

Autograph Photographers

Autograph Photographers is the name of the commercial photographic picture library and agency that has been set up by *Autograph: The Association of Black Photographers*. Sunil Gupta, photographer and Autograph member, describes its setting up and development.

The library was set up to hold colour and black and white material produced by members, and the agency to represent members' interests, also providing a framework for developing a series of stories for syndication to publications around the world. The Association has a lengthy informal history stretching back to the 1970s. However, its immediate origins lie with the demise of the metropolitan authorities and the prioritising of Black Arts in their arts and recreation agenda.

Photography played a small role and an exhibition emerged entitled *Reflections of the Black Experience*, organised by Monika Baker, which brought together a group of interested individuals, which in turn developed into a series of meetings at London New Technology Network (LNTN), Camden Town. Eventually the Arts Council emerged with its 4% funding initiative plan for Black, by then defined as specifically South Asian and Afro-Caribbean, Arts: therein lay again a small amount of budget for photography and the remains of the LNTN group set up a voluntary committee to approach the arts funding bodies which resulted in project money being released by the Arts Council for first a small research study and then a launch at The Photographers' Gallery in London in July 1988.

The aims of the Association were and still are to promote the work of Black (as in non-European) photographers in the UK primarily and to create a building based National Centre for Black British photography. What has been clarified during the first year of operation is that membership is clearly open to anyone who supports our aims, including institutions, although we can, by definition, only promote work originated by Black photographers.

In the course of the first funded year, 1988-1989, Autograph was able to secure revenue funding from Greater London Arts and project funding from the Arts Council towards developing a touring shows programme and to enable research into the areas outside London. The Newsletter was initially produced, and grew into a monthly organ that keeps members and other interested parties



Notting Hill Carnival 1987. Roshini Kempadoo, Autograph Photographers

informed of our and other relevant activities. As the confirmation of revenue status came rather late in the financial year Autograph was able to employ its first full-time administrator only in February 1989. Over the course of this first year a formal departmentalisation occurred so that the Association was seen to incorporate a core administration, an education programme, an exhibitions programme, an agency and a publications division. These departments have their own individual growth rates and depend upon the success of separate grant applications. The GLA revenue funding means that the core is reasonably financially secure and now has a new administrator.

The exhibitions programme has resulted in two community-oriented laminated shows so far; 'Fields of View' and 'North South'. The former arose out of a commission from the London Borough of Lambeth to do a community project in the summer of 1988 and the latter out of a commission from the Council of Europe in 1988. Two major exhibitions are in the pipeline. 'Autoportraits' will be opening in March 1990 at Camera work in London and is envisaged to tour. It is a critical look at the genre of self-portraiture by eight selected photographers and visual artists to reflect our particular mix of interests; four men and four women, and four South Asian and four Afro-Caribbeans. A second major exhibition received research funding and is to be

developed over the coming year. 'Mis(sed) Re-presentations' is being curated by David A Bailey to look at the invisibility of Sickle Cell Anaemia in Britain and the USA.

The education programme derives from providing access to the medium to our members who are largely non-professionals and many of whom have not had the opportunity to obtain formal education in art and design training. It also involves making interventions in the formal education sector, by providing speakers and course leaders. A conference, entitled *Picture This*, bringing together teachers and Black photographers is planned for later this year. A series of talks and workshops have taken place at our base in Brixton, and a wider range are planned, including talks on history, theory and practice. A particular need that has been voiced is to offer some guidance in conducting one's business affairs as a freelance individual. This request has come from those members involved with the agency.

The agency has been set up with an initial capital grant from GLA allowing us to expand into a second office space but funding restricts us from actually hiring anybody full-time to manage it. Therefore three members of the management committee; Roshini Kempadoo, Monika Baker and myself, have been involved in the day-to-day running of the office. We have been setting up the stock library and encouraging members to come forward with their material in an organised fashion. Getting images from people is perennially a difficult task which is further hampered by our sector which is under-resourced to begin with. Our funders were not convinced that we need to provide resources such as darkroom facilities or underwrite printing paper so that photographers can produce the prints that we can make available to the market.

The market we have clearly defined as largely editorial for the media including books, magazines and newspapers. We will not launch into a big marketing campaign until we have substantial numbers of images to offer. However we are using word of mouth and requests do come in, including an average of one photographic job a week. When one-off commissions are offered we pass these on to the membership. The agency takes a 50% cut of the library sales and charges a minimum service fee for handling picture requests. The agency has different criteria for pictures – saleability, than the rest of Autograph. We have produced guidelines that members can get before they submit material. Any non-European member of Autograph is welcome to submit material provided she/he has signed a contributor's contract and is prepared to follow our procedures. The agency is also a member of BAPLA (British Association of Picture Libraries & Agencies) and is advised by Martin Slavin who was instrumental in setting up the agency Network Photographers.

We welcome enquiries about the agency or Autograph. Any individual or institution who has an interest in work done by Black photographers is welcome to become a member. General queries should be directed to Michael Cadette on 01 274 4000 ext 225, and agency enquiries should be made directly on 01 737 5865. Copies of our First Annual Report are available from Michael as well copies of the current Newsletter.