

## Chapter 1

### FIRE

My exposure to art dates back to my early teens. It came about through an unexpected combination – one composed of events that happened, people I met, and things I was seeking.

I was the eldest child of five and both my father and mother worked nights, so I had to look after all my brothers and sisters. My early existence was very much connected to that, and to reading and studying. Looking back, I think I've always had a double sense of myself. Maybe this was because my parents spoke Creole to one another, Saint Lucian French Creole. Even though I could understand everything they were saying, they would only speak to the rest of us in English. I distinctly remember being at a party when I was very young – maybe five or six – and overhearing people say, *Gadé sé petit gason kon on makoumèò* (“Look at that effeminate boy!”). When you have a sense of language where people talk about you and you're not meant to understand – and yet you do – you start to read life very differently. Certainly, that affected my understanding of things; I felt the intention of what people say is never what they mean, that language and being each have their hidden, contradictory sense.

If I see a photograph of myself from around this time, it seems to me a picture of someone who is looking at things from a much older position. Because in my world I had to mature very quickly, there was never much chance of me remaining naïve.

Early on, there were two central goals in my mind: I did not want to live the life of my parents, nor did I want – ever – to work in a factory or a bank. I was very determined about it; there were things I wanted to do and things I didn't want to do. I think this was a lot about not being heterosexual, but I could also see what working in those environments did. What really started to change things for me was my O-Level Art class.<sup>1</sup> There, I had a set of extraordinary teachers – people whose conversations opened up a brand-new world. I had one teacher, for instance, who always went to Marseille in the summers and who would talk about how people, artists, lived in Marseille. Another influential teacher was Mr. Price who, during life drawing, started to explain dialectical materialism.

This was my first encounter with the idea of middle-classness. All my teachers were middle-class and they were also of the Left. So we were having these conversations

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<sup>1</sup> In English schools at this time, usually at age 16, students took a set of exams called O-Levels (ordinary levels). These determined the nature of their continuing education. These would later be followed by a second set of exams, A-Levels (advanced levels). A-Levels, usually taken at 18, were important for entrance to University and further education. They were the gateway to middle-classness and, where I grew up, to do A-Levels was the exception.

about Marx, about Trotsky, about socialism – all while I was drawing and painting and making sculptures.

I grew up in the East End, initially on a part of the Coventry Cross Estate. That was a fairly notorious estate where, by the time I was ten, practically everyone I knew had already been arrested. I didn't quite understand this, but I could clearly see that, between black boys and the police, there was always some kind of *encounter*. I was very aware the police were not around to protect me.

My school – which was then called the Daneford School for Boys – sat between the East End's Brick Lane and its Hoxton area. Now, this is a centre for the London art world but, during those years, it was a political battleground. There had been a local wave of Asian immigration and the young Bengali kids were just starting to enter schools. So things were politically charged, with street gangs and vigilante groups and all those sorts of things. Hoxton itself was a stronghold for the National Front, the far-right political party. This made it a serious no-go area for any black person. Briefly, violence was a part of my daily experience; it was just another part of my going to school.

This went on until 1975, the year there was a serious fire in our home. That was an event which ended up changing my life. Of course my parents were really upset, because we had to move. But I was completely happy, because we left a place where I was always being harassed. Where I was called 'secretary boy' because I bothered to study, because I was making a clear choice to be different. Once we moved estates, I was out of Coventry Cross. The block we moved into was nicer – plus it was on the estate's edge, facing out. Across the street I could see a little terrace, a row of Victorian two-up, two-down houses.<sup>2</sup>

For me, our moving house started to transform everything. This began with a building right around the corner – an East End landmark called Kingsley Hall. It's a very important building, one that is linked to the Suffragettes, to the General Strike of 1926, to the area's whole history of Left-wing politics. Once in the Thirties, Mahatma Gandhi stayed in it and, during the Sixties, R.D. Laing had a practice there. It was through the Hall I met a woman named Jenny Fortune.

I encountered Jenny through a summer mural project, something she had launched in tribute to the Suffragettes. Jenny was campaigning to make the Hall a community centre and, right away, she introduced me to a lot of people. Some of them brought me into their photography, others into their filmmaking – all things which were, at that time, being done in collectives. This workshop system, which had developed out of hippie counter-culture, was based on representing not just working-class people but also their rights. More specifically, in our neighbourhood, it was connected with the political

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<sup>2</sup> *Row houses with two rooms, upstairs and downstairs (and an outside privy), were a feature of Victorian working-class architecture.*

group Big Flame. This was a revolutionary socialist organisation, one in which Jenny played an active role.<sup>3</sup>

After meeting Jenny, I entered a different universe. On the one hand, there were all the things happening at Kingsley Hall. Then, directly across the street was the terrace, the row we all knew as 'the Acme Houses'. These were overseen by an artist-led charity which had turned them into artist housing and studios. I was very curious about those houses, so I started trying to befriend the people in them.

Thanks to that, I encountered another oppositional culture. I remember once just walking into one house where an artist was giving a performance. I think, retrospectively, it may have been Stuart Brisley. But he was in a bath, it was all completely black...and I remember thinking, 'God, these white people are strange. What on earth are they up to?' At the same time, I wanted to know more. Essentially, I was bored and I was also quite lonely. I wanted to make connections and I knew these people were interesting.

I also discovered there were lots of people near me making film – people like Noreen MacDowell, Alan Hayling and Joy Chamberlain. All three of them worked in the Newsreel film collective. Through Jenny Fortune, too, I met a German political fugitive by the name of Anna. Although I had no idea at the time, this was really Astrid Proll, who had been part of the Baader-Meinhof gang.<sup>4</sup> Both Jenny and Astrid had a definite influence over me. So did another woman called Susan Shearer – Susan owned a darkroom and she started to teach me photography. At the time, all I did was try to photograph my surroundings. But right away I liked how the camera was technical. Putting the film in, having to have a light meter, printing in the dark room – I relished all of that. Through Susan, I also met the people at Camerawork, which was another local collective engaged in photography.

This bohemian culture turned out to be quite artistically interesting. Take Alan Hayling, who later worked at Channel Four, at the Mentorn film production company and at BBC Documentaries. Although Alan was very much a part of Newsreel, both he and Susan worked at the same Ford plant as my Dad. So my introduction to all this new culture was dissident; its art was all formed in opposition to establishment politics. This is one of the reasons why the role of today's East End as an art-world 'headquarters' seems so uncanny to me. Because, when I was growing up there, artists also led the dialogues. But, back then, they did it while trying to re-make and re-create real connections between art and life and politics. Even if they didn't offer public art as such, one knew the public was always part of their discourse.

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<sup>3</sup> *Descended from the Italy's Lotta Continua, Big Flame began in 1970 at Liverpool's Halewood Ford Plant. In London, it took root at the Ford plant in Dagenham.*

<sup>4</sup> *I always knew Astrid as 'Anna Puttuick'. Along with several others I met, she then worked at Lesney's toy factory in Homerton. They produced Matchbox model cars.*

Then, as we know, council housing and similar ways of housing oneself started to disappear. Property, as a means of investment, became the ultimate fetish – it turned into the dominant means of securing one's position. Today, in the East End, the privatisation of public space is an obvious and defining feature of art's presence. It's largely the privatization of both the art world and that real estate, hand-in-hand, which has succeeded in redefining those geographies.

My East End, where I grew up and where I was familiarised with the making of art, has vanished. It's been replaced by a new, branded type of contemporary art – one whose deepest connections are to the market and to Mayfair. But in its original form, before artists like Rachel Whiteread and Tim Noble and Sue Webster and the Chapman brothers defined it, there was another East End. That was one described by different artistic ambitions and its 'art world' never tried to define itself against the local.

I certainly don't want to pretend that I'm outside of those changes. After all, as a kid, I dreamed my neighbourhood would be gentrified. If a club like Shoreditch House had existed when I was growing up, I would have been in there like a shot. But, on the flip side, now we have the Shard.<sup>5</sup> That represents the presence of capital in the city, it symbolises the wealth which created all this modernity. Yet it's all about the fact that – while you are able to look at it or you might be able to visit – you can never really inhabit the inside.

My own formation in the East End was just very different. For me, just trying to learn was difficult and it required the day-to-day negotiation of local boundaries. Learning was also punctuated by powerful news from elsewhere, of things like the 1976 uprisings in Soweto. I clearly remember being terrified by those newspaper photos that showed South African schoolkids being shot. It was images such as these that made me see how young black people were represented. That was something I recognised before I learned to articulate it.

Closer to home, we had our own oppositional organisations. There was Rock Against Racism, Big Flame, the Anti-Nazi League, the International Marxist Group (IMG) and the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). Most of these arose in the mid-1970s, around the time of punk rock – and, as with punk, most were very middle-class groupings. I myself preferred the more anarchistic groups and the East End saw a lot of circling around the Trotskyists. But I flirted with any organisation that seemed interested in me, even when I knew it was just for expedient reasons. At one point, my mum went completely

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<sup>5</sup> *Renzo Piano's 72-storey luxury housing, office and hotel complex which, at time of writing, is the UK's tallest building*

ballistic about all this. That was in 1976, when the WRP would come and knock on our door each day.<sup>6</sup>

By 1977, I was passionate about dance. So I trained for two years in the London Youth Dance Theatre. We performed at Queen Elizabeth Hall and Sadler's Wells, but I also went to see experimental groups – companies like Rosemary Butcher and Extemporary Dance. I met Gaby Agis, too; she was my *pas de deux* partner. Gaby went on to work with people like Michael Clark and become a proponent of collaborative performance.

I also felt an abstract link to dance and to performance. The way I've extrapolated those two things in my work is to think about them in relation to the body, to the use of non-actors and to the *mise en scène* that gets created by the camera. In works like *Three*, *WESTERN UNION: small boats* and *Looking for Langston*, there's a direct correlation with both choreography and performance. All of that stems from my first, teenage interest in dance. But it also comes out of the later disco culture. That was another thing which helped me take my early dance interests into a more theatrical, conceptual arena.

The other big thing for me during the disco Seventies was, of course, the questioning of my sexuality. One benefit of growing up when I did was that I could see many possibilities, many identities, that weren't simply heterosexual. One had the hippy cultures and one had the Left. But I also had pop culture and in pop culture – in music, certainly – there were many more forms of identification on offer. One had Marc Bolan, one had David Bowie and one had all the androgynous aspects of glam rock. At the same time, there was the whole evolution and development of gay culture. Of course, it wasn't exactly developing where I lived! But my first encounters with it did come through school, through a few friends who, as it turned out, were mostly gay. From my art teachers, too, there was a slightly more liberal approach. Nevertheless, at my school, the only time that I could come out – in any way at all – was after most of my class had left.<sup>7</sup>

By the time I was 16, I was going out to a nightclub in Essex called Lacy Ladies. Because there was a colour bar, that was a hard place to get into. The only way you could get around this was if you went with white friends – and I already had a few of those. But the door policy also took in how you dressed. How you looked was evaluated and, as I came to understand that, it made a deep impression. One had to dress in a particular style.

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<sup>6</sup> To counteract the rightwing *Sun* and *Daily Mail*, the WRP had its own daily paper, *Newsline*. Every day, they would drop this off at our home.

<sup>7</sup> When I stayed on to do two A levels (Art and Communication), I was one of only a very few people in my year.

Even though I couldn't afford to buy anything from them, after 1976 me and my friends went to Seditonaries. Equally, we later haunted Antony Price<sup>8</sup> together. At those times, they were underground fashions which, very quickly, permeated the mainstream. But we revelled in our styles; we enjoyed the status and the tribe-like nature of beings who could recognise one other by how we dressed – as well as by our connection to sounds and to dance. We considered the mainstream and the rest naff...truly unstylish. The appreciation of music mattered as much to us as it did to our elders. But it mattered in a sense that was our own.

At 18, I left secondary school and I more-or-less spent a whole year clubbing. A lot of that time was spent in Old Bond Street at the Embassy Club,<sup>9</sup> which was a bit like London's Studio 54. There I was able to check out people like Bryan Ferry, Bianca Jagger and Andy Warhol. Andy Warhol very often used to appear in that nightclub and just being around him was rather curious. It gave me clues that, between pop culture and my own experience, there might actually be some possibilities. I even remember thinking that – in a way – a part of me wanted to *be* like Warhol. Warhol was a key because, with him, one had both the lifestyle and the art.

Of course I couldn't actually afford to go to the Embassy Club. The way I managed that was, on weekends, I would haunt the East London jumble sales and "antique fairs". Then I would head to the King's Road and sell whatever I'd found. I sold my finds at two places, Antiquarius and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Box.<sup>10</sup> I also used to buy secondhand clothes from Seditonaries, so I could start assembling a wardrobe of my own. All this had a certain entrepreneurial aspect, in that I could look at the clothes stylish people were wearing – and read magazines like *Vogue* and go into certain shops – and then assimilate a very similar look. In strict fashion terms, it was a kind of passing. But it was also a punk-derived DIY.

One night at the Embassy Club, there was a performance piece which restaged the siege of the Iranian Embassy.<sup>11</sup> The real thing had involved terrorists, hostages and the army. But, in the Embassy version, it was the dancefloor which got stormed and it was a Marilyn Monroe lookalike who was rescued. The next day, all this made the front page of *Newsline*. The general idea in that piece was, "These decadent upper class types were

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<sup>8</sup> *Seditonaries* (formerly *SEX*) was Malcom McClaren and Vivienne Westwood's *World's End* boutique; initially, Antony Price designs were found at Plaza but, after 1979, Price opened his own shop, also on King's Road

<sup>9</sup> Located at 7, Old Bond Street W1

<sup>10</sup> Retail landmarks from a post-Sixties King's Road, both Antiquarius and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Box bought and sold antiques. Antiquarius was a market comprised of numerous separate dealers which is now a Grade II listed building. It is currently occupied by US chain Anthropologie.

<sup>11</sup> In 1980, from 30 April – 5 May, six men took 26 people hostage in London's Iranian Embassy on the south side of Hyde Park. After one hostage was killed, the government sent in its elite Special Forces Unit to storm the Embassy and end the siege. This they did, but not without deaths on either side.

all mocking this terrible moment". It really went on about how low and vile that was. I remember thinking, 'Well, I was there, I saw that, and I *go to that club*'. It made me think about the whole idea of trespassing: a trespassing between club culture, politics and one's sexual identity. I started thinking about that as something both quite dangerous and very attractive. I felt sure that, as an artist, I wanted access to that energy.

I was already convinced I wanted to go to art school. So, I did a pre-foundation course at City & East London College. It was during that I made my first real video – which was called *How Gays are Stereotyped in the Media*. That was something I'd love to see now, because what I did was cut out models and pages from *Gay Left* magazine, then add an analysis of the gay subtext in Hitchcock's *Rope*. I remember one teacher said it would be more "interesting" if I had talked a bit more about being black and gay. Well, those facts would take me a lot longer to address. They took around nine years to be able to articulate, starting with *Territories*, then *This Is not an AIDS Advertisement*, *The Passion of Remembrance* and, finally, *Looking for Langston*.

As far as my own identity, being between different groups – gay disco culture, black soulboy culture and white middle-class activist culture – was sometimes a painful and difficult way to exist. I had friends and I was able to exert a certain invention, which I could manage with a certain style. But, internally, it became quite complicated. Because, although I became fairly fluid and cosmopolitan, most other people tended to stay in their separate groups. Internally, also, negotiating all those different movements and allegiances was hardly simple. So I remember thinking, "I'm being interpreted by so many different factions; how can all my identities ever cohere?" In fact, this was something that was not so easily managed; it took time to attain my own position.

For instance, I've always been interested in the art part of fashion and in self-styling. By itself, gay culture was sometimes insufficient for that. Because some parts of it remained quite normative and almost bland...let's just say they were conventional. When you went out to a gay club, for instance, you would never hear James Brown – you would not hear hard funk. The music was never quite as good as at those mixed or straight venues where I also went.

Still, the more identities one could have, I felt, the more interesting. I liked the idea of having a gay identity because it was different than merely having a black identity. I never, ever, viewed being gay as disadvantageous. I just saw it as enriching to my life. But one of the things I did have to slowly acknowledge was the very real existence of gay racism.

It was through the fusion of club culture, fashion and music – and through those early meetings with Jenny Fortune and Astrid Proll – that I started to figure out some basic artistic correlations. This was also spurred by coming more into central London and especially into Bloomsbury, where we later made our home. I first came at age 16, to

visit the bookshop *Gay's the Word*. There, from the moment I steeled myself to walk in the door, I found that Left culture and gay politics were crystallised. Now, it's just around the corner and it's been there thirty years.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of desire, much of my art remains concerned with those early questions and conflicts. In one sense, of course, it's all about art and it always has been. But the serious art world has sometimes conceived of me as an outsider. Maybe that's why I retain such a concern with theory and with making arguments which connect to debates in that realm. Certainly, I've never been just interested in art for art's sake. But my work does have a schism and a confrontation. It has those things which are "high art", experimental and modernist but, at the same time, it retains my political focus.

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<sup>12</sup> This was the first place I found the kinds of writing I treasure, articles like 'In Defence of Disco' by Richard Dyer.