



Re

imaging

Donald

Rodney

Introduction

Reimaging Donald Rodney explores the work of Black British artist Donald Rodney (1961 – 1998). It is the first UK exhibition to examine Rodney’s digital practice, and through new commissions expands on the potential of Rodney’s archive as a resource for challenging our conceptions of cultural, physical and social identity.

Donald Rodney was considered to be one of the most significant artists of his generation. Mark Sealy, Director of Autography ABP stated in an online interview with TATE Britain for their collection of Rodney’s work;

“[Along] with Donald, Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers and people like Sonia Boyce, Lubaina Himid. Those characters in my view are really quite seminal in terms of beginning to create an articulate voice... he was really interested in working with new media and new technologies. One of the great tragedies is that he was becoming very articulate within this space around the end of his career”.

Born in Smethwick, West Midlands in 1961 to Jamaican parents, Rodney and his family lived on Marshall St, visited by Malcolm X in 1965 when racial tension in the area was high, due to Tory minister Peter Griffiths’ racist campaign slogan, “*If you want a nigger for your neighbour vote Labour*”. The racial climate to which Rodney was exposed had a lasting impression on him.

He developed his artistic skills during prolonged periods of hospitalisation, resulting in him regularly missing school, due to his sickle cell condition. After taking an arts foundation course at Bournville School of Art in Birmingham he went on to Nottingham Trent, where he met Keith Piper and Eddie Chambers. Chambers and Piper espoused the notion of Black Art/Black Power, which derived largely from the USA through black writers and activists like Ron Karenga. Becoming a prominent member of the Blk Arts Group, Rodney highlighted the sociopolitical condition of Britain in the 1980s-90s, referencing the global impact of a colonial past.

Whether political or personal, Rodney illustrated his versatility, utilising a range of mediums for artistic expression through painting, installations, audio, robotics, film and archive. He chose to incorporate his medical condition in his artistic practice, using it as a metaphor of black emasculation and racial stereotyping. Examples include the delicate *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother*, a miniature sculpture of a house made from Rodney’s skin, taken from his body, during one of many operations he endured due to his illness. Sadly, Rodney died from sickle-cell anaemia in March 1998, aged 37.



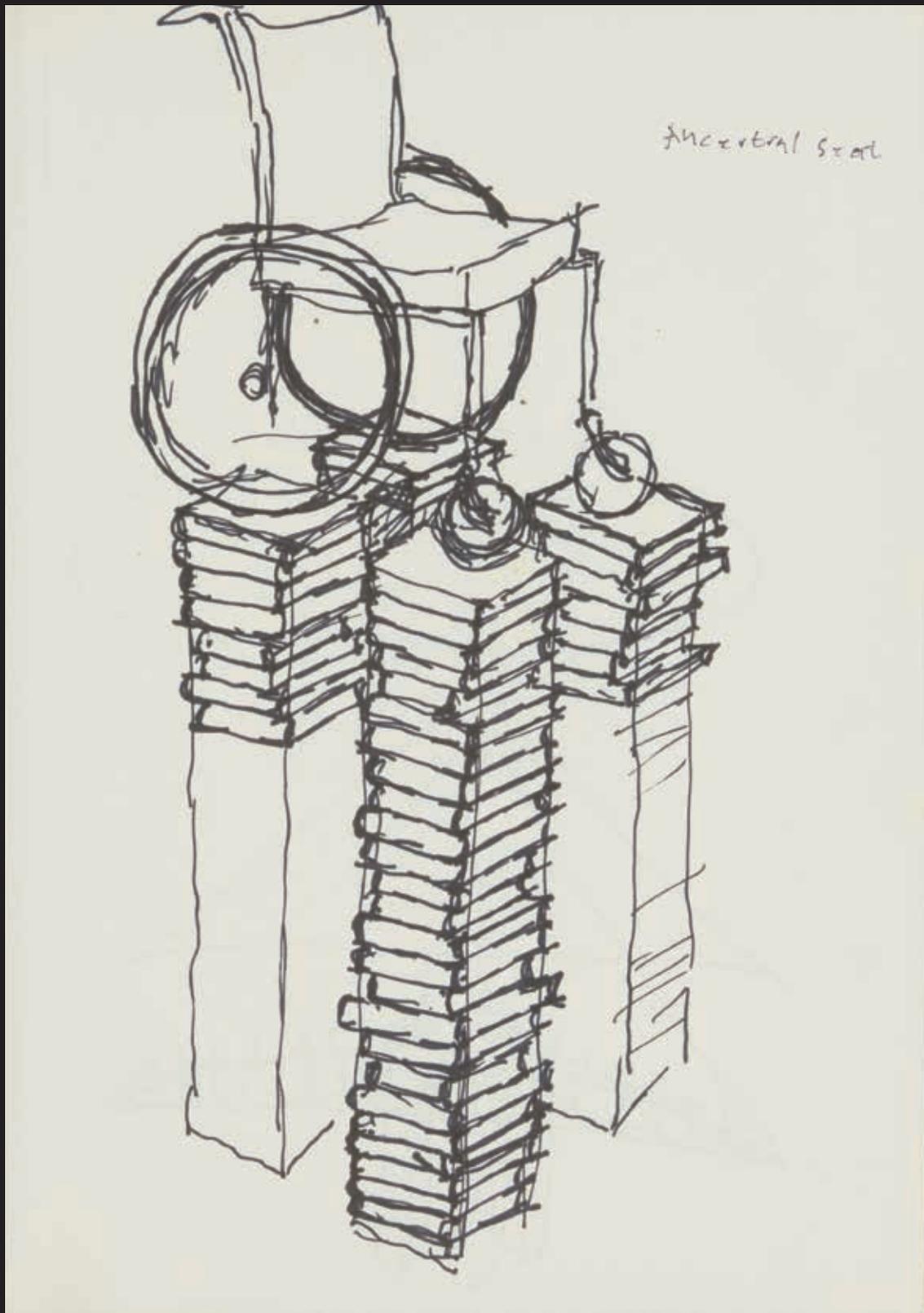
Exhibition

Donald Rodney, from
3 Songs of Pain
Light and Time

(25 mins, UK, 1995,
by Trevor Mathison
and Edward George)

Reimaging Donald Rodney aims to encapsulate the digital embodiment and legacy of Donald Rodney, engaging a new generation with an historically important visual arts practice. Rodney’s innovation in the face of the disabling, life limiting health condition sickle cell anaemia further informs two new commissions to support collaborative digital practice, which will be presented during the exhibition. These new works further interrogate Rodney’s key technology enabled works originally produced in the 1990s, *Autoicon* and *Psalms* - and reference the interdisciplinary methods Rodney brought together in order to facilitate his practice, specifically the art making collective ‘Donald Rodney plc’ comprising artists Keith Piper, Gary Stewart, and technologist Mike Phillips.

The new works developed for the exhibition include *doublethink* (2015), a bespoke online site designed and developed during workshops as part of a one year research process, with the participation of members of Wolverhampton Sickle Cell Care and Activity Centre (WSCCSAC) and artists Antonio Roberts and Sam Wray. Alongside this we present *Autoicon* (1998), the original digital archival website created in 1998 by Mike Phillips and members of Donald Rodney plc. *Autoicon* was created specifically as a digital repository of archival artefacts, related to Rodney. Rodney and Mike Phillips, as former students of Slade School of Art, were inspired by Jeremy Bentham, its founder, who left instructions for his own immortalization, through the creation of his *Autoicon*. “*The Rodney Autoicon is being fashioned from the body of medical information gathered over a lifetime, by assembling a virtual body he will be able to exist in a pure information space*”.



Sketchbook number 40. Sketch titled 'Ancentral Seat', January 1993

Bound volume - sketchbook, Ink on paper, 210 x 145 mm

© The estate of Donald Rodney

© Tate, London 2015

The 1997 work, *Psalms* wheelchair has been brought out of long term storage for this exhibition, and is the impetus for a new performance commission in collaboration with Birmingham Dance Network which navigates physicality and social identity. Originally unveiled at South London Gallery, October 1997, as part of Rodney's *9 Night in El Dorado* exhibition, *Psalms* is motorised using a computer programme, which enables it to continually navigate the gallery space, avoiding obstacles, human and inanimate objects alike. The wheelchair was modified at the School of Computing of the University of Plymouth to perform a repeated sequence of circles, spirals and figures of eight, as specified by the artist. *Psalms* uses 8 sonar sensors, shaft-encoders, a video camera and a rate gyroscope to determine its position; a neural network using normalised RBF nodes encodes the sequence of 25 semi-circular sequences of positions forming the trajectory.



PSALMS

Wheelchair
Collection The Estate of Donald Rodney

Images and text have been carefully selected from 48 Sketchbooks produced by Rodney 1982- 98, digitised by Tate Britain, as part of its Donald Rodney display in 2004. These selections provide an insight of Rodney's thoughts, concerns and state of mind and samples of initial designs of planned works, some of which are included in the exhibition.

Truth Dare, Double-Dare (1994) is an audio installation, originally commissioned by Ikon Gallery in 1994, featuring Rodney and the late Rose Finn-Kelcey and inspired by a children's game. Guy Brett at the time of writing the installation review described what the audience would encounter "*the voices give each artist's unpremeditated, unrestrained and contradictory feelings about the other...The phrases are very personal and often painfully raw*". The audio provides a narrative of a collaborative experiment by two artists, as opposed to willing partners, their disembodied voices filling the gallery space. Through their dialogical exchange and personalities it brings into question facets of artistic ego, guilt, equality, authorship, gender and race. Like *Psalms*, the empty automated wheelchair, continually navigating the gallery space, avoiding obstacles, human and inanimate objects alike, *Truth, Dare, Double-Dare* adds further context to Rodney's deteriorating health at the time of its creation, as he was hospitalised, whilst Rose was mobile. Its inclusion elicits further our understanding of an artist seeking solutions of being present.

John Barnes (1991) and Mexico Olympics (1991) are light boxes featuring two sporting iconic images, footballer John Barnes and American athletes at the Mexico Olympics in 1968. Barnes is seen kicking a banana thrown from the crowd during his time as a player for Liverpool FC in 1980s – 90s. Voted Liverpool's best ever player by one of the sporting magazines and fifth all-time best player by Liverpool supporters, during his playing career, Barnes endured the vitriol of racists on the terraces, hurling abuse and notoriously, bananas at Barnes and other black players. This image captures one of those moments, where we see Barnes back-heeling said object thrown from the crowd. The Mexico Olympics in 1968 is best remembered for the moment when two black athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in the Black Power salute on the podium whilst the "Star Spangled Banner" played in honour of them winning gold and bronze medals in the 200 metres. Carlos and Smith were booed by the crowd after leaving the podium and later banned by the International Olympics Committee for the gesture. These images symbolise defiance; play on, or stand tall in the face of certain sanction to raise awareness of their plight.

3 Songs of Pain Light and Time
(25 mins, UK, 1995, by Trevor Mathison and Edward George)



We are pleased to include screenings of two important films exploring Rodney's life. *3 Songs on Pain Light and Time* (1995) is a rarely seen video portrait in deliberately unbalanced colours, made by Trevor Mathison and Edward George and produced with Black Audio Film Collective. *The Genome Chronicles* (2009) directed by John Akomfrah will also be screened during the exhibition. In the space of a few days in 1998, filmmaker John Akomfrah lost two people very close to him: his mother and a friend, the British artist Donald Rodney. *The Genome Chronicles* is the filmmaker's response to these events in the form of a 'song cycle' in ten parts, which combines his own footage of repeated trips to the Scottish islands of Skye and Mull with Rodney's own Super 8 footage.

Reimagining Donald Rodney raises questions and supports audiences to explore how digital technologies enable, re-define and extend the creative potential of artists disabled by circumstances both social, physical and situational. This aspect will be explored further through artist talks and a symposium supported by The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and University of Birmingham to examine the scope of digital tools to extend artistic practice for marginalised artists. Through the exhibition and events, we hope to create a space where people can engage with and contribute to critical discourse on art, health and society.

Events

Full programme details can be found at www.vividprojects.org.uk



3 Songs of Pain Light and Time
(25 mins, UK, 1995, by Trevor Mathison and Edward George)

7 October, 6 – 8pm
Public Preview for Digbeth First Friday

22 October 1 – 3pm
Collecting Birmingham event in partnership with Birmingham Museums Trust

Join us for an afternoon exploring Donald Rodney's work, its relevance and resonance. This will be an informal two part event, with lots of opportunities to talk, to reflect and to eat cake. Opinions shared during this event will have a direct impact on what Birmingham Museums collects on behalf of the people of this fair city... have your say.

Meet at 1pm in the BMAG - Round Room for the first gallery discussion, before walking down to Vivid Projects for an exhibition tour, tea, cake and discussion.

27 October, 7 – 9pm
Screening: The Genome Chronicles and 3 Songs on Pain Light & Time

Introduction and Q&A with curator Ian Sergeant and Dr Rina Arya, Wolverhampton University

28 October, 6 – 9pm
Late viewing for Galleries Night

Board the free Art Bus and gallery hop between six of Birmingham's top art venues. Refreshments and guided tour available.

4 November, 6 – 8pm
PSALMS

Free live performance of new work commission, with Becca Thomas and Genevieve Say of Birmingham Dance Network

Works



Mexico Olympics
1991

John Barnes
1991

Light box, fluorescent
tube, 180 x 107 cm
Collection The Estate
of Donald Rodney

Mexico Olympics 1991

Light box, fluorescent tube
180 x 107 cm
Collection The Estate of
Donald Rodney

John Barnes 1991

Light box, fluorescent tube
180 x 107 cm
Collection The Estate of
Donald Rodney

Truth Dare, Double-Dare 1994

Audio, text panels
Truth, Dare Double Dare commissioned
by Ikon Gallery. Courtesy the Estate of
Rose Finn-Kelcey.

doublethink www.double-think.co.uk

The website was developed through
a series of workshops with members
of Wolverhampton Sickle Cell Care
and Activity Centre (WSCCSAC).

In re-imagining *AUTOICON*, we have
incorporated similar features utilised
during the creation of the original
work i.e. video, images, audio and
text, whilst taking advantage of
digital technology and social media
platforms not available at the time
of concept in 1997 – 8, The (re)
presentation of *AUTOICON* involved
collaborating with some of the original
artists including Gary Stewart (IniVA)
and Prof Mike Philips (Plymouth
University – idat) and the new body
of data was derived from interviews
(audio/visual) and written text
developed by members of WSCCSAC.

AUTOICON Research & Development 2015

AUTOICON was a dynamic internet
work that simulated both the
physical presence and elements
of the creative personality of the
Birmingham born artist Donald
Rodney who was considered to
be one of the most significant and
essential artists of his generation.
Rodney increasingly incorporated
his medical condition in his artistic
practice, using it as a metaphor for
pathologies of black masculinity,
racial stereotyping and ills of society.
After initiating the project – died from
sickle-cell anaemia in March 1998.

AUTOICON was a six month
research project exploring the
digital embodiment and rich legacy
of the artist Donald Rodney, whose
extensive archive of paintings,
sketchbooks, installations and
ephemera reside at Tate Modern,
on permanent loan or within the
Rodney Estate.

AUTOICON
discussion events

July & October 2015
Vivid Projects



Over ten sessions we hosted a
series of workshops with members
of Wolverhampton Sickle Cell
Care and Support Activity Centre
from 16 July to 08 October. The
sessions were led by artists
including Antonio Roberts, who led
sessions developing digital content
of photography, text and graphics;
Bobbie Gardner led audio recording
sessions, JA Digital produced
video content and Jason Daley
took portraits for the proposed
site. Participants gained a range of
skills and information including; an
introduction to the project and artist
Donald Rodney, how to write/edit
online, recording audio and using an
audio recorder, making short video
pieces and digital photography. A
group of participants also took part
in a visit to Ikon Gallery to see the
Vanley Burke exhibition and had
the opportunity to meet Vanley in
person.

Two public salons took place at Vivid
Projects (July & October), where
the progress of the *AUTOICON*
project was shared in discussions
between members of WSCCSAC
and colleagues of Donald Rodney
including Professor Mike Phillips,
Keith Piper and Marlene Smith.
Piper and Smith were fellow
members of the Blk Art Group,
who in the late 1970s and early
1980s produced a series of art
works exploring issues related to the
black experience both here in Britain
and abroad, addressing issues of
politics, social and cultural injustices
experienced by black and ethnic
minority communities.

Sketchbooks (TATE & Donald Rodney Estate)

Rodney began committing his thoughts and ideas to his sketchbooks from the age of seventeen and between 1982 and 1998 he produced forty eight distinct sketchbooks. These sketchbooks contained Rodney's thoughts and ideas and in themselves are regarded as works of art, uniform in look and a continuous thread of developing projects, revisions of past projects and notes to self. One could probably work out the health and physical state of Rodney due to the legibility and illegibility of his writing at times. Despite his condition, Rodney's wit and humour was sharp and cutting with images such as *Anatomy of Britain*, featuring the map of Great Britain designed in the shape of a skeleton. *Mau Mau School of Drumming - Ritual Advance* referenced the Kenyan Mau Mau fighting for independence against British colonialism in the 1950s. Whilst *A New Black Aesthetic* may have referred to Rodney's desire to see the emergence of black art to challenge the status quo of western arts practice and canon. Tate Britain has now digitised these sketchbooks and they are available to view online.

AUTOICON 1998

The original digital archival website created in 1998 by Mike Phillips and members of Donald Rodney plc.

PSALMS 1991, wheelchair

Screenings and Resource Area

3 Songs of Pain Light and Time (25 mins, UK, 1995, by Trevor Mathison and Edward George)

The Genome Chronicles (33mins, UK 2009, directed by John Akomfrah)

Books and ephemera

Staying Power – The History of Black People in Britain Peter Fryer

Black Visual Culture – Modernity & Postmodernity Gen Doy

Welcome to the Jungle – New Positions in Black Cultural Studies Kobena Mercer

There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack Paul Gilroy

The Empire Strikes Back – Race & Racism in 70s Britain Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

Black Artists in British Art – A History since the 1950s Eddie Chambers

The black arts movement – Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s James Edward Smethurst

Shades of Black – Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, Sonia Boyce

The Fight Norman Mailer

The Body Visual Helen Chadwick, Letizia Galli, Donald Rodney

Frankenstein Mary Shelley

The Body in Pain Eileen Scary

Pygmalion George Bernard Shaw

Credits

Reimagining Donald Rodney is curated by Ian Sargeant
and produced by Yasmeen Baig-Clifford.

Ian Sargeant began his career in the arts in 1994 as a founder member of Black Pyramid Film and Video, Bristol, and has since worked for institutions, including The Drum Arts Centre, New Arts Exchange, Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council. Throughout 2015 Ian led an Arts Council funded research project *Reimagining AUTOICON* exploring the digital embodiment and legacy of Donald Rodney. As an associate of Vivid Projects since 2012 he has curated *Free School* an interrogation of the life and legacy of black power activist Michael X. In 2014, *Fear of a Black Space*, on the regeneration of Birmingham through the arts. As a consultant for Wolverhampton Art Gallery, he has led public engagement workshops for Yara El Sherbin's exhibition *The Current Situation*, in April 2015, and public engagement workshops throughout 2016 as part of WAG's Black Arts, Collecting Cultures project. He has an MA in Contemporary Curatorial Practice from Birmingham City University and is an Honorary Research Associate with the Department of Digital Humanities, University of Birmingham.

Yasmeen Baig-Clifford is a producer and curator who has developed numerous media arts exhibitions and projects since 2000. Recent projects include: 2015 / *Queer Traces* / Season of black queer live art, digital and moving image practice for mac Birmingham; 2014-15 / *A Record of Undying* / George Saxon solo show; 2014 / *Looking Out From The CCCS* exhibition and events series in association with University of Birmingham CCCS50 project; 2013 / *Slide/Tape* In collaboration with Dr Mo White (University of Loughborough) on tape-slide art in Britain, 1970-80s. Publications include *What We're Trying to Do is Make Popular Politics: The Birmingham Film and Video Workshop*. Baig-Clifford, Long and Shannon, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* Volume 33, Issue 3, 2013. pp 377-395; *VASULKA LAB: LIVE ARCHIVE*, VIVID, 2005 and *RICHARD BILLINGHAM, ZOO*, 2006. Yasmeen founded Vivid Projects in 2012, and is an Honorary Research Fellow exploring interdisciplinary engagement with the University of Birmingham.

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The Estate of
Donald Rodney



PAUL MELLON CENTRE
for Studies in British Art



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Wolverhampton Sickle Cell Care and Support Activity Centre: Gwen Coates, Marty Rose, Ken Saviour, Sharifa Nandoo, Durante Graham, Janett Morris, Doreen, Eileen, Loury T Mooruth and Jennifer Poku.



In Memory of Kevin Dunkley
1969 – 2016

Workshops: Antonio Roberts, Bobbie Gardner, Jamil and Imran Arshad and Jason Daley

Double Think Website: Sam Wray

Psalms Wheelchair: Prof Mike Phillips and Guido Bugmann

Autoicon: Prof Mike Phillips

Oscar Sandwell: Anthony Macfarlane, Rachel McFee and Abdul Alim

Reimaging Autoicon Salon: Marlene Smith, Keith Piper and Tim Pratt

Donald Rodney Sketchbook images
© The Estate of Donald Rodney
Photo credit © Tate, London 2016

Exhibition installation technicians
Michael Lightborne, Matt Moore,
and Daniel Salisbury

Design by Keith Dodds

Vivid Projects is a non-profit collaborative space dedicated to exploring all forms of media art practice and is based at 16 Minerva Works, 158 Fazeley Street, Birmingham, B5 5RS. See the projects archive at www.vividprojects.org.uk

8 Oct – 5 Nov 2016

Launches 7 Oct, 6 – 8pm

Open Thu – Sat, 12 – 5pm

**Vivid Projects, 16 Minerva Works,
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vividprojects.org.uk

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