

Stephen Friedman Gallery

University of the Arts London
Counter Acts: in Conversation
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As the Lethaby Gallery exhibition exploring the connections between UAL and the Turner Prize continues, we talk to Osei Bonsu, the show's curator and BA Culture, Criticism and Curation alum.

How did you come to the project?

I first heard about the idea for this exhibition from Aisha Richards, founder of Shades of Noir. The challenge was to curate a show in response to UAL's history with the Turner Prize. My proposal was related to cultural studies in the 1980s, how British artists – especially those that had gone through arts education during a time of political revolution – thought about ideas of class, race and politics.

I think there was a relentless search for a cultural identity, not simply for those groups that were marginalised, but for every artist making work in Britain during a period of social transformation. I wanted to think about those conditions in relation to the Turner Prize and the institutionalisation of British art.



Image: Osei Bonsu, curator of Counter Acts, Lethaby Gallery (Photo: Matthew Reeves, In-Press Photography)

In the 1980s, there was academic interest in having confrontational conversations about identity, which I felt had dropped off the intellectual agenda by the time I came to university. Through post-structural critique and cultural studies came an idea that art could confront the fundamental questions of who we are.

Where do you begin with that history?

I like to have an open approach towards curating. It's a challenge with Counter Acts as we're dealing with layers of history that go beyond each artist's experience or version of events. History and memory are almost always irreconcilable narratives.

The more I researched, the less there was a sense of an official narrative.

Students and artists had different ideas of what University of the Arts London represented at different points in history, some had adverse relationship to the institution since graduating and felt strongly against its current formation.

There was a combination of processes for this exhibition. I went to the degree shows to look at work coming out of the individual Colleges, we also contacted art faculty to nominate students. Later on, we did our own research in the archives.