

The Unfinished Conversation: Stuart Hall in Dialogue with History



Atheel Elmalik [Follow](#)

Aug 11, 2017 · 6 min read



John Akomfrah. Still from “The Unfinished Conversation.” 2012. Three-channel video (color, sound), 45 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Contemporary Arts Council of the Museum of Modern Art, The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art, and through the generosity of Bilge Ogut and Haro Cumbusyan. Image © Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery. Installation view, “Unfinished Conversations: New Work from the Collection,” The Museum of Modern Art, March 19–July 30, 2017

Stuart Hall was a Jamaican-born cultural theorist, political activist, and public intellectual who lived and worked in the United Kingdom from 1951 until his passing in 2014. He is well known as a founder of Cultural Studies and an influential thinker of the British New Left. Upon arriving to England from

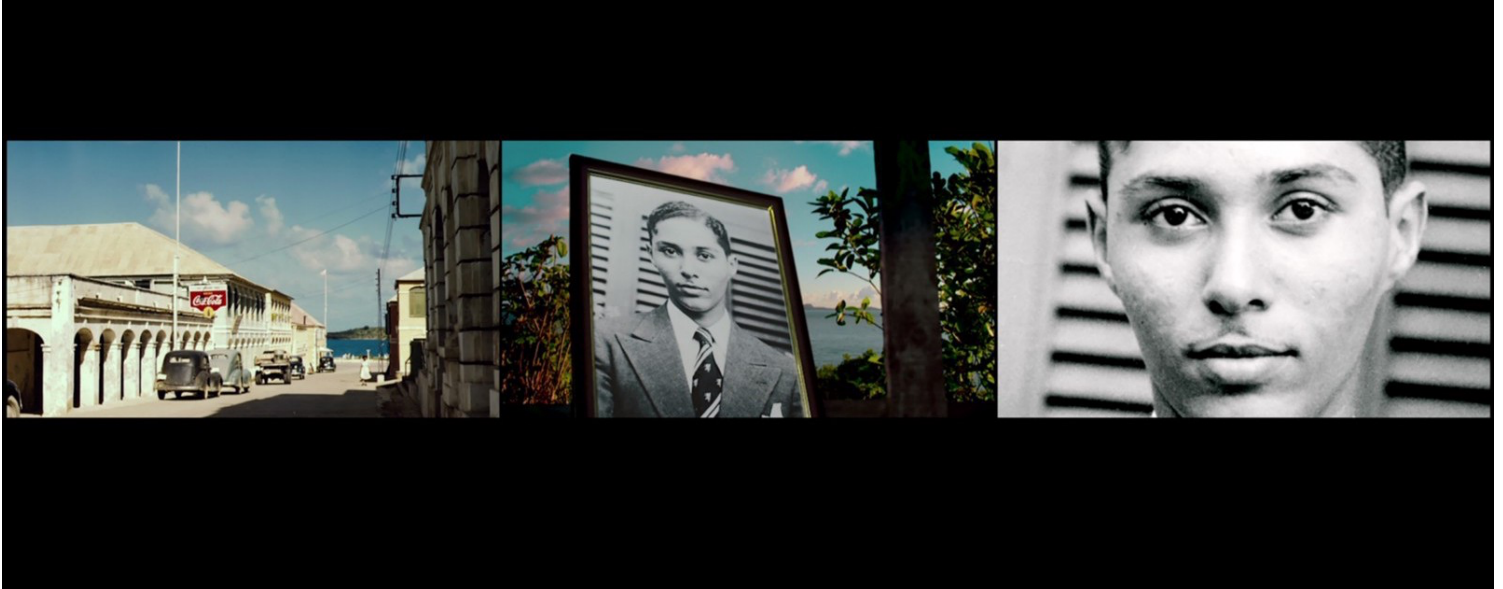
Jamaica to study at Oxford University, Hall felt a sense of alienation that prompted a personal and theoretical exploration that eventually associated him with the New Left. The sociopolitical elitism, as well as the values, ideologies, and systems of thought he found in his university studies felt removed from his own life experience. Influenced by his alignment with Oxford's displaced migrant communities, as well as the political provocations of 1956 — marked by events such as the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian revolution, and the invasion of Egypt by Israel, France, and the UK — Hall was propelled to the New Left, which would become his political home for many years.

The New Left was a broad political movement that took shape in the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast to earlier Marxist movements that focused more centrally on issues of class struggle, the New Left focused on a wide range of issues such as civil rights, gay rights, gender roles, and labor organization, among others. Hall was the first editor of the influential *New Left Review*, a journal that analyzed world politics, the global economy, protest movements, and contemporary social theory, philosophy, and culture. Out of the New Left emerged Cultural Studies, which was to become a discipline in its own right. It had at its foundation a commitment to take popular cultural and artistic production seriously, tracing the interweaving threads of culture, politics, and power.

When British artist John Akomfrah wanted to create a project

exploring the transmutation and transformation of the black image over time, he deemed Stuart Hall to be the perfect vehicle to examine these ideas. Hall occupied a unique position, not only as a thinker who reflected seriously on the politics of the aesthetic landscape — which he believed shaped rather than merely represented power — but also as a theorist whose monumental contributions were deeply rooted in his personal experience.

It is important to note Hall's hesitation with being a subject of Akomfrah's work, for he was someone who resisted being the center of attention, always preferring to speak of the collaborative elements of the work that he was a part of. So, on the occasion of John Akomfrah's *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012) — featured in the exhibition *Unfinished Conversations: New Work from the Collection* — a panel gathered at The Museum of Modern Art in March 2017 to discuss the legacies of Stuart Hall. These personal traits of Hall, which emerged throughout the night, were equally significant takeaways, as was learning about his work. For those of us who did not know him personally, we were introduced to Stuart Hall as a teacher, a mentor, and a friend. In an audience comprised of artists, curators, collectors, and cultural thinkers whose work and interests lie at the intersection of race, politics, and critical theory, a sense of community emerged: a community centered on people responding to — and contending with — Stuart Hall's ideas and their relevance today.



John Akomfrah. Still from “The Unfinished Conversation.” 2012. Three-channel video (color, sound), 45 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Contemporary Arts Council of the Museum of Modern Art, The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art, and through the generosity of Bilge Ogut and Haro Cumbusyan. Image © Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery

Hall’s political investment in the New Left came from the need to provide compelling alternatives to the rise of Great Britain’s conservative right — represented by Margaret Thatcher — that would center multiculturalism, civil rights, and environmentalism. This concern for a Left that was able to examine sociopolitical conditions and offer viable trajectories rings as true today as it did at the end of the 1960s. When John Akomfrah was asked about what one could borrow from Stuart Hall to help navigate the global rise of Right-wing populist regimes, Akomfrah highlighted Hall’s insistence on the historical being a vital component of the conversation. So the question then becomes: What kind of relationship to the historical did Stuart Hall push forth?

At the panel, John Akomfrah highlighted a quote from Hall’s

Cultural Identity and Diaspora: “Cultural identities come from somewhere, they have histories. But like everything else that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being externally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power. Far from being the mere recovery of a past, waiting to be found, and once found will secure our sense of self into eternity, identities are the different names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past.” This view presents us with a history that is unfixed, a history that is rewritten every time that it is told. The past becomes ever-shifting.

Stuart Hall’s constant self-questioning produced his rigorous and thoughtful body of work, manifested in his ongoing relationship to Marxism. Hall felt that the Marxist emphasis on class hindered the ability to consider other influences — such as race or gender — on the formation of power. The fact that Hall did not take on Marxism as an identity, but rather a framework that was more or less useful at different moments in time, allowed for him to question and revise its tenets to allow for many of the ideas that would become central to the New Left.

Stuart Hall argued that political identities were formed in discourse: Identity was a narrative dependent on how we positioned ourselves in relation to others. Identity to Hall — religious, national, ethnic, cultural — was “a matter of

becoming as well as being...” belonging “to the future as well as to the past.” On the other hand, institutions of power often strive to fix the meaning of difference, presenting difference as boundless and eternal; a fundamental truth that could not be changed or understood otherwise. That premise was used for a variety of political projects that were predicated upon othering those who held various identities, linking that identity to an innate violent nature or a fundamental, unreconciled otherness.

Hall’s insistence on the historical was a tool to resist endings and neat categorizations, forcing us to consider how there must be another way. This desire to resist endings is echoed by the formal qualities of Akomfrah’s work. He has designated *The Unfinished Conversation* not as a film, but as a project, which instantly conveys an ongoing examination. As Kobena Mercer put it speaking of the title of Akomfrah’s work, “[it is] a commitment that is not exhausted by meeting a goal.” The structure of the piece forces us to think and rethink our relationship to the subjects and narrative portrayed. The multi-channel installation conveys a sense of the multiple migrations of the image. Here, Akomfrah is exploring other, non-Aristotelian ways of storytelling. The logic of simultaneity that multi-screen pieces offer creates a more democratic viewing experience, which invites participation and interrogation of the history presented.

Writing against the staunch march of history, into a space that

offers multiplicity, fluidity, and thereby possibility, feels as important today as it ever was. Perhaps through an insistence on questions of temporality, one can come to understand the constructed nature of our circumstances, breathing imagination into how they could be configured otherwise.

John Akomfrah's The Unfinished Conversation was part of MoMA's Unfinished Conversations: New Work from the Collection, which brought together works by more than a dozen artists, made in the past decade and recently acquired by The Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition was on view March 19–July 30, 2017.

[Art](#)[Cultural Studies](#)[Museums](#)[Video Art](#)

Learn more.

Medium is an open platform where 170 million readers come to find insightful and dynamic thinking. Here, expert and undiscovered voices alike dive into the heart of any topic and bring new ideas to the surface.

[Learn more](#)

Make Medium yours.

Follow the writers, publications, and topics that matter to you, and you'll see them on your homepage and in your inbox. [Explore](#)

Share your thinking.

If you have a story to tell, knowledge to share, or a perspective to offer — welcome home. It's easy and free to post your thinking on any topic. [Write on Medium](#)

[About](#)[Help](#)[Legal](#)

