



JOHN
AKOMFRAH
FUTURE HISTORY

Large Print Gallery Text

Please Return at Exit

Introduction

John Akomfrah: Future History

This booklet of large print text is provided for visitors with low vision during their time in SAM's special exhibition, [John Akomfrah: Future History](#).

This document includes brief summaries for all three films, and the text presented in the first gallery of the exhibition.

Text for each of the films can be found on the exhibition's website under "Extras." Each film has its own large print PDF, which includes an introduction to the film, a transcript of the film, and the film's footnotes.

Thank you for visiting SAM. We're glad you're here.

John Akomfrah: Future History

You are invited to step back in time with a creative guide. John Akomfrah (British, b. 1957) considers the lapses in our collective memory and focuses our attention on pivotal moments in history. The three video essays presented in this exhibition encourage new perspectives on crucial turning points during the last 500 years.

Overall, a compelling question arises: what can we take from the past that can create our future?

Support for this exhibition was made possible by

Contributors to the SAM Fund

Theater 1

Vertigo Sea, 2015

Three-channel video installation, 48 minutes

Vertigo Sea visits oceans full of vibrant aquatic life, while humans migrate and tragedies unfold from the 18th century to the present.

Theater 2

The Last Angel of History, 1995

Single-channel video, 45 minutes

The Last Angel of History brings you to America and England in the 1990s to hear from Afrofuturist visionaries who open doors to new futures.

Theater 3

Tropikos, 2016

Single-channel video, 36 minutes

Tropikos takes you to the 16th century, when Africans arrive in Elizabethan England at the dawn of the transatlantic slave trade—an ominous air of their unknown relationships permeates the video.

How to Experience This Exhibition

The entrances to the videos are designated by signposts. You are welcome to watch these videos in whatever sequence you choose. Videos will be playing continuously, and they do not rely strictly on set narratives, so you can enter at any time. Two videos are enclosed in theater settings, and we ask you to enter and exit as quietly as possible and to keep your phones on silent mode. Footnotes about Akomfrah's rich collage of imagery are provided to help prompt your own notions of future history.

Footnotes

Footnotes are provided to help you recognize some, but not all, of the many references cited in these videos. Collect or photograph these pages to create your personal exploration of John Akomfrah: Future History.

Intro Gallery Labels

John Akomfrah: Why History Matters, 2017

Digital video (color, sound with dialogue),

7:34 minutes

Loan courtesy of Tate, Tate Digital, 2019

John Akomfrah talks about his practice as a filmmaker, how he navigates working in museum galleries with cinema productions, how much he was influenced by seeing Andrei Tarkovsky's films, and what compelled him to make his 2015 work, Vertigo Sea.

Figure with Raised Arms, ca. 15th century

Wood

African, Mali, Dogon people, Tintam style

Loan from the collection of an anonymous charitable foundation

Over 500 years ago, this woman held her hands up to the sky to announce a quest to connect with higher powers. She may be imploring Nommo for assistance. Nommo is the Dogon people's Master of Water, who they see manifested in every body of water on earth. In current rituals, a figure with this posture is placed on an altar with ancient stone axes sent down to earth by Nommo. Officials set thick smoky fires whose darkness is felt to help bring rain clouds closer to earth. Such prayers are thought to continue what was established long ago in the Dogon region, where it is dry enough to preserve wood for hundreds of years and to inspire sculptures that assist human pleas for rain.

Transcript for John Akomfrah: Why History Matters Video Interview

00:09

JOHN AKOMFRAH: One of the questions people ask me all the time—and I think it is an important one—is, What advice would you give? And when I look at what we've done, the only thing I can say to them—well, I can say two things to them—one is, “Don't wait,” and the second is, “There are no mistakes.”

00:34

AKOMFRAH: I always wanted to make films.

00:37 **JOHN AKOMFRAH**

AKOMFRAH: I didn't always want to be a film maker, that's a slightly different thing, but I always did want to make films. And I always did, to be honest.

00:46

AKOMFRAH: Right, so this is where I work, this is my... this is pretty much where I am most of the time and the desk has just the usual, sort of, mess that it would

have when I'm working, so there's books, CDs, some Maria Callas . . . to some old biddy I've never heard of. This is my library...of archives. Essentially, it is a collection of images going back a century.

01:17 **The Border of Cinema**

AKOMFRAH: The figure that really caught my attention was Russian, a guy called Andrei Tarkovsky . . . and the film that really did it for me was Mirror.

01:37

[Clip from Mirror, 1975, Andrei Tarkovsky; female voice speaking in Russian].

01:40

AKOMFRAH: It's the one that feels like the "border of cinema." Like, when you start off, you're trying to understand what the limits of something are. . . And when I saw Tarkovsky, I thought, This is it, this is the Mexico. [laughs] I've found it. You know what I mean? Like, if you could go this far, you'll still be okay, and it still functions a little bit like that for me. It's, kind of, the limit of cinema.

02:20 **Gallery, Cinema or TV**

AKOMFRAH: I do installations most of the time in the gallery world . . . feature length films in the cinema world, and documentaries in TV.

The ideal way of working, for me, if you want to occupy these multiple zones is to be aware that each of the zones has its own demands: ethical, political, cultural, aesthetic, blah, blah...

So at the inception of an idea or a way of doing something, what matters is to be clear about the pathway.

03:03

[Clip from The March, 2013, John Akomfrah]

AKOMFRAH: It's learning to really listen to yourself, think aloud and then having the, not so much the experience, just the courage to name what those germinations are.

03:19 **The Philosophy of Montage**

AKOMFRAH: "Is the philosophy—which is really what it is—a montage? The commitment to bricolage, the

commitment to having discreet elements—fragments come together. . . Is that something that you want to apply to this?” And generally, I say, “Yes.”

03:47

[Clip from The Nine Muses, 2010, John Akomfrah]

AKOMFRAH: Everyone who helped popularize the philosophy, or montage, was interested in one thing . . . deferred meaning.

That somehow when things collide, two opposites collide in this dialectical way, some sort of synthesis is engineered—or brought about.

And in that, a new form, a new meaning, or a new way, emerges which you can chase, ad infinitum. And that's the philosophy, it's a dialectical philosophy, and I'm absolutely committed to that.

04:26 **Archive and Documentary**

AKOMFRAH: The thing that, in a way I've spoken a lot about, is how much the archive is this, sort of, memory bank . . . which connects it to questions of Mortality.

04:42

[Clip from The Stuart Hall Project, 2013, John Akomfrah]

AKOMFRAH: Usually, most often, you can't watch stuff without realizing that it's also watching people who have gone.

That recognition is, on its own, not very much unless it's married with a second recognition which is, that. . .the image is one of the ways in which immortality is enshrined in our psyche and in our lives.

And documentaries do that, you make a documentary because you want to both capture something that's going to "die" unless it's captured.

But you're also trying to capture something because you want it to live.

05:35 **Why History Matters**

AKOMFRAH: The question of why history matters is connected to why the non-fictive or non-fictions matter . . .because you could tell—and I'm using the two

phrases here in metaphoric terms, you know—you could tell when the surplus of fiction has got [laughs] into the mix, you know.

05:49

[Video stills from Vertigo Sea, 2015, John Akomfrah]

So one of the reasons why I was compelled, in a way, to make Vertigo Sea is because you're sitting there listening to someone referring to "migrants" as "cockroaches" and you think, Okay what's going on here? [laughs] How do people migrate from being human beings to cockroaches? What do you have to forget?

06:32

[Clip from The Nine Muses, 2010, John Akomfrah]

AKOMFRAH: What's the process of amnesia that allows the kinds of forgetting that builds into hierarchies, in which there are beings and non-beings? So those things, the aversion to fiction is what keeps me interested in the non-fictive. It's what keeps me interested in questions of the historical. . .

06:57

[Clip from The Nine Muses, 2010, John Akomfrah]

AKOMFRAH: . . .because they act as a, kind of, powerful counter-ballast. It means a, sort of, turbulence of amnesia. And amnesia is a constant sea. We swim in it all the time [laughs], you know. So one does need the ballast of memory and historical just to counter balance.

07:22

All John Akomfrah works © John Akomfrah /

Smoking Dogs Films

Andrei Tarkovsky, *Mirror* 1975 © The Estate of Andrei

Tarkovsky, courtesy of Films Sans Frontières