

Altogether Different: From Black to Blonde and Back Again

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Jane Round

'There is nothing' Stuart Hall writes 'that global postmodernism loves better than a certain kind of difference, a touch of ethnicity, a taste of the exotic, a bit of the other (1996: 467). *'Do you want to touch?'* is a collection of 30 pieces of 'black' hair, some gathered from Afro-Caribbean hairdressers, and some synthetic. Whereas some hang like pictures on the wall, others are mounted on pedestals like antique sculptures (Tawadros, 1997). No two are the same. Woven with black/blonde/brown real and synthetic hair they sit unguarded by glass cases, ropes, or signs warning visitors not to touch. Instead, viewers are invited to engage at a tactile level. But to allow or even invite the possibility of touch is to present the viewer with the opportunity to transgress the boundary between a public gaze and a tactile relationship. What do we want to touch? In naming an offer Sonia Boyce makes her work available for literal inspection by a viewer whose hand is eager to read a tactile braille of racial difference, who wants to get a grip on material evidence, and who wants to know what it *feels* like (Jean Fisher, 2000: 104).

What *does* it feel like? Joy Gregory's multimedia interactive exhibition *'Blonde'* invites visitors to explore the notion of blonde not just as a hair colour but also as a state of mind; the encapsulation of the un-natural, an instant personality change and the ultimate in 'postfeminist, postcolonial and postmodern hair colouring' (www.iniva.org/archive/project/42). Made in response to the growing presence of non-European 'blondes' on the streets of major European cities, Gregory's project is a light hearted exploration of what it means to be blonde through popular perception, public opinion and the motivations of people who have 'gone blonde'. Here engagement is with a virtual rather than a tactile space. Set alongside an exhibition of photographs depicting blonde models, colour charts and samples of dyed blonde African, Asian, and European hair types, 'Blonde' asks the viewer to consider *'Who is the fairest of them all?'* (Gregory, 1998). *Here you can – briefly – be the blonde you want to be in any of her incarnations: as icon or celebrity, as decorative but dumb, or even as prototype career girl. In playing with 'difference as blonde' rather than 'difference as black' the notion of identity functions like a verb; it appears only in the future tense through a projection of what it might be like and feel*

like to be a blonde; an ambivalent practice of introjection and projection, and of metaphoric and metonymic strategies of displacement (Mercer, 1994: 82).

Both exhibitions present the viewer with a visual that invites us to indulge our fantasies through a hands-on engagement with an identity that can be played with, reconstructed and redefined in a way that is, to paraphrase Baumann, 'a freely chosen game, a theatrical presentation of the self' (1994: 18). But if the modern 'problem of identity' is how to construct an identity and keep it stable, then the postmodern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open (Baumann, 1994: 18). Here identity as a practice is dressed from the start as an individual task where it is up to the viewer to explore conventional connections between colour and difference through a fantasy space. The invitation to see, feel, and experience becomes a play with difference in a make-believe world that looks towards an identity never completed and always 'in process' (Hall and du Gay, 1994: 2). There is always too much or too little, an over determination or a lack, but never, as Hall writes, a proper 'fit' (Hall and du Gay, 1994: 2)

There are clear parallels here between a literal and a theoretical exercise: taking the concept of identity apart, putting it back together in a temporary arrangement or, as Jones (1995: 100), writes 'working-it' and seeing what works in a postmodern space itself. Subject to the play of difference this marks the move away from an essentialist concept of identity as fixed – in terms of what counts as 'being blonde' or 'being black' – and towards one instead that calls into question the bit



"Do you want to touch ?" 1993

Afro piece with red felt

Courtesy the artist, and Wigmore Fine Art, London

of the self which is always-already 'the same' (Hall, 2001). To take up the invitation that both artists offer is to confront the distortions of institutionalized representations by exploring a multiplicity of 'other' subjectivities: this functions as a critique of difference that can destabilize a ready-to-wear identity in favour of an ultimate destination which can only, deliberately, remain unsettled.

So is blonde the new postfeminist, postcolonial colour as Gregory asks? Can it mark the move away from a stereotypical representation of 'the blonde' as 'fairy princess' (Rapunzel with hair as beautiful as spun gold), 'stupid' (pretty vacant) or 'passive sex object' (always ready for all sexual advances) and use colour instead to say something different: 'like ... power and strength....?' as Gregory suggests (www.iniva.org/xspaceprojects/gregory). Perhaps this could be thought of as the creation of an interrogatory space where both sites – exhibition and website – work as a meeting point to bring the viewer to a place of confrontation with notions of 'blonde' and 'black', and about a temporary attachment to one or the other, or to neither. The point is to engage (touch, feel, think, and imagine) in order to be,



"Do you want to touch ?" ("The Comforter") 1993

Courtesy the artist, and Wigmore Fine Art, London

however fleetingly, who you want, where you want, and with whom you want, and with black or blonde, real or synthetic hair. What matters is to detach the 'black' and 'blonde' subject from their fixed inscriptions, where colour stands for difference, and produce both again but in a variety of radically new positions (Hall, 1996:4). From black to blonde and back again: an altogether different place of engagement.

author biography

Jane Round is currently completing an MA in 'Culture, Globalization and the City' at the Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths College.

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