



barbican

Purple

John

Akomfrah

Creative Learning Teacher Resource

GUILDHALL
SCHOOL

Introduction

Barbican Art Gallery has invited British artist, filmmaker and writer John Akomfrah to create an immersive six-channel video installation in the Curve. Following on from the acclaimed *Vertigo Sea* (2015), *Purple* forms the second chapter in a planned quartet of films addressing the aesthetics and politics of matter. Composed across six screens with an immersive soundscape, the film charts the incremental shifts in climate change across the planet and its effect on human communities, biodiversity and the wilderness.

At a time when according to the UN, greenhouse gas emissions from human activities are at their highest levels in history, with people experiencing the significant impacts of climate change, including shifting weather patterns, rising sea level, and more extreme weather events, Akomfrah's *Purple* brings a multitude of ideas into conversation. These include animal extinctions, the memory of ice, the plastic ocean and global warming. Akomfrah has combined hundreds of hours of archival footage with newly shot scenes and a hypnotic sound score to produce the video installation.

About John Akomfrah

John Akomfrah is a British artist, filmmaker and writer. He was one of the founders of the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), a group of artists and filmmakers active between 1982 and 1998, dedicated to examining issues of Black British identity through film and media. Akomfrah made his debut as a director with *Handsworth Songs*, which won the Grierson Award for Best Documentary in 1987. In 1998 he co-founded Smoking Dogs Films with Lina Gopaul and David Lawson (previous members of BAFC), and has since pursued an individual and distinguished film practice.

From 2001-2007 he was a Governor of the British Film Institute, and from 2004-2013 a Governor of Film London. John has received honorary doctorates from Goldsmiths, University of London; the University of the Arts, London; and Portsmouth University, from which he had originally graduated in 1982. He is currently a Tate Trustee 2015-2020.

Before you visit

Purple is an immersive six-channel video installation that includes scenes which some viewers may find upsetting. Children should be closely supervised at all times and under 12s must be accompanied by an adult.

It is most appropriate for pupils studying at Key Stage 4 or higher. A pre-visit is recommended for teachers intending to bring students to the exhibition.

Your visit

John Akomfrah: *Purple*, The Curve, Barbican
6 Oct 2017–7 Jan 2018
Sat–Wed 11am–8pm
Thu–Fri 11am–9pm
Closed 24 – 26 December 2017

Free: Booking not required. Curator introductions may be available to school groups, please email creative.learning@barbican.org.uk with your planned visit date to check availability.

Key questions

Review news, television and film coverage of climate change to observe how it has been documented. Beyond the use of text, has the media established a visual language for communicating climate change? What images come to mind when you think about climate change?

Purple is a six-channel video installation charting incremental shifts in climate change across the planet and its effects on human communities, biodiversity and the wilderness. Mounting concern over the environment and climate change has provided plenty of fodder for filmmakers and documenters in recent years, what does *Purple* add to this ongoing dialogue?

Purple points the lens firmly towards us, the human race. What role can an artist or documentarian play in a crisis of this proportion? How have artists documented climate change in the past? What role can individuals or communities play to address the issues documented in *Purple*?

Curriculum links

Geography/Humanities

Purple is staged across a variety of disappearing ecological landscapes, from the hinterlands of Alaska to desolate, icy Arctic Greenland and the volcanic Marquesas Islands in the South Pacific. How does each location, mixed with archival footage, draw attention to the complex relationship between humans and the planet?

The film documents the relationship between humans and landscapes, using archival footage and various geographical landscapes. How could a documentary approach be useful to a geographer? What does it communicate that is different to your current understanding of climate change?

Politics

Can *Purple* be looked at as a political statement? Is it possible to comprehend and interpret this work as political information? Use *Purple* as a starting point to research current environmental issues. Can artistic and/or fictional works contribute to political dialogue?

Photography/Art

Research John Akomfrah further as an artist, how does his work create a visual language for understanding complex issues? What other artists create work which makes a statement on political, global or environmental issues? How has the staging of this work in the Barbican's Curve Gallery impacted the affect it has on the viewer and change the way you read and interpret the work?

English Literature

Five minutes into *Purple* the words 'O earth, what changes hast thou seen!' which has been taken from Alfred Lord Tennyson's epic poem *In Memoriam* (1849)¹, is displayed across three purple-coloured screens. Why has Akomfrah chosen this quote and what impact does it have on how you view and interpret the piece? How do these words capture the tone and address of this melancholic work? How can we use literature as a starting point to create work that addresses global issues that at times are difficult to comprehend on an individual scale?

Music

Akomfrah and his long-time collaborator composer Trevor Mathison are renowned for their masterful dissonant sound design that marries ambient sound, poetry, literary recordings, and soundtracks from archival news. How is this soundscape used to reflect and highlight the themes and issues explored in *Purple*?

The innocuous sounds of a babbling brook soon register as sinister sounds of relentless melting of polar ice-caps; a faint rain builds to a crescendo of merciless beating of a torrential storm. What impact does this have? How do the sounds make you feel and think about the landscapes you see and the global and environmental issues that are being documented?

Citizenship / Social Responsibility

Purple serves as a starting point for discussing human impact on earth and our relationship with the planet. What can we do in our everyday lives to positively impact this crisis?

Additional resources

<http://www.lissongallery.com/artists/john-akomfrah>

<http://www.smokingdogfilms.com/>

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0015497/>

Further links

<https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2017/event/john-akomfrah-purple>

<https://climate.nasa.gov>

<https://climate.nasa.gov/resources/education/>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/climate-change/>

<https://www.wwf.org.uk/what-we-do/area-of-work/climate-change-and-energy>

Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning

This Teachers Resource was prepared by Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning, which supports people of all ages and backgrounds to access and participate in world-class visual arts, music, theatre, dance, film and spoken word. We regularly work with schools and colleges to create unforgettable learning experiences that help to embed arts and creativity across the national curriculum.

For more information please contact: creative.learning@barbican.org.uk



The City of London Corporation is the founder and principal funder of the Barbican Centre

¹ See Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam* AHH (1849), WW Norton & Company, New York, NY, 200

Image over: John Akomfrah, still from *Purple*, 2017. Six-screen film installation. © John Akomfrah and Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy of Lisson Gallery