

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Dark Light

By Chris Hunt and Mavernie Cunningham



Project Details

Name of Researchers:	Chris Hunt and Mavernie Cunningham
Name of Output:	<i>Dark Light</i>
UCARO link:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/5165/
Output Type:	Q – Digital or Visual media; artists’ film exhibited with accompanying performance, and screened in festivals
Year and mode of dissemination:	2018, film installation and spoken word performance, Whitstable Biennale Satellite 2018, film installation and spoken word performance, Free Range platform, Canterbury 2019, film screening, 51zero Festival
Key Words:	Hölderlin, Enlightenment, race, identity

Synopsis

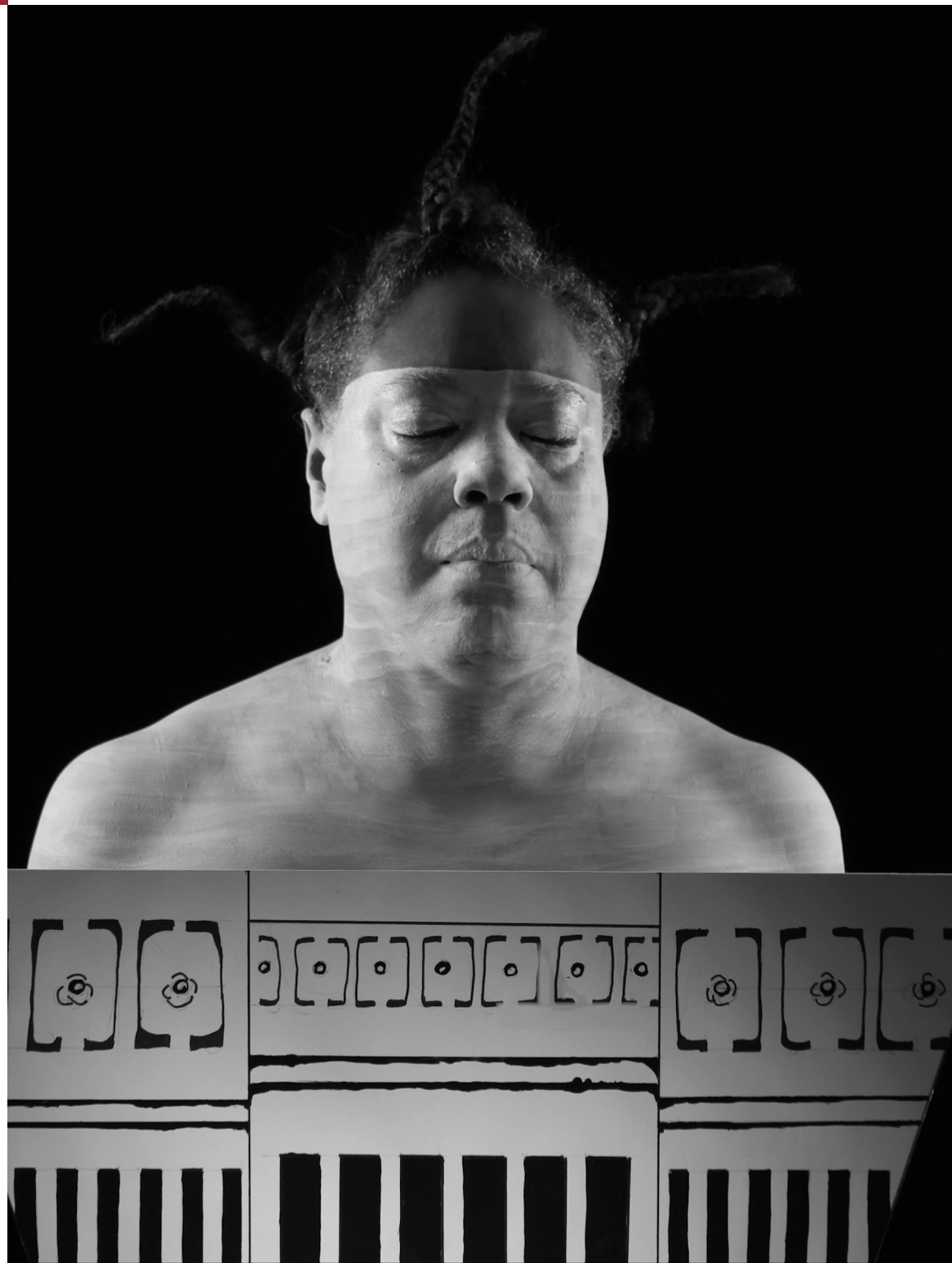
Dark Light is a film, installation and spoken word performance which explores themes of departure, migration, race, slavery and nostalgia. It was shown and performed at Whitstable Biennale Satellite (2018) and the Free-Range platform, Canterbury (2018), with the film screened at the 51zero festival (2019).

Dark Light was developed as a response to Cunningham's narrative prints and the poem 'Remembrance' by Friedrich Hölderlin. Although widely discussed by Heidegger and others, Hölderlin's poem has received little attention regarding the relationship of its imagery to the historical fact of slavery. *Dark Light* is the result of a research process in which Hunt and Cunningham explored the relationship between the accomplished beauty of historical cultural achievements (Hölderlin's poem) and the uncomfortable fact that such achievements were created within a culture that also

encompassed slavery, whilst also referencing elements from Cunningham's prints. It juxtaposes the myths and narratives that support contemporary black female identity with Hölderlin's world that accommodates both romantic poetry and slavery.

Hunt and Cunningham, as joint researchers, share an analytical process that is indivisibly collaborative through dialogue and creative practice. Although each brought a different starting point to *Dark Light*, in the process of developing the work both shared equally in the development of each aspect of the research. In the final outcome, Cunningham took the role of performer. Supporting contextual information presented here provides further explanation of research methods, processes and insights, details of the performed aspects of the research, and a range of visual material. The film *Dark Light* should be viewed alongside the portfolio.

*Still from Dark Light,
film, 14 minutes, 2018*







Context

Dark Light is one of a series of collaborative works produced by Hunt and Cunningham since 2016. Individually, their creative practice is centred on film (Hunt) and printmaking (Cunningham) while together they have developed works that comprise films screened alongside live performance. Working from distinct starting points, the artists explore related and intersecting shared themes in a collaborative process that draws on the creative practice of both.

Hunt first became aware of Hölderlin's poem 'Remembrance' in research on Heidegger for an essay he wrote for the book *Fifty Key Texts in Art History* (Newall and Pooke (eds), Routledge, 2012). *Dark Light* takes its title from Hölderlin's poem and alludes to lines which express the nostalgic imagery of Bordeaux, where 'riches begin in the sea' and the poet turns his gaze to 'the Indies'. Bordeaux was a major slave port up to and during Hölderlin's time there, a fact that is not acknowledged in the poem (or in Heidegger's analysis of it) but exists in its shadow. Hunt became increasingly interested in surfacing and exploring this dark shadow within high culture, where beauty intersects with atrocity. For both Hunt and Cunningham the work responded to the Venice Biennale Diaspora Pavilion (2017) and works from artists including Isaac Julien and Khadija Saye which focussed in varying

ways on a sense of crossing, transiting, and the resonance of history in contemporary politics.

For Cunningham, *Dark Light* also engages with a sense of personal history, drawing on unsettling nostalgia in her memories of childhood stories from Jamaica and her family's migrations. It incorporates comments on racism by Kobena Mercer and Ingrid Bank, alongside references that include the fate of the Maroons (escaped slaves in seventeenth-century Jamaica) and a cautionary tale taught to children in Jamaica in the 1930s. The teddy bear strapped to Cunningham's back in the film refracts a sense of enforced travel, the hurried taking up of the burden of childhood memory and history in a move from past to present and place to place. The oscillation of her character's face—from black to white and back again to black—evokes Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, a text which Cunningham wrote about in *Fifty Key Texts in Art History*, the same volume that contains Hunt's essay on Heidegger.

Key texts:

Dieter Heinrich (1997) *The Course of Remembrance and other essays on Hölderlin*

Frantz Fanon (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks*

Research Questions and Aims

Research question:

How do the cultural politics around black identity relate to the imagery of Hölderlin's poem, and what can each reveal about the other?

Research aims:

To draw attention to the relationships between an historical culture which was built on the back of slaves and the cultural politics around black (female) identity.

To explore this relationship in both the past and the present, and in the relationship between the two.

Research Methods and Process

Hunt and Cunningham identified and collated resources relevant to the research question—thematically, historically or otherwise. These took various forms, including literature, historical material, personal accounts, and recordings and stories from people of the Windrush generation. The work’s literary and narrative starting points (Hölderlin’s poem, Hunt and Cunningham’s own writings and imagery, Cunningham’s memories of her grandmother’s stories about a jinn, and a recording of her father telling the Jamaican cautionary tale) were developed through a creative process that also foregrounded material engagements with hair, ceramic objects and schematic models of the SS Empire Windrush.

Hunt and Cunningham worked collaboratively to juxtapose and combine elements to find what they revealed in each other and how they related to the research question. This led to experiments with film, photography, sound and in 3D, and material generated from this process culminated in a studio-based film shoot. Two ceramic sculptures of the SS Empire Windrush on fire were shown in conjunction with the film/ performance in its first iteration at the Whitstable Biennale in

2018. Both here and in its performance at Free Range, the *Dark Light* film was screened while Cunningham provided a spoken word performance of the female part in the film.

The collaborative creative processes involved extended editing, re-writing and reflection. Working with film and sound, the process was guided by the question of whether the work created juxtapositions that reveal new insight into the research question. Aesthetic considerations were at the forefront of the process. Disparate visual, material, aural, and verbal components create effects that can generate different readings and meanings when small changes are made. Hunt and Cunningham’s research process was conscious of these possibilities and aimed to be sensitive to an ‘open’ reading of its complex subject.

Key Texts:

Mercer, K. (2005) ‘Iconography of Identity’ In: Bailey, D.A. *et al* (eds) *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press)

Research Insights and Contribution

Research insights:

Bordeaux was a major slave port at the time Hölderlin's poem was written, and *Dark Light* articulates how historical culture (in this case the Enlightenment) can conceal unspoken histories within its fabric or the cultural artefacts it produces (Hölderlin's poem 'Remembrance').

Unlike a written account, the findings of creative research remain immanent in the work itself. They are elusive and allusive, allowing the subject to reveal itself, and leaving space for the viewer's responses.

Dissemination:

Whitstable Biennale Satellite, 2018: screening of film with live performance. Whitstable Biennale of Film and Performance is considered a significant platform for the exhibiting of diverse, leading film, performance and sound-based work, showing work from national and international upcoming and established artists. The Satellite programme is an important aspect of the Biennale, augmenting the main programme and providing an outlet for further workshops, performances and a diverse range of visual, performative and aural practices.

Free Range, 2018: screening of film with live performance. Free Range is a charity based in Canterbury that presents an award-winning series of experimental music, film and poetry events.

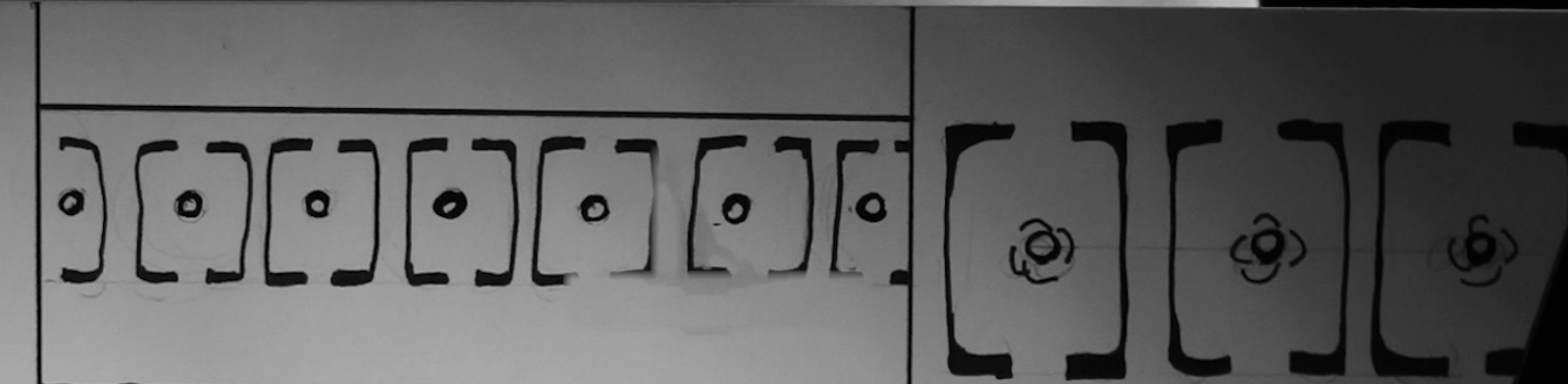
51zero Festival, 2019: screening of film. 51zero is a biennial festival in Kent showing international moving image and contemporary art. It presents artists, musicians and filmmakers whose production is located between contemporary art and cinema.

Follow-on activities:

Hunt and Cunningham have created a further related film/performance work, developed for the Whitstable Biennale 2020 (postponed until 2021 due to Covid-19).









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