

# David Scott

## PROLOGUE: On the Idea of The Visual Life of Social Affliction

The idea of “social affliction” seeks to encompass the range of social injuries and social suffering inflicted upon the human spirit as a consequence of long histories of marginalization, discrimination, and violation. The point is to render intelligible a social domain of moral harms. Notice, then, that the idea of social affliction is less concerned with the external or empirical features of social oppression (as important as these undoubtedly are as conditioning social facts) than with its *lived experience*, the ways people undergo or endure an experience of degradation, humiliation, shame, and hopelessness in everyday social life. Therefore, the idea of social affliction aims to evoke an existential field. It seeks to capture the destructive impact of social, economic, and political powers on people’s lives; it seeks to evoke how ordinary people cope with, or accommodate themselves to, the social relations that deny them recognition or infringe on their basic sense of humanity. “The Visual Life of Social Affliction” project (VLOSA) exhibited in this catalogue inhabits this sensibility. Our wager is that the visual arts constitute one of the most vital expressive and hermeneutic optics through which to explore social life in general and the life of social affliction in particular.

Needless to say, the Caribbean is no stranger to the life of social affliction. In a very real sense, the *modern* Caribbean not only was born in the structural violence of Native genocide, African slavery, and Indian indenture instituted by the colonial regime and its powers, but has been sustained since those founding moments by the relentless continuation (under different names, each more euphemistic than its predecessor) of institutionalized disrespect, disregard, and dishonor. Violence, in quotidian forms, has been the rule, not the exception, in Caribbean history: the violence of poverty and of racial injustice and the violence involved in the repression of nonnormative sexualities and religious nonconformity (whether driven by the institutions of the state, the church, or the family), these are familiar to anyone with a modicum of conventional knowledge of the Caribbean.

One way of telling the story of contemporary Caribbean visual practice—perhaps indeed, one way of telling the story of *modern* Caribbean visual practice—is to say that, on the whole, the aesthetic intelligence articulated by artists has been predominantly oriented toward not only expressing but also making sense of the various forms of social suffering and social affliction that are

part of Caribbean historical experience. Across the regional and diasporic Caribbean, and in a remarkable array of forms and media and styles and content, a significant body of contemporary Caribbean art has sought to make poignantly legible the stigma and demoralization and indifference and insecurity and anguish that are the moral psychological inscriptions of ordinary Caribbean life.

An articulation of the Small Axe Project, the VLOSA project seeks to participate in this larger Caribbean space of critical discourse and practice. VLOSA is the fourth in a series of interventions into the domain of visual practice and art criticism that the Small Axe Project has undertaken in the past decade or so. It follows “Caribbean Visual Memory” (2009), “The Visual Life of Catastrophic History” (2011–13), and “Caribbean Queer Visualities” (2015–16). All these projects, including the current one, VLOSA, have been supported by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and we are enormously grateful for the foundation’s continued interest and unstinting support of our work over the years. In each of these projects we have been able to commission original visual work and to solicit original written work around the theme at hand. We have been guided by the idea that visual work is, potentially, a critical practice no less than any other field of cultural work, a way of questioning the status quo, including the ossified structures that produce and reproduce social affliction and social suffering. But we have also been guided by the concern to participate in the development of critical writing on Caribbean art practice. Above all, however, what interests us is stimulating a process of *dialogue* between artists and writers—part of the larger project of *crossing* critical genres that has been the mode of engagement in the Small Axe Project. Thus, with “Caribbean Queer Visualities” we expanded our process so as to set real-time conversations in motion and to learn from them. For that project we hosted two occasions (at Yale University and Columbia University, in 2014 and 2015, respectively) where for each venue we paired five artists and five writers. The idea was to provoke a conversation around our theme that would then inform the work commissioned from both artists and writers. This process was so suggestive that we decided to make use of it again in the VLOSA project. Again, this time at the Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami in 2018, we paired ten writers and ten artists in a conversation out of which the commissioned work evolved (some of the images from this occasion can be viewed at [smallaxe.net/sxvisualities/catalogues/vlosa](http://smallaxe.net/sxvisualities/catalogues/vlosa)). We hope that this process represents one di-

mension of a larger principle of collaborative work that we in the Small Axe Project have sought to advance.

In taking this journey with us, I would like to thank the artists and writers (in alphabetical order): Anna Arabindan-Kesson, Marielle Barrow, Nijah Cunningham, Blue Curry, Florine Demosthene, Ricardo Edwards, Chandra Frank, Erica Moiah James, Patricia Kaersenhout, Christina León, Miguel Luciano, Anna Jane McIntyre, Kaneesha Cherelle Parsard, René Peña, Marcel Pinas, Belkis Ramírez, Nicole Smythe-Johnson, Kara Springer, Claire Tancons, and Yolanda Wood. They all warmed to our perhaps unusual invitation and brought to the project a vibrant energy and a demanding sense of integrity and creative purpose. Alas, though, as we began to assemble and prepare the catalogue, one of the artists, Belkis Ramírez, passed away. We mourn her loss, but we celebrate her memory and all that she gave to us. I would also like to thank my VLOSA colleagues, Juliet Ali, Nijah Cunningham, and Erica Moiah James, for the imagination and conscientiousness with which they helped to shape and realize this project.