

TWILIGHT CITY (DIRECTED BY REECE AUGUISTE, 1989, BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE), FRAME GRAB OF STILL BY ROTIMI FANI KAYODE.



Inside and Out: The Open Hand in the Work of Donald Rodney and Keith Piper

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“When one of your hands touches the other, something peculiar happens: You become aware of the strange ambivalence that makes your body different from all other things. Your hand is an object in the world, but it is also something you experience from within. And the hand you touch is also both an object and a feeling, sensing part of your embodied self. The touched thing is also touching.” Daniel Birnbaum on the exhibition *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948-1988*¹

The outstretched hand is a gesture that can be located in the everyday, the ritual, the performance, and the sculpture. As a gesture of exchange, agency, and arrest in the work of art, it becomes a site of poetic resonance. Evoking Merleau-Ponty, Daniel Birnbaum describes the hand as the threshold for the embodied

self and the body as object in the world, and the site where desire to move, and for artists to make, meets its external constraints. Artists Donald Rodney and Keith Piper—who along with Eddie Chambers and Claudette Johnson organized the Blk Art Group in Britain in the 1980s—created images that produced a tension with external constraints of social and political discrimination that dominated the public sphere, including city streets, neighborhoods, art schools, and the art world. The production of artwork, exhibitions, and conferences such as the National Black Art Convention in 1982, and later the Living Archive in 1997, suggest that cultural production was for these artists not only a question of visibility in the art world, but also about making visible the processes by which images deny depth of black subjectivity, allowing only shallow surfaces of blackness, as a signifier of difference,

to be present in the records, in the galleries, and in the media.

It becomes possible to consider how these artists’ formal decisions of scale, medium, and style worked with content to demand a hypervisible presence in order to critique the paradoxical conditions of social, political, and artistic constraint that was denied expression. As outlined by Jean Fisher in her introduction to the Living Archive conference in *Shades of Black*, reimagining presence across temporal distinctions has become a critical methodology for both artists and art historians to account for the processes of erasure and loss. This, she argues, has resulted in a historiography that is deeply invested in the voices of artists, diverging memories, and conflicting trajectories.² For many artists that began making work in the 1980s in Britain, the archive provided a site for critical examination and

creative production where absences can be generative and loss can be exposed. The centrality of the body, both within the record and as a record, oscillates between the body experienced from within and the exterior image of the body. Two later works from Donald Rodney and Keith Piper, I will argue, articulate the unique position of the fold as articulated by Merleau-Ponty and elaborated by Domieta Torlasco. Both works manage to suspend a moment between hypervisibility and invisibility, as well as the moment of touching and being the touched thing.

For Donald Rodney and Keith Piper, the body becomes a site for archivization of—as Torlasco posits—memory and creation, translation and invention.³ By 1997 the two artists, who both began as painters, were working across artistic mediums that resulted in multimedia installations. Tracing the

prevalence of art mediums across the 1980s, Kobena Mercer notes that a decade that began with painting soon saw the rise of independent filmmakers working in film and video, as well as photography.⁴ Coming out of art schools, artists were both addressing the formal specificity of their selected medium and its history. In *3 Songs of Pain, Light and Time* (1995)—a film made with the Black Audio Film Collective—Rodney notes that in addition to his personal relationship with Keith Piper, his artistic radicalization was inspired

(RIGHT) FIGURE 1:
Donald Rodney, *In the House of My Father*, 1996-7. Photograph, color, on paper mounted onto aluminum, 1220 x 1530 mm, Tate Britain, London (work © The Estate of Donald Rodney), courtesy of the estate of Donald Rodney.



by Frida Kahlo's ability to use her crippled body as a metaphor for a broken political system. Piper's early paintings have been contextualized by the aesthetic sensibilities of Robert Rauschenberg. Filmmakers of the Black Audio Film Collective very deliberately engaged in renegotiating the language of filmmaking, including nonlinear narrative structures, experimentation with sound, as well as color. Photographers such as Joy Gregory, Ingrid Pollard, and Rotimi Fani-Kayode were as Mercer states—challenging the norms of documentary realism.

By the 1990s, the boundaries between mediums were no longer applicable. Prompted in large part by collaboration, conversations, and exposure taking place between black artists, a fluidity emerges by which media, archive, and historical and contemporaneous art images get incorporated into a multi-media

practice. This practice can be seen most vividly in the works of the Black Audio Film Collective, Donald Rodney, and Keith Piper. As artists captivated by aesthetics as well as the history of form and/as the political, the way in which content is delivered cannot be overlooked.

In 1997, Donald Rodney produced the photograph *In the House Of My Father* and Keith Piper produced *Hand and Remains* for his interactive CD-Rom, *Relocating the Remains*. Both works feature the artist's own outstretched hand in a gesture of offering. As an image of resistance, the open hand counters the closed fist of black power with a radical openness. For Donald Rodney and Keith Piper, the images of their open hands act as the investigative surfaces at the threshold of interiority and exteriority of the body. Utilizing the skin as the archive where visual and avisual impressions can be

found, both Rodney and Piper's hands are mediated through a hybrid use of artistic mediums.

There are several effects to be analyzed: how the artists use the image to produce and record the way the experiencing body gives way to being the art object; how the images subvert the paradoxical position of the black hypervisibility and invisibility through the use of the fold; the significance of technology (art medium) as it mediates a radical disorientation of the body schema. Rodney's use of photography to document a sculpture and his body (but also a place and memory), and Piper's digital programming that document his artwork and his body (and also bodies under surveillance and enslaved bodies) illustrate a deliberate mediation in which one artwork is understood through another. Their images, in which their bodies are both centrally

“THE SCULPTURE TRANSFORMS THE PHYSICAL LOSS OF HIS SKIN INTO A MEDIUM...”

present but distinctly absent, destabilize the proprioception of the experiencing body as an act of resistance, in which black subjects are not denied interiority but rather are able to deliberately withhold complete legibility.

In Donald Rodney’s photograph *In the House of My Father*, the artist’s outstretched hand holds the fragile sculpture of a house made of his own skin (Figure 1). The photograph was taken from his hospital bed, and is not itself the artwork, but is documenting the sculpture titled *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother*. The sculpture transforms the physical loss of his skin into a medium, and that production into a site of mourning. Rodney uses his skin, which he lost following a surgery, in order to recall a prior hospital stay that prohibited him from seeing his father before he passed away. The sculpture does

not honor the limits between interiority and exteriority, but rather radically folds them into one another. As Jennifer Barker explains, “As the edge between the body and the world, then, the skin functions always as both a covering and uncovering, because of its simultaneous proximity to the public world and to the secretive inner body.”⁵ Here the secretive inner body is the site of his memories as well as the sickle cell anemia. His skin becomes the threshold where both become visible.

As an archive, the sculpture made of his skin makes the inner secretive body available to the public. His skin becomes a site where the limits of the representable are expressed as what Akira Lippit defines as the avisibility of an archive, or the externalization of an internal

process.⁶ As memories are hidden within and exposed as a house, the unstable sculpture throws into crisis Derrida’s emphasis on the archive as a permanent dwelling that shelters, which is also the expression of a principle of authority.⁷ Domietta Torlasco elaborates, “Lineage, inheritance, transmission, according to family or state law—the site that the archive needs to realize itself as such is inextricably physical and symbolic.”⁸ As an impermanent site marking the passing of his father the year before, the current loss of his skin, and the doubt his illness casts on his future, the photograph challenges the politically problematic “house arrest” that Derrida identifies as a condition for the archive.⁹

Mediating the sculpture, the photograph provides the indexical trace of both Rodney’s presence and the absence he is expressing. According to Derrida, as the

archiving technology, the photograph produces as much as it records the event.¹⁰ In the image, the sculpture sits in Rodney’s hand, visualizing the moment where Rodney is both the touching subject and the touched thing. For Lippit, self-awareness of radical exteriority, in which his interiority has been brought to the surface, allows the looking subject to disappear.¹¹ As such, the photograph documents a suspended state of disappearance, which allows for what Torlasco identifies as the possibility of “hybrid formations at the threshold of the visible world.”¹² Rodney’s hybrid subjectivity reorders his bodily schema as a fold, where he is both touching and the touched thing.

The skin he holds is all surface, visualizing a radical exteriority by obfuscating interiority without denying it. While the photograph acts as an archive, making visible

the event, there is within the image a secret archive that is “...never located entirely on the inside or outside, never entirely visible or invisible.”¹³ Unspoken memory, as Lippit describes, belongs to the avisual, the anarchival that captures the unsayable or unarchivable.¹⁴ Torlasco describes avisibility, or the unrepresentable, as a rearrangement of perception that maintains an obscurity even as images make visible. Borrowing from Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible*, she explains, “the fold is yet another name for the chiasm perception, the intertwining of seeing and being seen, touching and being touched—the cipher of reversibility, a coiling or doubling back that is in principle asymmetrical and always unfinished.”¹⁵ This is where Rodney’s gesture becomes one of resistance.

As a political body, he rejects the always-already-ness assigned to black British subjects. As the site

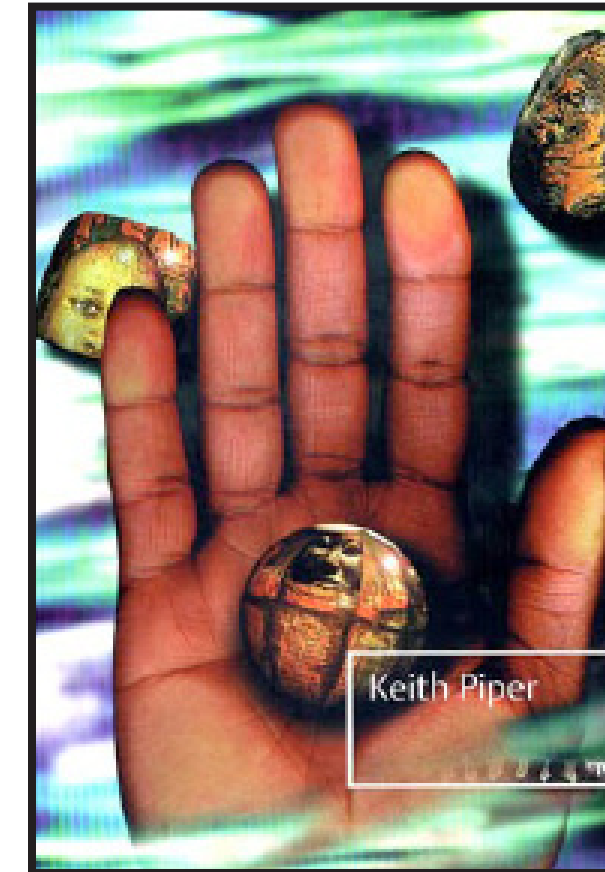
where blackness is visualized, the skin's ability to cover and uncover the secret inner body has been historically mobilized to evidence the invisible qualities of race visible. It is the site of overdetermination and where folding—as Alessandra Raengo asserts—has been employed to turn subjectivity inside out, refusing black bodies of interiority.¹⁶ Further, the medium of photography has been utilized for the purposes of indexing racial difference, using its technology as way to prove the indisputable visibility of race.¹⁷

Sickle cell anemia, as Eddie Chambers has noted, has come to signify blackness because black people are the primary population affected by it. Rodney had attempted to use his “diseased” blood as part of the artwork *Visceral Canker* (1990). Rodney described the use of his blood saying, “The blood serves as an analogue for all Black blood, or

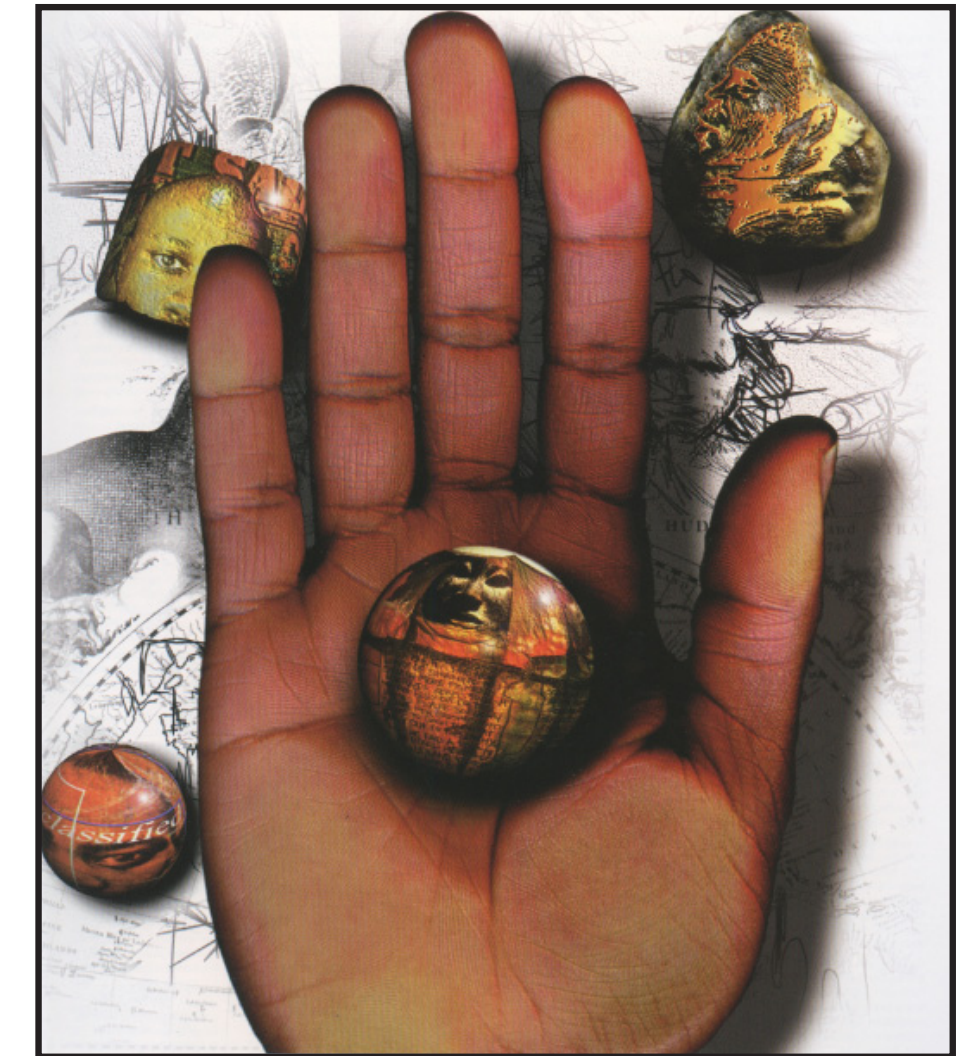
all Black people, who are frequently seen as a cancer within white society.”¹⁸ The collectivizing move that Rodney performs within his body can further an examination of the sculpture *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother*. Because the skin has become both the archive and the fold, the sculpture becomes a site of reversibility, acting as a site of the public's invisibility, the effects of a public disease. Akira Lippit describes the slippage between skin and archive as, “A place at once interior and exposed, imaginary and material: a public interiority and secret exteriority.”¹⁹ As Chambers noted in his lecture “Visualizing the Struggle of Black Britain” for black people the home did not necessarily mean refuge, it was a site that was both private and public as police could raid at their discretion. For many, homes were not chosen, but rather places where people were “put.”²⁰

Without the privilege of interiority, the home becomes a site of folding, providing the opportunity for a multiplication of narratives that includes constraint, displacement, and urban

(LEFT) FIGURE 2:
Keith Piper, Cover image for exhibition catalogue *Relocating the Remains*, 1997, 220 x 310mm. Institute of International Visual Arts, London (work © Keith Piper, Institute of International Visual Arts), courtesy of the artist, Institute of International Visual Arts.



(RIGHT) FIGURE 3:
Keith Piper, Still from *Hand and Remains* project on *Relocating the Remains* CD-Rom, 1997 (work © Keith Piper), courtesy of the artist, Institute of International Visual Arts.



deterioration. In 1987, Piper and Rodney collaborated on *Next Turn of the Screw*, a mural painted directly on the gallery's wall that commemorated the black men and women who had been killed in their homes. As an act of resistance—following the silence of public officials acknowledging the death of fourteen young people in a house fire—civil uprisings made the invisibility of mourning and of injustice hypervisible.²¹

Central to the hypervisible and invisible paradox is the way technology mediates the meaning and immediacy of blackness. As mentioned earlier, Derrida believed that archivization produces the event as much as it records the event. As such, he continues archivization of an event is not apolitical, rather, “This is also our political experience of the so-called news media.”²² The appropriation of the news-media event is central to Keith Piper's practice as a means to deconstruct

and reconstruct images of blackness. Suggesting new media art as both archive and fold, Torlasco elaborates, “Here memory comes into being as a folding of dimensions that cannot be simplified or translated into one another without residue: the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible, the sensible and the intelligible, the future and the past—it is such an excess of openness with respect to its own constitution that the heretical archive displays and affirms against the violence of definition and the inevitability of forgetting.”²³ New-media art practices as heretical archive performs a radical exteriority by means of its self-awareness, and does not make its mediation invisible but hypervisible. Remediation—which Bolter and Grusin define as the way in which new media is expressed by refashioning of old media—cannot erase the latter, but instead

rearranges the order of perception.²⁴ Piper then uses the possibilities of new media to rearrange his perceiving and perceived body.

In *Hand and Remains*, Piper's open hand holds a digitally rendered sphere made up of Piper's 1982 painting *Black Assassin Saints*. The discoloration of the hand's fingertips and palm produce the effect that the hand is pressed directly against the surface of the image. A few versions of this image have been circulated online and two are in the exhibition catalogue, *Relocating the Remains*. As the cover for his exhibition catalogue, the background is an abstracted field of blue and aqua, referencing simultaneously the ocean, the sky, and a nebulous cyberspace (Figure 2). The wisps of color covering the bottom of his hand suggest that the hand is not in front of, but within the ambiguous matter. In the final image

in the catalogue, the abstracted background is replaced by an image that combines loose sketches of human bodies, handwriting, and a world map that are recognizable as such but also indiscernible (Figure 3). The shadow the hand casts emphasizes the illusion of depth, and suspended between the background and the hand are various “stones.”

There is one other difference between the two versions of *Hand and Remains*. The second image, which also has the map as a background, has an additional stone that has an image of a black man's face with the word “unclassified” written across the forehead. The image is manipulated in such a way that it is hard to distinguish who the person is and gives him an anonymity that could either protect the individual or generalize him as “all” black men. The other stones present in both versions

are an image of the artist's face, partially obscured by the hand, and an image of a profile etched onto it recalling his work, *Seven Stories from Permanent Revolution* (1997).

In the image, his hand and face are both present yet detached from each other and any other body part. While the digital construction does not seek an illusory *trompe l'oeil* effect, the shadow the hand casts emphasizes the physical presence of the hand within the artifice. Here, hypermediacy becomes a particularly fruitful concept to describe the possibilities made available in *Hand and Remains*. Bolter and Grusin posit, “Where immediacy suggests a unified visual space, contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as window on to the world, but rather as ‘windowed’ itself—with windows that open to other representations or other

media...In every manifestation, hypermediacy makes us aware of the medium or media and (in sometimes subtle or obvious ways) reminds us of our desire for immediacy.”²⁵ As a windowed body, his body parts function independently of one another, allowing him to simultaneously be the touching subject and the touched thing. As part of the remains, the title suggests that his head and the other stones are to be discarded, so the still image suspends the disappearance of the looking subject. As a result, the image depicts a body that is no longer confined to its physical limits, and as a fold prompts a rearrangement of the order of perception. The arrangement and unclear presence of these objects that exist in a heterogeneous space, rather than a flat one, suggest that these images can move fluidly within it and have meanings and relationships that are deliberately shrouded.

As part of the larger project *Relocating the Remains* that accompanied an exhibition catalogue for his mid-career retrospective, the CD-Rom hosts the records of Piper's digital projects including video works, sound recordings, and research images. Throughout the visual material, the outstretched hand arises as a motif through his work as a site of offering in works such as *A Ship Called Jesus* (1991), where hands hold coins before a slave ship grounded by water and topped by the church arch, and *The Fire Next Time* (1991), where three video works are projected onto a slide image of an open hand (Figure 4). Printed on the CD-Rom, two cupped hands appear to be cradling the disc itself. In the publication foreword, Gilane Tawadros and David Chandler (the Director and Projects Manager) explain, "In the past his work has consistently invoked the body and its sensory domain: eyes and hands

recur; speech, vision and touch are tangible registers that underpin his narratives of difference, subjugation and resistance; the complexities of desire, of pain and longing are inscribed across the somatic field."²⁶ In addition to the interactive projects on the CD-Rom, Piper has included an archive of modes of surveillance on black men, ethnographic images as a site for both undiscovered narratives as well as the historical construction of racial difference as evidenced in the photographed body.

As a multi-media archive that resists the inevitability of forgetting, *Hand and Remains* also includes an archive of his body, his past work, and effort furthered throughout the content of the CD-Rom. By hypermediating these bodies, Rodney allows a figure to exhibit a radical exteriority that is irreducible to itself, as Torlasco claims, acting as "a light which, illuminating the rest, remains at its

source in obscurity."²⁷ Refusing to accept the historical ways in which these figures have been denied interiority, Piper's interventions reveal the ways in which they were made to be both hypervisible and invisible, while reinscribing their position as one of deliberate opacity, demanding the right to not be understood.²⁸ As a result, Piper creates what Torlasco terms the heretical archive, one that "can help us imagine an unruly, porous, incoherent legacy, one that appropriates a certain history rather than attempting to negate it."²⁹

Further denying the ability to know all of these bodies, *Relocating the Remains* is dispersed across an exhibition space, a catalogue, CD-Rom, and an Internet site. About this dispersion in cyberspace, Piper states,

In the case of this project, the act of 'relocation' takes on multiple meanings. In a literal sense, the relocation becomes

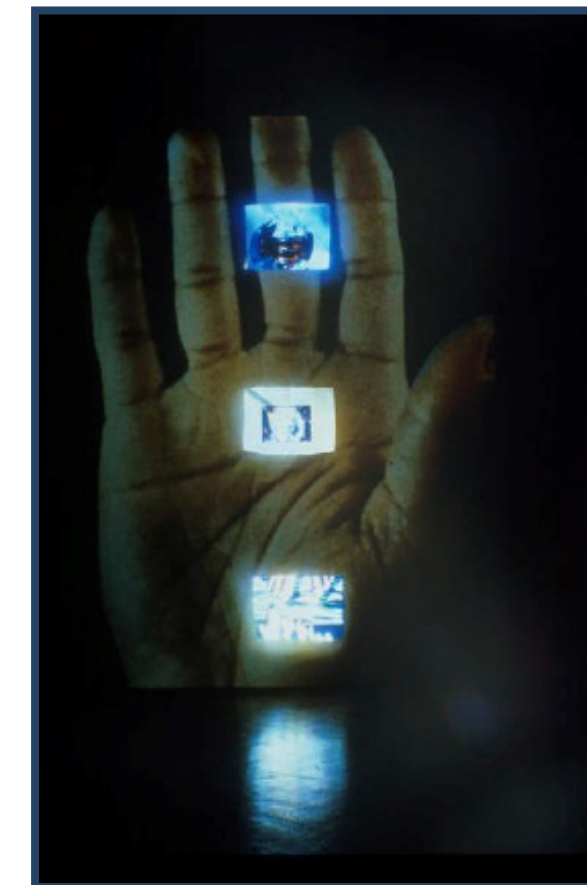
from physical to virtual space. The remains of objects, activities and ideas which at one time exclusively occupied the cold space of galleries and other places designated for the display of art, have become disembodied, recoded into digital form. At points these remains are compacted onto the CD-Rom, at others they are set adrift onto the virtual expanses of the Internet.³⁰

By emphasizing the fluid mobility of ideas, process, and objects that disperse and converge across virtual space and physical spaces, Piper reinforces the presence of the avisual in the visible. Like Rodney, the works also fold public interiority and private exteriority. As Jennifer Gonzalez writes, "For Piper, visual images are not, or not only, always already corrupted signs participating in the spectacle that is capitalism; they can also be the site for significant identifications, particularly for those subjects who are interpellated by them and can recognize themselves

in specific histories of embodiment."³¹ By creating images that do not always suppose a denied interiority, Piper encourages viewers to see themselves seeing as a way to better understand the depth of the figures imaged as surface.

Donald Rodney and Keith Piper use their own bodies as an act of resistance occurring between the hypervisibility and the invisibility of blackness in the public sphere. By performing the fold in which

(RIGHT) FIGURE 4:
Keith Piper, *The Fire Next Time*, 1991,
Dimensions Variable, Exhibition view
from *A Ship Called Jesus*, Ikon Gallery,
Birmingham, England (work © Keith
Piper), courtesy of the artist, Institute
of International Visual Arts.



the touching subject become the touched object, they both work to expose the limits of visibility from within the inner secret body, and body politic. Gonzalez writes, "Race serves as an aspect of secrecy in the logic of publicity, but as an already publicly constructed discourse, its secrets are plainly evident. This is its fundamental contradiction."³² Rodney and Piper each perform this contradiction at the level of the body through the seemingly small gesture of the open hand. While the image appears to be rooted in the individual body, I have argued that in both works enfold private and public, expressing the conditions of constraint for black people in their physical environment.

In *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* Fred Moten indicates, "Constraint, mobility, and displacement are, therefore, conditions of possibility of the avant-garde. Deterioration is crucial to the avant-garde, as well: as a certain aesthetics, as an effect of disinvestment, as a psychic condition: the decay of form and the internal and external environment of regenerative aesthetic production: turning, vanishing, enclosing, invaginating."³³ Moten's suggestion articulates the processes by which the threshold of the outside world and the inner body produce new aesthetic forms. Further, by recognizing the fold as a regenerative aesthetic, Moten's

insights amplify the radicalism of Rodney and Piper's works.

Stemming from Rodney's deteriorating health and the decay of the post-industrial city of Piper's childhood, both artists sought to express how a constraining police force, attempts to displace their British identity, and the suppressions of public demonstrations affected the individual body and the body politic.³⁴ By using their bodies to express the invagination, or folding that Moten identifies, Piper and Rodney produce hybrid forms of self-reflexivity proposing new arrangements of perception of blackness, including its mediation and resistance, in the public sphere. ■

¹ Daniel Birnbaum, "Lygia Clark Museum of Modern Art, New York," *Artforum* 53, no.2 (October 2014): 274.

² Jean Fisher, "Dialogues" in David Bailey, Ian Baucom, and Sonia Boyce, *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (Durham: Duke University Press Books), 169.

³ Domietta Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xi.

⁴ Kobena Mercer, "Iconography after Identity," in *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (Durham: Duke University Press Books) 49.

⁵ Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, First Trade Paperback edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 28.

⁶ Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 2005), 57.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, 1 edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 2.

⁸ Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, 17.

¹¹ Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 46.

¹² Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, xv.

¹³ Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, 10.

¹⁴ Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, 11.

¹⁵ Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, xvii.

¹⁶ Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth, 2013), 43.

¹⁷ Jennifer Gonzalez, "Morphologies: Race as Visual Technology" in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2003), 341.

¹⁸ Eddie Chambers, *Donald Rodney: Doublethink*, ed. Richard Hylton (London: Autograph, 2003), 33.

¹⁹ Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 9.

²⁰ Eddie Chambers, "Visualizing the Struggle of Black Britain" (lecture, National Center for Civil and Human Rights, Atlanta, GA, September 27, 2014).

²¹ In 1981 and 1985, cities around Britain experienced the uprisings or riots that responded largely to racial injustice.

²² Derrida, *Archive Fever* 17.

²³ Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, xvii.

²⁴ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, 1st edition (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000), 6.

²⁵ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation*, 35.

²⁶ Gilane Tawadros and David Chandler, foreword to *Keith Piper: Relocating the Remains* by Kobena Mercer (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1997), 5.

²⁷ Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, xvii.

²⁸ In Kara Keeling lecture "Errantry and Imagination in Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*," she leveraged Eduoard Glissant's concept of opacity as a position of resistance to reductive concept of the Other. (lecture, Georgia Institute of Technology, October 2, 2014).

²⁹ Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, xv.

³⁰ Keith Piper, "Relocating the Remains (A nomad leaves few traces)," Invia, <http://www.iniva.org/piper/RRNotes.html>

³¹ Jennifer González, "The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice," *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 170 (January 1, 2009): 55.

³² Jennifer González, "The Face and the Public," 59.

³³ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 40.

³⁴ Mercer, "Art Histories and Culture's Geographies: 1979-1985" in *Relocating the Remains*, 20.