

British Art Studies

September 2019

London, Asia, Exhibitions, Histories

**Edited by Hammad Nasar and Sarah
Victoria Turner**



British Art Studies

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Cover image: Rubber shavings made during Bettina Fung's performance of "Towards All or Nothing (In Memory of Li Yuan-chia)" at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019.. Digital image courtesy of Bettina Fung.

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London Comma Asia

This *London, Asia, Exhibitions, Histories* special issue of *British Art Studies* is the first publication to emerge from the *London, Asia* research project. The project, which is funded and hosted by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (PMC), is co-lead by Hammad Nasar, Senior Research Fellow and Sarah Victoria Turner, Deputy Director for Research at the Centre. Established in collaboration with Hong Kong's Asia Art Archive (AAA), it explores the ways in which modern and contemporary art history in Asia intersects with, and challenges, existing histories of British art. This introduction explores the main themes of this special issue, and reflects on the premise and themes of the broader *London, Asia* project as it has developed thus far through an ongoing series of collaborations and provocations staged primarily through events and exhibitions.

The project was prompted by a session titled "British Art Through its Exhibition Histories", which Sarah Victoria Turner convened with Martina Droth (Yale Center for British Art) and Mark Hallett (PMC) at the Association for Art History Conference held at the University of East Anglia in 2015. In that session, Nasar presented a paper that argued that Rasheed Araeen's exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* (1989) (Figs 1 and 2) was haunting British art history, and examined the exhibition *Migrations: Journeys into British Art* (Tate Britain, 2012) (Figs 3 and 4), as one such case.¹ The paper contended that while many of the works in *The Other Story* moved from the Hayward Gallery in the Southbank Centre to be absorbed into the national collection at Tate Britain in Milbank, the 23 years it took for the works to make this passage had made little discernible difference to the narratives of British art history. It posited that for diasporic artists like Li Yuan-chia and Araeen, new exhibitions in Taipei, Sharjah, and Karachi were overtaking the histories of art in Britain that are yet to be written (Figs 5 and 6).²



Figure 1.

The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain, Hayward Gallery, 1989-1990, gallery exterior. Digital image courtesy of Rasheed Araeen and Asia Art Archive.



Figure 2.

The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain, Hayward Gallery, 1989-1990, installation photograph. Digital image courtesy of Rasheed Araeen and Asia Art Archive.

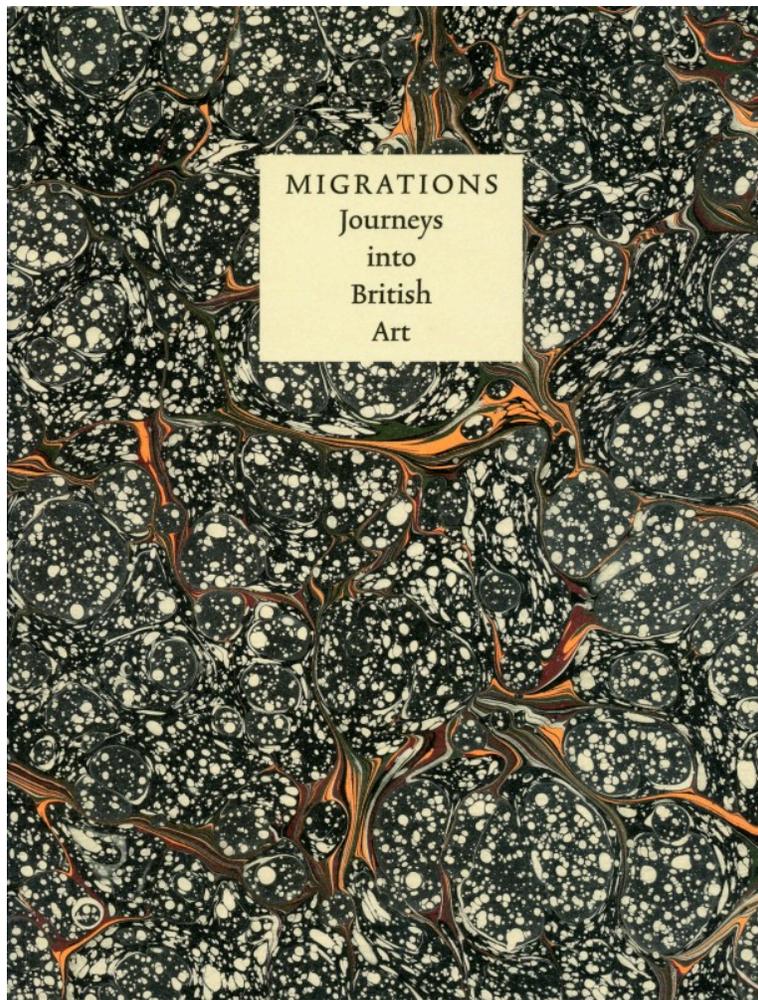


Figure 3.

Migrations: Journeys into British Art,, Tate Britain, 2012,
exhibition catalogue cover (London: Tate Publishing, 2012).
Digital image courtesy of Tate.



Figure 4.

Migrations: Journeys into British Art, Tate Britain, 2012, installation photograph. Digital image courtesy of Tate.



Figure 5.

View-Point: A Retrospective Exhibition of Li Yuan-chia, 2014, installation photograph. Digital image courtesy of Taipei Fine Arts Museum.



Figure 6.

Rasheed Araeen: *Before and After Minimalism*, 2014, SAF Art Spaces, Sharjah, UAE, installation photograph. Digital image courtesy of Universes in Universe and Haupt & Binder.

In a more recent paper, Nasar extended this argument of “art-historical haunting” to consider two subsequent exhibitions at the national repository of British art, Tate Britain.³ *Artist & Empire* (2015) relegated a collection of modern and contemporary work by artists from former colonies to two end rooms. *Conceptual Art in Britain 1964–1979* (2016) repeated a formulation of conceptual art advanced in another Hayward exhibition—*The New Art* (1972)—and ignored artists like Araeen (who had arrived in London from Pakistan in 1964), David Medalla (who was born in the Philippines and co-founded London’s influential Signals Gallery in 1964), and Li Yuan-chia (who moved from Taiwan, via Italy, to London in 1965 before settling in Cumbria from 1968 until his death in 1994). All three expanded the very notion of what conceptual art in Britain could be—in very visible ways within the art world—and yet they remain outside art-historical narratives in Britain.

Exhibitions make art and artists visible, but they can also omit and ignore. Exhibitions have the power to challenge or rewrite history, but often repeat and reinforce existing accounts. Exhibitions always produce meaning through: the art works displayed on the floors and walls of the gallery; the texts that accompany them; and, the larger infrastructures of exhibition making. These include the networks of the curators, the institutional priorities that determine which exhibitions happen and where, the impact of budgetary constraints, the logistics of transport and installation, the issues of authorship and ownership, the question of audiences (both imagined, before an exhibition has opened, and real, once it has), and the criticism and

responses that circulate in response. The crucial details of organisation and infrastructure are often, and purposefully, rendered invisible to the exhibition visitor, considered extraneous and unnecessary by comparison to the aesthetic *raison d'être* of the exhibition. However, for art and cultural historians, exhibitions leak well beyond the walls of the galleries that host them. They tell us much about the politics and manoeuvrings of the art world, and *how* artists, and indeed their work, are made public at a particular moment. Of course, not all exhibitions are equal. Some are organised with the weight of internationally recognised institutions backing them, whilst others are more provisional—hastily assembled on a shoestring budget. We take “exhibition” to signal a range of possibilities for displaying art to the public and the contributions to this issue take us on a journey across a multitude of exhibition spaces, from the permanent to the more provisional, some familiar and others much more surprising.

“Exhibitions” are the focus of the first research strand of the *London, Asia* project. Through the site of the exhibition, we have established some guiding principles which shape this special issue, but also the project as a whole. These are:

- To experiment with approaches and methodologies for researching and writing about connections, encounters, and differences across and within nations, regions, and cultures;
- To “socialise” a field of enquiry, by which we mean convene events and gatherings (physical and virtual) to discuss and debate the new research possibilities of *London, Asia*;
- To create art histories which are not siloed into neat categories, but that can exceed boundaries; and
- To build a project that is not self-contained, but can “infect” other projects and researchers working across art produced by artists from Britain, Asia, and their diaspora.

Other research strands of the project will further shape and develop these principles. They will encompass institutions and art schools, again allowing us to exceed the borders of the nation state and the monographic focus which still grips much art-historical study.⁴ These three research strands—exhibitions, institutions, and art schools—are also necessarily porous, with what we envision as many productive overlaps and interchanges between them. Together, they form the meeting points of *London, Asia*, the nodes around which a more expanded and diverse narrative of British art can be mapped. This expansion and entanglement of narratives is also an area where this project can intercept the ongoing construction of art histories in Asia and in the diaspora. Our intent is not to

map the world—but to privilege testing approaches that engage with this terrain in a systematic but open-ended way that socialises and convenes a field of new research possibilities.

Our title—*London, Asia*—is purposefully provocative. The juxtaposition suggests displacement and invites a kind of dissonance, for example, by bringing a city into proximity with a continent. It is also a claim on London, a city that exceeds and complicates easy nationalist framings, and Asia, a region so vast and diverse that it resists any homogenising categorisation. We embrace this ambiguity, uneasiness of scale, and resistance to sharp definition. The project does not propose a comparative framework; instead, it encourages new perspectives on the entanglements, historic and contemporary, between London (and more broadly Britain) and Asia.⁵ These entanglements are, of course, historic and there has been much recent work on imperial artistic and cultural networks, especially those facilitated through trade and cultural exchange.⁶ Our focus, whilst being informed by the critically energising and interrogative work of historians of empire and imperial aesthetic cultures, takes a more expanded framing that is not restricted by the geographies of the British Empire. Our focus is also very much on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, examining how these shared terrains have been negotiated by modern and contemporary artists. Modernism, particularly as it has emerged, been shaped, and defined in newly independent, post-colonial countries, has often been a nationalist project, or at the very least, inflected by the impulses of nation-building.⁷ We have histories of Indian modernism, for example, and those of modern art in Britain, but very few (if any?) that track the emergence of modernism and modern art in these countries and regions as connected, embroiled, and interconnected—as necessarily shaped by what Edward Said described in *Culture and Imperialism* as “overlapping territories, intertwined histories”.⁸ Newly independent nations were eager to emphasise separation from former imperial powers in the West, but these histories, in their desire to emphasise equally new and independent aesthetic languages, often ignored a messier reality. There was no *tabula rasa*, no fresh start, but only lives and careers that were lived across geographies and which were very much shaped by past events, as well as a desire to create new futures. It is hardly controversial to state that national and regional boundaries are porous, criss-crossed by people and ideas, and yet we are still working out how to research and write in ways that can accommodate these complexities. In rejecting imperial binarism (a kind of “them” and “us” structure, to put it more crudely), we have taken our cue from thinkers such as Leela Gandhi, who writes of “affective communities” as a model to think across and through national and imperial structures.⁹ *London, Asia* asks broader methodological questions about the ways in which the art histories of Britain and Asia have been written, circulated, and negotiated. It also asks questions

of the PMC as an institution that serves the field of “British art”, and through that platform seeks to infect the wider field of study that the Centre serves. This challenge to units of geography (nation, region, continent) circumscribing historical research is an approach we share with AAA, our partner in the *London, Asia* project, and in sympathy with other recent efforts such as the multi-disciplinary journal *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, and its attempt to “cross-pollinate the categories of analysis” that constitute both “Asia” and “the world”. ¹⁰

Exhibitions Comma Histories

All of the contributions to this special issue embody a collective attempt to interrogate the exhibition as a site for researching the entanglements between London and Asia, and deploy the digital publication *British Art Studies* as a platform for collaboration that will catalyse further research.

The Conversation Piece in this issue, led by Saloni Mathur, positions “exhibition histories as a practice of knowledge” and invites eleven respondents to consider “what is the nature of this knowledge pursuit” from distinct positions. Caroline A. Jones argues, in her response to Mathur’s provocation, that the “Western procedure of exhibition was always about capital, whether cultural, political, or fiduciary”. ¹¹ Kenji Praepipatmongkol points out that, as we move away from strictly Eurocentric models, “nothing about exhibitionary form is self-evident” and scholars increasingly recognise the parallels between exhibitions and other modes of collective gathering and performance that “trouble the propriety of museum and gallery spaces.” What all respondents do is take the exhibition as a site to destabilise the relationship between art and its many histories.

The Cover Collaboration is occupied by the artistic-curatorial-research collective Asia Art Activism, and emerges out of a series of performance art works (“Being Present”) that responded to the exhibition, *Speech Acts: Reflection-Imagination-Repetition*, (Manchester Art Gallery, 2018-2019). ¹² Their interventions treated the site of the exhibition not simply as a subject of historical enquiry, but as a productive space for conducting and staging research, as well as for fuelling artistic practice. Artists Bettina Fung, Ada Xiaoyu Hao, and Nicholas Tee, working with curator Annie Jael Kwan, have taken their performances as points of departure to create new works for this special issue that extend their exploration of voice, visibility, and trace to the digital realm.

The articles and contributions included in *London, Asia, Exhibition, Histories* do not simply provide the endpoint or outcome of a research journey, but also make available raw material, such as digitised archival materials or previously unavailable data, which might underpin further or different

research projects. In publishing the material in this way, our goal is to test how the digital format of *British Art Studies* can encourage or provoke new methodologies for researching or publishing the histories of exhibitions, and more broadly for the model of entanglement that we propose.

Visibility is one of the main themes that runs throughout this special issue. Many of the exhibitions discussed by our authors have slipped out of the art-historical record. This often has to do with issues of scale and institutional support. Often held in smaller and less financially stable venues, the archival traces of the exhibitions discussed here can be difficult to find, or where available, are dispersed across different publications and archives, or live on only through personal memories of the event, as Alice Correia discusses in her article on “Researching Exhibitions of South Asian Women Artists in Britain in the 1980s”. The question of how historians revisit, reconstruct, or even just describe a historic exhibition recurs throughout the articles, and the authors propose a range of possible solutions. Brinda Kumar’s article “Exciting a Wider Interest in the Art of India: The 1931 Burlington Fine Arts Club Exhibition” uses the published, but unillustrated, catalogue of the 1931 exhibition to reimagine the narrative journey through India’s art history constructed by curators and the 333 works they selected. A trio of articles by Sarena Abdullah, Kelvin Chuah, and Claire Wintle explore an exhibition space that no longer exists: the art galleries of the Commonwealth Institute. Through their distinct but overlapping contributions, Abdullah, Chuah, and Wintle demonstrate the possibilities and limits of the archive; a theme that several authors return to again and again. Exhibitions can also take place outside of the gallery and institutional walls, as Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason remind us as they follow the exhibition histories of two artists from East Pakistan (Bangladesh after 1971) as they made their way through London in the 1950s, displaying their works at the Sunday open-air exhibitions that took place on the railings of the city’s parks and in restaurants owned by acquaintances. A series of interviews with contemporary curators, Iwona Blazwick, David Elliot, and Sharmini Pereira, who have all steered influential curatorial projects between London and Asia, reminds us that these exhibition histories and their regional and institutional framings extend into the present and shape our future.

The open-access platform of *British Art Studies* is a springboard. Our hope is that readers use the ideas, research, and resources presented here to make conceptual and historical leaps of their own, which will contribute to more expanded notions of British art and its historical and contemporary entanglements with artistic production from Asia.

Footnotes

- 1 Hammad Nasar’s paper on *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, titled “Notes from the Field: Navigating the Afterlife of The Other Story”, Art Asia Archive, is available at: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/notes-from-the-field-navigating-the-afterlife-of-the-other-story>.

- 2 These exhibitions were: *View-Point: A Retrospective Exhibition of Li Yuan-chia* (Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2014); *Rasheed Araeen: Before and After Minimalism* (Sharjah Art Foundation, 2014); and *Rasheed Araeen: Homecoming* (Karachi: VM Art Gallery, 2014).
- 3 Hammad Nasar's paper, "Expanding Britishness: Curatorial Interventions in Re-Entangling Histories" was presented in the session "Diaspora Artists and British Art History: Intervention-Integration-Expansion" convened by Alice Correia, Anjalie Dalal-Clayton, and Elizabeth Robles at the Association for Art History conference held at the University of Brighton in 2019.
- 4 Some of these ideas are more fully explored in "Art Histories of Excess: Hammad Nasar in Conversation with Karin Zitzewitz", *Art Journal* (Winter 2018): 106-112.
- 5 The concepts of "entanglement" and "entangled histories" has gained currency in recent years. We want to acknowledge the work of Nicholas Thomas, who was one of the first researchers to promote this widely through his publications, stressing in his work on the Pacific the shared history of colonial entanglement. See, in particular, Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- 6 See, in particular: Tim Barringer, Geoff Quilley, and Douglas Fordham, *Art and the British Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Antoinette Burton, *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and Through the Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Natasha Eaton, *Mimesis Across Empire: Artworks and Networks in India 1765-1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).
- 7 For productive discussion of modernism and the nation, see the work of Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina, 2010); Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (Delhi: Tulika, 2007); and Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity and Modernism in India, 1930-1990* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015).
- 8 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), 1.
- 9 Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 10 One of AAA's content priorities that guides their research and archival collections is the idea of "complex geographies" that acknowledges the shortcomings of simple geographic delineations; see <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/building-asia-art-archive/type/conversations>. See Tina Chan and Eric Hayot, "Introducing *Verge*: What Does It Mean to Study Global Asias?", *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2015): vi-xv.
- 11 See this issue and also see Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
- 12 "Being Present" was staged as part of the symposium, "The LYC Museum & Art Gallery and the Museum as Practice" (Manchester Art Gallery, 6-7 March 2019), organised by the Paul Mellon Centre and University of the Arts London, in collaboration with Manchester Art Gallery and the University of Manchester; it was convened by Hammad Nasar, Lucy Steeds, and Sarah Victoria Turner. For more on the symposium, see <https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/whats-on/forthcoming/the-lyc-museum-art-gallery-and-the-museum-as-practice>. It accompanied the exhibition *Speech Acts: Reflection-Imagination-Repetition* (2018-2019), curated by Hammad Nasar with Kate Jesson, and presented by Manchester Art Gallery in partnership with The Black Artists and Modernism (BAM) research project—funded by the AHRC and led by University of the Arts London in collaboration with Middlesex University. For more on BAM, see <http://www.blackartistsmodernism.co.uk/about/>.

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Nasar, Hammad (2019) "Expanding Britishness: Curatorial Interventions in Re-Entangling Histories". "Diaspora Artists and British Art History: Intervention-Integration-Expansion" convened by Alice Correia, Anjalie Dalal-Clayton, and Elizabeth Robles, Association for Art History conference, University of Brighton.

Nasar, Hammad and Zitzewitz, Karin (2018) "Art Histories of Excess: Hammad Nasar in Conversation with Karin Zitzewitz". *Art Journal* (Winter): 106-112.

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Exhibitions, Histories: *Showing, Telling, Seeing* and Beyond

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The global turn in the discipline of art history over the past decade has generated new accounts of modernism and modernity, challenging Eurocentric, and especially Greenbergian, narratives of modern art. These new histories have expanded our canons and conceptions of modern art to include practices and discourses from Mexico, Brazil, Senegal, Nigeria, Vietnam, China, Japan, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Pakistan, Britain, and the Soviet Union, which is to say, outside the art world centers of Paris and New York. Examining overlooked artists and artworks and highlighting circulation and mobility, new scholarship has called attention to imperial and diasporic formations in ways that illuminate the aesthetics and politics of global cities and cosmopolitan art worlds rather than reinforcing the logics of empire or nation-state. Such scholarship has challenged the conventional organization of syllabuses, specializations, art exhibitions, and museum departments along national-cultural lines, and offered an opportunity to rethink the intellectual efficacy and analytic contours of subfields such as British art history and South Asian art history.

Taking its cue from these developments, *Showing, Telling, Seeing: Exhibiting South Asia in Britain, 1900 to Now* (co-organised by Sonal Khullar, Hammad Nasar, Devika Singh, and Sarah Victoria Turner), brought together specialists from these subfields that have functioned separately in modern museums, galleries, and the academy. Our focus was on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, given the relatively rich and robust scholarship on the nineteenth century. We took a *longue durée* approach to British colonial rule in South Asia, accounting for both pre- and post-independence periods. Our title emphasized the exhibition as a process: not a static collection of objects or assembly of forms, but rather like artistic practice that unfolds over time, tells stories, has histories, entails recursions, creates rituals, conjures place, displays objects, and shapes consciousness. Writing about exhibitions of Indian art in the United States, Rebecca Brown has used the evocative and historically resonant metaphor of the tent as “encampment, environment, all-encompassing lived experience”.¹ That metaphor extends to the Crystal Palace exhibition in London (1851) and *The Fabric of India* exhibition (2015–2016) at the Victoria and Albert Museum and refers to the ritual construction of kingship and sovereignty in South Asia through tents, canopies, carpets, and other luxury textiles (Fig. 1). Often relegated to the category of crafts, decorative objects, or applied arts in histories of art, these textiles were crucial to constructing a relationship between South Asia and Britain, and thereby the making of the modern world. That relationship, as the *London, Asia* project demonstrates, did not end with India’s independence from British rule in 1947. Its reverberations are evident in artistic practice and exhibitions in Bradford, Manchester, Leeds, and London, home to large South Asian and other diasporic communities settled in Britain.



Figure 1.

The Fabric of India, installation photograph, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2015. Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The conference explored the aesthetic, social, political, and phenomenological dimensions of exhibition practice, broadly construed to include institutions (e.g. Burlington House, the Museum of Modern Art Oxford) and individuals (e.g. Dayanita Singh, Lionel Wendt). Panels and roundtable discussions addressed “curatorial practice”, “crafting practice”, “institutional histories”, “writing about exhibitions”, “competing modernities”, “exhibition circuits/networks of display”, “experience and event”, and “other stories”, and involved curators, artists, critics, and professional academics from the United Kingdom, South Asia, and the United States. Our venues in central London—the Congress Centre, One Alfred Place, the Paul Mellon Centre, and Tate Modern—spoke powerfully to the themes of the conference. Jacob Epstein’s *Pietà*-like sculpture of a woman holding her dead son, a monument to workers who served in the two world wars and completed in 1956-57, stands in the courtyard of the Congress Centre, home to the Trades Union Congress (Fig. 2). Epstein’s modernism—and that of other avant-garde British artists such as Eric Gill—was deeply influenced by traditional Indian temple sculpture and emblemizes what Rupert Arrowsmith has called a “global aesthetic exchange” centered on “London’s museum network” during the 1910s.² That sculpture suggests London’s privileged place as the site of exhibitions, collaboration, and education for many artists from Britain and South Asia. The pioneering art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), a friend of Epstein and Gill, made his home in England between 1907 and 1917 (with long stays in India) and founded the India Society in London in 1910. In 1908, he published *Medieval Sinhalese Art* on William Morris’s Kelmscott Press, and

pursued multiple inquiries into the conjunction of art, labor, and value (Fig. 3). Coomaraswamy's friendship with Charles Robert Ashbee, a key figure in the Arts and Crafts Movement, and involvement with the Chipping Campden Guild and School of Handicraft attest to complex bonds that emerged from doing, making, and writing—and indeed, showing, telling, and seeing—and that defy nationalist or colonialist narratives of art.

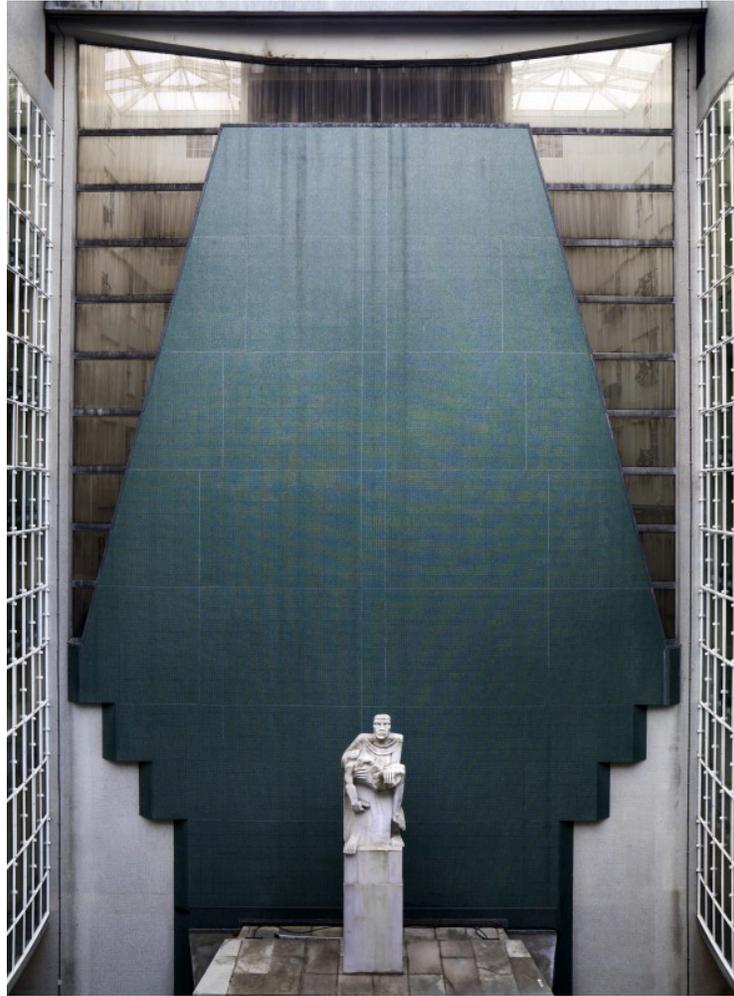


Figure 2.

Interior view of Congress House, Great Russell Street, London, photograph, showing the *Trades Union Congress War Memorial* by Jacob Epstein, 1956-1957, roman stone, 1956. Collection of English Heritage. Digital image courtesy of James O. Davies and English Heritage.

Four hundred and twenty-five copies printed under the care of the Author at the Essex House Press in the Norman Chapel at Broad Campden, Gloucestershire. Begun September, 1907, and finished December, 1908.

Of twenty-five copies on hand-made paper this is No. 14.

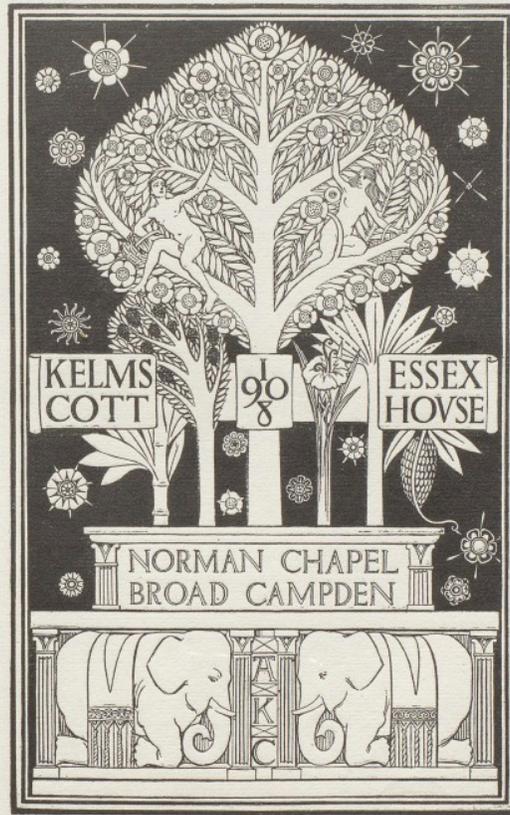


Figure 3.

Publisher stamp, reproduced in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (Broad Campden: Essex House Press, 1908), 1908. Collection of The British Library. Digital image courtesy of The British Library Board.

Those bonds were not limited to the colonial period. Take, for instance, the exhibition *Bhupen Khakhar: You Can't Please All* (1 June—6 November 2016) at Tate Modern, which provided an ideal opportunity to explore themes of the conference with an art world audience (Fig. 4). In 1976, Khakhar (1934–2003), a largely self-trained artist and part-time accountant, visited Britain, where he befriended the artist Howard Hodgkin and critic Timothy Hyman. He would later return to teach at the Bath Academy of Art in Corsham in 1979, with his style of figuration inspiring Francesco Clemente and Salman Rushdie, whose portrait, *The Moor*, Khakhar painted for the National Portrait Gallery in 1995. In 1962, Khakhar wrote a master's thesis on Company Painting (so named after the British East India Company), a genre of art executed by Indians, patronized by Europeans, and collected by British institutions. His paintings of the late 1960s and 1970s drew inventively on

the visual culture of empire, including paintings, prints, and photographs, as well as the figure of the colonial hunter, surveyor, and ruler. “Photographs of the British Raj,/Viceroy, battalions of attendants, pomp, hypocrisy,/and glamor of white skin” were among the visual sources Khakhar cited.³



Figure 4.

Bhupen Khakhar, *You Can't Please All*, 1981, oil on canvas. Collection of Tate (T07200). Digital image courtesy of Tate and the estate of Bhupen Khakhar.

In a public program at Tate Modern, organized by Sandra Sykorova and Nada Raza in conjunction with *Showing, Telling, Seeing* on 2 July, critics Geeta Kapur and Deepak Ananth and art historians Sonal Khullar and Karin Zitzewitz along with museum director Chris Dercon reflected on the artist's career and contributions. Jonathan Jones' controversial review of the exhibition in which he declared Khakhar a “hamfisted hack” whose “paintings belong in the Royal Academy summer show, not Tate Modern” made the stakes of the conference more urgent.⁴ Was Khakhar “Mumbai's answer to Beryl Cook,” as Jones suggested, or an artist who “can make the language of painting offer the gift of a complex vernacular and vivid speech to their (beloved) subjects,” as Kapur claimed in a rejoinder to Jones?⁵ What

was Khakhar's place in Britain, and by extension, the role of South Asian artists and artworks in British museums? For Kapur, the debate over the exhibition was about "other cultures lay[ing] claim to modernity as a historically co-produced project," a claim she first articulated in a master's thesis completed in 1968 at the Royal College of Art, "In Quest of Identity: Art and Indigenism in Post-Colonial Culture With Special Reference to Contemporary Indian Painting".⁶ That project of modernity remains unfinished as other artists and artworks continue to demand representation on equal and ethical terms in our exhibitions, institutions, and imaginations.

Footnotes

- 1 Rebecca M. Brown, *Displaying Time: The Many Temporalities of the Festival of India* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2017), 3.
- 2 Rupert Richard Arrowsmith, *Modernism and the Museum: Asian, African, and Pacific Art and the London Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.
- 3 Bhupen Khakhar, "Notes on the Visual Sources of My Painting", *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 10 (1969): 24–26. This essay was first published as Bhupen Khakhar, "Visual Notes", *Vrishchik* 1, no. 1 (1969): n.p.
- 4 Jonathan Jones, "Bhupen Khakhar Review—Mumbai's Answer to Beryl Cook", *The Guardian*, 31 May 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/may/31/bhupen-khakhar-review-you-cant-please-all-tate-modern> (accessed 25 June 2019). See also Laura Cumming, "Bhupen Khakhar—You Can't Please All Review: A Sprawl Through a Life's Work", *The Guardian*, 5 June 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jun/05/bhupen-khakhar-you-cant-please-all-review-tate-modern-pop-art-pink-city-howard-hodgkin-david-hockney> (accessed 25 June 2019).
- 5 Geeta Kapur, "Guardian Review of Bhupen Khakhar at Tate Narrow-Minded", *The Wire*, 5 June 2019. <https://thewire.in/40568/guardian-review-of-bhupen-khakhar-at-tate-narrow-minded-geeta-kapur/> (accessed 25 June 2019). See also Amit Chaudhuri, "Bombay Dreams: How Painter Bhupen Khakhar Captured the City Spirit", *The Guardian*, 21 May 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/may/21/bombay-dreams-how-bhupen-khakhar-captured-spirit-of-city> (accessed 12 January 2018).
- 6 Geeta Kapur, *In Quest of Identity: Art and Indigenism in Post-Colonial Culture with Special Reference to Contemporary Indian Painting* (Baroda: Vrishchik, 1973), no page numbers. This thesis was serialized in the journal *Vrishchik* in 1971 and 1972, and published in its entirety as a special publication of the journal in 1973.

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Kapur, Geeta (1973) *In Quest of Identity: Art and Indigenism in Post-Colonial Culture with Special Reference to Contemporary Indian Painting*. Baroda: Vrishchik.

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Why Exhibition Histories?

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Introduction by

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This special issue of *British Art Studies*, titled “London, Asia, Exhibitions, Histories”, takes as its point of departure the idea that exhibitions provide an important lens through which to explore the entangled art histories of Asia and Britain. This proposition, perhaps uncontroversial in its own right, nonetheless reflects certain intellectual and methodological shifts in the discipline of art history during the past decade, most obvious among them, the expanded geography and relational perspective invoked by the coordinates “London” and “Asia”. Another is the shift in focus away from the individual artist or artwork, towards the exhibition as a meaningful object of art historical inquiry. The discipline of art history has long attended to contexts of exhibition and display, evident in the historical study of museum collections and curiosity cabinets. During the 1980s and 1990s, the New Museology spawned all manner of more critical inquiry into exhibitions, collections, practices, and ideologies, fuelled by post-Marxist and post-structural theories of representation and spectacle. The twenty-first century saw the emergence of Curatorial Studies as another subfield of sorts, one that was quickly consolidated into a professional track that has a close affinity to contemporary art. Finally, the self-described field of Bienniology, the study of international biennials, has also advanced discussions about globalization and these exhibitionary platforms, even as its contributors acknowledge a relentlessly diverse and shape-shifting field of activity. We might see all of these trajectories converging upon, and ultimately affirming and legitimizing, the intellectual investment in exhibition histories contained in this special issue of the journal.

“London, Asia, Exhibitions, Histories” thus provides an excellent opportunity to reflect upon and re-evaluate the significance of exhibition histories as a practice of knowledge and subfield within the discipline that has gained solid ground in the past decade or so. I consider myself an enthusiastic student of exhibitions, having researched and written on a number of such historical events, from the nineteenth-century colonial showcases in London, to the 1922 modern art exhibition in Calcutta that featured Bauhaus artists alongside painters from Bengal, to contemporary global exhibitions like *Century City*, which inaugurated the Tate Modern in 2001. I have also written about a site-specific exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Museum in Calcutta, and participated, although modestly, in exhibition-making as a cross-cultural endeavor from within the United States. In each of these projects, the exhibition emerged as a text woven from a great many threads belying multiple and divergent aesthetic assumptions, fraught historical investments, the inconsistencies of national ideologies, and self-conscious efforts of intervention staged as visual and curatorial arguments. And yet, somehow, I

don't perceive myself as a person who "does exhibition histories", if we understand this to be an intellectual practice that is distinct from other kinds of knowledge practices. Which leads to my first set of questions: what is the nature of this knowledge pursuit? What are its investigative parameters, and when/how did it emerge? Do exhibition histories represent a specific methodology? An archival strategy? A conceptual approach? What is the relationship of exhibition histories to nations and canons, to post-colonial critique, and to the interdisciplinary terrain of cultural studies, more broadly? And finally, what is gained and what is lost by delineating exhibition histories as a separate field or subfield within the study of art history?

There is no doubt that the practice of exhibition histories has a synergetic relation to the question of the canon. If we understand canonization as a dynamic procedure of valuation based in a continuous process of consensus and contestation and—for better or worse—a hegemonic logic of inclusion and exclusion, then alternative stories of display and reception serve to challenge the status of the existing canon. As old canons become devalued and their authority destabilized, new canons and counter-canons actively take shape. Exhibitions and permanent collections have been crucial to this process of contestation and transformation, alongside other practices of art history such as scholarship, teaching, textbooks, and monographic studies. Hence, in the past few decades, the dominant canon of modern art from Western Europe and North America has been vigorously subjected to a spirit of revisionism and consequently shifted in response to its long-standing exclusions around gender, race, geography, ethnicity, sexuality, medium, and training, to name a few examples of the relevant criteria. This dimension of antagonism is crucial to the exhibition form and points to the productive aspects of visual arguments that have resulted in more fluid, entangled, and pluralistic understandings of art history and its canons. Exhibitions have thus been a crucial space through which the canon has been diversified—even globalized.

However, exhibition histories have also produced their own canon of sorts in the past decade. We can see this in a spate of ambitious publications that aspire to open out the archives of key exhibitions, like *Show Time: The 50 Most Influential Exhibitions of Contemporary Art* (D.A.P., 2014) or the two volumes by Bruce Altshuler, subtitled *Exhibitions That Made Art History* (Phaidon, 2008 and 2013). The latter, in particular, are carefully researched books presenting a tightly measured chronology: volume one is *Salon to Biennial (1863–1959)* and volume two, *Biennials and Beyond (1962–2002)*. However, these volumes also shore up a rather conventional Euro-American narrative about the development of art, and do little to challenge the enduring Eurocentricism of the discipline itself. By contrast, the *Exhibition Histories* series published by Afterall, which was launched in 2010 and which includes books about exhibitions of contemporary art "that have shaped the way that art is experienced, made and discussed", has sought to

meaningfully expand the geographic frame. Each book in the series brings together archival, visual, and textual material along with newly commissioned essays to dive deep into a given exhibition as a discursive product in the Foucauldian sense, that is, as a text that initiates other texts.



Figure 1.

South Court exhibition No. 4, representing India, reproduced in *Dickinson's comprehensive pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851 from the originals painted for Prince Albert by Messrs. Nash, Haghe and Roberts*, Vol. 2, plate V (London: Dickinson Brothers, Her Majesty's Publishers, 1852), 1854. Collection of the British Library (Cup.652.c.33., volume 2). Digital image courtesy of British Library Board.

The series has thus also helped shape an emergent canon of historically significant exhibitions, for instance, *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969), *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989), and the *Third Havana Biennial* (1989), while also fashioning a counter-canon of less well-known exhibition events in Moscow, São Paulo, Chiang Mai, and Lagos, to name a few. At times, in this broad spectrum of exhibition histories, the canon heralds innovation or influence. At other times, it registers fraught gambits and knotty entanglements that themselves open out onto new ways of seeing, though not as the curators may have intended (as in the case of MoMA's *Primitivism* show, or Hitler's 1937 *Degenerate Art*). Thus, a very peculiar aspect of the emergent canon of exhibition histories, as one author has observed, is "the fact that what is being canonized is itself an instrument in the process of canonization".¹ That this canon favours exhibitions from the 1960s onwards also reveals exhibition histories to be closely related to the field of contemporary art, or at least to the need to historicize our ever-changing contemporary. Exhibitions on ancient, medieval or early modern art—no matter how innovative, experimental, problematic, or fraught—have not

generally been included within the identifiable frameworks of exhibition histories. So why, then, exhibition histories? What kinds of uses and abuses might be discerned in this pursuit? How can exhibition histories go beyond or exceed current approaches in art history, or indeed the category of “art” itself? What is the role of new digital technologies and web-based platforms (like this one) to the methodologies of exhibition history? How do you perceive the past, present, and future of exhibition histories, and their relevance to geographies and canons? And what role *should* they have within the knowledge practices which we call art history?

Response by

Caroline Jones, Professor of Art History in the History, Theory, Criticism section of the Department of Architecture at MIT

Histories and Hagiographies

When Jacques-Louis David removed the deposed monarchs' bibelots from the Louvre, keeping only paintings and sculpture for the edification of the people, it was an act that declared the "exhibition" to be a newly hegemonic strategy (Fig. 2). In other words, when the same artist had earlier charged admission to his own studio for interested viewings of the *Sabine Women*, it had none of the fraught significance that attended the opening of the Louvre: *les expositions* would now be understood to produce citizens out of former subjects, public space from princely cabinets, universal civilization from the motley hoardings of royalty. Napoleon would take up the task of further supplying works for this ravenous exhibitionary logic: his navy waited patiently for the Titian and Veronese paintings to be brought to them in crates, ransom against ransacking by troops waiting for the Doges of the waning Venetian Republic to allow their people to be "liberated" to the rule of the Napoleonic code. Likewise, as the British blockaded French ports against the export of Terror, the French organized what is arguably the first "world's" fair, presaging a century of gigantic "beaux arts" machinery that would, in turn, provoke the first Biennale in 1895. The nakedly national act of juxtaposing foreign goods—in the French case, the former Royal manufactories now arranged against foreign wares to stimulate competition and consumption for the home team—was part of the DNA of these exhibitionary complexes until the Venice Biennale was forced to banish its own market operation in 1969. The Western procedure of exhibition was always about capital, whether cultural, political, or fiduciary.²

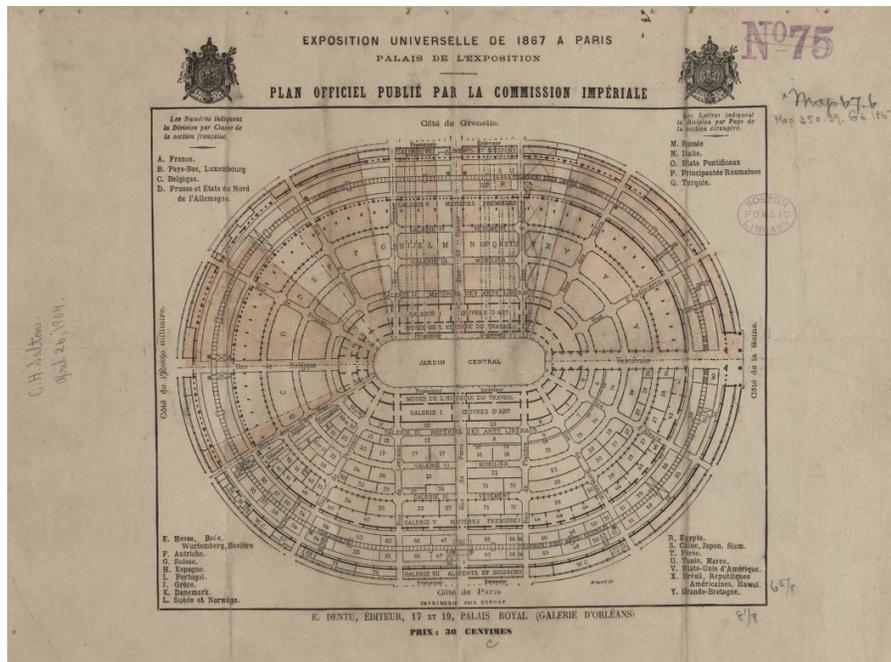


Figure 2.

E. Dentu, Official Plan for the 1867 International Exposition Palace, Paris, (Paris: Imperial Commission, 1867). Collection of Boston Public Library, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center. Digital image courtesy of Digital Commonwealth Massachusetts Collections Online.

As Mathur suggests, there is thus no exculpation from canonization for the modern exhibition—and no plausible history of “exhibitions” that originates outside of Western capitalism. Indeed, the most creative of its curators saw the artistry of this larger craft, subjecting their own works and ideas to a larger logic (or illogic) of the exhibitionary ensemble. The act of assembly could offer history—or hagiography, as in Sir John Soane’s semi-public architectural academy that testified to his notably eclectic tastes, its chaotic jumble of fragments celebrated by the current museum’s online tourist portal as “quite purposeful—each room a work of art in its own right”.³ If David would sublimate his personal aesthetic to the goals of a revolutionary collective, Soane bent the state to his own personal vision, persuading Parliament to pass an act guaranteeing the preservation of his collection in its exact configuration at the time of his death. Two exemplars of history, and hagiography, at work.

The threads of history versus hagiography can be found in our own contemporary historiographies of the exhibition form, which we art historians view correctly as a modern type of argument. Sometimes even the same exhibition can be read as the revelation of an epoch, or the gesture of an individual. Is the exhibition an anonymous speech act by state actors, as in the Victorian age Great Exhibition, the wartime *Family of Man*, or the 1970s Pepsi-Cola Pavilion in Osaka? Or should it be seen as an authored work by

curators whose power and vision we are inclined to celebrate—Henry Cole in 1851, Eduard Steichen for the 1955 *Family of Man*, or the individual avant-gardists comprising “Experiments in Art and Technology” for Osaka?

In my own work in this domain, I have struggled with the behemoth of the archive (which exhibitionary complexes are designed to produce), in order to forward my own counter-arguments to the argument of the exhibition (and the hagiographies that can emerge in its wake).⁴ In rebuttal to the general awe the literature holds for Harald Szeemann, for example, I offer the friction of local anti-tobacco activists, who saw his ready acceptance of US capital (in the form of sponsorship by Philip Morris) as just another component of Szeemann’s wholesale importation of New York art world values and artworks into the canon and canton of Bern. *When Attitudes Become Form* was the site of that contestation, as the “avant-garde” was revealed to be a wholly imperial formation, in the arguments of a local art instructor and former tuberculosis patient opposed to Szeemann’s high-handed ways and poisonous corporate sponsor.⁵ Similarly, I insist that we grapple with the discourse-production of the exhibitionary apparatuses and tackle the chimeras they spawn. Fairs, biennials, and the contemporary art market have partnered in producing the “Dutch Millet” and “Brazilian Rodin” of the nineteenth century, and the “Pakistani Picasso” of the twentieth century. I call this canonizing violence “Predicated internationalism”—the modified figure can be allowed in the world picture, but always with an asterisk enforcing their subsidiary status.⁶ Particularly in the twentieth-century case of the Pakistani Picasso, for the Urdu-speaking artist now known simply as “Sadequain”, much more remains to be done.⁷ The only way to do it is in collaboration with scholars of multiple languages and contexts, well aware of the “Picasso manqué” syndrome on the one hand, and the extraordinary heroics of figures negotiating the ever-shifting Euro-Asian divide on the other.

Response by

Patrick Flores, Professor, Department of Art Studies, University of the Philippines

A Burden not to Belabor

The uneasiness that the term “exhibition history” elicits comes from the tendency of the formulation to cohere seemingly without difficulty, as if it merely derived from the disciplinal gravitas of art history or proceeded from the structure of the museum as either an institution or an industry. Further attentiveness to this rubric, however, enables us to glean more politics and poetics in the proposition. Exhibition implicates “curatorial” work, while history presupposes the imperative to “historicize.” It should be more productive, therefore, to consider exhibition history within these acts that overcome the limits of object keeping and exhibition making—to say nothing yet of the idealizations of history. What does it mean to curate and to historicize? This is the question that must be asked to begin to demystify the endeavor called exhibition history: to exceed the exhibition via the curatorial and to complexify history through scrutiny around historicization. Without a thoroughgoing annotation of the curatorial and the analysis of the materiality of an event in time and space, exhibition history would merely be an inventory of fully formed efforts instead of a constellation of technologies and inquiries that makes it possible.

This being said, exhibition history continues to be burdened by the procedures of art history. Such burden does not have to be belabored. Rather, it must be turned into an opportunity to deconstruct exhibition history, to unhinge it from its theoretical investments and its “normative commitments” to, let us say, time, object, context, agency, among others. With art history still in play in the naming of exhibition history, the critical mediations of exhibition history must revisit the problematics of the aesthetic and of historiography, if the term under erasure were to be released into a vaster province of sensible life that is not reducible to art, its history, and the hegemonic formations of a discipline. As a consequence of the critique, the discipline has been so stirred to constantly swing its conceptual pendulum and has responded with the same intellectual intensity that had forged it to revise itself. Let it not be said that the fundamental post-colonial challenge against the autonomy of art and the sovereignty of its liberal subject has eluded art history as a living epistemic constituency. In fact, the schema of exhibition history may be a symptom of this facing up.

With regard to the exhibition as a moment or an instance, exhibition history needs to move away from an interrogation that construes the exhibition as a collection of things. It should try to intuit it as a meshwork of the semiotic

(representation, signification, a registration in the socius), the forensic (evidence of creative will, heritage, culture, or lifeworld), and the installative (experience, site production, experiment of feeling, authority of presenting). All this comes to conspire in the exhibitionary, and not the inert, privileged moment of the exhibition, which over time has dispersed across various modes of activating presence in space to include pedagogical and performative engagements with the civic milieu or public sphere, actual or virtual (Fig. 3).



Figure 3.

Balthasar Burkhard, John Dugger, David Medalla, First Manifesto of the Artist's Liberation Front—Movement for People's Culture, Documenta 5, photograph, 1972. Collection of the documenta archiv (Inv. No.: docA MS d05-10010468). Digital image courtesy of documenta archive. Photo: Burkhard.

These are the demands of exhibition history. The question of course is: What kinds of intelligence and subjectivity can profess to the responsibilities of this task? Is it the reconstructed art historian? Is it the curator? Is it the ethnographer of the art world? Or an assemblage or relay of all of these? Concomitantly, the locus of the investigation shifts and emerging from this shift is not merely a counter-locus, but a different conception of the local or of locality altogether—a theoretical vernacular from which the work of exhibition history commences. How does exhibition history conjure the scene of this "local", with all its density and redistribution across coincidences of reciprocal encounters?

Response by

Emilia Terracciano, Andrew W. Mellon Global South Fellow Torch & Ruskin School of Art Bowra Junior Research Fellow in the Humanities, Wadham College, University of Oxford

Enabling Entanglements

Saloni Mathur uses the verb “entangle” to highlight the difficult and often compromised relationship between the artist, who chooses to make a work *in situ*, and the curator, an institutional broker who selects and arguably produces the same work for an audience located elsewhere. To make sense of Mathur’s provocation, this short contribution touches upon some of the critical, material, curatorial, and logistical challenges posed by the work of fibre artist Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949–2015).

Mukherjee twisted, knotted, folded, and twined fibre into monumental sculptures for over twenty-five years in New Delhi, India (Fig. 4). Working off the loom, it could take Mukherjee up to a year to produce a single piece. The heavy pieces (weighing up to 100kg), made matters of transport, display, and housing complex. For most of her career, Mukherjee was at pains to sell or showcase her work; her home and studio-garage were crammed with unsold sculptures. “There was no question of living with them”, she states.⁹ But Mukherjee’s lamentation of the “exotic, lovely and spacious studios artists had in the west” was always underscored by her refusal to “quit” India.¹⁰ “Environment” meant access to material, material such as hemp fibre (*shan*), dyes, and cheap labour, which she could not source easily anywhere else.¹¹ At home, peers dismissed Mukherjee’s sculptures as “mythic”, “exotic”, even “twee”.¹² Perhaps it is for this reason too, that Mukherjee repeatedly sought international audiences, securing ways to ship, display, and house her “pachyderm” works. Her sculptures were by no means ignored; included in major international exhibitions and biennales, a solo show was also dedicated to them at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford in 1994, curated by David Elliot. But it is only now, after her death, that her work is eliciting greater international attention.



Figure 4.

Photograph of Mrinalini Mukherjee surrounded by her sculptures, date unknown. Digital image courtesy of Mrinalini Mukherjee.

Her 2015 retrospective exhibition at New Delhi's National Gallery of Modern Art, did much to advance her slightly wacky and singular body of work, generating the kind of awe and recognition which she had struggled to achieve. In June 2019, Met Breuer in New York staged her first solo show in the USA, *Phenomenal Nature: Mrinalini Mukherjee*. Only now are scholars reassessing her sculpture, since few thorough assessments were produced during her lifetime. Such belated appraisal for Mukherjee's materials and work process signals the need for a radical analysis across multiple registers, and in hindsight, an account of why she was relegated to the margins.¹³ This analysis alerts us to Geeta Kapur's insight that time lags across global spaces; modernism and the process of modernisation do not unfold at the same speed across space and time.¹⁴ Moreover, as Keith Moxey writes, more inclusive art-historical attempts have failed to account for those material and historical inequalities that are bound up with legacies of power struggles to date. Moxey asks,

What are the implications of such unequal power relations for historical narratives? Even if the historical record attempts to interlace the various narratives of global art in an effort to produce a richer tapestry of the past and the present, these threads will inevitably be woven together according to the idiosyncrasies of a particular loom.¹⁵

For Mukherjee, art residencies to work abroad were typically difficult to negotiate, given the labour-intensive and time-consuming nature of her work process. Going through the correspondence and Kafkaesque paper trail of Modern Art Oxford, one finds amusing anecdotes. In 1990, Robert Hopper, then director of the Henry Moore Sculpture Trust explained to Mukherjee that although they still referred to the space as a “studio”, the practice of most artists that they worked with was to use it for the “display of work as opposed to actually fabricating it on site”.¹⁶ Henry Moore Sculpture trustees argued that due to the long period of fabrication required by Mukherjee, its potentially open-ended “contract with the future”, the Trust had no infrastructure in place to support her. Moreover, to secure a visa for an Indian national complicated matters further; where would Mukherjee live and who would support her? What about her health insurance? Who would cover that? Hopper’s letter clarifies what kind of makers and art practices the Trust could support and those it could not. Polite but firm in tone, Hopper advises that it therefore made more sense to ship the work rather than invite Mukherjee to make it *in situ*. But freighting the heavy and large sculptures to Dean Clough Studios, Halifax, would prove to be equally difficult. In a fax dated 14 April 1994, we read: “No carrier is willing to accept the airfreighting of these packages.”¹⁷ After numerous “dead ends”, following an invitation by Modern Art Oxford to showcase Mukherjee’s work in 1994, a single air company was willing to accept the airfreighting of Mukherjee’s strange 6-ton crates and at a huge cost.¹⁸

Curated by Elliott, the show *Mrinalini Mukherjee Sculpture* prized the craft-like and feminine qualities of Mukherjee’s practice and advanced her work as part of a Third World modernism, securely removed in time and space. The show provoked debate as critics also repeatedly sought to tie Mukherjee’s part vegetal, part animal fibre sculptures to discourses around ethnicity and identity, Third World feminine craft, and Hindu Vedic mythology.¹⁹ Others picked up on the ambiguities and tensions provoked by strange feelers and tentacles protruding from the large biomorphic sculptures. The alien creatures “colonised the space from another reality-zone”;²⁰ for one critic, they brought to mind the malignant and rapidly multiplying plants of the dystopian sci-fi novel *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham (Fig. 5).²¹ Viewed in this way, Mukherjee’s own tendrilled creatures become both a subject of exotic fascination as well as of potential fear, illustrating the difficulties around the creation of space for productive dialogue about her “modernist” sculpture. Today, Mukherjee’s fibre sculptures continue to excite complex debates about modernism, third world art craft, and the role of women artists. Tentacular, from the Latin “*tentacle*” (tentative) meaning “to try, to have a feel for”, these sculptures solicit debates around the struggle over what it means to be modern, who can claim it, and on what grounds.²²



Figure 5.

Fig. 2 Film poster for Day of the Triffids, based on the novel by John Wyndham, directed by Steve Sekely and distributed by Rank, UK and Allied Artists, USA , 1962. Digital image courtesy of picturepalacemoveiposters.com.

Response by

Brook Andrew, Associate Professor of Fine Art, Monash University

A number of exhibitions in the past few decades have attempted to address the histories of exclusion referred to by Saloni Mathur. A notable example was the 2015 Tate Britain exhibition *Artist and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past*, which included an artwork of mine. While an exhibition might speak to themes of the global—and include artworks by “other” makers—this by itself does not make for a radical activity that undoes the canon. To be antagonistic towards histories of imperialism, through an exhibition, involves a dismantling of the institution itself.

The language of exhibitions, the architecture, the methods of classification and display continue the formulas of the historical expositions, such as the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London's Crystal Palace or the Garden Palace in Australia in 1879, to name just two. These imperial exhibitions emerged to show off the products of industrialisation and colonisation, including the people and estates of colonised countries in purpose-built buildings of great ambition. In museums and galleries today, objects continue to be separated from their kin and put on display, framed in neo-classical or modern architecture, and classified according to systems that cannot begin to account for all their meanings.

Museums also share a language that has empowered colonial actions and ways of seeing, in the way that bodies are made active or passive in gallery spaces. This language continues to influence how we see the “other” and each other. In many cases, cultures outside of the imperial exposition mandate are still looking at our own bodies and cultures through ideas such as the noble savage. Romantic visions of the primitive still divide, putting into doubt who is the “authentic” Aborigine or African, and contributing to lateral violence. ²³

I was glad, and very curious, that my artwork *Island I* (2008) was included in the 2015 exhibition *Artist and Empire* and to contribute to a dialogue about the legacies of British colonisation (Fig. 6). However, I was deeply disappointed that, in the main, the contemporary art was displayed in an end room and could not directly engage with, or be used to question, the genre of history painting which dominated the exhibition. Moreover, the exhibition was one-dimensional, with literal representations of collected dead animals and people everywhere, but no new thematic arguments about what is “imperial”.



Figure 6.

Brook Andrew, *The Island I*, 2008, mixed media on Belgian linen, 250 × 300 × 5 cm framed. Collection of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. Digital image courtesy of Brook Andrew.

The exhibition might have challenged some visitors' perceptions of British colonial history, with the cumulative effect of the numerous history paintings. However, the bloody battles and the vastness of the imperial massacre were glorified and the indigenous body objectified. The genre was not challenged because the comparative artworks were invisible or placed in the back closet. The visitor's gaze was hostage to the usual monotonous routine of standard heights or the "Queen's height" for hanging pictures. I don't see why a history painting or two couldn't have been hung upside down for some kind of "gaze leverage".

Artist and Empire did not manage to *face* Britain's imperial past or disrupt its dominant narratives.²⁴ I would have replaced the history paintings in this exhibition with everyday British objects of the colonial expeditions like teacups, guns, photographs of exploited people, and pelts of extinct animals that were the real companions of the imperial projects. The juxtaposition of teacups with the (now broken) spear from the Gadigal people of Sydney Cove that Captain Cook stole on his first voyage to Sydney, in my opinion, would have created a level playing field of representation. Apparently, the spear was shipped to England in one piece but when it was gifted to the Museum of Art and Anthropology, the removalists couldn't fit it into the cart so broke it in two to make their job easier. It would have halted the romanticism and the

continual violence of the colonial gaze which festered in the exhibition, particularly for audiences who do not understand its inter-generational effects. Like the excreted faeces of a devil serpent too busy drinking tea and ruling a fake heaven to atone for its own ignorance.

Response by

Michelle Wun Ting Wong, Researcher, Asia Art Archive

Before he got his first camera in 1982, the late Hong Kong-based, self-taught artist Ha Bik Chuen (1925–2009) collected publications and printed matter from exhibitions he visited. Armed with his prized possession of a camera, Ha photographed not only the exhibitions that he was part of as an artist, but also almost every single exhibition that he attended. Ha documented over 2,500 exhibitions in Hong Kong and internationally, and kept prints as well as over 3,500 contact sheets made between 1982 and 1999. These photos—often filed neatly into dedicated albums, envelopes, and paper bags, hand annotated by Ha—and exhibition-related printed matter, accumulated over time to form a significant part of Ha’s personal archive. His archive, which dates back to 1950s, was tucked away on the top floor of a walk-up building in the Kowloon district of Hong Kong until 2014, when the Ha family approached Asia Art Archive (AAA) to work on this collection of materials (Fig. 7).



Figure 7.

Former studio of the late Hong Kong artist Ha Bik Chuen, Collection of the Ha Family and Asia Art Archive. Digital image courtesy of Ha Family and Asia Art Archive.

In Asia, where I practise as a researcher and curator, exhibitions are one of the key vehicles through which the history of recent art is written, as some museums in the region and their collections are literally being built as we speak. This is perhaps especially resonant for the city of Hong Kong, where the Hong Kong Museum of Art reopens in a few months after three years of closure for renovation, the opening of M+ looms in the near future of the

next year or so, and new institutions such as Tai Kwun and CHAT have freshly opened their doors. What AAA proposed and explored in its 2013 conference *Sites of Construction* continues to reverberate: exhibitions are sites where art meets its public, essays are commissioned and written, and both art-historical discourse and curatorial strategies entangle and unfold.

Ha's archive offers an exhibition history that, while egocentric and biased, is pregnant with possibilities. The materials he collected provide factual information as well as installation views of exhibitions. Some of these exhibitions are widely known by art practitioners here in Hong Kong, while some of them were completely unknown and/or had been unseen by us beforehand. If I were to put on *London, Asia* tinted glasses, Ha's archive of exhibition documentation and ephemera from 1950s-1997 is an instrumental repository of Hong Kong's *colonial* exhibition history, as the territory counted down to its last days of being a British crown colony. One of the British artists that appeared in Ha's photo documentation quite regularly was Henry Moore, who showed in Hong Kong in 1965, 1970, 1974, and 1986 with the Hong Kong City Hall Museum and Art Gallery (a city-level museum by British standards, renamed Hong Kong Museum of Art in 1975). Some of the questions that could be asked include, why Henry Moore's work was shown so often by the official city museum? How did this frequent exposure of Moore affect the practices of artists in Hong Kong? Did Henry Moore become less attractive to show in Hong Kong after the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, when Hong Kong began its designated journey back to Chinese sovereignty?

At the same time, Ha's post-1997 exhibition history materials reflect how Hong Kong's art ecology and its communities responded to its relationship with mainland China. As such, here in Hong Kong, exhibition histories may not be an alternative approach that counters mainstream art history, but a primary approach that art history must incorporate, if it desires to take root in the city. At AAA, we have been experimenting with this approach by including it as one of the key methods for a Hong Kong Art History course that we co-teach with the Fine Arts Department at the University of Hong Kong. Often, students, researchers, and curators alike learn from moments when Ha's archive connects diverse collections, such as when his ephemera supplement CVs from artist files in Hong Kong museums, or when his installation shots depict works by multiple artists whose personal archives are held by AAA. With its emphasis on linked archival materials, I cannot help but think that exhibition histories are the main platform where the diverse voices that drive the art world meet and negotiate, and find expression in fragmentary narratives.

The sheer volume of Ha's documentation beckons the question: Is there a "big data" approach to exhibition histories? The literary scholar Franco Moretti suggested the methodology of "distant reading", in which

researchers would step back from a small canon and instead consider larger bodies of work to unearth patterns. Yet, it is unclear how machines would read visual art works, determine their cultural value, or represent their intellectual content. The digital humanities may offer solutions, but for now, I believe that exhibition histories are sharpest at a case study level. Storytelling—through weaving oral histories, archival materials, and works of art together—remains an indispensable way of making sense.

Response by

Karin Zitzewitz, Associate Professor of Art History and Visual Culture,
Michigan State University

London, Asia pithily inverts the idea of the city as containing the world. Instead, it places London within Asia, so that its histories can be seen as internal to the region, rather than as disconnected impositions from outside. The potential implications of this phrase are extensive: for artists, migration to London from Asia might not mean leaving behind a frame of reference for producing their work. Curators located in the West might no longer be viewed, in benign terms, as mediators and translators tasked with bridging cultural difference, or in the blunter language of older anthropological literature, “culture brokers” engaged in acts of arbitrage.²⁵ It could mean that works of art can find audiences and make meaning as easily in London as in any other city in Asia. *London, Asia* posits a fairly seamless network of circulation, in which differences between center and periphery, (erstwhile) metropole and (former) colony, are still recognizable but do not impede movement.

Exhibition histories are a point of entry into that network of circulation, one that emphasizes the cooperation between artists and curators in particular. As Mathur argues, they allow historians to draw attention to the acts of re-evaluation and revisionism that place particular artists and works of art in art-historical canons. A “dimension of antagonism is crucial to the exhibition form,” she writes, in which the “visual arguments” that exhibitions pose can be productive of more “fluid, entangled, and pluralistic understandings of art history”. Exhibition histories offer a parallel set of discursive events to production histories of works of art, while widening the frame of art history to acknowledge other art-world actors. Exhibition histories of *London, Asia* allow for a focus on particular discursive tactics, including the evolving ideas of Blackness, of post-coloniality, and of Asian solidarity that made possible the articulation of difference within visual art.

But exhibition histories, particularly those that privilege, methodologically, the textual and photographic records left by curators and critics, as well as those that focus on mega-exhibitions like biennials, can leave much of the potential of *London, Asia* on the table. This was brought home to me at a party in New Delhi, a number of years ago, when I joined a group of Indian commercial gallerists who were tittering over a television interview with a visiting British museum director, in which he declared that he had “discovered” a particular Indian artist. The idea that an artist whose work had been carefully cultivated for close to a decade by a complex network of for- and non-profit art institutions—art schools, galleries, residencies, scholarships—had been plucked from obscurity through the pure discernment of this powerful man was, to this group, incredibly hilarious.

That moment—one of many—makes me wonder what exhibition histories might obscure, rather than reveal. It motivates me to advocate instead for a broader idea of art infrastructure, in which the object of analysis is the entire network that makes art, and makes art possible.

This idea of art infrastructure borrows from anthropological studies of power grids, road systems, or media, which themselves build upon the major insights of Actor-Network Theory.²⁶ Following their lead, art infrastructure can be seen as an assemblage of material and immaterial, human and non-human “actants”, which have varying degrees of agency in the movement of people, things, and ideas across ever-expanding and shifting networks of circulation. To some extent, this is a call for more attention to art institutions, including the relationships between kinds of institutions that might seem to be quite distinct in their aims, such as commercial galleries and non-profit art centers. But it also prescribes the movement away from a focus on discourse and toward apprehension of materiality. As a method, it allows for analysis of the way that works of art are shaped—often quite literally—by the networks in which they circulate. Art infrastructure connects to and works within other infrastructural forms, like systems of shipping or finance capital, or supply chains for concrete or steel, or the media or political systems that control travel or the spread of images and ideas.

Attention to the connections between art infrastructures and broader infrastructures of circulation typically allows for deeper understanding of the constraints under which art is made and understood. But taking art infrastructure as an object of analysis is especially appropriate to a contemporary art that has always already been global, and that resists separation from context. Curators of canonical exhibitions of the “aughts”, including *documenta xi* (2002) and *When Latitudes Become Forms* (Walker Art Center, 2003), seized upon such work as it was being made. But to record the histories of those exhibitions—the visual arguments made by curators about contemporary art—would be to miss the place of these events within broader histories of infrastructural change. From my perspective as a historian of Indian contemporary art, it would be to ignore how Sheela Gowda’s work, shown in *Latitudes*, was amplified by feminist artists of color in London. And it would be to miss how Enwezor’s storied inclusion of Indian documentary film in *documenta xi* was connected to the replacement of state film funding with international sources, like grants from the Ford Foundation and Channel 4.

The boundaries drawn around exhibitions as events are convenient, but false, and the materials they leave behind tend to obscure rather than illuminate the broader factors that shape their making. The conceptual and material form of exhibitions depends upon the construction of broader art infrastructures, often by actors who would never appear in historical

accounts that privilege the curatorial voice. Further, those art infrastructures are themselves imbedded in broader systems that lie outside of the art world and are not terribly attuned to the needs of contemporary art. In short, exhibition histories alone cannot capture the infrastructure that places London in Asia.

Response by

Chiara Zuanni, Austrian Centre for Digital Humanities, University of Graz

Temporary exhibitions are ephemeral assemblages of objects, ideas, and people. Once the exhibition is over, the panels dismantled, the objects sent back to their lenders, and the rooms emptied, they cannot be experienced anymore. The exhibition catalogue may remain as the sole reminder of the curator's ideas. In the archives, curatorial notes and internal meetings minutes might shed more light on the exhibition's planning and execution, and how it told a story about a topic, a group of artworks, or an artist. Who was selected? How were the works presented? Newspapers articles—those of which the museum was aware and could collect in ledgers or folders—might remain as the sole testimony of the exhibition's impact and reception in the public sphere, at times complemented by a visitors' comments book. And, in the last two decades or so, an exhibition will also leave an increasingly significant digital footprint: the website, the blog, the social media posts by the organization and by the visitors, not to mention online press, and possibly online collection portals recording the presence of objects in these temporary assemblages.

The possibilities of digitization, alongside the digital footprint of most exhibitions today, require us to consider how digital technologies can shape exhibition histories. How can an exhibition's ephemera and multiple layers of curatorial, artistic, and public interventions be captured digitally? Can the perceptual experience of visitors be conveyed in a digital format? How can the digital lives of objects be represented? How can we avoid replicating in the digital counterpart structures of power embedded in the original exhibition? And how are digital methods and practices affecting the production of a canon of past exhibitions?

In recording and visualizing an exhibition with digital media, institutions can both preserve a record of this temporary event for research and study purposes and aim to enable visitors to "re-visit" past events. In doing so, the virtual exhibition keeps together objects that are now back in their original locations, whether different galleries in the same institutions or far away museums that had loaned them for a period of time. Temporary assemblages which the practices of acquiring, collecting, and curating had kept separate, but which had achieved an epistemological coherence in the temporary exhibitions, may continue to display their connections in the digital exhibition.

From the perspective of researching exhibition histories, this is a great opportunity to capture the messages and frameworks in which these objects have been presented at a given time and place, and to reflect on the status of knowledge at a given moment. However, as digital preservation extends

the lifespan of a temporary exhibition, it also risks stretching and enhancing curatorial narratives in both unanticipated and problematic directions. In particular, since online reproductions of temporary exhibitions reflect their contemporary politics and social contexts, they may perpetuate, in a digital format, the inequalities and injustices of their source event. Questions of how to deal with stories, objects, and the contexts in which they have been presented should therefore be central to the digitization of exhibitions.

From a technical and technological perspective, the question is how to best present online an exhibition which took place in a physical space. On the one hand, it is important to appropriately record all the objects by digitizing them, and by enriching their records with metadata, preferably drawing on widespread schemata and standards. On the other hand, a robust online collection does not yet convey the contexts and narratives within which these objects were presented. For this, a visualization that allows one to glimpse the perceptual experience of visitors in the physical space would be more effective. However, the question is how to achieve such visualization: is a virtual tour which follows the conventions of Google Street View sufficient? Or do we need to design a virtual reality experience? And if a VR solution is chosen, shall we scan the galleries and the objects or shall we collaborate with game designers to virtually recreate the environment? Or is it better to simply digitize, and add alongside a record of the objects, secondary sources and documentary material on the exhibition? In planning for more immersive solutions, it is also important to keep in mind the obsolescence of our technology, which might affect the sustainability and long-term preservation of this virtual reproduction. Finally, in collecting user-generated content to document the subjective experiences of visitors, a series of ethical and legal questions on data protection and copyright arise—an area which is still largely unexplored.

The choice between immersive visualization and the creation of a digital archive implies prioritizing either public engagement and immediate impact or long-term digital preservation. Ultimately, any choices about the digital recording of an exhibition will affect the canon, which—as Saloni argues—is emerging as a question of pressing concern for the study of exhibition histories.

Response by

Pamela Corey, SOAS, University of London

An exciting provocation of exhibition histories is what they might occasion as historical method. We primarily reconstruct past exhibitions through written accounts, often based upon first-hand experience or archival materials. The phenomenological dimension of the exhibition—that which cannot be recreated, if we want to see it as something contingent upon its specific temporality, publics, and milieu—is thus captured through writing as affective recollection or as research-based speculation. As stories, exhibition histories may be more connected to memory studies as much as art history. The story of an exhibition creates something else, an exhibition as memory that takes on a life of its own in distinction to the exhibition as lived experience. As such, how might exhibition histories help us better understand the historicity of historical imagination? What I mean by that is the way that exhibitions bring historical imagination into being, and how the exhibition's reincarnation as exhibition history also constructs an historical present.

If the historical present narrates the past in the present tense, to create a sense of temporal and spatial proximity, the writing of exhibition histories may illuminate a sense of immediacy, impact, or even crisis. And this is where an anecdote in Benedict Anderson's *The Spectre of Comparisons* (Verso, 1998) comes to mind. Anderson describes hearing former Indonesian President Sukarno give a speech in which he ventriloquises Hitler. To impart a sense of exemplary national leadership, he exhibits in his voice the voice of another. Anderson describes the jarring experience as an invitation to see his Europe through an inverted telescope. To echo this spectatorial inversion, how might the study of certain exhibitions as correlates of one another reveal the inverted telescope through which one nation looks through another to look at itself? How might exhibition histories acutely bring this spectre of comparisons to light?

The Tate Britain and National Gallery Singapore iterations of "Artist and Empire" come to mind here. In both instances, the exhibitions live on as objects of critique. The original Tate Britain exhibition, titled *Artist and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past* (2015–2016) was both lauded and criticised, the latter predominantly targeting the institution's belated and ineffective handling of what should have been a decolonial remit, with its offensively benign curatorial contextualisations of the various ethnographic and artistic objects on display. In striking contrast, several favourable reviews in national media were revealing of how much empire lingers as a cornerstone of British identity, and it is difficult to disentangle the exhibition's message from the pending 2016 Brexit referendum. But what is more interesting for me, as a scholar of Southeast Asian art, is the fact that

such an exhibition travelled (in revised form) to a former colony on the merits, and promise, of the curatorial premise, and the problems arising from its reinterpretation.

The National Gallery Singapore iteration, titled *Artist and Empire: (En)countering Colonial Legacies* (2016–2017), received criticisms for the lack of clarity of its curatorial vision, particularly given what might have been hopes that the institution could provide a sharper post-colonial perspective. But here too it appeared to fall short, with reviewers targeting the overreaching breadth of curatorial narratives, which included locating Singapore's place in the British imperial imagination, the formation of modern art and national identity as part and parcel of the colonial encounter, in addition to critical interventions staged by contemporary artists. Serious marketing mishaps (e.g. invitations to an Empire Ball, quickly renamed after a public outcry in which participating artist Yee I-Lann threatened to withdraw) underscored the institutional equivocation towards the post-colonial remit, gesturing to historiographic blind spots and biases at the scale of the national (Fig. 8). Although one objective of the NGS exhibition might have been to give voice to the (Southeast) Asian perspective, which had been largely absent from the Tate presentation, by failing to accentuate a particular tone of response, the exhibition was perceived as ambivalent and disjointed in its counter-narrative.

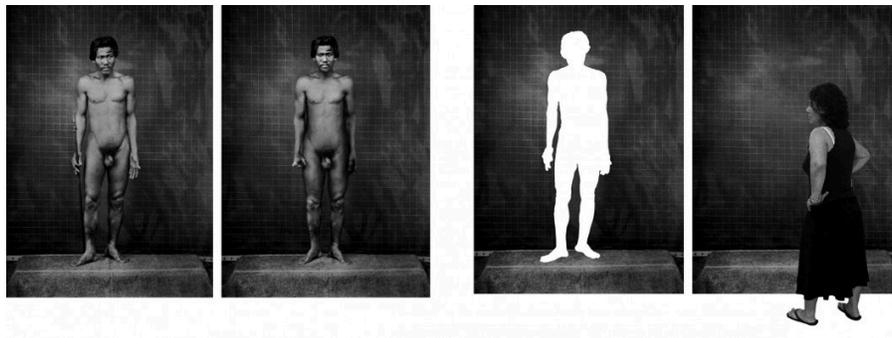


Figure 8.

Yee I-Lann, *Study of Lamprey's Malayan Male I & II*, 2009, black and white digital print on Kodak Endura paper, diptych each 60 × 42 cm. Digital image courtesy of Yee I-Lann and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Considering the two together makes it apparent how, at the level of institutional ambition, each was vaguely about a post-colonial (and certainly not decolonial) imperative, and more telling of how empire is imagined today to locate a sense of national self across time, and in vexed relation to an Other. But beyond showing how "empire" respectively serves the historical imagination, the two realisations of *Artist and Empire* revealed important

fissures within their institutions and public spheres. Perhaps through the metaphor of the inverted telescope, exhibition histories could give form to such multiple senses of feeling afforded by the historical present.

Response by

Lucy Steeds, Reader in Art Theory and Exhibition History at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London

My work within exhibition histories—writing, editing, teaching, and curating—aims both to entangle and to open up art histories. I do not see the field in which I operate as demanding a shift away from the artwork, although this neglectful tendency is sometimes aridly apparent. Instead, I'd suggest an insistence on art seen in relation and in public. The practice of exhibition histories does not focus so much on the isolated, intact artwork but, rather, approaches it in conjunction and puts it into question. How does art develop dialogues with adjacent art—and non-art—with a host environment, institutional ideologies, and among geopolitically and historically particular publics?

I have previously written about the interdisciplinary field of exhibition histories as having the political potential of a “minor” mode that rears its head powerfully within the majoritarian registers of disciplinary art history (after Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure*, 1975). I still feel that this sets the bar high for what we aim to achieve when we commission and shape books in Afterall's *Exhibition Histories* series. However, as I have watched the field become more widely established over time, I perceive more conventional norms emerging in some quarters—at worst ossifying and commercialising past moments of radical practice.

In order to address the “London, Asia” topic in this special issue of *British Art Studies*, I want to elaborate my thoughts further via Afterall's work to revisit and analyse *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Postwar Britain* (1989–1990). This show, curated by artist Rasheed Araeen for the Hayward Gallery in London and a UK tour, united art which had largely been overlooked by the white British establishment at the time. A modern-and-contemporary art survey—foregrounding those usually left out of such shows on racist grounds—it met a mixed critical reception at the time: in outline, conservative authors proved dismissive, if not derisive, while those convinced that anti-racist cultural change was badly needed defended it strongly. The exhibition's art-historical achievements are easy to see in retrospect, with works by many of its participating artists more recently getting the consideration long awaited, including steps—albeit falteringly—towards entering into the British national canon.

In the ten years since we commissioned Jean Fisher to reappraise *The Other Story* in 2009, the need to assert an internationalism and transnationalism within British culture—against a hostile, exclusionary nationalism—has only become more urgent. In response, we have initiated a microsite dedicated to online reconsideration of the exhibition. For us, this is an exciting first

venture into the digital mode for exhibition histories: a modest exploration of what is possible in a virtual environment rather than on the printed page. Specifically, the microsite is populated by such interrelated elements as installation photographs, gallery plans, and audio-clips read from contemporaneous reviews—all positioned alongside critical reflection. Amplifying the ambitions for our books, we have started work online to: (1) mobilise archival traces of *The Other Story* into a visuospatial, kinaesthetic, and situated proposition;²⁷ and (2) examine the socio-political implications of that proposition, in its place and time, from plural perspectives in the here and now.

My own essay on the microsite is constructed as an exhibition tour.²⁸ It argues for the hang of the show on the upper floor of the gallery (in contrast to that below) as challenging the teleological thrust of traditional art history; and for its intensifying the anti-imperial address made possible through bringing artworks together. Moreover, in the context of symposia staged to accompany more recent exhibitions, I have sought to articulate how the specific display circumstances for *The Other Story* shifted on travelling to Manchester in 1990, with implications for our understanding of works by Rasheed Araeen²⁹ and Li Yuan-chia,³⁰ in particular (Figs. 9 and 10).



Figure 9.

Works by Li Yuan-chia (foreground) and Rasheed Araeen (background), exhibited in *The Other Story*, Hayward Gallery, London, 1989-1990, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Rasheed Araeen.



Figure 10.

Works by Li Yuan-chia (foreground) and Rasheed Araeen and David Medalla (background), exhibited in *The Other Story*, Manchester Art Gallery, 1990, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Manchester Art Gallery.

In these and other moves I have made under the banner of exhibition histories, I have pursued methodologies responsive to the situations under study, rather than following something prescribed. My ambition is not only for rigorous research and criticality, but also for exploratory indiscipline—with an address not only to art historians but also, and equally, to artists, curators, and indeed all of art's wider possible publics.

Response by

Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol, PhD Candidate, Department of the History of Art, University of Michigan

One of the greatest contributions of the exhibition history boom in recent decades has been to address instances of artistic display and reception whose intensity *exceeds* and *eludes* prevailing institutional mediations. Scholars have highlighted ways that exhibitionary forms share the qualities of festivals, rituals, ceremonies, theater, and protest—modes of collective gathering and performance that, in their affective excesses, trouble the propriety of museum and gallery spaces.³¹ Much attention has also been given to how discourses around exhibitions emerge and circulate through modes of everyday and intimate social exchange—whether storytelling, rumor, gossip, or scandal—that fail to coalesce into rational discourse, and that elude registration in familiar archival modes of curatorial notes, catalogues, reviews, and photo documentation.³² Against stable mediating institutions, exhibition histories have alerted us to the hunger for immediacy, for embodied experience, for the presencing of the political, and for other allegedly irrational relationships to objects and persons that fall out of alignment with a traditional conception of the bourgeois public sphere (Fig. 11).

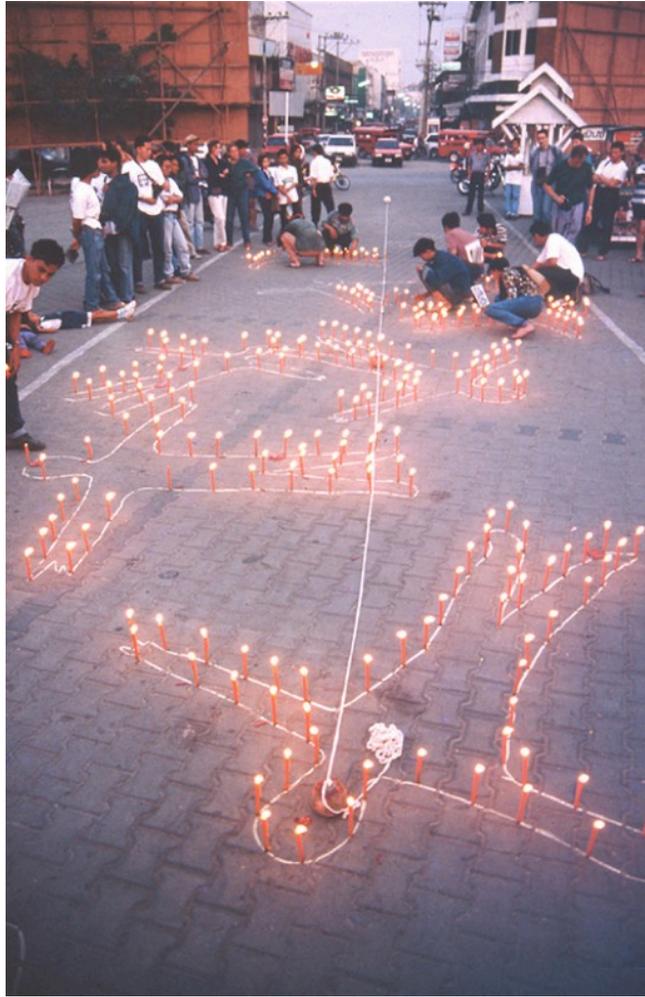


Figure 11.

Sunthorn Meesri, *Bot bat sommut* (role play), Tha Pae Gate, Chiang Mai, 1993, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Uthit Atimana and Gridthiya Gaweewong.

In this anti-normative guise, exhibition histories have the potential to dislodge the primacy of the generic liberal regime of mediation that has long served as the standard against which modernities of the Global South are compared. This decentering of the “free world” is most clearly exemplified in scholarship that takes seriously art produced under conditions of authoritarian rule or strong religious persuasion. Attuned to the excesses of populist sentiment, scholars like Patrick Flores, Sohl Lee, and Karin Zitzewitz have foregrounded the charismatic, erotic, and emotive energies brought to the ritual of viewing.³³ On the side of elusion and fugitivity, Joan Kee, Tina Le, Anneka Lenssen, and Chika Okeke-Agulu have redeemed the situated integrity of artistic displays that are often too readily dismissed as populist, propagandistic, fundamentalist, corrupt, cynical, or merely instrumental.³⁴

This growing body of research denatures the liberal norm of medial transparency and its attendant values of autonomy, agency, free speech, and direct communication.

If, as I have implied, the study of exhibitions should attend to the limits of conventional forms of institutional mediation, we may wish to register the sheer diversity of media ecologies and sociologies of art worlds within which instances of artistic display are embedded. But we should also resist sliding into simple empiricism that treats exhibitions merely as a class of primary sources for an ever-expanding global art history. The point, rather, is that nothing about exhibitionary form is self-evident. With the discipline moving towards narratives of artistic modernities that are assembled and imagined across multiple medial scales, clinging to a Eurocentric model of the exhibitionary complex—centered on the public museum, private gallery, and independent criticism—becomes increasingly untenable (Fig. 12).



Figure 12.

Jose Maceda, *Cassettes 100*, Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1971, photograph. Collection of the UP Center for Ethnomusicology, University of the Philippines. Digital image courtesy of UP Center for Ethnomusicology, University of the Philippines. Photo: Nathaniel Gutierrez.

The sense of urgency that attends to the creation of new types of institutions and new modes of mediation today tells us that established norms and forms of museology are already faltering.³⁵ Several trends can be observed. Experiments deeply rooted in the specificity of urban and rural formations in the Global South run apace, whether in the likes of the artist collective *ruangrupa*, which revels in the chaotic energy of Jakarta, or the folkloric museum *Arna Jharna*, which opens itself up to the sacred ecology of the Thar

Desert.³⁶ Impact investing and social enterprise drive the long-term development of alternative artistic infrastructures, such as the multi-disciplinary platform of the Dhaka Art Summit and the grass-roots business network of Économusées.³⁷ Finally, digital technologies afford object lessons that break down barriers between the singular artifact and the wisdom of indigenous communities, as with Te Papa’s and Vanuatu Cultural Centre’s initiatives to unsettle property claims of the (settler-)colonial state.³⁸

What these contemporary instances of unruly and unprocessed museology have in common is an optimism that the exhibiting of art will find a vital place at the heart of communities and publics. Perhaps it is in this spirit that exhibition histories should be carried forth: as a study that is less enamored by art and the institutional mediations of the art world as we know it, and more curious and more caring about the *people* for whom art matters.

Footnotes

- 1 Felix Vogel, On the Canon of Exhibition History, in Ruth E. Iskin (ed.), *Re-Envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon: Perspectives in a Global World* (London: Routledge, 2017), 189–202.
- 2 See Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World’s Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
- 3 “Our History”, website of the Soane Museum, <https://www.soane.org/about/our-history> (accessed 30 June 2019).
- 4 While I value the useful Afterall series, for example, I am more critical of the projects on which they report, seeking as I do the unique tensions between expats or experts and the “local” players. Most of the Afterall books valorize the expats and experts, in my analysis.
- 5 “When Attitudes became Norms”, Jones, *The Global Work of Art*, 171.
- 6 Jones, *The Global Work of Art*.
- 7 This research on Syed Sadequain is in preparation with Sarah Rifky and will be published in the *Canonicity* volume resulting from the symposium of that name at Wesleyan University in February 2019.
- 8 For the “Picasso manqué syndrome”, see Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India’s Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922–1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 7. Mitter continued this theme in “Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery”, *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (December 2008): 531–548, and as late as 2014 with “Collapsing Certainties”, *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs* (Summer 2014), online at: <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/collapsing-certainties/>. For another variation on this theme, see Simon Gikandi, “Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference”, *Modernism/Modernity* 10, no. 3 (September 2003): 455–480.
- 9 Mukherjee quoted in Lekha J. Shankar, “Using a Unique Medium”, *Hindustan Times*, n.p.
- 10 Mukherjee quoted in Shankar, “Using a Unique Medium”.
- 11 Mukherjee, “Knots: Interview with Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton and William Furlong” (1993), File 1, Archive of Modern Art Oxford (MAO), no page.
- 12 M. Ramachandran, “Oriental Reflections on Sculpture”, *Arts & Review, The Statesman*, 2 October 1995, 27; Bharati Chaturvedi, “Sensuality in Hemp”, *Indian Express*, 15 October 1995, n.p.; and Ranjit Hoskote, “High and Popular Art in Proximity”, *The Times of India*, 15 February 1996, 10.
- 13 Emilia Terracciano “Urpflanze: The Probing Sculptures of Mrinalini Mukherjee”, in Shanay Jhaveri (ed.), *Mrinalini Mukherjee* (Mumbai: Met Breuer and Shoestring Publishers, 2019), 161–175.
- 14 Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Press, 2000).
- 15 Keith Moxey, *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 16.
- 16 Robert Hopper, The Henry Moore Sculpture Trust. Letter to Sushma Bahl, The British High Commission, British Council Division, New Delhi, India, 23 July 1990. File 5, Archive of Modern Art Oxford (MAO).
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- 21 Tania Guha, "Mrinalini Mukherjee: Labyrinths of the Mind", *Third Text* 8, nos. 28-29 (1994): 165-168. It is useful here to recall that *The Day of the Triffids* was published four years after the independence of India and the formal dissolution of the British Empire. The novel shed light on the fraught nature of social collective consolidation as the basis of modern British democracy. This prompted legislation like the 1948 British Nationality Act, which delineated colonial "subjects" from British citizens, in part by making ethnicity, culture, and territory markers of national belonging. See Erik Brice Jaccard, *Speculative Fiction, Catastrophe, and the Devolutionary Imagination in Postwar Britain*, unpublished PhD dissertation submitted to Washington University, 2017, 69. For more on the British Nationality Act, see Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 7-14; and Allan Hepburn (ed.), *Around 45: Literature, Citizenship, Rights* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 11-16. For how these debates played out in the realm of post-war British sculpture in relation to Anish Kapoor's sculpture, see Paul Overy, "'Lions and Unicorns': The Britishness of Postwar British Sculpture", *Art in America* 79, no. 9 (September 1991): 105-110.
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- 33 Patrick D. Flores, "Social Realism: The Turns of a Term in the Philippines," *Afterall* 34 (Autumn/Winter 2013): 62-75; Sohl Lee, "Images of Reality/Ideals of Democracy : Contemporary Korean Art, 1980s-2000s," (PhD dissertation, University of Rochester, 2014); Karin Zitzewitz, *The Art of Secularism: The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India* (London: Hurst & Co., 2014).
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- 35 Robert R. Janes, *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance, or Collapse?* (London: Routledge, 2009).
- 36 David Teh, "Who Cares a Lot? Ruangrupa as Curatorship," *Afterall* 30 (Summer 2012): 108-117; Rustom Bharucha, "Museums Are Not for Posterity: The Making and (Un)Making of Museums in the 21st Century," in *Making a Museum in the 21st Century* (New York: Asia Society Museum, 2014), 129-136.
- 37 Dhaka Art Summit, www.dhakaartsummit.org; Économusées, www.economusees.com.
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Exhibitions in Print

Sharmini Pereira and Sneha Ragavan

Abstract

Raking Leaves was founded in 2008 in the UK as an independent, non-profit organisation with an aim to publish artist books, with an emphasis on the geopolitical and cultural contexts of South Asia. With a focus on exploring the collaborative potential of artistic practice, of thinking beyond the “art object”, Raking Leaves has consistently pushed the boundaries of how objects and ideas are disseminated, viewed, and engaged with. Some of its publications include, The One Year Drawing Project: May 2005–October 2007 by Muhanned Cader et al. (2008); Pearls by Simryn Gill (2008); Name, Class, Subject by Aisha Khalid (2010); Side by Side by Imran Qureshi (2010); The Incomplete Thombu by T. Shanaathanan (2012); The Speech Writer by Bani Abidi (2012); and the recently published The A-Z of Conflict (2019). The founder and director of Raking Leaves, Sharmini Pereira looks back at her engagement with the artist book as a form, the conditions and contexts of the founding of Raking Leaves in the UK, and its relationship with contemporary cultural and political ecologies, in the following interview with Sneha Ragavan.

Authors

Director of Raking Leaves and co-founder of The Sri Lanka Archive of Contemporary Art, Architecture, and Design

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Interview

Sneha: What were the specific conditions and contexts that led to the founding of Raking Leaves as an organisation in the UK in 2008?

Sharmini: While I was co-curating the first Singapore Biennale in September 2006, I mooted the idea about commissioning art projects in the form of books with artists like Simryn Gill, Bani Abidi, Jagath Weerasinghe, Muhanned Cader and Shahidul Alam, all of whom I was working with at the time. Raking Leaves was borne out of these conversations and a belief that curated books could provide a way for raising awareness about artists living outside of Europe and the USA that did not rely on exhibitions. I invited Simryn Gill to create one of the first book projects because I admired the way she thought about the circulation of ideas through objects (Fig. 1). Alongside Gill's artist's book, I also had the idea for *The One Year Drawing Project* and of working with Muhanned Cader, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, T. Shanaathanan and Jagath Weerasinghe on a drawing exchange, which was conceived as a challenge to the workshop-orientated art projects that proliferated in Sri Lanka at the time, in response to funding and discussions about peace and reconciliation (Fig. 2). Our first meeting took place in Colombo at Muhanned's house in 2005. Shanaathanan managed to join us, despite the fact that travel between Jaffna and Colombo was subject to security restrictions. I recall saying goodbye to him with a sense of trepidation as he stepped back into a reality that few of us had any idea about. On reflection, the context of the war in Sri Lanka has thrown a long shadow of influence over Raking Leaves.



Figure 1.

Simryn Gill, Pearls, 2008. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Raking Leaves.

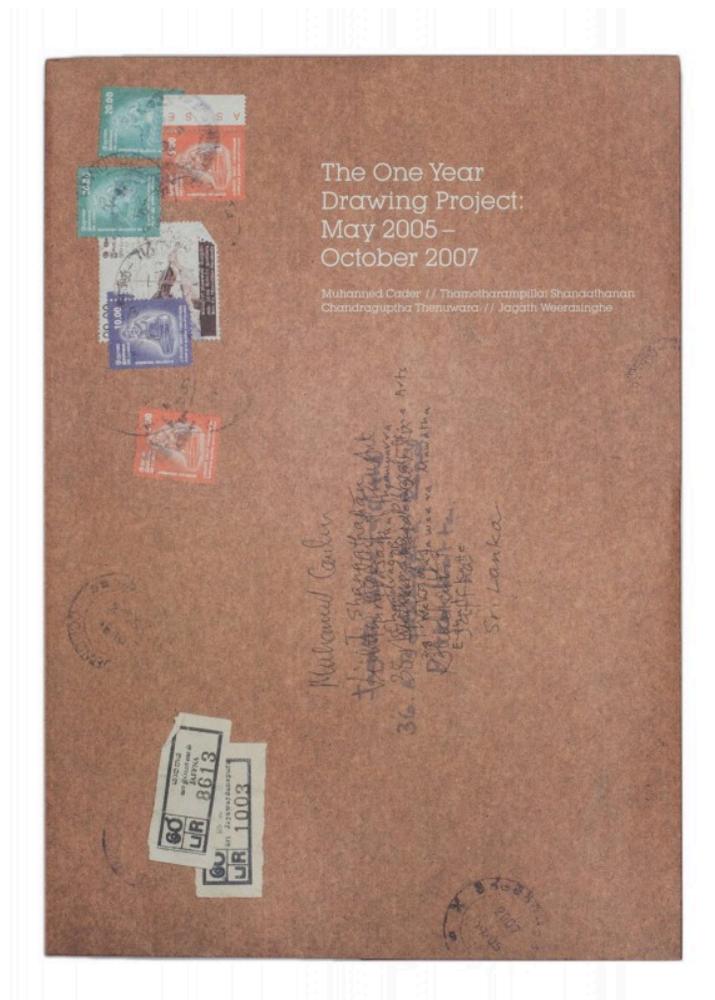


Figure 2.

Muhanned Cader Et Al, *The One Year Drawing Project: May 2005–October 2007*, 2008. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Raking Leaves.

In contrast to curatorial work, I had also done more work in the publishing industry working as an editor at a number of different small- and large-scale publishers. I was a trustee of the BookWorks in the UK. So, in many ways, my relationship with the printed form was much more developed compared to that of exhibitions. A trip to the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2005 however made it plain to me that this was an industry dominated by European men—and to be a publisher was not just about having ideas but bank rolling them too. Fortunately, for me, the Prince Claus Fund for Culture came on board as the first funder. And much to my surprise, prior to the launch of Raking Leaves in March 2008, an unexpected telephone call from the Arts Council England (ACE) confirming they wanted to fund Raking Leaves for a three-year period giving me the financial incubation I required. That same year, however, Lehman Brothers went into receivership ushering in a global downturn. Ten

years on, while circumstances have changed, securing financial support for more experimental forms of art-making and the context of conflict continues to impact the work many of us are still engaged with.

Sneha: How, if at all, have the changing geopolitical contexts of its shift of base to Sri Lanka affected the mission of Raking Leaves?

Sharmini: Thanks to ACE funding, I was able to shore up Raking Leaves' organisational structure and deliver a publishing programme that includes much talked about projects such as *The Speech Writer* by Bani Abidi (Fig. 3), *Side by Side* by Imran Qureshi, and the award-winning *Name Class Subject* by Aisha Khalid (Fig. 4). In 2010–2011, however, I decided to relocate to Sri Lanka, from where I had been coming and going for over 15 years. While the move required looking for an alternative funding source, it also allowed Raking Leaves to follow its founding mission, which was simply to commission and publish artists' books. My interest from the start was never to set up an arts organisation which would grow over the years, employing more people and delivering an education programme, etc. This was the type of arts organisation favoured by ACE but not a model particularly suited to publication-based curating. Though my decision was sad, it was absolute and with the move to Sri Lanka, Raking Leaves made it possible, for example, to set up—with T. Shanaathanan and P. Ahilan—the Sri Lanka Archive of Contemporary Art, Architecture and Design in Jaffna, which has been running for over six years. The public benefit and learning opportunities generated by SL Archive over the years is incomparable to the impact of any of Raking Leaves' publishing projects. Sometimes one's mission grows as a response to something rather than as a set of objectives that are measurable and quantifiable.



Figure 3.
Bani Abidi, *The Speech Writer*, 2012. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Raking Leaves.



Figure 4.

Aisha Khalid, Name Class Subject, 2010. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Raking Leaves.

Sneha: Given that Raking Leaves primarily works with the artists' book, which is, as you have identified, a minor form, where do you locate its role and function in contemporary contexts of art publishing, exhibiting, and viewing?

Sharmini: Prior to setting up Raking Leaves, I was a recipient of grant funding in the UK from ACE. All the funds I received were awarded on the basis of my ethnicity, where my work was counted in statistical terms as secondary. I was categorised as Black Minority Ethnic (BME), a term that conflates and confounds identities of marginalisation in relation to what is construed as the norm—to be white. As pressing as it is to find ways to address inequality, being tagged by a system of subjugation does not allow professionally qualified individuals to compete in an already competitive playing field. Speaking at the Paul Mellon Centre's conference in 2016, I asked what are the differences between organisations that are supported by

RFO funding compared to organisations that are borne out of specific cultural diversity initiatives? ¹ Projects like Organisation for Visual Arts (OVA), INiVA, Rich Mix, Autograph, for example? Is the perceived difference between such organisations healthy or harmful? Are organisations borne out of cultural diversity initiatives in effect widening the gap between the centre and the periphery? What in turn is being constructed, at an organisational level with regard to certain kinds of narratives? If some professionals are marginalised as different, why can't the same be said of art forms, the artist's book being one such example? The conceit of seeing it as such was what I wished to raise in analogy to arts funding in the UK.

Sneha: What has been Raking Leaves' relationship to the art market as a site for circulation and sales of your publications? Could you share any instances where it proved to be advantageous, and vice versa, some challenges you encountered.

Sharmini: Art fairs have often included "publishing" sections but these have tended to be restricted to publishers of art journals. The adverts in such journals have always had close ties for the commercial gallery sector, so it's not surprising to see art fairs accommodating them. Over the last few years, however, the art market has seen the rise of fairs specialising in artist's books. Printed Matter's New York Artist Book Fair has led the way on this front and is the biggest. What's been interesting to see is how places like Sharjah, Singapore, and Hong Kong initiate their own art book fairs. Participating in such events has been hugely beneficial to Raking Leaves in helping to establish a place for artist-led critical publishing projects within an arena that caters to the market. Many museums, mostly in the USA, have turned their attention to acquiring artist books for their collections, recognising the form as something curators, writers, and artists are using to produce work, and therefore something they wish to collect. Alongside the standard editions, Raking Leaves has always produced collector's editions too. I am seeing collecting institutions buy and collect both. In some cases, institutions and collectors have wanted to buy the original works that were made to create the artist's books, and more recently, there has been interest in buying materials related to the production process too, such as make ready print sheets and printing proofs.

Sneha: Could you discuss why the concept of "movement" holds significance to the work of Raking Leaves? For instance, one sees movement in, among other aspects, the fact of its publication of books by artists from Asia, while Raking Leaves itself was located in the UK; its shift of base to Sri Lanka; the travelling of the artist books themselves, and more.

Sharmini: When I set up Raking Leaves, I wanted to embrace an art form that lent itself to dissemination, in the way that seeds can be dispersed by the wind, birds, insects etc. Where, in effect, the circulation of an object, in

this case a book, was subject to modes of dissemination and reception that were indifferent to the orthodox distribution channels of culture found in exhibitions, art fairs, biennales etc. I'm aware of the inherent idealism in saying this but I think it's always important to know what you are pushing against and why. I grew up surrounded by books not exhibitions, which were unfamiliar spaces. I therefore came to associate the movement of information and ideas more with the printed form. Copies of the *National Geographic* with their full bleed, glossy photo-journalist images provided me with my first taste of a world out there. As a child, I also had a copy of a Good News Bible that I treasured because of the tissue-like paper of the pages. As I started to travel and stay in hotels, I was perplexed to find copies of the Bible in the drawer of the bedside table. I have always been tempted to do a project where all Bibles in all hotel rooms would be replaced with Raking Leaves books.

Sneha: There seems to be a consistent effort through your work to complicate the concepts of both region and nation. For instance, you have on previous occasions spoken about South Asia as a fraught category, particularly in the context of the art world and the Indianisation of the region. Could you elaborate?

Sharmini: The category of "South Asia" is a relational term that has been used by many exhibition makers, arts funders, and institutions as a way of focusing on a geographic grouping of countries that excludes seeing them in relation to historic, economic, social, and legal determinants. On a global scale, India occupies one of the largest landmasses in the world, warranting attention on the basis of scale and population alone. Its scale has, however, had the side effect of eclipsing attention from neighbouring countries to the extent that the idea of India has become synonymous with the idea of South Asia, excluding countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, who each have complex histories of art that necessitate being looked at on their own terms. The Indianisation of the region cannot be ignored but it can also be countered over time as art worlds, markets, artists, scholars, and exhibitions in the region offer accounts that are not India-centric. I have recently been reading a brilliant exchange between Stuart Hall and David Scott in *BOMB Magazine* (2005) about the future of critical enquiry. Talking about Scott's work, Hall says, "in his new book, *Conscripts of Modernity*, [Scott] proposes not that we give better answers to the old questions, but that the questions themselves are no longer relevant—because they belong to a different 'problem space' and need to be radically refashioned." The category of "South Asia", in Scott's terms, can be seen as a "problem space" of a particular point in history and within a particular geopolitical understanding of the region. What we need to do today is ask different questions so that we can overcome the Indianisation that has dominated the region.

Sneha: Language—be it as a site of the operation of power, or of fostering communities and milieus—has been a crucial site of address for several of Raking Leaves’ projects, and in particular the forthcoming book *The A-Z of Conflict*. Could you say more about why language and translation are such crucial sites of enquiry?

Sharmini: *The A-Z of Conflict* is the first tri-lingual artist’s book to be published by Raking Leaves (Figs. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12). The premise of the project set out to explore the extent to which new words had been borne out of conflict or if existing words gained new meanings. Using the format of a children’s ABC book, which juxtaposes letters, words, and images the project has taken five years to create, compile, and edit. In its final form, it is the largest project to date in terms of volume and number of artists. Over 1,000 new artworks were specially commissioned from ten artists: Abdul Halik Azeez, Muhanned Cader, Arjuna Gunarathne, Nina Mangalanayagam, Nillanthan, Anomaa Rajakaruna, T. Shanaathanan, Anushiya Sundaralingam, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, and Kamala Vasuki. A team of 23 editors and translators were also involved plus a designer and an extremely patient printer. What defines the project are the three languages spoken in Sri Lanka: English, Sinhala, and Tamil. The history of conflict in Sri Lanka has been the subject of many important books, plays, films, and art works over the years but few have addressed the role language has played. *The A-Z of Conflict*, in spite of its size and scale, only starts to scratch the surface about a subject that has contributed on so many levels to where the country finds itself today.

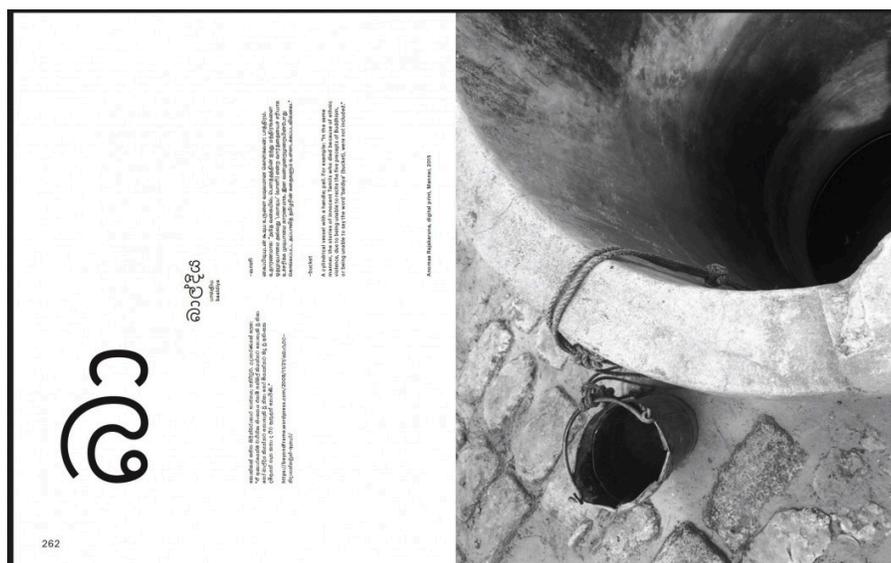


Figure 5.

Anomaa Rajakaruna, *The A-Z of Conflict*, 2019. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Raking Leaves.

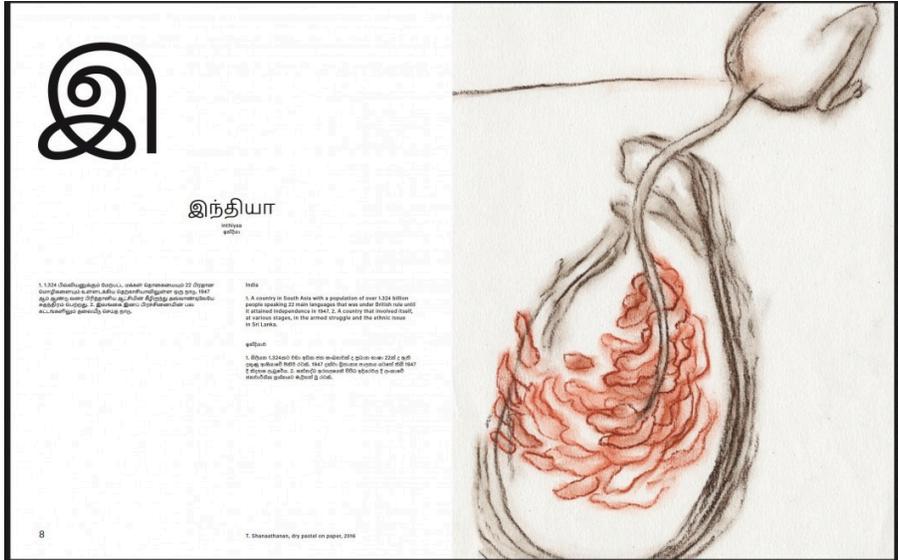


Figure 6. T. Shanaathanan, *The A-Z of Conflict*, 2019. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Raking Leaves.



Figure 7. Anushiya Sundaralin, *The A-Z of Conflict*, 2019. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Raking Leaves.



Figure 8. Muhanned Cader, *The A-Z of Conflict*, 2019. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Raking Leaves.

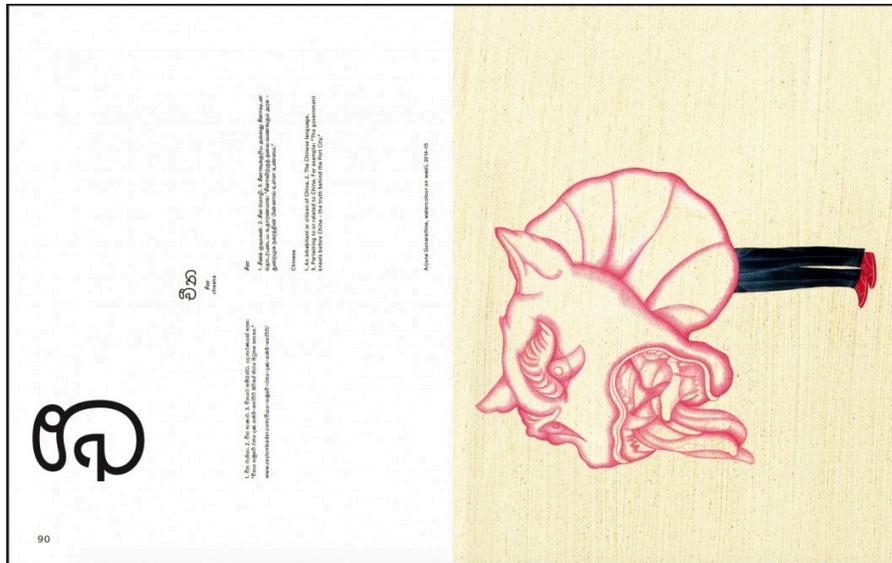


Figure 9. Arjuna Gunarathne, *The A-Z of Conflict*, 2019. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Raking Leaves.



Figure 10. Nillanthan, *The A-Z of Conflict*, 2019. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Raking Leaves.

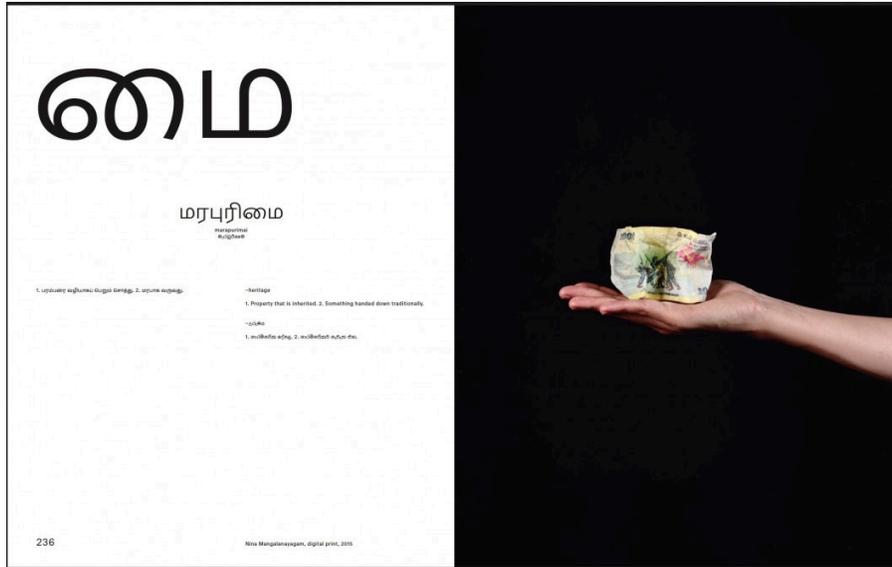


Figure 11. Nina Mangalanaya, *The A-Z of Conflict*, 2019. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Raking Leaves.

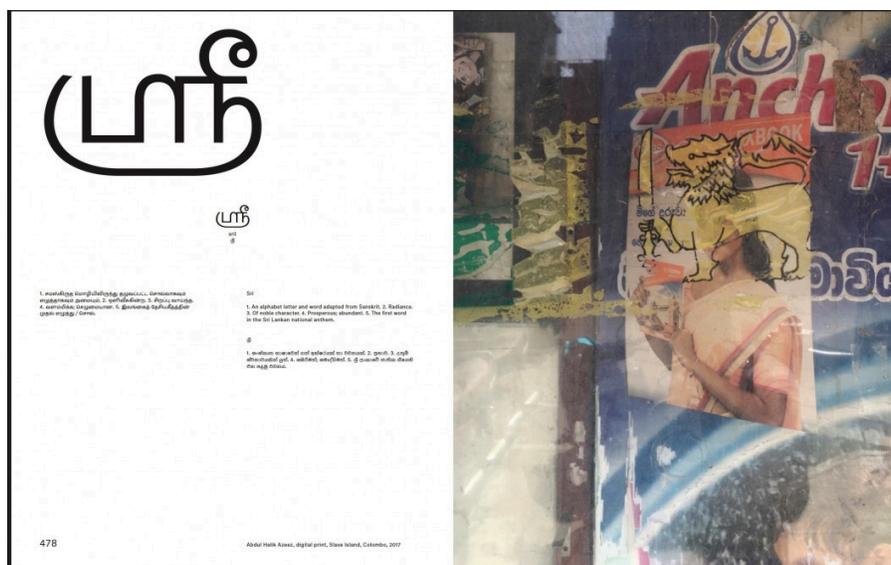


Figure 12.
Halik Azeez, *The A-Z of Conflict*, 2019. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Raking Leaves.

Sneha: How do curated publications or artist books challenge how we think about exhibition practices?

Sharmini: They tend to confound many curators because exhibiting a book-based work has traditionally been something that is seen in a vitrine with an acrylic bonnet over it. The audience cannot touch it, or turn the pages, unlike in a bookshop, where in most cases, these objects have also existed. Tethering books to tables is also another common way to encounter publications within an exhibition space. Ironically, this is how illuminated manuscripts in Europe were dealt with, when literacy did not exist among the masses and those who could read occupied a position of authority and power over the audience, who were there to listen, usually to the contents of a sermon. Tethering books to tables has, thus, always reminded me of the proselytising role books have played historically. Many good exhibition histories however do start to unpack so much important information and I hope in time, there will be people who start to do the same with artists' books where they start to consider the collaborative nature of the productions, the design decisions, the curatorial motivations, and the funding involved.

Footnotes

- 1 The conference was "Showing, Telling, Seeing: Exhibiting South Asia in Britain, 1900-Now", held on 30 June-1 July, 2016, at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, London, <https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/whats-on/past/showing-telling-seeing-conference>.



Curating the Cosmopolis

Iwona Blazwick and Rattanamol Singh Johal

Abstract

Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis was the first temporary exhibition mounted at Tate Modern from February to April 2001. The exhibition's central problematic was the intensification—at specific moments in particular places—of the relationship between urban experience and cultural praxis. Iwona Blazwick organised the show, working with a team of curators from within and outside Tate, to showcase the relationship between vanguard culture and the urban through the twentieth century across nine cities from Asia (Tokyo, 1967–1973, Reiko Tomii; Bombay/Mumbai, 1992–2001, Geeta Kapur and Ashish Rajadhyaksha), Africa (Lagos, 1955–1970, Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe), the Americas (Rio de Janeiro, 1950–1964, Paulo Venancio Filho; New York, 1969–1974, Donna De Salvo), and Europe (Paris, 1905–1915, Serge Fauchereau; Vienna, 1908–1918, Richard Calvocoressi and Keith Hartley; Moscow, 1916–1930, Lutz Becker). Now director of the Whitechapel Gallery, Blazwick looks back at this ambitious exhibition, discussing its development, challenges, and legacy in the following interview with art historian Rattanamol Singh Johal.

Authors

Iwona Blazwick is Director of the Whitechapel Gallery

Rattanamol Singh Johal is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University

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issue-13/johal-blazwick](https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-13/johal-blazwick)

Interview

Rattan: The late 1980s and early 1990s might be a logical place to begin this conversation, specifically your work at the ICA as director of exhibitions, followed by the work in art publishing. All this preceded your arrival at Tate but will help chart the trajectory of your career through the lens of projects and experiences that seem particularly formative looking back now.

Iwona: When I joined the ICA in the 1980s, we presented a sequence of shows—*About Time*, *Women's Images of Men* and *Issue* (initiated by Sandy Nairne)—that foregrounded feminism. There was a dawning institutional realisation that so many different practitioners and discourses had been excluded solely on the basis of gender; and from that it became clear that geographies were being excluded as well. So, it was a two-step process. This was also in the context of the remarkable sequence of talks organised by Lisa Appignanesi, who invited many different theorists to come and speak at the ICA on a set of themes: one strand was on desire, another—so ahead of its time—was called “identity”; there was a conference on postmodernism (organised by Michael Newman); but the word “colonialism” hadn't really surfaced as a trope within that discourse. Every week someone of the calibre of Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, or Julia Kristeva would come and speak—it was a kind of utopia! I was a baby curator, and it was like being at some astonishing university or academy.

There were also, of course, many artists of different ethnicities who lived and worked in London, who were fighting for visibility and raising consciousness about the politics of race. A further critical discourse around anthropology, orientalism, and alterity was contributed by figures such as Rasheed Araeen and those who published in *Third Text*, Edward Said, James Clifford, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak ... and then in 1994, Gilane Tawadros staged this absolutely revolutionary Iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts) event at the Tate Gallery, a conference called *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*. Many artists came and spoke: Jimmy Durham, Gordon Bennett—all these different perspectives that had been completely absent or marginalised came to the fore. There are two other big moments in this story. In 1989, *Magiciens de la terre*, which is a very problematic show, of course, and severely criticised, but it really did open up a global perspective. And *documenta X*, curated by Catherine David, whose focus at that point was Latin America; she raised awareness of artists such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark.

Rattan: And how did all this come to bear on the discussions around Tate Modern's opening hang, when you joined the institution's team in 1997?

Iwona: When I joined the team at the nascent Tate Modern, we were charged with installing the twentieth-century collection; it caused us to reflect more broadly on the collections' acquisition policies, the gaps, the absences—and occasionally, the surprising presence of non-Western artists. The new museum opened in 2000 with the collections displays; our first exhibition—*Century City*—came a year later (Figs. 1, 2, 3, and 4). Tate Modern director Lars Nittve agreed that it was the perfect opportunity to set a new agenda. However, we also recognised that we had to trust global knowledge and specialist art historians, so we invited guest curators to address the cities that had each constituted crucibles of the avant-garde.



Figure 1.

Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis, Tate Modern, February–April 2001, Digital image courtesy of Tate.



Figure 2.

Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis, Tate Modern, February–April 2001, installation photograph of the Bombay/Mumbai section 1992–2001, featuring work by Vivan Sundaram, Sudarshan Shetty, Bhupen Khakhar, and paintings by Sudhir Patwardhan and Tyeb Mehta. Digital image courtesy of Tate.



Figure 3.

Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis, Tate Modern, February–April 2001, London section 1990–2001, featuring *The Shop* by Tracy Emin and Sarah Lucas. Digital image courtesy of Tate.



Figure 4.

Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis, Tate Modern, February-April 2001, Tokyo section 1967-1973, featuring *From Surface to Surface* by Susumu Koshimizu. Digital image courtesy of Tate.

Rattan: I watched your presentation at the “Showing, Telling, Seeing: Exhibiting South Asia in Britain 1900-Now” conference where you talked about three large areas of work leading up to the opening of the new museum: collections, site-specific projects in and around the building as it was being transformed, and developing a temporary exhibition programme. What was the vision for the temporary exhibition programme when you joined the team? The Tate Modern project archive contains papers from discussions on the subject in the early to mid-1990s, involving people like Sandy Nairne and Jeremy Lewison, and those early templates for possible exhibitions don’t contain any evidence of a show as ambitious and avowedly international as *Century City*.

Iwona: (Laughter) Well, you know, I was an outsider. I had been working freelance in Antwerp on the European Capital of Culture, 1993 and in Louisiana [*Work in Progress* as part of *NowHere* at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 1996]. I worked at Phaidon Press developing their contemporary artists’ monograph series, and a series called *Themes and Movements*. These anthologies of artists’ works and primary texts required a huge amount of research and very often, in particular around non-Western practitioners, we just drew a blank. It became clear that there was another job to be done. I was also teaching on the first curatorial course in Britain, at the Royal College of Art. It was year two of the course; I’d never taught before and it was frankly terrifying. But I thought as I am not an academic but a curator, it would be interesting to tell the story of twentieth-century art as a history of exhibitions. So, I put together a series of talks on that, and

then I challenged my little team of students—there were 12—to each research a non-Western avant-garde. We made a book called *Tales of the Unexpected* that included case studies from Jamaica, Mexico, Eastern Europe, the DDR, Palestine, India, and so on ... From India, it was Group 1892—all new to us, all new to everybody. It was tough because there was virtually no documentation, no Internet, no travel, no nothing. I don't know how they did it!

From these case studies, it became very clear that there were paradigm shifts in art generated by communities of artists all over the world. Usually, because there wasn't the economic infrastructure to support them and also because of the lack of resources and documentation, they disappeared. But they were there, and that seemed to me to merit further investigation. You could tell that modernism was a global phenomenon, it truly was. There were of course spheres of influence, an international style if you like, but there was also an intellectual fervour and an aesthetic language that developed according to the specificities of each local situation.

When I joined the Tate, I had been out of the institution for a while, and felt it was time for a fresh approach. My colleagues, Caro Howell, Frances Morris, Sophie McKinley, and I had our office in a former nurses' dormitory at the very top of Tate Britain. We had these flip charts and would come in every day and pull off large sheets of paper, cover them with ideas and stick them up on the walls. The flip charts became a mind map, a kind of gigantic drawing with no specific ownership. Looking back across these yellowing sheets of paper over a year of brainstorming, you could see what was exciting and what was frankly embarrassing. The point was it was a joint endeavour. Everyone threw ideas up on that thing, and so it evolved as a conversation.

It was a real privilege, and because everybody else was busy raising the money and building the building, they left us to it; we had *carte blanche*. Eventually, we developed eight possible iterations of the collection displays. We pitched four, knowing which one we wanted. Ironically, the one that succeeded and became the basis of the opening displays was also the most conventional because it was based on genres—the still life, the landscape, the nude, and history painting. We refigured these into binaries—but Nick Serota brilliantly added a third, intermediary term rooting them in practice. So the themes emerged as: “Still Life/Object/Real Life”; “Landscape/Matter/Environment”; “Nude/Action/Body”; and “History/Memory/Society”.

That team effort resulted in jettisoning chronology, which was better because huge chunks of the twentieth century just weren't represented in Tate's collection. The lack of non-Western art in the collection also became ever-more clear, and this was a way of trying to address that. Some people loathed it; there was great fury and outrage, and then some people just said,

“At last!” The curators loved it because it gave them the opportunity to author some truly experimental juxtapositions outside the linear march of chronology and its “isms”; it gave them agency. Also, it gave equivalence, parity, between practitioners from different times, spaces, and geographies.

Rattan: Was there a conversation about the particular gaps in the collection that you’ve alluded to, maybe being balanced out or addressed through the temporary exhibition programme?

Iwona: Yes, I think relatively early, it became accepted that there was this problem of global modernisms, which had to infuse the culture of the institution. It was slow, partly because little-known artists weren’t going to make money at the box office. Critics are conservative; audiences are conservative. *Century City* was a huge risk as the first show.

Rattan: It strikes me as really interesting that in the years immediately following *Century City*, there seems to have been a massive retrenchment, if you will. Even today, the economic rationale that governs decisions regarding Tate exhibitions is so strong that it’s quite surprising that *Century City* got through. Maybe it was that early moment—do you think there was something particularly generative and permissive about that time in the institution’s history?

Iwona: It’s true. If we had sat down and done the numbers the way that museums do today, it wouldn’t have happened. But the new director, Lars Nittve, who joined in 1999, was acutely aware of this kind of imbalance and proved tremendously supportive, even securing a sponsor from Sweden.

Rattan: At what point did he come into the picture? Was he involved in developing the idea for the actual show?

Iwona: He was really there to provide support—he described himself as our coach. The exhibition really built up steam in 2000; by that point, he had signed off on it as a concept and was behind it. The next step was finding the curators. Although we could draw on the expertise of our in-house curators Donna de Salvo and Emma Dexter, we also needed others who could provide both the historic and geographical knowledge. It was pre-Internet and quite hard to figure out who’s on the ground, who really could pull something like this off. Inevitably, you are drawn to figures with a certain amount of prominence already such as Okwui Enwezor, who was also curating *documenta* and *The Short Century*. We spent a long time and finally got this group together, which was hard work because they were so far flung.

Rattan: Everything came together between fall 1999 and the opening in February 2001—it’s completely mind-boggling that all of these people could be coordinated...

Iwona: I know, it was insane!

Rattan: And something that probably wouldn't happen today because you would give yourself five years to do a show like this. Moreover, the exhibition was interested in the intersection of the visual arts with forms of popular culture, music, cinema, and architecture, which was quite a unique way of thinking and presenting modernism at the time.

Iwona: Exactly. The installations we devised with our guest curators were also exciting. For each city, we asked "How do you make it into an experience? How do you avoid making the show like an illustrated book?" The exhibition had to have physicality. It had to have a sense of immersion, of theatre. So, for example, with Mumbai, we made a cinema in the Turbine Hall that evoked the environment that framed its cultural content—the structure sort of anchored it. The other aspect of the project was that there were a lot of ephemera. So, in the London section, we had all these fanzines, and that was easy to put together. It wasn't like negotiating for the loan of a Picasso. These materials are more immediate, generating a grass-roots feeling about an epoch ... It actually made the loans easier because they're not that valuable, or they're not in a public collection. The harder loan negotiations were around Vienna, Moscow, Paris, but not so much New York because Donna De Salvo had so many artists who were female, and who were not yet in any major collections!

Rattan: You've talked about the *New Internationalism* conference, and the critical discourses in London with Rasheed Araeen, the *Third Text* writers, and *The Other Story* artists, all of which were interestingly missing from the London section of the show. I'm sure someone like Rasheed would have come and seen the exhibition. What was the reaction from members of the Black Arts Movement? Even people like John Akomfrah, and other film and video practitioners, who were also very active in London in the 1990s were not a part of the picture at Tate.

Iwona: That's a very valid criticism. I have to say on the other hand, there appeared to be a kind of separatism about *Third Text* and Iniva. We sensed a not surprising antagonism towards an institution like Tate. *Third Text* was also very academic and theoretical in tone; and Emma Dexter, who curated the London section, was drawn to a more, I don't know, anarchic streak that characterised an emerging generation of artists in the late 1980s. We had this Michael Landy market stall; and satirical punk fanzines such as those generated by a group called Bank. There is a tongue-in-cheekness about a lot of British art of this era. At the time, it felt right also because the first shows of people like Michael Landy and Damien Hirst were in abandoned industrial spaces. They were in exactly the same kind of space [as the Turbine Hall]. In retrospect, however, I think it was an oversight—John

Akomfrah, Isaac Julien, Zarina Bhimji, Steve McQueen—all completely left out ... but Emma's point was to capture the transformation of the London art scene in the early 1990s.

Rattan: It is important to note the different methodologies employed by the curators. While many focused on presenting a cohesive group—in terms of age, movement, style—Geeta [Kapur] and Ashish [Rajadhyaksha] took a very different direction. They brought together an intergenerational group of practitioners, choosing works from the 1990s but referencing a much longer history of Indian modernism and its relationship to cinema since the 1940s.

Can you say a little bit about the aftermath of *Century City*? Lars articulated how it represented a kind of mission statement for the Tate going forward, and yet you can't really draw a straight line through to what's happening there today. The specialised acquisitions committees emerged later—Latin American art in the mid-2000s as an offshoot from North America, but the South Asia, Asia-Pacific, Middle-East, and North Africa committees have all been set up post-2010.

Iwona: No, you can't follow a straight line. The extent of press coverage was amazing; there were camera crews from all over the world. If only we had social media at the time, it would have been astonishing. But obviously, the show didn't really have a direct impact. Perhaps it just became impossible to tell certain stories without acknowledging a more diverse range of practitioners. I hope that might have been one consequence of the show. Phaidon, for example, when it does its art books and big surveys, has completely changed—their survey books now feature artists from all over the world. But it's like a drop of ink in a big glass of water. It has to filter through, even if you can't make a clear line from this to that—just the fact of it, I think, changed everything. I think the immediate beneficiaries were artists from Latin America, because it really propelled awareness and appreciation of Lygia Pape, Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica...

Rattan: Well, with that work I think there's a very direct connection to geometric abstraction in the Euro-American tradition. Of course, there are powerful readings of the Brazilian modernists through feminist, psychoanalytical, and indeed phenomenological lenses, but the visual experience of seeing that kind of work in a European or American museum is not quite as jarring.

Iwona: I think you're absolutely right about that emphasis on abstraction. Whereas, I think almost without exception, the work from India was figurative. They didn't have Nasreen Mohamedi, who is still quite a singular figure, to my knowledge.

Rattan: She is, and certainly did not fit within the larger arguments Geeta and Ashish were making in the Bombay/Mumbai section of *Century City*.

Iwona: We did a show in 2010 here at the Whitechapel Gallery, called *Adventures of the Black Square*, that included Nasreen Mohamedi but she was the only South Asian artist in that show. In 2001, the emphasis on figuration in modern and contemporary Indian art was an outlier in many ways, though it's not now, because figuration is back.

Rattan: Yes! These things change. (Laughter) You know, when it comes to impact, in a longer institutional history to be written towards the end of the century, everything up until the present will probably be considered part of the early years of Tate Modern—the institution isn't even twenty yet! So, maybe there will be the impression of a connection between *Century City*, the global acquisitions committees, and the recent monographic exhibitions of international artists (Saloua Raouda Choucair, Ibrahim El-Salahi, Bhupen Khakhar, Wifredo Lam etc.).

Iwona: It's a really interesting thing. When I was at the ICA, those three all-women exhibitions that Sandy Nairne commissioned made no impact on the market or the culture of the museum. Only years later did those artists we showed in the 1980s, like Rose Finn-Kelcey, Mary Kelly, Jenny Holzer, Martha Rosler, and Nancy Spero gain recognition. It takes years, although I think things have accelerated since then, partly because of social media and the Internet; but sometimes you can be too early. People aren't able to absorb it, or they do, but it doesn't manifest itself until a long time later. An institution or a canon is like an ocean liner, it takes 30 miles to stop and change direction!

Rattan: And today, where do you think institutions like the ICA, Whitechapel, Hayward sit in relation and response to the Tate when it comes to exhibiting international artists? They operate on different scales, but do you feel, at the Whitechapel for example, that you can do things more nimbly?

Iwona: Yes, we were able to do major exhibitions of Zarina Bhimji and Emily Jacir. But at Tate, not enough people would pay to see that show—that's the big issue for them right now. It's an issue for the Royal Academy and the Hayward. They rely on box office revenues and need to sell tickets. As I said earlier, audiences are conservative and want to see someone they've heard of. It's very difficult to broach that first step. But the Whitechapel can do that—currently we have an Iraqi-American artist, Michael Rakowitz, showing, and there are all sorts of exciting artists coming up.

Rattan: Nearly a decade after *Century City*, as director of the Whitechapel Gallery, you commissioned the ambitious exhibition *Where Three Dreams Cross*, bringing together another distinguished curatorial team (Sunil Gupta

with Shahidul Alam, Hammad Nasar, Kirsty Ogg, and Radhika Singh) to survey the history and present of photography on the Subcontinent (Figs 5 and 6). How did the ideas for this exhibition emerge and develop? Was working with external specialist curators something you continued to do post *Century City*? I am also interested in how *Century City* and *Where Three Dreams Cross* stand at two ends of a decade (the 2000s) known for its explosion of so-called “survey” exhibitions of non-Western modernisms and contemporary art at institutions in Europe and America. Such exhibitions have been called out for lacking curatorial rigor and inevitably exoticising the artists and regions they seek to promote. Both *Century City* and *Where Three Dreams Cross* surveyed global modernisms in different ways, and certainly stand in relation to (though also apart from) exhibitions like *Indian Highway* (Serpentine Gallery, 2008) or *Contemporary Iranian Art* (Barbican, 2001). Could you elaborate on this relationship and how you situate(d) your practice in the 2000s during this rapid expansion of interest in the non-West/global?

Iwona: I had come from a background of the ICA’s consciousness-raising programmes, all those exhibitions and talks of the 1980s and early 1990s that had put forward radical propositions directly challenging the canon. At the Whitechapel Gallery, *Where Three Dreams Cross* and shows like the Barjeel Collection of art from the Arab world or the archives of the Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis are part of a wider project to spotlight the geographical lacunae in modern art history. Through Geeta Kapur’s Bombay section of *Century City*, we had discovered the distinctive and diverse vision of Indian cinema. I proposed that one way of mapping the modern in South Asia was via the camera. We have a large South Asian community in the UK but their histories are dominated by representations of Empire—from our perspective. Photography enabled us to present ways in which South Asian communities represented themselves, their histories, and societies. At the same time, we wanted to celebrate the breadth and invention—from formal portraiture to documentary to abstraction—of South Asian photography.

We first invited Sunil Gupta, artist, curator, and frequent traveller between India and the UK to be the guest curator. He established the curatorial framework for the show and the rest of the team each contributed their specialist knowledge. It was an education for us all, as no comprehensive history exists. It was not only a historical exercise; we also wanted to reflect contemporary practice. In this respect, it was important to have a curator from outside the field (Kirsty Ogg) to bring an external perspective. It can be liberating to not know a local scene and explore it from the outside.



Figure 5.

Where Three Dreams Cross, Whitechapel Gallery, 2010, installation photograph. Whitechapel Gallery Archive. Digital image courtesy of Whitechapel Gallery.



Figure 6.

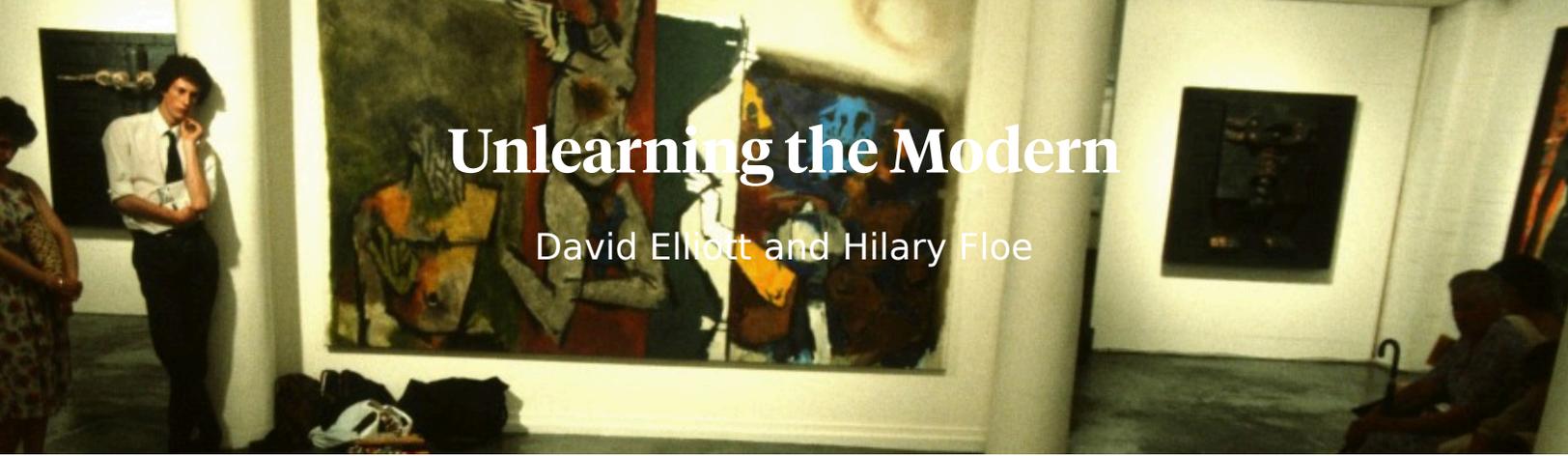
Where Three Dreams Cross, Whitechapel Gallery, 2010, installation photograph. Whitechapel Gallery Archive. Digital image courtesy of Whitechapel Gallery.

Rattan: Publications were an important aspect of both *Century City* and *Where Three Dreams Cross*. What work do you see these books doing, both at the time of the exhibition but perhaps more importantly in the future (or

present, if you will)? You worked in art publishing early in your career and I'd be interested to hear how you think that landscape has shifted, especially when it comes to non-Western art and artists?

Iwona: The catalogues for *Century City* and *Where Three Dreams Cross* completely sold out, proving the urgency and appetite for a global art history. These books offered glimpses of the immense wealth of art and ideas not only from South Asia but also from other regions that had been occluded by the art-historical canon. When I worked as commissioning editor at Phaidon Press in the mid-1990s, our access to information was very limited. At that time, exhibition catalogues from non-Western regions were rarely in translation, had tiny print runs, and virtually no distribution. Some introductions were made by artists themselves who have been mining archives—from their families, regions, or from suppressed government archives—to reveal local histories.

At the same time the proliferation of biennales—from Porto Allegre to Istanbul, Sharjah, Gwangju, Karachi or Kochi-Muziris—offer a multiplicity of platforms for contemporary art from every region. Today, we can brief our guest editors for the Documents of Contemporary Art anthologies published by Whitechapel Gallery with MIT Press, to include voices from every continent—documentation is emerging, texts can be found in translation, non-Western artists and thinkers are present in the West through residencies, conferences, and so on. The recognition of the presence of multiple modern art scenes, coupled with an awareness of their heterogeneity and global significance, has been a long, slow but exhilarating journey.



Unlearning the Modern

David Elliott and Hilary Floe

Abstract

*British curator David Elliott led the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford (MoMA) between 1976 and 1996. During this time, he developed a distinctively diverse and international programme in which twentieth-century art from Asia played a significant role, including landmark multi-exhibition projects devoted to India (1982), Japan (1985), and China (1993). Subsequently, he has been director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the Mori Art Gallery in Tokyo, and the Istanbul Modern, in addition to directing biennial exhibitions in Moscow, Kiev, and Sydney. He is currently vice-director and senior curator at the Redtory Museum of Contemporary Art (RMCA) in Guangzhou. His book *Art and Trousers: Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Asian Art* includes an essay reflecting on exhibitions of Asian art staged at MoMA during his time as director, and will be published by ArtAsiaPacific in spring 2020. He discusses those projects, in particular his influential series of exhibitions clustered under the title *India: Myth and Reality*, in this interview with curator and art historian Hilary Floe. Her doctoral dissertation considering the early history of MoMA (1965–1982) was completed at the University of Oxford in 2016.*

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Interview

Hilary: Over the course of your career, you spent twenty years as director of the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford curating—among many other things—both historical and contemporary Asian art exhibitions within a programme that was vastly more global than was considered the norm at this time. When we've talked in the past about your work in Oxford, you have mentioned that one of the things you were trying to do with your exhibitions was to intervene in British preconceptions about Asia, countering specific prejudices.

David: My own British and European prejudices as well. It wasn't intending to imply that "I'm enlightened and you're not." [But] I felt concerned and suspicious about how extremely prejudiced the contemporary art world and art market were about things beyond their expertise or interests.

Hilary: Your forthcoming book is a major publication, *Art and Trousers*, which addresses the context of contemporary art in Asia.¹ I was looking again at your list of past exhibitions, which is so remarkably broad and deep. You could tell the story of your career as a curator by pulling any number of geographic threads—whether it be Eastern Europe or Germany or Latin America or other locales. Why have you chosen to adopt this Asian framework?

David: I lived in Tokyo for five years and Istanbul for two years and have been interested in Asian art since I was a teenager, but what you are referring to is more than the vagaries of my personal biography. Asia is a great landmass from which so much of Western culture comes, providing a kind of alternative to the Greco-Roman world. Professionally, I came to it through my work on Russia and the Soviet Union, and through interest in the major civilisations of India, China, and central Asia. All of the big world religions are derived from either the fertile triangle or the Himalayas—you could even say that a lot of the indigenous cultures of the Americas are related in some way to the shamanist nomadic cultures of Siberia and north-eastern Asia. European imperialism cut its teeth in Asia and, in the process, discovered America. Amazing art has always been made throughout this vast, perplexing continent that we are still learning to understand and appreciate.

Hilary: In your book, you describe very compellingly the way one project for you begot another project—a game of hopscotch or following a thread, where one show would lead to another show would lead to another show, not coming fully enlightened but following a pathway of research and discovery. After your time as director of MoMA in Oxford and of Moderna Museet in Stockholm, you shifted to working within Asia, staging (among other things)

Asian art exhibitions there: for example, in Tokyo as founding director of the Mori Art Museum, and in your current role as vice-director and senior curator at the RMCA Guangzhou. For you, what kind of shift was it working on Asian art in Britain versus working in Asia itself? There's a lovely line where you talk about your relationship changing from that of a voyeur to a flaneur.

David: Well, there is an intimacy that arises when you're not just visiting a place. And for me, this was to do with everyday interactions and came from socialising with Japanese, or Turkish, or Chinese people, rather than being laagered in atomised expat communities.

Hilary: In terms of British audiences, did you make different kinds of assumptions about received knowledge? Is there something fundamentally different for you about curating "art from elsewhere"—also the title of the Hayward touring show of international contemporary art that you curated in 2014?

David: In Oxford, I knew that I was presenting exhibitions for British audiences. You can't assume that people have knowledge and, whether it is popular or not, the work has to be made intelligible (or "accessible" as we say in museums today). For example, in 1982, when I curated *India Myth and Reality: Aspects of Modern Indian Art* with Ebrahim Alkazi and Victor Musgrave, a lot of people regarded India as a "Third World" country and not "modern" at all.² Many thought it was a "backward" ex-colony and, on top of this, there was significant racial prejudice against Asian immigrants. Even Howard Hodgkin, who was on my board, a collector and connoisseur of classical Indian art, was uninterested in contemporary Indian art, apart from that of [his friend] Bhupen Khakhar. So, I realised that we had to build bridges. For this I applied various rules of thumb. Most important was "do I think this work is any good? Do I find it interesting? And if I do, how can I articulate it? How may it be communicated with other people?" If I could be satisfied on these fronts, for me at least, the exhibition should be realized and 70 percent of the job was accomplished.

Hilary: Looking at the list of artists you included in *Aspects of Modern Indian Art*, the exhibition of modern and contemporary art, for example, many of those are names that have become much more familiar to British audiences today (Fig. 1). I would argue that your exhibition contributed significantly to that process of canon formation.

David: Absolutely. It reflected the remarkable strength of work made by Indian artists from the period of independence to the early 1980s—this has only relatively recently been widely acknowledged. I was then learning on the hoof in the run up to the exhibition and made two substantial visits to India to see artists' work. For *Aspects of Modern Indian Art*, both Victor Musgrave and I wanted to include the painter V.S. Gaitonde, but Ebrahim

Alkazi, the third co-curator, wasn't keen on it and, as it was logistically complicated to get the right works, he was not included. But on balance, we made a really good, representative selection (Fig. 2).

The second part of a series of five exhibitions on aspects of contemporary Indian art and culture with supporting film programme and events at the Museum of Modern Art during Summer 1982. This programme focuses on popular art, ritual, film art, film and photography in present day India. The concepts of myth and reality are often indivisible in modern India, yet these remain a tension and irony in this indivisibility which lies at the root of much contemporary creative expression.

Part 2: 15 August - 9 October: The Other India; six contemporary Indian photographers.

Upper, New, Piper, Middle and Back Galleries: **27 June to 8 August 1982**

India: Myth and Reality; Aspects of Modern Indian Art

Bikash Bhattacharjee
Rameshwar Broota
Jogen Chowdhury
Satish Gujral
Husain
Anish Kapoor
Krishen Khanna
Ram Kumar
Nalini Malani
Tyeb Mehta
Mrinalini Mukherjee
Akbar Padamsee
Gieve Patel
Sudhir Patwardhan
A. Ramchandran
Raza
Mohan Samant
Francis Newton Souza
K.G. Subramanyan

The relationship between outside influence and indigenous tradition in modern Indian art is far from simple. Not surprisingly, contemporary Indian art reflects many of the concerns, styles and uncertainties which are prevalent in the art of the West, yet as often was the case with classical art, these outside influences are absorbed and transmuted, producing work which is substantially different from what it might appear to be at first sight. Working within the context of Indian society, the artist's circumstances are radically different from those of his Western counterpart and these are inevitably reflected in the work he or she makes.

India: Myth and Reality attempts to show in some depth that direct and often raw relationship with society as seen in the work of nineteen selected artists. It also hints at that specifically Indian sensibility for colour, texture and form which remains with artists even though they may have lived abroad for many years.

The exhibition shows the work of three generations who have become established since independence and who all, in very different ways, have had to come to terms with their own surroundings, cultural history and tradition.

Although the concepts of myth and reality tend to be thought of as opposites in the West, in India this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, the indivisibility of myth with contemporary reality is a central theme in many artists' work as in, for example, Husain's epic paintings of the Mahabharata. Souza's contorted icons of the destroyers of civilization or Ramchandran's demonic renderings of ancient mythical battles.

Yet a number of artists confront society and social issues more directly. The exhibition includes a number of terracottas by K.G. Subramanyan made in response to the Bangladesh War of 1971 while Krishen Khanna's and Rameshwar Broota's satirical paintings of war-mongering generals and predatory apes expose the origins of such human catastrophe.

The younger generation such as Jogen Chowdhury, Gieve Patel, Sudhir Patwardhan and Nalini Malani, involve themselves in a close examination of particular social types. They all, in some measure, deal with displacement and alienation, individually within the family or, on a larger scale, in the city, where the migrant village dweller is forced to earn a living.

In a less obvious way a group of landscapes by Raza, Padamsee and Kumar, with figure studies by Bhattacharjee, Samant and Mehta, together give a further insight into the fractured unity of man with nature. The passage from a pastoral to an industrial society is the critical change that has and still is taking place in India. The work in this exhibition reflects this state of transition and a prevailing sense of disquiet.

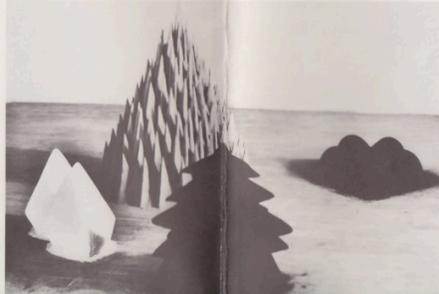



Figure 1. India Myth and Reality: Aspects of Modern Indian Art, festival newsletter designed by Trilokesh Mukherjee, 1982. Collection of Modern Art Oxford. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.



Figure 2.

India Myth and Reality: Aspects of Modern Indian Art, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, installation photograph with M.F. Husain. Collection of Modern Art Oxford. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.

Hilary: The Paul Mellon Centre's project *London, Asia* acknowledges the significance of London in the emergence of our historical narratives about Asia. But, of course, you were working not in London but in Oxford between 1976 and 1996. Your *India: Myth and Reality* programme seems to have been an unofficial riposte to the enormous official *Festival of India* that took place mainly in London in the same year. I wonder if your position as the head of a non-national museum outside the capital allowed you to make bolder gestures in terms of the art that you could represent? Or the ways you could show it?

David: Well, that's a big question! The equivalent organisations to MoMA in London at this time would have been the Whitechapel or the Serpentine, neither of which were national museums. The Serpentine was mainly showing then younger British artists, and by the early 1980s, the Whitechapel was starting to show international expressionist and "new spirit" painting. I liked the sense of freedom in Oxford because the city was small but world famous, not far from London or the main international airport (Fig. 3). It was full of learned people and had a kind of cosmopolitan swing as well as a strong European character of its own. And, in this case, because we were working with a private foundation, I was able to keep well clear of political or diplomatic interests—or lassitude.



Figure 3.

"One of the most influential and exciting centres of the visual arts in Britain", Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, promotional leaflet, 1985. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.

Hilary: How did exhibitions of modern and contemporary Asian art, such as your season devoted to India, fit within your wider vision for the institution? And how did they relate to the focus on art from the USSR, which was also a very strong current within the programme at this time? At this time, MoMA itself was still a relative newcomer to the British art world, having opened only in 1966.

David: In the early 1980s, as an indirect result of the increase in the money supply from the deregulation of financial markets by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, contemporary art became more expensive and therefore more "important". Before I arrived at the museum, former directors Peter Ibsen and Nick Serota had shown a lot of work from an avant-garde pool of Western artists who were not publicly exhibited elsewhere in the UK. I continued in this spirit, but also wanted my exhibitions to challenge the accepted canon of the "avant-garde". This meant challenging the point of

view that contemporary art of any quality was determined by the discourse in which it was embedded. While such discourses were not necessarily uninteresting, their dominance resulted from particular circumstances that were largely controlled by people who were Western, white, and male. This seemed to be rather myopic and at MoMA I set out to examine the idea of artistic quality within a broader framework that criticised the biases of both modernity and modernism, by factoring in the importance of viewpoint, gaze, and power.

Hilary: The freedom to programme was obviously very distinctive.

David: It was good for me. I also liked the roughness of the museum's industrial building. Twenty years is a very long time to stay in one place, but it enabled me to educate myself.

Hilary: It seems to me that the sorts of critical interventions you were trying to make in your exhibitions often didn't fully register with the mainstream art press. Is that fair to say? The 1982 Indian exhibitions were certainly a case in point: most critics seem to have been oblivious to the exhibitions' attempts to challenge shallow concepts of national identity. They repeatedly framed their assessments of modern Indian art as a struggle between supposedly native tradition and supposedly Western modernity. Those are exactly the sorts of misreadings you were seeking to contest.

David: Yes, the art press were more or less hopeless. There were some people who had an idea, but usually they weren't the regular reviewers. For the rest, one just had to try and avoid offending them. They were completely unpredictable.

Hilary: There is a difference, isn't there, between the art journals and the broadsheet type of review for which the lead times are so short—if they have to come out the day of the preview, it doesn't lend itself to a very sophisticated discourse.

David: It then tends to become naively political, and I don't think that's interesting either.

Hilary: Conversely, there were at the same time some really constructive critical debates taking place in Britain. Your *India: Myth and Reality* exhibitions in 1982 were explicitly post-colonial in structure, taking independence as the chronological starting point. These seem to have reflected some of the debates that were going on in art magazines, led by people like Rasheed Araeen and Victor Musgrave in *Art Monthly* and elsewhere, critiquing the plans for the Festival of India for adhering too closely to tropes of glorious unbroken tradition and not fully engaging with modernity or contemporary art.

David: I think that Rasheed at that time was locked in combat with Joanna Drew who was the deputy head of visual arts at the Arts Council and was responsible for *In the Image of Man*, a historical exhibition of classical Indian art at the Hayward Gallery. It was a very good show but Rasheed felt that the Art Council should be showing contemporary Asian art—a dialogue that they did not resolve until 1989 when he curated the exhibition *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* at the Hayward. *In the Image of Man* brought complaints from Philip Rawson because it contained no tantric art, although an exhibition, *Tantra: The Indian Cult of Ecstasy* had taken place in the same gallery in 1971. He disliked the Oxford show for the same reason but neither Alkazi, Musgrave nor I were convinced by the contemporary tantric artists and we were unanimous in not including their work. Jean-Hubert Martin included some examples of this work in his big show *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris in 1989.

Hilary: That year was also a formative time in the black British art movement with the first National Black Art Convention in Wolverhampton in 1982. How much were you aware of the crossover in thinking around art in Britain, with people like Araeen engaging with black British art as well as with post-colonial representations of Asia?

David: For a number of reasons, I wasn't so interested in this. I knew what was going on and who the people were, and also Rasheed at this time. But I decided to look at art from places where there were national or regional art histories, which, for various reasons, had not been acknowledged in Britain. Examining these within an international context seemed more complicated and rewarding because of the light it also threw on British knowledge and attitudes. The topic of black art is very important, but was not of such great interest to me then, because of the cultural situation in Oxford I have already described. Had I been working in Birmingham or Manchester, it may well have been very different.

Mainly, I was interested in bringing things from outside by people working today who were part of established cultures going back thousands of years, before the British were even running around in woad. And in really seeing what they were doing now, and why, and how. Obviously this wasn't just a matter of aesthetics, it also related to broader social, political, economic, aesthetic, and ideological development.

Hilary: On this question of politics, the London Festival of India was, as we know, the product of very official channels of cultural diplomacy. There were long negotiations between the governments of Thatcher and Gandhi. Whereas the *India: Myth and Reality* project you did in Oxford was largely, a kind of independent initiative between you, Victor Musgrave, and Ebrahim Alkazi, who also significantly funded the project through his family

foundation. Private patronage is such a loaded concept, and often maligned, but in this case, it clearly served to facilitate an alternative to a limited official narrative.

David: It enabled us to be more flexible and get up to speed very quickly, which would not have been possible through the official channels. Also, all of our activities were concentrated in one place. The Festival of India was spread widely over London. There were very few books on the subject of modern Indian art, but Alkazi is a public figure in India and, having spent twenty years as director of the National Theatre in Delhi and having run a gallery, he knew all of the artists. His wife, Roshen, was also running the Art Heritage gallery in Delhi, which was a great help in local logistics and administration. We were in touch with Festival of India organisers, though—when I was in India, I had meetings with Pupul Jayakar, and Geeta Kapur whom I had already briefly met in London. She was the author of the one book then in English on modern Indian art and one of the curators of the Royal Academy show of contemporary Indian art. There was another exhibition curated by Rajeev Sethi at the Barbican called *Aditi: Craftsmen and Performers* (Fig. 4). It was impressive in its way but criticised as a kind of “human zoo” because there were musicians and craftsmen who set up “huts and stalls”—a bit like a late nineteenth-century world fair. But there was some music, craft and folk art that was really good and had not been seen before in Britain.

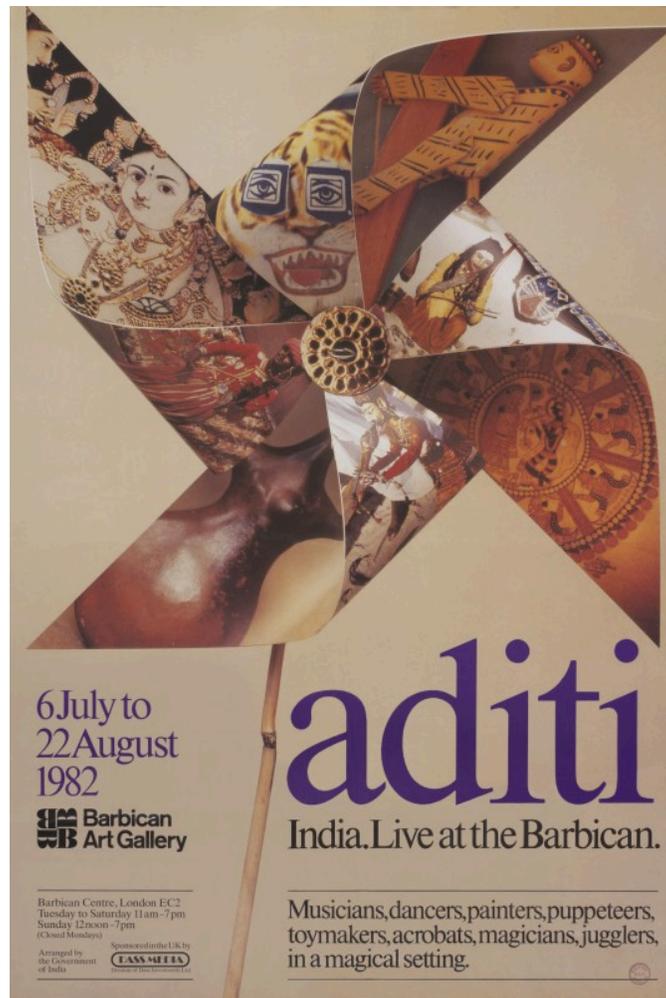


Figure 4.

Aditi: Craftsmen and Performers, Barbican Art Gallery, 1982, poster design by Richard Bird, 1982, ink on paper, 76.3 × 50.9 cm. Collection of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (S.527-1995). Digital image courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum

Hilary: You subverted the idea of the national survey show about India by having five different exhibitions over a three-part period, each examining different facets (Fig. 5). This strikes me as a very strong statement to make about the plural nature of Indian culture.³ Where did that idea come from?

David: I would have been uneasy just doing the one show because so little had been seen in the UK. And also the popular arts in India are amazing. As a kid in the 1960s, I used to buy Indian posters with Hindu goddesses and gods on them, which were part of the hippie culture, and Ravi Shankar was also very popular. I was very interested in the musical culture, as well as in the folk art and the modernist or modern art. From an initial position of almost total ignorance, one of the first big questions in my mind was, “why does

Indian modernism make me feel a bit uneasy?" It was like seeing oneself reflected in a strange distorting mirror. Once I had travelled to India, immersed myself in its culture at different levels, met many artists, and seen some of the best examples of its modern art, I realised that the vestigial neo-colonial gaze had to be completely obliterated. Powerful and varied art works were being made with a numinous quality ... any problems were my problems, not those of the work. This process of unlearning was a great lesson for me.



Figure 5.

Gods of the Byways: Wayside Shrines of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1982, installation photograph. Collection of Modern Art Oxford. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.

Hilary: Clearly the market for Asian contemporary art in Britain, and everywhere, has dramatically changed over the last forty years. Some of the artists that you have been engaged with for a long time and that you write about in your book, such as Ai Weiwei or Yayoi Kusama, are now very much at the top tier of art world stardom. I wonder how much you think there has been a genuine shift in the way that British audiences look at Asian art and how much you think the art market has played a role in that?

David: Personally, I've never been interested in the art market. For people who don't know much about art, the fact that a work has sold for a lot of money may seem impressive but is no indication of its artistic quality. Now, with the extension of the contemporary art market in Asia, we have seen the

rise of Asian collectors. And this has created a limited, but virtuous, economic circle in the matter of supply and demand.⁴ But private collections are no substitute for strong, independent, publically minded museums which a few collectors and foundations are now trying to set up in Asia. At present, the lack of solid infrastructure there is serious and the matter of research is confined to a few universities and to those large museums that are able to publish catalogues.

Hilary: You've talked about how important it is to you as a curator to try and see as much as possible beyond the market, beyond whatever is commercially or critically fashionable at a given moment in a given place. In your book, you call it the "ethno-centric market-based myopia of the contemporary art world". This philosophy led you far beyond what other curators were exhibiting in Britain at that time. It was probably considered rather eccentric. Although we've supposedly had a global turn in the art world, and in many places programming is indeed more international, I'm sure the blinkers that we wear now remain very limiting in terms of what we're invited to value. From your perspective, what are we not seeing today? Where should we be looking harder?

David: I think there are still a lot of things to be seen. In this respect, there's a lot of research to be done in Southeast Asia, central Asia, the Pacific region, Africa, and Latin America. Also, in looking seriously at indigenous cultures and their position in contemporaneity. Other eyes and other voices are needed to tell their stories. Today, what I see is a Western art world obsessed by AI and virtual reality—I'm interested in how people use technology, but this kind of technocratic "flavour-of-the-monthness" leaves me cold.

Hilary: You've also talked about how important you think it is for exhibitions to be able to be argumentative, to take a stance about something, or to make a proposition. In some ways, this feels like a rather rebellious position when the dominant tendencies in contemporary curating have tended towards the indeterminate, the minimal, a horror of didacticism. Sometimes paring away so much of the interpretation that exhibitions don't say very much at all. In contrast, your approach seems to embody a sort of ethics of curatorial generosity, whereby you feel comfortable giving more to the visitor, through the exhibitions, through the design, through the catalogues, than some others do because they're worried about coming across as too authoritative. Does the idea of generosity resonate for you at all?

David: Yes, having a position and being professionally generous are very important. For one thing, if you think something's good, you want to share it with other people. Otherwise, why bother? And you're already there—in a position of authority—because you've chosen the work to exhibit, whether you want to admit responsibility or not. This is really your power as a curator, so I'm not afraid of didacticism and like to provide people with a "toolbox". I

would never dream of telling people what they should think or feel, but I can give interesting and relevant information about the work, the place, the person, the people. Then others can decide whether or not they would like to use it.

Hilary: Another change over the course of your career has to do with the term “curator” itself, which barely existed when you started working. Now it’s overused, and rampantly commercialised as well, with everything from curated womenswear to a whole new line of beef jerky that I’ve seen in Sainsbury’s called The Curators.

David: Really?

Hilary: Yes! And parallel to that emergence in popular culture, there has been the emergence of curatorial and exhibition histories as an academic discipline. But it’s still unusual for curators to engage with those histories in the first person, as you do in a long essay in your new book. What made you decide to write about the history of your own work in this way?

David: I wanted to get the history of MoMA Oxford down before it disappears entirely. And I thought it may be useful for people to see a way of reasoning about exhibitions and the process of putting things together which isn’t often discussed. I touch a little bit, also, on the political background to exhibitions I organised on art from southern Asia, Southeast Asia, central Asia, Japan, and China.

Hilary: The way you write about curating gives a sort of inside-out view that acknowledges the limitations of the critical response, the role that chance encounter plays in the development of particular projects, and how one project leads to another, budget problems, last-minute political dramas, all of the things that go into exhibition-making but are often excluded from its histories. You write about it in a very frank and unpretentious way—you’re obviously engaged with the politics of your past projects but it’s not a piece of curatorial theory.

David: Thank God. Yes, the period I’ve been working in has formulated the curator as the all-knowing, all-seeing figure, who ineffably decides what the most important art is, without knowing much about what’s actually happening. And, as you say, there is the widespread growth of critical theory and curatorship as subjects at universities. I think it’s important to know about philosophy and critical theory, particularly as it influences artists, but I wouldn’t use it as the sole prism with which to view the world.

Hilary: Tell me about your national shows. The India project was an expanded, festival-style, five-exhibition project, which approached the idea of national representation in a consciously fragmented and pluralistic way.

This format of multiple national exhibitions comes back with regards to the post-war Japanese avant-garde in 1985, after which you do single shows on art from South Africa, Argentina, Australia, and so on (Fig. 6). You also did a very important two-part show of Chinese contemporary art, *New Art from China*, in 1993 (Fig. 7).⁵ It's a model you have also continued to work with recently. You've mentioned not wanting to see those as national "survey" shows, although they could be mistaken for them. Do you ever feel awkward having a national framework around a show?

David: It's not necessarily awkward because there *are* national histories and they are always being revised and contested, which is often the territory where I work. Close to home, there are overlapping and sometimes competing British, English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish art histories. I don't see this as being deeply problematic; one just has to be succinct. But there is a feeling in the art world that somehow it's improper to put a national "label" on anyone. In my view, it's not a label but a convenience, which may be adopted if helpful or dumped if it becomes any kind of impediment.



Figure 6.

Reconstructions: Avant-Garde Art in Japan 1945-65, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1985. Collection of Modern Art Oxford. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.



Figure 7.

New Art from China, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1993, exterior view. Collection of Modern Art Oxford. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.

Hilary: You've worked extensively with public and diplomatic bodies as well as with privately led initiatives—for example, you've been involved with the British Council for a long time, and often needed to work with foreign governments to realize an exhibition. The RMCA where you work now is privately run. How important do you think it is to read the distinctions between public and private when thinking about the final outcome of an exhibition? Have your choices often been constrained by a need for funding or loans?

David: Running any non-profit museum is a financial and aesthetic balancing act, but only very rarely have I not been able to raise funds for projects I have wanted to do. In the decision to make a particular exhibition, the argument of the director/curator should be decisive and the interests of either government or a private sponsor should not be primary. When I was in Oxford, I used to keep a lot of projects on the backburner as I looked for opportunities, collaborations, and public or private sponsorship--both of which we could receive as an independent non-profit. Part of our success was

also in organising many exhibitions that travelled to other museums and galleries in the UK and overseas, which guaranteed an income from hire fees and catalogue sales. In terms of making contacts and securing loans, this also meant that we could operate outside official British government policy. An exception was the EU-wide embargo on cultural relations with China after 4 June 1989, which meant that our planned project had to be put on hold until 1993.

In the case of the exhibition *Art From South Africa* (1990), we had no links with the South African government or UK representation there and worked directly with the legal representation of the ANC inside the country (the United Democratic Front). By the time our exhibition took place, Nelson Mandela had been released. In relation to Indonesia, we received quite a shock when in 1994–1995 we organised a residency, exhibition, and performance with Heri Dono, from Yogyakarta, who received a very good review of his work in *The Times* that quoted the artist directly from the catalogue (Fig. 8).⁶ Just as this show ended, the museum received a furious letter from the Indonesian embassy stating that both the museum and artist had completely misrepresented many aspects of the country, particularly its policies and political history, and requested that the catalogue to be immediately withdrawn. Dono was very concerned but, as he and his family were still living in Indonesia and could suffer reprisals, I had to stifle my initial reaction of telling the embassy to get lost. A letter of polite concern sent by my assistant while I was away did the trick, and fortunately by then the exhibition was over, it was easy to remove the catalogue from sale for a time.



Figure 8.

Heri Dono: *Blooming in Arms*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1996, installation photograph. Collection of Modern Art Oxford. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.

Hilary: It's one thing to insist on your curatorial independence until the life of the artist is at stake.

David: Exactly. The functionary at the embassy had a letter saying that the catalogue was withdrawn and was happy with this. After President Suharto resigned in 1998, the catalogue was openly put back on sale.

Hilary: One of the things I noticed going through the archives in Oxford is the extent to which some of these political fudges were possible because the parties involved were a long way away and information didn't travel as rapidly as it does now. You could get away with having multiple editions of exhibition catalogues or quietly exhibiting artworks that have been refused for export. Do you think it's a very different situation now, in a digital era?

David: I don't know. There are big problems with censorship in China at the moment, which is often decided by a minor official's individual interpretation and is never communicated in writing. I sincerely hope this won't continue and really struggle to see its political utility for the Chinese government. There's a grisly echo here of the Cultural Revolution as well as of Stalinism. So I'm still dealing with this kind of thing.

Hilary: What does your current position at the RMCA involve?

David: I'm its vice-director and senior curator, so I'm helping with the programming and curating a number of exhibitions. I work primarily long distance and go there four or five times a year. The programme is contemporary and it's both Chinese and international. They're particularly interested in video work, although not exclusively so. The museum is situated in a district, about 17 hectares, designed by Russian architects in the early 1950s as a gift for the new Chinese government. It was initially for food processing and food canning which was one of Guangzhou's big industries in those days but has now been converted for arts, culture, leisure, and educational use. It's wonderful to have this kind of relaxed space where people can get together. The museum has six buildings stretched across the site.

Hilary: It's a newly established museum, like the Mori Art Museum and Istanbul Modern, both of which you led over the last 20 years. Even the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford was only ten years old when you moved there in 1976. Is there something about a young institution that appeals to you?

David: I hadn't really thought of it but, yes, I guess so. I haven't particularly been searching them out. Maybe older institutions are more stratified; they have a very large, often frustrated, not-so-well-paid staff and horrendously hierarchical pecking orders. Moderna Museet in Stockholm, where I worked from 1996 to 2001, is a national museum with well over a hundred staff and my time there was sometimes consumed by local politics. But wherever you are, if you do new things, people will always take notice, although not necessarily in a friendly way. This is all part of being a museum director—to be open, take responsibility for doing your job properly, and to refuse to be browbeaten; to expose the public to new art, new ideas; to give them something real to grasp their imaginations.

Footnotes

- 1 David Elliott, *Art & Trousers: Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Asian Art* (Hong Kong: ArtAsiaPacific, 2020).
- 2 The exhibition *Aspects of Modern Indian Art* was one of a number of exhibitions and events devoted to contemporary Indian culture sharing the overall title *India: Myth and Reality* that ran at MoMA Oxford between May and October 1982.
- 3 Part one of *India: Myth and Reality* featured *Gods of the Byways: Wayside Shrines of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat* and *Screen Idols: Indian Film Posters from the 1950s to the Present* (9 May–20 June 1982); part two was *Aspects of Modern Indian Art* and *The Indian Calendar* (27 June–8 August 1982); part three was *The Other India: Seven Contemporary Photographers* (15 August–3 October 1982). Programmes of cinema and film were also organised.
- 4 In the early 1980s, Chester and Davida Herwitz, the biggest collectors of modern Indian art, were American. There was virtually no market for modern Chinese art.

- 5 Three contemporary exhibitions of modern and contemporary Japanese art ran at MoMA (8 December 1985–9 February 1986): *Reconstructions: Avant-Garde Art in Japan 1945–65*; *Dada in Japan 1920–1970*; and *Black Sun: The Eyes of Four*. *Art from South Africa* ran from 17 June–23 September 1990. *New Art from China*, part one *Silent Energy and Posters and Ceramics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* ran from 27 June to 29 August 1993 and part two *China Avant-Garde* (co-organised with HKW, Berlin) with *Stuart Franklin Mexico and Beijing: a Tale of Two Cities* (5 September–24 October 1993). *Art from Argentina* ran from 2 October–31 December 1994. After Elliott had left MOMA *In Place (Out of Time): Contemporary Art in Australia* (co-curated with Howard Morphy) ran 20 July–2 November 1997.
- 6 *Heri Dono: Blooming in Arms*, 1 October–20 December 1995.

26 x 2 = 0

Bettina Fung | ???

Authors

Cite as

Bettina Fung | ???, "26 x 2 = 0", *British Art Studies*, Issue 13,
<https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-13/bfunh>

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 1.

Bettina Fung, Cyclic Fragments,

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 2.

Bettina Fung, $26 \times 2 = 0$, booklet

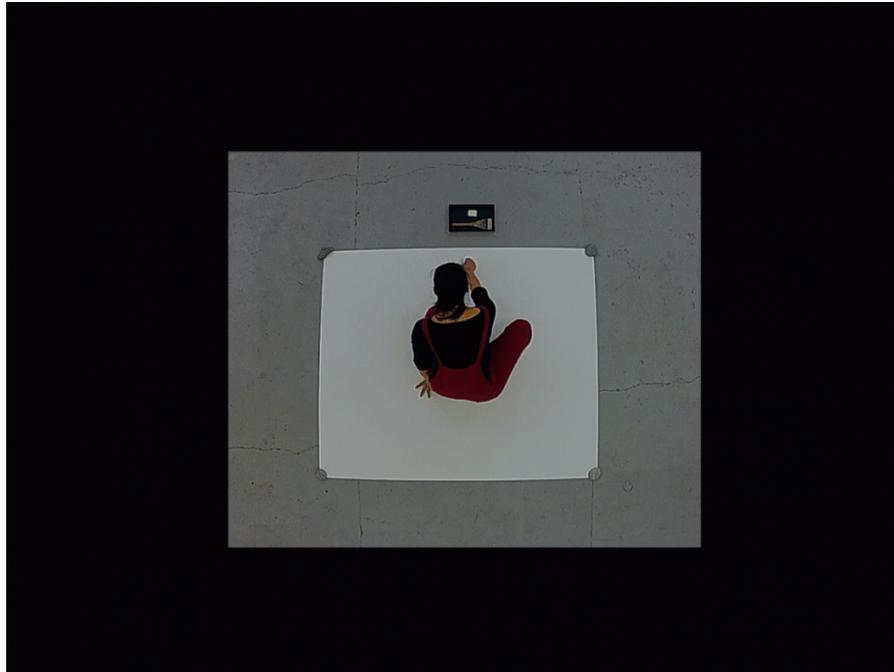


Figure 3.

Bettina Fung, Circle Loop,

“like a flower paddle my teeth”

Ada Hao

Authors

Cite as

Ada Hao, “like a flower paddle my teeth”, *British Art Studies*, Issue 13, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-13/ahao>

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 1.

Ada Hao, Sound of other spaces with the speculative others,



Yellow Peril

Nicholas Tee

Authors

Cite as

Nicholas Tee, "Yellow Peril", *British Art Studies*, Issue 13, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-13/ntee>

Timeline

Please note that the following video contains scenes of bodily cutting as part of an artistic performance.

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 1.

Nicholas Tee, *Yellow Peril*, performance at Manchester Art Gallery, 2019.



Figure 2.

Nicholas Tee, *Yellow Peril*,



Figure 3.
Nicholas Tee, *Yellow Peril*,

Do Ho Suh's *Who Am We?* (2000) is a print composited from photographs of thousands of teenagers' faces, taken from the artist's high school yearbooks. Viewed from a distance, the print appears as a sea of unintelligible faces. But up close, with the aid of a magnifying sheet provided by the gallery, the unique contours of the individual faces become visible. While the title *Who am We?* reads oddly in English, Do's title is translated directly from his native language of Korean, where the use of *woori* (??)—meaning "we", or "us"—is grammatically correct in the sentence. In Korean, "we" is commonly used in place of "I", and connotes a grouping or community of people who are aligned.

Born 1962, Do came into adulthood in the 1980s, a period when Korea emerged from decades of military dictatorship to democratic reforms, and became increasingly open to the economic forces of globalisation and innovation. In 1988, when Seoul hosted the Olympics, Korean people were able to obtain more passports than ever before to travel overseas. Although he had already achieved his Bachelor of Arts and Masters of Arts at Seoul National University, Do retrained for his Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting at Rhode Island School of Design, before receiving his Master of Fine Arts in sculpture from Yale University. He has since lived and worked between London, New York City, and Seoul. As an émigré overseas, Do has witnessed and participated in the socio-political shifts of Korean social identity, and his work reflects the tension between the collective and the individual; belonging and difference.

Do's image was the starting point for the development of Nicholas Tee's performance at the Manchester Art Gallery, which took place on 6 March 2019 in the spaces of the *Speech Acts* exhibition at the Manchester Art Gallery. In response to its questions of visibility, scrutiny, and identity, Tee exaggerated Do's gesture by starting his performance seated behind a large magnifying sheet hung from a rack. Tee similarly invites the audience to inspect him—albeit a version of him that is playfully aggrandised to grotesque proportions—while considering his own position as a Singaporean migrant Chinese performance artist in the UK.

- Annie Jael Kwan



Figure 4.
Nicholas Tee, *Yellow Peril*,



Figure 5.
Nicholas Tee, *Yellow Peril*,

Nicholas Tee's embodied presence challenges us to look beneath surface perceptions, be they the ambivalent yet profitable prospects of international students, the gilded façades of model minorities, or the uglier layers of prejudice and yellow peril that lie just under the surface. Gold leaf flutters precariously in the ambient breeze. It is inflated by breath, and threatening to peel back to reveal the thick, opaque layer of yellow paint that covers Tee's face, a contemporary reference to Singaporean artist Lee Wen's performance series, *Journey of a Yellow Man* (1992-2012).

If we look at a related image, the GIF that Tee made for this series (Fig. 1), Tee's gaze is not unwavering, but rather is punctuated by blinking—an all too human gesture of incomprehension, of frustration, and of self-protection that reveals his vulnerability. As he meets the viewer's gaze, drops of blood trickle down from his forehead, a potent reminder of shared humanity and an indictment of those who refuse to see it.

- Ming Tiampo



Figure 6.
Nicholas Tee, *Yellow Peril*,

In situating himself between Sutapa Biswas' *Housewives with Steak Knives* (1985–1986) and Steven Pippin's *Laundromat-Locomotion (Running Naked)* (1997), Nicholas Tee invites additional layers of meaning to a work already overflowing with ideas, acknowledgements, and quotations.

Laundromat-Locomotion is Pippin's tribute to *Animal locomotion* (1887), Eadweard Muybridge's pioneering analysis of human and animal motion. In Pippin's work, a battery of washing-machines-turned-cameras in a public laundromat capture the artist's naked streak in twelve silver gelatin prints—revealing the relationship between the performance of self, its apparatus of capture, and the site of performance.

Biswas' iconic work is an artistic claim on diverse genealogies—from Kali, the multi-armed Indian goddess of destruction, to Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (circa 1620). Biswas' Kali wears a necklace made from the severed heads of political and historic "villains", while one of her hands makes a peace sign—a disorienting mixture of aggression and humour. Its confrontational impact is heightened by the way the work leans forward from the wall.

Tee shares Biswas' and Pippin's interest in art history. The yellow paint and gold leaf he applies to his face is a homage to *Journey of a Yellow Man* (1992–2012), Singapore-born artist Lee Wen's seminal exploration of race and migration, first performed in London. Wen's death on 3 May 2019, days before Tee's performance, lends the latter additional poignancy. Tee also

borrowed and exaggerates the magnifying sheet used to view Do Ho Suh's *Who Am We?* in the next room of the gallery to question epidermal framings, and who is allowed to become "we".

- Hammad Nasar



Figure 7.
Nicholas Tee, *Yellow Peril*,



Figure 8.
Nicholas Tee, *Yellow Peril*,

The audience to Tee's performance included other performers. Quietly observing the events unfolding in the *Speech Acts* galleries was an unlikely witness: James Northcote's painting of the black actor Ira Aldridge. Made in 1826, Northcote depicted Aldridge in his much-celebrated role as Othello--"the Moor of Venice"--as the title to the artwork declares. Having entered the collection of Manchester Art Gallery in 1882, the presence of Aldridge reminds us of the stories of migration, race, performance, and identity that abound in the histories of British art, yet often remain hidden from view in the permanent displays of our public collections and the more canonical histories of British culture.

Tee's performance was a reactivation of another historic performance, that of Singaporean Lee Wen's *Journey of a Yellow Man* (1992-2012), first performed in London. But in the galleries in Manchester that night, Tee was reactivating, perhaps unknowingly, much longer histories of performance that astounded and shocked audiences in Britain. Born in New York City in 1807, Aldridge had a stage career that not only brought him to Britain but which also saw him perform in mainland Europe, Ireland, and Russia. He died while travelling in Poland. In the portrait, Aldridge looks to the right, to something beyond the heavy gilt frame which we, the viewer, cannot see. This photograph captures the moment that Tee, his face framed by a heavy gold moulding of its own, is about to pass Aldridge. It is a silent, but poignant, conversation across the centuries.

- Sarah Victoria Turner



Figure 9.
Nicholas Tee, *Yellow Peril*,

What does it mean to be there, to witness a performance, an event? Performance art often relies on the special, somewhat cultish status of “being there”. I was there that evening and watched Tee’s performance from beginning to end. Or so I thought--there were definitely bits I missed. I never faced Tee head on, or looked him in the eye via the mediating barrier of his magnifying glass as the photographer has done here. Perhaps I didn’t want to get in the way, or was looking at other things: the other artworks or performances by other members of Asia-Art-Activism. The fragility and imperfections of memory are part of performance art’s beguiling, frustrating nature. Its history is lost even before it has been made. You want to be there, but know that you can never see it all. Photography and film do their best to capture the experience, but can only offer the partial perspective of their operators. Tee plays with these gaps, these distortions of memory and vision. His large mirror, carried in front of his face, both magnifies and blurs. Now you see me, now you don’t.

- Sarah Victoria Turner



Figure 10.
Nicholas Tee, Yellow Peril,

In the words of Manchester Art Gallery Fine Art Curator Hannah Williamson, “What is a city if not a civilized place? And you are not civilized unless you have art.”¹ Williamson describes the gallery’s civilising role in the city of Manchester, with its beginnings in the 1820s as a site of civic articulation in the context of the city’s booming textiles industry.

Taking his performance into the galleries, Tee haunted the histories presented with his own presence, a return of the repressed colonial to ask which narratives were being told, and which were being obscured or pushed to the edges of the frame? Turning the frame’s gilded peripheries upon

themselves, Tee focused attention on his own face, made alien and stuffed with chilli peppers, to gesture at silenced histories of empire that refuse to stay silent.

- Ming Tiampo



Figure 11.
Nicholas Tee, Yellow Peril,



Figure 12.
Nicholas Tee, Yellow Peril,

Carrying the magnifying sheet, Tee slowly exited the main doors of the Manchester Art Gallery. Outside on the public street, Tee knelt down on the pavement, facing the gallery. Donning black latex gloves, he proceeded to cut his torso with quick shallow slashes, till the words “Bloody Foreigner” were perceptible.

Since the 1970s, artists have employed violence on the body as part of the creative performance. Artists such as Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic, Franko B., and Ron Athey have treated the artist's body like a canvas that can be shot, slashed, cut, and bled. In the same tradition, Tee utilises his body and blood as media, acting upon a darker interpretation of the exhibition's focus on "speech acts" as material utterances. Tee depicts how racist slurs can be inflicted and manifested on the body, but the cuts are shallow—only "skin deep", Tee assured me, when I queried the severity of his wound and possible scarring. The cuts will likely leave no permanent mark, but nevertheless the stings were felt. As he bled, the markings were somewhat faint in the dim streetlight. Beyond the unseen and yet present formal boundaries that delineate artist and audience in the gallery, passers-by stopped to enquire and inspected Tee's body to discern the wording.

- Annie Jael Kwan

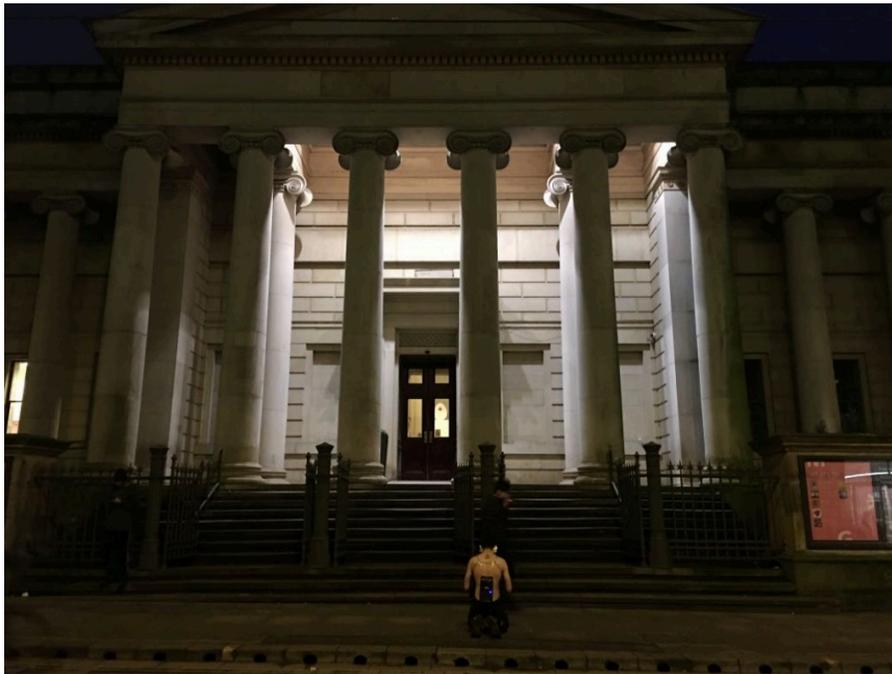


Figure 13.
Nicholas Tee, Yellow Peril,

The Manchester Art Gallery has had a history of interventions against its exhibition displays that intertwine activism and art. The British women's suffrage movement gained momentum in the city of Manchester, with the Women's Suffrage Committee forming in 1867 to work with the Independent Labour Party to secure votes for women. By 1897, the campaign became increasingly militant and urgent. In 1913, activists Lillian Williamson, Evelyn Manesta, and Annie Briggs entered the gallery and attacked the exhibition

displays, breaking the glass of thirteen paintings and even damaging four works. Just over 100 years later, in January 2018, for an art event led by black British artist Sonia Boyce to question the tension between curatorial choice and censorship in producing cultural narratives, the gallery temporarily removed John William Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896).

In this vein, Tee's action could be read as a similar attempt to affect the gallery's exhibition display. After he breached the boundaries of the Manchester Art Gallery, Tee continued his charge up to the second floor and entered the *Speech Acts* exhibition. Next to the introductory wall text, Tee presses his abdomen against the exhibition wall, in an attempt to imprint the words "bloody foreigner" on its surface. Beneath the stain, he positioned the magnifying sheet as an invitation for the viewer to scrutinise closely. In marking his place within the institution, Tee's intervention sought to enhance the themes explored by the *Speech Acts* exhibition in highlighting the contributions of diaspora artists to British art history. Leaving only an almost imperceptible mark after I hurriedly cleaned off the stain, mindful of the institutional pressures around this type of performance and bodily harm, Tee's work underscores the difficulty of negotiating the institutional structures of power around which art and culture unfold, to make space for unauthorised, disobedient narratives.

- Annie Jael Kwan

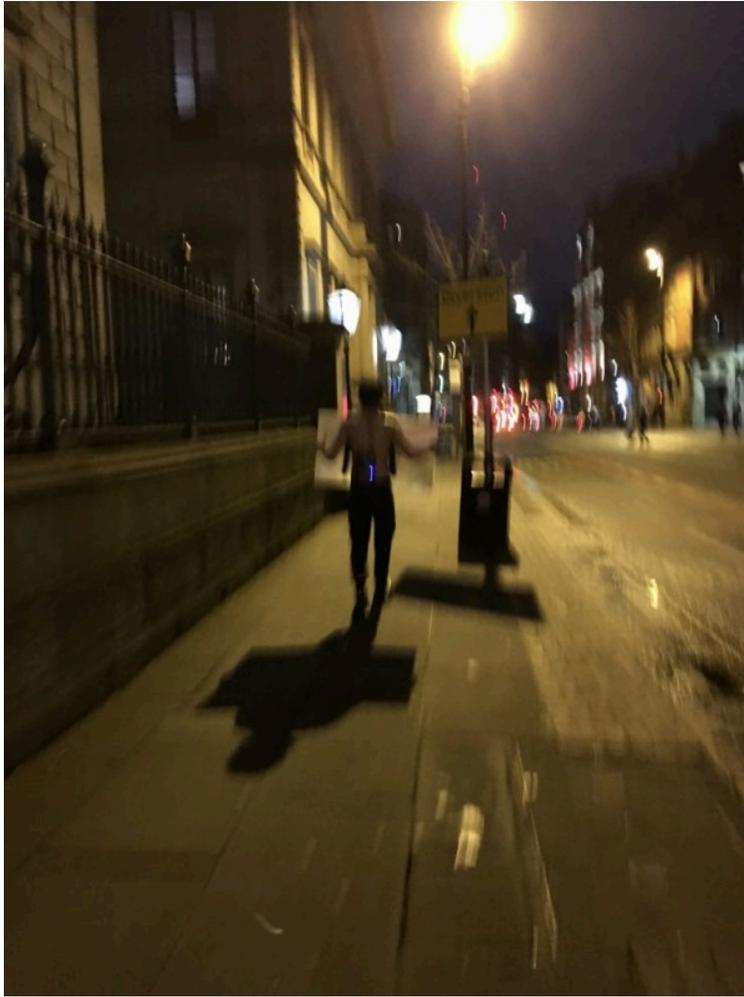


Figure 14.
Nicholas Tee, Yellow Peril,



Figure 15.
Nicholas Tee, Yellow Peril,



Figure 16.
Nicholas Tee, Yellow Peril,

Performance art, in its sharpest register, has the capacity to puncture social space; to activate it and make us feel the discomforts, half-secrets, and inconvenient truths we hide within ourselves and our social relations. Its twenty-first-century popularity has in many cases obscured this social pungency. Performance art now features in art fairs, launches gala dinners, and risks being tamed in institutional petting zoos.

This risk of neutering performance is one that Nicholas Tee navigates adroitly through the strategic and tiered withholding of his full plans; shielding the undisciplined edge of his performance from the flattening regimes of display and behaviour that museums, as public spaces, end up policing.

He ended his performance seemingly as planned, by walking through the exhibition and out of the Manchester Art Gallery. Upon reaching the street, however, he carved out the words "BLOODY FOREIGNER" on his own skin. This fragment of the performance had to take place outside the gallery because the city council had denied permission for Tee to cut himself, due to concerns around young people and self-harm. Escaping the confines of the gallery space was agreed with, and indeed recorded by, Annie Kwan, who had coordinated the performances by Asia-Art-Activism, but this plan was strategically kept from the curators of the *Speech Acts* exhibition, myself and Kate Jesson.

Then, quietly, Tee went rogue. He re-entered the gallery and finished his performance by pressing his body onto the wall, leaving a bloody mark at the entrance of the exhibition. He blindsided Kwan, whose slightly fuzzy photographs of these surreptitious stages are suggestive of the conflicted impulses she must have felt at this unexpected coda to what she had agreed with the artist.

In the short time before these unruly traces were cleaned from the gallery walls, the crimson marks of Tee's blood were reflected in the different shades of red in Li Yuan-chia's *Untitled* (1994) and Rasheed Araeen's *Christmas Day* (1997). Together they formed a brief but intense intergenerational conversation evoking the anger, melancholy, resignation, resilience, and defiance that are germane to the immigrant experience.

- Hammad Nasar



Figure 17.

Nicholas Tee, *Yellow Peril*,

Tee has used the GIF format to create images with looped movements as bookends for this recreated timeline of his performance at the Manchester Art Gallery. The final GIF, on the following slide, displays a large flag that was hand-sewn with gold leaf, made in collaboration with embroidery artist, Nicole Chui. Tee titled the flag GIF ??????[*who are my people?*]--an invitation he also extended via a social media call-out for participants to take up space on the flag and be represented alongside him on the *British Art Studies* website. The question was phrased with an awareness of the complexity and ambivalence imbued in its language, shaped by personal experience and geopolitical realities: the rise of the Chinese economy and its impact on global political and economic exchanges; the majority Chinese representation in his home country of Singapore; his experience of enforced Mandarin language education; and the tendency in the UK to attend to ideas of East and Southeast Asian identity with subsuming notions of orientalism and "Chineseness".

In ??????, Tee's visage is projected onto the flag with red chillies bleeding out of his mouth. Tee uses chillies as an artistic medium in his performances, because they are a sign that embodies his Southeast Asian identity. He is flanked by portraits of Asian diaspora friends and colleagues--a visual riff that calls back to Do Ho Suh's print with multiple faces. Like a body with many heads, both alluring and grotesque, Tee's gaze is fixed steadily on the viewer as the shimmering flag undulates slowly and continuously forwards.

--Annie Jael Kwan

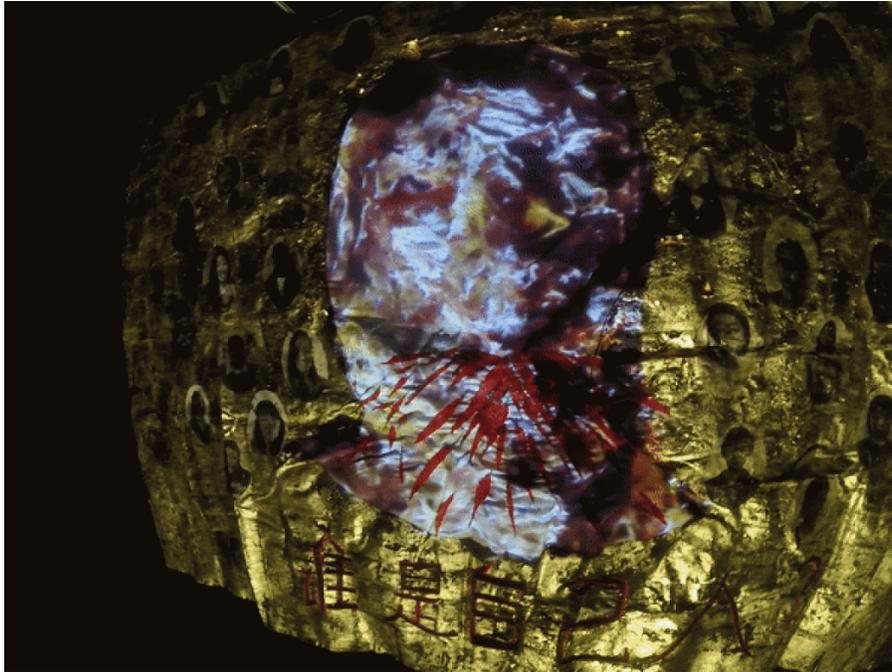


Figure 18.
Nicholas Tee and Nicole Chui, ??????,

Footnotes

- ¹ Hannah Williamson in "Insights into Manchester Art Gallery", *Manchester Art Gallery*, <http://manchesterartgallery.org> (accessed 3 September 2019).



Instant Malaysia: Imagining a Nation at the Commonwealth Institute

Kelvin Chuah

Authors

Kelvin Chuah is a writer and researcher with a keen interest in exhibition histories.

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Kindly note that all the mistakes found in this article are entirely mine.

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I: Personal Journey

Meandering through the Malaysian exhibition in the Commonwealth Institute,
this text takes
the form of
ghost-writing: a
segue of
continuous texts,
subjecting the self
to ambulation
through space and
time.

Ghosting.

I am going to visit Malaysia. A Malaysia I have never visited. An alternate
Malaysia

I have not seen as a citizen of the country.

It is exciting;

and a different experience.

Will I recognise the place, be familiar with the culture, people, or
climate?

After all, this is not Malaysia geopolitically located in Southeast Asia,

but a Malaysia created by an exhibition promoting the country of my birth.
Promoting Malaysia at the centre of the old empire: the Commonwealth
Institute

for London audiences.

I will be comparing the Malaysia I know as a lived experience against
what I see at the display—walking through the exhibition space to get
to know the place I think I know. A country condensed and housed in
an exhibition gallery, confined within fabricated walls.

Maybe, this will be my way of looking at what it means to be Malaysian;
facing my

struggles and coming to terms with the country's history,
nationalism, patriotism, and understanding the nation-state

in another place: in London.



Figure 1.

Central platform of the Commonwealth Institute in Dave Walker, "Almost forgotten: the Commonwealth Institute", *The Library Time Machine*, 28 June 2012, 1962, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.



Figure 2.

Alex Upton, Interior view of the Design Museum, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Alex Upton.

It is 2019, 36 years after the Instant Malaysia exhibition was staged. Though it was

intended to be a permanent display, technological failures mean that it did not survive until the closure of the Commonwealth Institute in 2002.

I don't know for sure.

Today, the Institute has ceased to exist, its building redeveloped into the new and gleaming Design Museum.

When I visited the Design Museum,

I was not there for their exhibitions. Sorry.

Instead, I was constructing my memory theatre, removing the exuviae of the new institution

to visualise the old.

At the Design Museum's reception, I paid £2 for a short history of the building.

I asked for the Commonwealth Institute's library and archives. They are scattered

everywhere, they told me. Its traces almost completely

erased, forgotten, or disconnected

from its replacement.

Nevertheless, it was in 1973 when the Malaysian display

graced the halls of the Commonwealth Institute. It was practically unknown to Malaysians

then and now. I would not have known about this show, if not for my years of residing

and studying in London.

How do I visit an exhibition that lives in the past?

Loosely taking a page from Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*,

I like the possibility of visiting the display as a

displaced character and having fragments of information

fill the gaps.



Figure 3.

Tim Street-Porter, “Instant Malaysia” exhibition, 1973, installation photograph. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-208-TC01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

Coming to the entrance of the display, I am looking at exhibits of black and white faces plastered onto boards of red and green.

The aesthetic sensibilities of the boards are possibly the flavour of the day,

but it’s too gaudy for my taste.

Furthermore, the images are cropped and enmeshed together in jarring compositions.

Maybe I missed it, but they lack explanatory notes to elaborate on their intentions.

Nevertheless, the boards are probably the work of Ron Herron, an English architect, who had an affinity for pictorial collocation —juxtaposing portraits of people. ¹

On the panels are photos of Malaysians, people from all walks of life—entangled.

This style of portrayal continued on the walls of the exhibition.

On the front left panel by the entrance, the word Malaysia attempts to encapsulate the people

of a nation.

Conceivably, the non-coloured images reflected a unity among the races, or attempted to blanket over differences.

My walk-through reveals that the display

was constructed to represent a country in a particular period.

To re-enact a Malaysia from a different era: the time my parents' generation reminisced as the

“good old days”.

Yesterday's exhibition.

II: Malaysia and the “Soft Sell”

13 May 1969

and a personal reflection

Malayan Independence in 1957

framed diverse people as countrymen within an imagined community,² formulated by the borders that make a nation. Alongside the Malay majority, there were Chinese and Indian immigrants, whose forefathers came to British Malaya for work and trade.

Malayan Independence gave them a chance to be part of a new country, but racial seams remained, and ethnic issues became domestic points of contention. National boundaries separated Malaysia from Singapore in the South of the Peninsula in 1965, just as societies in the North were divided from Thailand.

The borders separated
families, friends, and cultures.

In 1969, Malaysia's first general election after Singapore's departure sparked a national implosion. For voters who lost in the election, discontentment with—among the reasons given—overzealous celebrations, and racial and religious taunting by supporters of the winning party, led to confrontations and violence. The Chinese and Malays began rioting on 13 May, as increasing instability and deaths on the streets prompted the government to impose a curfew. Parliament was suspended in a state of emergency and a National Operations Council (NOC) was established to manage state affairs for the next 18 months, until Parliament was reinstated in 1971. Led by the NOC, the Department of National Unity created the National Principles to unify the country, and spent “nearly a year drafting a national ideology meant to bond Malaysia's diverse population.”³ The principles were based on the Malaysian Constitution and could not be challenged; it has been argued that they “considerably tightened the political framework in Malaysia and restricted the freedom of expression and manoeuvre of the opposition parties.”⁴

My parents had grown up in different towns accustomed to a British lifestyle and practices. Their youth was the subject of some of my bedtime stories, but these stories disappeared or became darker when they thought of the 1970s. The racial riots after the '69 elections changed the country, they said.

I remember this particular anecdote:

On 13 May, a curfew was announced asking everyone to vacate the streets. With shops closing indefinitely, your grandmother went out alone. Desperate, she cycled for miles to buy milk powder for her infant. We thought she would die.

a story in a car ride, 1988



Figure 4.

Patrol Streets. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Troops of the Malay Royal Regiment patrol damaged and littered streets of the Chinatown area in Kuala Lumpur, 17 May, following days of racial rioting between Chinese and Malay mobs that left 100 persons dead, 17 May 1969, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Bettmann, Getty Images.



Figure 5.

Sultan Ismail Nasiruddin Shah, May '69—KL Berkurong, 1969/1969, gelatin silver print, 50 × 60 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers.

The Malaysian exhibition, a few years later.

A little-known fact:

Instant Malaysia was a production headed by the Malaysian government. Various

government bodies were enlisted, including

the Visual Production team from

the Ministry of Information,

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and

the Malaysia High Commission of London.

When the exhibition began its run at the Commonwealth Institute, it showcased significant and noteworthy technological advances in exhibition design. State of the art mechanisms, automatic sensors, and a climate simulator were fabricated to enhance the experience.

Malaysia's humid climate was artificially fabricated to provide an immersive experience. Visuals, sound, heat, and touch transported visitors to the tropical surroundings of Malaysia. The Malaysia Department of Information also produced a brochure for members of the audience, serving as a souvenir and guide.⁵ Regrettably, I can't find a copy of the brochure. The exhibition was funded by the Government, and must have been especially costly during its recovery from the national crisis, though it appears this was downplayed.

An initial plan for the exhibition, designed by James Gardner, was rejected by the government. A different approach was necessary to: *...reinvent the nation's image for larger global communities especially after the 1969 riots; and to remain economically competitive at the onset of the worldwide oil crisis in 1972.*⁶ The Malaysian government took ownership of its national exhibition, as the Commonwealth Institute's curatorial leadership was set aside.

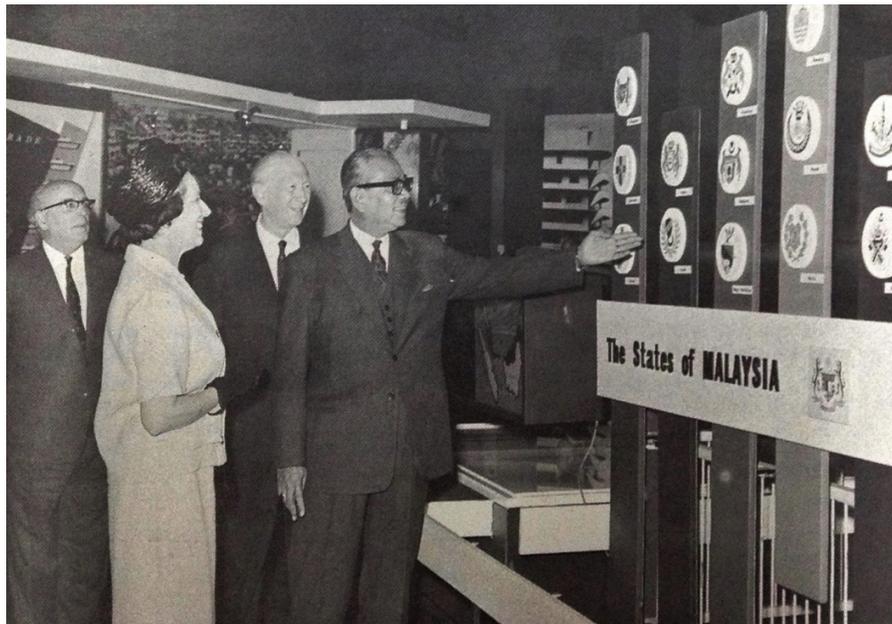


Figure 6.

The First Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman (right), visiting an exhibition at Commonwealth Institute, in *Annual Report of the Director of the Board of Governors*, 1964, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

Architect and historian Lai Chee-Kien writes:

To procure a suitable design for a new exhibit, the Malaysian government in 1972 approached the architects of Archigram through Fred Lightfoot, an administrator at the Institute. A meeting was convened where a Malaysian representative presented what was programmed, and how they could be exhibited in the new display. Archigram accepted the job as the nature of the task was similar to earlier projects ... The exhibit's conception and design were largely undertaken by Dennis Crompton and Ron Herron...⁷

Following the exhibition, Archigram reported:

Archigram Architects recently designed a permanent exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute for the Malaysian government which has set out to soft sell the country as a politically viable, economically stable and industrially progressive nation. At the opening of the exhibition, at the end of last year, the High Commissioner said the exhibition was intended to "show a cross-section of life in Malaysia today ... and its hopes and aspirations for the future" as an integrated multi-racial country. With the aid of the audio-visual techniques used in the exhibition, plus "the blessing of the Almighty" (to quote the High Commissioner again), the soft sell is pretty successful—at least in its hardware; which stands out resoundingly from the conventionally tasteful exhibits which surround it.⁸

The engagement between the parties was made through Commonwealth links. The result was a Malaysian themed exhibition interpolated by the changing forms and architectural designs of Archigram's practice. The group's ideological emphasis on "hardware", rather than politics, would have been favourable to the Malaysian selection committee, whoever they were. Staging the show at the Commonwealth Institute, where Malaysian exhibitions were already on display in the permanent galleries, was a platform to strengthen existing relationships, participate in an international forum, and "soft sell" the nation to other Commonwealth citizens and businesses.

So,

the images from *Instant Malaysia* used diversity and pluralism to entice visitors, a message spearheaded by the government to denote a harmonious society.

Back in Malaysia, official forms for locals still have a tick box

for ethnic divisions.

What happened to the Commonwealth's objective of racial equality?

Instead of addressing the blood-stained streets and social re-engineering

policies, *Instant Malaysia* was a smokescreen concealing actual realities.

Was this a political project with a state agenda? Governmental policing by exhibition?

The Malaysian racial riots happened four years before

the installation of *Instant Malaysia*. It was probably an event

unknown to many in London.

As I continue with my walk, there is a sense that this is primarily a Malaysia packaged and sold to the world when long-distance travel was less accessible in the 1970s.

Unless someone had the financial means or cause

to take such an incredibly long flight, folks

were unable to experience the tropical country in the East.

This exhibition provided an experience of the tropics,

transporting visitors like myself to another world,

another place instantly.

Who were the people who formed the audience?

From my perspective, foreigners are looking at Malaysians in the photomontage.

What would they make of the images? Would they think critically about the exhibits?

I hope visitors considered the scope and meaning it created as a national exhibition, but also

wonder if other nationally endorsed shows were curated and presented in this manner and scale?

Something worth considering.

III: Archigram

What is Archigram?

I read:

Archigram are amongst the most seminal, iconoclastic and influential architectural groups of the modern age. They created some of the 20th century's most iconic images and projects, rethought the relationship of technology, society and architecture, predicted and envisioned the information revolution decades before it came to pass, and reinvented a whole mode of architectural education—and therefore produced a seam of architectural thought with truly global impact.⁹

The collective efforts of the architects produced over 900 drawings between 1961 and 1974. Mike Webb, a founding member of the group, explained that the drawings were not just two-dimensional works. They embodied and expressed ideas.¹⁰ To understand Archigram would be to examine their drawings.



Figure 7.

Tim Street-Porter, "Instant Malaysia" exhibition, 1973, installation photograph. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-370-TC01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

It was through Archigram's drawings that I managed to make more cohesive sense of *Instant Malaysia*.

There is a sense

that Archigram's research may not be entirely visible, as

much of it became incorporated into the exhibition.

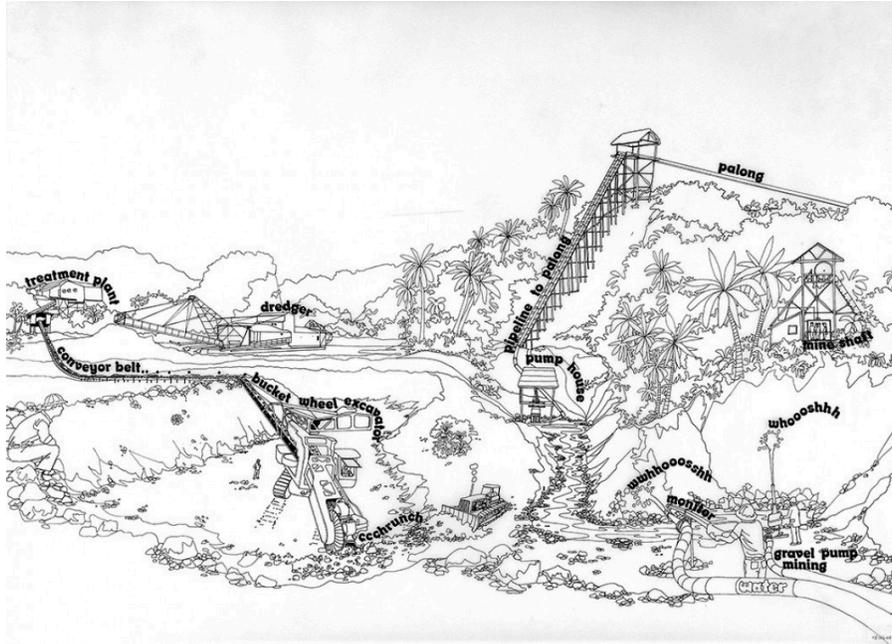


Figure 8.

“Instant Malaysia” exhibition, original drawing for the wall of illustrations featuring mineral extraction and processing, 1973, ink on tracing paper, 850 × 600 cm. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-121-OM01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

Dennis Crompton, another founding member of Archigram, spoke in an interview about his ten-day research trip to Malaysia. Upon arrival at the airport, he encountered a wave of hot and humid air, which was a new experience for him. ¹¹ He

travelled around the peninsula and visited its major cities and industries; and experienced its various landscapes, cultures and micro-climates. ¹²

Crompton visited Malaysia to study and observe everything the country had to offer. His research was fairly extensive:

there are mapped towns and careful annotations of significant sites relating to infrastructure, education, and tourism. Studies included:

topographical layouts, and images of Malaysian domestic aviation, riverine routes, railway lines, road systems, areas with tin mining and timber, rubber plantations, and worldwide telecommunications for the country.

Some of these were charted on local and global maps to pinpoint exact locations.

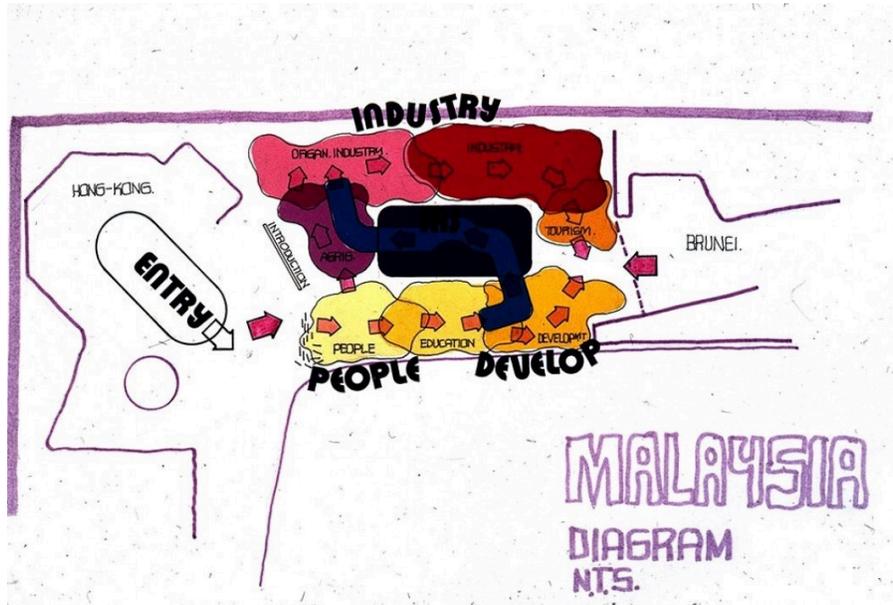


Figure 9.

Dennis Crompton, Peter Cook, and Ron Herron, "Instant Malaysia" exhibition, lower level early development site plan, 1973, ink and felt-tip pen on trace, 510 × 325 cm. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-801-0006). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

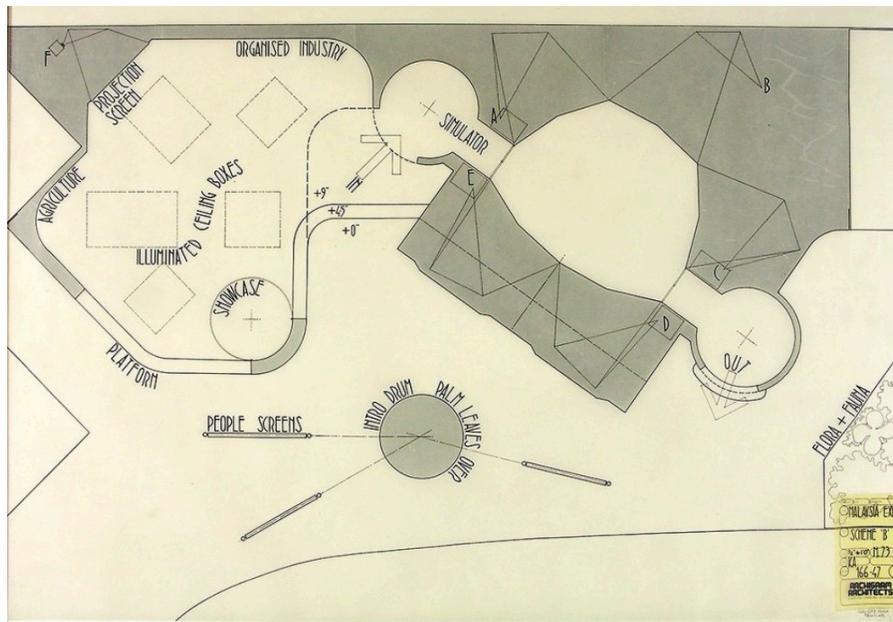


Figure 10.

Ken Allinson, "Instant Malaysia" exhibition, studies for different sections of the Scheme B upper level, 1973, ink on trace, 850 × 600 cm. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-047-OM01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

These drawings made little sense until I realised they were studies for different sections of the exhibition. Reading the drawings in parallel with installation photographs uncovered Archigram's intention to delineate the different sectors, including

organised industry, agriculture, education, tourism, and development, with

subsections on

communications, housing, health and welfare, policy, and planning.

The Archigram designers wanted to demonstrate the nation's progressive politics and industries; that even a third world country was a place of tremendous prospects. Without government support for their research, gaining access to all this information would have been impossible.

Archigram research outcomes populated the lower level display, which provided a comprehensive account of Malaysia as a nation, while the upper level contained the sensory simulator.

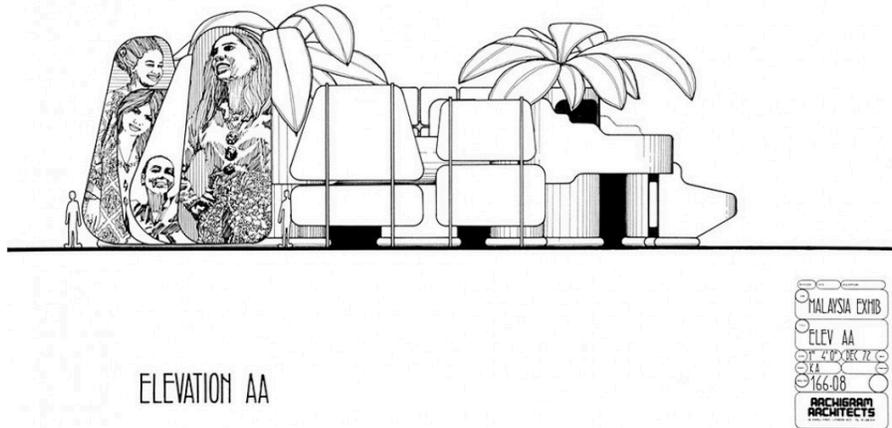


Figure 11.

Ken Allinson, “Instant Malaysia” exhibition, Elevation A-A drawing, 1973, print, 590 x 429 cm. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-008-NM01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

Even though the Archigram graphics were vibrant, within the exhibition I found many photos

in black and white,

dulling the colours of the country.

Beautiful drawings, possibly meant for large-scale wall and pillar illustrations, were also replaced in several instances by photographic images in the display. Their omission remains one of the mysteries of the exhibition.

In the *Elevation A-A* drawing, a human figure on the left specified the structure’s massive proportions. It was also a prompt to read the illustration from left to right—in accordance with how visitors would stream across the display. The architects added a tropical feel to the design with two overarching palm trees looming over the show. It is evocative of certain old Malaysian Tourism Board advertisements promoting sunny beaches with trees that give shade from the tropical heat.

In my opinion, there are strong parallels with the tourist experience; front panels resembled locals greeting visitors arriving upon Malaysian shores. Moving deeper into the interior metaphorically opened up the country, providing access to its ecosystems, culture, and industrial sectors. The entire

configuration was carefully considered, encouraging viewers to explore the varied industries and people's lives from within the structure, which also symbolised the country.



Figure 12.

“Instant Malaysia” exhibition, mask for simulator projection, 1973, sketch. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-125-SM01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

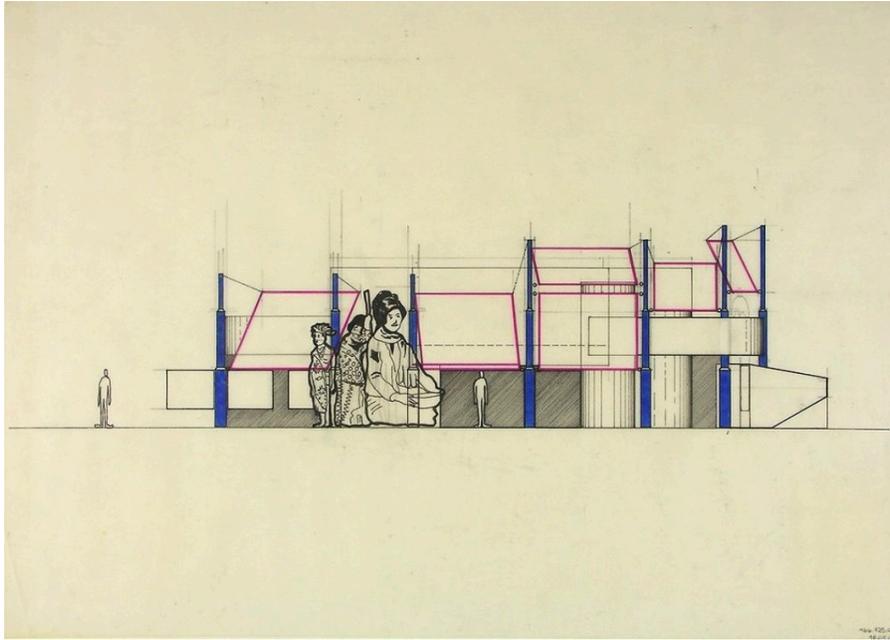


Figure 13.

Ron Herron, "Instant Malaysia" exhibition, development study elevation, 1973, sketch. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-125-OC01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

The drawings also provided insight into the incorporation of vernacular architecture in the show.

Malay houses are traditional architectural forms suited for the tropical weather. These timber structures built on stilts with a slanting roof offered sufficient ventilation and protection against natural elements.

I find the shape of the slanted roof similar to the kit-of-parts that Archigram used in the exhibition. The proposed exhibition structures—

recreations to be installed as part of the displays—are possibly simplifications of the original. But the scale of the standing figure in the exhibition drawing is comparable to the proportion of a person's height in an actual Malay House.

Importantly, adopting traditional architectural values

enhances the showcase

by retaining the essence of

Malaysian culture in this

exhibition for those unfamiliar with Malaysia.

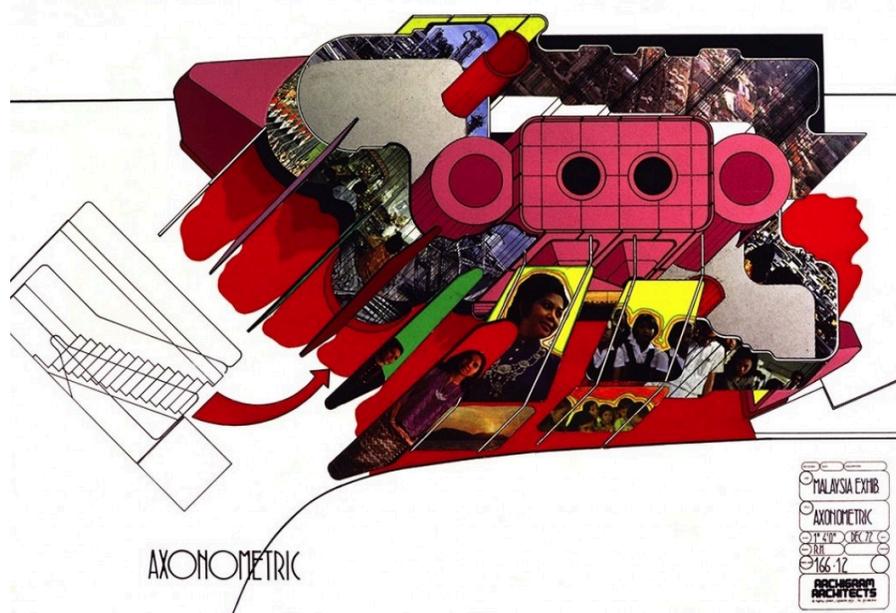


Figure 14. Ron Herron, “Instant Malaysia” exhibition, axonometric print of the exhibition featuring a bird's-eye view of the entire arrangement, 1973. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-012-OC02). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

Ron Herron’s axonometric print of the exhibition featured a bird’s-eye view of the entire

arrangement in colour, compared to the earlier outline drawings.

The different sections were fully illustrated

—children in school uniform would be in the education section, and so on.

The only solid-looking structure appeared to be the simulator hovering in the

centre, with the surrounding exhibits looking more

malleable and organic.

Baillie, my editor, wondered if perhaps the exhibits surrounding the solid central structure were modular; another kit-of-parts assembled to mould the space, guiding visitors through stand-alone thematic displays that could be presented together variously.

This approach would be a nod to Archigram's propositions of non-solid architecture.

Since the 1960s, the architects in the group have challenged accepted conventions

with futuristic strategies and outcomes.

Instant Malaysia's set-up was well suited to their architectural ideas,

which went beyond the

modernistic conventions of the day.



Figure 15.

Collage to illustrate the proposed appearance of the "Instant Malaysia" exhibition, 1973, photographic collage. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-101-TC01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.



Figure 16.

Tim Street-Porter, "Instant Malaysia" exhibition, 1973, installation photograph. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-203-TC01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

Fortunately, there is an illustration which allows for a comparison of Archigram's vision

against the realized project. The collage was fairly colourful and brighter in contrast to the muted outcome of the show, with greyscale images fronting the exhibition façade. A green coloured structure was chosen to envelop the exhibition, and the portrait boards were scaled down making them less imposing. Moreover, the portraits were considerably smaller and now bled around the edges of the construction. Strikingly, the palm trees no longer reach above the top of the showcase. The exhibition photograph provides a good idea of the space taken by *Instant Malaysia* within the Commonwealth Institute, revealing that, compared to other exhibits at the time, it was a bigger attraction.

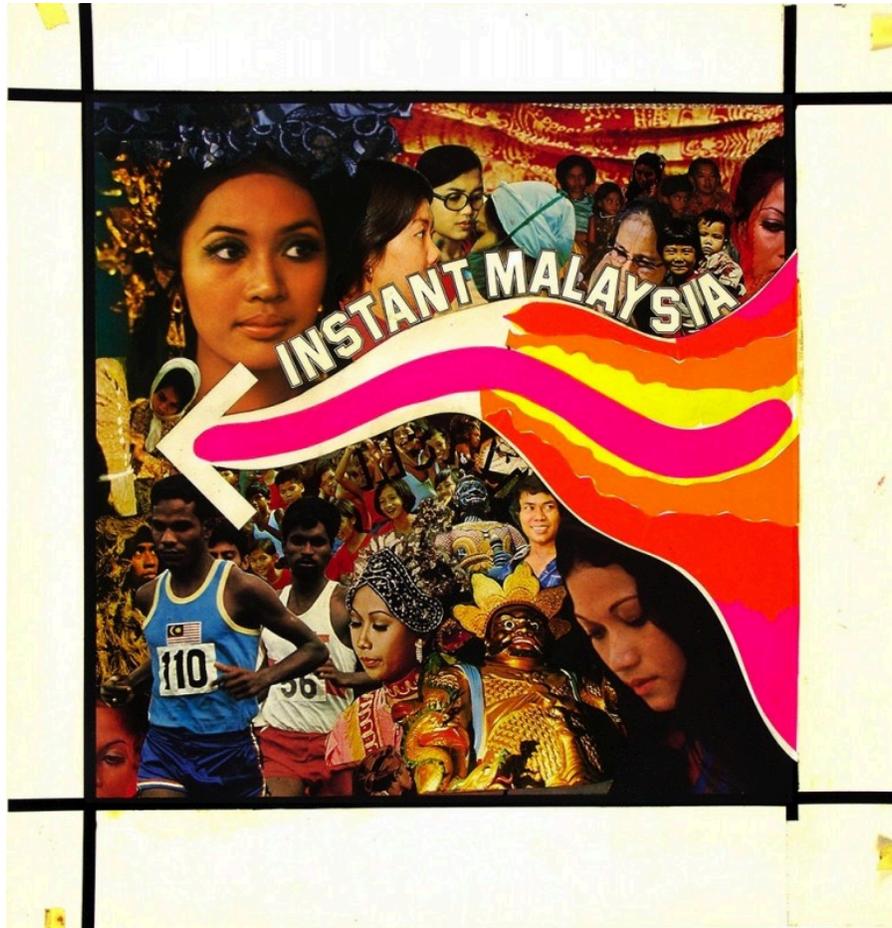


Figure 17.

Ron Herron and Dennis Crompton, "Instant Malaysia" exhibition, introduction slide, base art, 973, collage. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-001-EC01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.



Figure 18.

Ron Herron and Dennis Crompton, "Instant Malaysia" exhibition promotion, 1973, poster. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-066-OC01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

I found a couple of graphics in the Archigram Archive.

With no written evidence, I can only speculate on their intended purposes. The way they foreground the exhibition title suggests advertisements to entice London viewers to the exhibition. Herron and Crompton's graphic arrangement of Malaysians meshed together interestingly inserted a gold-plated statue of a deity among ordinary faces. In a different pitch, Herron and Allinson's design-in-progress had white visitors within the simulator. The use of plausibly European models probably had a greater chance of attracting British visitors to the exhibition. At this stage of the planning, the simulator's design was already complete, with handrails on the side mounted in front of the large projection screens. Unfortunately, I am not doing justice to the design properties employed in the posters.

A design historian would surely be able to articulate the principles of design seen here, and the currency of graphic design in the 1970s, but I am searching for clues that illuminate the experience of the exhibition.

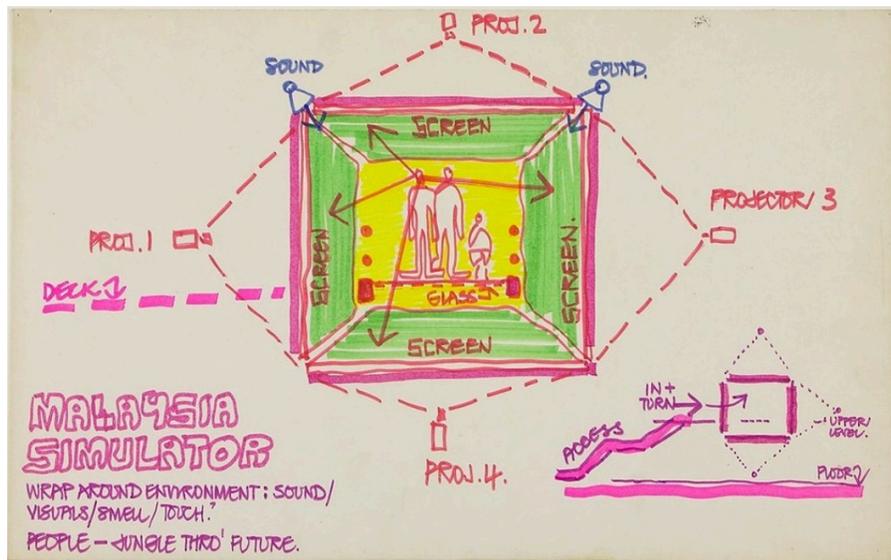


Figure 19.

Ron Herron, "Instant Malaysia" exhibition, sketch for the simulator, 1973, sketch, 600 × 425 cm. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-006-SC01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

Archigram adopted a multitude of influences including technology, space gadgets, media, and even pop culture. Their endeavours were not unnoticed by the Malaysian Government, who engaged their services and allowed Archigram's unconventional approaches to infuse their permanent exhibition.

This is how Archigram described the simulator for *Instant Malaysia*:

The major feature of the exhibition, which is built on two levels, is the sensory (and sensual) simulator located at the level above the general display area. Inside, "in 12 minutes you experience the 90° atmosphere of the Malay jungle and the cool winds after the monsoon". The simulator accommodates up to 15 people at any one time and they are subjected to constantly changing visual images and sounds, and, more powerfully, temperature and humidity. The mechanics of the simulator are interesting—the four screen multi-projection slide system, which is literally done by mirrors, synchronised with three track sound, and the associated impacts of superimposition, dissolve, blink etc... In the end, of

course, it is the simulator which really draws one's attention. Rightly or wrongly, this particular piece of hardware is much more intriguing than the content of the exhibition as a whole. ¹³



Figure 20.

Ron Herron and Ken Allinson, "Instant Malaysia" exhibition sketch for the simulator, control room sequence, 1973, Ink, collage, and felt tip on board, 850 × 400 cm. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-070-OC01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

Coloured

illustrations also provided insights to the simulator.

Though the end product evolved from these initial ideas,

it was a window into the conceptual developments for the main exhibit.

With a limited number of photographs

of the actual simulator,

graphics and sketches signified the

designers' intent to

encapsulate viewers with foliage and nature. Different images projected on the screens also made an impression of this being a one-stop visit, bringing multiple attractions from Malaysia together for visitors' convenience.

Instant.

The idea of a living machine was carried over to *Instant Malaysia* from earlier Archigram conceptions, with the simulator having one objective: to induce a tropical ecosystem similar to Malaysia.

Archigram projects adopted the kit-of-parts as their architectural language. These flexible assemblages allowed the architects to work with organic components instead of fixed structures. This significant shift moulded their direction as appliances became increasingly visible in their ideations. Here are some of the items they used:

... First, the idea of a "soft-scene monitor"—a combination of teaching-machine, audio-visual juke box, environmental simulator, and from a theoretical point of view, a realization of the "Hardware/Software" debate ... as the notion of an electronically-aided responsive environment... ¹⁴

Due to the close time-frame between the projects and *Instant Malaysia*, it is not a surprise

to see Archigram use similar machines/ideations adopted from earlier projects.

I believe all their projects and developments added to the knowledge that made *Instant Malaysia* possible. The drawings and photographs for *Instant Malaysia* evidenced Archigram principles as

I think of the Malaysian exhibition as a materialisation and achievement of the group's

incredible journey.

Built for London audiences,

the simulator's objective was to clone a particular human condition:

of people acclimatised and habituated in hot, humid conditions with torrential monsoon rain. In short, the tropical weather. The simulator's function enabled visitors to experience this alien condition.

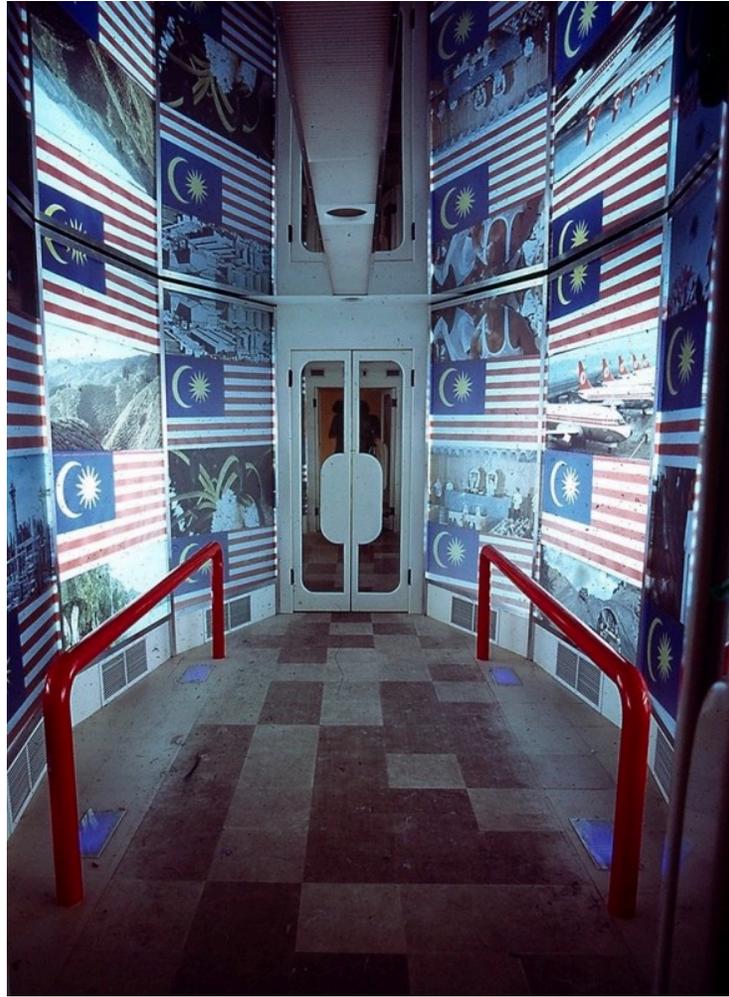


Figure 21.

Tim Street-Porter, "Instant Malaysia" exhibition, inside the simulator, 1973, photograph. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-203-TC01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

According to the 1974 Commonwealth Institute Annual Report, the Malaysian simulator was

popular with visitors. In the following years, there were continuous reports of damages, theft, and vandalism of the exhibit. The dysfunctional machine persisted as the Commonwealth Institute laboured to keep the device fully operational. The Commonwealth's 1977's Annual Report concluded that the complex system needed continuous maintenance, which generated a substantial financial cost.¹⁵ By this time, thieves had stolen the slides from the old machine, which was in need of an overhaul. With the consistent technical problems plaguing the device, the *Instant Malaysia* simulator is an exemplar of an exhibition over-reliant on an instrument.

Who should have taken responsibility for the simulator? The Malaysian Government, or Archigram?

Unfortunately, the company that had produced the simulator for Archigram ceased its operations in 1975. Without the simulator, visitors and the exhibition itself were victims of a failed machine.

I spoke to a Malaysian who visited the exhibition in 1973, and she said,

The graphics were excellent, and the display had a presence and scale unlike some lurid images

now. I remember the humidity simulator very well. I was impressed when I saw it as anything Malaysian was usually less exciting. People wished to experience the tropics again. While Malaysian visitors wanted to feel the warmth, the British officers who travelled to Malaysia before this exhibition were nostalgic of their time spent in the tropics. Although I did not see them at the show, I met some of them afterwards, friends of my parents.

The simulator was humid. When you arrive at Kuala Lumpur International Airport

after a long flight and come out into the open? That blast of humid hot air. Like that. Also, it smelled right in the capsule. Like, after rain. There was no time limit as we took our time. Also, it was quite spacious. I do not remember feeling crowded-in.

From the screens, I saw images of tropical plants and wild animals. Yes, monkeys and

a tiger. The sounds were terrific with a waterfall somewhere.

It became one of those must-see exhibits that year. I was there a few times with my friends.

I think Londoners, especially those who have not visited Malaysia would have liked it—to experience tropical humidity at their doorstep. Those I met at the exhibition were pleasantly surprised by the different climate and thoroughly enjoyed it. ¹⁶



Figure 22.

Tim Street-Porter, "Instant Malaysia" exhibition, inside the simulator, 1973, photograph. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-206-TC01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

The visitor enjoyed the simulator, and recalled certain vivid sights, sounds, and feelings such as the controlled

temperature, decades after the event. That the show was a talking point among former British colonial officers and Malaysians in the 1970s proves the success of the simulation. I argue that the exhibition and simulator inadvertently became their memory theatre of time spent in Malaysia. Archigram probably did not intend the display to have nostalgic purposes. Nevertheless, it went beyond its objective as a real crowd-pleaser, triggering deeper feelings and emotions from people affiliated with Malaysia.

Earlier, I mentioned Crompton's visit to Malaysia. In the simulator, he must have incorporated the sensation of the tropical weather that he experienced with the more general atmosphere of a jungle. The visitor was right when she recalled the sounds of wild animals.

Up until the 1990s, I had older Europeans asking if I lived on top of a tree. One wonders if there was a link between the Malaysian exhibition and the lasting perceptions it formed for its visitors.

IV: Things One Experienced in the Simulator

So, these are the things one experienced in the simulator.

I saw it as an

interactive simulator

political simulator

education simulator

humidity simulator

memory simulator

It was a form of entertainment, an attraction for visitors to *Instant Malaysia* and the

Commonwealth Institute in 1973; and in 2019—for me.

It was fantastic listening to the memories of somebody who had visited the exhibition.

Her account alongside with Archigram's notes added a human touch to my mental image of the display.

I would love to speak with British visitors who visited *Instant Malaysia*.

That would be a third perspective, showing how they perceived the exhibition as the target audience.

I am still amazed by this exhibition.

Doesn't it mean one country in two locations?

A strange proposition,

Malaysia in Southeast Asia and Malaysia in London.

I'm a town boy.

Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, I experienced most of the things shown in the simulator, except for the wild animals incorporated into the sequence—something I hope to see only at the zoo. However, the simulation of rain was spot-on.

That tropical smell was unmistakable and the sounds, magical.

The filmed scenes are images I associate with Malaysia, but it is weird to see them portrayed on the screens. I probably took such things for granted.

My walk-through of the exhibition was probably unnecessary and inappropriate. After all,

I was not the exhibition's target audience. It was for non-Malaysians to get to know the new country, and there was a sense of exoticisation at play; to romanticise the foreign culture and differentiate it from British practices and experiences.

However, the exhibition was a portrayal of Malaysia in 1973.

It introduced the Malaysia I know, but different. I am told the country was much greener then, with less cars, less pollution, less sophisticated electronic devices. A simpler life. Growing up, I did not have the luxury of the Internet until my college days in the 1990s.

It was a different world with different conditions then.

With advancements in global travel today, people are probably less taken with the images from *Instant Malaysia*. However, it is a nostalgic trip for me. A trip down memory lane—remembering the conditions and beauty of Malaysia.

If I had been the curator of this significant exhibition, forgotten though it is today, what would I have wanted the audience to see? How would I frame the visual

pedagogy of such a show? The Commonwealth Institute posited exhibitions like *Instant Malaysia* as educational tools. Their efforts, documented in photographic prints, depict schoolchildren visiting the shows. I wonder about the impact of such visits and how they shaped young minds towards the Commonwealth's objectives? The Commonwealth's educational drive has been in place for decades, instructing thousands of people. How did it affect, change, or develop new windows into third world countries, like Malaysia), which exhibited at the Commonwealth Institute? These exhibitions were knowledge agencies containing the power to frame viewer perceptions. Didactic in

nature, they were capable of building serious scholarship on these alien cultures by percolating their social, cultural, political, and ethnographical practices.

I still have a question. Should the presentation be considered a Malaysian exhibition, or should it be viewed as an Archigram display? It was a Malaysian display with Archigram aesthetics, where one could not do without the other.

The fulfilment of the project was never an intervention for the architects. Archigram's design

and execution of *Instant Malaysia* was never celebrated as an achievement of the group. Until today, even Archigram publications have very little information regarding the Malaysian show.

It resulted in

the exhibition itself forgotten as there are a lack of dedicated resources regarding *Instant Malaysia*. As a Malaysian and a student of the history of art, I have never even heard of this national presentation. I started my investigation with a scrap of information on a website which has since been taken down, highlighting this Malaysian exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute. Further research on unpublished Commonwealth documents brought me to archives of universities and museums focused on art exhibitions, but not the "national galleries" in the Commonwealth Institute. This is surprising as the national spaces were spread across the main areas of the building. It then dawned on me that shows like *Instant Malaysia* were significant in forwarding new nation states with the support of the Commonwealth of Nations, not fine art. These national exhibitions became a political front, a façade of newly independent countries promoting themselves to the world in London. In turn, fine art was shown in the art gallery, but it was not displayed within the spaces allocated for national agendas and portrayals. The 1973 Malaysian exhibition was a means to "soft sell" a modernising and developing country. With the entire country's ecosystem acting as subject matter, it took precedence over artistic practices and presentations. Lest we forget, the Commonwealth Institute was an organ of the Commonwealth, a political association.

Essentially, months of investigation finally revealed the Archigram digital archives with

drawings, photos and prints of the Malaysian show. Even then, there were minimal written resources as I continue my journey piecing together information using predominantly Archigram images.

One more thing about architects and their design for exhibitions.

I read:

Much has been written about how challenging architecture exhibitions are to mount. The primary critique is that they rely on displaying representations—drawings, sketches, collages, models, fragments, photographs, the like—rather than built forms. But these documents are, for many practitioners, their principal form of communicating architectural ideas... ¹⁷

For architects, this is the way they present their works in and through exhibitions. Without permanent structures, these works on paper, print, and models become the completed works. Archigram embraced this method of production and presentation—providing many of these valuable works for the Malaysian exhibition. The annual reports from the Institute in the 1970s also left behind links. Without Archigram and the annual reports, it would have been impossible to historicise the Malaysian exhibition and its significance.

Where Malaysia is concerned, this exhibition provided a glimpse of how the government wished to promote the country, especially towards London and European audiences. The state commissioned Archigram, a London-based practice for the construction of a simulated display within a strategic London space, the Commonwealth Institute. It resulted in a co-authorship consisting of Malaysian advocacies, political direction, and subject matter combined with the architects' technological experimentations and conceptual biases. A complex negotiation witnessed in the working processes of previously unnarrated drawings, models, and prints.

At this stage, do I know this Malaysia? Is this what I expected from the show? I don't know. While I have a clearer understanding of the displayed items along with its intentions, my search for history, politics, and nationalism continues. As I look at the photographs, the exhibits, and enjoyed the sensory simulator, the exhibition is a memory of a Malaysia strange yet familiar...



Figure 23.

Ron Herron and Dennis Crompton, “Instant Malaysia” exhibition masks (sandwiched in by hand between the slides) for the simulator projection, 1973, ink on trace. Collection of the Archigram Archival Project (166-150-OC01). Digital image courtesy of Archigram Architects 1973.

Wandering,
I am still
lost—a
contemporary
ghost strolling
around a forgotten
exhibition. I

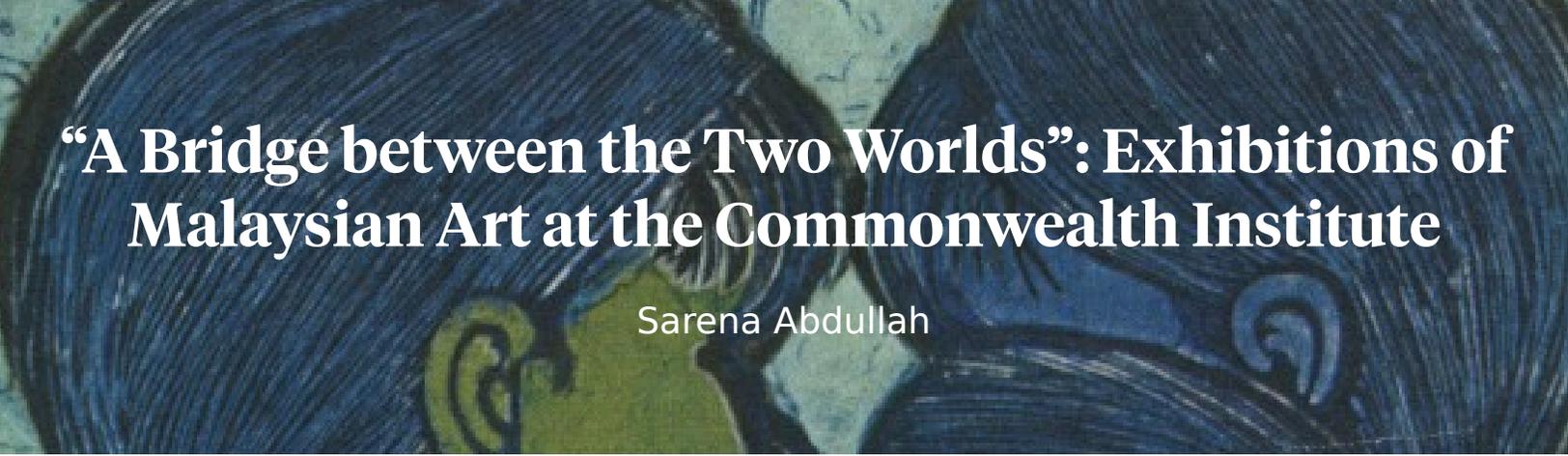
could go no
further in this
memory theatre
but to look
elsewhere for
answers. My
ghosting has come to an end. For
now.

Footnotes

- 1 Simon Sadler, *Archigram: Architecture Without Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 54.
- 2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revised edn (London: Verso, 2006).
- 3 Perdana Leadership Foundation, "Rukun Negara: The National Principles of Malaysia", 19 September 2016, <http://www.perdana.org.my/index.php/spotlight2/item/rukun-negara-the-national-principle-of-malaysia>. Accessed 25 January 2019.
- 4 Peter Wicks, "The New Realism: Malaysia since 13 May, 1969", *The Australian Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (December 1971): 20–21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20634465>. Accessed 12 May, 2019.
- 5 Commonwealth Institute, Annual Report of the Director to the Board of Governors (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1973), 8 and 12–13.
- 6 Chee-Kien Lai, "Concrete/Concentric Nationalism: The Architecture of Independence in Malaysia, 1945–1969", PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 334.
- 7 Lai, "Concrete/Concentric Nationalism", 334–335.
- 8 Architectural Design, "Archigram as Architects", *Architectural Design* (1974): 387–388. Project by Centre for Experimental Practice, "Malaysian Exhibition", Archigram Archival Project (2010), University of Westminster, <http://archigram.westminster.ac.uk/project.php?id=171>. Accessed 10 January 2018.
- 9 Project by Centre for Experimental Practice, "About Archigram", The Archigram Archival Project, 2010, University of Westminster, <http://archigram.westminster.ac.uk/about.php?pg=archi>. Accessed 10 January 2018.
- 10 Peter Cook, ed. *Archigram* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 2–3.
- 11 Lai, "Concrete/Concentric Nationalism", 252 and 335.
- 12 Lai, "Concrete/Concentric Nationalism", 335.
- 13 Centre for Experimental Practice, "About Archigram", The Archigram Archival Project.
- 14 Cook, *Archigram*, 94.
- 15 Commonwealth Institute, Annual Report of the Director to the Board of Governors (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1974), 15; Commonwealth Institute, Annual Report of the Director to the Board of Governors (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1975), 18; Commonwealth Institute, Annual Report of the Director to the Board of Governors (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1976), 17; and Commonwealth Institute, Annual Report of the Director to the Board of Governors (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1977), 16.
- 16 Born and raised in Malaysia, Izan Tahir received her education at the London College of Printing in the 1960s. She was a designer employed by Terence Conran when she visited Instant Malaysia in 1973. Izan witnessed the political and cultural developments in the UK and experienced the tumultuous formation of Malaysia as a new nation-state. I had this conversation with Izan on 4 December 2017.
- 17 Zoe Ryan (ed.), *As Seen: Exhibitions that made Architecture and Design History* (Chicago, IL: Art Institute of Chicago, 2017), 15.

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“A Bridge between the Two Worlds”: Exhibitions of Malaysian Art at the Commonwealth Institute

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Introduction

In recent years, calls for a more globalised art history and the decolonisation of the Euramerican-centric approach of the field has encouraged new attitudes and approaches, especially the impact of artistic exchange in different parts of the world. As an area of research, the history of modern and contemporary art is relatively new in Malaysia. It has continued to be pursued within the construct of its national boundary, despite the long transnational history of the Malay Archipelago. For centuries, this area saw high migration and mobility that reached its height during the colonial era, as signified by its thriving port cities--namely Penang, Singapore, and Malacca. With the end of the Second World War and the retreat of colonial powers, young nations started to sprout in the region. By the 1960s, the nation-building project in Malaysia saw the establishment of the National Art Gallery along with several other national institutions. As the development of Malaysian modern art and art writing has always been nation-centric in nature, transnational interactions and mobility, either by people or by objects, tends to be disregarded in the writing of Malaysian modern art. Focusing on Malaysian art at the Commonwealth Institute in mid-twentieth-century London, and the cultural transactions it produced, the research presented here seeks to fill the lacunae left behind by this neglect. Looking particularly at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia and the Commonwealth Institute in London, this feature is grounded in archival research that will illustrate and discuss the links between London and Kuala Lumpur during the 1960s and 1970s, through several exhibitions of Malaysian art organised at or by the Commonwealth Institute. The discussion of these materials will situate them within the longer history of artistic engagement between London and Kuala Lumpur.

In Malaysian art and art history, the activities of Malaysian artists and art institutions in the 1950s and 1960s remain under-examined. In 2017, the London, Asia Research Award allowed me to conduct fieldwork in a variety of British archives that is important in situating and understanding the early developments of Malaysian modern art, especially in the context of early Malayan/Malaysian exhibitions in London during that period of time. Although the unexamined and complex relations between Kuala Lumpur and London, and their impact on Malaysian art, were the main objective of my research, the actual direct impact of these exhibitions in London or to Britain in general and vice versa was indeed very limited. Having said that, this does not mean such examination is futile. Within this feature, I present research findings connecting personalities and the exhibitions in question to the larger context of Kuala Lumpur and post-war London. From the arts education attained by Malaysian artists in Britain, to the role played by Frank Sullivan, an Australian

who helped establish the National Art Gallery and the early international exhibitions under the Commonwealth Institute—it is possible to expand our understanding of these connections, relationship, and encounters.



Figure 1.

National Art Gallery, Malaysia, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Sarena Abdullah.

The National Art Gallery of Malaysia was established on 28 August 1958 by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first prime minister of Malaysia, a year after Malaya's Independence (Fig. 1). Members of the Malayan Arts Council, headed by the late Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard and Frank Sullivan, who was Tunku Abdul Rahman's press secretary at that time, were the first to moot the idea of having a national art gallery.¹ As well as the establishment of the National Art Gallery (NAG), the other forms of post-Independence national projects during the 1950s and 1960s included the establishment of the National Monument, the Parliament House, the National Museum, the National Mosque (Masjid Negara), the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the Stadium Negara, and the Merdeka Stadium.²



Figure 2.

National Art Gallery, *Malaysia exhibition covers*. Digital image courtesy of National Art Gallery, Malaysia.

The international approach of the National Art Gallery from its outset is unsurprising, and this ethos is evident within the history of its very establishment. Among the people who were involved with the formation of the National Art Gallery were Frank Sullivan, Kington Loo, Ungku Abdul Aziz, P.G. Lim, Peter Harris, and Mubin Sheppard. They later served as the first board of trustees. If we were to examine the institution and exhibition history of the National Art Gallery, we cannot fail to notice that in the first twenty years of its formation, the National Art Gallery had organised a significant number of international art exhibitions as seen through these catalogue covers (Fig. 2).³ These exhibitions were usually organised through the collaboration of various high commissioners, ministries of cultures, foundations, and even art councils. Indirectly, these various exhibitions reflected a phenomenon described by Krishen Jit: “the notion of the modern in the visual arts had arisen in the national consciousness”.⁴ Thus, we can observe that the exhibitions on Malaysian arts were interspersed with international exhibitions—denoting Malaysia’s standing as a nation among other nations as early as the onset of Independence. Although Malaysia was a very young nation then, the internationalising approach by the National Art Gallery was commendable despite the state of the country, which had just undergone a period of upheaval and turmoil due to the Malayan Emergency from 1948 until 1960. One aspect of such internationalisation could be seen in the NAG’s participation and collaboration with the Commonwealth Institute in London.



Figure 3.

Kenneth Bradley, "The New Commonwealth Institute (exterior)", *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 111, no. 5081 (1963): 403-411. Digital image courtesy of The Royal Society of Arts.

The Commonwealth Institute was established in South Kensington, London, as the Imperial Institute in 1888. However, it was only in 1958 that the Imperial Institute changed its name to the Commonwealth Institute, and in 1962, moved its premises nearby to Kensington High Street—in a striking new building, designed by Robert Matthew Johnson-Marshall & Partners (RMJM). The aim of the Commonwealth Institute was "to foster the interest of the Commonwealth by information and education services designed to promote among its peoples a wider knowledge of one another and a greater understanding of the Commonwealth itself".⁵ One of the main sections of the Commonwealth Institute was the Art Gallery. The Art Gallery aligned with the general policy of the institute itself, which was:

to give promising, as well as better known, artists, in other parts of the Commonwealth opportunities for showing their work in England at a minimum cost to themselves, and to make the Institute gallery the natural home for Commonwealth art in London.⁶

As Malaya gained its Independence in 1957, and Malaysia was later formed in 1963, the Commonwealth link was seen favourably by the anglophile first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. Although the development of modern Malaysian art started in the early twentieth century, it was in the 1950s, with the establishment of the National Art Gallery, that various international exhibitions were organised, and among them those by the Commonwealth Institute itself.

Frank Sullivan became the secretary of the first working committee and then a member of the board of trustees of the National Art Gallery—a position that he held until 1971. It can be easily inferred that the close relationship between Tunku and Frank Sullivan, who was his press secretary at that time, could have resulted in the favourable establishment of the gallery at 109, Jalan Ampang, right in the centre of Kuala Lumpur, where it was adjacent to Malaysia's first parliament building.⁷ Sullivan's role as a very passionate collector who supported Malaysian artists in the nation's early years also cannot be denied. In fact, Sullivan himself donated some of the first National Art Gallery collections.

In regard to Sullivan's art interests and lack of art background, Neil Manton has observed,

There was nothing in Frank's background to suggest that he was particularly interested in the visual arts and his sister was at loss to explain it. Perhaps it was simply the appeal to his administrative sense of being "The Secretary" of various organisations which led him to join up with the local art groups.⁸

Sullivan's roles and influence in the new Malayan/Malaysian administration cannot be disclaimed. The years working with Tunku were described by Sullivan as "the hardest and yet the happiest years of my life."⁹ Sullivan travelled extensively with Tunku Abdul Rahman, including to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences in London a few times. Other visits included state visits to Brunei, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, West Germany, Belgium, Holland, France, Canada, the United States, Pakistan, and India. He also accompanied the second prime minister, Tun Abdul Razak, to Thailand and the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (the king) to India, Pakistan, Thailand, and Japan.¹⁰

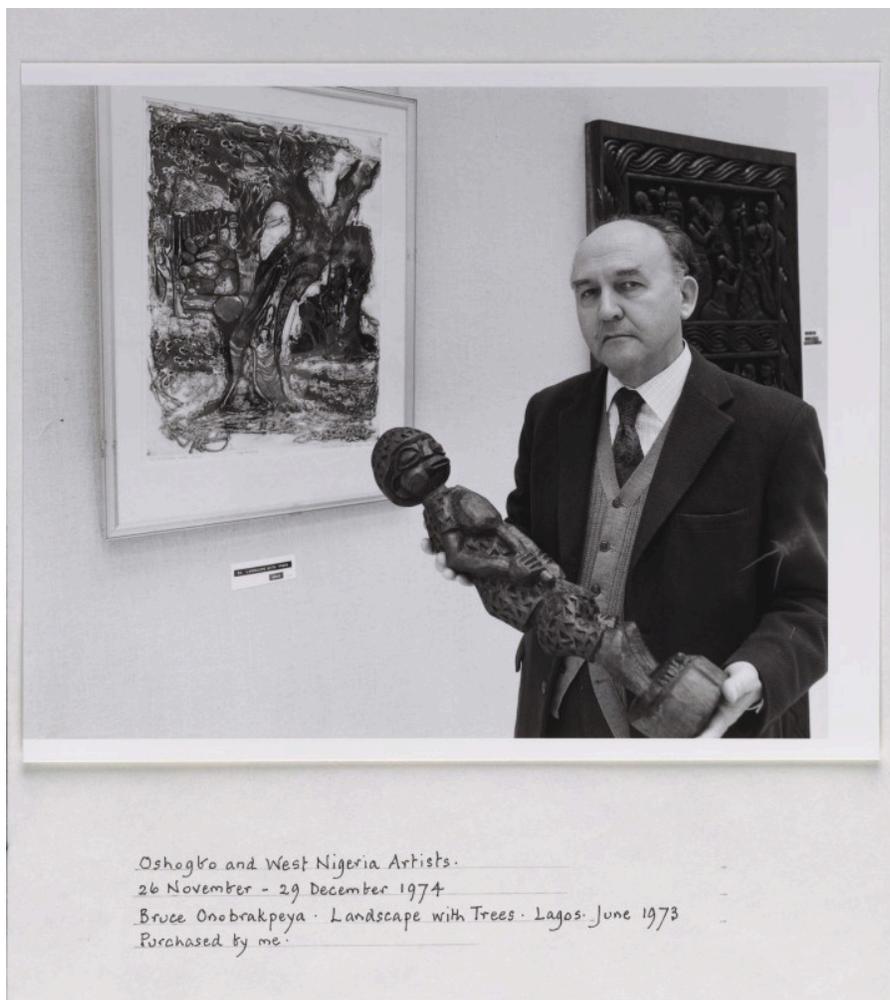


Figure 4.

Donald Bowen at Oshogbo and West Nigeria Artists exhibition, 26 November–29 December 1974, photograph. Donald Bowen Archive, Cambridge Library (RCMS 360_3). Digital image courtesy of Donald Bowen Archive, Cambridge Library.



Figure 5.

Donald Bowen, photograph. Donald Bowen Archive, Cambridge Library.
Digital image courtesy of Donald Bowen Archive, Cambridge Library.

Donald Bowen joined the Imperial Institute in 1953 as the exhibitions officer, and became curator of the art gallery in 1962. Although Bowen trained as an artist and was a highly accomplished draughtsman, he devoted 25 years of his life to the Commonwealth Institute until his retirement in 1979. During that time, Bowen organised more than 200 exhibitions of paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, crafts, and other media, while working with established and emerging Commonwealth artists, many of whom had never exhibited in Britain before. It was Bowen's responsibility to plan the artistic programme for the gallery and to design every single show. Numerous international artists applied to show their work at the Institute as it was immediately recognised as a prestigious home for Commonwealth art. ¹¹

As much as Frank Sullivan had contributed in bringing works by Malaysian artists to London and Europe, Donald Bowen, the curator of the Commonwealth Institute, was the one who introduced the artists of the Commonwealth to the London public. For Malaysia itself, during his position, he organised exhibitions for Chuah Thean Teng (1959 and 1965), Lee Joo For (1960), Abdul Latiff Mohidin (1971), and a few others.

Commonwealth Art Today, 1962–1963

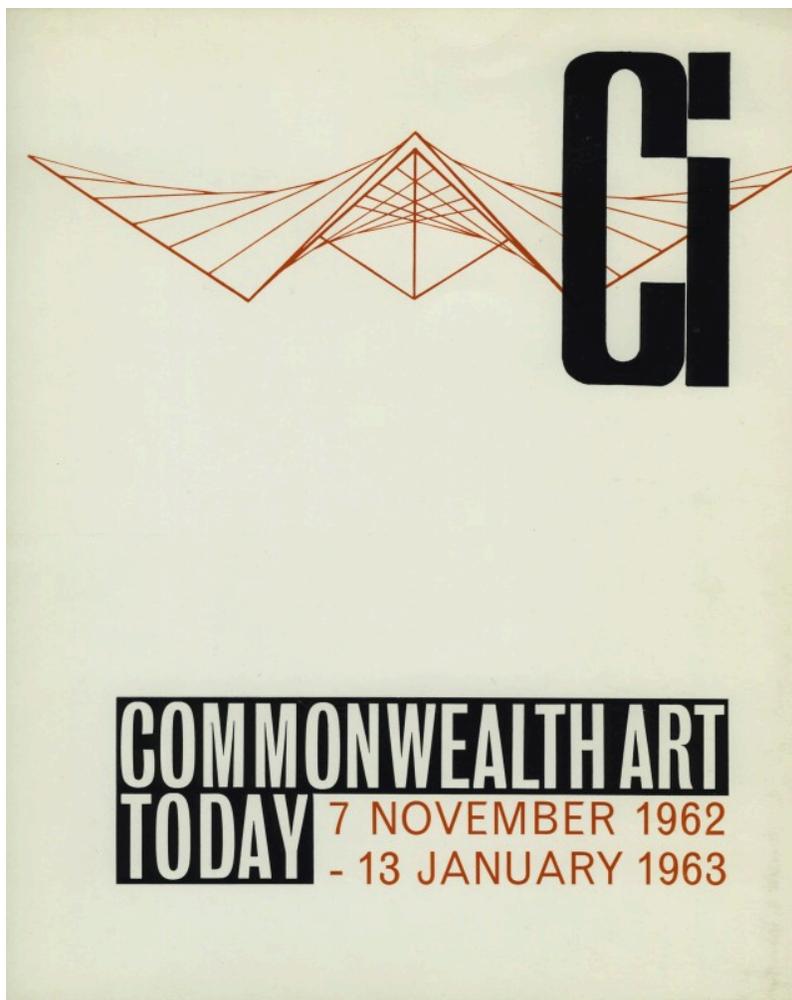


Figure 6.

Commonwealth Art Today, Commonwealth Institute, 7 November 1962-13 January 1963, catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

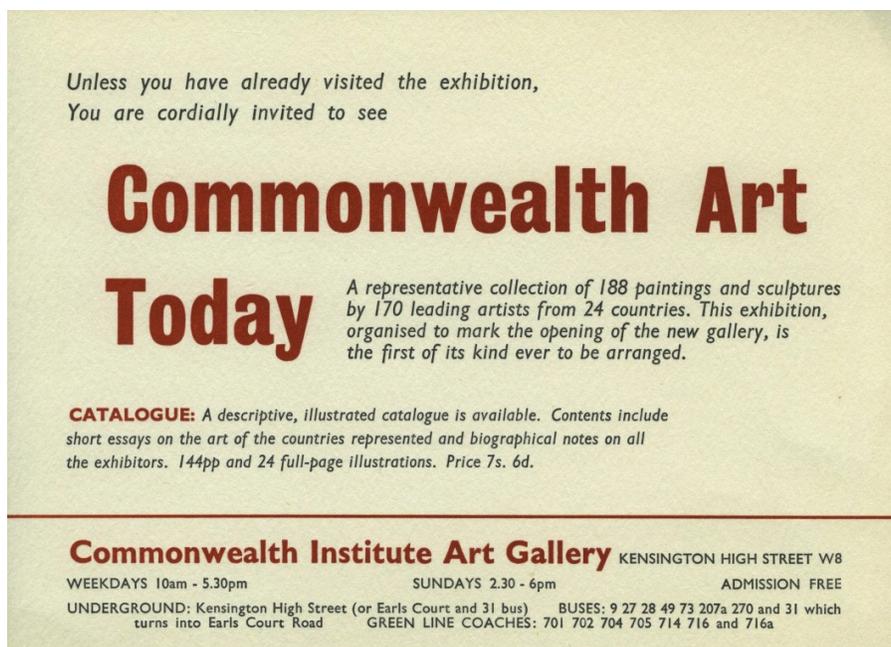


Figure 7.

Commonwealth Art Today, Commonwealth Institute, 7 November 1962-13 January 1963, invitation. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

For a young nation, Malaysia's participation in exhibitions such as *Commonwealth Art Today* in 1962, the Commonwealth Arts Festival in Glasgow in 1965, and the *Malaysian Art* exhibition in 1966 marked an important point in early Malaysian art history. These exhibitions denoted Malaysia's participation internationally, which was not limited to the Commonwealth Institute, but included other European cities as well. Although Malaysia's participation was quite limited in comparison to other Commonwealth countries such as Australia and Canada, it must be noted that to participate in an exhibition abroad at that time was very rare and therefore was regarded as a privilege by Malaysian artists. All of these exhibitions were held or organised by the Commonwealth Institute and highly supported by the Malayan/Malaysian government at that time.

works for the exhibition was made by the Commonwealth Institute, helped by other national galleries, arts councils, art academies, societies, and even the ministries of education from other nations.

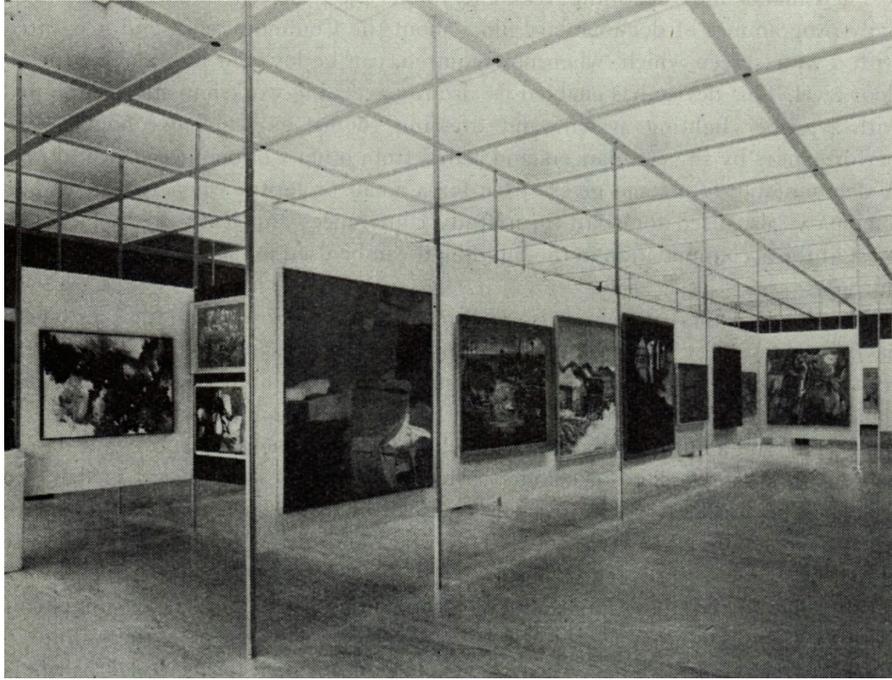


Figure 10.

Bradley, Kenneth, The New Commonwealth Institute (art gallery interior), *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 111, no. 5081 (1963): 403-411. Digital image courtesy of the Royal Society of Arts.



Figure 11.

The New Commonwealth Institute (art gallery interior), Robert Matthew and Johnson-Marshall, "The Commonwealth Institute", *Official Architecture and Planning*, 26, no. 1 (January 1963): 34. Alexandrine Press.

In this exhibition, artworks by a handful of Malaysian artists were selected and shown. In total, there were 180 artworks and 50 sculptures assembled in the 95 ft by 44 ft gallery area from participating Commonwealth countries. From the "Plan of Exhibition", Malaya's artworks were positioned between Hong Kong and Ceylon (Fig. 9).¹² Among the Malaysian artists whose works were selected were Cheong Lai Tong, Chung Chen Sun, Ho Kai Peng, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Jehan Chan, Lu Chon Min, Nik Zainal Abidin, Patrick Ng, and Chuah Thean Teng.

The catalogue did not publish images of the works exhibited except for Syed Ahmad Jamal's *Exuberance*, but it can be deduced that the selection by Sullivan reflected the Commonwealth spirit. A high-quality colour image of *Exuberance* could not be obtained for this article, but *Tulisan* is a stylistically similar work that is today found in the Muzium and Galeri Tuanku Fauziah collection at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (Fig. 10). Sullivan saw these works as visual espousals of a Malaysian identity, which, through their subject matter and media, reflected the plurality of Malayan society and responded sympathetically to the multiracial ideal embraced by the Commonwealth.



Figure 12.

Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Tulisan (Writing)* (detail), 1961. Digital image courtesy of Muzium and Galeri Tuanku Fauziah (MGTF), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

The historian T.N. Harper has pointed out that, during the last few years of colonial rule, the British promoted the idea of “Malayan” identity through the introduction of coercive collaboration between cultures, alongside the promotion of an ideology of citizenship. As such, Harper argues that colonial policy rested on fostering a form of national culture, or a multiracial politics in which a cultural renaissance under the British was envisioned. This so-called “Malayan identity” promoted by the British can be seen in the inclusion, as well as fusion, of the Chinese, Indian, and Western elements into art, music, architecture, fashion, etc.¹³ Thus, this first exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute portrays a selection of artworks and artists that primarily reflects such a perspective. The media of the artworks ranged from ink painting, oil, watercolour, to even *batik* (the region’s traditional art).

In their works *Dusk* (undated) and *Keluarga (Family)* (1962), Chuah Then Teng and Patrick Ng Kah attest to this “Malayanisation” project. Both artists, despite their Chinese heritage, employed the technique common to the region, using resist dyeing to portray local scenes. Other artists of Chinese heritage such as Chun Chen Sun, Jehan Chan and Ho Kai Peng, and Lu Chon Min painted the local fishing villages, fishing boats and huts, rubber trees, and rice paddy fields. In these scenes, the artists either painted them using Chinese ink painting or an impressionist approach using oil paint—reflecting their cultural background by using traditional techniques, combined with their knowledge of modern art. On the other hand, a watercolour painting by Nik Zainal Abidin Nik Salleh portrays characters from the *Ramayana* epic. His works incorporate the main storyline of the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) in a painterly Western art format.

Sullivan wrote:

The streams of influence in art from East and West converge in Malaya, and slowly but surely the artists of Malaya are building a bridge between the two worlds, both in technique and ideas. In Chinese-style painting, this is particularly clear. The brush is still used in the ancient way, but the traditional conventions of subject are being discarded; artists using this form are depicting directly the Malayan scene.

Even more interesting is the adaptation of the centuries-old method of making batik cloth as a medium of painting. This is no longer an experiment but a fact, a painstaking but richly colourful alliance of old methods and new outlook. ¹⁴

On top of that, the spirit of the recent Independence can be seen in Syed Ahmad Jamal's *Exuberance* (1961) and Cheong Lai Tong's *Eve of Independence Day* (1961). Syed Ahmad Jamal's *Exuberance* reflects a direct cultural influence of Britain or Western art on his art-making as he was taught at the Malayan Teacher Teaching College at Kirkby, in north-west England, for two years in 1958–1959. The winter landscape there had inspired him to produce *Angin Dingin (Winter Wind)*, *Umpan (The Bait)*, and *Payung Biru (Blue Umbrella)*. In a similar approach to these works, *Exuberance* indicates the influence of an abstract expressionist approach in its gestural and biomorphic shapes, with the background empty in emulation of the white winter landscape that he had experienced in Kirkby. Syed Ahmad Jamal himself was very much influenced by abstract expressionist exhibitions, especially *German Expressionism* at the Tate Gallery. ¹⁵

The Commonwealth Arts Festival, 1965



Figure 13.

Commonwealth Arts Festival, 1965, brochure cover. Digital image courtesy of Commonwealth Arts Festival.



Figure 14.

Commonwealth Arts Festival in Glasgow, 1965, in Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Kunang-Kunang Kenang-Kenangan Syed Ahmad Jamal Seniman Negara*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1999), 106. Digital image courtesy of the National Art Gallery Malaysia.

The most significant and important development to take place during the year was the debut of Malaysian Art in the Western world, in which the National Art Gallery played the principal role.

16

The above statement was written in the report of the board of trustees prepared by Frank Sullivan, the fourth report produced by the NAG since its establishment in regards to its participation in the Commonwealth Arts Festival. It was also noted that an invitation to exhibit at the Commonwealth Institute in London in 1966 had already been agreed upon earlier by the Arts Council Malaysia. ¹⁷ Thus, what were planned as exhibitions in Glasgow and London, as part of the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival, were later extended to a tour in various cities in Europe: Dublin, Cologne, Berlin, Hamburg, Rome, St Etienne, and Paris. ¹⁸

The 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival was organised in Britain for visual artists, musicians, dancers, poets, and writers representing various national cultures from Commonwealth nations. This festival was staged between 16 September and 2 October 1965, in four cities: Liverpool, Glasgow, Cardiff,

and London. ¹⁹ Expressing the official Commonwealth sentiment, Ian Hunter, the director of the festival, explained that the purpose of the festival was not to present the similarities of the countries but to accentuate the cultural differences contained within the Commonwealth. ²⁰

Despite the grand scheme of the festival and its multiple venues, Malaysia's participation was limited to the exhibition of visual art. In an article written that year, Hunter explained that: "Malaysia was unable to send us any performing artists because of her present difficulties of confrontation, but she is sending a contemporary exhibition of painters who reflect the Malay, the Indian and the Chinese schools." ²¹ Still, Malaysia's visual arts exhibition, held at the Glasgow Museum and Art Gallery from 18 September to 2 October, attracted an audience of 39,000 people, and represented a serious attempt to reiterate the newly independent nation's role in the Commonwealth community. ²²



Figure 15.
“The Arts in the Commonwealth”, The Times Supplement, 13
September 1965. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.



Figure 16.
 “Glasgow's Busy Fortnight of Art Exhibitions”, *The Times*, 25 September 1965. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

The task of selecting the artworks for this exhibition was not taken lightly, and was the responsibility of the National Art Gallery and the Arts Council's Special Joint Committee (SJC). The selections themselves were from the permanent collection of the National Art Gallery, works in private collections seen at earlier exhibitions, even from loans from artists. In total, 500 paintings and 90 sculptures were viewed but only 100 paintings and 23 sculptures that fulfilled the “aim of giving a truly representative ‘picture’ of Malaysian art” were selected.²³ The works were also exhibited in Malaysia for the public before they were sent abroad. It must be noted that all the financial expenditure for the packing and freight of the exhibition to the UK was borne by Malaysia's Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport.

In the context of Malaysian art history, the Commonwealth Arts Festival was an important impetus for Malaysia's arts and cultural visibility in the international realm. It was not only highlighted by Frank Sullivan as such, but by Syed Ahmad Jamal as well, who also noted how the exhibition receives favourable comments from art critics.²⁴

Similarly, the selection of artwork was reflective of the plurality of Malayan identity. Exhibits ranged from the abstractions of Abdul Latiff Mohidin to Syed Ahmad Jamal, Jolly Koh, and Khoo Sui Hoe. The realism, impressionism, and even the abstraction of local scenes could be seen in work by artists such as Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Laitong, and Cheong Soo Pieng depicting the market, fishing villages, and local nature scenes with mountains, rivers, and animals, as well as realist portraiture by Hoessein Enas and Mazli Mat Som. In terms of media, oil painting, pastel, *batik*, and mixed media were represented, as well as prints, with lithograph, linocut, and etchings by Lee Joo For. The key difference in Malaysia's participation this time was the inclusion of sculptures. Works by artists such as Anthony Lau, Lim Nan Seng, and Michael Muthu, using metal and cement fondue as a form of early exploration of cheap materials in sculpture were exhibited. The show also included wooden "sculptures" by indigenous "artists" or Orang Asli described as "modern art", in an article in *The Times* dated 28 January 1966 and "Spirit of Malaysia" in *Overseas*, April 1966.

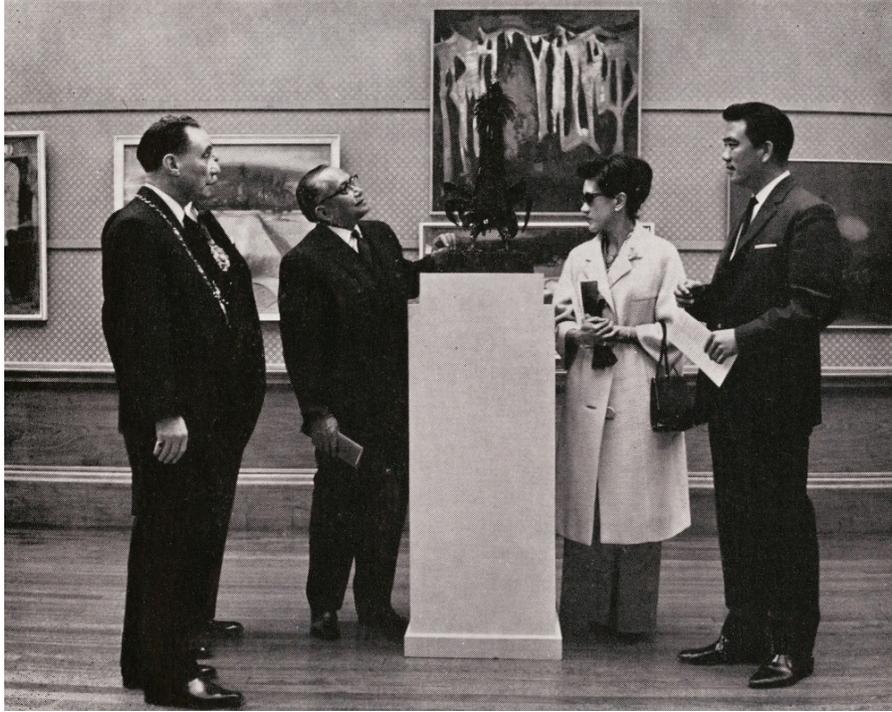


Figure 17.

The High Commissioner for Malaysia and his wife together with Bailie Shinwell, representing Glasgow Council during the Commonwealth Arts Festival, 1965, photograph. Digital image courtesy of the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre.

Malaysian Art Exhibition, 1966

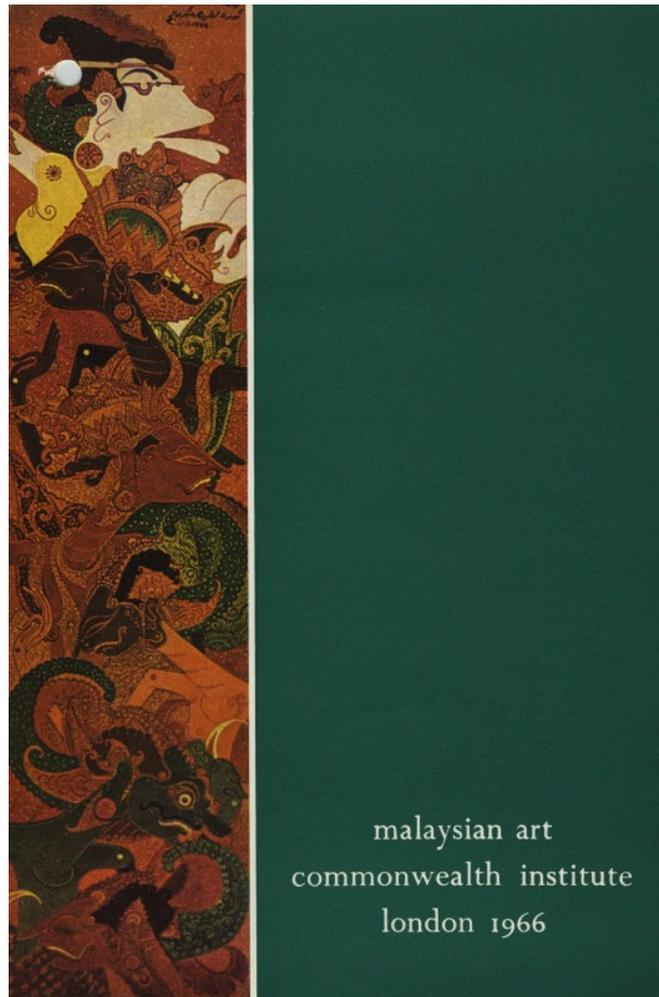


Figure 18.

Malaysian Art, Commonwealth Institute, London 1966, exhibition catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

The same exhibition later came to London after the festival and it was retitled as the *Malaysian Art Exhibition*. It was exhibited in the Commonwealth Institute, London from 26 January to 14 March 1966 and received press coverage and several reviews. What was initially intended to be participation in just two events, the first in Glasgow as part of the Commonwealth Arts Festival and the second at the Commonwealth Institute as the *Malaysian Art Exhibition*, later became an international two-year touring exhibition in Europe. The invitations to exhibit mostly came from diplomatic missions. The tour locations and dates were:

1. 22 November–17 December 1965: The Building Center, Dublin (under the expense of Sir John Galvin of Loughlinstown) with the attendance of 5,000 people.
2. (dates unknown) 1966: Cologne, Germany; Berlin, Germany; and Hamburg, Germany.
3. 1 February–5 March 1967: Museum of Art & Industry, St Etienne, Italy with the attendance of 8,250 people.
4. 21 March–24 April 1967: Musée Galliera, Paris, France with the attendance of 2,000 people. ²⁵

Over the course of these exhibitions, these works were accompanied by a few artists at a time, for example, Anthony Lau, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Latiff Mohidin, Lee Joo For, Yeoh Jin Leng, Mohd Hoessein Enas, and Cheong Laitong. It must be highlighted that this Western tour was made possible because of Frank Sullivan, who administered the exhibition planning from the UK, the Republic of Ireland, France, Germany, and Italy. Although Sullivan later planned to bring back the exhibition through North America and Far East, it did not materialise due to unsatisfactory tour arrangements from both countries. ²⁶



Figure 19.
"Spirit of Malaysia", Overseas, April 1966. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.



Figure 21.
"Malaysian Art", The Birmingham Post, 1 February 1966. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.



Figure 20.
"Malaysian Artists Exhibit Superior Works in London", New York Herald Tribune, Paris, 8 February 1966. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

Exhibition

MANY STYLES IN MALAYSIAN ART

348 By Terence Mullaly

FOR the first time a large exhibition of contemporary Malaysian art can be seen in London. It remains at the Commonwealth Institute until March 6.

On view are 100 paintings and 23 pieces of sculpture. All were selected in Malaysia and many are owned by the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur.

They reveal no exceptional talents. What is often apparent is a knowledge of trends currently fashionable in Paris, New York and London.

★

Another fact quickly evident is that the stylistic range of the works on view is wide. The tear rolling down the cheek of a young woman in "Admonition," by Hoessein, is worthy of a late 19th-century Academy Exhibition, while many of the pictures would not look out of place in a Venice biennale.

Where distinct regional characteristics can be discerned are in a certain fastidiousness in the handling of colour and in elegance of design.

Both are to be found in the paintings by Phoon Poh Hoong and Yeoh Jin Leng. The former in "When Darkness Retreats" achieves an elegant abstract pat-



"Admonition," by Hoessein.

tern, while the latter uses simplified design and strong colour to suggest the landscape of Malaysia.

★

Also with a clear local flavour is the work of Abdul Latiff, whom I find the most interesting of the artists exhibiting.

His pictures are hanging on the

end wall to the left of the entrance. In the best of them, such as "Pagoda and Agave Leaves," the sharp, spiky shapes and the uncomplicated use of colour are bold and make an arresting design.

By contrast almost all the sculpture is weak, and far too full of whimsy to be effective.

Figure 22.

"Many Styles in Malaysian Art", Daily Telegraph, 2 February 1966. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

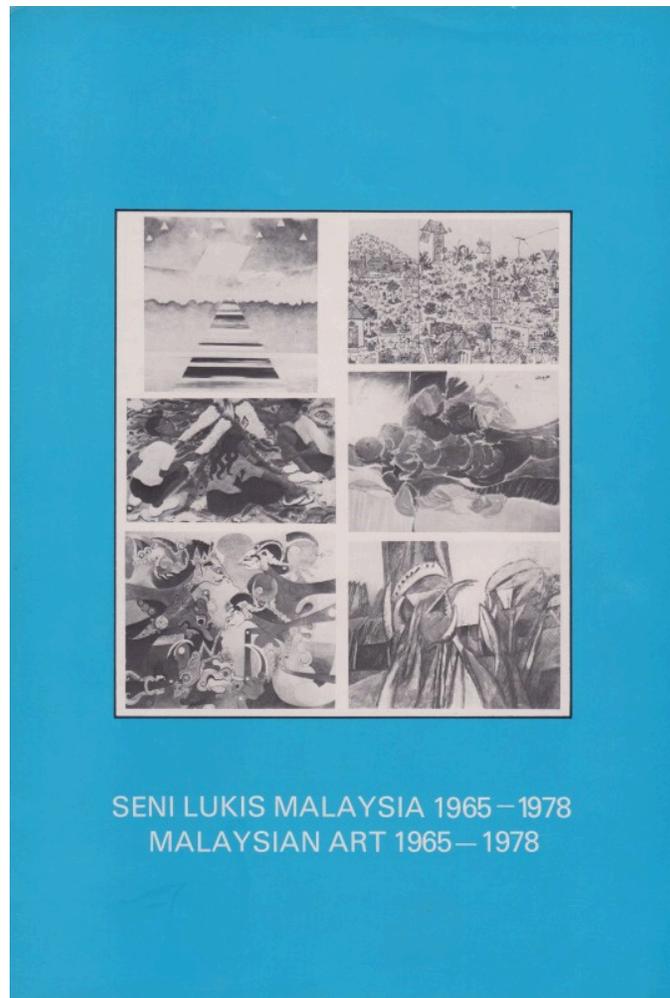


Figure 23.

Seni Lukis Malaysia 1956-1978 (Malaysian Art 1965-1978), Kuala Lumpur, 1978, exhibition catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

After these collections were abroad for two years, their return was welcomed at another National Art Gallery exhibition in Kuala Lumpur titled, *Welcome Home Exhibition of Malaysian Art* (21 July-6 August 1967). As much as Frank Sullivan had contributed in bringing works by Malaysian artists to London and Europe, it must be noted that it was also Donald Bowen's role as the curator of the Commonwealth Institute that allowed him to introduce the Commonwealth artists to the London public. During his position, he had organised several solo exhibitions for Malaysian artists such as Chuah Thean Teng (1959 and 1965), Lee Joo For (1960), and Abdul Latiff Mohidin (1971) at the Commonwealth Institute, and had written/lectured on Malaysian artists as well.

Malaysian Contemporary Art 1965–1978, 1978

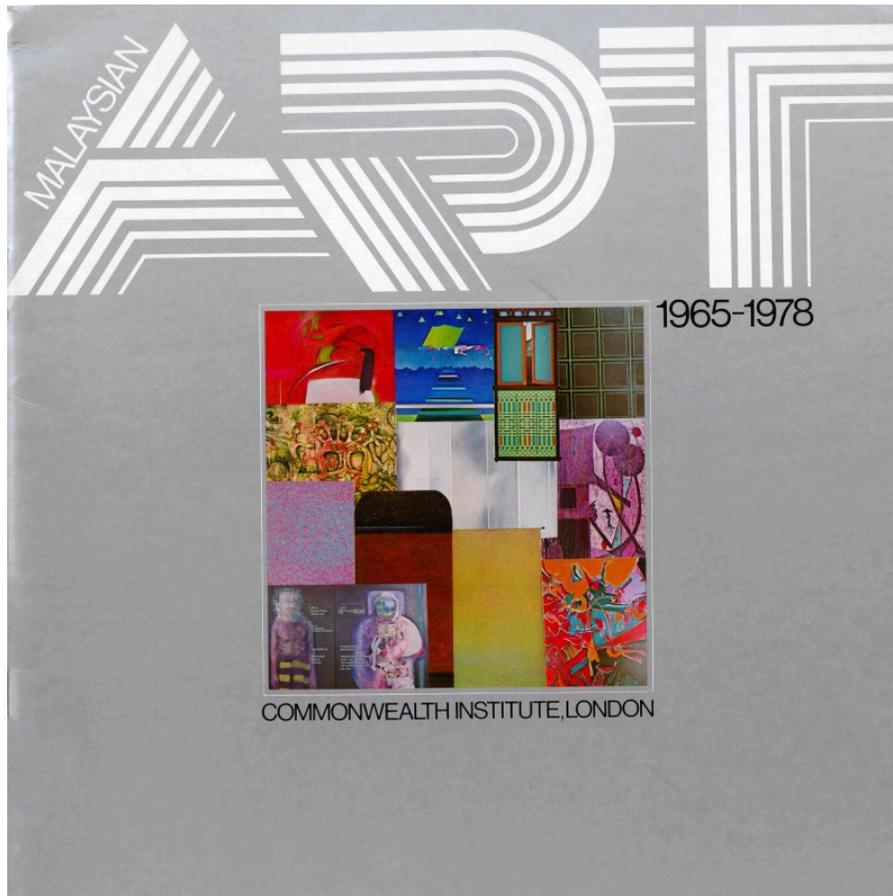


Figure 24.

Malaysian Art 1965–1978, Commonwealth Institute, London, exhibition catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Tate Library.



LEMBAGA AMANAH
BALAI SENI LUKIS NEGARA

TEL: 85144 & 89680

109 JALAN AMPANG KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA.

NATIONAL
ART GALLERY
TRUSTEES

The Director,
The Commonwealth Institute,
High Street Kensington,
LONDON, W 14 8 NL.

bb 13/12

*Balai Seni Lukis Negara
National Art Gallery,
109 Jalan Ampang,
Kuala Lumpur
Tel 85144*

Dear Sir,

EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN ART

At the request of the Chairman of the Exhibitions Committee of the National Art Gallery, I am writing to you regarding the proposal to send a collection of contemporary Malaysian Art on a tour of Europe and the Middle East in 1978. The exhibition of the latest works by the leading artists of Malaysia, will be comprised of about 100 paintings, sculptures, batiks, hangings, prints and other media. The organization and expenses of the project is undertaken by the National Art Gallery, Malaysian Airline System, and other major semi-government bodies. It is planned to hold the first exhibition in London. In 1965 the National Art Gallery organised a similar undertaking; the exhibition of Malaysian Art was held in the Commonwealth Institute. Based on the previous experience, we think your exhibition hall is most appropriate and suitable for staging the exhibition in London for a period of 2-3 weeks in Autumn 1978. The exhibits will be accompanied by leading artists who will be able to arrange the show and give illustrated talks on aspects of Malaysian art.

I shall be most grateful if you would be kind enough to let me know whether the hall will be available for the purpose during the proposed period. Please do give information regarding space, storage, rental, insurance, etc. Posters and catalogues for the exhibition will be provided by the organisers.

Hoping to hear from you soonest.

Yours truly,

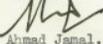

Syed Ahmad Jamal,
Museum of Asian Art,
UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA,
KUALA LUMPUR 22-11.
3rd December 1977.

Figure 25.

Letter to Donald Bowen by Syed Admad Jamal enquiring about organising, Malaysian Art 1965-1978, exhibition. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.



Figure 26.

Malaysian Art 1965–1978, Commonwealth Institute, London, installation photograph. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

In a letter dated 3 December 1977, Syed Ahmad Jamal wrote to Donald Bowen to organise a major exhibition of Malaysian art in the Commonwealth Institute. After several letters discussing the potential dates, the result was that the *Malaysian Art 1965–1978* exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute would be held on 2–30 November 1978. Jointly sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysian Airlines System and the National Art Gallery, it was first held at the National Museum of Art on 12 September–5 October 1978 before leaving for London.²⁷ Syed Ahmad Jamal, the guest curator and artist Joseph Tan accompanied the works to London.

As this exhibition was held almost fifteen years after Malaysia's participation in the Commonwealth exhibition in 1962, it included an even broader selection of Malaysian artists. Out of 33 artists, 16 of them had received their art education in Britain. Several of them were also there when art schools in London underwent significant changes, in which leading English art colleges began to introduce "basic design" as a subject based on Bauhaus pedagogy.²⁸ Indirectly, these changes influenced the state of art education in Malaya/sia, where approaches to teaching broke into two camps. First, there were

those who supported the fine art approach, extolling the aesthetic value of art and the individuated status of artists as embodied by the Royal Academy. Second, there were those who advocated for the applied arts and insisted on the functional role of art. ²⁹

Among the artists included in this exhibition were Redza Piyadasa, Sulaiman Esa, and Tang Tuck Kan, all of whom had attained their art education in Britain during the transitional phase to Independence, which influenced them to advance the idea of an “alternative aesthetic” to other established artists like Chuah Thean Teng, Syed Ahmad Jamal, and Cheong Laitong. They upheld that art should be cerebral rather than emotionally inclined. The play between two- and three-dimensional work became important, as seen in Redza Piyadasa’s *Marakesh Series* and Choong Kam Kow’s *Sea Thru Series*, which were both included in this exhibition. Overall, the selection of artworks reflected the shifting inclination of Malaysian artists at the time. During the 1970s, artists began to expand their art-making beyond the traditional forms of painting to explore three-dimensional forms, as seen in Ruzaika Omar Basaree’s *Dungun Series* and Latiff Mohidin’s *Langkawi Series*, works from which were included in the exhibition. ³⁰

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FESTA MALAYSIA

23 OCT 1978

Private View and Opening - Wednesday 1 November 1978 6.00-8.00pm
in the Commonwealth Art Gallery

Open to the public - Thursday 2 November to
Sunday 26 November 1978

Monday-Saturday 10.00am-5.30pm
Sunday 2.30-6.00pm

ADMISSION FREE

Malaysia is coming to Kensington High Street in November! At the Commonwealth Institute from 2-26 November (inclusive) you will be able to sample some of the warmth and sunshine of this gentle land through the unique experience of FESTA MALAYSIA.

So much is going on, there are so many things to see, hear, do - and taste! - that you really had better come along and experience them for yourself. In the main entrance each day a stall will be selling delicious satay. And every visitor is presented with a cup of refreshing Malaysian pineapple juice which comes free with the compliments of the Malaysian Pineapple Industry Board. Time your visit between 2-8 November (at noon) and witness BERSANDING, a Malay wedding ceremony, a parade of traditional Malaysian costumes, dancing and BERSILAT, the Malay art of self-defence. Also from 2-8 November you can sample the delights of Malaysian cooking in the restaurant (prices from £1.20 for a main dish).

At the centre of FESTA MALAYSIA is an exhibition of MALAYSIAN ART 1965-1978, on view throughout the Festa until 26 November. Other events in this not-to-be-missed experience include a presentation of latest haute couture fashion by Zai, Malaysia's brilliant young designer (11.00am, 2 November only); an evening of Malaysian poetry, prose and music (7.30pm and 9.30pm, 7 November); showings of recent Malaysian feature and documentary films shown each day in the Cinema (2-8 November - except 4 November, weekdays 12.15pm and 3.00pm) (Thursday 4 November - 1.15pm) (Sundays: 3.30pm) and a three-day study course on Malaysia, Indonesia and South East Asia Today from 16-18 November.

In addition, and running for the duration of the Festa, are a Malaysian Book Exhibition, a Trade Show featuring the main industries of Malaysia and video recordings of typical Malaysian TV news programmes shown continuously in the Exhibition Galleries.

/For children,

Figure 27.
FESTA Malaysia, Commonwealth Institute, 2-8 November
1978, private view announcement. Digital image courtesy
of Tate Archive.

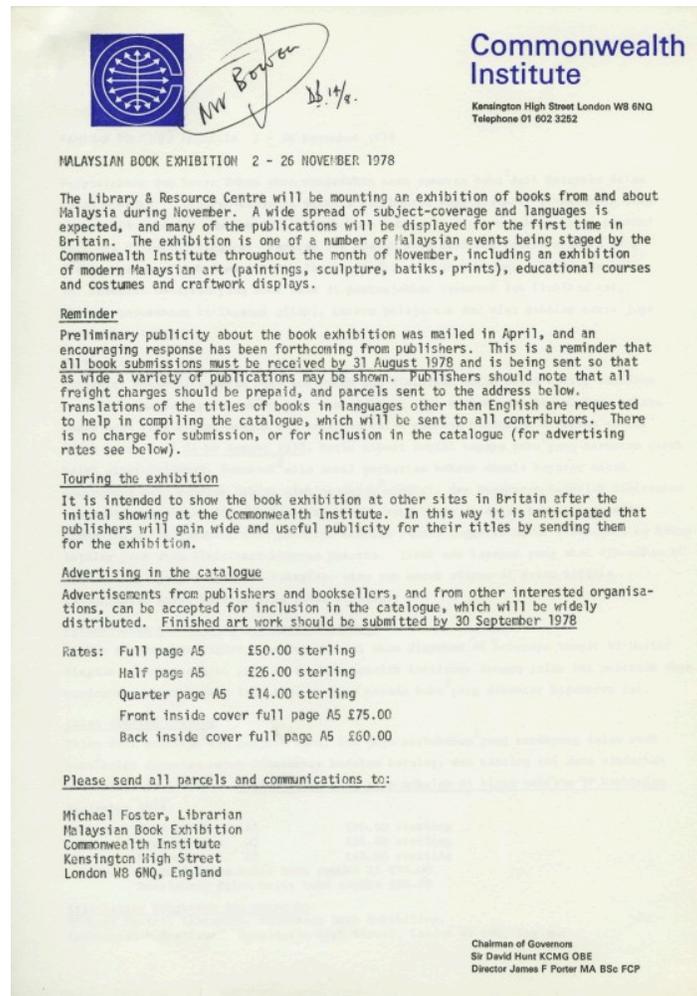


Figure 28. Invitation to participate in the Malaysian Book Exhibition during, FESTA Malaysia, Commonwealth Institute, 2-8 November 1978. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

Concurrent to the exhibition, Bowen also approached the Malaysia high commissioner to coordinate a Malaysia Fest that consisted of several film showings, special educational programmes, a book fair, poetry readings, arts and crafts, a traditional costumes and dance show, food, and a trade show.



Figure 29.

FESTA Malaysia, Commonwealth Institute, 2-8 November 1978, poster. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

Solo Exhibitions, 1959–1976

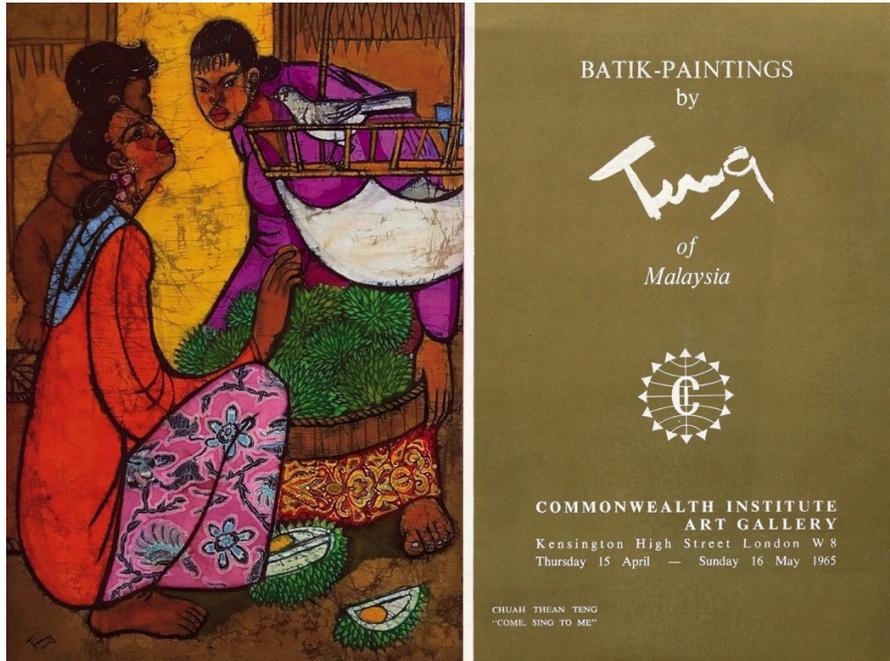


Figure 30.

Batik Paintings by Chuah Thean Teng of Malaysia, Commonwealth Institute, 15 April–16 May 1965, exhibition catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Tate Library.

Besides the international group exhibitions mentioned above, there were also solo exhibitions by Malaysian artists, namely, Chuah Thean Teng (twice, in 1959 and 1965) and Abdul Latiff Mohidin, that were organised by the Commonwealth Institute itself.

Donald Bowen's fascination on Chuah Thean Teng's *batik* can be seen in the text below:

It is astonishing to think that although making batik has been common for hundreds of years, no one before Teng ever thought of adapting this age-old craft as a medium for fine art. Teng, and Teng alone, is responsible for this most original contribution to the whole world of art. ³¹

Despite being a Malayan artist who had not attained his art education in Britain, the Commonwealth Institute had accorded Chuah Thean Teng's two solo exhibitions. The artist was later awarded a fellowship by the British

Council for his travelling expenses to visit British museums and galleries, and his work, *Two of a Kind* had been selected to be reproduced as UNICEF's Christmas greeting cards in 1967.

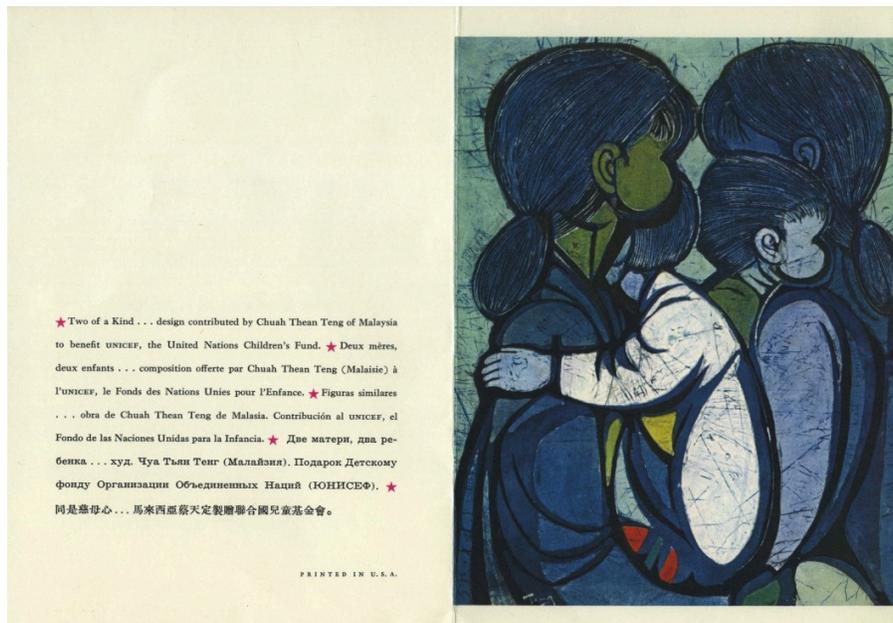


Figure 31.

Chuah Thean Teng, *Two of a Kind*, reproduced as UNICEF Christmas greeting card, 1967. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

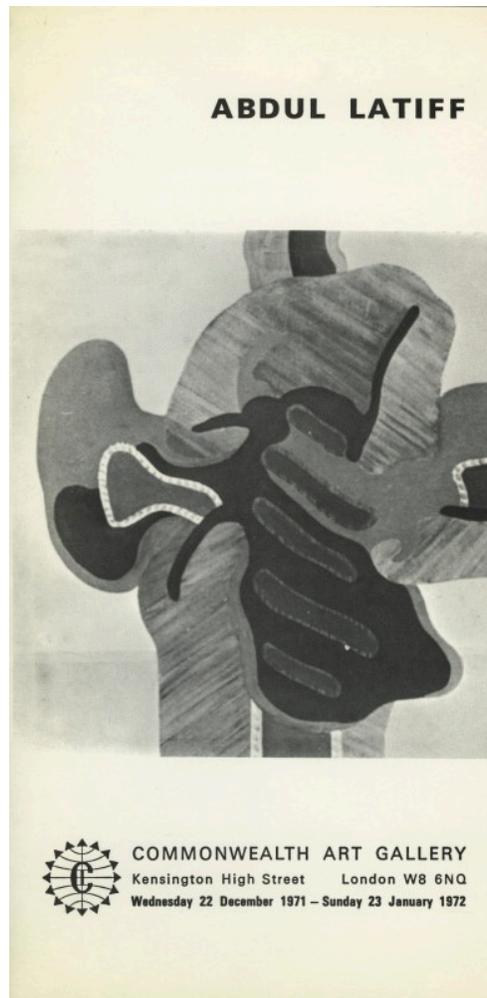


Figure 32.

Abdul Latiff, Abdul Latiff Mohidin exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute, 22 December 1971-23 January 1972, brochure cover. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

Conclusion

In the early years, the establishment of the NAG relied on much of Frank Sullivan’s passion, networks, and connections, and also on the support of the board of trustees. As much as Frank Sullivan had contributed in bringing works by Malaysian artists to London and Europe, it must be noted that it was also Donald Bowen’s role as the curator of the Commonwealth Institute that had allowed him to introduce and facilitate the exhibition of the Malaysian artists to the London public.

Nevertheless, as Bowen observed, the cultural impact of London, and Britain, on the art in the Commonwealth—and in Malaysia in particular—was very minimal, except for the fact that there were already instances of British influence in work by these artists. Alongside the significant number of Commonwealth painters and sculptors who trained in Britain, many Malaysian artists attained their early art education in London, as well at regional art schools in the UK. In most cases, these Commonwealth artists had already established their own reputation at home and the experience of being a part of these international networks inevitably increased their fame.³² This fact is also true in the context of Malaysia—the arts education attained by Malaysian artists in Britain could be seen as more influential in comparison to the exhibitions discussed here.

Yet positive participation and engagement through key figures in art such as Frank Sullivan and Donald Bowen during the period right after Malaya's Independence proves that art could become a platform of cultural diplomacy and further facilitate the complex relations between post-Independence Malaya and Britain within the larger post-war context. Thus, it can be argued that this could have been the reason why participations in exhibitions organised by the Commonwealth were taken seriously and supported by the Malayan government at the time, although the intention was not directly related to personal artistic exchange or engagement in terms of art-making. Despite that, study on these exhibitions reflects the international role of the National Art Gallery and how important the gallery was as part of the nation-building agenda in Malaya/Malaysia's formative years.

Footnotes

- 1 "The National Art Gallery: 1958–2003", in *45 @ 45* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2004), 13–16.
- 2 Lai Chee-Kien, *Building Merdeka: Independence Architecture in Kuala Lumpur, 1957–1966* (Kuala Lumpur: Petronas, 2007).
- 3 See National Art Gallery, *55 Tahun Balai Seni Visual Negara/National Art Gallery 1958–2013* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Visual Negara and Kementerian Pelancongan dan Kebudayaan, 2013).
- 4 Krishen Jit, "Introduction", in *Vision and Idea: Rethinking Modern Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), 5.
- 5 *Commonwealth Institute: A Handbook Describing the Work of the Institute and the Exhibition in the Galleries* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1969), 6–7.
- 6 Kenneth Bradley, "Commonwealth Art in the Institute", in *Commonwealth Art Today* (London, Commonwealth Institute, 1963), 7.
- 7 Redza Piyadasa, "On Origins and Beginning", in T.K. Sabapathy (ed.), *Vision and Idea: Rethinking Modern Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), 46.
- 8 Neil Manton, *The Arts of Independence* (Holt, ACT: Hall Arts, 2008), 24.
- 9 Manton, *The Arts of Independence*, 31–32.
- 10 Manton, *The Arts of Independence*, 31–32.
- 11 The Donald Bowen collections are available at Cambridge University Library. Visit <https://specialcollections-blog.lib.cam.ac.uk/?p=8276>.
- 12 It must be noted that at this time, Singapore's section differed from Malaya's as Singapore was still regarded as a British Crown Colony before its merger with the Federation of Malaya, the Crown Colony of Sarawak, and the Crown Colony of North Borneo forming Malaysia in 1963.

- 13 T.N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 275–276.
- 14 Frank Sullivan, “Malaya”, in *Commonwealth Art Today* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1962), 83–84.
- 15 Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Kunang-Kunang: Kenang-Kenangan Syed Ahmad Jamal Seniman Negara* (Ampang/Hulu Kelang: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1999), 68–69.
- 16 “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1965 to December 31, 1965”, (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1966), 4.
- 17 “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1965 to December 31, 1965”, 4.
- 18 “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1965 to December 31, 1965”, 5–8.
- 19 The problematisation of the festival can be read in Gail Low, “At Home? Discoursing on the Commonwealth at the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival”, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48, no. 1 (2013): 97–111, doi:[10.1177/0021989412471838](https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989412471838).
- 20 Ian Hunter, “The Commonwealth Arts Festival”, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 113, no. 5108 (1965), 606 and 608.
- 21 Hunter, “The Commonwealth Arts Festival”, 608.
- 22 “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1965 to December 31, 1965”, 7.
- 23 “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1965 to December 31, 1965”, 5.
- 24 Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1988), unpaginated.
- 25 “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1967 to December 31, 1967” (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1967), 5–8.
- 26 “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1967 to December 31, 1967”, 5–8.
- 27 The National Art Gallery’s name was changed to the National Museum of Art and was under Director Sulaiman Othman at that time.
- 28 Sarena Abdullah and Ah Kow Chung, “Re-Examining the Objects of Mystical Reality”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19, no. 1 (2014).
- 29 T.K. Sabapathy, *Piyadasa: An Overview, 1962–2000* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2001), 19.
- 30 See S. Abdullah, “Changing Approaches: Installations Produced in the Malaysian Art World”, *Wacana Seni* 16, no. 1 (2017), 8, doi:[10.21315/ws2017.16.1](https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2017.16.1).
- 31 Bradley, “Commonwealth Art in the Institute”, 7.
- 32 Donald Bowen, “Contemporary Art in the Commonwealth”, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 113, no. 5101 (1964), 16.

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Mapping Decolonisation: Exhibition Floor Plans and the “End” of Empire at the Commonwealth Institute

Claire Wintle

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between “permanent” exhibitions and political flux. Offering a close reading of London’s Commonwealth Institute and its intriguing gallery floor plan of 1969, it considers the interaction between display, exhibition graphics, and imperial change. While the British Empire crumbled (reforming in more clandestine guises), and new nation-building programmes took place around the world, the Commonwealth Institute became a dynamic site of neo-imperial and nationalist agendas, with diplomats, designers, and educators from Asia and beyond all working to re-territorialise, redistribute, and challenge British hegemony. Through this history of the Commonwealth and its exhibitions, the article offers broader lessons on the possibilities and limits of an exhibition’s ephemeral archive, the embodied, fragile nature of exhibition making, and the limits of ‘decolonisation’ as a productive term in the current drive to develop socially just exhibitions.

Authors

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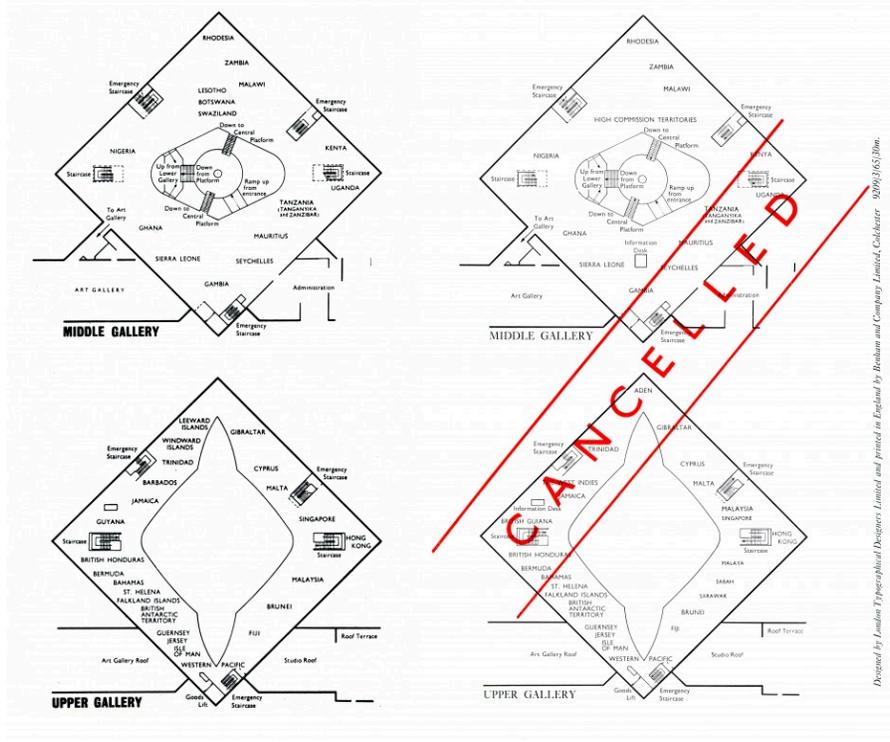


Figure 1.

Two gallery maps, 1965 and 1969, in *Commonwealth Institute: A Handbook Describing the Work of the Institute and the Exhibitions in the Galleries* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1969 [1965]). Digital image courtesy of LTD Design Consultants and the University of Brighton Design Archives.

On the final two pages of a handbook describing the work of the Commonwealth Institute in the 1960s, two near-identical maps printed in black ink on white card are arranged in neat alignment, side by side (Fig. 1). Both maps depict a plan of the middle and upper floors of the Commonwealth Institute’s exhibition galleries at two different moments—in 1965 and 1969. The map on the right has a red “CANCELLED” banner emblazoned across the original graphic, drawing attention to the material changes that had apparently affected the galleries in the years between their production. The floor plans—as with all exhibition maps—were designed to show the spaces available to visitors, and to define and explain the spatial arrangements and content of the galleries in an accessible and simplified two-dimensional form. The printed lines of the maps thus mark the physical and conceptual boundaries of the Commonwealth Institute. The changes in the floor plans, both physical and conceptual, are the subject of this essay; tracking these changes helps us to map shifting practices at the Institute across the 1960s, and understand how they aligned with and contributed to the complex and contradictory processes of “decolonisation” that occurred both in the galleries and the world beyond (Fig. 2).

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 2.

Two gallery maps, 1965 and 1969, in *Commonwealth Institute: A Handbook Describing the Work of the Institute and the Exhibitions in the Galleries* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1969 [1965]). Digital image courtesy of Digital image courtesy of LTD Design Consultants and the University of Brighton Design Archives.

The Commonwealth Institute was a new cultural centre that had opened in 1962, located in Holland Park on the western edge of central London. The successor to South Kensington's Imperial Institute, it was intended to "foster the interests of the Commonwealth by information and education services designed to promote among all its people a wider knowledge of one another and a greater understanding of the Commonwealth itself."¹ Its great square structure, capped with its spectacular tent-like copper roof and flanked by an adjoining block, incorporated a library, art gallery and cinema, book shop, several reception rooms, and 60,000 square feet of exhibition galleries spread over three floors. In the exhibition galleries at the Institute, individual display areas were allocated to each of the Commonwealth countries and "dependent territories". They were represented through a multi-sensory mix of dioramas, mural paintings, sculptures, models, taxidermy, photographs, everyday objects, graphics, and interpretative text. Exhibits aimed to depict "not only the history and geography" of each particular country, but also their "contemporary economic, social, cultural and constitutional development".² In the *Handbook*, both maps identified the inclusion and position of each of the Commonwealth member states in the galleries, labelling every country by name in uppercase sans serif typeface. In as much as all maps are selective models of perceived reality that make the world anew,³ the maps depict the Commonwealth Institute, but they are also representations of the Commonwealth itself.

Yet, both the Commonwealth and the Institute were undergoing intense change in the 1960s. In a display space that sought "always [to] present contemporary and not outdated pictures" of the countries concerned, "the portrayal within 'permanent' exhibitions of so much that is impermanent" was acknowledged by Institute staff as "the most difficult of our problems".⁴ Between the design of the right-hand map in 1965 and the second one on the left in 1969, political shifts on the world stage had been rapid, and national and colonial boundaries were being redrawn in several regions. The Commonwealth itself had shifted from a "comfortable and cooperative erstwhile club of white Dominions" into a multiracial forum dominated by the newly independent nations of Africa and Asia.⁵ In September 1963, Sarawak and Sabah were among the crown colonies that joined with the Federation of Malaya to become the Federation of Malaysia; British Guiana emerged as Guyana in May 1966 and Barbados gained independence in November 1966.

In August 1964, a single high commission for the protectorates of Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland was abolished, with Basutoland gaining independence as Lesotho in October 1966, Bechuanaland as Botswana in September 1966, and Swaziland (now Eswatini) in September 1968. When Aden became part of an independent South Yemen in November 1967, the new country declined to join the Commonwealth.

Each of these constitutional shifts required amendments on the gallery floor. On the map and in the exhibits themselves, country names were changed, exhibits added, divided, or, in the case of Aden, entirely removed (see interactive map). Eventually, in 1969, the decision to supplement the original *Handbook* with a four-page textual explanation of wider changes across the Institute and an additional map was unavoidable. Presumably for budgetary reasons, the majority of the 1969 handbook appears to have been reprinted using the original printing plates from 1965. The new edition took the form of the earlier design, but a “supplement”—including the new map—was inserted. In the 1969 edition, the 1965 map was nullified through the use of an additional plate which formed the word “CANCELLED” framed by fine parallel lines. During the printing process the red type seems to have been applied to the page first, followed by the 1965 map, printed from the original plate in black ink. ⁶

The bolder typography included in the new map from 1969 on the left-hand side might imply a confidence in the permanence of the new exhibitionary and geopolitical arrangements. Yet the urgency and anxiety of the “CANCELLED” banner, amplified in red and strengthened by the contrast of just two colours, hints at a certain desperation on the part of Institute staff at the impossibility of keeping up with constitutional change. As Kenneth Bradley, the Institute’s director, confided to readers of the *Commonwealth Institute Journal* as early as 1964, keeping abreast of political shifts in the exhibition space was “inevitably a continuous and sometimes rather arduous process ... Our purely private hope is that one day the Commonwealth will settle down and give us a breathing space!” ⁷

Maps and exhibition spaces have long been understood as “institutions of power”. ⁸ Distinguished map historian J.B. Harley famously described cartography as “a teleological discourse, reifying power, reinforcing the status quo, and freezing social interaction within charted lines.” ⁹ Within the field of museum studies, Michel Foucault’s conceptualisation of the relationship between power and knowledge, the politics of space, and the mechanisms of governmentality have been similarly influential in reframing the museum as a civilising instrument “designed to effect consensual governance through the organization and transmission of culture.” ¹⁰ In the case of the Commonwealth Institute, the architectural historian Mark Crinson

has argued that the building's architecture and spatial syntax offered a panoptic display which provided visitors with a "specular dominance over the world of the Commonwealth" (Fig. 3).¹¹ To adapt, once more, the words of J.B. Harley, maps and museums, and indeed maps of museums, have been largely couched as "a language of power, not of protest".¹²



Figure 3.

Exhibition galleries at the Commonwealth Institute, in *Commonwealth Institute: A Handbook Describing the Work of the Institute and the Exhibitions in the Galleries* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1969 [1965]), 28-29. Digital image courtesy of the Commonwealth Education Trust.

But the double-map feature contained within the Commonwealth Institute's *Handbook* hints at the limits of maps and museums as totalising entities through which powerful institutions affect influence. Although archives, too, are often positioned as sites of control through which to cover up complexities on the ground,¹³ here the materiality of the guidebook, in which a defunct map is physically juxtaposed with a replacement, explicitly highlights the embodied, messy, and fragile nature of work at the Commonwealth Institute and in the Commonwealth at large. Scholars have drawn attention to the phenomenon of "counter maps", in which techniques of map-making are used "to re-territorialise the area being mapped and to make a case for the redistribution of resources".¹⁴ Such counter maps act to "re-frame the world in the service of progressive interests and to challenge inequality".¹⁵ As this essay will demonstrate, much of the work at the Commonwealth Institute was directly aligned with a regressive aspect of mid-

century “decolonisation” (often suppressed in contemporary calls to “decolonise” the museum) in which those in positions of power present themselves as gracefully bestowing “freedom”, even while retaining and reconstructing imperial influence over economic and cultural practices under models of “development” and “partnership”.¹⁶ As we shall see, mapping “decolonisation” at the Commonwealth Institute also involved such neo-imperial methods. There was no end of empire at the Commonwealth Institute. Yet the practical realities of exhibition work at this time, which necessitated the unusually swift turnaround of displays and relied on limited and particular forms of funding, meant that diverse agents and more progressive forms of decolonisation also made inroads into the work of the Institute. In what follows, guided by the map, the Commonwealth Institute will be charted as a space in which those in the former colonies could in part articulate their own vision of a “decolonising” world, working to re-territorialise, redistribute, and challenge (some forms of) inequality. As we shall see, driven by independence movements across the world and the realities of museum practice, the double map in the *Handbook* has some characteristics of the “counter map”: it is a language of power, but *contra* Harley, also one of protest.

There were several unique aspects of the Commonwealth Institute’s structure that demanded its active response to political change to a greater extent than any other exhibition space in the UK at this time.¹⁷ In addition to the Institute’s contemporary focus highlighted above, the organisation’s public premise as “an outstanding example of that close functional co-operation which characterises the modern Commonwealth”¹⁸ lent an expectation that its exhibitions would be informed by international collaboration. In the run up to the Institute’s opening, between 1957 and 1961, Bradley and his staff visited Malta, Cyprus, Aden, India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Malaya, Singapore, Borneo Territories, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and Canada. The brief trips were designed to gain knowledge of “contemporary conditions”, develop networks of support within the respective governments concerned, and facilitate discussions about exhibition designs with partners in the countries to be represented.¹⁹ In 1965, Bradley, accompanied by the consultant exhibition designer James Gardner, visited Ghana again. Here the two men worked in “close co-operation” with government officials, designing the exhibition “on the spot” and obtaining exhibits for display.²⁰

In a more sustained process of cooperation that worked to create a significant level of accountability among staff, the Institute’s board of governors included high commissioners to the UK of various Commonwealth countries. In 1958, following the passing of the Commonwealth Institute Act, in which the new name and purpose passed into law, representatives of

newly independent Ghana and the Federation of Malaya joined representatives of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, Pakistan, Ceylon, and Southern Rhodesia as governors of the Institute. Alhaji Abdulmaliki, acting commissioner for Nigeria, and the commissioners for British West Indies, British Guiana and British Honduras, and East Africa were also included. ²¹ Throughout the 1960s, as the Commonwealth grew, so did membership of the board, and an education committee also comprised representatives of the various high commissions. High commissioners were seen by the Institute's British staff as a practical conduit to their home countries' governments. ²² They informed the processes and practices of the Institute inasmuch as their approval or dissent was registered in the Institute papers, ²³ and their officers regularly engaged with the production of specific exhibits. For example, Tanganyika's 1961 exhibition was developed with its high commissioner, Mr Dunstan Omari, "under his direction"; ²⁴ and many other more practical alliances also took place (Fig. 4). ²⁵ Some used the space in their own, politically astute way: in 1965 and 1966 alone, diplomats from Barbados, Ceylon, Gambia, Ghana, Guyana, Jamaica, Malta, Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uganda held private receptions in the galleries, with the high commissioner for Kenya noted for hosting a party of 2,000 guests. ²⁶



Figure 4.

Preparing a modelled relief map for the Ceylon display in the new Institute, the Director [Bradley] and the Chief Exhibition Designer [Gardner] confer with the artist and a representative from the Office of the High Commissioner in London in *Commonwealth Institute, Annual Report* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1960), 32. Digital image courtesy of the Commonwealth Education Trust.

Perhaps the most influential driving factor in the Commonwealth Institute's interaction with political change was its reliance on the grants contributed by the governments of the countries represented. Each country was responsible for the production and maintenance costs of its own exhibitions, and countries often contributed further grants to the wider costs of the Institute. Between 1953 and 1958, for example, the governments of Ceylon, India, and Pakistan contributed £7,225, £8,843, and £7,170 respectively,²⁷ with the Government of India in 1958 paying for a new diorama of Benares, as well as a group of life-size human figures depicting a "Parsee Businessman", "Marwari woman", "Sikh soldier", "Woman and child from the Deccan", "Muslim merchant", and "South Indian Brahmin", all set within a street scene and made by H. Baines, E. Folkard, and C. Davidson. (Fig. 5)²⁸ Governments

also gave gifts in kind, such as the government of Pakistan's 1965 donation of "a plaster cast of a fine example of Gandhara sculpture, carpets, textiles, and arts and crafts".²⁹ They additionally funded education officers and lecturers from their various countries to work with school groups and other audiences, both in the Institute and across the UK (Fig. 6). These close working arrangements resulted in a "never-ending process"³⁰ of responding to political change and the practical requests of the Commonwealth governments involved. Bradley regularly described the "difficult" work "necessitated by" government demands and the pressures of maintaining "accurate and up-to-date" exhibitions and educational services: as he suggested, "the achievement of independence must always be made [visible] immediately".³¹

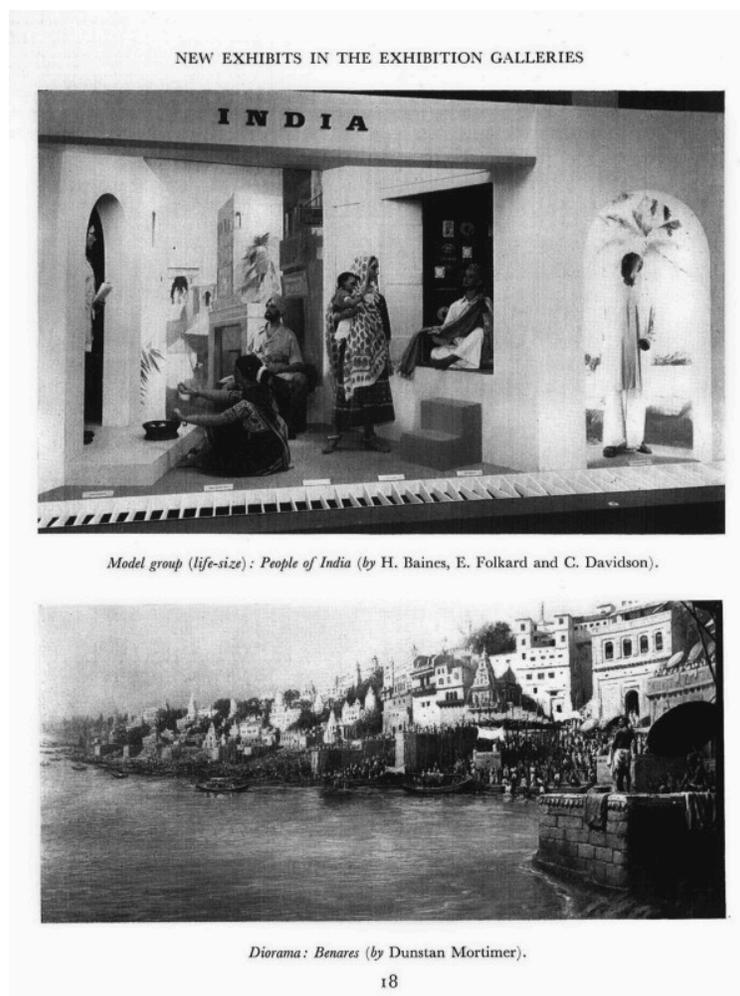


Figure 5.

"People of India" model group and Benares Diorama, Imperial Institute (later transferred to Commonwealth Institute), in *Commonwealth Institute, Annual Report* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1958), 18. Digital image courtesy of the Commonwealth Education Trust.

Despite the added labour that the structural frameworks of the Institute necessitated, such cooperation with Commonwealth governments was the cause of great celebration within the Institute and by Bradley in particular. Most of the examples introduced above were described in the annual reports and official *Journal* of the Institute. The repeated and public dissemination of this continuous, dynamic activity supported Bradley's clear agenda to demonstrate the validity of the Institute and make a claim for its continued funding, both from foreign governments and the UK's Department of Education and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. For Bradley, the pressure upon the British staff at the Institute from foreign governments to reconstruct their exhibits demonstrated "so clearly the value which other commonwealth governments set" on the Institute.³² As an example of this repeated emphasis on the contemporaneity and responsiveness to international agendas, we might even read the inclusion of the double map in the 1969 edition of the *Handbook* as evidence of this desperation to retain relevance in a changing world.

But archival evidence, less in the public eye, also demonstrates the genuine difficulties that the Institute's structures presented to the practicalities of exhibition work, as well as the challenges they posed to British control. Documents, likely authored by Bradley and written in preparation for the reframing and relocation of the Institute in the late 1950s, describe how "the necessity for obtaining grants of various kinds each year from 47 separate governments makes accounting complicated and revenues uncertain".³³ India's refusal to pay a general maintenance grant and preference for giving £500 a year for the improvement of its court caused "constant difficulty ... because it is not always desirable or possible to spend £500 in this way within one financial year".³⁴ The "relative poverty" of some countries prevented their governments from meeting their commitments to the Institute,³⁵ and on other occasions, in the case of Nigeria in 1968 for instance, the civil war, described in the *Annual Report* as unspecified "political difficulties", caused funding delays for the Institute and a "difficult phase" in the exhibition department.³⁶

Furthermore, despite his regular published celebrations of the "practical co-operation" between nations imbedded in the work of the Institute,³⁷ Bradley also found the associated challenges to his authority and the artistic and pedagogic vision for the Institute problematic. In an extraordinary diatribe about the "important question of principle involved" in redistributing creative control to those in other countries, he described his partners' interest in the displays as one of several "important difficulties to be overcome".³⁸ He bemoaned how:

the Overseas Governments who give the grants sometimes try to dictate to the Institute as to the content of their exhibitions or, worse still, insist on carrying out the work themselves ... South Africa insisted on rebuilding its own Court, rather than allowing the Institute to do it, and the result is, as they now admit, aesthetically deplorable and educationally inadequate ... Canada designed and built their own Court in 1948. About half of it would be suitable only for a Trade Fair. ³⁹

For Bradley, Canada's continued position of "look[ing] after its own Court itself and at its own expense" was deemed "generous, but as it virtually removes this Court from the control of the Institute and leaves the Institute no say in its educational content it is undesirable." ⁴⁰ He expressed his fear at the possibility that India might also threaten to implement a similar scheme. ⁴¹ As this document might suggest, and as several contemporary and more recent commentators on the Institute have argued, in some respects, the Institute under Bradley projected a "spurious egalitarianism", ⁴² "echoing imperial ways of seeing distant territories as ordered, described and laid out, from and for the core of Empire." ⁴³

But if Bradley imagined the Commonwealth Institute as a site through which to continue imperial practices of paternalist control, both the archive and the map suggest the limit of his opportunities. From the 1950s onwards, at the Institute, the (former) empire's capacity to "strike back" continued: in 1960, South Africa left the Commonwealth, removing its funding entirely; despite Bradley's complaints, in 1962 Canada opened an exhibition that had been completely designed and built in Ottawa, ⁴⁴ and by 1978, India's foreign secretary, Jagat Singh Mehta, had commissioned the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad to redesign and construct a new permanent display in London. Indeed, due to production delays in India and strikes in London during the Winter of Discontent, NID staff completed the *India: A Whole World in her Self* exhibit while in the UK, taking over the Commonwealth Institute's own equipment and machinery during the installation. ⁴⁵ The Commonwealth Institute was thus not a straightforward technology of control. A growing body of scholarship has highlighted the inconsistencies and failures of museums as "disciplinary regimes", and the need to credit a broader range of actors in the practice of meaning making. ⁴⁶ Here, the neo-colonial tendencies of the Commonwealth Institute were challenged by a wide range of participants who were interested in how their nations were represented. ⁴⁷ The double map in the *Handbook* is just one piece of evidence that visually represents both the fragility of the Commonwealth Institute and its reliance on the world beyond the UK.



How the tabla (drum) is played—part of a lesson on India.

11

Figure 6.

Tabla lesson at the Commonwealth Institute, in *Commonwealth Institute, Annual Report* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1959), 11. Digital image courtesy of the Commonwealth Education Trust.

Of course, the displays that emerged from these complex international relationships had limited decolonial potential. They are not the “red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives” of genuine decolonisation called for by Frantz Fanon, and in most cases, the individuals working with Bradley and his team at the Institute could be described as part of Fanon’s despised “colonized ‘elite’”, whose individualist and capitalist values are seen by Fanon as borrowed from the colonialists and preserved intact after their departure.⁴⁸ Ghana’s new display of 1965, described above as part of a celebrated act of international cooperation, hails the independent nation’s industrial development through an emphasis on a burgeoning cocoa industry and the hydroelectric dam on the Volta River. Both exhibits slotted in very well to the wider use of images of industrialisation in the former colonies to provide “evidence” of the benefits of Western modernisation theory and justification for continued British intervention after independence.⁴⁹ They might also be seen as championing an elite capitalist agenda that displaced many poorer inhabitants of the Volta River region at great social and economic cost. Many of the exhibits incorporate classically objectifying modes of display, such as life-size human models and dioramas, visual techniques that have long been used as forms of ocular control over geographical space and human cultures.⁵⁰ In an astonishing British Pathé film of 1959 of the India court that brings Figures 5 and 6 to life, the sight of Mr Angadi, education officer at the Institute, stepping out of the tableau of model human figures in order to demonstrate to British schoolchildren “how

the tabla (drum) is played” and how to wear a sari, could certainly be read as a form of exotic spectacle and objectification of the “other” (Fig. 7).⁵¹ It could also evoke a long, violent history of the display of humans in international exhibitions across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The film’s clearly white male narrator, the clichéd soundtrack redolent of an Indiana Jones film, and the typecasting of Angadi as “an Indian [here] to introduce his native country”, might cement this exoticisation of India, and heighten our discomfort at an exhibition that certainly says as much about the prevalence of British cultural imperialism in 1959 as it does about Indian society in this period.



[Watch Video](#)

Figure 7.

Mr Angadi, education officer, working with visiting children at the Commonwealth Institute, 1959, 2.20 minutes. Digital image courtesy of Film courtesy of British Pathé.

Yet one might also recognise that Angadi, in both the film and the photograph, takes his place at the Institute as a museum professional, a subject specialist and expert member of staff who commands a position of authority in the mediated space of the museum.⁵² The constructed nature of his performance as an “authentic Indian” is made explicit through the rupture of the tableau as he dramatically emerges from the scene, challenging visitors’ perspectives of a static, timeless country “over there”. Adorned in a *khadi kurta* and “Gandhi cap”, both popular symbols of the anti-British nationalist struggle in India throughout the twentieth century,⁵³

Angadi interrupts the children's comfortable "specular dominance", and physically guides their movements through the gallery and their handling of the Institute's collections. As such, Angadi is not only a passive subject offered up for British consumption. The children are also bound up in their own rituals of performance, to the camera, and in relation to Angadi: they respond to his guidance within the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, politely acknowledging his seniority and cultural capital. Angadi is of course constrained by the disciplinary structures of the Institute—bound to do his employers' bidding (and thus informed by both Bradley's neo-imperial project, and the nationalist agenda of the Indian government which likely paid for his post). Yet, he is also an active part of the Institute's structures and hints at their complexity. Angadi's probable long-term residence in the UK blurs the boundaries between "home" and "abroad". His interaction with the schoolchildren and their incorporation into the film confounds distinctions between performer and audience, and his physical presence ruptures the neat divisions between "Eastern" tradition and "Western" contemporaneity—both hallmarks of the imperial display of colonial cultures. As Ruth Craggs has argued in relation to the use of the Institute by immigrants residing in the residential areas around west London, "to think of the Institute solely in terms of the spectacle of 'out there' performed for those 'at home' misses some of the ways that it worked for Commonwealth ... communities" themselves.⁵⁴ Angadi, as with the map, further represents some of the direct impact that these communities also had on the Institute's work.

Jonathan Hale has described museum graphics, from text labels to museum maps, as having the tendency to distract from the "emotional power of the embodied encounter" in the museum space;⁵⁵ Carl Knappett, in his contribution to a growing discourse on practices of drawing, describes how the process of representation required in the production of a diagram "reduces all that exhausting flux, movement and creativity to something less manic".⁵⁶ Scholars have also linked the abstraction, certainty, and singular perspective often involved in both mapping and exhibition-making to the tendency of these media to portray "a disembodied and emotionless view from nowhere".⁵⁷ Maps and museums can work to quieten and ignore the "inherently fragmentary, complex and ambiguous nature of life" and land.⁵⁸ Certainly, the *Handbook's* maps of the Commonwealth Institute have the capacity to distance, distract, and simplify, at the macro and micro level. In the maps, and in the galleries they represent, there is no trace of the trauma and ongoing process of decolonisation as experienced by many of those who lived it. That "Nigeria" remains static and neatly repeated on both maps, fails to acknowledge the horrifying experiences of civil war that ravaged the region, in part as a result of British imperial administrative and exit policies.⁵⁹ The newly allocated open space surrounding "Malaysia" on the 1969 map

does not correlate with the invested presence that British economic interests retained in the Federation after 1963.⁶⁰ As Harley suggests, maps can be “an impersonal type of knowledge” that “tend to ‘desocialize’ the territory they represent.”⁶¹

Yet here, the permanence, abstraction, and certainty of the printed maps were not only sanitising salves, smoothing over change and distracting from the embodied, confrontational process of decolonisation. They also represented a threatening challenge for Bradley and his team to maintain an impossible stasis, in the galleries, and in the personal relationships that forged them. The maps also reveal rather than efface the “flux” and “movement” of exhibiting decolonisation in the middle years of the twentieth century in ways that have rarely been acknowledged. The “CANCELLED” banner reminds us of the important role that newly independent and decolonising countries had in the wider process of decolonisation, and their physical and metaphorical presence at the heart of the “metropole”. While the banner was perhaps a premonition of the eventual closure of the Commonwealth Institute in 2004, it might also be a lesson for future modes of decolonisation that take seriously a range of claims on exhibition spaces and that might shape all museums moving forwards.

Footnotes

- ¹ Commonwealth Institute, *Commonwealth Institute: A Handbook Describing the Work of the Institute and the Exhibitions in the Galleries* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1969 [1965]), 6.
- ² Commonwealth Institute, *Commonwealth Institute*, 33.
- ³ J.B. Harley, *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, edited by Paul Laxton (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 53.
- ⁴ Commonwealth Institute, *Commonwealth Institute*, 24–25.
- ⁵ K. Srinivasan, “Nobody’s Commonwealth? The Commonwealth in Britain’s Post-Imperial Adjustment”, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 44, no. 2 (2006), 258.
- ⁶ I am grateful to Stefan Dickers at the Bishopsgate Institute (who hold the 1965 edition) and Lesley Whitworth and Barbara Taylor of the University of Brighton Design Archives for helping me to understand this process.
- ⁷ Kenneth Bradley, “Diary”, *Commonwealth Institute Journal* 2, no. 2 (1964), 28.
- ⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 163.
- ⁹ Harley, *The New Nature of Maps*, 79.
- ¹⁰ Lara Kriegel, “After the Exhibitionary Complex: Museum Histories and the Future of the Victorian Past”, *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 4 (2006), 683. Kriegel offers a useful summary of both this Foucauldian literature, including the seminal work of Tony Bennett and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, and a review of the scholarship that has begun to acknowledge its limits.
- ¹¹ Mark Crinson, “Imperial Story-Lands: Architecture and Display at the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes”, *Art History* 22, no. 1 (1999), 120.
- ¹² Harley, *The New Nature of Maps*, 79.
- ¹³ For example, Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993).
- ¹⁴ Rob Kitchin, Martin Dodge, and Chris Perkins, “Power and Politics of Mapping”, in Martin Dodge, Rob Kitchin, and Chris Perkins (ed.), *The Map Reader: Theories of Mapping Practice and Cartographic Representation* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 443; see also David Pinder, “Mapping Worlds: Cartography and the Politics of Representation”, in Miles Ogborn, Alison Blunt, Pyrs Gruffudd, David Pinder, and Jon May (eds), *Cultural Geography in Practice* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2003), 172–191.
- ¹⁵ Kitchin, Dodge, and Perkins, “Power and Politics of Mapping”, 443.

- 16 On the “imperialism of decolonisation” in a historical context, see Wm. Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Decolonization”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 22, no. 3 (1994): 462–511. For two important perspectives on the imperial complexities of “decolonisation” movements today, see Sumaya Kassim, “The Museum will not be Decolonised”, *Media Diversified*, 15 November 2017, <https://mediadiversified.org/2017/11/15/the-museum-will-not-be-decolonised/> (accessed 13 August 2019); and Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor”, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40. On the disciplinary differences and contradictions between the use of “decolonisation” as a political, economic, and social process that intensified in the mid-twentieth century, and “decolonisation” as a social justice agenda today, see Claire Wintle, “Decolonising UK World Art Institutions, 1945–1980”, Special Issue: De-Colonizing Art Institutions, *OnCurating* 35 (2017): 106–111.
- 17 Some of these structures have been identified in Claire Wintle, “Decolonising the Museum: The Case of the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes”, *Museum & Society* 11, no. 2 (2013): 190–193.
- 18 Commonwealth Institute, *Commonwealth Institute*, 7.
- 19 Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1960), 31.
- 20 Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1965), 11; Kenneth Bradley, “Diary”, *Commonwealth Institute Journal* 3, no. 2 (1965): 23–24.
- 21 Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1958), 3.
- 22 Report on Imperial Institute’s Grants from Overseas Governments, circa 1957. PRO 30/76/816. 9034. National Archives, Kew.
- 23 For example, [Kenneth Bradley?], “The Future of the Imperial Institute”, 12 May 1954. ED121/808. 9000. National Archives, Kew.
- 24 Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (1965), 10.
- 25 See Wintle, “Decolonising the Museum”.
- 26 Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (1965), 29; Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1966), 31.
- 27 Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1961), 32.
- 28 Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (1958), 26.
- 29 Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (1965), 13.
- 30 “The New Institute”, *Commonwealth Institute Journal* 1, no. 1 (1963), 18.
- 31 Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1967), 7; Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (1966), 10.
- 32 Kenneth Bradley, “The Institute in 1966”, *Commonwealth Institute Journal* (1966), 17.
- 33 Report on Imperial Institute’s Grants from Overseas Governments, circa 1957. PRO 30/76/816. 9037. National Archives, Kew.
- 34 Report on Imperial Institute’s Grants from Overseas Governments, circa 1957. PRO 30/76/816. 9036. National Archives, Kew.
- 35 Report on Imperial Institute’s Grants from Overseas Governments, circa 1957. PRO 30/76/816. 9036. National Archives, Kew.
- 36 Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1968), 19.
- 37 Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (1968), 11.
- 38 Report on Imperial Institute’s Grants from Overseas Governments, circa 1957. PRO 30/76/816. 9035. National Archives, Kew.
- 39 Report on Imperial Institute’s Grants from Overseas Governments, circa 1957. PRO 30/76/816. 9034/35. National Archives, Kew.
- 40 Report on Imperial Institute’s Grants from Overseas Governments, circa 1957. PRO 30/76/816. 9036. National Archives, Kew.
- 41 Report on Imperial Institute’s Grants from Overseas Governments, circa 1957. PRO 30/76/816. 9035. National Archives, Kew.
- 42 Crinson, “Imperial Story-Lands”, 120.
- 43 Ruth Craggs, “The Commonwealth Institute and the Commonwealth Arts Festival: Architecture, Performance and Multiculturalism in Late-Imperial London”, *The London Journal* 36, no. 3 (2011), 256. See also Wintle, “Decolonising the Museum”, 188–190, “Neo-Colonialism at the Institute”.
- 44 Commonwealth Institute, *Annual Report* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1962), 9.
- 45 Vikas Satwalekar, former NID Executive Director, interview with the author, 4 April 2015, Mumbai, India.

- 46 Kate Hill, *Culture and Class in English Public Museums, 1850-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Samuel Alberti, *Nature and Culture: Objects, Disciplines and the Manchester Museum* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), Chapter 6; Claire Wintle, "Visiting the Empire at the Provincial Museum, 1900-1950", in Sarah Longair and John McAleer (eds), *Curating Empire: Museums and the British Imperial Experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).
- 47 I have made a similar argument in Claire Wintle, "Decolonising the Museum", 188-190.
- 48 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004 [1963]), 1-62, quotations from 3 and 9.
- 49 Anandi Ramamurthy, "Images of Industrialisation in Empire and Commonwealth During the Shift to Neo-Colonialism", in Simon Faulkner and Anandi Ramamurthy (eds), *Visual Culture and Decolonisation in Britain: British Art and Visual Culture since 1750, New Readings* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006). On the role of local cultures in the "neo-colonial" development of the Volta River Project, see Viviana d'Auria, "More than Tropical? Modern Housing, Expatriate Practitioners and the Volta River Project in Decolonising Ghana", in Ruth Craggs and Claire Wintle (eds), *Cultures of Decolonisation: Transnational Productions and Practices, 1945-1970* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 193-196; and for a more detailed reading of other displays at the Institute which combined nationalist and colonial tropes of industry to develop anti-British sentiment, see Claire Wintle, "Decolonising the Museum", 193-196.
- 50 See, for example, Claire Wintle, "Model Subjects: Representations of the Andaman Islands at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886", *History Workshop Journal* 67, no. 1 (2009): 194-207; Stephanie Moser, "The Dilemma of Didactic Displays: Habitat Dioramas, Life-Groups, and Reconstructions of the Past", in Nick Merriman (ed.), *Making Early Histories in Museums* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1999).
- 51 I am grateful to Tom Wilson for drawing my attention to this video.
- 52 Rebecca Brown's instructive work on the performance of craft practitioners from India at the 1985/1986 US Festival of India has shaped my ideas here. Rebecca M. Brown, *Displaying Time: The Many Temporalities of the Festival of India* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2017), 51-85.
- 53 Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (London: Hurst & Company, 1996), 62-93.
- 54 Craggs, "The Commonwealth Institute and the Commonwealth Arts Festival: Architecture, Performance and Multiculturalism in Late-Imperial London", 257.
- 55 Jonathan Hale, "Narrative Environments and the Paradigm of Embodiment", in Suzanne MacLeod, Laura Hourston Hanks, and Jonathan Hale (eds), *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 194.
- 56 Carl Knappett, "Networks of Objects, Meshworks of Things", in Tim Ingold (ed.), *Redrawing Anthropology: Materials, Movements, Lines* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 48.
- 57 Rob Kitchin, Martin Dodge, and Chris Perkins, "Power and Politics of Mapping", in Martin Dodge, Rob Kitchin, and Chris Perkins (eds), *The Map Reader: Theories of Mapping Practice and Cartographic Representation* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 442.
- 58 Laura Hourston Hanks, Suzanne MacLeod, and Jonathan Hale, "Introduction: Museum Making: The Place of Narrative", in Suzanne MacLeod, Laura Hourston Hanks, and Jonathan Hale (eds), *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), xxii.
- 59 Chibuïke Uche, "Oil, British Interests and the Nigerian Civil War", *Journal of African History* 49, no. 1 (2008): 111-135.
- 60 Nicholas J. White, "The Survival, Revival and Decline of British Economic Influence in Malaysia, 1957-70", *Twentieth Century British History* 14, no. 3 (2003): 222-242.
- 61 Harley, *The New Nature of Maps*, 81.

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Journeying through Modernism: Travels and Transits of East Pakistani Artists in Post-Imperial London

Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason

Abstract

This article explores the journeys of two key twentieth-century artists from East Pakistan—Zainul Abedin and S.M. Sultan—to and through post-imperial London in the early 1950s. Sultan’s cosmopolitan journeying, from Calcutta through Karachi and Lahore, to the USA and through London, to eventually settle in the countryside of Eastern Bengal, left traces in his practice, philosophy, and the narratives that have come to surround his work. Abedin’s London stay was both as an artist from the former colonies and as an East Pakistani cultural bureaucrat representing the post-colonial nation-state of Pakistan. These two very different journeys are approached by the co-authors from two different disciplinary traditions (anthropology and history), to bring into focus the concept of “journeys of post-colonial modernisms.” We show how the case of East Pakistan, with its incomplete decolonisation, shaped the travels and trajectories of these two artists and the ways in which their work was received and exhibited. We also show that this cannot be understood without the context of the Cold War, which facilitated particular routes for travel to and through art institutions globally, and which was to become crucial in shaping practice as well as conferring canonicity.

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Introduction

In the early 1950s, two artists from East Pakistan (Bangladesh, post-1971) travelled through London and showed their work there. Today, each is considered a protagonist in the story of Bangladeshi art, but back then, the routes and reception of Zainul Abedin and S.M. Sultan could hardly have been more different. Zainul Abedin, already a well-established artist and founder of the Institute of Fine Art in Dhaka, visited London's Slade School of Fine Art on a Commonwealth fellowship in 1951–1952. S.M. Sultan was a promising young artist who travelled through London in 1952 en route back to Pakistan from his study-tour to the United States sponsored by the Institute of International Education (IIE). Comparing the journeys of Abedin and Sultan through London, and their exhibition practices and critical receptions, sheds light on the question of what it meant to be a South Asian artist in newly decolonising London of the 1950s. What did London, emerging from the experiences of a second world war and in the throes of end of the British Empire, look like for artists from the newly post-colonial nation-states journeying through the spaces, galleries, and institutions of the city? The material presented in this article answers such questions in the light of the journeys of these two significant East Pakistani artists, studies of whose lives and work have remained limited, especially for this early post-colonial period.

The two individual, and often idiosyncratic, routes through London we trace here also provoke larger questions about how modernism was lived, shaped, and experienced by black artists in early post-colonial Britain, both in terms of an embodied artistic practice and as a set of institutional, personal, and artistic pathways that facilitated their movements, visibility and work.¹ Following Abedin and Sultan along their journeys highlights the often contradictory and complex infrastructures by which the art worlds of the newly independent Commonwealth connected with its metropolitan centre. Their journeys through the city show how certain ideals of modernism that animated its art world at the time were actualised and articulated in this early stage of London's post-colonial trajectory. These journeys provide the means by which to evaluate the possibilities and limitations offered by modernism, the infrastructures of the art world, and by the metropolis to South Asian artists in the years immediately following independence of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Following the travels of Zainul Abedin and S.M Sultan in the early 1950s London reveals the city as a crossroads where multiple modalities of post-colonial modernisms operated. It opens up the very idea of the journey as a means by which to think about the ways in which artists like Abedin and Sultan encountered and lived the trajectory of post-war and post-colonial modernism.² While laying out the particular journeys of these artists through

London, we also use the idea of the journey as a sensitising concept by which to explore infrastructures, aesthetics, and ideologies of the 1950s Commonwealth art world as it was encountered *in movement*. To do so, we first lay out briefly how we use the notion of the journey in terms of the artistic trajectories of Abedin and Sultan, as well as in terms of a passage across two disciplinary approaches that we bring to this project as authors—the approaches of history and anthropology.³ Second, we detail the two journeys made by Abedin and Sultan through London. Finally, we compare these journeys to parse the economies of encounter that marked artists and artworks as they journeyed within the already hierarchised spatial politics between South Asia and Britain. We believe this early moment in the recalibration of such a hierarchical set of routes and connections between Britain and South Asia is formative of subsequent engagements by South Asian artists with British art worlds.

Journeying Through

Both Zainul Abedin and S.M. Sultan travelled *through*, rather than *to*, London. Their intentions were never to remain there and their participation in London's art worlds was temporally and spatially delimited. Nonetheless, retrospectively, these relatively brief periods of movement through London have, for both, been posited as significant and have allowed both artists to be inscribed into a larger, global narrative of (post-colonial) modernism. Our tracing of their journeys through London will illustrate that their movement through the decolonising capital was not a straightforward initiation into metropolitan modernism that was then returned to the former colony. Instead, the journey, beginning well before and continuing on from London, highlights the disjunctures in such a seamless narrative. This speaks of the nature of post-colonial modernism in its immediate post-imperial formations rather than somehow a failure on the part of these two artists to “live up” to the promises extended by this ideological and aesthetic repertoire in a newly decolonising world.

The journeys by Abedin and Sultan through London and through modernism can be seen as a constitutive part of their artistic practices. We draw on Tim Ingold's notion of making as a form of “procession”, “a passage along a path in which every step grows from the one before it and into the one following, on an itinerary that always overshoots its destination.”⁴ We take to heart this dialectic of making and movement in our assessment of the ways in which travels through London were part of an itinerary *and* iteration for the two East Pakistani artists we discuss in this article. Given the fact that for both artists the period following the journey through London has been described as one of a certain form of absence, both sunk into the “ethnographic” or folk in different but equally un-esteemed ways: the idea of making art as a form of a journey that is inevitably one of a productive

overshooting of destinations and ends is helpful in rethinking what travel through the metropolitan centre allowed to be produced in its wake. Tracing these geographic and artistic journeys shed light on the ways in which the experience of the art world of post-war London might refract the practice of artists from countries newly liberated from British colonial rule.

This way of understanding the journey provides conceptual traction on the economies of encounter that marked artists and artworks travelling within the networks of post-war modernism. The immediate post-independence decade of the 1950s in South Asia is important here, for it captures a temporality that was both active and uneasy. A palpable internationalism defined this post-war moment that was developing under the shadow of the Cold War, when the journey itself—as travel, exchange, forums, and circulation—was seen as foundational to artistic freedom and patronage. Such values were highlighted repeatedly at international congregations. The UNESCO conferences of Beirut 1948, Florence 1950, and Paris 1951 raised the need for promoting international travel and conferences for artists in dialogue with the National Commissions.⁵ A culmination of these efforts was UNESCO's International Conference of Artists in September 1952, planned to converge with the 26th Venice Biennale. As the conference called for "cultural co-operation ... to promote and defend the economic and social position of artists on an international level", the National Commissions were urged to promote international mobility and dialogue between artists of "all cultural backgrounds ... devoid of all considerations of propaganda."⁶ Among the over 200 delegates and more than 150 artists representing 44 countries and 11 artists' associations across the world, was Zainul Abedin, as an official representative of the government of Pakistan.

Abedin's is an iconic example. Supported by both the Commonwealth and the Rockefeller grants, Abedin travelled across North America, Europe, the United Kingdom, and Japan in the 1950s, followed soon after by invitations from the Soviet Union where he was awarded a gold medal. By the late 1960s, Abedin returned to a more active political staging after being invited by the Arab League to visit and sketch the Palestinian guerrillas and refugees. London was, in fact, the first step into these journeys. After London, Abedin travelled to Brussels, Paris, Ankara, and Istanbul, before attending UNESCO's Venice conference. S.M. Sultan, a much more junior artist at this stage, similarly travelled through the USA in the early 1950s on a grant aimed at making artists travel internationally, supported by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundation. The momentum behind these journeys was sustained by a network of transnational art funds that invested in facilitating the travel of artists from the new post-colonial nation-states. Organisations such as the British Council, the Ford Foundation, and others actualised such ideals and objectives in opening particular routes for travel to and through art institutions globally.

Such travel intersected with localised forms and contexts of the globalised narratives of (artistic) modernism. In the UK, the Festival of Britain in 1951 had made the connection between post-war reconstruction, modernism, and a renewed place for Britain in a decolonising world. In the post-war period in Britain, “modernism now became identified with progressive liberal opinion and was easily identified with a supra-national agenda, just as abstract art ... appeared deceptively value free.”⁷ Alongside this, as Stuart Hall has argued, artists and writers from (former) British colonies

came to London [in the 1950s and 1960s] ... to fulfil their artistic ambitions and to participate in the heady atmosphere of the most advanced centres of artistic innovation at the time. As colonials ... they came to Britain feeling that they naturally belonged to the modern movement and, in a way, it belonged to them. The promise of decolonisation fired their ambition, their sense of themselves as already “modern persons”.⁸

That is, the internationalism inscribed in the institutional efforts and artistic practices of modernism at mid-century ostensibly laid out an equal footing for those that Hall describes as the “first wave” of black diaspora artists in Britain. “‘Modern art’ was seen by them as an international creed, fully consistent with anti-colonialism which was regarded as intrinsic to a modern consciousness.”⁹ Pakistani artists—already engaged with transnational intellectual, artistic, and institutional movements—participated in this creed and travelled along the infrastructures of mid-century modernism.¹⁰

Art institutions in post-war Britain, however, remained largely unresolved in the structural assimilation of the modernity of former colonies within the ways of exhibiting, narrating, or writing about “non-Western” art in the metropolis. While certain galleries, academic institutions, and critics engaged Hall’s “first wave” of artists, overall, they continued to be denied recognition and integration into the larger art establishment.¹¹ Their travels through the art world of 1950s Britain were thus marked by a viscosity, both participating in and resisting modernism’s universalising ambitions. In the travels and transits of Zainul Abedin and S.M. Sultan in the London of the early 1950s, these dialectical formations of post-colonial modernism become visible.

Abedin and Sultan were natural co-travellers on this journey into modernism described by Hall. But their brief tenure in the capital positions them outside the domain of the black diaspora artists. Instead, their London moment was part of a series of larger routes that incorporated Dhaka, Karachi, Lahore, New York, Venice, and Chicago, as well as Chittagong, Mymensingh, and Narail. It illustrates how London was part of a series of interlinked sites

through which newly decolonised subjects moved. The relations between these sites and cities was hierarchically organised yet the path through them was not necessarily one of predictable routes of ascent or descent, as our two artists will illustrate. Given the fact that for both Abedin and Sultan London was part of a journey, not a destination, tracking their movements through the city will illustrate the many complexly related infrastructures that post-colonial artists travelled through in the 1950s as well as providing a sense of how the encounter with their former Imperial capital, and its position in a chain of other sites, refracted in their onward journey.

Finally, the idea of the journey also helps stage this article as an encounter between two disciplinary positions, that of history and of anthropology. While the intersections between the disciplines of history, anthropology, and art history deserve an extensive account, here we note the methodological approaches we have combined to detail the journeys of Abedin and Sultan. The different disciplinary sensibilities and methods of history and anthropology are suitable to the artists in question and produce different accounts of the journeys they made. While the disciplines are no longer quite as distantly related as when Bernard Cohn first described our differences as those between members of different societies, some of his observations still hold true, especially as it concerns methodology. "Research in history is based on finding data; research in anthropology is based on creating data."

¹² Given the fact that Abedin was by the early 1950s already a well-established artist and an important figure in the art bureaucracy of Pakistan, while Sultan was anything but, and given their personal differences, with Abedin a dedicated institution builder and Sultan fundamentally a wanderer, different methodological approaches to tracing their journeys have been appropriate. Documentary evidence of Sultan's early career is very scarce, including the absence of a body of early works, while those of Abedin's movements and works are scattered and disregarded. To present their journeys, then, we draw on the strengths of our different disciplines: finding the dispersed materials that document Abedin's journey while producing the data by which Sultan's journey may be reconstructed out of fragments and putting these into context. Combined, these produce this account of the journeys, the artistic practices, and the art worlds that our two artists inhabited in the early 1950s.

Zainul Abedin and the Journeys of Allegory

Abedin's London journey came on the heels of a series of journeys he had made since the late 1940s, each inscribed within the trails and momentum of decolonisation. In 1947, as the British exit from India created the new nation-states of India and Pakistan (then divided into West and East Pakistan), partitioned along religious lines in the wake of communal genocide and refugee exodus, Abedin, a Muslim artist, migrated to Dhaka—the new capital

of East Pakistan, along with three of his fellow-artists and colleagues from the Government School of Art in Calcutta—Qamrul Hasan, Safiuddin Ahmed, and Anwarul Haque. The move also uprooted these artists from their professional world at the Government School of Art in late-colonial Calcutta. They were rendered jobless, and had to seek work as schoolteachers around Dhaka to make ends meet. The quandary of having no institutional support was heightened all the more by the secondary location East Pakistan occupied vis-à-vis its western counterpart. One of the main challenges for these artists was to negotiate with the new seat of the federal government of Pakistan in far-off Karachi, for budgetary allocations to allow a new art school for Dhaka. As these negotiations facilitated the formation of the Dhaka Art Institute in 1948, Abedin had to shift to Karachi to join the Information and Publication Division of the Federal Government of Pakistan as Chief Designer. When he returned to Dhaka in 1949, he became Principal of the newly formed art school.¹³ His international trips started soon after, his official status as an artist, pedagogue, and bureaucrat making these journeys quasi-official. Yet, reading this official patronage against the grain, through the sketchy information available, we uncover a curious mix of informal and formal economies that marked inevitably, even an official artist like Abedin. For instance, despite official patronage, Abedin notes that he had to transport his sketches and watercolours himself, without government support, to have them exhibited. The works then had to be smaller drawings primarily, for easier packaging. This also determined the scope of his visibility in London.¹⁴

When Zainul Abedin came to London in 1951, not only official patronage but also a pedagogical grid framed his journey. As a representative of the federal government of Pakistan, Abedin was visiting London on a Commonwealth Scholarship that sponsored his study at the Slade School of Art. In a brief published in *Commonwealth Today* magazine, art critic Eric Newton introduced Abedin as a “Pakistan Artist Studying in London”, with illustrations detailing his spell at the Slade (Fig. 1). The brief piece reveals Abedin’s pedagogical mission that was multipronged: he was supposed to have been studying fine art at the Slade under “the famous New Zealand born painter, John Buckland-Wright”; he was also supposed to have been studying “pottery and textile designing in various art centres”; and “collecting ideas” at the same time, “for the development of the Dacca Institute of Arts”.¹⁵ The article’s illustrations show Abedin observing a student receiving lessons by John Buckland-Wright’s assistant R. Nuttall-Smith; sketching on the Chelsea Embankment along with the “Scots artist Miss Elizabeth Balneaves, who recently returned from a tour of Pakistan”; observing group classes on “the men’s ‘life’ classes”; as well as in discussion at the “London studio of his tutor, Mr. John Buckland-Wright, famous New Zealand-born painter, and instructor at the Slade School.”¹⁶ Newton notes that over his stay, Abedin “has met, as he had hoped, many prominent British artists and has been

visiting the kind offices of Mr. Buckland-Wright, who is instructor at the Slade School of Fine Art [...].” The weight of institution-building sat as heavily on this trip as did artistic training and travel, making the visit itself that of a cultural diplomat and pedagogue, as much as of a student and artist.



Figure 1.

Eric Newton, Zainul Abedin: Pakistan Artist Studying in London, in *Commonwealth Today*, 1952 (London: Commonwealth Today, 1952). Digital image courtesy of Mainul Abedin.

Two significant solo exhibitions were organised during his stay, both quasi-official: the first, at the Imperial Institute (which was to become the Commonwealth Institute in 1961), organised by the Royal India, Pakistan and Ceylon Society in London 3–8 December 1951 (Fig. 2); and the second, supported by the Pakistan High Commission and held at the Berkeley Galleries in London in 14–26 January 1952 (Fig. 3). These sites of exhibition merit some attention. The Imperial Institute was already a centre for displaying artists from the former empire, and their exhibition of Abedin, for

instance, was closely followed by “a private view of the work of the Sinhalese painter Ranjit Fernando at the Montage Gallery.” ¹⁷ The exhibition catalogue already announced Abedin’s official status, introducing him as being “sent by the Pakistan Government, to hold an exhibition of his work in London, and to visit the art galleries of England and France.” ¹⁸ The Berkeley Galleries, set up in 1941, had an energetic proprietor in William Ohly, a connoisseur, collector, and patron, who used the gallery to organise exhibitions from the “Non-West”. Here, too, he seems to have consciously maintained a curious mix of folk crafts, aboriginal arts, and modern art from the regions, often displayed in close succession. For instance, in the same year of Abedin’s exhibition, a show of Gandhara sculpture was held in July. And works by artists like Denis Williams from Sudan and Kofi Antubam from Ghana—exhibited before Abedin—were followed by exhibitions of African pottery and aboriginal sculpture. ¹⁹ It is worth noting that both Williams and Antubam had profiles similar to Abedin—Williams was teaching fine art in London, and Antubam was an artist, educator, and writer; Antubam’s works on labouring bodies were very close to Abedin’s own works on rural labour and leisure. ²⁰

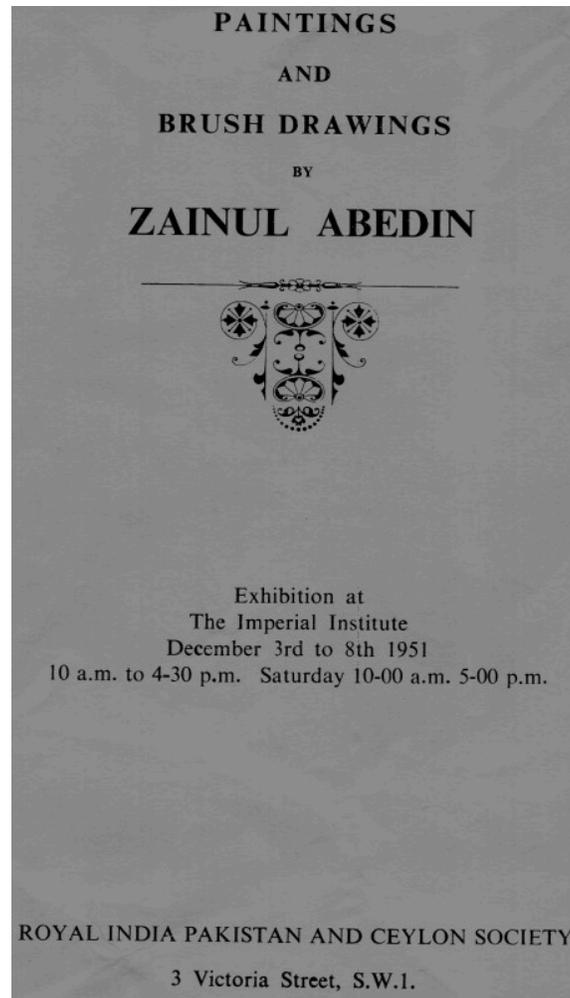


Figure 2. Paintings and Brush Drawings by Zainul Abedin, The Imperial Institute, London, 3-8 December 1951, exhibition catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Mainul Abedin.

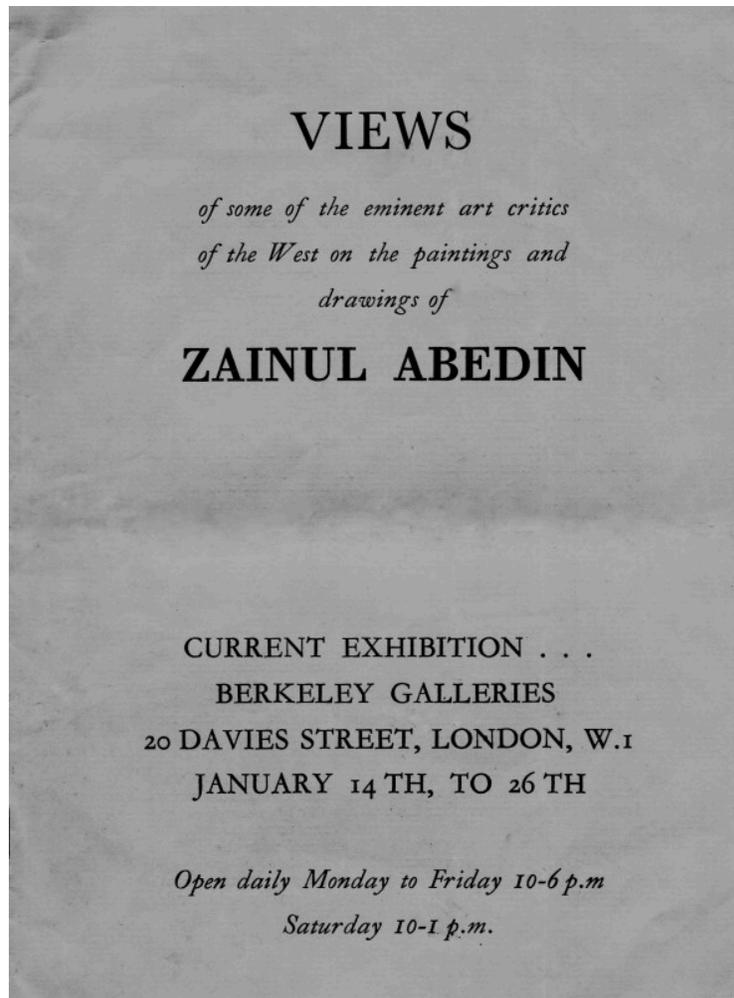


Figure 3.

Views of some of the eminent art critics of the West on the paintings and drawings of Zainul Abedin, Berkeley Galleries, London, 14-26 January 1952, exhibition catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Mainul Abedin.

At the centre of Abedin's London exhibitions were his drawings on the notorious wartime Bengal famine of 1943, which had already gained iconic status during the mid-1940s (Fig. 4). Since 1944, the artist—then a young and inspiring art teacher at the Calcutta art school—had been celebrated by activists and journalists as well as the Communist Party of India for his stark pen and ink sketches of hunger and displacement, in a famine manufactured by wartime profiteering and strategic lapses of the colonial government. These sketches were in a way raw trails of late-colonialism, not images sketched or photographed by travellers, artists, or cartoonists in the West, but produced from an entirely different optic, by an artist and colonial subject walking the famine-struck streets of urban Calcutta, marking in pen and ink, a radical shift towards social realism in Indian art. One of these

sketches had been exhibited at the Royal Academy exhibition of the art of India, Pakistan and Ceylon in 1947–1948, though a more substantial scale was visible for the first time during Abedin’s London shows of 1951.²¹



Figure 4.

Zainul Abedin, *Untitled Famine*, Drawing, 1943. Digital image courtesy of Mainul Abedin.

Exhibited alongside those famine works were ones depicting the quotidian life of East Pakistan, for instance, *Homeward Bound*, *The Floating Market*, *Boatrace*, *After Fishing*; displayed also were some works that would become signature motifs, for instance, the bull in *Retreat*.²² Eric Newton’s article noted these motifs: of the “*Pastoral Scene*,” he wrote: “Mr. Abedin specialises in water-colour painting. He works rapidly. This sketch (20 x 24 inch) took about 15 minutes to complete”; the raging bull “*Retreat*”, he wrote, was “another 15 minute sketch (20 inch by 24 inch), done with characteristic dry brush strokes” (Fig. 5).²³ Yet it was Abedin’s famine work that dominated his art critical reception in London, which though sparse, can be read to exemplify the ways of seeing and telling that marked post-colonial artists like Abedin in decolonising London.



Figure 5.

Zainul Abedin, *Retreat*, 1952, sketch in *Zainul Abedin, Paintings and Brush Drawings by Zainul Abedin*, The Imperial Institute, 3-8 December 1951. Digital image courtesy of Mainul Abedin.

Abedin's mentor at the Slade, Buckland-Wright, and the critics he would have encountered as part of that institution, framed his exhibition in a set of texts, significant for understanding the "discursive reading" of an artist like Abedin in London. Buckland-Wright wrote, for instance:

the best drawings, considered from a purely abstract graphic standpoint, have a life of their own. They are a pattern imbued with the artist's sensibility. If at the same time they re-create and strongly evoke for us the object that inspired them, they possess, not only a purely aesthetic value, but a forceful emotional power. [...] It was these two qualities that struck me forcibly in seeing Mr. Abedin's brush drawings of the famine scenes in India. The emotional impact of the starving figures is immense, and yet apart from this emotional quality what remains is an abstract aesthetic composition of a very high quality.²⁴

To Abedin's friend, the critic Eric Newton, these sketches—"of families—gaunt, dying mothers, children sharing with crows and dogs. The half-edible contents of refuse bins, families wearily moving from village to city in search of food"—were "symbols as well as statements", capturing both the "unseen meanings as well as the seen results" of the famine, his art combining a simultaneous work of observation and contemplation.²⁵ The

drawings are, Newton noted, in effect a “combination, which one has thought almost impossible, of orient and Occident.” With their documentary edge, he observed, the drawings carried occidental aesthetics, yet behind Abedin’s “selective eye is the contemplative Oriental mind”: “It is as though the oriental hand, holding the brush in the traditional Oriental way, and using nothing but fluent black ink and water on absorbent paper, had been guided by a European eye.”²⁶ Even in his other watercolours, which had “normal life as their subject”, where “the need for urgency has disappeared”, Newton noted that while

The spacing of the main masses is Oriental, the observed fact is Oriental. Again and again the placing of each feature on the papers surface is reminiscent of Asia, yet the detail itself might have been drawn by an English water-colourist.²⁷

This rhetoric remained a vivid category in appreciation of post-colonial artists in the metropolitan sites, their modernism never allowed in the same plane as that of the West, and displayed only within the bracket of “Oriental” art. The journeys of these artists never reduced the epistemic distance that held apart the colony and the metropolis. Moreover, the visit of artists like Abedin to the metropolis to acquaint themselves with the achievements of Western modernism were articulated as the journey of artists from the former colonies on a path from political independence to “cultural independence”. In the Introduction of Maurice Collis—the art critic of *Art News*, *Time and Tide*, Abedin was turned into a “student” of Western art:

That Mr. Abedin should arrive in this country already equipped in this way promises well for his future. Being possessed of the essential, his progress is bounded only by his powers of imagination and the discretion he shows in choosing a type of painting suitable to his personality ... It is an arduous quest on which he has come, but one that is necessary if those parts of Asia which have regained their political independence are also to regain their cultural independence. The more centers of artistic autonomy there are, the more will the art of the world be enriched...²⁸

The rhetoric of the journey was active in Collis’s reference to ideas of quest and arrival. The 1950s and the 1960s were foundational years for the new post-colonial nation-states in India and Pakistan and a period of “becoming”—that is, of institutions, apparatuses, and publics that were being formed and “put in place”, to claim a modernity which by default is

seen to arrive late in the former colonies. There is in post-colonial nation-states a recurring anxiety of “not yet”, and thus a continuous sense of “moving towards” or aspiring to a modern that has already been achieved elsewhere, in the West.²⁹ This ethic of becoming determined the teleological mechanism of framing post-colonial artists. Yet this contained celebration of Abedin as an oriental artist carrying the allegorical burden of post-colonial becoming needs to be read alongside both the politics of national allegory that marked him, in manners more nuanced, given the conflicted status of East Pakistan within the post-colonial national imagination of Pakistan. Nazir Ahmed, Abedin’s friend and admirer from his Calcutta and Dhaka days, and an employee at the BBC, introduced Abedin at the Berkeley Galleries exhibition as a visualiser of both grime and beauty: “Abedin’s works give one the emotional clue to visualize the grotesque scenes of 1943, and also to rediscover the beautiful country of our own.”³⁰ To understand Abedin, Western viewers, he noted, “will have to look through the orient’s eye”: “We love him, for he expresses our joy, our sentiments, and does it so well. If a western critic derives even a fraction of his pleasure, his endeavour to see the works of Abedin will not be in vain.”³¹ Ahmed’s use of “we” and “our” is more than one of the solidarity of friends. They echo the “public-ness” of national allegory, Abedin’s art signifying the trials and triumphs of the collectivity—the nation as well as the state.

Abedin himself was committed to this rhetoric and its affective economies. Ever since his move to Dhaka in 1947, he made conscious efforts to integrate art with the people—whether in projecting the image of the common man in art, or promoting public access and public taste. His works from the early 1950s capture not only a struggle for survival, but also idioms of movement, labour, and leisure. By the 1950s, Abedin had become an iconic artist capturing the “life” of Pakistan’s eastern frontier (Fig. 6). Even as he idealised a rural everyday in his works, far-removed from the urban realities and aspirations of the post-colonial nation-state, the political resonances of “the people” never left his idiom. Yet, the burden of national allegory was not stable, the artist being challenged time and again for being a victim to the very publicness that iconicised him. Back home in Pakistan, Abedin was seen as “not modern enough”. As early as 1955, a prominent critic noted him as a “victim of conflicting ideas’, an artist succumbing to outdated romanticisation of the folk, slipping to journalistic drawing rather than creative form-making, his watercolours of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, for instance, carrying “geographical rather than artistic interest”, or one more suited to “an ethnologist equipped with camera and colour film” than an artist of Abedin’s stature.³² The artist, the critic argued, was taken over by “constant public gaze and drum-beating”, leaving him little privacy for creative work.³³ For other critics, Abedin was instead a “victim of confused criticism”, for formalism was never an aesthetic criteria for Abedin; instead,

“a stamp of nativeness” is what he carried: “The familiar countries of our hills and valleys, the stance and features of our men and women, the peculiar dress and their distinct colours”, all “markedly Pakistani”.³⁴ This debate reveals, on the one hand, the tension between the demands of modernist internationalism in the post-colony and the pressures of national allegory on the post-colonial artist, beyond the inevitable allegorical subjectivity of the post-colonial artist.³⁵ On the other hand, it hides, as was evident in Nazir Ahmad’s Introduction to Abedin in London, an allegorical mechanism that sought to claim Abedin’s vernacular signature as a hegemonic Pakistani identity—a process that would keep losing its political legitimacy through the 1950s and 1960s.

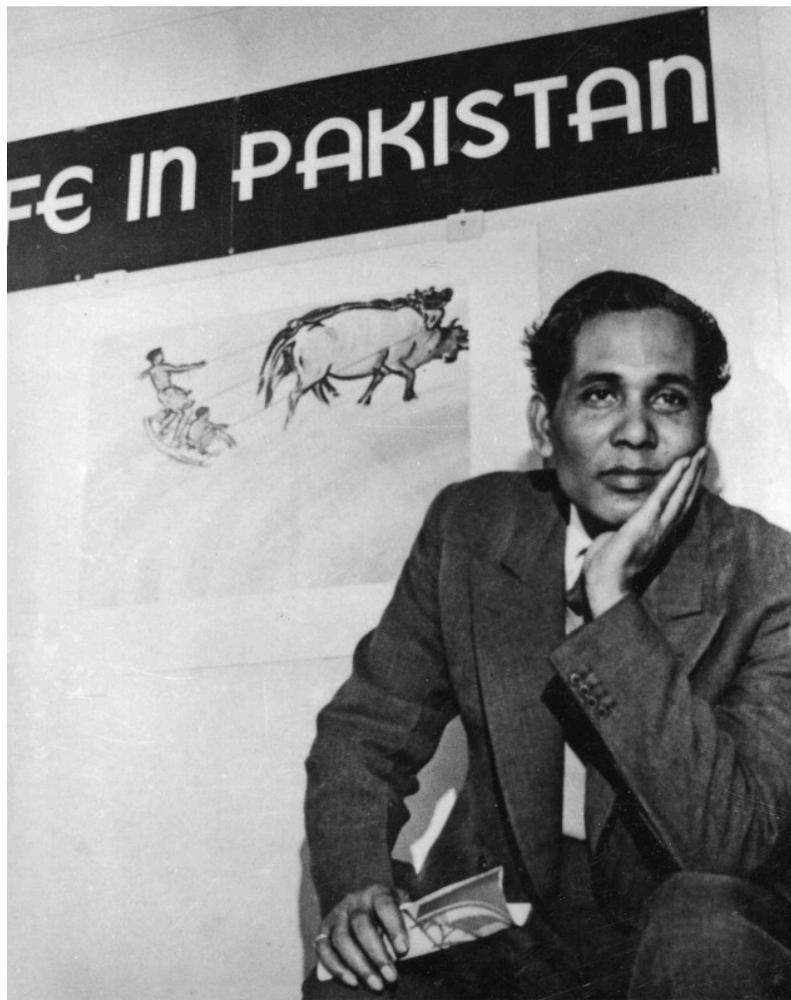


Figure 6.

Zainul Abedin, *Life in Pakistan*, 1950s, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Mainul Abedin.

A dialectic between the public and the private, and the social and the formal, forms the artistic climate within which Abedin's London trip happened. Time and again, his reviewers in London put his art under the allegorical shadow of being a Pakistani artist, or an oriental artist travelling to modernism's centres. Anxieties around public-ness in Abedin's art, and the dialectics of national allegory, are also indicative of concerns that were being aired at the UNESCO conference at Venice that Abedin had attended in 1952. The noted British sculptor, Henry Moore, was careful to warn that there existed a paradoxical relationship between the artist's freedom and his social function, between "his need for the sympathy of a people and his dependence on internal springs of inspiration."³⁶ Situated as he was at the overlapping spheres and idioms of the local, the national, and the global—artists like Abedin occupied this curious location under the shadow of the Cold War—where they travelled to and negotiated the contradictory aesthetic currents in both the Western and Eastern Bloc.

S.M. Sultan and the Unscripted Journey

S.M. Sultan's international travels were also shaped by the developing cultural politics of the Cold War. The most eye-catching quality of the life and work of painter S.M. Sultan has been his reclusion in the village of Narail, Bangladesh. After a long journey to the USA and Europe in the early 1950s facilitated by American cultural institutions, he returned abruptly to rural East Pakistan, where he sequestered himself. Between the mid-1950s until his death in 1994, Sultan lived and worked in the village, realizing the now famous canvases extolling the bodies and labour of the Bengali peasantry. Like Abedin, Sultan's work and lifestyle were marked by a strong commitment to the peasant and rural forms of culture, which came to be increasingly expressed in his canvases after his retreat to Narail, and which too have been read as a form of national allegory that chose the local, particular, and figurative rather than the global, universalising, and abstract.

Sultan's charisma and eccentricity has produced an appreciation bordering on devotion, marking many accounts of his life.³⁷ Within such accounts, the life and world of Narail out of which Sultan's most famous paintings emerge, has been set off from an earlier itinerant period, consisting of a largely undocumented wandering in search of work in pre-independence India, following his abandonment of a degree at the Government School of Art in Calcutta, and a short but emphasised international journey in the early 1950s to the West.

In the accounts of Sultan's work, and particularly when his relation to modernism is discussed, Sultan's international travel is often emphasised, including the exhibition of his work in London. This journey is used to balance the idea of his quintessential "Bangladeshi-ness" with the effort to accord

him a status on a par with other internationally recognised modernist artists.³⁸ Formally, the period following the independence of British India in 1947, when Sultan held his first solo exhibition, and the mid-1950s, when Sultan left for Narail after his international travels, has been used to account for a transition within Sultan's art from figurative work, primarily landscape painting, to what has been described as his abstract art.³⁹ In critical appraisals of Sultan's development over the 1950s, this transition can be mapped. In 1952, Syed Amjad Ali writes that "ever since [the establishment of Pakistan] he [Sultan] has been painting mostly landscapes of Bengal and Kashmir."⁴⁰ In the May 1954 issue of *The Studio*, Jalal Uddin Ahmed notes that: "S.M. Sultan ... now seems to have gone over completely to abstract art..."⁴¹ (Fig. 7). By 1958, Ahmed devotes only a brief paragraph to Sultan in his book *Contemporary Painters of Pakistan* and mentions that "he has shut himself up in a small village in Jessore ... He has not participated in any exhibition since his return from the United States, and his recent work is yet to see the light of day."⁴² After this, Sultan largely drops out of the narrative of Pakistani art.⁴³ Instead, Sultan resurfaces as a major artist in the 1970s in what is then independent Bangladesh, and, like Abedin, he does so as a distinctly *Bangladeshi* artist, committed to its land, people, and culture, represented in his figurative oil paintings.



Figure 7.

S.M. Sultan, *Untitled*, 1953, in *Adam Surat: The Inner Strength* (Dhaka: Bengal Foundation, 2014). Digital image courtesy of S.M. Sultan and the Bengal Foundation.

Retrospectively, too, the years between the independence of Pakistan and Sultan's disappearance into the hinterland of Jessore, are credited with great importance. Selim notes that: "[h]e travelled widely after Partition in Pakistan, Europe and the USA."⁴⁴ This travel is recognised as expanding, and perhaps transforming, his style, and appears to prefigure Sultan's later importance among the Bangladeshi modernists. Sultan's international travel has been at the heart of both understanding any aesthetic transformation as well as all attempts to anchor him within an internationally recognisable pantheon of modernist masters.

However, closer inspection of Sultan's international travels reveals an evanescent archive. This is in part due to the fact that Sultan was not an established artist when he set off for the USA. In January 1952, Syed Amjad Ali describes him as "A Young Artist from East Bengal", who is on a "visit to America under the International Education Exchange programme."⁴⁵ That year, "the Institute [of International Education] developed and administered a project to bring young foreign artists to the United States, which was supported by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations."⁴⁶ During this trip, Sultan visited New York and Ann Arbor. He also spent a number of weeks in Vermont, "watching the efforts of young children. Throughout the tour, he stopped at elementary schools where he took notes of the procedures used in teaching art to children."⁴⁷ The teaching of children would become a strong motif in Sultan's time in Narail and clearly runs through Sultan's travel on behalf of the IIE.

The American part of Sultan's international travel was organised and timetabled by the IIE.⁴⁸ The London part that followed, however, was not. According to his biographer Abul Hasnat Hye, Sultan decided to stop over in London on his way home from the USA to Pakistan to "stay in London for a few days and visit a few galleries and other places."⁴⁹ He was to be received by his friends Khan Ataur Rahman and Fateh Lohani, fellow bohemians with a great interest in the dramatic and visual arts. Rather than a few days, Sultan stayed in London for the better part of a year.⁵⁰

It is this London period, which, in its unscripted and unanticipated nature, has become retrospectively inscribed with great significance. The catalogue accompanying the 1987 exhibition of his works at the Goethe-Institut in Dhaka mentions "four exhibitions in London ... where his paintings were on display along with those of great modern Masters as Picasso, Dali, Braque, Klee."⁵¹ This undocumented information is repeated extensively. The publication accompanying Tareque Masud's 1989 documentary about S.M. Sultan, lists his exhibitions and includes: "1950: Exhibition in London, Victoria Embankment, Hampstead. An exhibition of works by artists of the time. The most renowned of whom were Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, Georges Braque

and Paul Klee.”⁵² Similarly, the website *ARTNews*, in their “Top 200 collectors” list for 2015, features the influential Bangladeshi collectors Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani. Under the heading “Fun Fact”, *ARTNews* mentions that: “The first work Nadia Samdani collected was a watercolor by the Bohemian Bangladeshi modernist, SM Sultan, the only Bangladeshi artist to exhibit alongside Picasso, Dalí, and Braque at the Victoria Embankment Gardens, Hampstead, London, in 1950.”⁵³ This repeated invocation of a 1950 London exhibition equates London, modernism, and Sultan in the middle of the twentieth century. It produces exactly the sort of conditions under which Sultan’s international travel, pre-Narail, could be seen to qualitatively transform his style and provide him with the resources by which he subsequently can be categorised as one of Bangladesh’s modernist greats.
⁵⁴

Closer inspection, however, destabilises such an easy equation. In part, this is because it is unlikely that Sultan travelled to the UK before 1952; in part, it is due to the obvious conflation of two rather distinct sites in London (Hampstead and the Victoria Embankment Gardens); and in part it is due to archival traces of an exhibition at either site, including any of these artists, which quickly grow cold.

In researching Sultan’s London journeys, it becomes immediately apparent that the conflation of the two sites was probably based on Hye, who mentions that “[Sultan’s] paintings were exhibited with those of the Hampstead Victoria Embankment Sunday Artist.”⁵⁵ These were two different exhibition sites (Embankment Gardens and Hampstead) that ran a very similar sort of exhibition: an un-curated, “anything-goes”, open-air exhibition that attracted so-called “Sunday artists”, those who painted for pleasure, or for strictly commercial reasons. At Hampstead, the Hampstead Artists’ Council organised such shows on the weekends where anyone could come to exhibit. A sceptical contemporary noted that:

London’s other open-air exhibition, that in the Victoria Embankment Gardens, is not organised by an artists’ society but by the London County Council, a body which seems less concerned to maintain a reasonable artistic level and has kept this exhibition free-for-all. The consequence, it must be admitted, is that the few tolerable paintings are overwhelmed by a flood of nonsense...⁵⁶

It is highly possible that Sultan showed, and sold, his paintings through such open-air exhibitions in 1952. When he arrived in London, his friends Fateh Lohani and Khan Aatur Rahman were staying above an Indian restaurant

called Taj Mahal, operated by Sylheti entrepreneurs.⁵⁷ According to Hye, the bohemian lifestyle of the friends meant a continuous drain on resources and Sultan's arrival provided a new means of income. They encouraged him to paint and sell his paintings in Underground stations. Apparently, the final settling of the bill with the restaurateur-landlord was a painting of the Taj Mahal made by Sultan for the restaurant.⁵⁸ When trying to gain some traction on Hye's account, Lotte Hoek met with a number of different British Sylheti men related to those who operated restaurants in the 1950s. On a number of occasions, Hoek was immediately told "I don't know where the painting is!" This illustrates both an awareness of Sultan's presence in London, and the circulation of a story of one of his paintings that survives from that period. It seems likely, however, that if Sultan painted a view of the Taj Mahal for the restaurant, it would not have been on canvas. The Bengali/Sylheti restaurants of the period were frequently decorated with extensive murals, as can still be seen in the long-standing Bangladeshi restaurants around London's Brick Lane.⁵⁹

The open-air exhibitions, the selling of paintings in tube stations, and the remuneration of the landlord through a (mural?) painting of the Taj Mahal are tantalising clues about the likely contours of the art world available in post-war London to artists travelling from newly decolonised parts of the British Empire. These clues illustrate how London provided Sultan with a series of possibilities for informal modes of making, exhibiting, and selling of his work. It maps in some ways onto the period of Sultan's itinerancy in South Asia before 1947, when he would make a living selling his work to British army officers.⁶⁰ It shows that London provided a series of informal or semi-formal spaces for artists, delinked from the circuits of formal invitations, exhibitions, reviews, and schooling that artists such as Zainul Abedin inhabited.

Nevertheless, such informal art circuits could serendipitously link up to the formal economy of the fine arts in London. A feature of London's art world at the time, that both Sultan and Abedin visited, were large mixed shows held at commercial galleries. Summer exhibitions, mixed shows, or New Year's exhibitions would present a huge number of works from more or less established artists. The year Sultan spent in London, galleries such as the Redfern and the Leicester Galleries held such mixed exhibitions.

Mixed shows could inspire great enthusiasm in amateur or "Sunday" painters hoping for greater recognition, as is illustrated in this 1952 editorial from *The Artist*:

A number of readers have been enquiring about the Leicester Galleries Exhibition, *Artists of Fame and Promise*. In the main, exhibition at this show is by invitation from the Gallery ... If any artist wishes to be considered, he should first write to the gallery for an appointment and on no account should he send his work until requested. In fact, those who would wish to be considered for inclusion in this exhibition would be better advised to submit their work to the open exhibitions of the London societies, where their work may be noticed by the proprietors of the Leicester Galleries, who may then extend an invitation to them.⁶¹

This editorial indicates simultaneously the perhaps sometimes misplaced zeal among its readership for inclusion in the show, as well as the ways in which more and less formal modes of exhibition were linked within the broader space of London's art world. It is the latter that could be inhabited by post-colonial artists such as S.M. Sultan.

Hye makes note of an encounter between Sultan and someone connected to the formal spaces of art exhibition. "An English gentleman after looking at my works [in the open-air exhibition] said that he would like to exhibit two of my canvases at the Leicester Gallery (*sic.*)"⁶² Here, the worlds of informal and formal exhibition intersected. Hye records Sultan saying that: "In the 1950 exhibition at the Leicester Gallery (*sic.*) my paintings were exhibited along those of Picasso, Paul Klee, Matisse and Dali."⁶³ A strong proponent of modernist art, the Leicester Galleries did exhibit Klee and Picasso in the early years of the 1950s. However, upon consultation of their catalogues, it does not appear that they showed these artists simultaneously, nor in the company of S.M. Sultan. We have not found any other mention of a group exhibition featuring these artists in London between 1950 and 1955, nor in the company of S.M. Sultan.

Going through the Leicester Galleries catalogues, however, Hoek did finally find one concrete reference to S.M. Sultan exhibiting in London in the early 1950s: in the 1952 *Artists of Fame and Promise, Part I* exhibition of July 1952. This was the exhibition that the readers of *The Artists* were so keen to be included in.

The *Artists of Fame and Promise* exhibition was an annual, two-part, summer show at the Leicester Galleries. These were large mixed shows that included many different artists, presenting oil paintings, drawings, watercolours, and sculpture in four rooms. In the 1942 edition of the exhibition, a work by Camille Pissarro was exhibited.⁶⁴ Evelyn Silber describes the Leicester Galleries as "one of the galleries most committed to showing contemporary

and modernist art during the twentieth century," ⁶⁵ in London, while simultaneously noting that "the place was characterized by comparative informality", ⁶⁶ with an "unpretentious, déclassé style". ⁶⁷ Such a perception is especially marked in contemporaneous accounts of the big summer exhibitions at the Leicester Galleries, which are described as an opportunity to "enjoy a reasonably compact miscellany". ⁶⁸ yet "the most agreeable of London's mixed exhibitions, small enough to not be wearisome, thoroughly catholic, but with a high standard exercised in the choice of most of the exhibits." ⁶⁹

EAST ROOM		
WATER-COLOURS AND DRAWINGS		
NO.		
146	GLYN PHILPOT, R.A. (1884-1937)	Carnaval, Nice, the car called "Sa Majesté à son harem"
147	PRUNELLA CLOUGH	Machine in gravel pit
148	DAVID SMITH	Welsh slate town
149	GUY BURN	Carcassonne
150	WILLIAM HARTWELL	Back garden in spring
151	S. M. SULTAN	Winter, Putney
152	MARY KESSELL	Bull's head
153	VERA CUNINGHAM	St. Just
154	NINA HAMNETT	Paulina
155	OROVIDA PISSARRO	Catawaul (<i>hand - coloured etching</i>)
156	T. B. HUXLEY-JONES	Seated figure

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Figure 8.

Artists of Fame and Promise, exhibition catalogue artist listing for the East Room including *Winter Putney* by S.M. Sultan, Leicester Galleries, London, July 1952. Digital image courtesy of Ernest Brown & Phillips Ltd.

The catalogue for the July 1952 *Artists of Fame and Promise* mentions a single work by S.M. Sultan (Fig. 8)—exhibit number 151 out of a total of 203 works shown. It is titled *Winter, Putney*. From this, we might assume this was

a winter landscape, painted or drawn recently, probably not in Putney, London, but in Putney, Vermont, where Sultan had stayed as part of his US tour.⁷⁰ This work was hung among watercolours and drawings in the East room, where a drawing by Orovida Pissarro, Camille Pissarro's granddaughter, was also on display. Upon enquiry, I learnt that Sultan's work had been priced at 14 gns. but remained unsold.⁷¹ As "the Leicester rarely bought outright from artists, relying rather on percentages on sales from exhibitions", it is likely that the work reverted to Sultan after the show.⁷²

This has been the only concrete indication Hoek has found of Sultan having exhibited in London in the first half of the 1950s. It appears likely that Sultan did put his paintings in one or more of the "open" Sunday painters' shows around London and was subsequently invited by the Leicester Galleries to put his painting into the *Artists of Fame and Promise* exhibition. It shows that he was in London in 1952 and that he painted local scenes during his international travels. This puts some of Hye's claims in doubt, including the year of Sultan's presence in London (1952, not 1950), the type of exhibition he was in at the Leicester (not with Picasso, Klee, Matisse, and Dalí), as well as the types of subjects Sultan painted. Hye notes that Sultan said: "I made no foreign subject the theme of my work. Didn't feel the urge within. I chose all my subjects from my native land"—except perhaps for Putney, Vermont, in winter.⁷³

Of course, none of this precludes the possibility that Sultan did exhibit among Klee and Dalí, just that there appears to be no record of this happening in London anytime between 1950 and 1955. What it does show, however, is the existence of an interlinked set of more and less formal circuits of showing and exhibiting in early post-colonial London. Off the back of a tour of the USA, organised through some of the most significant institutions whose work with South Asian artists in the early 1950s we can read within the context of a changing political and economic global environment, Sultan's London sojourn was a far less clearly itinerated mode of travel. Instead, he drew on informal networks among London-based East Pakistani students, bohemians and restaurateurs, and various art societies, amateur groups, informal exhibition sites, and roaming curators to produce, sell, and exhibit works of art that were created abroad. Much of this happened off the radar of the formal art institutions, including beyond the purview of critics, but this activity was nonetheless meaningfully connected to more formal sites of the art world, in which artists such as S.M. Sultan could appear, perhaps briefly but nonetheless prominently, among those similarly of fame and of promise. The subsequent inscriptions of these activities into art-historical or curatorial narratives tend to fix Sultan's aesthetic and geographic journeys rather than emphasise the loose constellations of junctures and movements that made up the paths through which his process of making developed.

“An itinerary that overshoots its destination”

Differences between the London exhibitions of Abedin and Sultan are evident—Abedin’s official patronage contrasted with Sultan’s more informal, bohemian circuits, or Abedin’s solo exhibits contrasted with Sultan’s minor visibility in Sunday group shows, mark out the divergent institutional framings of these two artists. However, both artists shared critical similarities that are important for rethinking the aesthetic and political dynamics of these 'postcolonial journeys'. Both appeared in the former colonial metropolis in an ambivalent relation to its art worlds. Both were propelled by politically informed and formal routes that emerged as part of an unfolding cultural logic of the Cold War era yet relied on personal and affective ties. Situated at very different ends of the art worlds of London in the immediate post-colonial period, their travels can be described as part of an “itinerary that overshoots its destination.” While perhaps intended to produce a clear commitment to the international modern, both journeys overshoot this destination, encouraging in both artists a return to Bengal where the image of the peasant, in very different ways, emerges as a central trope. The rural, pastoral idiom was to gain renewed political importance through the 1960s, as East Pakistan negotiated its differential politics vis-à-vis the federal government in Karachi. Both Abedin and Sultan were to become architects of this folk-modern imaginary, which played a crucial role in producing and galvanising the political affects that fed the struggles of the 1971 Liberation War through which East Pakistan was liberated as the independent nation-state of Bangladesh.

The early 1950s form a peculiar context for East Pakistan, as artists from the region travelled under the patronage of the federal government of Pakistan, or as Pakistani artists. This required both an awareness of the tenuous relationship that the eastern wing had with West Pakistan, and a conscious exploration of a new national identity via the particularities of location and culture in the eastern wing of the country. As Abedin and Sultan were exhibiting in London in 1952, the language movement was raging in Dhaka, with students, artists, writers, political activists, and the populace itself fighting for the sovereignty of the Bengali language, against the political dominance of Urdu from the federal centre in the western wing of the country. The year 1952 was a flash point in the region’s struggle with its incomplete decolonisation, the acceleration of which over the late 1960s would lead to the Liberation War. The events in Dhaka echoed across the region as well as through the Bengali East Pakistani communities in Britain.

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A double allegorical bind seems to mark these East Pakistani artists—one of the nation, attached in different formal and affective ways to Abedin and Sultan, as they travelled on behalf of, or selected by, the nation-state; and

the other, of location—eastern Bengal, to which both artists would return more wholeheartedly after coming back from London. Their spaces of exhibition in London are sites where this double bind can be seen to get animated—whether in the frames of viewing and narrating that mark Abedin’s formal reception, or in the informal, social grids that contain Sultan’s more peripatetic itinerary. Abedin and Sultan—like many other artists from the former colonies in 1950s London—were artists poised at the peculiar shifting grounds of modernism at the end of empire, in which questions of freedom (of the newly independent nation-state, of their artistic practice) and the affects of region and locale (recognised and misrecognised as a part of their modernist artistic practice), combined in complex ways. Tracing their journeys are for us singular exercises in sketching the particularities of the geographies of post-colonial modernisms. Their itineraries and their unforeseen destinations require an attentiveness to the dialectical instabilities that mark travelling artists, and compel us to frame their journeys beyond art-historical binaries of monolinear nationalism or zealous modernist universalism.

For Abedin and Sultan, these journeys of the early 1950s were marked not only by their rhetorical stagings as Third World artists (and therefore as a 'promise', or 'students', as artists to come good in some future) in decolonising spaces like London, but also some very personal rejections from the artists themselves. Abedin’s realistic, representative language had changed, though mildly and for a short span, after he returned from his first spell in the UK, Europe, and Turkey between 1952–1953. Post-1953, he can be seen to experiment in linear simplifications, breaking up the image and trying out semi-Cubistic figurations. What is critical to note in these images is that his subjects remain the same—peasants, labours, domestic subjects (like mother and child)—though the artist seems momentarily lured by a language of modernism while holding on to a commitment to the rural. Similarly, subsequent to London, Sultan’s earlier profusion of landscapes is transformed into a commitment to the peasantry that inhabits and constitutes that landscape, presented in organic forms. These are curious instances of a national-popular modernity that both an artist-pedagogue like Abedin and an artist-recluse like Sultan grappled with. It can almost be seen to signify a transitional aesthetic in the post-colony, where modernity is hinged between context and the universal. In Abedin’s case, this was between the image of a peasant and that of Cubism. Abedin symbolised a regional artistic language, which could be framed repeatedly as a regional signature of East Pakistan in Pakistani modern art, wherever these were exhibited. The celebration of Sultan’s peasant images subsequent to the emergence of independent Bangladesh illustrates how this form of a modernist-rural as the recognisable 'regional signature' of what was previously East Pakistan comes to be placed centre stage in the cultural narratives and imagery of the new nation-state of Bangladesh.

A certain disquiet about the reappraisal of the folk, of the ethnographic, and of the figurative in the works of both Abedin and Sultan can be discerned in critiques of their work subsequent to their journeys through London. Abedin's overt stress on realism and folk imagery was increasingly being opposed by his students, with a rising trend of individualistic, non-figurative art championed by Abstract Expressionism. One of his students, the artist Aminul Islam, notes that after Abedin returned from the UK—and even after attending the UNESCO conference and Venice Biennial of 1952—he did not take any initiative in establishing the International Artists Association.⁷⁵ For Abedin, a return to his pre-London idiom was marked by an almost defensive refusal to internalise a rationality of post-war modernism. His rejection became stronger through the 1960s:

“Art for art’s sake” is not my faith. I believe art is for human welfare, for making life harmonious and beautiful ... I say time and again that our present famine—is one less of food than of taste. This has to be eradicated. Or else, economic poverty and the poverty of taste will march in parallels. Our struggle, thus, is against both these poverties.⁷⁶

The famine of 1943 recurs in Abedin's art—in idiom and narrative, in memory and metaphor. When, on the eve of the Liberation War, Abedin drew his monumental scroll—*Nabanna* (1969) and after a devastating cyclone of 1970, *Manpura'70*—the impulse towards memorialising and storytelling could be seen to be taking over the momentum of modernist universalism. The instability of national allegory too becomes palpable through the 1960s, with his recurring imagery of the recalcitrant bull assuming increasingly the allegory of political revolt in images like *Rebellion*, that suggested return to realism to capture political discontent in the post-colony. Similarly, Sultan was dismissive of non-figurative art because of its lack of connection to the people. Speaking in the 1980s, he noted that: “most drawing rooms have an abstract painting on the wall. ... But in my eyes these works are not important because general people can't easily grasp them.”⁷⁷ As he said, “the modernist trend which we have today is taking us away from the soil, from our roots” (Fig. 9).⁷⁸



Figure 9.

S.M. Sultan painting at home in Narail, film still, in *Adam Surat: The Inner Strength* (Dhaka: Bengal Foundation, 2014). Digital image courtesy of Adam Surat and the Bengal Foundation.

While the embedding of Abedin and Sultan within a predictable modernist narrative has been urgent both on the part of collectors and historians, their travels through London complicate such accounts: as their works refract through the multi-layered art worlds of London, they become parts of a potentiality that resides in an unfolding logic of post-colonial modernism. What characterises this potentiality is not only asymmetrical journeys and allegorical burdens of the post-colonial artist in the post-war metropole, but dialectical nationalisms *within* the new post-colonial nation-states. If to follow global modernisms, new “alternate geographies”⁷⁹ need to be charted—in archives, trails, and writings—these pursuits need to happen along non-linear, asymmetric journeys in which the folkloric or ethnographic follows abstraction or the focus on children’s art practices emerges out of Rockefeller Foundation funded travel.

The problem of narrating decolonisation is central here, and casts a shadow over the journeys and momentum of post-colonial modernism. Research on Cold War cultural politics in the United States has argued for unpacking how modernism as a formal and ideological language simultaneously transcended and reified national boundaries.⁸⁰ This simultaneous and contradictory mechanism of the universal and the particular were visible in the ways in which the London exhibitions of Abedin and Sultan were framed. Like the

post-colonial journeys of these artists, trails of decolonisation also overshoot the destination of post-colonial 'arrival'. Beyond its assumed linear teleology that charts political 'transfer of power' from empire to the post-colony, decolonisation needs to be read as “a complex dialectical intersection of competing views and claims over colonial pasts, transitional presents, and inchoate futures.”⁸¹ While it tends to lend itself to blanket historical use across post-colonial contexts, decolonisation needs to be read as “a *situated* process that requires attention to local case-studies as well as broader patterns of event and meaning across space and time.”⁸² The particular journeys of Zainul Abedin and S.M. Sultan show the push towards the ethnographic and the local that are latent in modernisms' global trajectory. Their travels illustrate how productive London was as a site of *particular* forms of modernism through which post-colonial artists could travel on their trajectories to those unstable edges of what post-colonial modernism could become.

Footnotes

- 1 Projects like *Black Artists and Modernism*, for instance, have begun the archival and theoretical work around documenting artists of African and Asian descent in twentieth-century British art: <http://www.blackartistsmodernism.co.uk/about/>. Accessed 20 July 2019.
- 2 This study contributes to expanding literature that studies interfaces of modernism and decolonisation in the Global South. See for instance, Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Rebecca Brown, *Art for Modern India, 1947-1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930-1990* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015).
- 3 Of the two authors, Lotte Hoek is a media anthropologist and Sanjukta Sunderason is a historian of twentieth-century art and aesthetics, both specialising in cultural forms and their political, social, and intellectual lives in South Asia.
- 4 Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), 45.
- 5 *The Artist in Modern Society*, International Conference of Artists, Venice, 22-28 September 1952 (Paris: UNESCO, 1954), 7.
- 6 N.C. Mehta, “Report from the Resolutions Committee”, *The Artist in Modern Society: Essays and Statements Collected by UNESCO* (Paris: UNESCO, 1954), 126.
- 7 Henry Meyric Hughes, “The Promotion and Reception of British Sculpture Abroad, 1948-1960: Herbert Read, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and the ‘Young British Sculptors’,” *British Art Studies* Issue 3 (2016). doi: [10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/hmhughes](https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/hmhughes).
- 8 Stuart Hall, “Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three ‘Moments’ in Post-War History”, *History Workshop Journal* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 5.
- 9 Hall, “Black Diaspora Artists in Britain”, 6.
- 10 Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
- 11 Jean Fisher, “The Other Story and the Past Imperfect”, *Tate Papers* 12 (Autumn 2009), <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/no-12/the-other-story-and-the-past-imperfect>. Accessed 25 July 2016.
- 12 Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1987]), 6.
- 13 See Lala Rukh Selim, “50 Years of the Fine Art Institute”, *Art, A Quarterly Journal*, October-December 1998.
- 14 For biographic works on Abedin, see, Abdul Matin, *Zainul Abedin* (Dhaka: Ahmed Publishing House, 1978); Burhunuddinkhan Jahangir, *The Quest of Zainul Abedin* (Dhaka: International Centre for Bengal Studies, 1993); and Hashem Khan, *Zainul Abedin-er Sharajibon* (Dhaka: Somoy Prakashan, 2003).
- 15 Eric Newton, “Zainul Abedin: Pakistan Artist Studying in London.” I am thankful to Ming Tiampo for providing me with a copy of the article as part of the Slade School of Fine Art's scrapbook of Commonwealth artists. The article was published in *Commonwealth Today*, 1952.
- 16 Newton, “Zainul Abedin”, 17.

- 17 "Annual Report and Accounts for 1951", *Art and Letters: The Journal of the Royal India, Pakistan and Ceylon Society*, new Series, 26, no. 2, (Second Issue for 1952), 103.
- 18 *Paintings and Brush Drawings by Zainul Abedin, Exhibition at The Imperial Institute, December 3rd to 8th 1951*. Private papers of Zainul Abedin. Courtesy: Mainul Abedin.
- 19 Hermione Waterfield and J.C.H. King, *Provenance, Twelve Collectors of Ethnographic Art in England 1790-1990* (Paris: Somogy Art Publishers; Geneva: Barbier-Mueller Museum, 2006), 107.
- 20 Evelyn A. Williams, "Denis Williams in London: 1946-1957", *Third Text* 25, no. 2 (2011): 157-168.
- 21 *Exhibition of Art Chiefly from the Dominions of India & Pakistan, 1947-48 / Royal Academy of Arts, London*. I am thankful to Brinda Kumar for pointing out the show of Abedin's famine works in 1948.
- 22 *Paintings and Brush Drawings by Zainul Abedin, Exhibition at The Imperial Institute, December 3rd to 8th 1951*. Zainul Abedin private papers. Courtesy: Mainul Abedin.
- 23 *Paintings and Brush Drawings by Zainul Abedin*. Zainul Abedin private papers.
- 24 John Buckland-Wright, "Zainul Abedin", *New Values* 4, nos 2 and 3, 18. Reproduced in the catalogue to Abedin's exhibition catalogue from the Berkeley Galleries. *Views of some of the Eminent Art Critics of the West on the Paintings and Drawings of Zainul Abedin*. Zainul Abedin private papers. Courtesy: Mainul Abedin.
- 25 Eric Newton, "Zainul Abedin", reproduced in *Views of Some of the Eminent Art Critics of the West on the paintings and drawings of Zainul Abedin*.
- 26 Newton, "Zainul Abedin".
- 27 Newton, "Zainul Abedin".
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 On critiques of the "time-lag" of the post-colonial modern, see the extensive body of scholarship from the 2000s: Dipesh Chakraborty, *Provincializing Europe, Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism?: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000); Timothy Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity", in Timothy Mitchell (ed.), *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
- 30 Anwar Dil notes that Nazir Ahmed had given copies of the speech to Anwar Jalal Shemza and the author along with some other materials on Zainul Abedin when he came to Lahore in the mid-1950s. See Anwar Dil, *Bangladesh: An Intercultural Memoir* (Dhaka: Adorn Publications, 2011), 62. The speech was reproduced in *Views of some of the eminent art critics of the West on the paintings and drawings of Zainul Abedin*.
- 31 Dil, *Bangladesh*, 62.
- 32 Syed Waliullah, "Zainul Abedin: A Victim of Conflicting Ideas", *The Dawn*, 23 October 1955, Karachi.
- 33 Waliullah, "Zainul Abedin".
- 34 S. Amjad Ali, "Zainul Abedin: A Victim of Confused Criticism", *The Dawn*, 30 October 1955, Karachi. Accessed at the private collections of the artist Murtaza Baseer, Dhaka.
- 35 Aijaz Ahmad's critiques of Fredric Jameson's notion of the Third World Literature as national allegory are relevant here. See, Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'," *Social Text* 17 (Autumn 1987): 3-25.
- 36 Henry Moore, "The Sculptor in Modern Society", *The Artist in Modern Society: Essays and Statements Collected by UNESCO* (Paris: UNESCO, 1954), 104.
- 37 Nasir Ali Mamun, *Guru* (Dhaka: Neer, 2005); Sadeq Khan, *S.M. Sultan* (Dhaka: Dept. of Fine Arts, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, 2003); *Adom Surat*, directed by Tareque Masud (1989; Dhaka: Bengal Foundation, 2014), DVD.
- 38 Burhanuddin Khan Jahangir, *Deshjo Adhunikata: Sultaner Kaj* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1999); Lala Rukh Selim, "Art of Bangladesh: the Changing Role of Tradition, Search for Identity and Globalization" *Samaj* 9 (2014): <https://samaj.revues.org/3725>; Muhammad Sirajul (ed.), *S.M. Sultan* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, 1976).
- 39 Muhammad Sirajul (ed.), *S.M. Sultan* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, 1976), n.p.
- 40 Syed Amjad Ali, "A Young Artist from East Bengal", *Pakistan Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (January 1952), 58.
- 41 Jalal Uddin Ahmed, "Art Today in Pakistan", *The Studio* 147, no. 734 (May 1954): 129-137.
- 42 Jalal Uddin Ahmed, *Contemporary Painters of Pakistan* (Karachi: The Arts Council of Pakistan, 1958), 52.
- 43 For example, Salima Hashmi and Quddus Mirza, *50 Years of Visual Art in Pakistan* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1997).
- 44 Selim, *Art of Bangladesh*.
- 45 Ali, "A Young Artist from East Bengal", 60.
- 46 Institute of International Education, 33rd Annual Report (New York: Institute of International Education, 1952), 16; see also "8 Foreigners Named to '52 Arts Program", *New York Times*, 20 December 1951, 6.
- 47 Muriel Clafin, "Pakistani Artist Visits Graduate Student at 'U'." *The Michigan Daily*, 4 January 1952, 6.

- 48 Hasnat Abdul Hye, *Sultan*, trans. Kabir Chowdhury (Dhaka: Adorn Publications, 2008), 247–253. However, Sultan’s journey to the West does not present a particularly concrete archival trail of activities and movements, even the otherwise “planned” US part of it, in the first three months of 1952 (Karin Zitzewitz, personal communication).
- 49 Hye, *Sultan*, 255.
- 50 Hye, *Sultan*, 256.
- 51 German Cultural Institute, *S.M. Sultan and his Paintings* (Dhaka: German Cultural Institute, 1987), 10–11.
- 52 Tareque Masud Memorial Trust, *Adom Surat*, 145.
- 53 ARTNews, “The Top 200 Collectors”, *ARTNews* (2015), <http://www.artnews.com/top200/nadia-and-rajeeb-samdani/>.
- 54 Golam Mortuja, “Identifying Bangladeshi Art in the Context of Modernism”, *Depart* 1, no. 2 (April 2010): 21–26.
- 55 Hye, *Sultan*, 258.
- 56 Stephen Bone, “Truce in Open Air Art Dispute”, *The Manchester Guardian*, 12 April 1956, 6.
- 57 Hye, *Sultan*, 256.
- 58 Hye, *Sultan*, 260.
- 59 Delwar Hussain, personal communication.
- 60 Ali, *A Young Artist from East Bengal*, 58.
- 61 “The Artist’s Notebook”, *The Artist* 43, no. 6 (August 1952), 139.
- 62 Hye, *Sultan*, 258.
- 63 Hye, *Sultan*, 258.
- 64 “Artists of Fame and Promise”, *The Times*, 1 September 1942, Issue 49329, 8.
- 65 Evelyn Silber, “The Leicester Galleries and the Promotion of Modernist Sculpture in London, 1902–1975”, *Sculpture Journal* 21, no. 2 (2012), 132.
- 66 Silber, “The Leicester”, 133.
- 67 Silber, “The Leicester Galleries”, 133.
- 68 “Leicester Galleries: Artists of Fame and Promise”, *The Times*, 20 July 1950, Issue 51748, 8.
- 69 “Artists of Fame and Promise”, *The Times*, 21 July 1951, Issue 52059, 8.
- 70 Hye, *Sultan*, 250.
- 71 Christopher Phillips, personal communication.
- 72 Silber, “The Leicester Galleries”, 133.
- 73 Hye, *Sultan*, 257.
- 74 Sarah Glynn, *Class, Ethnicity and Religion in the Bengali East End: A Political History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 38.
- 75 Aminul Islam, *Bangladesher Silpa-Andolaner Panchash Bachar [A Study of Fifty Years of Bangladesh Fine Arts Movement]* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Silpakala Academy, 2003).
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- 77 Tareque Masud Memorial Trust, *Adom Surat*, 27.
- 78 Tareque Masud Memorial Trust, *Adom Surat*, 27.
- 79 Andreas Huyssen, “Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World”, *New German Critique*, 100, 34, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 189–207.
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“Exciting a Wider Interest in the Art of India” The 1931 Burlington Fine Arts Club Exhibition

Brinda Kumar

Abstract

This article focuses on the largely understudied Art of India exhibition held at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in London in 1931, which was hailed at the time as the first event of its kind in the West. Featuring over three hundred objects, including many major works of art from important collections, as well as the recently discovered objects from the Indus Valley Civilization, the BFAC exhibition has nevertheless featured at most as a footnote in accounts of Indian art and its exhibition histories. Recuperating this early exhibitionary attempt at an historical survey of Indian art through archival material, its catalogue, and contemporary coverage reveals the exhibition’s entanglements with art-historical and cultural concerns of the day, and its more enduring impact on narratives and debates about the contours of an emerging canon for Indian art.

This article is accompanied by two downloadable resources: a complete copy of the Art of India catalogue ([Fig. 1](#)), and a PDF compiled by the author that attempts to visually reassemble the exhibition through images of works in the (originally unillustrated) catalogue ([Fig. 2](#)).

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Even though it was hailed at the time as the first event of its kind in the West, and included several major works of art, the *Art of India* exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1931 has been eclipsed by the better-known *Exhibition of Art from India and Pakistan* staged at the Royal Academy of Arts, in Burlington House, in 1947–1948. In the annals of Indian art, the well-recognized and manifold significance of the latter exhibition is attributable in part to the fact that it marked the recent independence of two new nations and fêted their artistic heritage.¹ Nevertheless, repositioning the more modest 1931 exhibition in historical accounts of Indian art of this period, as well as in accounts of exhibitions of Indian art in Great Britain is instructive for understanding the importance and contributions of this largely overlooked early exhibitionary attempt at an historical survey of Indian art. Considering the paucity of subsequent awareness, or an appreciation of its contemporary significance notwithstanding, a closer examination of the exhibition reveals its important entanglements with prevailing art-historical debates and cultural priorities. In revisiting the exhibition by tracing its development through archival material, its catalogue, and contemporary coverage in newspaper and magazine articles, one can better understand its form, impact, and limitations. The exhibition foregrounded collecting and connoisseurship, and its selective inclusions and omissions privileged narrative strands that would find echoes in the 1947 exhibition and beyond. Moreover, collections included in the exhibition would go on to find prominence in shaping narratives of Indian art in museum settings in Britain, India, and America, while the absence of the work of living artists points to the unease in reconciling the pre-modern and the modern in the emerging story of Indian art.

The Burlington Fine Arts Club (henceforth BFAC) was a private gentlemen's club for art collectors, founded in 1866. Its name was chosen as its original premises on Piccadilly stood opposite Burlington House, which the Royal Academy had recently occupied. In 1870, the club moved to a new location at 17 Savile Row. The club was formed with "the purpose of bringing together amateurs, collectors, and persons interested in the Fine Arts; and for the exhibiting and comparing the acquisitions made from time to time by the Members."² As Stacey J. Pierson has pointed out, in a recent study focused on the club and its history, the mounting of special exhibitions set apart the BFAC from other clubs of the day.³ The exhibition of works of "past ages" were privileged, while the work of living artists were permitted in exceptional circumstances. Although the BFAC was a private club, access to the exhibitions it organized was apparently generously granted.⁴ The BFAC was also known for publishing catalogues that accompanied such special exhibitions, often with introductory remarks from scholars in the field. While the primary focus of the BFAC remained European, the club had exhibited non-Western art from time to time. These included exhibitions of Japanese prints in 1888, the faience of Persia and the nearer East in 1907, early

Chinese porcelain and pottery from 1910, and an exhibition of objects of Indigenous American art in 1920. The exhibition of the *Art of India* was thus arguably in keeping with established practice, and arose out of prevailing interest within the club—fourteen of the forty-seven lenders to the exhibition were members of the BFAC.

The *Art of India* exhibition was proposed and accepted as the summer exhibition for 1931 by the BFAC's general committee in July 1930, and an exhibition subcommittee was convened for its organization. Chaired by Archibald G.B. Russell of the BFAC, the committee included both club members and non-members: Lord Lytton, and the Marquess of Zetland, both former governors of Bengal; Laurence Binyon of the British Museum; Sir Atul Chandra Chatterjee, then high commissioner for India in Great Britain; Sir William Rothenstein, principal of the Royal College of Art; and Kenneth de Burgh Codrington. Of the committee, most men were (or had been) members of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) and many were also members of the India Society.⁵ While their proximity to the colonial administration in India would be a practical advantage in securing several loans,⁶ the close relationship between the India Society and the BFAC would ultimately land the exhibition in the midst of a broader controversy.

The *Art of India* exhibition opened at the BFAC premises on Savile Row on 11 May 1931 and closed on 1 August later that same year. During that period, it received 1,462 visitors, exclusive of members of the club. The exhibition was accompanied by a seventy-two-page catalogue featuring prefatory remarks by Archibald G.B. Russell and two introductions—one on Indian painting by Laurence Binyon and the other on Indian sculpture by Kenneth de Burgh Codrington. Both Binyon and Codrington also loaned works to the exhibition and were key figures in the India Society and discussions about Indian art at the time. These short essays were followed by a catalogue featuring details of all 333 objects in the exhibition, arranged in order of their display within the exhibition rooms at the BFAC.

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 1.

Burlington Fine Arts Club, Catalogue of an exhibition of the art of India, London: Privately printed, 1931. Exhibition catalogue. Texts by Archibald G.B. Russell, Laurence Binyon, and K. De B. Codrington. Digital image courtesy of Digital Facsimile courtesy of the Courtauld Institute of Art, department of Digital Media.

In his preface, Russell observed,

The prestige of Indian Art has suffered, both in this country and generally in the Western world, from a want of knowledge of its finest achievements. It should be clear from the examples shown on the present occasion that it is an art rich in masterpieces of a marked individuality of character. ⁷

He added that the exhibition was aimed at:

exciting a wider interest in the Art of India by the display of a comparatively small number of objects ... The objects chosen are principally from the sphere of sculpture and painting, since it was felt that in these arts the genius of India has most completely expressed itself. ⁸

While acknowledging that this was not a comprehensive artistic account, the emphasis on “masterpieces” in the “fine art” genres of painting and sculpture did nevertheless peg the nodal points around which a canon could and would be woven. The privileging of the fine art categories in museum collections, and in subsequent exhibitions, would further establish those canonical frameworks. From the early twentieth century, nationalist Indian art historians had sought to delineate the two main categories of fine arts (in contrast to a relegation to the decorative or industrial arts) for Indian art as painting—broadly meaning the individual manuscript folio—or sculpture—referring mostly to figural architectural fragments—in a bid to demonstrate parity with and intelligibility within the categories of Western art, and in Western institutions. ⁹

In his essay on Indian painting, Binyon opened with the caveat,

An exhibition like the present can illustrate but partially and imperfectly the achievements of India in painting, since the great frescoes of the Buddhist period surpass in scope and grandeur all the later pictorial art, and these are necessarily unrepresented. ¹⁰

Binyon then breezed through a well-worn narrative of rises and falls; beginning with the rise of the great lyrical naturalism of Buddhist fresco painting at Ajanta and Bagh, through the decline of Buddhism itself. Hindu and Jain paintings were dismissed as being ruled by hieratic convention and “The art had fallen into a state, if not of atrophy, of somnolence, from which it could only be roused by some external stimulus.” ¹¹ The literary and

artistic traditions from Persia were identified as responsible for this resurgence of artistic activity, which in turn gave rise to the Mughal school. The predominance of Mughal painting in the exhibition, coupled with the fact that by the 1930s there had been a fair amount of scholarship on the subject, saw Binyon most at ease in positively addressing this painting tradition.¹² On reaching the eighteenth century, however, he was once again on shaky ground. Although Binyon at one point suggested that the sight of Persian miniatures in the possession of their patrons might have stimulated Rajput painters to evolve new modes of representations,¹³ he quickly retrenched into an absolute distinction from Mughal painting.¹⁴ He resorted to description that excessively evoked “emotion”¹⁵ and escapism, which he equated with a feminization. He abruptly concluded the essay (and the story of Indian painting) with a dismissive account of Kangra painting from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.¹⁶ Having established at the outset that Indian painting could never again reach the great heights of ancient India, Binyon did not find it necessary to bring the story forward to the twentieth century, when then contemporary artists from both the Bengal and Bombay schools had looked to the paintings at Ajanta and engaged with those traditions. Although some of these twentieth-century artists had been included in earlier exhibitions in London such as the Festival of Empire exhibition in 1910, they were *not* included in the BFAC exhibition (a controversial point at the time), and in Binyon’s account even Kalighat paintings which *were* included in the exhibition did not apparently merit being addressed.

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 2.

Images of works exhibited, The Art of India, held at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, London, in 1931. Images sourced by Brinda Kumar, with image files obtained by Maisoon Rehani. Note: Images with an asterisk (*) indicate a tentative attribution. Digital image courtesy of Design by Tom Powell, 2019.

Kenneth de Burgh Codrington’s essay on Indian sculpture sketched out the progression of Indian artistic production in three dimensions beginning with the Mauryan archaeological remains, although he noted that they didn’t have “anything in common with Indian sculpture proper”.¹⁷ That, he identified as truly beginning with the sculptural reliefs on the stupa railings at Bharhut and Sanchi from the second–first century BC, of which there was an example included in the exhibition (Cat. 318). Moving through the Kushan period and the sculptural traditions at Amaravati, he concluded with the development of Hindu sculpture in medieval India, favouring formal analysis over any iconographic interpretation, noting that: “The iconographical theory of the late medieval period has been allowed too much weight in the criticism of the sculptures themselves.”¹⁸ Codrington took the approach of identifying a

succession of major dynasties that provided patronage, and brought the story to the eighth century, after which he said “the history of Northern and Southern India is not so closely knit together, the appearance of the Muhammadan being the disturbing factor...”,¹⁹ once again invoking the familiar narrative of iconoclasm and inevitable decline. Situating Codrington’s text, one can glean his scepticism of methods increasingly used by younger scholars of the day such as the Austrian art historian Stella Kramrisch, and when two years later Kramrisch published her first book titled *Indian Sculpture* (1933), Codrington gave it a lukewarm review.²⁰ It is perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, that even though fifteen pieces from Kramrisch’s collection were exhibited in the BFAC exhibition—by far the most sculptures from any single collection—Codrington did not refer to them at all.²¹ (Kramrisch’s large collection of Indian sculpture would later be exhibited at and subsequently bought by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the 1950s).

While the narrative frameworks of the essays delimited the arc of Indian art in particular ways, the catalogue reveals that the actual works included in the exhibition extended beyond the chronological posts marked by the authors, with historical works being privileged for the most part. Chief among these was the inclusion of objects from the recent excavations at the Indus Valley sites of Harappa and Mohenjodaro that were loaned by the government of India, and it was the first time that these works were being seen outside of India. The government of India additionally loaned a few important pieces from the Indian Museum and the Sarnath Museum as well, while other regional government museums and princely states also loaned works. The secretary of state for India,²² and the King of England were also lenders (Cat. 65). These sources are a further testament to the standing of the exhibition, which in turn was largely an extension of the prestige of its organizing members and advisory committee, and their influence with the powerful and influential colonial administration.

The exhibition was also significant in bringing together pieces from important private collections. Most prominent among these was that of Alfred Chester Beatty who by this period was also a leading collector of manuscripts including several important imperial Mughal paintings. A member of the BFAC, Beatty had been invited to serve on the exhibition committee, but on account of his travels to Egypt had to decline. Nevertheless, he instructed his librarian that: “We want to help make the exhibition a success; loan them anything they want.”²³ Chester Beatty is identified in the catalogue as having loaned a total of forty-nine works, mainly several important Mughal paintings, including all nineteen folios from the Minto album—a mid-seventeenth-century muraqqa made for the Mughal emperors Jehangir and Shah Jahan. Most of the private collections represented at the BFAC exhibition would eventually find their way into museums: Chester Beatty’s

would be deposited in his eponymous library in Dublin, several works would find their way into the collections of the V&A, and a few in India as well. Three women also loaned works to the exhibition, including most prominently Stella Kramrisch. Other lenders included Ajit Ghose, a Calcutta-based collector from whose collections works would also feature prominently in the 1947 exhibition, and many of his pieces would end up in the National Museum in New Delhi too. The jewel of Ghose's collection was the recently discovered Akbari period Mughal manuscript the *Tarikh-i-Alfi*,²⁴ from which four folios were exhibited at the BFAC exhibition. Although he had initially been reluctant to sell individual folios from the manuscript piecemeal, by 1931 his views had altered and Ghose sold four different folios to the Freer Gallery in Washington DC,²⁵ while on the conclusion of the BFAC exhibition leaves from the manuscript were bought by the Cleveland Museum of Art (Cat. 258), the Art Institute of Chicago (Cat. 264), and the British Museum.²⁶ Finally, the ten Kalighat paintings exhibited came from the collection of the Bengal school artist Mukul Dey, then principal of the Government School of Art, Calcutta. Dey had been an early champion of Kalighat painting, having written about them in *Rupam* in 1926, and would introduce W.G. Archer—who was then an ICS officer, but would go on to become a leading scholar of Indian painting—to Kalighat art and artists. Dey's collection of Kalighat paintings was acquired by Archer in the 1930s, and in turn also ended up in the V&A (Cats 307 to 316).

While the catalogue was not illustrated, it meticulously listed all 333 works in the exhibition, sometimes with precise titles that have endured or that make the work easily identifiable, but in other instances specific works are harder to discern from their given titles alone or even when seen in conjunction with each lender. Although the lenders for individual works were identified in the catalogue, the ultimate fate of some collections and works are more challenging to track. Therefore, the task of attempting to visually reassemble the exhibition through its catalogue in the illustrations accompanying this essay has entailed puzzling out the identity of specific objects through strategies including tracing their eventual depository locations and matching catalogue descriptions and dimensions with objects, linking accession numbers (especially in the case of the Indus Valley Civilization objects), and tracking references mentioned in the catalogue as well, cumulatively yielding a list of firmly identifiable and more speculatively identifiable objects. While this compilation of images of works in the catalogue thus remains partial and open-ended (and indeed it is hoped that emendations and additions to the visual list may continue in the future), this strategy nevertheless provides a supplementary tool towards achieving a fuller understanding of the scope of the exhibition, especially in the absence of photographs or descriptions of its installation. The BFAC catalogue did however indicate the locations in the

club where the works were exhibited—in the main gallery, on the staircase, and in the writing room, suggesting that the volume was also meant to be used as an in-gallery guide to the objects on display.

The main part of the *Art of India* exhibition was in its grand gallery, which had been in place since the establishment of the BFAC at its permanent residence in Savile Row. Pierson has pointed out, that from the few images of inside the club, “the design of the space was traditional and very much reflective of the period room phenomenon that was gaining pace at the time the building was opened.” ²⁷ (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4) She adds that:

the Gallery was designed as a luxurious domestic interior and for the ordinary exhibitions, the space was a suitable and conventional backdrop for a range of objects that usually included furniture, pictures, and various works of art. For the special exhibitions, however, display cases were used which presented objects in a museum style ... Such displays were curated and arranged systematically, bringing the museum into the Club both visually and conceptually. ²⁸

Current images of the club premises on Savile Row indicate extensive renovations have replaced its early twentieth-century interiors and, unfortunately, I have thus far not found any illustrations or photographs of the inside of the *Art of India* exhibition, and the few contemporary accounts of the exhibition do not make particular mention of its display beyond the presence of cases in which the Mohenjodaro objects were featured. Such lacunae in the archival record serve to underscore the challenges in recuperating the histories of an ephemeral format such as the temporary exhibition, especially those on a more intimate scale. In the case of the BFAC, this eclipsing of its exhibitionary legacy is not a little paradoxical given the editorial from the *Burlington Magazine* that ruefully marked the dissolution of the club in 1951, noting in its closing statement that: “The Club has left its permanent mark on the history of exhibitions, and indirectly on the history of criticism.” ²⁹



Figure 3.

Interior of the Burlington Fine Arts Club, 17 Savile Row., 1921, photograph. Historic England (BL25311/001). Digital image courtesy of Historic England / Photograph Henry Bedford Lemere. All rights reserved.



Figure 4.

Interior of the Burlington Fine Arts Club, 17 Savile Row, 1921, photograph. Historic England (BL25311/002). Digital image courtesy of Historic England / Photograph Henry Bedford Lemere. All rights reserved.

The *Art of India* catalogue, however, did indicate broadly that the exhibits were either upon or against walls or in cases while others were exhibited on the floor in the middle of the room. The catalogue was intended to be a directional and instructional guide in the space and listed the works in order (in the likely absence of individual object labels). A close reading of the volume reveals that while in fact the essays laid out a historic progression of art, the actual display itself was quite different, freely mixing works in different mediums, subjects, and from different eras. For example, the catalogue indicates that Mughal and Rajput paintings, architectural fragments, Buddhist Gupta sculpture from Sarnath, objects from Mohenjodaro, South Indian bronzes, North Indian jewellery, Kushan sculpture, Indo-Bactrian coins, sculptural figures and friezes from medieval temples, playing cards, Pala bronzes, and Jain manuscripts all kept company with one another in the exhibition's main gallery. This indifference to chronology pervaded the catalogue entries (in many, a date or era was omitted entirely) and the display, such that the visitor presumably saw millennia-old seals from Mohenjodaro, seventeenth-century Mughal paintings, and fourth-century Gandharan sculpture in quick succession (Cat. nos 41-66). At other times, sculpture and painting were more rhythmically alternated (Cat. nos.

157-173), presumably for visual interest, although a thematic connection is hard to determine, resulting in the visitor being lurching back and forth between centuries.

It seems that the approach taken by the organizers was akin to that of the recently concluded and much lauded *International Exhibition of Persian Art* at the Royal Academy at Burlington House in 1931 (and to which the BFAC had coincidentally loaned some of its display cases).³⁰ In his analysis of that display Barry D. Wood has observed,

Given the amazing range and variety of the artworks they had been able to procure, the organizers of the Persian Exhibition could have assembled the definitive “guided tour” of the history of Persian art. Yet what is striking about the descriptions and reviews of the show is how lightly the historical factor seems to have weighed as an organizational principle. Rather than a chronologically arranged exhibition designed to educate the view about the development of the arts in Persia, the wealth of artistic treasures on display was conceived as a decorative extravaganza that would bowl viewers over from the moment they set foot in the building.³¹ (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6).

Discerning the display through the description in the catalogue, it would seem that the *Art of India* exhibition very much took a similar approach to the arrangement of the objects in the BFAC’s spaces. The influence of the Persian exhibition on that of Indian art at the BFAC is noted by Pierson, “Possibly because of the prominence of the Royal Academy exhibition, the Club unusually decided to offer lectures to members about their own exhibition of Indian art around the same time.”³² These lectures were given by catalogue authors Binyon and Codrington, but were apparently not well attended.³³



Figure 5.

Gallery IV, the International Exhibition of Persian Art, at the Royal Academy of Arts, 1931, colour transparency, 20.3 × 25.4 cm. Royal Academy of Arts (10/4764). Digital image courtesy of Royal Academy of Arts. All rights reserved.



Figure 6.

Gallery III, the International Exhibition of Persian Art, at the Royal Academy of Arts, 1931, colour transparency, 20.3 × 25.4 cm. Royal Academy of Arts (10/4759). Digital image courtesy of Royal Academy of Arts. All rights reserved.

Outside of the membership of the club, a young Trenchard Cox (who would become the director of the V&A in the 1950s), also noted a connection between the two exhibitions. Writing a “Letter from London” for *Parnassus*, Cox observed:

Another important exhibition in London was that held by the Burlington Fine Arts Club of the Art of India, which achieved a certain popular attention since it followed closely on the heels of the exhibition of the Art of Persia. Although in no way as spectacular as its Persian precedent, this small exhibition was able to raise the level in this country of the prestige of Indian Art.

34

The importance and success of the Royal Academy (Burlington House) exhibitions of the *Art of Persia* and the *Art of China* (that would take place in 1935) would be invoked when the need for a similarly grand exhibition for the art of India was being advocated. 35

Impact and Controversy

In her research, Pierson has acknowledged that: “What is more difficult to assess is the general impact of the Club’s exhibitions, both at the time of display and subsequently,” adding that:

[t]he Club’s India exhibition has received very little attention in the literature of the display of Indian art in Britain. It is often dismissed for either not including monumental sculptures ... or for being “small” and not introducing “an overall portrait of Indian art”.³⁶

While the organizers pre-emptively acknowledged these limitations, largely for practical reasons of space,³⁷ and although the archival records *are* scant, there is nevertheless scope to determine certain shorter-term and longer-term effects of the 1931 *Art of India* exhibition. Contemporary press coverage can provide clues, and looking back at subsequent exhibitions that focused on India can indicate any formative impact the BFAC exhibition may have had.

Press coverage of the day nearly unanimously noted the ninety-nine Indus Valley objects as one of the highlights of the exhibition.³⁸ This was a truly unique aspect of the exhibition, and generated broader interest beyond the membership of the club alone,³⁹ spurred by the potential of this recent discovery to yield new insights into the history of India and establish new roots for the history of Indian art.⁴⁰ That the number of objects from the Indus Valley Civilization displayed in the 1947 exhibition dwindled to just forty-five was perhaps in some ways a response to the unmet promise in the intervening years of establishing significant links between the Indus Valley Civilizations and the subsequent great periods of Indian art. Even so, some of the works exhibited at the BFAC would go on to become icons such as the bronze dancing girl (Cat. 146) and the figure of the “priest king” (Cat. 114). Later, many of the Indus Valley objects would end up divided between collections in India and Pakistan, following the partition of the country in 1947, with some objects—such as necklaces (Cat. nos 30 and 33)—being quite literally split in two.⁴¹ A similar fate would befall the works from the Central Museum in Lahore that in 1931 were lent by the Punjab government of undivided India to the BFAC exhibition.

In an unanticipated turn of events, however, it was the exhibition’s exclusion of the works of living Indian artists that would prove controversial. The fact that the BFAC exhibition took place against the backdrop of a bitter rivalry

between the then ascendant Bombay and Bengal schools of painting, and that neither of these contemporary art movements were included in the exhibition, or even addressed by Binyon in his essay, caused an outcry among the art establishment in India, particularly in Bombay. Partha Mitter has addressed the competition between the Bombay and Bengal schools in attaining supremacy in the 1920s and 1930s in representing modern Indian art.⁴² This played out in the arena of both exhibitions of their work, but also in the garnering of lucrative commissions such as mural paintings for public buildings. At the same time as the BFAC exhibition, the murals for the interior of India House were also being completed by a set of young Bengal school artists in London. Gladstone Solomon and his Bombay School of Art faction were much chagrined by this decision, for although the Bombay school artists had secured the commission of the murals for the Imperial Secretariat in Delhi a few years earlier, they suspected favouritism towards the Bengal school on the part of the India Society, in leading to the commission being granted to their rivals. In a series of searing articles published in *The Times of India*, they lambasted individual BFAC members and the India Society for exercising inordinate influence in determining which aspects of Indian art would be highlighted in London. The BFAC exhibition became entangled in this public outcry against the India Society, for although the two organizations were separate, they clearly had cordial relations.⁴³ The Bombay press picked up on this intimacy and pre-emptively declared its wariness of the BFAC exhibition, noting the overlapping of members of the exhibition committee and the India Society and adding that:

The matter has now become clearer: the India Society has constituted itself as the only gateway of Indian Art into England—and a pretty narrow entrance at that. We are not in the least surprised then to learn further that all modern Indian Art is excluded from this representation of “The Art of India.” Presumably modern Indian Art will be sufficiently illustrated for the British public by Sir William Rothenstein’s Bengal Class of Indian Mural Paintings now busily at work upon India House...⁴⁴

The chairman of the India Society defensively pushed back against the charge that Bombay had been overlooked, or that the society had been responsible for any mural commissions, and finally refuted any connection the society had to the BFAC exhibition.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the connection was hard to shake, and beyond the controversy surrounding the India House murals, the absence of modern Indian artists from a proposed "Central Museum of Asiatic Art in London" then also being discussed by the India Society was also heavily criticized. The scope of the BFAC exhibition became caught up in the swelling outrage and well after the exhibition’s conclusion

newspaper articles continued to fulminate against the deficiency of the exhibition in reckoning with modern Indian art.⁴⁶ Members of the India Society who had played a role in the BFAC exhibition were accused in the press of inscribing a narrative privileging artists from Bengal as representing the continuance of tradition in modern India,⁴⁷ and foolishly overlooking Bombay.⁴⁸ Mitter has pointed out that a truce would finally be achieved only when the India Society organized the large exhibition *Modern Indian Art* at the new Burlington Galleries in 1934, when a comprehensive survey of all prevailing art movements in India would be attempted, with Gladstone Solomon as part of the organizing committee championing the cause of the Bombay school.

Conclusion and Aftermath

A closer examination of the BFAC exhibition reveals that it in fact had greater significance than has been fully appreciated. Its relative obscurity may stem from a number of reasons: that it was a temporary loan exhibition and many works were subsequently dispersed and lodged in different public or still-private collections; that the unillustrated catalogue had a limited print run aimed mostly towards the members and lenders; that there wasn't any (known) photography of the exhibition; and that it was organized by and held in a private club, which would itself close in 1951.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it is undeniable that it was an early attempt to present the material range and historical span of Indian art in an exhibitionary format. In spite of its somewhat delimited format, the exhibition ended up being part of a discourse on the visibility of modern Indian art, which did have a knock-on effect on subsequent exhibitions. While the display seems to have presented work as a visual cornucopia aimed at suggesting a more general sense of cultural richness, the catalogue presented the narrative arcs for Indian painting and sculpture with deep historic roots and aesthetic highlights—the masterpieces that were its focus—and in so doing demonstrated the maturity of a canonical framework. Indeed, the BFAC exhibition highlighted the urgent need for a more substantial exhibitionary reckoning with the long history and foundational character of Indian art. It laid out the possibility of what could be articulated on a more extensive scale and pointed to the potential realization of such an exhibition at the Royal Academy. Finally, the BFAC exhibition reflected the prevailing biases of art-historical writing and collecting practices of the preceding two decades, in which there was a predisposition towards historical works and a discomfiture with considering the then contemporary Indian practice as part of that continuum, with the Bengal school being the only *occasional* exception. It was this omission that elicited critique from living artists who sought to be recognized as the latest exponents with connections to a deep tradition of Indian art. This criticism doubtless confirmed the India Society's decision not just to mount a

dedicated exhibition to modern Indian art in 1934, but also made inevitable the inclusion of artists from the twentieth century when the much-anticipated survey exhibition, *Art of India and Pakistan*, finally took place at the Royal Academy in 1947.

While the 1947 exhibition had sixty-eight pieces under a section titled “Modern Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture”, it would be a motley selection, ranging from a mix of paintings from the Bengal and Bombay schools, with a few works by Amrita Sher-Gil, to a random figuring of the new modernists and progressives.⁵⁰ Overall, the visual narrative was disjointed, and unlike the pre-modern works, which carried explanatory notes in the catalogue entries, the modern works were limited to caption details alone, and in a manner reminiscent of Laurence Binyon’s elision of the subject in his 1931 essay on Indian painting, were not addressed in Basil Grey’s catalogue text either. By the 1940s, the rivalries between the Bengal and Bombay schools that had dominated the theatre of Indian art in the 1920s and 1930s had cooled in vitriol, and were overtaken by the work of new generation of artists with different agendas. When the 1947 Burlington House exhibition travelled to Delhi and there became a foundation for the National Museum, the appendage of the modern was dispensed with altogether. As Tapati Guha-Thakurta notes on the matter of its exclusion,

Such an absence was easily naturalized in the event (as it is even in my discussion), as attention focused predominantly on celebrated notions of history and heritage that halted the narrative of India’s achievements well before the modern age. So at the scene of the 1948 exhibition in New Delhi, viewers found themselves fully in the grip of an art historical past that effectively dislodged the present in staking its singular civilizational claims over the nation’s art.⁵¹

The modern would find a home elsewhere, in a separate but dedicated institution soon thereafter. Looking back, therefore, at the 1931 exhibition in the light of its much larger and better-known successor one can discern how it was an important precursor that established certain conceptual contours and cultural priorities for a reckoning with a survey of Indian art, while at the same time surfacing points of tension—in particular the evolving place of the modern, in relation to the art of the past—that arise when contending with art-historical canons in an exhibitionary space.

Footnotes

- 1 Kavita Singh, “The Museum Is National”, *India International Centre Quarterly* 29, no. 3/4 (2002): 176–196.
- 2 Burlington Fine Arts Club Rules and Regulations, I, 1866, NAL archives, 200.b.110.

- 3 The BFAC was in existence until 1951 and active until 1940. During that time, they mounted over 110 formal exhibitions, with numerous other informal ones. For further information on the history of the BFAC see Stacey J. Pierson, *Private Collecting, Exhibitions, and the Shaping of Art History in London: The Burlington Fine Arts Club* (London: Routledge, 2017).
- 4 An early exhibition of the portraits and drawings of D.G. Rossetti attracted over 12,000 visitors, excluding members of the club. Although the Rossetti exhibition took place during the heyday of the club in the decades preceding the First World War, nevertheless, the Egyptian exhibition of 1921, organized in collaboration with the Egypt Exploration Society, also attracted figures of about 4,000 visitors.
- 5 The India Society was founded in 1910 by a number of private individuals in London in order to draw attention to the art traditions of India. Founding members included E.B. Havell and William Rothenstein, and would go on to include members in South Asia and America, including Rabindranath Tagore and Ananda Coomaraswamy. The society also brought out its own journal, *Indian Art and Letters* from 1925.
- 6 "The committee should add to their number someone who would lend weight to any applications made to or through the India Office." *Burlington Fine Arts Club: General Committee Minute Books, Vol: 1930-1951*, National Art Library (Great Britain). MSL/1952/1317-1322. (not paginated) Entry: July 1st, 1930. "Mr. Chester Beatty regrets that he is unable to join the Committee of the Art of India which had co-opted the High Commissioner for India the Marquess of Zetland and the Earl of Lytton". *Burlington Fine Arts Club: General Committee Minute Books, Vol: 1930-1951*. Entry: October 7th, 1930.
- 7 Archibald G.B. Russell, "Prefatory Note", *Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Art of India* (London: Privately printed for the Burlington Fine Arts Club, 1931), 7.
- 8 Russell, "Prefatory Note", 8.
- 9 "[T]he two "fine art" genres constituted here for India—sculpture and painting—are artificial categories. Both are literally composed of shards wrenched out of other, embedding, cultural phenomena that are crucial to their understanding or appreciation. Instead of viewing the objects *in situ*, Indian art history presents the architectural fragment as sculpture, and the detached manuscript folio as painting, in an approximation of a western model of these arts. For the nationalist art historians who fought for the entry of Indian artefacts into the enclave of fine arts, the strategy seems to have been the positing of an Indian tradition equivalent to the western." Shivaji K. Panikkar, Parul D. Mukherji, and Deeptha Achar (eds), *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art: (essays Presented in Honour of Prof. Ratan Parimoo)* (New Delhi: D.K. printworld, 2003), 352.
- 10 Laurence Binyon, "Indian Painting", *Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Art of India*, 9.
- 11 Binyon, "Indian Painting", 10.
- 12 Binyon's book co-authored with Thomas Arnold, *The Court Painters of the Grand Moguls* (1921) was often referenced through the BFAC exhibition catalogue.
- 13 "It is probable that the sight of Persian miniatures in the possession of their patrons stimulated Rajput painters and moved them to cast off the stiff conventions and formal gestures of tradition." Binyon, "Indian Painting", 12.
- 14 "The typical drawing of the Rajput school, however, owes nothing essential to Persian example; at the same time it has quite different aims from the typical Mogul painting." Binyon, "Indian Painting", 12.
- 15 "The Rajput painters, on the other hand, are inspired rather by emotional themes. They are interested in the things in life and nature which kindle emotion, and in the pictorial expression of that emotion." Binyon, "Indian Painting", 12.
- 16 "The Kangra paintings and drawings have a delightful freshness and joyous grace. In the later work of this school the sweetness cloyes. The designs become enervated by continual repetition. But at their best the Kangra drawings have a special kind of feminine charm, unmatched elsewhere in art." Binyon, "Indian Painting", 13.
- 17 Kenneth de Burgh Codrington, "Indian Sculpture", *Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Art of India, Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Art of India* (London: Privately printed for the Burlington Fine Arts Club, 1931), 15.
- 18 Codrington, "Indian Sculpture", 17-18.
- 19 Codrington, "Indian Sculpture", 15.
- 20 In his review for the *Burlington Magazine*, Kenneth de Burgh Codrington took issue with Kramrisch's approach on several counts, from her reliance on archaeology to trace the development of form, her choice of examples, to her grounding her interpretations in Indian philosophy as the basis for an aesthetics that was distinct from that of the West. He could not accept such a premise, as is evident in the exasperated tone of his review where he takes issue with Kramrisch's emphasis on abstract ideas and philosophy. Codrington further suggested that methodologically, Kramrisch's metaphysical framework could not contribute to art history: "It may be pointed out, both with regard to such a philosophy and western modernism, that there is a tendency on the part of such critics to substitute a rather indefinite appreciation of the artist's state of mind, for a definite appreciation of the works of art in question. It is, after all, the business of art-criticism to discuss works of art." See Kenneth de Burgh Codrington, "Review of: Indian Sculpture by St. Kramrisch", *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 64, no. 375 (1 June 1934), 292.
- 21 Furthermore, Codrington who was responsible for the organization of the Burlington House Exhibition of 1947 chose to only exhibit three works from the Kramrisch collection at that later exhibition.
- 22 These were primarily works from the Johnson collection housed in the British Library.
- 23 Hyder Abbas, "'We Want Quality and Condition' The Formation of Chester Beatty's South Asian Manuscripts and Miniatures Collection", in Allysa B. Peyton and Katherine A. Paul (eds), *Arts of South Asia: Cultures of Collecting* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2019), 113.

- 24 *History of a Thousand Years* was written for the Mughal Emperor Akbar in circa 1582–1588 and was likely illustrated just after circa 1588.
- 25 In 1930, Ajit Ghose had travelled to America, where he had visited the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Freer Gallery in Washington DC. He had been sufficiently impressed with the state of museums in America, that he was moved to speak on “The Need for Museums of Art in India” at the All India Oriental Conference in Patna in December 1930, and subsequently published the lecture in special issue of the journal *Roopa Lekha*. By 1931, however, Ghose changed his mind, and that same year he offered four other folios to John Ellerton Lodge, director of the Freer Gallery of Art.
- 26 In the following decades, other folios would enter museum and private collections in India and abroad including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The San Diego Museum of Art and also the National Museum in Delhi.
- 27 Pierson, *Private Collecting, Exhibitions, and the Shaping of Art History in London*, 22.
- 28 Pierson, *Private Collecting, Exhibitions, and the Shaping of Art History in London*, 26.
- 29 “Editorial: The Burlington Fine Arts Club”, *The Burlington Magazine* 94, no. 589 (April 1952), 97–99.
- 30 BFAC Minute Book entries from May 1931, shortly after the Royal Academy exhibition had concluded, note the making of a claim to the Persian Art Committee for damages to cases loaned to them, and the subsequent remittance received for the same. *Burlington Fine Arts Club: General Committee Minute Books, Vol: 1930–1951*, Entries: 5 May 1931 and 28 May 1931.
- 31 Barry D. Wood, “‘A Great Symphony of Pure Form’: The 1931 International Exhibition of Persian Art and Its Influence”, *Ars Orientalis* 30, Exhibiting the Middle East: Collections and Perceptions of Islamic Art (2000), 116.
- 32 Pierson, *Private Collecting, Exhibitions, and the Shaping of Art History in London*, 150.
- 33 “During the course of the Exhibition the Committee arranged for Mr. Laurence Binyon to lecture on Indian Painting and Mr. K de B Codrington to lecture on Indian Sculpture and they regret that more members did not avail themselves of the opportunity to attend two such excellent lectures.” *Burlington Fine Arts Club: general meeting minute books, 1866 Apr. 27–1951 Feb. 7*. by Burlington Fine Arts Club, National Art Library (Great Britain). MSL/1952/1323-1324. (not paginated) Entry: 31 May 1932.
- 34 Trenchard Cox “A Letter from London”, *Parnassus* 3, no. 6 (October 1931): 12–14.
- 35 “Considerable interest has been aroused in London artistic circles by the reference made by Sir Samuel Hoare in his speech to the Asia Society on July 7 to project the holding of the Indian Art Exhibition at Burlington House on the lines of those which already successfully represent the art of Persia, Italy and other countries ... Shortly after the closing of the Persian exhibition, the India Society approached the Royal Academy on this matter and found that the authorities showed interest and were ready to examine the possibilities of organizing a retrospective exhibition of Indian Art under their auspices...” from “Indian Art Exhibition at Burlington House: Encouraging Replies from India”, *The Times of India* (1861–current), 23 July 1932; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Times of India*, 4.
- 36 Pierson, *Private Collecting, Exhibitions, and the Shaping of Art History in London*, 29.
- 37 “A comprehensive survey of Indian culture, if on grounds of space alone, could not be attempted ... Selection was further limited by the fact that the artistic riches of the country are still largely unexplored. The question of size and weight, especially in the case of sculpture, was also a determining factor.” See Russell, “Prefatory Note”, 8.
- 38 “Of special interest are the objects in cases, lent by the Government of India, which were found at Mohenjodaro and Harappa, in the valley of the Indus. They are of uncertain date—1500 b.c. has been suggested—and represent a new type of art. Included among them are a number of seals in steatite, most beautifully carved intaglio with figures of men and animals and inscriptions in an unknown language, and two male heads (Nos. 104 and 105) of a facial type that cannot be related to anything else in Indian art.” See “Art Exhibitions: The Art of India”, *The Times* (London, England), Friday, 15 May 1931; 14. “The loans from the Museum and Collections controlled by the Government of India include a series of the objects recently excavated in the Indus Valley, which stand in close relationship with the Sumerian culture and date from the 4th millennium b.c. The discovery of these objects opened a new chapter in the history of Indian art and their importance can scarcely be exaggerated. None of them have previously been seen outside India. The opportunity of studying them will accordingly be welcomed by students and lovers of art.” See “The Art of India: Burlington Arts Club Exhibition”, *The Times of India* (1861–current); April 10, 1931; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Times of India*, 5.
- 39 The 31 July issue of the journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) noted: “By invitation of the Burlington Fine Arts Club a Special Meeting was held on 9th June to view the exhibition of Indian Art at their house in Savile Row. Our Fellow, Mr. Codrington, who had been entrusted with a large share of the organizing of the exhibition, was present to answer questions and help in the discussion of knotty points, and the meeting proved to be not only very pleasant but also of much value to those interested in the art of India and, especially, its archaeology. The Indian Government had generously lent a considerable number of objects from the famous excavations of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, including examples of all the most significant of them, the privilege of examining which, comfortably and at leisure, was much appreciated.” See “Loan Exhibition of Indian Art”, *Man* 31 (July 1931) Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 136.
- 40 “The civilization of which they are the outcome is one of which until lately the existence had hardly been suspected, and it is likely that we are still only upon the threshold of discovery in this direction. A new light may well be shed upon the history of art which may prove to have an influence extending even to the Mediterranean.” Russell, “Prefatory Note”, 8.
- 41 One necklace (Cat. 33) was the focus of a recent BBC podcast “The Necklace That Divided Two Nations” as part of its “Museum of Lost Objects” programme <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p058gg29>.

- 42 See especially "Contesting Nationalism: The New Delhi and India House Murals", in Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).
- 43 "Permission was given to the India Society to meet in the Club gallery on Wednesday, May 13th at 5 o'clock" – *Burlington Fine Arts Club: General Committee Minute Books, Vol: 1930-1951*, Entry: 5th of May 1931.
- 44 And continuing, "But even the long-suffering Bengal reader, who with some little acquaintance with the methods of the India Society expects nothing for Bombay from that quarter, will be induced to boggle at this rehash of old masters and archaeology—even though Sir William Rothenstein's Moghul paintings, which must now be getting a little shop-soiled, are to be once again paraded before the wondering British public, and though Calcutta connoisseurs, Dr. Stella Kramrisch, and Mr. Ajit Ghose, are generously reinforcing Bengal in London." See "The India Society Again", *The Times of India (1861-current)*; 1 April, 5.
- 45 "As regards the exhibition of Indian art which has been organised by the Burlington Fine Arts Club, to which one of the articles refers, we may point out that the India Society has no connection with this exhibition." Francis Younghusband, "The India Society: No Lack of Interest in Bombay School", *The Times of India (1861-current)*, 20 May 1931, 8.
- 46 The attacks continued, and by October that year, the Bombay Society still seemed to be smarting, sarcastically noting as yet another article in *The Times of India* that the Society was "innocent of the recent Exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club of 'The Art of India'—with the Indian artists left out!" "The Great Illusion", *The Times of India (1861-current)*; 2 October 1931, 6.
- 47 Finally in response to an exhibition of Indian art at the British Museum, largely drawn from the museum's own collections, later that year, the attacks became personal once more, "This is the second Exhibition of Indian Art in London this year. Its predecessor was the notorious 'Art of India' Exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club; and it is said that the main credit for both is due to Mr. Lawrence Binyon ... Certainly one seems to detect the Binyon touch in some of the Press descriptions of this exhibition. 'There are also fine examples of stone reliefs from Gandhara and statues of the Mathura school, which with Mukul Bey's [Dey's] excellent copies of the magnificent paintings in the Bagh and Ayanta [Ajanta?] caves, illustrate the creative power and extraordinary vitality of the Hellenistic formula at the service of Buddhist inspiration in the course of the first few centuries A.D.' So the latest criticism brackets Ajanta Painting with Gandhara Sculpture, and both with the Hellenistic formula! But let not the Havellites in our midst despair. The inevitable consolation prize still goes to Bengal of course—last but by no means least in the series of India's historic schools of painting. We are told that 'New life began to quicken Indian tradition, and the Schools of Rajputana, Kangra, Himalaya and those allied with them produced Art purely Indian in feeling, lyrical in mood, idyllic in theme, exquisite in colour, fluid in line, and musical in motive.' And what is known as the Calcutta School carries on the old tradition thus revived. So 'the wheel has come full circle' once again as it always does. But it really seems a pity that when the Calcutta School can so easily annex Rajputana and the Himalayas, it should have omitted to exhibit Bombay among its captives in the London Press." See "Indian Art for the R.T.C.", *The Times of India*, 28 October 1931.
- 48 Bombay artists were still smarting the following year when they chided Codrington for not having engaged with contemporary artists on his visit to Bombay, noting: "But we may assure Mr. Codrington, with an affability equal to his own, that his ignoring the most important movement in art which the British Empire has seen since the Pre-Raphaelite movement in England when he was in India and the opportunity lay before him, was a faux pas which his reply entirely fails to justify." See "Mr. Codrington's Reply", *The Times of India*, Oct 11, 1932".
- 49 "At a special general meeting of the Burlington Fine Arts Club, held at the National Gallery on February 7, 1951, under the Chairmanship of Lord Ilchester, it was reluctantly decided that the Club must go into voluntary liquidation." "Editorial: The Burlington Fine Arts Club", *The Burlington Magazine* 94, no. 589 (April 1952), 97-99.
- 50 Zainul Abedin, K.H. Ara, Nandalal Bose, N.S. Bendre, Dhanraj Bhagat, M.A. Chughtai, K.K. Hebbar, S.H. Raza, Jamini Roy, D.P. Roy Chowdhury, Amrita Shergil, Abanindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore, and Rabindranath Tagore, see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 343.
- 51 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 176.

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Researching Exhibitions of South Asian Women Artists in Britain in the 1980s

Alice Correia

Abstract

This paper narrates the author's research methodologies and findings relating to her ongoing project, *Articulating British Asian Art Histories*. With a specific focus on four exhibitions of South Asian women artists during the 1980s and early 1990s, it provides an overview of her primary and secondary research, and presents archival material, which cumulatively gives a richer understanding of the aesthetic and political aims of exhibitors, and the contexts in which they were working. Exhibitions of exclusively women artists of South Asian heritage were rare during this period, but close visual analysis of individual exhibitions and artworks reveals an active engagement with the specificities of the female, British-Asian experience.

This article is accompanied by two downloadable resources: a complete copy of the *Numaish* exhibition catalogue (Fig. 15) and a copy of the exhibition pamphlet for *Jagrati* (Fig. 22).

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Introduction

In 2014, I initiated a large-scale research project titled *Articulating British Asian Art Histories*. The aim of the project was to undertake new primary and secondary research into the contributions made by South Asian diaspora artists to British art during the 1980s and 1990s. In collating and organising archival information, conducting studio visits and artist interviews, and undertaking close visual analysis of individual artworks, my objective was to gain a richer understanding of the aesthetic and political aims of South Asian diaspora artists, and the contexts in which they were working. Although the so-called “Black Arts Movement” has increasingly become an area of art-historical research in Britain, I identified an urgent need for the specific analysis of South Asian diaspora artists. Although deeply imbricated within counter-narratives of mainstream British art, and making important contributions to intellectual conceptions of Black Art, the activities of artists of South Asian heritage have largely remained on the fringes of those histories.

Superficially, perhaps, the presence of South Asian artists within narratives of Black British art histories appears secure. After all, Rasheed Araeen’s work as an artist, curator, and scholar has arguably shaped this emergent field of enquiry, and his 1989 exhibition, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* and its attendant catalogue, remain for many scholars, myself included, an important point of departure when studying diaspora artists in Britain.¹ Of the twenty-four artists included in the exhibition, ten were of South Asian origin, including Araeen himself.² But in using *The Other Story* as a launch for my research, its shortcomings quickly became apparent. Of the South Asian artists included, all were men, and at the time of the exhibition, all were aged forty or above. My project sought to recover from the archive the stories of a younger generation of artists, born and/or raised in Britain, who came to prominence during the 1980s. During this period, in what has become known as the “critical decade”, some young South Asian artists forged productive allegiances with artists from Britain’s African and Caribbean communities, producing work with specific anti-racist and anti-imperialist themes.³ While affiliations were fluid, the self-identification of artists including Chila Kumari Burman, Allan deSouza, and Shaheen Merali as “Black” has positioned them and their work within a specific art-historical discourse set against the backdrop of discriminatory police practices and civic unrest. But many artists later found that although there was benefit in creating cross-cultural political allegiances under the sign of Blackness, as Stuart Hall noted, such an essentialised identification also enacted silences; as a collective identifier, Black “had a certain way of silencing the very specific experiences of Asian people”.⁴

In 2015, while rummaging in the Panchayat archive, then housed at the University of Westminster, I came across Parita Trivedi's 1984 essay, "To Deny Our Fullness: Asian Women in the Making of History", published in *Feminist Review*, in which she discussed the representation and status of Asian women, both historically in colonial India, and in contemporary post-colonial Britain. In her opening paragraph, she challenged her readers to "conjure up a picture of an Asian woman". She asked: "Have the words 'passive, submissive', been part of your portrayal?"⁵ Reading Trivedi's essay, I was encouraged to think deeply about the representation of South Asian women in Britain, and how a generation of female artists were actively seeking to challenge the stereotype of Asian womanhood she described, both in what they produced and in how they exhibited their work. Although I was interested in the work of female artists, henceforth my project took on a more determined dimension: to explore how South Asian women artists were critically enacting and creating new self-representations, challenging stereotypes and articulating what being British, Asian, and female in the 1980s, meant. This paper presents my research methodologies and findings relating to exhibitions of South Asian women artists in the 1980s, and the ways in which artists sought to address the silences identified by Hall through their active engagement with the specificities of the female British-Asian experience.

Although the work of Sutapa Biswas, Zarina Bhimji, and Chila Kumari Burman was familiar to me from my postgraduate studies, it was evident from my initial literature review that the 1980s saw a generation of young South Asian female artists graduate from art colleges across the UK. Names including Nilofar Akmut, Nina Edge, Perminder Kaur, Gurmindar Sikand, and Shanti Thomas came into view. However, while finding the names of artists was relatively easy, locating examples of their work or lengthy critical analysis was more difficult. Arguably, my project inadvertently became one of advocacy; of re-orientating historiographies of the 'Other' in British art away from the narrative constructed by Araeen towards a messier assemblage. In undertaking what has been described as "sincere historiography", my argument for inclusion—that female artists of South Asian origin should, indeed must, be included in histories of British art—may seem simplistic, unambitious, or inarguable.⁶ But at a time when debates over who is included within British cultural identity are rife, the simple, albeit laborious, act of retrieval and recovery has become a politicised necessity; there are many in British public life who would question the value of contributions made to British culture by immigrant communities.⁷ While the impact of South Asian female artists on British culture in the 1980s may have been modest (and I make this characterisation on the basis that most artists considered below are not widely known, their work is not held in large quantities in major national collections, and they have not been recipients of large-scale exhibitions or subjects of scholarly publications), this does not

render their work unworthy of attention. It should also be said that this is an ongoing project and in presenting a historiography of exhibition histories, I also point to gaps and further questions. It is hoped that I am not only making certain histories visible—opening the archive up to further scrutiny—but also encouraging those with personal archives and memories of exhibitions and artistic activity to add to, correct, or amend this patchwork narrative. The arguably more radical or challenging praxis of reading artists and their artworks through different theoretical, philosophical, or analytical perspectives is the next stage of research.

The South Asian Diaspora in Britain during the 1970s

The generation of artists who came to prominence during the late 1970s and 1980s were either born in Britain, or arrived as small children. Their experience of being South Asian in Britain was thus shaped by the cultural context of the 1970s and the political and social disquiet that “coloured migration” stimulated.⁸ The end of the 1960s and early 1970s saw the arrival of what many in Britain regarded as alarming numbers of South Asian migrants, particularly from East Africa; the Kenyan, and then Ugandan crisis of 1968 and 1972 respectively, saw thousands of displaced people of South Asian descent settle in Britain.⁹ For many on the political right, these people were regarded as a homogenous threat, but as Avtar Brah reminds us, the term ‘South Asian’ is a label used to categorise a heterogeneous group of people.¹⁰ Although nominally used to describe people originating from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, due to the legacies of British colonialism, it also includes those born in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and elsewhere. Britain’s South Asian community thus includes people from different social classes, religions, and castes, who consequently have different socio-economic and political agency.

Nonetheless, a common experience of South Asian people in Britain during the 1970s was that of racism, both physical and epistemic. In his landmark text of 1981, “From Resistance to Rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean Struggles in Britain”, Ambalavaner Sivanandan charted the racism encountered by Black and Asian migrants since the 1950s and their resistance to it.¹¹ The political climate that followed Enoch Powell’s 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech, in which he foretold of a Britain overrun with Black immigrants, led to the rise of the National Front as a menacing presence on the streets of British cities, and white youths regularly terrorised Asian communities.¹² The *Observer* noted in April 1970, “any Asian careless enough to be walking the streets alone at night is a fool”, and racially motivated violence, commonly known as “Paki-bashing”, became regular occurrences.¹³ Police response to attacks on South Asian victims was characterised by an unwillingness to afford protection; delays and

inadequate investigations; treating the victim as the aggressor; and subjecting victims to continued harassment and persecution.¹⁴ Kenneth Leech records that in 1976, the Anti-Racist Committee of Asians in East London was established to “draw attention to the inadequacy of the protection offered to Asian people by the police and authorities”.¹⁵ By the late 1970s and early 1980s, “the political activism of Asian young people hit the headlines as they adopted a highly visible and militant stance against racial oppression”.¹⁶ Responding to the murder of Altab Ali in Whitechapel, East London, an area home to a large Bengali community, on 14 May 1978, 7,000 people marched behind his coffin from Brick Lane to Downing Street. In response on 11 June, approximately 150 white youths “rampaged through Brick Lane shouting ‘Kill the black bastards’, smashing windows of Bengali shops”.¹⁷ On 23 April 1979, the National Front held a pre-election rally at Southall Town Hall, which resulted in the police brutally quashing a peaceful counter-demonstration; eyewitnesses reported police vans driving into crowds; nearly 700 people were arrested; and Blair Peach, a white member of the Anti-Nazi League, was killed by riot police.¹⁸

In addition to facing discrimination and intimidation by British authorities, South Asian women (like Asian men) suffered racism and forms of humiliation in the workplace. In 1976–1977, a strike at the Grunwick film processing plant in north London, ostensibly about the right to trade union recognition, was led by Jayaben Desai, and was undertaken by the mainly female Asian workforce unwilling to accept poor pay and degrading treatment by the white managers and owners.¹⁹ The Grunwick strike lasted for fourteen months and the striking women were subject to particular forms of racial and sexual provocation as factory management sought to use their preconceived understanding of Asian patriarchy as a mode of control, arguing that those on the picket line brought shame on their families. The demonstration of South Asian female agency at Grunwick, as at the earlier Imperial Typewriters strike in Leicester, in 1974, challenged the widespread short-sightedness in Britain that failed to recognise women’s active participation in the vocal fight against workplace injustice because of racial and gender biases.²⁰

South Asian women were also engaging in social protest against domestic and sexual violence, and challenged racist practices within housing and social welfare provision. During the late 1970s, many Asian women joined forces with Black women from the African and Caribbean diaspora “in an expression of solidarity against the shared experience of anti-black racism”.²¹ Groups such as the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), established in 1978, and Southall Black Sisters, established in 1979, addressed the specific needs of Black and Asian women, and particularly focused on achieving justice for victims of domestic abuse,

forced marriage, and honour-based violence.²² At the end of the 1970s, gender-based violence and racial discrimination perpetrated against South Asian women hit the headlines. On 1 February 1979, the *Guardian* newspaper published a story on its front page, reporting that a few weeks earlier, on 24 January, a thirty-five-year-old Indian woman arriving at Heathrow had been subjected to an internal medical examination, to determine whether or not she had previously had children. On the basis of this information, it was believed possible to ascertain whether or not she was still a virgin. The outcome of this so-called virginity test would then determine the outcome of her application to enter the UK in order to marry her fiancé.²³ Female South Asian migrants were regarded with particular mistrust by British immigration officers who believed that fiancées seeking entry to Britain to participate in arranged marriages sought to join their prospective husbands fraudulently—in order to obtain a British passport, rather than for love. Based on an assumption that South Asian women did not engage in pre-marital sex, border officials controversially inflicted ‘virginity tests’ on women and despite government proclamations that the case reported in the *Guardian* was unique, it is known that these invasive procedures regularly took place, whether in the UK, or prior to the women’s departure from the subcontinent.²⁴ In 1980, Southall Black Sisters were at the forefront of the campaign against virginity testing.²⁵

An Overview of South Asian Artists in Britain

South Asian artists had been active in Britain throughout the twentieth century, from Mukul Dey to Anwar Jalal Shemza, who studied at the Slade School of Art in the 1920s and 1950s respectively. During the 1950s, Shemza, Francis Newton Souza, and Avinash Chandra exhibited with considerable success at Gallery One, London, run by Victor Musgrove. The Indian Painters Collective UK, whose members included Gajanan Baghwat and Lancelot Ribeiro, was formed in 1963, and although short-lived, it provided the template for the later organisation, Indian Artists UK, known as IAUK. Established in 1976, IAUK’s founding members were Balraj Khanna, Yashwant Mali, Lancelot Ribeiro, and Ibrahim Wagh; the organisation sought to support its members in their artistic careers, not only through exhibition opportunities, but also by working collectively to raise awareness of Indian arts and culture in the UK.²⁶ Despite these collective activities, given the range of thematic concerns and aesthetic preferences evident in their work, it is clear that South Asian artists in Britain cannot be classified as a group stylistically, but rather, their experiences as artists of colour, working within the particular socio-political climate in Britain, provided points of commonality. In the 1970s, while artists such as Amal Ghosh and Prafulla Mohanti were principally engaged with aesthetic concerns, centred around

the modernist doctrines of colour, form, and spirituality, at around the same time, Rasheed Araeen's work took a distinctively politicised turn to performance and photography.

No study of British Asian art can omit the influential work of Rasheed Araeen. As already noted, as a scholar and curator, he is a ubiquitous presence in narratives of Black British art history, and significantly, his artistic practice has recently been subject to renewed critical analysis.²⁷ In 1975, Araeen staged his first one-person exhibition at the Artists for Democracy space on Whitfield Street, London. Established by David Medalla, the collective Artists for Democracy attempted to claim political agency in the field of art, and Araeen's exhibition included *For Oluwale* (1971–1973, 1975), a conceptual text and image work that addressed the death of Nigerian migrant, David Oluwale, in Leeds and the subsequent investigation into the Leeds police force.²⁸ On 31 July 1977, in response to the prolonged attacks on the South Asian community in east London, Araeen showcased what was described as “a live event with slides”.²⁹ His multimedia performance, *Paki Bastard (Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person)*, saw Araeen perform a number of menial tasks such as sweeping the floor, and then blindfolding himself, and sitting mute in front of a sequenced slide show which projected images of South Asian cafés and urban street scenes in London's East End, alongside images of mounted police, anti-fascist marches, the picketers at the Grunwick strike, and newspaper clippings reporting violence against South Asian people in London. The soundtrack included excerpts from Handel's *Messiah* which were followed by male voices aggressively chanting “Paki, Paki, Go Home”. The work sought to enact the lived experience of South Asian people in Britain, as being under constant intimidation and threat. Araeen re-used some of his photographs featured in *Paki Bastard (Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person)* in the cruciform work, *Tableau Noir* (1987). A mural of an exoticised reclining Asian woman, photographed in a Bangladeshi restaurant in Brick Lane, is surrounded by black and white images of mounted riot police protecting a meeting of National Front members at Conway Hall, London, in 1973. As Zoe Sutherland, notes, “That the police gave little protection to South Asian people—including many Bangladeshis who were brutally, and sometimes fatally, attacked by the National Front—makes this configuration particularly pointed”.³⁰

Rasheed Araeen's curatorial intervention, *The Other Story*, provided an unprecedented, and personal, overview of post-war modernist practice, and during my postgraduate studies, the exhibition's catalogue introduced me to the work of Chandra and Souza, among others. Such is the ubiquity and importance of *The Other Story* in the story of Black British art history, that its legacies can be found in nearly every publication and exhibition on the subject, and it is always included in bibliographies and timelines. Indeed, Hammad Nasar has argued that Tate Britain's 2012 exhibition *Migrations*:

Journeys into British Art “can be read as a partial restaging of *The Other Story*”.³¹ *Migrations* included not just a number of the same artists featured in Araeen’s exhibition, but also a number of the same artworks. Although Nasar contends that *Migrations* was not a conscious re-staging of *The Other Story*, its repetitions of the 1989 show raise some important questions: if *The Other Story* is being used as a curatorial template, what happens to the many significant artists who were not included, or who declined to take part? Are curators and scholars looking beyond *The Other Story* in their research of Black and Asian artists? Or does Araeen’s catalogue, and the increasing availability of archival material relating to the show, facilitate lazy curating? My project aimed to go beyond the parameters of *The Other Story*, and investigate those not included in Araeen’s exhibition. Having been prompted to consider the activities of women artists, it was immediately clear that *The Other Story* would be of little use. Despite its undeniable importance in constructing a narrative of Black British art history, one of the criticisms levelled at the exhibition was its noticeable lack of female, and in particular, South Asian female artists. Rita Keegan’s assessment of *The Other Story* rang in my ears: “No Asian women were included”.³²

My literature review and archival research, discussed below, evinced that during the 1980s a generation of young artists of South Asian origin emerged and produced (politically) engaging work. But despite a rich and diverse history of art production in Britain, to date, this story has not been fully recounted. The only book specifically examining the work of British Asian artists that I have identified is *Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British Art by Artists of South Asian Descent* (2001).³³ This publication was belatedly produced to accompany the South Asian Contemporary Visual Arts Festival, organised by Juginder Lamba, and staged across the West Midlands in 1993. Although a vital resource, examining the work of two generations of artists, with excellent chapters on female artists including Nina Edge and Bhajan Hunjan, *Beyond Frontiers* has had a limited circulation. Other published sources, including *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in Britain* (2005), remain important sources for illustrations and information about the activities of British-born and diaspora artists during the 1980s and early 1990s.³⁴ In 2006, John Holt and Laura Turney published their essay “The Singular Journey: South Asian Visual Art in Britain”.³⁵ Although much of this essay is faithful to the narrative propounded by Araeen, in their discussion of the 1990s and early 2000s, the authors make the important point that “much of the most innovative work in raising the profile of South Asian art has occurred in the North West” and make particular reference to the organisation Shisha, and the Asia Triennial Manchester.³⁶ Eddie Chambers’ book *Black Artists in British Art: A History since the 1950s* (2014) was published as I started my project and provides a forensic chronology of which

artists were active and where they exhibited, but relatively little discussion is given to visual analysis of individual artworks or the reception exhibitions received.³⁷

Methodologies

Having decided to undertake a project specifically investigating South Asian diaspora artists, I visited Lubaina Himid's *Making Histories Visible* archive at the University of Central Lancaster, in Preston. I discussed with her my interest in the position of South Asian artists within the existing narratives of the British Black Arts Movement of the 1980s and consulted her archives. She alerted me to the work of Saleem Arif and Shanti Panchal, with whom she exhibited during the 1980s, but two things struck me during that visit. The first was the reproduction of Nina Edge's mixed media work, *Snakes and Ladders* (1988) on the cover of Maud Sulter's book *Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity*; and the second was a catalogue for a small exhibition called *Keepin' it Together* staged at the Pavilion, Leeds, 1992-1993, and curated by Chila Burman.³⁸ Here were two examples of South Asian women specifically engaging with the politics of feminism, and I was enthused that I was on the right track.

My first task was to gauge the extent to which there was significant activity by female South Asian artists within a broader and collaborative Black Arts Movement during the 1980s. I started my project by compiling lists of relevant exhibitions and a bibliography of related catalogues. To this end, the timeline of exhibitions and events, and the bibliography included in *Shades of Black* was invaluable. The online catalogues of the Stuart Hall Library, Iniva, and the Tate Library and Archive were very useful for undertaking keyword searches and generating reading lists of materials that I was able to consult during several visits. My purchase of *Recordings: A Select Bibliography of Contemporary African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian British Art*, published by Iniva, was a game-changer.³⁹ This publication catalogues the African-Caribbean, Asian & African Art in Britain Archive, held at Chelsea College of Arts, and provides bibliographies for individual artists and exhibitions. With this resource, I was able to identify not only artists, and when and where they exhibited, but also reviews and other published materials. These preparatory lists were invaluable while undertaking archival and library visits.

The Stuart Hall Library at Iniva and the archive held at Chelsea were well-known collections, but during internet searches, I identified a number of other archival resources. The digitised African and Asian Visual Artists Archive, and the South Asian Diaspora Literature and Arts Archive, both available through the Visual Arts Data Service (vads.ac.uk), were very useful

for images of digitised ephemera such as exhibition pamphlets and press releases, and in some cases, also provided images of individual artworks. The University of Brunel special collections held significant materials relating to South Asian artists in Britain, although on consultation, it was discovered that much of this material related to male artists active during the 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁰

By far the most significant collection was the Panchayat archive, then held at the University of Westminster, and now at Tate. Established in 1988, Panchayat was an arts education agency with the aim of distributing and archiving materials relating to South Asian artists in Britain. The founding members of Panchayat were all artists—Bhajan Hunjan, Shaheen Merali, Symrath Patti, Allan deSouza, and Shanti Thomas—who came together after conversations at the Slade School of Art to establish a collaborative and supportive network for South Asian arts practitioners in Britain. The collective's name, meaning "group of five", took inspiration from the systems of Indian village governance, where the Panchayat acted and still acts as a local council. During its period of existence, Panchayat had educational, curatorial, and archival objectives, and organised exhibitions including *Crossing Black Waters*, touring Leicester, Bradford, and Oldham during 1992. I spent days in the Panchayat archive at the University of Westminster. With my digital camera in hand, I photographed ephemera relating to individual artists and exhibitions, as well as catalogues, magazines, and journals. The archive had its own idiosyncratic filing system, but significantly had files on individual artists, as well as a slide collection of artworks. The problem with working in the Panchayat Archive was knowing when to stop: everything was potentially relevant. Initially, I focused my data-gathering on artists and exhibitions that I had already identified as being of interest; this is not to say that I curtailed my curiosity, and I certainly found material on artists and exhibitions completely new to me. Simultaneously, I worked my way through the British Library's holdings of *Bazaar: South Asian Arts Magazine* and *ArtRage*, both important arts and culture magazines championing Black and Asian artists in the later 1980s and early 1990s. These magazines, along with particular issues of *Spare Rib* (then recently digitised by the British Library), were invaluable for providing the broader context in which exhibitions were taking place. Established in 1983, the Mukti Collective published a magazine in five South Asian languages, and aimed to voice concerns of a broad female community, in a tone of defiant feminism.⁴¹ Although language barriers will be a problem, I look forward to studying copies of *Mukti*, held in the British Library.

Having amassed large amounts of archival material, the next problem was how to decide which exhibitions and artists to examine in detail. In this regard, my task was helped by the fact that there seemed to be only a few exhibitions of exclusively South Asian women artists. In 2016, I presented my

initial findings relating to four exhibitions of South Asian women artists at the conference, *Showing, Telling, Seeing: Exhibiting South Asia in Britain 1900–Now*, organised by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Asia Art Archive.⁴² At that event, I limited my presentation to consider exhibitions staged within a ten-year period. These were:

1. *Four Indian Women Artists*, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981–1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman;
2. *Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work*, People’s Gallery, 1986, organised by Bhajan Hunjan;
3. *Jagrati: An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists*, Greenwich Citizens Gallery, Woolwich, 1986, organised by Symrath Patti; and
4. *In Focus*, Horizon Gallery, London, 1990, coordinated by Georgina Grange.

The only other group exhibition of exclusively South Asian Women artists that I have been able to identify is *Aurat Shakti*, a community-based photographic show organised by Mumtaz Karimjee and Amina Patel in 1987.⁴³ However, to date, I have found very little archival material regarding this exhibition but will continue investigating it as my project progresses. Indeed, I am hopeful that other exhibitions may come to light, and there is certainly scope to extend my research into the 1990s; in 1991, *A Table of Four*, was shown at the Bluecoat in Liverpool and then toured, while *The Circular Dance* was displayed the Arnolfini in Bristol before also touring. Arguably, both exhibitions were directly informed by the earlier shows.

Having identified these four exhibitions, on closer inspection of the archival materials available, I discovered some common problems. Although not all of these issues related to each exhibition, they included: the absence of an exhibition catalogue, a press release, an exhibition list, or installation images; and the problem of the exhibition venue no longer existing. [Figure 1](#) is a visual representation of how widespread these barriers to research were when investigating my chosen exhibitions. Immediately apparent is the rarity of installation images and the ephemerality of the exhibition sites themselves.

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 1.

Common Barriers to Research, A table showing the common barriers to research encountered by the author when investigating four key exhibitions of work by South Asian women artists in Britain.

In the absence of what might be regarded as “official” documentation, press materials became particularly important. Each of the four exhibitions received coverage in the art or British Asian press; despite being of varying

length and detail, in the absence of catalogue lists itemising exhibited artworks, reviews naming and illustrating artworks are vital. However, although an image may be reproduced in relation to an exhibition preview or review, this is not a guarantee that that particular artwork was included in the show; as such these materials are used with caution.

Having identified the four exhibitions, I cross-referenced who exhibited in each ([Fig. 2](#)). Mapping the participation of individual artists in these shows was revealing: only Bhajan Hunjan exhibited in all four, and this being the case, I was curious as to why she and her work is so little known within wider narratives of (Black) British art. Simultaneously, this mapping also identified *Jagrati* as a comparatively large-scale exhibition, showing by far the largest number of artists. In simple numerical terms then, *Jagrati* was identified as being worthy of further study.

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 2.

Cross-Referencing Artists and Exhibitions, A table showing which artists exhibited in each of the author's four exhibitions chosen for study.

Informal meetings and interviews with artists active during the 1980s have been invaluable sources of information and encouragement; in some cases, personal recollections have been supplemented with access to private, and thus unofficial and uncatalogued archives. A colleague introduced me to Chila Burman via email. Following a period of correspondence, I visited her studio in East London, and we have had numerous meetings and discussions since. Bhajan Hunjan, who I contacted via her personal website, has been exceptionally generous and has provided access to her personal archives, actively shaping the narratives I give below. Following email correspondence with Nina Edge, I also visited her studio, during which I was able to consult her collection of books and ephemera. After sharing digital images of materials I'd found in the Panchayat archive relating to her work, Edge then went on to find additional materials relating to, and (excitingly) artworks exhibited in, *Jagrati*. In addition to Burman, Hunjan, and Edge, two of the artists who had exhibited in *Jagrati* were already personally known to me, while I contacted others via their personal or institutional websites, or social media profiles. Some artists have not responded to my enquiries. Some did not want, or found it difficult, to talk about that period of their life; others, while encouraging of the project, had little to add to the narrative I had pieced together from archival material. Of the seventeen artists listed in Figure 2, I have been in contact with ten; contacting the remaining artists is an ongoing project.

Exhibitions of South Asian Women Artists in Britain: Case Studies

What follows is an introduction to each of the four exhibitions, based on my archival research and conversations with artists. These introductions are a first step towards narrating a richer history of British Asian art history than is currently available, and as such, are incomplete. I have found more information on some exhibitions than others, and there remain gaps and uncertainties.

***Four Indian Women Artists*, Indian Artists UK Gallery, 1981-1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman**

The exhibition *Four Indian Women Artists* at the Indian Artists UK Gallery was organised by Bhajan Hunjan with Chila Burman, and included examples of their paintings and prints alongside wooden sculpture by Naomi Iny and ceramic works by Vinodini Ebdon (Fig. 3, Fig. 4, Fig. 5, Fig. 6, Fig. 7). The show ran from December 1981 until February 1982, and in a conversation, Hunjan recalled that she was “invited by members of the Indian Artists UK (IAUK) to curate the show”, which was “the first one in their new premises at Audley Street”, in the basement of the Indian high commission.⁴⁴ Hunjan was, in her recollection, “the only woman on the board”, and as such it fell to her to organise a show of women artists. Vinodini Ebdon and Naomi Iny were known to the group, although both lived outside London, and Hunjan knew Burman, as they had both studied at the Slade. Hunjan recalled, “The selection of women artists was not planned ... but grew organically as these were the only women on IAUK’s books”. Significantly, feminist scholars Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock identify *Four Indian Women Artists* as the first exhibition of Black women artists in their book, *Framing Feminisms: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970-85*, although, frustratingly, they refrain from discussing its content.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Burman agreed that the show in itself was intended as a feminist gesture.⁴⁶

In 1963 a group of Indian painters living and working in the United Kingdom got together and formed the Indian Painters Collective, U.K. Then in 1976, we re-formed the group and functioned under the name of Indian Artists Collective U.K. so that it could embrace all forms of art in fine art community. We had several shows, lectures and seminars and helped organize shows for visiting Indian artists. But, we still had one main objective to attain, namely, a recognition of our contribution to the cultural life of the U.K. and fulfill a dream - a place of our own to function from.

In 1978 we adopted our present name - INDIAN ARTISTS UNITED KINGDOM. We resolved to work towards a creation of a genuine awareness on the part of cognoscenti in the art world in this country and the general populace of the variety, extent and depth of the work of our members practising their professions in this country. We further resolved that our work should be evaluated as the work of any other artist practising his profession in this country, and not as that of 'an Indian Artist' working in a 'foreign country!' We do cherish and wish to promote the 'Indian' content and form of our work - but that the projection of that 'Indianness' is to be in harmony with the artistic traditions and development of art of this country and must be viewed as contributions towards its enrichment.

With the gracious help of Indian High Commission, who has given us the use of the premises at 8 South Audley Street, we have seen the beginning of our dream to eventually own our own premises in this great metropolis. The centre was opened by the Rt. Hon. Paul Channon, M.P. Minister for the Arts, in April 1981.

This exhibition of work by four Indian women artists is the first major exhibition to be held since the inauguration of the centre. The work covering as it does, sculpture, printmaking, painting and ceramics indicates the diversity of the four artists, although all are of Indian origin, symbolises both the Indian tradition of I.A.U.K. and its involvement in, and contribution to, the cultural life of the United Kingdom. It is a remarkable example of the multi-cultural enrichment that is possible in art. Three of the artists completed their postgraduate studies at the Slade School of Art. The work in the exhibition combines a sophistication and professionalism with the inspirational background of their Indian Culture. The result is an exhibition of great diversity, originality and freshness.

Figure 3.

Four Indian Women Artists, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981-1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, Press release/ exhibition statement.

<u>CHILA KUMAN BURMAN</u>		
1	Series	1980
2	We don't care about them	1980
3	Homage to the Beatles	1980
4	Erosion	1980
5	"Smoke up"	1979
6	"Bloody Cages"	1980
7	"Love Hearts"	1980
8	"Keep up the Scratchin"	1979
9	"Orgasm"	1980
10	"Ban the bomb"	1981
11	United	1980
12	Blow-out	1981
13	"White-on-white"	1981
14	"Di-P-Tych"	1981
15	Paper sculpture	1976
16	The Girls Toilet	1980
17	Summer 1981	1981
	Series of "Three Copses" (Work in progress)	
<u>Vinodini Ebdon</u>		
18	Five Peacocks	1970
19	Tower of Hindu Trinity	1978
20	Jantar Mantar	1972
21	The sphere	1973
22	Red iron sphere	1969
23	The squares	1968
24	Squares 2	1971
25	Four ovals	1971
26	The mountain	1972
27	Stirrup wine flask	1981
28	Rima's clock with 3 peacocks	1979
29	Dancing peacock clock	1974
30	Round face clock	1978
31	Orange blossoms (Square dish)	1979
32	Peacock dancing	1976
33	Girl picking champa flowers	1981
34	Kalasa	1965
35	Set of three dishes	1963
36	Coiled designed lamp base	1981
37	Girl in a garden	1977
38	Orange blossoms (Square dish)	1978
39	Set of 3 bowls	1979
40	Two candils	1977
41	Tarboose	1974
42	Peacock round plate	1978
43	Girl with peacocks	1979
44	Ammonite barrel	1975
45	Cake dish with cover	1965
46	The Inca bottle	1971
<u>Bhajan Hunjan</u>		
47	The one	1979
48	All and one	1979
49	Enclosure	1979
50	Male and female	1979
51	Tension	1980
52	The Human race	1980
53	Four dimensions	1980
54	The embrace	1979
55	The birth	1980
56	Opposites	1981
57	Untitled	1980
58	The passionate snake	1980
59	Postures	1980
60	The Human race	1980
61	Emotions	1981
62	Intimacy	1980
63	Symbols	1981
64	Emotions 2	1981
65	Maze of life	1981
66	Four dimentions 2	1980
67	Relationships	1981
68	Passion	1981
69	Relationships 2	1981
70	Lizzard and the egg	1981
71	Passions	1981
72	Intimacy 2	1981
73	Fertility	1981
<u>Naomi Inv</u>		
74	Tree man	1980
75	Mother and child	1979
76	Untitled	1976
77	The Fool	1981
78	Untitled	1977
79	Angel	1978

Figure 4. Four Indian Women Artists, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981-1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, list of artists and works.

CHILA KUMARI BURMAN Prints

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

- 1957 Born in Liverpool.
1977 Studied Foundation Course at Southport College of Art.
1977-80 Studied for B.A.Honours in Graphics at the Leeds Polytechnic.
1980-82 Currently a postgraduate student in the department of Print-making at the Slade School of Art, University College London.

Graduate work was researching into graffiti and the environment. Recent work will be encompassing and illustrating social, political, women's and race issues, in print and hopefully introducing the use of video.

EXHIBITIONS

- 1980 St. Pauls, Leeds. Group Exhibition of Leeds Polytechnic students.
1981 Stowells Trophy, Royal Academy of Arts, London.
1981 New Contemporaries, ICA Galleries, London.
1981 Third World Artists Exhibition, London School of Economics, London.
1981 Soma Black Book Fair, Brent Town Hall, Middlesex.
1981 Group Show of Indian Artists(UK), London WI.

VINODINI EBDON Ceramics

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

- 1919 Born, in Delhi, India.
Second daughter of Samuel and Grace Jaikumari Joseph of Delhi.
Studied at Queen Marys School, Isabella Thoburn College, and St Stephens College, Delhi.
1945 Married Major A.V.Ebdon, Madras Regiment.
Had two daughters and a son.
1947 War having twice prevented her proposed further education she eventually reached England.
1949-52 Short return to India.
1953 Became a permanent resident of England.
1962 First became interested in ceramics.
Studied under Peter Wright at the Bath Academy of Art, Bath.

Clay work was just another activity when I started, other than looking after my family and teaching a remedial class of mixed age group children.

Figure 5.
Four Indian Women Artists, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981-1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, Chila Burman and Vinodini Ebdon CVs.

Finding I enjoyed it, I continued and found my family in India just thinking it was a great 'hoot' as only 'Kumhars' work with clay. I certainly feel that anything I make should be functional and pleasing to look at. I think that probably a lot of my styling and ideas come from my Indian heritage which is so rich and inspiring and of course from nature. Most of all I work in clay simply because I enjoy it.

Other women in my family are artists too. Usha Rani is well known sculptor and Mohini a painter.

EXHIBITIONS

Exhibits annually at the Bath Academy, Bath.

COLLECTIONS

Work in private collections in India, Scotland, England and USA.

BHAJAN HUNJAN

Paintings Prints and Floorpieces.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

1956 Born in Manyuki, Kenya.
1975-79 Studied for B.A.Honours in Art, at Reading University, Reading.
1979-81 Postgraduate course in the department of Printmaking, at the Slade School of Art, University College London.
1979-81 Part-time student in the department of Ceramics, at the Central School of Art and Design.

My work was concerned with the relationship of circular and flexible linear forms. The linear forms enclosing and expressing real and illusionistic space. Within the last two years, I have concentrated on small works, getting more involved into symbols used right throughout mankind's history, using solid and organic forms. Etching being the major printmaking technique and clay for its most tactile quality have been used for the expression of my ideas.

EXHIBITIONS

1979 Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences, Reading University.
1979 Stowells Trophy, Royal Academy of Arts, London.
1980 Slade Folio Show, Greenwich Theatre, Greenwich.
1980 Rainbow Arts Group, Berthe Hesse Museum, St Pauls, London.
1981 Stowells Trophy, Royal Academy of Arts, London.
1981 Third World Artists Exhibition, London School of Economics.
1981 Indian Artists (U.K.) Group Show, Indian Artists (U.K.) Centre, London.
1981 Soma Black Book Fair, Brent Town Hall, Middlesex.

Figure 6.

Four Indian Women Artists, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981-1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, Bhajan Hunjan CV.

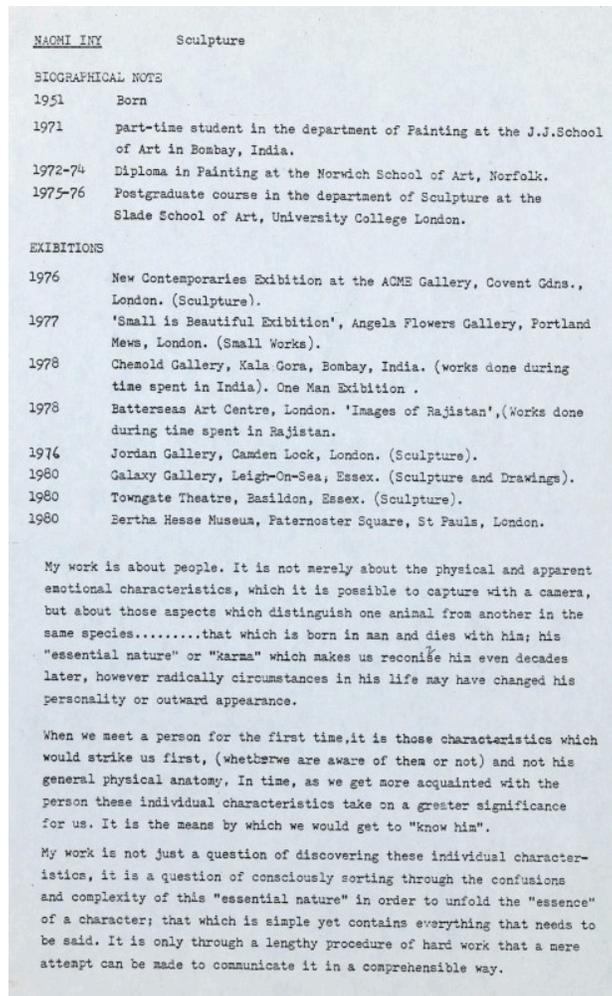


Figure 7.

Four Indian Women Artists, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981-1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, Naomi Iny CV.

Of the four artists, Burman can most easily be identified as challenging the oppressive parameters placed on South Asian women and since the earliest stage of her career has been outspoken in her advocacy of feminist politics. The exhibition's list of works notes that she exhibited seventeen works including *Bloody Cages* (1980), *Orgasm* (1980), and *Ban the Bomb* (1981)—the titles of which are suggestive of her thematic concerns. Although partial, a series of photographs taken at the exhibition's opening provides an insight into its content (Fig. 8, Fig. 9, Fig. 10, Fig. 11, and Fig. 12). From these images, it might be surmised that the works on display did not uniformly exude radical feminist action; it would perhaps be hard to make a case that Ebdon's ceramics were expressions of subversive descent in the way that Burman's prints were intended as politicised gestures. However, Iny's *Angel*

(1978), reproduced in *Echo*, the newsletter of Minority Arts Advisory Service, is deserving of further scrutiny and could potentially be positioned within discourses of feminist soft sculpture (Fig. 13).



Figure 8.

Four Indian Women Artists, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981-1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, photograph of Chila Burman with one of her body prints.



Figure 9.

Four Indian Women Artists, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981-1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, photograph of Bhajan Hunjan with one of her paintings at the private view.



Figure 10.

Four Indian Women Artists, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981-1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, photograph of Naomi Ily with one of her sculptures.



Figure 11.

Four Indian Women Artists, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981-1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, photograph of the private viewing with the artists and the Indian high commissioner and his wife.



Figure 12. Four Indian Women Artists, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981-1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, installation photograph.

VISUAL ARTS

Four Indian Women Artists

ERROLL LLOYD

Four Indian women artists gathered for a visual and audio-tape recording exhibition at the Indian Artists (UK) Gallery at 10, Upper Street, London, which opened on December 1981. The artists are: Chila Burman, Bhajan Hunjan, and two others.

These were shown by Chila Burman and Bhajan Hunjan, who were also the curators of the exhibition. The artists are: Chila Burman, Bhajan Hunjan, and two others.

The exhibition was held at the Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 10, Upper Street, London, from December 1981 to January 1982.

VISUAL ARTS

FRIDA KAHLO and TINA MODOTI

Whitbread Art Gallery, 10th March and 14th May

This is the first exhibition in the world to bring together the work of the painter Frida Kahlo and the sculptor Tina Modotti. The exhibition is held at the Whitbread Art Gallery, 10th March and 14th May.

The exhibition is held at the Whitbread Art Gallery, 10th March and 14th May.

The exhibition is held at the Whitbread Art Gallery, 10th March and 14th May.

FRIDA KAHLO and TINA MODOTI

INDIA and BRITAIN

TWO FRIDAYS FOR ILLIUMINATED

The exhibition is held at the Whitbread Art Gallery, 10th March and 14th May.

INDIA and BRITAIN

TWO FRIDAYS FOR ILLIUMINATED

The exhibition is held at the Whitbread Art Gallery, 10th March and 14th May.

Figure 13. Erroll Lloyd, "Four Indian Women Artists", Echo: Living Arts in Britain's Ethnic Communities, No.48, April-May 1982, p.14-15, newsletter published by the Minorities Arts Advisory Service (MAAS).

Although the show was by all accounts modest in size and without any well-known participants, it was reviewed in the magazine *Arts Review* by the writer and curator, Caroline Collier. This was in many respects, remarkable; of the four exhibitions under consideration, at the time of writing, this is the only known review to be published in what may be regarded as a mainstream art publication. Nonetheless, it is plausible that the decision to review the show was made because it coincided with the magazine's editorial focus on the 1982 Festival of India, rather than any explicit desire to support diasporic women artists. For Collier, the show examined "the power of emblems, and raise[d] questions about the nature of symbols".⁴⁷ Interestingly, Burman's prints, which focused on urban Liverpool, depicting barred windows and metal grills, or made with graffiti-like marks, were viewed as symbolic equivalents of Hunjan's prints evoking regenerative seed pods and highly textured sawdust paintings presented in a colour palette of reds and umbers, reminiscent of scorched earth.



Figure 14. "Indian Artists U.K. Present Four Indian Women Artists Show", *New Life*, 29 January 1982, 10-11.

In a review of the show in the British-Asian newspaper, *New Life*, an unnamed journalist explained that the show aimed to demonstrate how this generation of artists, trained in British art schools, were combining that training with “the richly imaginative and inspiring seedbed of their Indian origins” (Fig. 14).⁴⁸ This in itself was a new way of thinking about and representing second generation migrants: as part of, and making significant contributions to, British cultural life. However, in their description of the show, the journalist also reverted to female stereotypes, writing:

One senses as soon as one enters the exhibition that one is in a—dare one say it without being labelled sexist?—women’s world. ... Thick earthy coloured paint swims with primaevaeal commencement, worms or sperms struggle into age-old beginnings ... Womanhood in dark shiny wood or pallid puffy stuffed material, eyes the world from under long swathes of very real and very femaley dead hair.⁴⁹

This elision of femininity with generative, primal forms could be regarded as reductive, but conversely these concerns with natural forms and life forces may equally indicate how this generation of artists were engaged with feminist concerns, as outlined in Lucy Lippard’s *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*.⁵⁰ Certainly, Collier’s review seemed to evoke the aesthetic intersection of feminist concerns and natural forces. Further research concentrating on specific works by Ebdon and Iny, and their artistic practices, is required to fully gauge the potency of such an intersectional reading. Nonetheless, I would suggest that in asserting their identities as artists, and in the acts of making, and of pursuing artistic careers, *Four Indian Women Artists* should be regarded as a manifestation of feminist agency and a challenge to those who thought that Asian women could not, or should not, be artists.

Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work, People’s Gallery, 1986, organised by Bhajan Hunjan

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 15.

Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work, People’s Gallery, 1986, organised by Bhajan Hunjan, exhibition catalogue.

Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work at the People’s Gallery, 1986 was organised by Bhajan Hunjan, and sought to highlight the creative diversity of Asian women artists. Hunjan recalled that the show was staged at short notice in response to the availability of funding from the Greater

London Council (GLC), which also enabled the production of an exhibition catalogue (Fig. 15).⁵¹ The exhibition showcased work made in sculpture, stained glass, print, ceramics, and painting, produced by Dushka Ahmed, Vinodini Ebdon, Nina Edge, Bhajan Hunjan, and Naomi Iny. Hunjan recalled that, by 1986, she had met a widening circle of artists and was subsequently able to include a larger number of artists, in comparison to the earlier *Four Indian Women Artists*. Little is known of what was included in the show and the catalogue does not contain an exhibition list; however, it is known that the show did not have a specific thematic agenda, but rather sought to showcase the work of the participating artists. Some of the artworks displayed were illustrated in a review published by *Asian Times*, and further research into the individual artists may help identify which other artworks were exhibited and provide a greater sense of the variety of artistic practices that it presented (Fig. 16, Fig. 17, Fig. 18, Fig. 19, Fig. 20, and Fig. 21). It seems, however, that the exhibition was staged opportunistically, in response to available funding rather than developing from considered curatorial interests. To what extent then, can this show be regarded as exemplary of the ways in which minority artists were corralled and contained by quangos and funding bodies during the 1980s?⁵² Might this be an instance of an art exhibition being used as tick-box exercise, paying lip-service to equal opportunities through ad hoc funding?



Figure 17.

Bhajan Hunjan, *The Choice*, 1985, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 76 × 51 cm.



Figure 18.

Bhajan Hunjan, *Within*, 1986, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 76 × 51 cm.



Figure 19.

Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work, People's Gallery, 1986, organised by Bhajan Hunjan, photograph of Mother and Child, wood sculpture by Naomi Iny.



Figure 20.

Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work, People's Gallery, 1986, organised by Bhajan Hunjan, photograph of Grey Vexed Mermaid, ceramic sculpture by Nina Edge.



Figure 21.

Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work, People's Gallery, 1986, organised by Bhajan Hunjan, photograph of sculpture by Naomi Iny.

Jagrati—An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists, Greenwich Citizens Gallery, Woolwich, 1986, organised by Symrath Patti

Jagrati—An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists was held at the Greenwich Citizens Gallery, Woolwich, in 1986, and included the work of Dushka Ahmed, Zarina Bhimji, Sutapa Biswas, Chila Kumari Burman, Nina Edge, Bhajan Hunjan, Naomi Iny, Mumtaz Karimjee, Shamina Khanour, Symrath Patti, Sukhwinder Saund, Ranjan Shadra, and Shanti Thomas. Organised by the artist Symrath Patti, who had recently started work at the newly opened gallery, the exhibition aimed to connect “the work of these artists to the experience of the Asian community; enabling the artist to develop a dialogue within the community to raise issues of artistic and

political relevance".⁵³ *Jagrati* had originally been conceived as a thematic show concentrating on the issue of domestic violence, but during the planning stages, it expanded its remit to a broader consideration of the experiences of Asian women. Nonetheless "the experience of fragmentation and isolation" was central to the show and many of the artworks presented solitary female figures.⁵⁴

Although a formal catalogue was not produced, Fay Rodrigues was commissioned to write an extended essay introducing the show, which was accompanied by a list of exhibited works (Fig. 22).⁵⁵ Introductory texts in four different Asian languages were also available at the gallery during the exhibition.⁵⁶ In her essay, Rodrigues referenced the murders of Balwant Kaur and Gurdip Kaur as points of departure for the exhibition. Balwant Kaur was murdered by her husband at the Brent Asian Women's Refuge in 1985; and Gurdip Kaur (no relation) was murdered in Reading by her husband and brother-in-law in 1986. Southall Black Sisters organised campaigns "to ensure the proper prosecution" of those who had perpetrated these murders.⁵⁷ By overtly identifying these tragedies, the exhibition may be regarded as being in step with feminist activism at the time; Shaila Shah noted in 1988 that: "The Asian women's movement in Britain has, for some years now, targeted domestic violence as a prime focus of their fightback for liberation".⁵⁸ While domestic abuse was not exclusively experienced by Asian women, a host of culturally specific factors meant that it was a problem that particularly needed to be addressed: language barriers, institutional racism, and the perceived role of traditional culture and religion within the home, all impacted on how Asian women were mistreated by organisations including the police and social services.

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 22.

Jagrati—An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists, Greenwich Citizens Gallery, Woolwich, 1986, organised by Symrath Patti, exhibition pamphlet.

The works by Dushka Ahmed and Bhajan Hunjan (who worked at Sahara, the Asian Women's Refuge in Reading during this period) should be properly regarded as artistic interventions aimed at focusing attention on abuse. Reproduced in *ArtRage*, the mural by Dushka Ahmed testifies to the murder of Asian women within the home (Fig. 23).⁵⁹ Enlarged and overlapping black and white newsprint offers a disturbing visual cacophony that conveys "the grim reality of the physical and mental abuse which women suffer".⁶⁰ Headlines shout "Family Plotted Murder", while in the centre, the eye of a defiant woman stares out at us. Like many of Bhajan Hunjan's portrait paintings, *Tribute to Late Balwant Kaur and Gurdip Kaur—Victims of Domestic*

Violence (1986) is divided into two parts (Fig. 24). On the left is a framed image of a woman, dressed in a shalwar kameez, looking out directly at the viewer. She is upright, dignified, and seemingly self-assured. Adjacent to her is an orb of glowing orange, emanating rays of red-orange light. While Ahmed’s mural conveys fury, in Hunjan’s contemplative work, the figurative and symbolic combine. Although this orb could pessimistically be regarded as symbolic of the blood shed by victims of domestic abuse, I prefer to see it as a torch: the women burn brightly in our memory.



Figure 23.
 “Jagrati—An Exhibition by 13 Asian Women Artists”, *Artrage*, no. 15 (Winter 1986): 24-25.



Figure 24.

Bhajan Hunjan, *Tribute to Late Balwant Kaur and Gurdip Kaur—Victims of Domestic Violence*, August 1986, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 76 × 51 cm.

However, *Jagrati*, which means “awakening” in Hindi, also sought to move beyond the narrative of honour killings and victimhood commonly associated with the representation of South Asian women. Other forms of feminist resistance were explored, and the presentation of powerful and independently minded Asian women as a dominant theme of the show was perhaps an inevitable response to its initial conception. For example, the locations within which South Asian women could assert their visibility and agency were addressed in *City Tempo* (1985) by Shanti Thomas, in which a woman is shown apparently retreating from the looming city skyline (Fig. 25). St Paul’s Cathedral, the Bank of England, and St Bride’s Church jostle for space among the newer towers of London’s financial centre. This is an interesting painting, for despite the dark, oppressive sky and the precariousness of the urban infrastructure, the woman herself seems self-assured and part of her environment: her red briefcase and newspaper could indicate that she works in the City, and her backwards glance connects her with the buildings in the distance. And at the same time, however, her hasty retreat suggests that she has not given herself to this particular urban environment wholeheartedly.



Figure 25.

Shanti Thomas, *City Tempo*, 1984 (featured in the Commonwealth Institute, Exhibition Poster, 1987), painting, 101.6 × 76.2 cm.

Nina Edge was also keen to undercut expectations of Asian womanhood and utilised humour as a mode of subversion. Edge had recently graduated from college in Cardiff when she participated in *Jagrati*. Slightly younger than the other artists, her approach to image making “did not adhere automatically to the radicalisms of the previous generation”, and initially her contact with other Black artists was stimulated by her concern with making rather than politics.⁶¹ Nonetheless, her work has been noted for its ability to combine the wry, humorous and mischievous, with a knowing and cutting critique; what John Brady has described as “combining the qualities of a smile and a stare”.⁶²

Edge contributed two sets of work to *Jagrati*. The first was a series of four figurative pen and ink drawings, *Searching for Flowers in the Tandoori Garden*; *Chips on her Shoulders—Her Arms Fell Off*; *Trying not to Offend My Parents*; and *Paki Goes Home on a Piece of Spit* (Fig. 26, Fig. 27, Fig. 28, and Fig. 29). These were somewhat tongue-in-cheek, addressing the realities of growing up in Britain, and addressing essentialising racial stereotypes through humour. For Fay Rodrigues, these works, “make witty tragi-comic comments on the situation of Asian women. There is a light, ironic touch bordering on self-parody, which belies the poignancy of her work”.⁶³ Edge’s other contributions to the show was a series of eight abstract monoprints: *The Jewel* (Fig. 30); *The Crown* (Fig. 31); *Fingerplate* (Fig. 32); *We Three*

Things of Orient Art (Fig. 33); *Diamond Coloured* (Fig. 34); *Diamond Skin Rug* (Fig. 35); *Gem* (Fig. 36); and *Ink is a Girl's Best Friend* (Fig. 37). Each utilised a diamond-shape motif and through their titles referred to the ways in which British imperialists 'orientalised' India. The fact that these non-figurative works were included in *Jagrati* indicates that both the artist and organisers were conscious that activism and critique could take a variety of forms. On one level, Edge used the diamond to reference the beauty of Indian decorative patternwork, all the while undercutting visual pleasure through her titles.

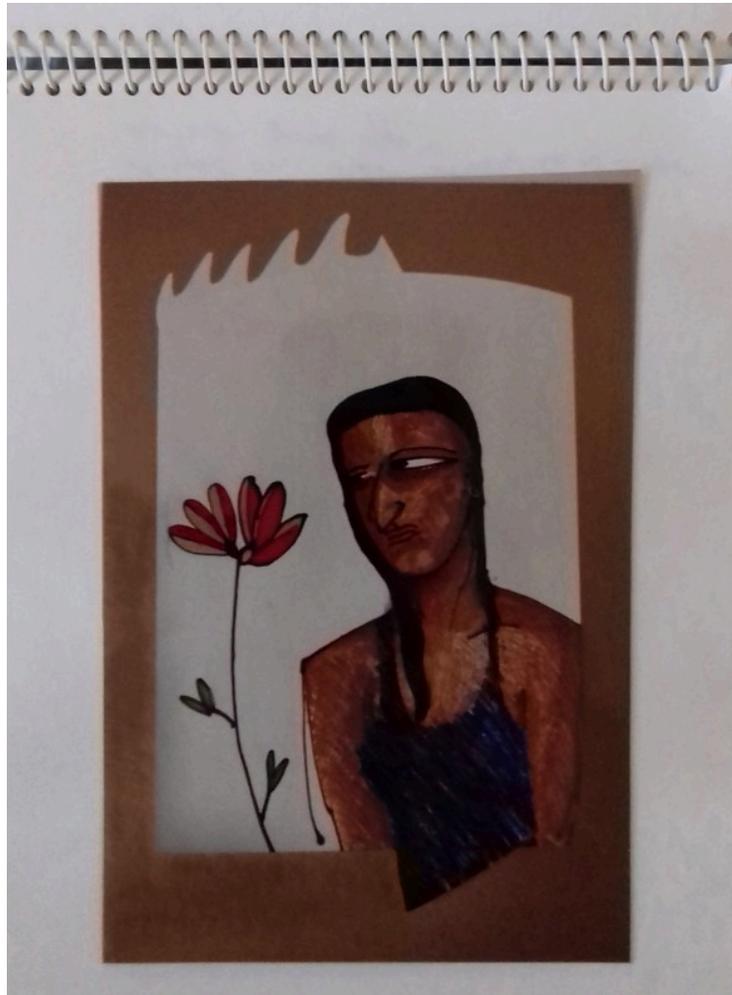


Figure 26.

Nina Edge, *Searching for Flowers in the Tandoori Garden*, felt pen and paper collage.



Figure 27.
Nina Edge, Chips on her shoulders—her arms fell off,
felt pen and paper collage.



Figure 28.
Nina Edge, Trying not to offend my parents, felt pen
and paper collage.

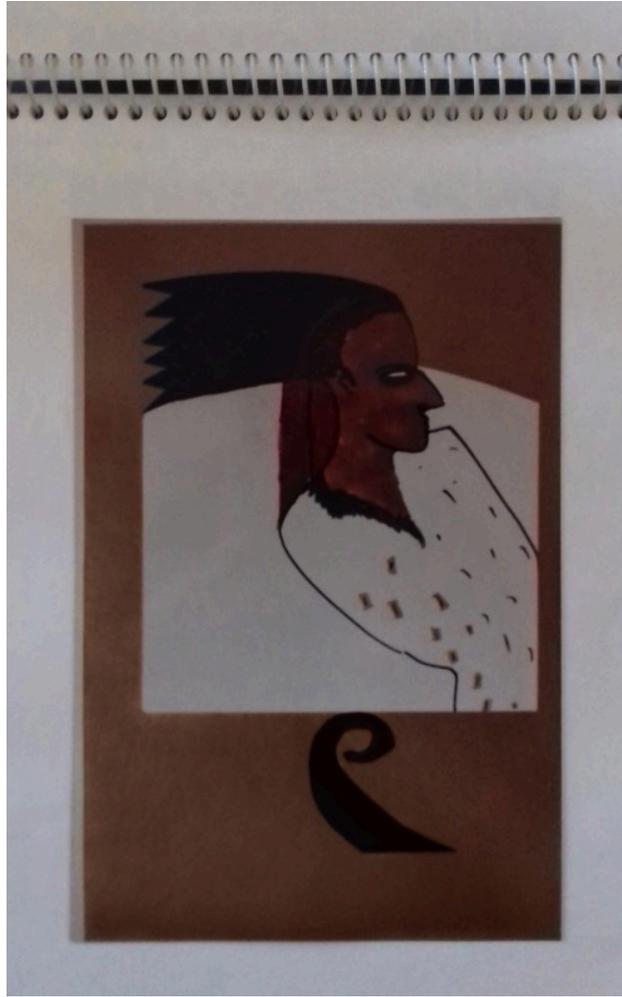


Figure 29.

Nina Edge, Paki Goes home on a piece of spit, felt pen and paper collage.

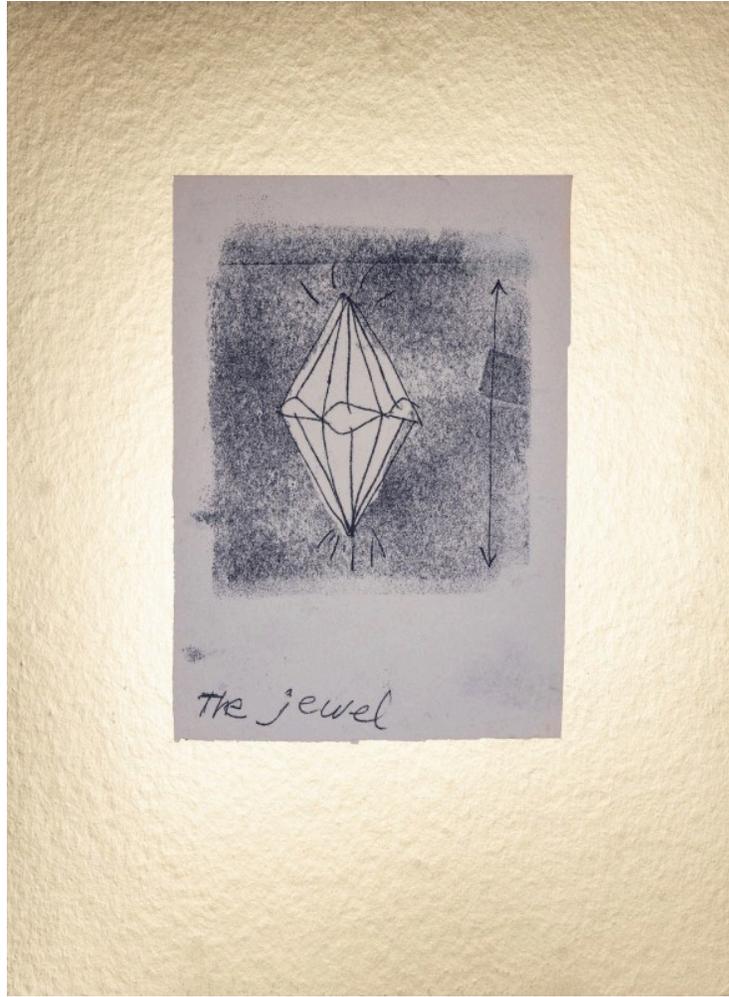


Figure 30.

Nina Edge, *The Jewel*, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8 cm.



Figure 31.
Nina Edge, *The Crown*, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8 cm.



Figure 32.

Nina Edge, Fingerplate, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8 cm.



Figure 33.
Nina Edge, *We three things from orient are*, 1984, monoprint,
53 × 40.8 cm.



Figure 34.
Nina Edge, *Diamond Coloured*, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8
cm.



Figure 35.
Nina Edge, Diamond Skin Rug, 1984, monoprint, 53 x 40.8
cm.



Figure 36.
Nina Edge, Gem, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8 cm.



Figure 37.
Nina Edge, *Ink is a Girl's Best Friend*, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8 cm.



Figure 38.

Symrath Patti, *Sketches for a Memorial*, 1986, collage with acrylics pastels and pencil, 42 × 59.4 cm.

In July 2019, I made contact with the exhibition's organiser, Symrath Patti. Discussing her own contributions to the exhibition, it became clear how published resources are only useful up to a point. Her gouache and paper collage, *Sketches for a Memorial—Yaadgari* (1986) addressed themes of arranged marriages, sexual violence, and desire (Fig. 38). The blue head of Krishna is overlain with images of brides in their wedding gowns, surrounded by swirling, saturated colour. Patti asserted that colour was used emotively in her work and informed responses to it.⁶⁴ However, having only seen *Sketches for a Memorial—Yaadgari* in black and white reproduction in *ArtRage*, an appreciation of the importance of colour to interpretation had been impossible. It was only when Patti sent me a colour reproduction of the collage that this facet of the work became clear; it also became evident that the image in *ArtRage* had been incorrectly reproduced in verso. This example reiterated to me the importance of having access to correctly orientated, colour images in order to undertake nuanced critical readings of artworks.

There is still much work to be undertaken on *Jagrati*. Numerous questions remain, including: what happened to Dushka Ahmed's mural, and what more is known about the Greenwich Asian Womens' Art Group that commissioned it? What was the audience response to the show, and did it receive any reviews in the art press? Did the seminars, planned to accompany the exhibition, take place? Who spoke at them and what was discussed? Symrath Patti has alerted me to the existence of an archive relating to *Jagrati* held at the Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths, University of London. Materials held in the archive include the minutes of organising meetings, photographs of

individual artworks, and a visitors' comments book. All of this material, in addition to Patti's own recollections of the exhibition will unquestionably shed light on the aims and aspirations of the exhibition, and provide additional information regarding its content and reception. I look forward to consulting this material in due course, in the knowledge that in doing so, more questions will arise.

***In Focus*, Horizon Gallery, London, 1990, coordinated by Georgina Grange**

During its years of operation between 1987 and 1991, the Horizon Gallery worked to promote the work of South Asian artists. In 1990, it made what Eddie Chambers has described as "by far [its] most important curatorial intervention", by staging a series of four consecutive exhibitions under the collective title *In Focus* (Fig. 39 and Fig. 40).⁶⁵ These exhibitions were a direct response to Rasheed Araeen's *The Other Story*, and significantly, eight of the sixteen exhibiting artists—exactly half—were female. The press release for the *In Focus* exhibitions noted that an "important group" of Asian women artists "is not represented in the Hayward show", and went on to explain that the *In Focus* shows "are designed to give a representative view of the work of Asian artists living in Britain".⁶⁶ Reiterating the *In Focus* press release in her review of the *In Focus* exhibitions, Veena Stephenson, writing in *Bazaar*, explained that "particular emphasis was given to women artists who comprise exactly half the exhibitors". For Stephenson, "the significance of this arrangement ... was to highlight the much talked about omission of South Asian women artists in the Hayward show. In fact this was one of the main motivations for mounting this series of exhibitions".⁶⁷ As Jean Fisher recounted, "Among the more analytic exhibition reviews, the poor representation of women artists drew the most criticism", and discovering that a corrective to *The Other Story* had taken place while that exhibition was on display at the Hayward Gallery was mind-blowing!⁶⁸

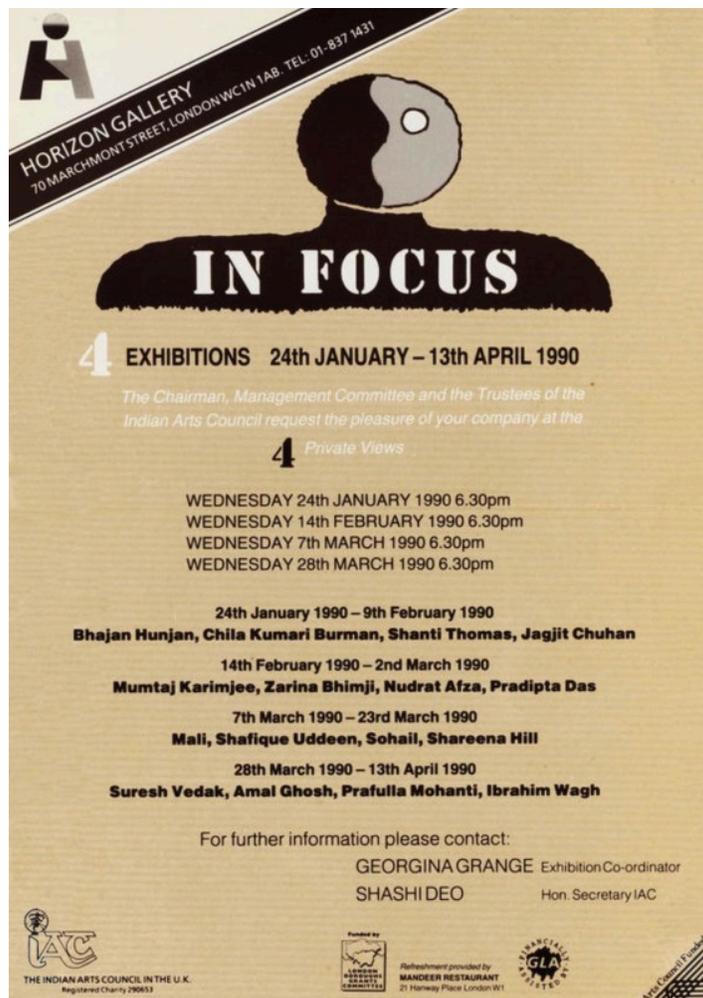


Figure 39.

In Focus, Horizon Gallery, London, 1990, coordinated by Georgina Grange, poster.

brings a humanistic approach which is clear wide-ranging. Also, **AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY ANGELA DAVIES** now newly introduced and published in Britain after being out of print for ten years. (Women's Press, P/B £6.95)

LINESH CHANT: Fyna & Nefertiti (Karia Press, P/B £4.25)
Linesh Chant are Fyna Dowe & Nefertiti Gayle and this is their collection of performance poems. Two women who are committed to a positive image of women which certainly reflects in this good selection of some forty five items. Foreword by Madax Coaton who describes them 'as creative messengers. Nefertiti and Fyna combine poetry and music which carry both bite and humour'.

HERE TO STAY— FOUNDRY STORIES BY AFRICAN-CARIBBEAN WOMEN edited by Phyllis Thompson
Lion Press, Oxford, Tel: 0865 747550, P/B £3.99

A collection of stories by Phyllis Thompson, June Brown, Evelyn Ellis and Lureen Lyseight. All Afro-Caribbean women who have had varying involvement with the Black churches. We are given aspects of standing strong between two cultures, the prospect of the Black church into the next decade, parents and children and the pain of racial discrimination and the route to racial recognition.

BARRIED LINES by the Bengali Women's Support Group & Yorkshire Art Circus (Orders from Yorkshire Art Circus, Tel: 0977 550401, P/B £4.95)

A bi-lingual anthology in Bengali and English with translations and illustrations by the Bengali Women's Group of South Yorkshire. A bitter-sweet set of experiences by thirty-two women who write of their sense of home and identity, friendships, family, work, work and education. In the form of stories, poems and dialogue they tell us of racism and sexism but above all their aspirations for the future, strong and positive.

ECSTATIC ANTIBODIES—RESISTING THE AIDS MYTHOLOGY Edited by Tessa Buffin & Sunil Gupta (Rivers Oram Press, P/B £8.95)

A powerful explanation in image, photos and text of the impact of the AIDS crisis. This book shows how AIDS has caused devastation in personal lives and also resulted in a creative life. Many of the images provide to counter-act the common assumptions of AIDS and the myths surrounding it and its victims. Contributors include: Allan de Souza, Isaac Julian, Pratibha Parmar and photographs by Sunil Gupta, and Rotimi Fani-Kayode.

A TURN IN THE SOUTH by V S Naipaul
(Penguin Books, P/B £5.99)

A panoramic and yet also a personal view of the peoples of South America by this distinguished writer. Words of ordinary men and women—preachers, farmers, businessmen, musicians and housewives, put into a celebration of colour and lifestyles, noted by Naipaul 'not a book of race but an explanation of the present and past as it can be seen today in S. America.'

*****MAGAZINES*****

A new Magazine entitled **PUCKO** will be published by Pucko Peoples Press and writers Agency. A quarterly dedicated to literature, exploring all aspects of Oral and literary forms. The first volume is a major critical appraisal of Dub Poetry. **DOBUSI SMOOTI** (Other-wise somebody) Avail in April £1.95. Tel: 986 7028 for more details.

*****POETRY READINGS*****

Apples and Snakes March programme features:
Fri 2 - Mufira, Merle Collins, Marcia Prescott & Patience Aghahai.
Fri 9 - Janice Perry, Storm Webber, Maggie Nicols & Pinise Saul & Janette Mason, & Viv Achou.
Fri 16 - The Dimer Ladies, Mark Steel, Logan Murray, Porky the Poet.

Fri 23 - John Hegley, Curtis Ingham, Henry Normal & Ann Zietz
Fri 30 - Carol Grimes with Angela Vellawjer, Janette Mason & Sheryl Morris, Maud Sulter, Sapphire & Linda King.
All shows at Covent Garden Community Centre, 46 Earlham Street, WC2. Open 8pm. Tickets: £2.50/£2.00 concs. Tel: 890 5346 For more details.

Pitika Nzali will be reading his poetry and other works. Best known for his work with Jenako Arts in N London. A frequent and brilliant performer of his own work with Apples and Snakes. Also Bruce Barnes and music from Jim Deorak. On 6 Mar at the Blue Nose Cafe, 78 Mountgrove Road, Highbury, NS. Tel: 354 3655. At 7.45pm. Check for prices.

*****SEMINARS & CULTURAL EVENTS*****

OUT OF TOWN - Femi Oyedode & John Haynes both from Nigeria and currently living in Britain. Femi Oyedode's collection of poems, based to your softness & other Dreams. Inscr

weaves memories of his Yoruba childhood with images of contemporary life here. Both Oyedode and Haynes will talk on the expatriate experience on Tues 13 Mar. At 5.30pm. £2/1 concs.

Professor Peter Guikind of Harwick University, will give a lecture on **African Workers: a social history approach**. On 6 Mar at 4.15pm
Frank Birkholts of York University, Canada, will give a lecture on **Beatie Head and Feminism**. On 20 Mar at 4.15pm.
All at the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 32 Pritchatts Rd, Edgbaston. Tel: (021) 414 5126.

*****BOOK EXHIBITION*****

An exhibition with a difference - **International Writers** includes 160 titles based on the Book Trust's on-going series of guides to writings from around the world, beginning with writers from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. At the Barbican Library from 29 Mar - 28 April. Open Mon-Fri 9.30-5.30pm, Tues 9.30-7.30 pm, Sat 9.30-12.30. Tel: Book Trust Press info: 870 8235.

VISUAL ARTS

IN FOCUS - 4 EXHIBITIONS

The Horizon Gallery brings us an important series of exhibitions by various Asian artists many of whom were not featured in *The Other Story* at the Hayward Gallery. This month sees the opening of the last three which feature the work of: **Sanji Mar - Mumukh Karjane, Zarinsha Bhatiji, Nudrat Afza & Pradypta Das**. From 7 - 23 Mar - **Mali, Sharique Udddeen, Sahali & Shareena Hilli**. And finally from 28 Mar - 13 April - **Sarosh Veda, Amal Ghosh, Pratibha Mohanti, & Ibrahim Magh**. The work of Mumukh Karjane is particularly stunning. Her series of photographic essays on China are breathtaking. Her landscapes are images of mist, colour and purely

artistic. All photos are accompanied with text from poems by Gu Cheng, Su Ting & Bei Dao. The work of all artists above have been designed to give a representative view of work by Asian artists living in Britain, in fact providing us with 'another story' left out of the *Other Story*. Three distinct groups of Asian artists emerge here, the older generation who came here in 1950 to 1970, and also Asians compelled to leave Africa and those born here since the 1960's. The Horizon Gallery and those artists included above have done well to take on the issues and criticisms raised at the talks at the Hayward since Dec 89. At the Horizon Gallery, 70 Marchmont St, WC1.

Figure 40.

Unknown author, "In Focus—4 Exhibitions", Black Arts in London, no. 122, 1-31 March 1990, 9.

The first of the four *In Focus* exhibitions was all female, and included work by Bhajan Hunjan, Chila Kumari Burman, Shanti Thomas, and Jagjit Chuhan. Stephenson records that most of the works were figurative, and subjects included the self-portrait, the family, and notions of home. In her review, Prasanna Probyn highlighted Shanti Thomas's painting *Sleeping Woman* (1985) as an example of contemporary British Asian painting that conveys the duality of the beauty and hardship experienced by women (Fig. 41).⁶⁹ Stephenson recorded that Chila Kumari Burman exhibited *Ma Ji In Basti Sheik—Punjab* (date unknown) (Fig. 42), while Jagjit Chuhan recalled that she exhibited *Yakshi* (1987) (Fig. 43), and Bhajan Hunjan remembers being excited about exhibiting her new painting, *Peacock Feather* (1990) (Fig. 44).⁷⁰



Figure 41.
Shanti Thomas, *Sleeping Woman*, 1985, painting, 121.9 × 152.4
cm.



Figure 42.

Chila Kumari Burman, *Ma Ji In Basti Sheik—Punjab*, 1989, pastel drawing, 29.7 × 42 cm.

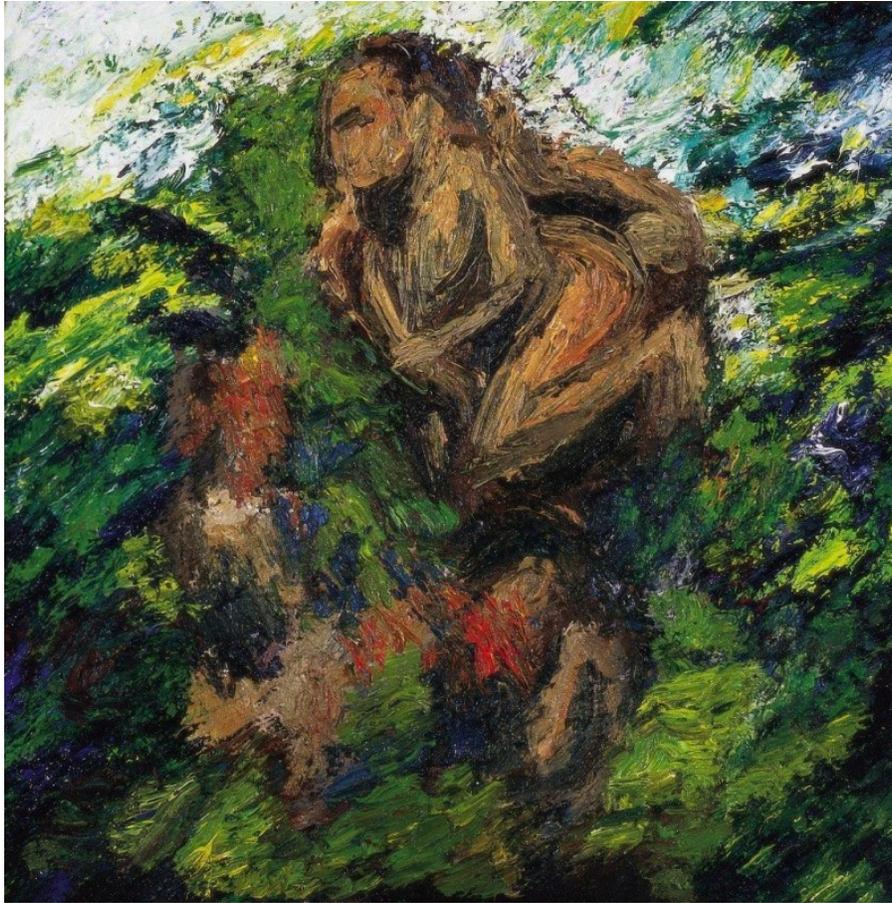


Figure 43.

Jagjit Chuhan, Yakshi, 1987, oil on board, 48 × 48 cm.



Figure 44.

Bhajan Hunjan, *Peacock Feather*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 91 × 122 cm.

The second show included photographic work by Mumtaz Karimjee, Zarina Bhimji, and Nudrat Afza; Pradipta Das was the only male artist in this display. Each artist addressed themes of memory, history, and sexuality, and proposed the possibility of articulating dissent through the medium of photography. Nudrat Afza and Pradipta Das presented documentary images taken in Europe and South Asia respectively, while Zarina Bhimji presented an installation, combining images with “scattered text, dried flowers and crumpled muslin on the floor”.⁷¹ Mumtaz Karimjee presented work from her series *Notes from the City of the Sun*, in which photographs depicting Chinese landscapes were accompanied by poems by Gu Chen, Shu Ting, and Bei Dao, which the artist herself had translated.⁷² These landscapes were described as “images of mist, colour, and purely artistic”, while the poems were written by scholars closely associated with the pro-democratic movement, and were understood by the artist, and Chinese audiences, as acts of contestation.⁷³ Although more research on her work needs to be undertaken, it is clear that Karimjee’s body of work should be regarded as an investigation of how dissent can be articulated through aesthetic means.

The third *In Focus* exhibition included works by male artists Yashwant Mali, Shafique Uddeen, and Sohail, and the female artist, Shareena Hill. This exhibition included paintings, drawings, photography, and installation, and Hill presented recent paintings depicting magnified domestic utensils,

Although archival material is scarce and does not give a complete picture of the exhibitions, the critical reception of the Horizon shows seems to have been generally positive. Probyn's review for *Spare Rib* focused on the first two exhibitions and their predominantly female participants (Fig. 46). However, while ostensibly a review article, Probyn says little about the exhibitions, highlighting instead the barriers faced by women artists, suggesting that, "The very need to hold an exhibition of Asian women artists in a more modest setting than the Hayward Gallery ... defines the meaning of Black women's struggle in the world of art".⁷⁵ In the short text, she relayed her conversations with Chila Burman and Shanti Thomas, and reflected on the status of Asian women. Burman is cited as being frustrated by the fact that male artists fail to recognise the struggles Asian women experience in getting to art college, in the face of disapproving or uncomprehending parents, while Thomas is presented as being concerned with finding a balance between both the positive and negative life experiences of women.

Final Thoughts

In creating new images of South Asian women, artists including Dushka Ahmed, Chila Burman, Nina Edge, Bhajan Hunjan, and Shanti Thomas challenged audiences to reconsider long-held stereotypes regarding South Asian femininity, and their work should, I argue, be regarded as acts of reclamation, empowerment, and self-definition. For these artists, art--the mediums of painting, sculpture, and printmaking--offered a space for reflection and reconstruction; and for social commentary and critique from within a British social, political, and aesthetic context. Considered collectively, the exhibition case studies demonstrate that while ghettoised in many respects, during the 1980s and into the 1990s, women artists of South Asian origin worked and exhibited collaboratively, curating their own shows in environments that supported their aspirations as artists, as women, and sensitive to the specificities of their identities as South Asian. Comparing *Four Indian Women Artists* (1981) and *Jagrati* (1986), separated by five years, it is evident that there was a shift--not only in how these artists represented themselves as artists, but also in how exhibitions were conceived. By the mid-1980s, it was not enough to simply exhibit and exhibitions such as *Jagrati* were expressions of social activism. By 1990, the *In Focus* exhibitions at the Horizon Gallery

of day at the Hayward. Black male artists are probably threatened by feminist art, said the women artists.

Chila believes that many women artists are geniuses who are kept down by male forces. 'Men don't see or understand the struggles that Asian women have to go through to get even their parents to understand', she says, not demoralised, but as someone who has crossed that hurdle.

She has exhibited many times but sees the exhibitions as temporary exposures which cannot sustain an artist for long. 'When its all over, we are all on our own.'

Shanti, on the other hand, had no problems explaining her profession to her parents, her father is a painter. She has outside pressures to contend with, 'I am fed up of being called an ethnic painter. I am a painter, but you cannot avoid the identity struggle in your work.'

Shanti is chiefly a figurative painter. She says that her paintings address the personal as political, in particular through mythology, psychology and the human drama. Painting to her, is all about releasing life's struggle and portraying it to the world in art form.

Her most beautiful work at the exhibition was the *Sleeping Woman*. The posture of the village woman is an authentic representation, a common sight beside a ploughed field on a hot Indian afternoon.

Her paintings are not all about women straining to get free. 'It is uplifting to me when I balance the good with the bad. But a woman's struggle is important to me, and other women artists. If we do not portray this we are censoring ourselves.'

Prasanna Probyn

The last two shows are on from 7 March - 23 March, and 28 March - 13 April. For further information contact the Horizon Gallery, 70 Merchants St. London WC1N 1AB Tel: 01 837 1431

Looking at the Stars by Shanti Thomas



Figure 46. Prasanna Probyn, "In Focus: Horizon Gallery", *Spare Rib*, no. 210 (March 1990), 42.

sought to demonstrate the depth and breadth of artistic practice among artists of South Asian origin and the four exhibitions collectively extended the narrative of diasporic artistic practice in the UK as presented in *The Other Story*. Nonetheless, while the conceptual drivers of exhibitions may have changed and developed over time, underpinning each was a concern for the ever-present need to promote minority artists in a mainstream (white) art world that was ambivalent to their work.

The Horizon Gallery had intended that the *In Focus* exhibitions be re-articulated as a touring show. Although this plan failed to come to fruition, in 1991, the gallery did produce a loose-leaf catalogue, compiling information about each of the sixteen exhibiting artists, plus information on an additional ten artists.⁷⁶ As mentioned above, in 1991, there were two touring exhibitions of female South Asian diaspora artists; and in 1993, the South Asian Visual Arts Festival took place across the Midlands. It would seem then, that at the start of the 1990s, South Asian diaspora artists were gaining access to, and visibility within, mainstream institutions and were significant in number. But if this was the case, why then, are so few artists of South Asian origin included in mainstream narratives of British art? Why are the same handful of artists discussed in published narratives of Black British art? Why is it that so many artists, exhibitions, and projects have been so emphatically forgotten? My research continues...

Footnotes

- 1 Rasheed Araeen, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* (London: The South Bank Centre, 1989).
- 2 The ten South Asian artists were: Saleem Arif, Avinash Chandra, Avtarjeet Dhanjal, Iqbal Geoffrey, Balraj Khanna, Ahmed Parvez, Ivan Peries, A.J. Shemza, F.N. Souza, and Rasheed Araeen.
- 3 See David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall, "Critical Decade: An Introduction", *Ten.8 Critical Decade: Black British Photography in the 80s* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 4-7.
- 4 Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities", in Anthony D. King (ed.), *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 56.
- 5 Parita Trivedi, "To Deny Our Fullness: Asian Women in the Making of History", *Feminist Review: Many Voices, One Chant, Black Feminist Perspectives* 17 (Autumn 1984), 38.
- 6 See comments by Geeta Kapur and Saloni Mathur made during discussion at the *Showing, Telling, Seeing: Exhibiting South Asia in Britain 1900-Now*, a conference organised by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Asia Art Archive, 30 June-1 July 2016, panel seven: Other Stories, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwskwS4PcLk&feature=youtu.be&list=PLf4F3b0ZQ-HkvRFBRNEQZEy0gcxU6Nels> (accessed 20 August 2019).
- 7 For examples of recent contributions to debates on the constitution of Britishness see, Nikesh Shukla (ed.), *The Good Immigrant* (London: Unbound, 2017); Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); and Afua Hirsch, *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018).
- 8 See Ian R.G. Spencer, *British Immigration Policy Since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- 9 See Zig Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Race in Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 78-79, 85-87.
- 10 Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), Chapter 3, "Gendered Spaces: Women of South Asian Descent in 1980s Britain", 67-83.
- 11 Ambalavaner Sivanandan, "From Resistance to Rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean Struggles in Britain", *Race and Class* 23, no. 2/3 (1981-1982), 116.

- 12 Enoch Powell, *Freedom and Reality*, edited by John Wood (London: B.T. Batsford, 1969), Chapter 13, "Immigration", reproduces the "Rivers of Blood" speech in full, 213–237.
- 13 *The Observer*, 5 April 1970, as cited in Kenneth Leech, *Brick Lane 1978: The Events and Their Significance* (Birmingham: AFFOR, 1980), 8. See Louise London, "The East End of London: Paki Bashing in 1970", *Race Today* 5, no. 11 (December 1973).
- 14 See "Police Against Black People: Evidence Submitted to the Royal Commission on the Criminal Procedure by the Institute of Race Relations", *Race and Class*, pamphlet No. 6 (London: Institute of Race Relations, 1979).
- 15 Leech, *Brick Lane 1978*, 8.
- 16 Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 43. See also, Anandi Ramamurthy, *Black Star: Britain's Asian Youth Movements* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).
- 17 Leech, *Brick Lane 1978*, 10.
- 18 Vivek Chaudhary, "Forty Years on, Southall Demands Justice for Killing of Blair Peach", *The Observer*, 21 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/apr/21/southall-demands-justice-killing-of-blair-peach-1979> (accessed 15 August 2019).
- 19 For a useful introduction to the Grunwick strike, see <https://www.striking-women.org/module/striking-out/grunwick-dispute> (accessed 18 May 2019).
- 20 For more on the Imperial Typewriters strike of 1974, see <https://strikeatimperial.net> (accessed 21 August 2019).
- 21 See Brixton Black Women's Group, "Black Women Organizing", *Feminist Review: Many Voices, One Chant, Black Feminist Perspectives* 17 (Autumn 1984): 84–89.
- 22 See Southall Black Sisters, <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk> (accessed 22 August 2019).
- 23 See Evan Smith, and Marinella Marmo, "Uncovering the 'Virginity Testing' Controversy in the National Archives: The Intersectionality of Discrimination in British Immigration History", *Gender & History* 23, no. 1 (2011), 161.
- 24 Anon, "Asian Women Subjected to 'Virginity Tests' at Heathrow", *The Telegraph*, 9 May 2011, see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/8501872/Asian-women-subjected-to-virginity-tests-at-Heathrow.html> (accessed 26 September 2017).
- 25 See Hannana Siddiqui, "Black Women's Activism: Coming of Age?" *Feminist Review* 64 (2000): 83–96.
- 26 See Minutes of the IAUK meeting 30 November 1978, reproduced in *The Roots of the Indian Artists' Collectives*, exhibition catalogue (London: Grosvenor Gallery, 2019), <https://www.grosvenorgallery.com/usr/library/documents/catalogues/therootsoftheindianartistscollectives.pdf> (accessed 15 August 2019).
- 27 See *Rasheed Araeen: A Retrospective*, touring exhibition initiated by Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2017, and the accompanying exhibition catalogue, Nick Aikens (ed.), *Rasheed Araeen: A Retrospective* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2017).
- 28 See Courtney J. Martin, "Sculptor, Performer, Critic: Rasheed Araeen, Circa 1970", in Nick Aikens (ed.), *Rasheed Araeen: A Retrospective* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2017), 177–190.
- 29 See poster promoting performance of *Paki Bastard*, 29 October 1977, 2B Butler's Wharf, London, included in Araeen's retrospective at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.
- 30 Zoe Sutherland, "Dialectics of Modernity and Counter-Modernity: Rasheed Araeen's Cruciform Works", in Nick Aikens (ed.), *Rasheed Araeen: A Retrospective* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2017), 196.
- 31 Hammad Nasar, "Notes from the Field: Navigating the Afterlife of the Other Story", *Asia Art Archive*, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/notes-from-the-field-navigating-the-afterlife-of-the-other-story> (accessed 2 May 2019).
- 32 Rita Keegan, "The Story So Far", *Spare Rib*, February 1990, 36.
- 33 Amal Ghosh and Juginder Lamba (eds), *Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British Art by Artists of South Asian Descent* (London: Saffron Press, 2001).
- 34 David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, and Sonia Boyce (eds), *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 35 John Holt and Laura Turney, "The Singular Journey: South Asian Visual Art in Britain", in N. Ali, V.S. Kalra, and S. Sayyid (eds), *A Postcolonial People: South Asians in Britain* (London: Hurst & Company, 2006), 329–339.
- 36 Holt and Turney, "The Singular Journey", 339.
- 37 Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History since the 1950s* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).
- 38 Maud Sulter (ed.), *Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity* (Hebden Bridge: Urban Fox Press, 1990).
- 39 Melanie Keen and Liz Ward (eds), *Recordings: A Select Bibliography of Contemporary African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian British Art* (London: Iniva, 1996). See https://issuu.com/artslondonlibraries/docs/recordings_-_a_select_bibliography (accessed 15 August 2019).
- 40 Since undertaking this research, the South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive has moved to Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. See <https://sadaa.co.uk> (accessed 15 August 2019).
- 41 See Laurel Forster, *Magazine Movements: Women's Culture, Feminisms, and Media Form* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), Chapter 5: "'Our Culture' in a Racist Society": Mukti".
- 42 For a recording of my presentation, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_Ty58l498E (accessed 21 August 2019).

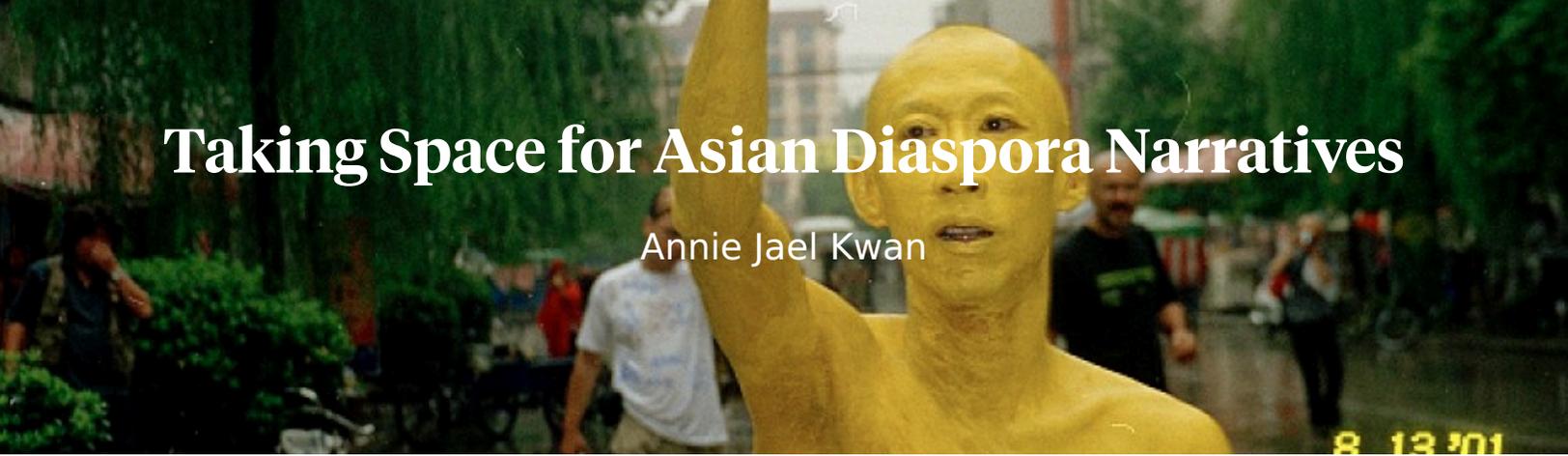
- 43 See Mumtaz Karimjee and Amina Patel, "Aurat Shakti", *Ten.8 Critical Decade: Black British Photography in the 80s 2*, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 62–63.
- 44 Bhajan Hunjan in conversation with the author, 23 October 2015.
- 45 Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (eds), *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970–85* (London: Pandora, 1987), 64.
- 46 Chila Burman in conversation with the author, 10 September 2015.
- 47 Caroline Collier, "Four Indian Women Artists: Bhajan Hunjan, Naomi Iny, Chila Kuman Burman, Vinodini Ebdon (Indian Artists UK Gallery, London: Exhibition Review)", *Arts Review* (UK) 34, no. 2 (15 January 1982), 18.
- 48 Anon, "Indian Artists U.K. Present Four Indian Women Artists' Show", *New Life* (29 January 1982), 10.
- 49 Anon, "Indian Artists U.K. Present Four Indian Women Artists' Show", 11.
- 50 Lucy Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and Art of Prehistory* (New York: The New Place, 1983).
- 51 Bhajan Hunjan in conversation with the author, 23 October 2015.
- 52 See Richard Hylton, *The Nature of the Beast: Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector: A Study of Policies, Initiatives and Attitudes, 1976–2006* (Bath: Institute of Contemporary Interdisciplinary Arts, 2007).
- 53 Fay Rodrigues, *Jagrati—An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists*, exhibition pamphlet (Woolwich: Greenwich Citizens Gallery, 1986), 1. Panchayat Archive.
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- 55 Symrath Patti, in conversation with the author, 18 July 2019.
- 56 Anon, "Murder Tribute Sparks Art: Women's Eye for Visuals", press cutting, Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths, University of London.
- 57 Ranu Samantrai, *AlterNatives: Black Feminism in the Postimperial Nation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 150.
- 58 Shaila Shah, "We will not Mourn their Deaths in Silence", in Shabnam Grewal, Jackie Kay, Liliane Landor, Gail Lewis, and Pratibha Parmar (eds), *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1988), 281.
- 59 Dushka Ahmed, *ArtRage* 15: 25–26.
- 60 Rodrigues, *Jagrati—An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists*, 4.
- 61 John Brady, "UKasian: Nina Edge", in Amal Ghosh and Juginder Lamba (eds), *Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British Art by Artists of South Asian Descent* (London: Saffron Press, 2001), 105.
- 62 Brady, "UKasian: Nina Edge", 107.
- 63 Rodrigues, *Jagrati—An Exhibition by 13 Asian Women Artists*, 4.
- 64 Symrath Patti, in conversation with the author, 18 July 2019.
- 65 Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art*, 125.
- 66 As cited in Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art*, 125–126.
- 67 Veena Stephenson, "In Focus", *Bazaar South Asian Arts Magazine* 12, 12. For further discussion on the omission of women from *The Other Story*, see Homi Bhabha and Sutapa Biswas, "The Wrong Story", *New Statesman and Society*, 15 December 1989, 40–42. Reprinted in Steve Edwards (ed.), *Art and its Histories: A Reader* (London: The Open University, 1999), 269–273.
- 68 Jean Fisher, "The Other Story and the Past Imperfect", *Tate Papers* 12 (Autumn 2009), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/no-12/the-other-story-and-the-past-imperfect> (accessed 1 May 2019).
- 69 Prasanna Probyn, "In Focus", *Spare Rib*, March 1990, 42.
- 70 Stephenson, "In Focus", 12. Jagjit Chuhan, email correspondence with author, 11 January 2016. Bhajan Hunjan, in conversation with the author, 6 September 2019.
- 71 Stephenson, "In Focus", 12.
- 72 Mumtaz Karimjee, in conversation with the author, 3 June 2016.
- 73 Anon, "In Focus—4 Exhibitions", *Black Arts in London* 122 (March 1990), 9.
- 74 Stephenson, "In Focus", 12.
- 75 Probyn, "In Focus", 42.
- 76 See Horizon Gallery, "Press Release: InFocus Restated", 1991, SADAA: South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive, <http://sadaa.co.uk/archive/art/horizon-gallery/infocus-restated-press-release> (accessed 15 August 2019).

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Taking Space for Asian Diaspora Narratives

Annie Jael Kwan

Abstract

This curatorial essay discusses an experimental performance programme, Being Present, which included three works by three artists from the Asia-Art-Activism Research Network. The performances occurred as part of an exhibition, Speech Acts, held at the Manchester Art Gallery in 2018–2019, and in conjunction with a scholarly symposium titled “The LYC Museum & Art Gallery and the Museum as Practice”. This essay reflects on the origins of the commission, the mission, and ethos of Asia-Art-Activism (AAA), and how each artist’s bodily explorations of identity connected to Speech Acts, the wider theme of solidarity, and the significant yet somewhat forgotten contributions of diaspora and immigrant artists such as Li Yuan-chia in histories of British art. Finally, with reference to the virtual and digital after-archive, it discusses the implications of AAA artists extending their performances as interventions on the digital platform of British Art Studies.

Authors

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Speech Acts and Asia-Art-Activism

On 6 March 2019, the Manchester Art Gallery, in collaboration with the Paul Mellon Centre and Central St Martins, launched the symposium “The LYC Museum & Art Gallery and the Museum as Practice”, with an evening performance programme. The symposium was organised as part of the public programme for its temporary exhibition, *Speech Acts: Reflection-Imagination-Repetition*, curated by Hammad Nasar with Kate Jesson.¹ One of the evening’s activities was *Being Present*, an experimental performance programme that I curated in response to the exhibition.² It presented three works by three artists from the Asia-Art-Activism Research Network within the *Speech Acts* exhibition galleries. These were *Sound of Other Spaces with the Speculative Others* by Ada Hao; *Towards All or Nothing (In Memory of Li Yuan-chia)* by Bettina Fung; and *Yellow Peril* by Nicholas Tee.

Asia-Art-Activism (AAA) is an intergenerational and interdisciplinary research network that was launched in May 2018. Spurred by an opportunity to apply for studio and event space at Raven Row, London, it was initiated as an experimental one-year format for sharing knowledge through activities that explored and complicated the broad paradigm of “Asia”.³ It also sought to explore alternative ways of working, and question what it meant to bring diaspora and migrant bodies together in shared space.⁴ It is not difficult to recognise some immediate connections between AAA, *Speech Acts*, and the central project of the LYC Museum and Art Gallery that was founded by Li Yuan-chia, in Cumbria in 1979.⁵ Established by diaspora and migrant practitioners, AAA similarly emphasises the importance of “networks and practices”⁶ in the “relational and participatory work of art”,⁷ and shares Li’s “commitment to art as a mode of experimentation ... and social interaction.”⁸ Most significantly, the *Speech Acts* exhibition configured a complex and inclusive interweaving of artistic narratives that acknowledged Li and other diaspora artists’ contribution to British art history—that indeed, the narrative of ‘British art history’ must encompass all artistic activities within the UK, even those of the diaspora, immigrants, and migrants.

The performances by Hao, Fung, and Tee expressed the overlapping anxieties of migrant artists in the UK, but exemplified different embodied approaches and aesthetics. Despite each artist’s varying level of commitment to AAA, they also inescapably draw on its network and its public stance, echoing Nasar and Jesson’s curatorial focus on Li’s practice as “one example of how networks of people shape artistic practices and determine how artworks circulate. It suggested that affinities—between people and practices—help create the shared stories that forge meaning in art.”⁹ Given the loose not-quite-a-collective-but-being-together nature of AAA, it may be

more accurate to consider its work as a “social formation”, following Judith Butler’s description of “a politics of alliance” that might exist “among groups of people who do not otherwise find much in common and between whom there is sometimes even suspicion and antagonism.”¹⁰

Crucially, AAA’s project operates in London, in the context of fraught ongoing Brexit negotiations, the UK Home Office’s Hostile Environment policy targeting migrants, and increasing occurrences of overt racism in the public sphere.¹¹ Butler’s politics of alliance is “not just what it means to ally with one another, but what it means to live with one another ... [where] a politics of alliance ... requires, an ethics of cohabitation” in the struggle to “make a claim in public space.”¹² In view of Butler’s proposition, I would suggest that AAA finds and forms resistance by bringing migrant and diaspora bodies together, in times of increasing precarity and hostility, simply by *being present* and taking up space.¹³ For the performances at *Speech Acts*, it was fundamental that the AAA artists were present and took up space—both physically and in terms of attention—aligning their contemporary practices with the longer trajectories of British art history and British migrant art history.

Sound of other spaces with the speculative others by Ada Hao Xiaoyu

Being Present opened with Hao’s performance, which interrupted Nasar and Jesson’s curatorial tour for the conference guests and members of the public. Playing on the form and content of the curatorial tour, Hao utilised the equipment and protocols usually employed in making such a public presentation. Wearing a suit and a microphone headset while fiddling with her beeping audio-receiver pack, Hao greeted the audience and announced she was “present” in honour of Zoe Meng, who hired her as a performer and from whom she would read a message via a series of notes.

Hao’s performance teased out the slippages of meaning in the transmission and circulation of text, the performativity of language systems, and the ruptures that lead to a breakdown in communication. Her next reading disintegrated into pauses, interruptions, slips, and stutters as it reflected on the intersections between observation, bodies, identities, art production, artistry, and the philosophical meaning of sentience. Hao read out Meng’s words—instructions to her to utilise a magnifying glass that is similar to the one Meng uses to read. The glass was to stand in for Meng’s ‘eye’, as a point of observation. The text then speculated empathetically on Meng’s alleged autobiographical link to Li Yuan-chia, both having shared experiences of adoption, even as Li’s works also meditated on the ‘point’ as an aesthetic and philosophical search for origin. Through this performative play with

words and gesture, Hao questioned the accepted understanding of embodiment as equivalent to inherent humanity—if the human merely replicates a transmission of meaning, is its utterance human?

Hao's performance referenced Michel Foucault's fourth principle of "heterotopia"—where "heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time—which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies." ¹⁴ It then speculated on whether the body itself might constitute a spatio-temporal vessel of sorts; but what kind of "heterochronies" might be created by and within the human/post-human body? And thus what might be created *between* bodies—would it be accumulative or fluid? What were the implications for togetherness and solidarity?

According to Hao, her "collaborator", Zoe Meng, is a pioneering university professor and lecturer at Shanghai University, with a list of academic and research credentials that mark her as being multi-located. She was born in Kazakhstan, grew up and studied in the USA, and pursued further research in China on the themes of post-humanism, heterotopias, and gender studies that resulted in an impressive resume of publications. While I had suspected from the outset that Meng is an alter ego, Hao insists that Zoe Meng is a real living individual. However, upon close inspection, Meng's biography is full of inaccuracies in the names of research centres, institutional departments, and publisher names, where the titles sound almost accurate to an existing entity, except for a misspelling or the use of a different word. Perhaps it is possible to infer that Hao's manufacture of an alter ego demonstrates there may be accumulative meanings imbued in the performance of identity, which is itself constructed and deconstructed, accumulative and yet always in flux—displaying the operation of heterochronies in a single embodied/ disembodied performance.



Figure 1.

Ada Hao performing "Sound of other spaces with the speculative others" at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019. Digital image courtesy of Ada Hao.

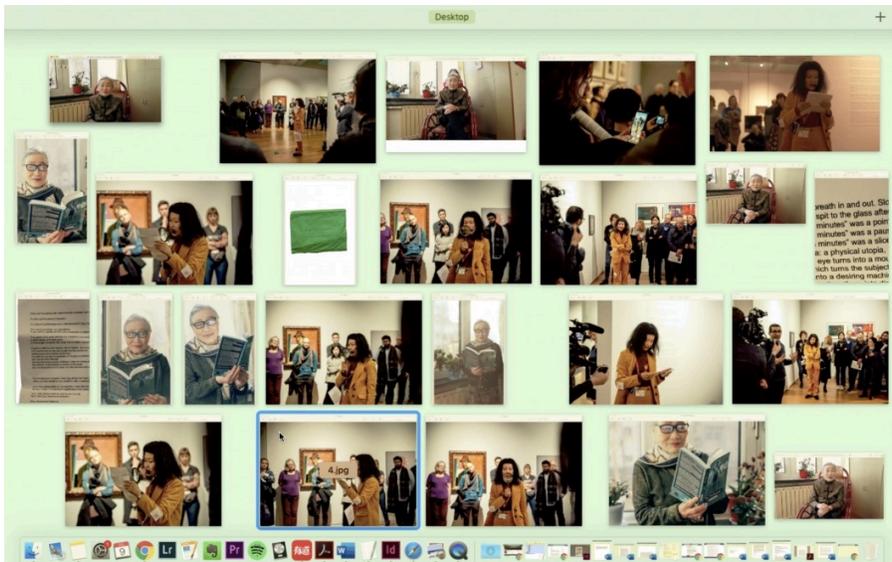


Figure 2.

Ada Hao, Still from "like a flower paddle my teeth" (8:25), 2019. Digital image courtesy of Ada Hao.

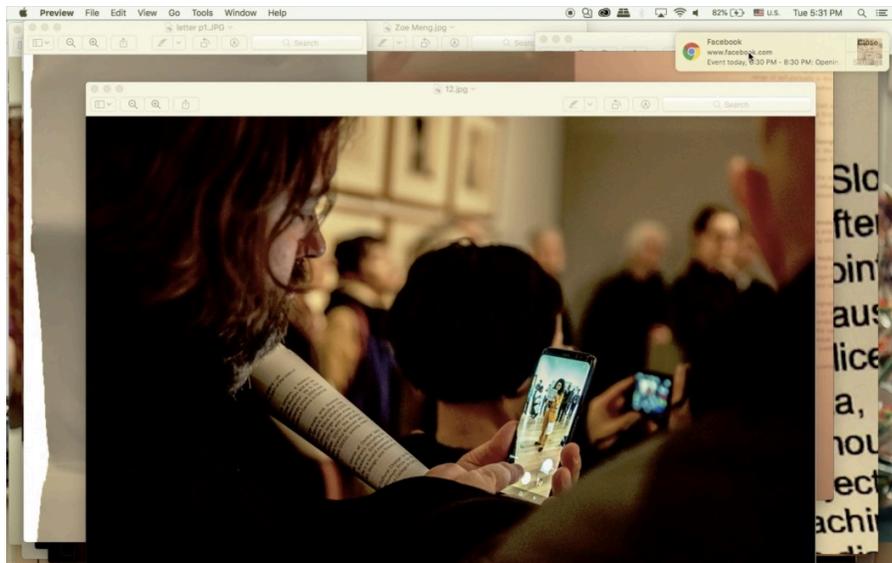


Figure 3.
Ada Hao, Still from "like a flower paddle my teeth" (7:50), 2019. Digital image courtesy of Ada Hao.

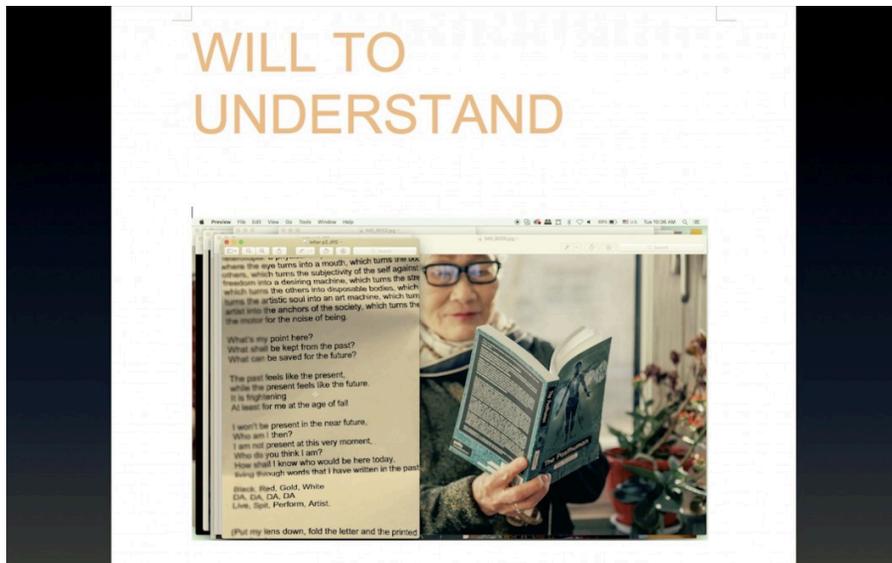


Figure 4.
Ada Hao, Still from "like a flower paddle my teeth" (5:30), 2019. Digital image courtesy of Ada Hao.

Towards All or Nothing (In Memory of Li Yuan-chia) by Bettina Fung

Born in Hong Kong, the British-Chinese artist Bettina Fung immigrated to the UK at the age of eight. Fung conceptualised her performance drawing piece as a tribute to Li Yuan-chia, having felt a strong connection to Li's past as an immigrant artist, his artistic practice, and his philosophy of "all and nothing" as expressed by celebrating the point as the origin and end of creation. For

Being Present at the Manchester Art Gallery, Fung laid a large piece of blank drawing paper on the floor where it sat in front of a colourful window pane with the softly illuminated initials “LYC” installed in the *Speech Acts* exhibition, a homage to the window created by the sculptor David Nash for the LYC Museum. As the performance began, she stepped into the middle of the paper and paused, taking several breaths. Then she squatted down, picked up a graphite crayon, and smoothly pivoted counter-clockwise on one foot to draw a circle whose radius was defined by her arm span. Then, moving clockwise, she proceeded to painstakingly erase the drawn circle, as if to unwind the movement and its consequences. Over the duration of the performance, Fung completed 26 circles around her body, each circle to mark a year Li spent in the village of Banks in Cumbria, where he set up his beloved LYC Museum that generated numerous artistic encounters, until his passing in 1994.

Each repetition provided an enhanced awareness of another moment of time passing, which also enabled a kind of remembering of Li—connecting the present passing moment with the accumulating past. As Fung erased each traced circle, it invoked reflection about the transience of life and legacy—*What remains? What is lost? Who remembers? Who or what endures?* While the repetition of 26 circles was enacted in memoriam for Li Yuan-chia’s years in Cumbria, it is notable that Fung’s performance was actually inspired by an artistic proposal Li conceived that was never realized.¹⁵ Alongside her empathy for Li’s struggles as a migrant artist, Fung expressed a Taoist philosophical interest in the act of drawing—one that she embodies also in her Tai chi martial arts training, which has conditioned her ability to execute delicate balletic movements to materialise her drawing.

One might read in her performance the diasporic urge for institutional representation as well as a form of Derridean “archive fever” towards “an impossible archaeology” and the desire “for a return to the authentic and singular origin, and for a return concerned to account for the desire to return.”¹⁶ If a return to origin is impossible even via acts of memory, perhaps a bodily-inscribed gesture leaves remnants that speak to the past as a continuous (re)construction in the present. Fung’s performance left scattered rubber shavings. Using a paintbrush, she carefully swept them to form a central mound where, after she exited, they were displayed for the remainder of the evening. The sheet of white paper framed this central point of rubber shavings, a still clock without the activation of Fung’s movements, whose silence resonated her bodily absence.

In relation to “archive fever”, it is significant that during her research in the Li Yuan-chia archives at the John Rylands Library, Fung’s request to access Li’s letters was refused because they were written in Chinese, and the library did not have anyone with the language skill to verify if the letters contained

sensitive information. Fung, of Chinese heritage, has the language skills required, but was prevented from accessing the materials due to institutional policy and protocol. One might wonder for whom these archives have been established, and whose sensibilities these created boundaries to access are protecting? Do archives hold knowledge, or do they bind knowledge in a stronghold? Where can the memories of migrants take up space, and continue to participate in a broader understanding of British migrant and immigrant history? Interestingly, Fung has retained all the shavings from performance at *Being Present* and other iterations since, in a container as her personal and artistic archive. She says they are “a bit like ashes in a funerary urn, dead drawings in a way. But they are the documentation of the work too.”¹⁷ Fung’s performance materialised an abstracted utterance of the difficult issues regarding migrant identity, representation, and subjectivity in one’s adopted nation. Having experienced the language barrier on arrival and various instances of racism, Fung has discussed her confusion and discomfort about her cultural identity as an artist:

I used to stay away from anything that represented my cultural heritage, I didn’t want to represent, because I couldn’t represent ... [I] identified with not belonging anywhere and ... recently realising if you do identify as not belonging, than you might put yourself in a position where you might feel you don’t have the right to take up space.¹⁸



Figure 5.
Bettina Fung, Circle Loop, 2019. Digital image courtesy of Bettina Fung.



Figure 6.
Rubber shavings made during Bettina Fung's performance of "Towards All or Nothing (In Memory of Li Yuan-chia)" at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019. Digital image courtesy of Bettina Fung.

***Yellow Peril* by Nicholas Tee**

Nicholas Tee's performance took inspiration from Korean artist Do Ho Suh's *Who Am We?* (2000), a print exhibited in the *Speech Acts* exhibition that explored the act of scrutiny and visibility with regards to thinking about the tension between individual and collective identity. His performance of *Yellow Peril* was situated within the the first gallery that explored "reflection"; these artworks included portraits, self-portraits, and works expressing the complexities of representation and performative subjectivity, and the acts of looking or obscuring.

Bridging a practice between the theatre and live art, *Yellow Peril* reflected an awareness of staging as a way of inviting a gallery audience to view his performance. Tee, dressed minimally and somewhat absurdly, in dark industrial jeans with huge cuffs and black boots, shirtless but with metal chains crossing his body—was not unlike a tragicomic Samuel Beckett character living on the fringe of society.¹⁹ He began his performance by sitting still and silent behind a large magnifying sheet, upon an upturned bucket. He was framed doubly by the sheet and the metal posts of the clothes rack upon which the sheet was hung—together they formed the outlines of a makeshift proscenium stage where his distorted puppet-like head took centre stage. The audience was invited—compelled—to inspect his visage.²⁰

Framed thus, and taking place only three days after the passing of Lee Wen (1957–2019), Tee paid tribute to the pioneering Singaporean performance artist's iconic performance of *Journey of a Yellow Man* (1992–2012)(Fig. 7), and reinscribed Lee Wen's 2010 *Anyhow Blues Revival Project* into *Yellow Fever* by playing his track, "Missing You", from the four cassette players strung about his torso. Lee's performance of a warbling folk singer that made mistakes was originally intended as a critique of Singapore's first de facto ban of performance art in 1994, and subsequent instrumentalisation of the niche form for art fairs and large exhibitions.²¹ Tee's reference to Lee's musical project connected this critical ethos emerging "from the outside" in a Singaporean context, with the negotiations that *Speech Acts* brokered with institutionalised hierarchies of power—specifically with regard to the demarcation of Tee's performance by what was acceptable to Manchester Art Gallery. While transgressive acts by artists have been canonised as part of performance art history, Tee's proposal for cutting his body was prohibited by Manchester Art Gallery to avoid seeming to condone self-harm in youth, which an increasing social concern for the city of Manchester.

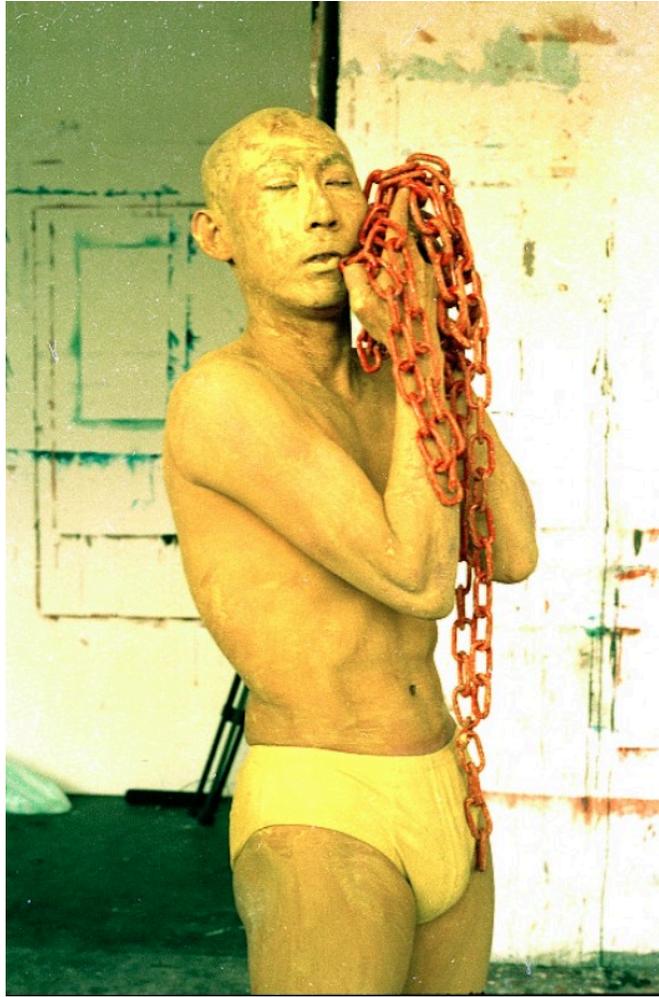


Figure 7.

Lee Wen, *Journey of the Yellow Man*, 1992 (City of London, Polytechnic). Digital image courtesy of the estate of Lee Wen and the Southeast Asia Performance Collection.

Hence for the latter part of his performance, Tee exited the building and knelt in front of the older wing of the Manchester Art Gallery (previously the City Art Gallery building), which was constructed between 1824-1835. Commissioned by the Royal Manchester institution, a scholarly society formed in 1823, this building was designed by famed British architect Sir Charles Barry in the Classical European revival style of architecture that was emblematic of knowledge and power. Beneath this imposing façade, with its protruding portico and six columns in the Greek Ionic style, Tee's excluded body prostrated symbolically at the feet of the institution of art history. Ironically, by displacing his act from institutional space and onto the street as a guerrilla intervention, Manchester Art Gallery heightened the possibility that his action might be misread as self-harm or part of a sub-cultural fetish. As the curator (and lone individual) supporting Tee's performance on the

street, I became acutely aware of his exposed body and its vulnerability to the elements of Manchester nightlife. Awkwardly laden by the cassette players (approximately 4 kilograms), Tee's posture gestured towards the burden of artistic legacies and concerns that as a young artist he might be expected to bear or chafe under.

Under the symbolic shadow of the institution, Tee displayed the cut words "Bloody Foreigner" to some passers-by who stopped for a closer look. For the audience that passed casually and did not have the benefit of background information regarding Tee's practice or *Speech Acts*, how Tee applied the cuts was less important than the 'sign' of his bodily incisions. The wounds invoked visceral empathy, and perhaps spoke to the foreigner's anguish to make meaning and be understood—the state in which, as Jean Fisher observes, "the teller's struggle to make sense of senselessness touches our *own* experience of a deeply felt *aporia* in human existence."²² Tee's silent cuts testified to other forms of silencing—for the many other, and increasing, number of migrant and immigrant bodies considered transgressive that are barricaded and excluded—outside the mainstream acceptable narratives of art history and society in the United Kingdom and beyond.



Figure 8.

Nicholas Tee Performing "Yellow Peril" at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019. Digital image courtesy of Nicholas Tee.



Figure 9.
Nicholas Tee Performing "Yellow Peril" at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019. Digital image courtesy of Nicholas Tee.



Figure 10.
Nicholas Tee Performing "Yellow Peril" at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019. Digital image courtesy of Nicholas Tee.



Figure 11.

Nicholas Tee Performing "Yellow Peril" at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019. Digital image courtesy of Nicholas Tee.

Being Present on a Digital Platform

The invitation from *British Art Studies* to create a Cover Collaboration for this *London, Asia* special issue presented the *Being Present* project with an opportunity to consider what it might mean to 'be present' and take up space on a digital platform. For a team of diaspora and migrant curators and artists, the possibilities of participating by interjecting our programme into the journal's two paradigms—what might be deemed 'British' and what might be the scope of 'art studies'—were particularly tantalising. As a curatorial steer, I invited the artists to consider how they might extend their *Being Present* performances onto the 2D screen-based digital plane, utilising the different web frames (as prescribed by the available formats and technical capacities of the journal) as sites for performance. This direction followed a key thematic lead of the issue: the rethinking of archives, from being neutral repositories of objectively obtained materials that offer authentic or authorised knowledge, to "the after-archive", which is "an active environment that does not remain unaffected by our presence in it", "for staging 'epistemological experiments'; not as sites for 'knowledge retrieval' but as sites of 'knowledge production'". ²³

Curating *Being Present* in this context operated with an understanding of the "after-archive" that acknowledges the contemporary social order, within which computers, smart phones, and other technologies make us all archivists and archival producers. For most, there are numerous everyday actions producing, accumulating, editing, sampling, and circulating large amounts of images and text—"a daily routine no longer grounded in the past but in the production of a present." ²⁴ Central to this reframing of the

“archive” is the reconfiguring of space and time where the “present” is its focal point, and “all temporal layering is considered an interface phenomenon”,²⁵ where “networks and connectivity”²⁶ supersede the provenance of a single document or file. Curating for the online platform of *British Art Studies* was therefore to conceptualise and address the “ever-present”, where the different works will henceforth be simultaneously present, and may be accessed in any order, repeated any number of times, or skipped through. There is also no absolute guarantee that images or text may not be screenshot and recorded, and remediated by the audience. Where then, in this context, is the performative? What is being performed?

The three artists demonstrate the potentialities and challenges of presenting on the digital plane, with very different approaches to embodying presence in relation to the contextual platform. Ada Hao Xiaoyu’s video contribution, “*like a flower paddle my teeth*”, was edited from the computer screen recordings of the technical functionalities of typing, editing, the changing of font sizes and colour, the collaging of cut and paste, playing with cascades of screens, and so on. She layered the textual interplay with images spliced in from the performance at Manchester Art Gallery, of Zoe Meng at her residence, along with an audio track that is composited with sounds of breath, original music, singing, ambient sound, and voice recordings at different volumes and proximities. With the editing functions made visible, the resulting effect is a disorientating flurry and accumulation of imagery where the artist’s presence is embodied in the work via its movement and sound, but whose sense of subjectivity—that is, “anxiety of being”, as depicted in large font—is simultaneously fractured and constantly destabilised.

Bettina Fung’s $26 \times 2 = 0$ also reconfigures the sense of linear time with its attempt to conduct an imagined conversation between Fung and Li Yuanchia, that is expressed with the laying out of both parts of the correspondence side by side on black and white squares. Referencing the squares employed by Li to lay out his poetry works, Fung retrieved materials from his archive and his texts, and reassembled them as a projection of their interaction across space and time. Mediating her skills in drawing in animation, these points of intersection were visualised by red lines, and the display on the journal gestures back to Fung’s performance at Manchester Art Gallery with an audio recording of her material action, and a GIF that depicts a counter-clockwise cycle. The act of recollecting is underscored as a performative gesture in the present. While Fung’s presentation in the galleries had its limitations as a time-based work, online, the sound of her action and GIF cycle remains always ready and always performing.

Nicholas Tee's presentation in *British Art Studies* has several components: a film recording of *Yellow Peril* in its entirety, a timeline of images tracking his performance at Manchester Art Gallery interspersed with short commentaries, and animated GIF images. The motivation for marking each stage of his performance is underwritten by a desire to have all of it witnessed, as opposed to the discrepancy between what was seen by the audience within the gallery, what took place outside, and his final brief attempt to leave an imprint on the exhibition wall. The GIFs evoke close scrutiny, especially in the last GIF where Nic showcases a flag embroidered with the faces of his Asian diaspora peers—a call back to Do Ho Suh's print.²⁷ Nevertheless the timeline provides readers with an interface that offers multiple entry points, with the capability to skip forward, to reverse, and even open up multiple images across several browser windows; and to apply viewing options that vary proximity, level of detail, and scale.

All three works sit concurrently “in the present” on the website. Referring back to Butler, she contends that:

The body is constituted through perspectives it cannot inhabit; someone else sees our face in a way that we cannot and hears our voice in a way that we cannot. We are in this sense—bodily—always over there, yet here, and this dispossession marks the sociality to which we belong. Even as located beings, we are always elsewhere, constituted in a sociality that exceeds us.²⁸

Given this view, where and how might togetherness and solidarity be ascertained in the digital realm? Reflecting on the after-archive, Spieker finds recourse to sociologist Arjun Appadurai, for whom “it is not a matter of creating a community on the basis of an archive of shared beliefs or memories: ‘Where natural social collectivities build connectivities out of memory, these virtual collectivities build memories out of connectivity.’”²⁹ Notably Appadurai finds aspiration in such an archive, and Spieker similarly opines that “the archive opens up towards the present and a (possible) future...”³⁰ Hence the digital after-archive may extend the same preoccupation with networks beyond the interpersonal realm of “friendships” or even “collectives”, to a plausibly global sense of solidarity—that draws together diaspora and migrant experiences of dislocation and marginality.

Following this reading, these migrant bodies being present and taking up space in *British Art Studies* embody multiple experiences and transborder knowledge—and reconfigure a much needed and reparative perspective of “Britishness” that acknowledges the relational reach of its post-empire

legacies. As the future of AAA remains uncertain after November 2020, reflecting the general trauma and malaise of ongoing Brexit negotiations and the global increase of xenophobia towards migrants and immigrants, each moment of togetherness becomes exceedingly precious. In the words of Lee Wen, who was also a builder of archives and communities,

In the beginning of various forms of collective work, it is always exciting to meet fresh new faces and to learn that we are not alone in our search to make art that has more meaning to it than just being a commodity. There is great rejuvenation of faith in the human spirit. However, things do happen that test our will and resolve. We learn to overcome our weaknesses if we are not just to live with them; we find or make friends and lose them – but hope always they will return or we otherwise meet them again through reconciliation, somehow. ³¹

Footnotes

- 1 *Speech Acts: Reflection-Imagination-Repetition* was exhibited at the Manchester Art Gallery from 25 May 2018 to 22 April 2019.
- 2 Curated by Hammad Nasar with Kate Jesson, the exhibition *Speech Acts: Reflection-Imagination-Repetition* was presented at the Manchester Art Gallery from April 2018–2019.
- 3 The project emerged from a conversation that I had in April 2018 with arts producer and community organiser, Joon Lynn Goh. Both of us have roots in Southeast Asia and have lived and worked in the UK for extended periods as migrant cultural workers. We share overlapping concerns regarding what “Asia” means in the context of London and the UK more broadly. Throughout the 1990s–2000s, Southeast Asian, and to some extent East Asian, diaspora narratives had been hardly visible. Instead, the emphasis conveyed by “Asia” was on diaspora and immigrant narratives in relation to “South Asia” or in terms of “Chineseness”. See, for example, texts such as Rey Chow’s *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) and Lisa Tyler and Michael Hoover’s *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema* (London: Verso, 1999), which were read for cinema studies in the 1990s. The 2018 volume *Contesting British Chinese Culture*, edited by Ashley Thorpe and Diana Yeh (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan) is the first anthology to explore British Chinese culture. Conversely, for example, Tate Britain’s *Artist and Empire* exhibition (25 November 2015–10 April 2016) included art and objects in relation to the British Empire but excluded any presence from its previous colonies in Southeast Asia.
- 4 While the website currently lists 35 London and international members, the exact membership of Asia-Art-Activism is ambiguous and has changed across 2018–2019 with some members leaving and others joining later in the year. Other contributors also participate regularly in AAA organised activities but are not formally listed on the website. <https://asia-art-activism.net>, information noted on 1 September 2019. The 2018–2019 working group for AAA that met more frequently and discussed day-to-day issues of operation generally included Yarli Allison, Burong, Bettina Fung, Caroline Gervay, Ada Hao, Tram Nguyen, Cuong Pham, Jia Qi Quek, Erika Tan, and Howl Yuan.
- 5 Hammad Nasar, “Cumbrian Cosmopolitanisms: Li Yuan-chia and Friends”, *British Art Studies*, Issue 12, (May 2019), doi:10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-12/hnasar, 10.
- 6 Nasar, “Cumbrian Cosmopolitanisms”, 10.
- 7 Nasar, “Cumbrian Cosmopolitanisms”, 13.
- 8 Nasar, “Cumbrian Cosmopolitanisms”, 14.
- 9 Nasar, “Cumbrian Cosmopolitanisms”, 12.
- 10 Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 27.
- 11 Robert Booth, “Racism Rising Since Brexit Vote, Nationwide Study Reveals”, *The Guardian*, 20 May 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/20/racism-on-the-rise-since-brexit-vote-nationwide-study-reveals>. Accessed 15 August 2019.
- 12 Butler, *Notes Towards A Performative Theory of Assembly*, 70.
- 13 James Martel, “Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly, by Judith Butler”, *Law & Literature* 30, no. 2 (2018), 381.

- 14 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, October 1984 ("Des Espace Autres", March 1967, translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec), 6.
- 15 Bettina Fung's proposal, submitted on 9 January 2019 stated that: "The work is inspired by Li's *All & Nothing Show*, which was a proposed performance to be held at Hyde Park's Speakers' Corner in 1967 before his departure for Cumbria. However this event never took place as Li had fallen ill." This information was drawn from Diana Yeh, "Under the Spectre of Orientalism and Nation," in *The Reception of Chinese Art across Cultures*, ed. Huang, M (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 239.
- 16 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 85.
- 17 Fung, via email 14 September 2019.
- 18 Quote taken from AAA Radio's "A Series of UnComfortable Conversations #1", published on 31 July 2019.
- 19 Two of his famous plays come to mind: *Happy Days* (first performed 1961) and *Waiting for Godot* (first performed 1953), where the characters blithely repeat actions and refrains without result, or consequence. In *Happy Days*, the characters stay put on the stage and chatter away obliviously, as they become increasingly buried under a low mound of sand. The two hobo-like characters of *Waiting for Godot* also remain loitering on stage, "waiting" for the off-stage persona of Godot who never arrives.
- 20 Interestingly, Tee confirms that the magnifying sheet is two-way. Audience members who peer closely are similarly magnified when viewed from the other side.
- 21 Performance art once suffered a ten-year de facto ban when the National Arts Council of Singapore withdrew its available funding after the public controversy of Josef Ng's performance in 1994.
- 22 Fisher makes this observation with regards to the use of visual scarring in *7th November* (2001), by Steve McQueen, a Black British artist and film-maker. See Jean Fisher, "Where Here Is Elsewhere", in Kamal Boullata (ed.), *Belonging and Globalisation* (London: Al-Saqi, 2008), 61-74 (republished from Sharjah Biennale No. 7, curated by Kamal Boullata, 2005). <https://www.jeanfisher.com/where-here-is-elsewhere/>.
- 23 Sven Spieker, "The After-Archive: Notes on Contemporary Art", Paper delivered at the "The Whole Life" conference, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Dresden, 23 May 2019, 1-2. https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2019/the_whole_life/das_ganze_leben.php.
- 24 Spieker, "The After-Archive", 3.
- 25 Spieker, "The After-Archive", 4.
- 26 Spieker, "The After-Archive", 5.
- 27 The flag GIF, titled ??????[who are my people?], was made in collaboration with Nicole Chui.
- 28 Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 96-97.
- 29 Arjun Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration", cited in Spieker, "The After-Archive", 6.
- 30 Spieker, "The After-Archive", 5.
- 31 C.J. Wan-ling Wee, "On the Individualistic Artist and Collectives in Organising Art Events: An Interview with Lee Wen", in C.J. Wan-ling Wee (ed.), *Practising Contemporary Art in the Global City for the Arts*, Singapore, *Performance Paradigm* 8, (2012), 2-3, <https://www.performanceparadigm.net/index.php/journal/issue/view/14>.

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