

ARTS CATALYST

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PRESS RELEASE

LARRY ACHIAMPONG & DAVID BLANDY GENETIC AUTOMATA

A new film and installation exploring race and identity in an age of avatars, video games, and DNA Ancestry testing

24 January – 30 March 2019

Opening preview: Wednesday 23 January, 6 – 8:30pm



Image courtesy Larry Achiampong & David Blandy, 2018

Concepts of race and ethnicity in science over the last century have been split between two main perspectives. One, rooted in the eugenics movement, treats racial and ethnic categories as biological classifications. The other, stemming from social science, regards race and ethnicity primarily as cultural and historical constructs with very little biological significance. Even after the human genome was decoded in 2003, which scientists believe proved there was no biological basis for race, the arguments continue to rage.

Genetic Automata is a new commission by artists Larry Achiampong and David Blandy. It forms the first part of an ambitious new body of film-based works by the artists that attempt to address this complex history of classification and segregation.

Referencing the history of the theory of evolution, and the relationship between Darwin and his taxidermy teacher John Edmonstone, a freed slave, the artists' new commission for Arts Catalyst takes the form of a video installation combining animation, spoken word and text interspersed with microscopic topographies of varied shades of skin, digital renditions of skin from video games, and film footage of taxidermied bird life from Darwin's bird skin collection at the Natural History Museum. Viewers are taken on an immersive journey marked by encounters with histories of racial science, computer-generated virtual landscapes and the molecular speculations of genetic testing.

The work investigates how invisible histories – such as the transfer of knowledge from Edmonstone to Darwin – have helped to inform mainstream western scientific thinking while remaining unrecognised. It is now believed that Edmonstone was pivotal in advancing Darwin's theory of evolution, inspiring Darwin to visit South America and teaching him taxidermy skills that enabled the preservation of specimens of finches Darwin discovered on his voyage to the Galapagos Islands, which helped him to develop his theory of natural selection. Through *Genetic Automata*, the artists question how these narratives shape our perception of the history of scientific thought and who determines such history. They ask, whose voices are erased from mainstream narratives?

Weaving together imagery and narratives from various popular cultural interpretations of genetic manipulation, from *Metal Gear Solid* to *Resident Evil* to *Final Fantasy* and the *Metroid* series, the artists will explore the legacy and language of concepts around eugenics and human agency.

Genetic Automata forms part of Arts Catalyst's long-term curatorial programme *Radical Ancestry*, a cultural collective inquiry exploring how artists can transform new knowledge from genetic science into a re-thinking of race, identity and migration. The work emerges from Achiampong and Blandy's research into DNA ancestry genetics, for which the artists undertook a series of DNA ancestry tests before discussing the results in a public talk at Arts Catalyst's Centre in 2017.

An accompanying programme of events will be announced soon via the Arts Catalyst website.

Ends.

Exhibition open Thursday – Saturday, 12 – 6pm
Arts Catalyst Centre for Art, Science & Technology, London WC1H 8DR
Free admission

Notes to Editors

Larry Achiampong (b.1984) is a British-Ghanaian artist whose solo and collaborative projects employ imagery, aural and visual archives, live performance and sound to explore ideas surrounding class, cross-cultural and post-digital identity. These investigations examine constructions of 'the self' by splicing the audible and visual materials of personal and interpersonal archives, offering multiple perspectives that reveal entrenched socio-political contradictions in contemporary society. Achiampong has exhibited, performed and presented projects within the UK and abroad including Tate Britain/Modern, London; The Institute For Creative Arts, Cape Town; The British Film Institute, London; David Roberts Art Foundation, London; Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen; Bokoor African Popular Music Archives Foundation, Accra; Logan Center Exhibitions, Chicago; Prospect New Orleans, New Orleans; Diaspora Pavilion – 57th Venice Biennale, Venice; and Somerset House, London.

David Blandy (b. 1976) is a British artist who has established his working practices through a series of investigations into the cultural forces that inform and influence him, ranging from his love of hip hop and soul, to computer games and manga. His works slip between performance and video, reality and construct, using references sampled from the wide, disparate sources that provide his (and our own) individualist sense of self. He has exhibited at institutions nationally and worldwide including Tate Modern, London, UK; Bloomberg Space, London, UK; The Exchange, Newlyn Art Gallery, UK; Kiasma Contemporary Art Museum, Helsinki, Finland; The Baltic, Gateshead; Turner Contemporary, Margate; Spike Island, Bristol; Kunstlerhaus Stuttgart, Germany; MoMA PS1, New York, and Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai, China. He is currently working on a New Geographies Commission for Focal Point Gallery in Southend-on-Sea.

In Larry Achiampong and David Blandy's collaborative practice, they share an interest in popular culture and the post-colonial position. They examine communal and personal heritage, using performance to investigate the self as a fiction, devising alter egos to point at their divided selves. They have recently been shortlisted for the Film London Jarman Award for their collaborative work.

Radical Ancestry is a curatorial research initiative instigated by Arts Catalyst in which critical and imaginative artists, scientists and thinkers are invited to explore recent histories of scientific categorisation and theories of race and the deep history of human migration. Through a programme of research, commissions, exhibitions and discursive events, the project explores how history provides context for and alternative perspectives on today's mass migrations. From this uncovering of the past, the programme contemplates contemporary biopolitics of race – in which some scientists are resuscitating biological theories of race using cutting-edge genomic research.

Arts Catalyst is a contemporary art organisation focused on transdisciplinary art and inquiry. It commissions and produces projects, artworks and exhibitions that connect with other fields of knowledge, expanding artistic practice into domains associated with science and specialist research. Arts Catalyst has commissioned more than 160 artists' projects, including major new works by Tomás Saraceno, Aleksandra Mir, Ashok Sukumaran, Otolith Group, and Critical Art Ensemble.

Support

Genetic Automata is supported by The Elephant Trust and Arts Council England.