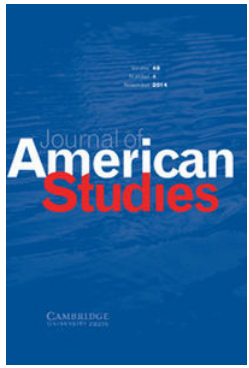

Eddie Chambers,*Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain* (Amsterdam and New York:Rodopi,2012, \$98.00). Pp. 299.isbn978 90 420 3443 3.

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Eddie Chambers, *Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012, $98.00). Pp. 299. ISBN 978 90 420 3443 3.

Few people could be better situated to take account of the history of overlapping British art scenes toward the end of the twentieth century than Eddie Chambers. Since the 1980s, he has been an engaged participant: artist, curator, critic, founding member of cultural collectives, and activist fighting against exclusionary practices in cultural institutions. Chambers has kept tabs on everything and everyone, and *Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain* is founded not only on what he witnessed but also on his examination of the written record: exhibition publications, reviews, and other documents of the public record as well. (Reading this book's endnotes, one has to surmise that Chambers has overstuffed file cabinets, brimming with folders of original newspaper clippings, flyers announcing art shows, exhibition pamphlets and brochures that you'd be lucky to find in any archive, large or small.)

In title, *Things Done Change* nods to a popular musical touchstone: it references "Things Done Changed," a track by African American rapper Notorious B.I.G. (a.k.a Biggie Smalls) on his debut album *Ready to Die* (1994) that sold more than a million copies. Smalls's rap sits somewhere between a nostalgic lament and a jeremiad, and by name-checking it, Chambers tips us off about his mood on the subject at hand: the fortunes of black British artists who gained a degree of critical notice in the 1980s and those who, since the 1990s, are much better known and have attracted more widespread praise from mainstream commentators. In the former group are Sonia Boyce, Keith Piper, and the late Donald Rodney, and in the latter Chris Ofili, Steve McQueen, and Yinka Shonibare. Throughout *Things Done Change* Chambers contrasts "the issue based gravitas of the 1980s" (xxiv) that he locates in the work of Piper and Rodney, in particular, with the production of Ofili, McQueen, and Shonibare, which he reckons to be lesser and shallower. Chambers's admiration for Piper and Rodney is unmistakable and understandable: the three were prominent members of the BLK Art Group, founded in the 1980s, which mounted provocative group exhibitions in that decade. (Although Chambers selflessly does not promote his own artistic career in *Things Done Change*, his output was among the important aesthetic experiments in video, installation, and assemblage that communicated antiracist politics in the 1980s.) In the introduction of *Things Done Change*, Chambers raises a question that he is ready to answer: "How have certain black artists come to be reminiscent of yesteryear, while others – a blessed few – are perceived and rewarded for being wholly in step with the present and changing times?" (xxvii). That things have changed for some black artists, but "not necessarily for the better" (xlix), is Chambers's brief summation of the predicament he lays out in the five ensuing chapters.

There's much blame to go around. In chapter 1, Chambers asserts that histories of the 1980s "reflect a profound *not knowing*" about the period and the years that preceeded (3, italics in original). He seeks to address this failure with a mention of black British artists' participation in Festac '77 and consideration of London-based OBALA (the Organisation for Black Arts Advancement and Leisure (and later Learning) Activities), CFL (Creation for Liberation), and the Black-Art Gallery. For

Chambers, the OBALA and CFL were exemplary engaged artist communities that, like the Black-Art Gallery in London, offered platforms for black artists when there were few. Chambers writes that certain artist-organized surveys were especially important in introducing practitioners to audiences, among them Into the Open: New Paintings and Sculptures by Contemporary Black Artists (Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, 1984), The Thin Black Line (Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1985–86), and The Image Employed: The Use of Narrative in Black Art (Cornerhouse, Manchester, 1987). But exposure was a double-edged sword, for "mainstream galleries embarked upon a piecemeal programme of 'separate' exhibitions, initially for Black artists in general, but then narrowing selection to artists deemed better than the rest" (11). Furthermore, From Two Worlds of 1986, which Chambers cites as the first time the Whitechapel Art Gallery dedicated significant attention and space to black British artists' works, might have productively situated "the work of Black-British artists in relation to notions of postmodernism . . . that demanded new ways of looking at artistic practice and identity" (45). Instead, Chambers judges it "an exercise in marginalization" (25) in which the artists selected "embodied a sort of cultural hybridity" (35).

In chapters 2 and 3, Chambers focusses on the tokenization of British artists of color and celebration of diversity as cynical, government strategies of Conservative and Labor Party-led governments in the 1990s. Nominated for prestigious awards for service to the cultural well-being of the United Kingdom, artists, writers, entertainers, and politicians who accepted the honor were coopted and compromised, according to Chambers. If blackness was once "a signifier of an oppositional state of being" (87), the newly conferred Members, Officers, and Commanders of the British Empire who were of African, Asian, Caribbean descent embraced the validation of the state, and in turn validated the state. In chapter 3, titled "Chris, Steve, Yinka: We Run Tings," Chambers writes of their indisputable celebrity and of what he considers their shortcomings: they did not acknowledge the impact of an older generation of black British artists on the discourse of multiculturalism, nor did they challenge the critical body's expressed weariness with identity politics, which their admirers happily found absent from their projects. Although Chambers singles out individual pieces produced in the 1990s by these three as accomplishments, he's generally dismissive of what others hailed: Shonibare's work with faux-African fabric was "fixed in its parameters" (121), Ofili's elephant dung medium was "gimmicky" (137), and McQueen's career was "launched on the back of barely a half-hour's worth of 16 mm film and video" (153).

Chambers is as hard on British cultural institutions as he is on Ofili, McQueen, and Shonibare in the book's fourth chapter, "Coming in from the Cold." Citing the Tate's acquisition of work by Frank Bowling and Sonia Boyce in the 1980s, he also describes the Tate's "reluctance to discuss the ways in which issues of race affected its programming" (187) and condemns its diversity strategy of the 1990s as "retrospectivity" (202). And, while acknowledging the inclusion of the Black Audio Film Collective, Mona Hatoum, Vong Phaophanit, Veronica Ryan, Lesley Sanderson, Shaffique Udin, and Boyce in the British Art Show 3 (1990), Chambers takes note of how these exhibitors were perceived by observers. In an era when "black" was a political term embraced by progressives of African, Asian, and Caribbean heritage in antiracist UK circles, some critics sidestepped its instrumentality and instead saw nonwhite artists as exiles and permanent outsiders. Also included in the "racial pathologies of the art world" (227) are the phenomenon of exoticizing ethnic art

exhibitions, the emergence of "new internationalism" as a discursive and distracting rubric, and the ossifying historicization of black artists and their 1980s-era interventions. Under such circumstances, it is no wonder that "everything crash," a phrase borrowed from an old reggae song and put into service as the title of the fifth and final chapter of *Things Done Change*. Looking back at the shrinking government support for the arts and the narrowed field of artists who featured in exhibitions of the 1990s, Chambers sees that there was neither constancy nor commitment to contending with the previous decades' hard questions about the nature of British identity, the status of racial identifications in the country, its histories of political injustice and their legacies, and art industry stakeholders' hedged bets. "State funding," in particular, Chambers declares, "by its nature often consigns what it touches to failure, disappointment, or a disempowering and moribund existence" (257). For this reason, Chambers concludes that black British artists did best in the past, when, he argues, they were on their own, working independently to curate and raise funds for shows and actions that they organized themselves.

One might dispute the historicity of Chambers's claim of absolute autonomy – for anyone, really, anywhere, and at any time. Yet one of the contributions of *Things Done Change* is that it offers a context for "managed multiculturalism" in the UK, which, unfortunately, is a current dynamic in evidence elsewhere, namely in Australia, Canada, and the United States. At the same time, things have changed in all these locations, especially in Britain. Truth is, Sonia Boyce, Sunil Gupta, Roshini Kempadoo, Lubaina Himid, Keith Piper, Ingrid Pollard, and others who first rose to prominence in the 1980s were "followed" not only by McQueen, Ofili, and Shonibare, but also by the Young British Artists, many of whom grabbed the baton of identity politics (though it was not identified as such) and ran with it. All of these artists are still working and producing smart work that is sometimes drawn into intersecting, international art markets. And, of course, Steve McQueen's just-bestowed Academy Award for his direction of *12 Years a Slave* "means" something; just "what" is being debated on both sides of the Atlantic. Somehow, we must balance all of these facts with the previously unimaginable, such as the Tate Modern's exhibitions in 2013 of work by sculptor Saloua Raouda Choucair (born 1913 in Lebanon), painter Ibrahim El-Salahi (born 1930 in Sudan), and mixed-media artist Ellen Gallagher (born 1965 in the US). While only El-Salahi lives in the UK, he, as well as Choucair and Gallagher, are represented in the Tate's permanent collection. Change has come. We all know that much; much more is absolutely necessary, and we'd better make it happen sooner rather than later.

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