour, who, in of lieu of support from major institutions or centres of ideological power, work tirelessly to champion not only themselves but also their contemporaries, predecessors and successors. Understanding Keegan's career thus helps furnish a framework for interpreting her latest exhibition, 'Rita Keegan: Somewhere Between There and Here', which, divided across three galleries at the South London Gallery (hereafter abbreviated as SLG) Fire Station building, has been curated by the RKAP.

The first gallery immediately conveys Keegan's concern with the networks – social, geographic, contemporary and historic – that have shaped her practice and, indeed, existence. Here, Keegan's mixed media installation reinterprets her original 1992 work, *Cycles*, that was first displayed at The Bluecoat arts centre in Liverpool as part of the 1992 'Trophies of Empire' exhibition, initiated by Keith Piper to mark the quincentenary of Columbus's 1492 arrival in the 'New World'. Endeavouring to 'personalise issues of the African diaspora', Keegan collages arresting images of the Atlantic slave trade with her own family photographs.<sup>7</sup> These images, all sourced from Keegan's personal collection, are transferred onto acetates, which, fused together by ungalvanised chains, hang from the gallery's ceiling so that the figures in them appear translucent, like ghosts eerily suspended in mid-air. The acetates are double-sided; thus, they both outwardly confront the viewer and inwardly reflect onto the other components of the installation, including video works projected from three rudimentary television boxes installed on plinths on the gallery floor. The result is that each element of the installation, although distinct, amalgamates, thereby denying the simplistic division of colonial past from present moment.

The television boxes also project three of Keegan's moving image works: *Trophies of Empire* (1992), *Rites of Passage* (1991) and *Outfit* (1999) alongside a new film, *Somewhere Between There and Here* (2021). *Trophies of Empire* reactivates the distressing slave trade images, whilst *Somewhere Between There and Here* presents new and old photographs of Keegan's maternal and paternal relatives – figures who, thanks to Keegan's employment of Avenue software, swirl into each other, cleaving and coalescing as if mimicking the merger of once-distinct familial units.

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<sup>5</sup> Rita Keegan, in *Rita Keegan: Somewhere Between There and Here*, exhibition pamphlet, South London Gallery, 2021, p 1

<sup>6</sup> Sutapa Biswas and Marlene Smith, 'Black Women Artists', *Spare Rib*, March 1988, p 10

<sup>7</sup> Rita Keegan, in *Rita Keegan: Somewhere Between There and Here*, op cit, p 1



Rita Keegan, *Trophies Revised*, 2021, installation view at the South London Gallery, courtesy the artist, photo by Andy Stagg

The original installation was conceived of as site specific, and so Keegan has altered it accordingly, substituting the tar-stained ropes of Liverpool's docks that were included in the original *Bluecoat* installation for mounds of sand and spices stowed in glass jars and wooden bowls, which when combined with rustic herbs such as rosemary, bay and sage sensorily engage the viewer. The herb and spice mixture functions on a trilateral level: first of all, it creates an olfactory portrait of colonialism and global trade; secondly, it engages with the factory setting of the SLG's Fire Station Building, part of which was once a sausage manufactory site; and thirdly, it arouses the smells of a household kitchen, inviting audiences to contemplate their own domestic settings and collective rituals.

At the centre of this assemblage is a bespoke ceremonial garment made from a wax print textile designed by Europeans for an African market. The dress is tailored to Keegan's body and features elements of her corporeality via stencils of her hand that



Rita Keegan, *Trophies Revised*, 2021, detail of installation at the South London Gallery, courtesy the artist, photo by Andy Stagg



reoccur throughout the piece as an assertion of the artist's haptic desire to touch and be touched by history. Supporting the bodice is a train described by Keegan as a 'social fabric',<sup>8</sup> constructed out of A4 patchworks gifted by the artist's global network of family, friends and collaborators, including the curator of the Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths, Althea Greenan, multimedia artists Ingrid Pollard and Joy Gregory, and filmmaker Michelle Williams Gamaker. The dress, formed to fit Keegan, thereby obtains its structural integrity and aesthetic finesse through the contributions and support of others.

By embracing the metaphorical attributes of fabric art – which as Rozsika Parker notoriously demonstrated has been traditionally derided as benignly feminine – Keegan and her collaborators work together to realise the medium's potential as a feminist mechanism for self-expression and subversion.<sup>9</sup> To underline this potential each woven patch has been encoded with a QR matrix barcode that corresponds with information about the individual collaborators, with the result that this digital network literally facilitates Keegan's symbolic social one. Transmuting the handmade textile into the digital realm, Keegan thus subverts the notion of the dress as an object of craft, disrupting the hegemonic racial and gendered dichotomies between work and home, art and life whilst simultaneously animating female creativity.

The second gallery at SLG tacitly extends themes introduced in the first, investigating Keegan's exploration of her multilayered identity and collaborative practice. Here, the viewer is confronted by a series of copy art collages produced in the 1980s, a period during which Keegan was a member and co-founder of the co-operative print shop Community Copy Art, a resource for community groups and artists working with the emerging technologies of computers, scanners and photocopiers. Keegan embraced photocopying in part for its portability; it enabled her to create, regardless of financial imperatives restricting access to studio space. But beyond its practicalities, the photocopier, a somewhat volatile image-maker, chimes with Keegan's practice in enabling her to manipulate original source materials in unexpected, dynamic ways.

Each exhibited collage takes as its basis something of Keegan's own, whether it be an image of herself or one of her family members. Diverse motifs, including flowers, seashells and automobile steering wheels, are inserted into the composition using ad hoc tools like Tippex, Pritt stick and X-Acto knives, whilst layers of colour are built up onto the surface of the image through repeated copying using different coloured toners. Keegan's approach to photocopying affords insight into her treatment of temporality, which seems to bifurcate as, on the one hand, she imbues static images of the past with new life and, on the other, she implants herself into history – a procedure, she contends, performed throughout time.

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<sup>8</sup> Rita Keegan, in *Rita Keegan: Somewhere Between There and Here*, op cit, p 2

<sup>9</sup> See Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, The Women's Press, London, 1984



Rita Keegan, *Somewhere Between There and Here*, 2021, installation view at the South London Gallery, courtesy the artist, photo by Andy Stagg

The remainder of the second gallery is occupied by Keegan's portraits and self-portraits, which, in contrast to the domestic proportions of the copy art collages, are sizable, with the largest, *Red Me* (1987), looming at ten-feet high. The portraits' magnitude is partly situational, given that at the time of their creation Keegan had access to a capacious studio in Gunnersbury Park, West London, a resource that afforded her the opportunity to create more expansively. Yet, beyond this, the sheer scale of these portraits conveys something of their subject matter, with the magnitude of those depicted – Keegan herself, and her mother and father – reflective of their vivacity and dominance.

The personal attributes of Keegan's subjects are reiterated in the composition of the portraits, with each figure filling the majority of the canvases that they occupy as though bursting from the frames that seek to constrain them. Their colour scheme supplements Keegan's system of representation: each artwork boasts a rich palette that projects the vibrant life force of the people she paints. In some, specific colours carry specific connotations, with, for example, the earthy red hue featured in the backdrop of *Red Me* a reference to Keegan's maternal indigenous roots in Dominica. The combined effect of Keegan's use of scale, composition and colour is that each work, or more specifically each figure in each work, commands rather than invites the viewer's attention. In this capacity, Keegan's portraits draw parallels to the British artist Claudette Johnson's immense 1980s paintings of Black women (and sometimes men) as well as Frida Kahlo's earlier self-portraits.

Keegan explicitly cites Kahlo as an influence, including in her *Homage to Frida Kahlo* (1987) in the SLG exhibition. The affinity between the pair is illuminating, for both artists adopt analogous stylistic approaches and are manifestly concerned with female representation and cultural heritage. One way in which they espouse these thematic concerns is through self-fashioning, with Kahlo's sartorial choices the subject of much critical attention,<sup>10</sup> and Keegan's decidedly less so. Yet for Keegan, as with Kahlo, dress is pivotal not only to her practice but to her social cosmology. In a conversation with the curator Mora J Beauchamp-Byrd, Keegan professes the importance of clothing to her New York adolescence, intoning that 'Black people dressed up is what I knew' and declaring that: 'Clothes can change perceptions of who you are...so textiles are important...different fabrics represent different things.'<sup>11</sup> With this knowledge, the viewer is encouraged to exercise a closer examination of the garments that appear in the portraits, the result of which is a deeper appreciation of the significance of dress in Keegan's strategies of representation. In *Self Portrait with Benin Queen Mother* (1985), for instance, Keegan depicts herself wearing a dress designed for an African market, which, although made from cotton grown in Africa, has been fabricated in Germany. The piece functions bilaterally, for on one level the garment can be understood as an allusion to colonial histories of trade, whilst on another it might be perceived as a homage to a culturally rich, ancient kingdom as it features a woven image of Africa and the hand of Idia, the first Queen Mother of Benin (a wealthy eleventh-century West African empire).



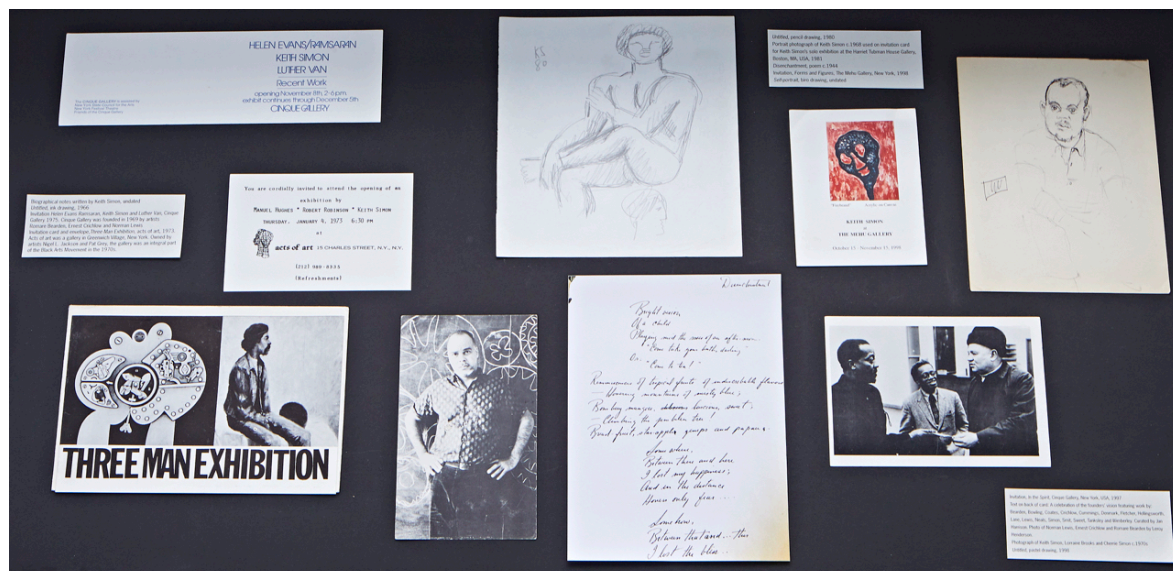
Rita Keegan, *Homage to Frida Kahlo*, 1987, courtesy the artist and the South London Gallery

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Rebecca Block and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep, 'Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in "Gringolandia"', *Woman's Art Journal* 19, Vol 2, 1998, pp 8–12; Claire Wilcox, *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up*, V&A, London, 2018

<sup>11</sup> Rita Keegan, quoted in Mora J Beauchamp-Byrd '“Black People Dressed Up Is What I Knew”: Rita Keegan's Performative Self-Portraiture' in Rita Keegan, Matthew Harle and Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski, eds, *Mirror Reflecting Darkly: The Rita Keegan Archive*, Goldsmiths Press, London, 2021, p 45



The significance of Keegan's family histories is most copiously explored in the final gallery, which presents artworks and archival materials that meditate on the nature of cultural inheritance and critical memory. Two illuminated lightboxes display digitally enhanced family photo portraits. In one, the infant Keegan is depicted alongside her family. The other presents two images: Keegan's father casually leaning against his car, and her Aunt Ida sat in a New York City bar surrounded by friends and relatives. By exhibiting these images of joy, Keegan, as Janice Cheddie observes, affords primacy to the power of black love and kinship.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, by digitally manipulating them Keegan imbues each image with different layers, thereby resituating them within a more fluid concept of temporality that instead of being fixed is continuous and open-ended. Consequently, the viewer moves beyond perceiving the photographs as static, analogue documents of memory and is encouraged to critically contemplate the endurance of the diasporic family and the multiplicity of processes that register in its existence. In this capacity, Keegan's digital modifications draw parallels to her earlier, more rudimentary, copy art practice.



Rita Keegan, *Somewhere Between There and Here*, 2021, installation at the South London Gallery (detail of vitrine for Keith Simon), courtesy the artist, photo by Andy Stagg

Adjacent to the lightboxes are a selection of paintings by Keegan's uncle, Keith Simon, (1922–2014) who, a contributor to the Harlem Renaissance, lived in London from 1952 to 1972 and where he exhibited widely, including at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Commonwealth Art Gallery. Like Keegan, Simon moved between New York and London; the pair's parallel lives are articulated materially through the coupling of two vitrines. The first contains materials belonging to Keegan, with personal items such as sunglasses, a brooch, a Dungeons and Dragons dice, and framed photographs and sketches of her family situated atop

<sup>12</sup> Janice Cheddie, 'Homemaking in the Work of Rita Keegan', in Rita Keegan, Matthew Harle and Ego Ahaïwe Sowinski, eds, *Mirror Reflecting Darkly: The Rita Keegan Archive*, op cit, pp 68–71

the dress worn by Keegan in *Self-Portrait with Benin Queen Mother*. The second, Simon's vitrine, is populated by biographical notes, poems and exhibition paraphernalia, ephemera collected by Lorraine Brooks, who is custodian of her uncle's estate as well as being Keegan's cousin and a member of the RKAP.

The SLG exhibition takes its title, 'Somewhere between There and Here', from one of Simon's poems, *Disenchantment* from 1944. It is a phrase mobilised in testament to the mutual paths – artistic and geographic – journeyed by niece and uncle. Yet it also acts as an apt summary of Keegan's broad aesthetic concerns: her exploration of the historic and contemporary, social and geographic narratives that shape the way she works and lives. Refusing to be constrained by the conventions of the ultimately biographic exhibitory mode, Keegan and the curatorial collective firmly situate the roots of her practice within these narratives, preserving her – and her family's, friends', ancestors' and collaborators' – legacy for subsequent generations. In doing so they look to the past, critically framing artworks and ephemera in retrospect which, when located within a creative continuum, make visible the long-evident, but pervasively ignored, presence of black creativity in British history. Simultaneously, the collective imbues this material with fresh life, recasting it within a new context and thereby cultivating ripe terrain for future research. Thus, gesturing back to the concept of the 'Living Archive', Keegan and RKAP expound the notion that the archive should be treated as a fluid, open-ended and ultimately unfinished project possessive of the potential to not only endure but also to innovate.

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**Jessica Boyall** is a PhD candidate in the department of Media Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London, where she also teaches. Funded by the AHRC, her research focuses on collective practice, feminism and race in the context of 1980s British art and film history. Her writing has appeared in various publications, including the *New Left Review*, *ARTUK* and *The Guardian*, and she has held research positions at the Victorian Albert and Design Museum in London.